

Men's Wives

by

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The Ravenswing

Chapter 1

Which Is Entirely Introductory - Contains An Account Of Miss Crump, Her Suitors, And Her Family Circle.

In a certain quiet and sequestered nook of the retired village of London - perhaps in the neighbourhood of Berkeley Square, or at any rate somewhere near Burlington Gardens--there was once a house of entertainment called the "Bootjack Hotel." Mr. Crump, the landlord, had, in the outset of life, performed the duties of Boots in some inn even more frequented than his own, and, far from being ashamed of his origin, as many persons are in the days of their prosperity, had thus solemnly recorded it over the hospitable gate of his hotel.

Crump married Miss Budge, so well known to the admirers of the festive dance on the other side of the water as Miss Delancy; and they had one daughter, named Morgiana, after that celebrated part in the "Forty Thieves" which Miss Budge performed with unbounded applause both at the "Surrey" and "The Wells." Mrs. Crump sat in a little bar, profusely ornamented with pictures of the dancers of all ages, from Hillisberg, Rose, Parisot, who plied the light fantastic toe in 1805, down to the Sylphides of our day. There was in the collection a charming portrait of herself, done by De Wilde; she was in the dress of Morgiana, and in the act of pouring, to very slow music, a quantity of boiling oil into one of the forty jars. In this sanctuary she sat, with black eyes, black hair, a purple face and a turban, and morning, noon, or night, as you went into the parlour of the hotel, there was Mrs. Crump taking tea (with a little something in it), looking at the fashions, or reading Cumberland's "British Theatre." The Sunday Times was her paper, for she voted the Dispatch, that journal which is taken in by most ladies of her profession, to be vulgar and Radical, and loved the theatrical gossip in which the other mentioned journal abounds.

The fact is, that the "Royal Bootjack," though a humble, was a very genteel house; and a very little persuasion would induce Mr. Crump, as he looked at his own door in the sun, to tell you that he had himself once drawn off with that very bootjack the top-boots of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and the first gentleman in Europe. While, then, the houses of entertainment in the neighbourhood were loud in their pretended Liberal politics, the "Bootjack" stuck to the good old Conservative line, and was only frequented by such persons as were of that way of thinking. There were two parlours, much accustomed, one for the gentlemen of the shoulder-knot, who came from the houses of their employers hard by; another for some "gents who used the 'ouse," as Mrs. Crump

would say (Heaven bless her!) in her simple Cockniac dialect, and who formed a little club there.

I forgot to say that while Mrs. C. was sipping her eternal tea or washing up her endless blue china, you might often hear Miss Morgiana employed at the little red-silk cottage piano, singing, "Come where the haspens quiver," or "Bonny lad, march over hill and furrow," or "My art and lute," or any other popular piece of the day. And the dear girl sang with very considerable skill, too, for she had a fine loud voice, which, if not always in tune, made up for that defect by its great energy and activity; and Morgiana was not content with singing the mere tune, but gave every one of the roulades, flourishes, and ornaments as she heard them at the theatres by Mrs. Humby, Mrs. Waylett, or Madame Vestris. The girl had a fine black eye like her mamma, a grand enthusiasm for the stage, as every actor's child will have, and, if the truth must be known, had appeared many and many a time at the theatre in Catherine Street, in minor parts first, and then in Little Pickle, in Desdemona, in Rosina, and in Miss Foote's part where she used to dance: I have not the name to my hand, but think it is Davidson. Four times in the week, at least, her mother and she used to sail off at night to some place of public amusement, for Mrs. Crump had a mysterious acquaintance with all sorts of theatrical personages; and the gates of her old haunt "The Wells," of the "Cobourg" (by the kind permission of Mrs. Davidge), nay, of the "Lane" and the "Market" themselves, flew open before her "Open sesame," as the robbers' door did to her colleague, Ali Baba (Hornbuckle), in the operatic piece in which she was so famous.

Beer was Mr. Crump's beverage, diversified by a little gin, in the evenings; and little need be said of this gentleman, except that he discharged his duties honourably, and filled the president's chair at the club as completely as it could possibly be filled; for he could not even sit in it in his greatcoat, so accurately was the seat adapted to him. His wife and daughter, perhaps, thought somewhat slightly of him, for he had no literary tastes, and had never been at a theatre since he took his bride from one. He was valet to Lord Slapper at the time, and certain it is that his lordship set him up in the "Bootjack," and that stories HAD been told. But what are such to you or me? Let bygones be bygones; Mrs. Crump was quite as honest as her neighbours, and Miss had five hundred pounds to be paid down on the day of her wedding.

Those who know the habits of the British tradesman are aware that he has gregarious propensities like any lord in the land; that he loves a joke, that he is not averse to a glass; that after the day's toil he is happy to consort with men of his degree; and that as society is not so far advanced among us as to allow him to enjoy the comforts of splendid club-houses, which are open to many persons with not a tenth part of his pecuniary means, he meets his friends in the cosy tavern parlour, where a neat sanded floor, a large Windsor chair, and a glass of hot something and water, make him as happy as any of the clubmen in their magnificent saloons.

At the "Bootjack" was, as we have said, a very genteel and select society, called the "Kidney Club," from the fact that on Saturday evenings a little graceful supper of broiled kidneys was usually discussed by the members of the club. Saturday

was their grand night; not but that they met on all other nights in the week when inclined for festivity: and indeed some of them could not come on Saturdays in the summer having elegant villas in the suburbs, where they passed the six-and-thirty hours of recreation that are happily to be found at the end of every week.

There was Mr. Balls, the great grocer of South Audley Street, a warm man, who, they say, had his twenty thousand pounds; Jack Snaffle, of the mews hard by, a capital fellow for a song; Clinker, the ironmonger: all married gentlemen, and in the best line of business; Tressle, the undertaker, etc. No liveries were admitted into the room, as may be imagined, but one or two select butlers and major-domos joined the circle; for the persons composing it knew very well how important it was to be on good terms with these gentlemen and many a time my lord's account would never have been paid, and my lady's large order never have been given, but for the conversation which took place at the "Bootjack," and the friendly intercourse subsisting between all the members of the society.

The tiptop men of the society were two bachelors, and two as fashionable tradesmen as any in the town: Mr. Woolsey, from Stultz's, of the famous house of Linsey, Woolsey and Co. of Conduit Street, Tailors; and Mr. Eglantine, the celebrated perruquier and perfumer of Bond Street, whose soaps, razors, and patent ventilating scalps are know throughout Europe. Linsey, the senior partner of the tailors' firm had his handsome mansion in Regent's Park, drove his buggy, and did little more than lend his name to the house. Woolsey lived in it, was the working man of the firm, and it was said that his cut was as magnificent as that of any man in the profession. Woolsey and Eglantine were rivals in many ways--rivals in fashion, rivals in wit, and, above all, rivals for the hand of an amiable young lady whom we have already mentioned, the dark-eyed songstress Morgiana Crump. They were both desperately in love with her, that was the truth; and each, in the absence of the other, abused his rival heartily. Of the hairdresser Woolsey said, that as for Eglantine being his real name, it was all his (Mr. Woolsey's) eye; that he was in the hands of the Jews, and his stock and grand shop eaten up by usury. And with regard to Woolsey, Eglantine remarked, that his pretence of being descended from the Cardinal was all nonsense; that he was a partner, certainly, in the firm, but had only a sixteenth share; and that the firm could never get their moneys in, and had an immense number of bad debts in their books. As is usual, there was a great deal of truth and a great deal of malice in these tales; however, the gentlemen were, take them all in all, in a very fashionable way of business, and had their claims to Miss Morgiana's hand backed by the parents. Mr. Crump was a partisan of the tailor; while Mrs. C. was a strong advocate for the claims of the enticing perfumer.

Now, it was a curious fact, that these two gentlemen were each in need of the other's services--Woolsey being afflicted with premature baldness, or some other necessity for a wig still more fatal--Eglantine being a very fat man, who required much art to make his figure at all decent. He wore a brown frock-coat and frogs, and attempted by all sorts of contrivances to hide his obesity; but Woolsey's remark, that, dress as he would, he would always look like a snob, and that there was only one man in England who could make a gentleman of him, went to the perfumer's soul; and if there was one thing on earth he longed for (not including

the hand of Miss Crump) it was to have a coat from Linsey's, in which costume he was sure that Morgiana would not resist him.

If Eglantine was uneasy about the coat, on the other hand he attacked Woolsey atrociously on the score of his wig; for though the latter went to the best makers, he never could get a peruke to sit naturally upon him and the unhappy epithet of Mr. Wiggins, applied to him on one occasion by the barber, stuck to him ever after in the club, and made him writhe when it was uttered. Each man would have quitted the "Kidneys" in disgust long since, but for the other--for each had an attraction in the place, and dared not leave the field in possession of his rival.

To do Miss Morgiana justice, it must be said, that she did not encourage one more than another; but as far as accepting eau-de-Cologne and hair-combs from the perfumer--some opera tickets, a treat to Greenwich, and a piece of real Genoa velvet for a bonnet (it had originally been intended for a waistcoat), from the admiring tailor, she had been equally kind to each, and in return had made each a present of a lock of her beautiful glossy hair. It was all she had to give, poor girl! and what could she do but gratify her admirers by this cheap and artless testimony of her regard? A pretty scene and quarrel took place between the rivals on the day when they discovered that each was in possession of one of Morgiana's ringlets.

Such, then, were the owners and inmates of the little "Bootjack," from whom and which, as this chapter is exceedingly discursive and descriptive, we must separate the reader for a while, and carry him--it is only into Bond Street, so no gentleman need be afraid-- carry him into Bond Street, where some other personages are awaiting his consideration.

Not far from Mr. Eglantine's shop in Bond Street, stand, as is very well known, the Windsor Chambers. The West Diddlesex Association (Western Branch), the British and Foreign Soap Company, the celebrated attorneys Kite and Levison, have their respective offices here; and as the names of the other inhabitants of the chambers are not only painted on the walls, but also registered in Mr. Boyle's "Court Guide," it is quite unnecessary that they should be repeated here. Among them, on the entresol (between the splendid saloons of the Soap Company on the first floor, with their statue of Britannia presenting a packet of the soap to Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, and the West Diddlesex Western Branch on the basement)- lives a gentleman by the name of Mr. Howard Walker. The brass plate on the door of that gentleman's chambers had the word "Agency" inscribed beneath his name; and we are therefore at liberty to imagine that he followed that mysterious occupation. In person Mr. Walker was very genteel; he had large whiskers, dark eyes (with a slight cast in them), a cane, and a velvet waistcoat. He was a member of a club; had an admission to the opera, and knew every face behind the scenes; and was in the habit of using a number of French phrases in his conversation, having picked up a smattering of that language during a residence "on the Continent;" in fact, he had found it very convenient at various times of his life to dwell in the city of Boulogne, where he acquired a knowledge of smoking, ecarte, and billiards, which was afterwards of great service to him. He knew all the best tables in town, and the marker at Hunt's could only give him ten. He had some fashionable acquaintances too, and you might see him walking

arm-in-arm with such gentlemen as my Lord Vauxhall, the Marquess of Billingsgate, or Captain Buff; and at the same time nodding to young Moses, the dandy bailiff; or Loder, the gambling-house keeper; or Aminadab, the cigar-seller in the Quadrant. Sometimes he wore a pair of moustaches, and was called Captain Walker; grounding his claim to that title upon the fact of having once held a commission in the service of Her Majesty the Queen of Portugal. It scarcely need be said that he had been through the Insolvent Court many times. But to those who did not know his history intimately there was some difficulty in identifying him with the individual who had so taken the benefit of the law, inasmuch as in his schedule his name appeared as Hooker Walker, wine-merchant, commission-agent, music-seller, or what not. The fact is, that though he preferred to call himself Howard, Hooker was his Christian name, and it had been bestowed on him by his worthy old father, who was a clergyman, and had intended his son for that profession. But as the old gentleman died in York gaol, where he was a prisoner for debt, he was never able to put his pious intentions with regard to his son into execution; and the young fellow (as he was wont with many oaths to assert) was thrown on his own resources, and became a man of the world at a very early age.

What Mr. Howard Walker's age was at the time of the commencement of this history, and, indeed, for an indefinite period before or afterwards, it is impossible to determine. If he were eight-and-twenty, as he asserted himself, Time had dealt hardly with him: his hair was thin, there were many crows'-feet about his eyes, and other signs in his countenance of the progress of decay. If, on the contrary, he were forty, as Sam Snaffle declared, who himself had misfortunes in early life, and vowed he knew Mr. Walker in Whitecross Street Prison in 1820, he was a very young-looking person considering his age. His figure was active and slim, his leg neat, and he had not in his whiskers a single white hair.

It must, however, be owned that he used Mr. Eglantine's Regenerative Uction (which will make your whiskers as black as your boot), and, in fact, he was a pretty constant visitor at that gentleman's emporium; dealing with him largely for soaps and articles of perfumery, which he had at an exceedingly low rate. Indeed, he was never known to pay Mr. Eglantine one single shilling for those objects of luxury, and, having them on such moderate terms, was enabled to indulge in them pretty copiously. Thus Mr. Walker was almost as great a nosegay as Mr. Eglantine himself: his handkerchief was scented with verbena, his hair with jessamine, and his coat had usually a fine perfume of cigars, which rendered his presence in a small room almost instantaneously remarkable. I have described Mr. Walker thus accurately, because, in truth, it is more with characters than with astounding events that this little history deals, and Mr. Walker is one of the principal of our dramatis personae.

And so, having introduced Mr. W., we will walk over with him to Mr. Eglantine's emporium, where that gentleman is in waiting, too, to have his likeness taken.

There is about an acre of plate glass under the Royal arms on Mr. Eglantine's shop-window; and at night, when the gas is lighted, and the washballs are illuminated, and the lambent flame plays fitfully over numberless bottles of vari-coloured perfumes--now flashes on a case of razors, and now lightens up a

crystal vase, containing a hundred thousand of his patent tooth-brushes--the effect of the sight may be imagined. You don't suppose that he is a creature who has those odious, simpering wax figures in his window, that are called by the vulgar dummies? He is above such a wretched artifice; and it is my belief that he would as soon have his own head chopped off, and placed as a trunkless decoration to his shop-window, as allow a dummy to figure there. On one pane you read in elegant gold letters "Eglantina"--'tis his essence for the handkerchief; on the other is written "Regenerative Unction"--'tis his invaluable pomatum for the hair.

There is no doubt about it: Eglantine's knowledge of his profession amounts to genius. He sells a cake of soap for seven shillings, for which another man would not get a shilling, and his tooth-brushes go off like wildfire at half-a-guinea apiece. If he has to administer rouge or pearl-powder to ladies, he does it with a mystery and fascination which there is no resisting, and the ladies believe there are no cosmetics like his. He gives his wares unheard-of names, and obtains for them sums equally prodigious. He CAN dress hair--that is a fact--as few men in this age can; and has been known to take twenty pounds in a single night from as many of the first ladies of England when ringlets were in fashion. The introduction of bands, he says, made a difference of two thousand pounds a year in his income; and if there is one thing in the world he hates and despises, it is a Madonna. "I'm not," says he, "a tradesman--I'm a HARTIST" (Mr. Eglantine was born in London)--"I'm a hartist; and show me a fine 'ead of air, and I'll dress it for nothink." He vows that it was his way of dressing Mademoiselle Sontag's hair, that caused the count her husband to fall in love with her; and he has a lock of it in a brooch, and says it was the finest head he ever saw, except one, and that was Morgiana Crump's.

With his genius and his position in the profession, how comes it, then, that Mr. Eglantine was not a man of fortune, as many a less clever has been? If the truth must be told, he loved pleasure, and was in the hands of the Jews. He had been in business twenty years: he had borrowed a thousand pounds to purchase his stock and shop; and he calculated that he had paid upwards of twenty thousand pounds for the use of the one thousand, which was still as much due as on the first day when he entered business. He could show that he had received a thousand dozen of champagne from the disinterested money-dealers with whom he usually negotiated his paper. He had pictures all over his "studios," which had been purchased in the same bargains. If he sold his goods at an enormous price, he paid for them at a rate almost equally exorbitant. There was not an article in his shop but came to him through his Israelite providers; and in the very front shop itself sat a gentleman who was the nominee of one of them, and who was called Mr. Mossrose. He was there to superintend the cash account, and to see that certain instalments were paid to his principals, according to certain agreements entered into between Mr. Eglantine and them.

Having that sort of opinion of Mr. Mossrose which Damocles may have had of the sword which hung over his head, of course Mr. Eglantine hated his foreman profoundly. "HE an artist," would the former gentleman exclaim; "why, he's only a disguised bailiff! Mossrose indeed! The chap's name's Amos, and he sold

oranges before he came here." Mr. Mossrose, on his side, utterly despised Mr. Eglantine, and looked forward to the day when he would become the proprietor of the shop, and take Eglantine for a foreman; and then it would HIS turn to sneer and bully, and ride the high horse.

Thus it will be seen that there was a skeleton in the great perfumer's house, as the saying is: a worm in his heart's core, and though to all appearance prosperous, he was really in an awkward position.

What Mr. Eglantine's relations were with Mr. Walker may be imagined from the following dialogue which took place between the two gentlemen at five o'clock one summer's afternoon, when Mr. Walker, issuing from his chambers, came across to the perfumer's shop:--

"Is Eglantine at home, Mr. Mossrose?" said Walker to the foreman, who sat in the front shop.

"Don't know--go and look" (meaning go and be hanged); for Mossrose also hated Mr. Walker.

"If you're uncivil I'll break your bones, Mr. AMOS," says Mr. Walker, sternly.

"I should like to see you try, Mr. HOOKER Walker," replies the undaunted shopman; on which the Captain, looking several tremendous canings at him, walked into the back room or "studio."

"How are you, Tiny my buck?" says the Captain. "Much doing?"

"Not a soul in town. I 'aven't touched the hiron's all day," replied Mr. Eglantine, in rather a desponding way.

"Well, just get them ready now, and give my whiskers a turn. I'm going to dine with Billingsgate and some out-and-out fellows at the 'Regent,' and so, my lad, just do your best."

"I can't," says Mr. Eglantine. "I expect ladies, Captain, every minute."

"Very good; I don't want to trouble such a great man, I'm sure. Good-bye, and let me hear from you THIS DAY WEEK, Mr. Eglantine." "This day week" meant that at seven days from that time a certain bill accepted by Mr. Eglantine would be due, and presented for payment.

"Don't be in such a hurry, Captain--do sit down. I'll curl you in one minute. And, I say, won't the party renew?"

"Impossible--it's the third renewal."

"But I'll make the thing handsome to you;--indeed I will."

"How much?"

"Will ten pounds do the business?"

"What! offer my principal ten pounds? Are you mad, Eglantine?--A little more of the iron to the left whisker."

"No, I meant for commission."

"Well, I'll see if that will do. The party I deal with, Eglantine, has power, I know, and can defer the matter no doubt. As for me, you know, I'VE nothing to do in the affair, and only act as a friend between you and him. I give you my honour and soul, I do."

"I know you do, my dear sir." The last two speeches were lies. The perfumer knew perfectly well that Mr. Walker would pocket the ten pounds; but he was too easy to care for paying it, and too timid to quarrel with such a powerful friend.

And he had on three different occasions already paid ten pounds' fine for the renewal of the bill in question, all of which bonuses he knew went to his friend Mr. Walker.

Here, too, the reader will perceive what was, in part, the meaning of the word "Agency" on Mr. Walker's door. He was a go-between between money-lenders and borrowers in this world, and certain small sums always remained with him in the course of the transaction. He was an agent for wine, too; an agent for places to be had through the influence of great men; he was an agent for half-a-dozen theatrical people, male and female, and had the interests of the latter especially, it was said, at heart. Such were a few of the means by which this worthy gentleman contrived to support himself, and if, as he was fond of high living, gambling, and pleasures of all kinds, his revenue was not large enough for his expenditure- -why, he got into debt, and settled his bills that way. He was as much at home in the Fleet as in Pall Mall, and quite as happy in the one place as in the other. "That's the way I take things," would this philosopher say. "If I've money, I spend; if I've credit, I borrow; if I'm dunned, I whitewash; and so you can't beat me down." Happy elasticity of temperament! I do believe that, in spite of his misfortunes and precarious position, there was no man in England whose conscience was more calm, and whose slumbers were more tranquil, than those of Captain Howard Walker.

As he was sitting under the hands of Mr. Eglantine, he reverted to "the ladies," whom the latter gentleman professed to expect; said he was a sly dog, a lucky ditto, and asked him if the ladies were handsome.

Eglantine thought there could be no harm in telling a bouncer to a gentleman with whom he was engaged in money transactions; and so, to give the Captain an idea of his solvency and the brilliancy of his future prospects, "Captain," said he, "I've got a hundred and eighty pounds out with you, which you were obliging enough to negotiate for me. Have I, or have I not, two bills out to that amount?"

"Well, my good fellow, you certainly have; and what then?"

"What then? Why, I bet you five pounds to one, that in three months those bills are paid."

"Done! five pounds to one. I take it."

This sudden closing with him made the perfumer rather uneasy; but he was not to pay for three months, and so he said, "Done!" too, and went on: "What would you say if your bills were paid?"

"Not mine; Pike's."

"Well, if Pike's were paid; and the Minorities' man paid, and every single liability I have cleared off; and that Mossrose flung out of winder, and me and my emporium as free as hair?"

"You don't say so? Is Queen Anne dead? and has she left you a fortune? or what's the luck in the wind now?"

"It's better than Queen Anne, or anybody dying. What should you say to seeing in that very place where Mossrose now sits (hang him!)- -seeing the FINEST HEAD OF 'AIR NOW IN EUROPE? A woman, I tell you--a slap-up lovely woman, who, I'm proud to say, will soon be called Mrs. Heglantine, and will bring me five thousand pounds to her fortune."

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