

IS HE POPENJOY?

BY
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTORY—NUMBER ONE

I WOULD that it were possible so to tell a story that a reader should beforehand know every detail of it up to a certain point, or be so circumstanced that he might be supposed to know. In telling the little novelettes of our life, we commence our narrations with the presumption that these details are borne in mind, and though they be all forgotten, the stories come out intelligible at last. 'You remember Mary Walker. Oh yes, you do;—that pretty girl, but such a queer temper! And how she was engaged to marry Harry Jones, and said she wouldn't at the church-door, till her father threatened her with bread and water; and how they have been living ever since as happy as two turtle-doves down in Devonshire, till that scoundrel, Lieutenant Smith, went to Bideford! Smith has been found dead at the bottom of a saw-pit. Nobody's sorry for him. She's in a madhouse at Exeter; and Jones has disappeared, and couldn't have had more than thirty shillings in his pocket.' This is quite as much as anybody ought to want to know previous to the unravelling of the tragedy of the Jones's. But such stories as those I have to tell cannot be written after that fashion. We novelists are constantly twitted with being long; and to the gentlemen who condescend to review us, and who take up our volumes with a view to business rather than pleasure, we must be infinite in length and tedium. But the story must be made intelligible from the beginning, or the real novel readers will not like it. The plan of jumping at once into the middle has been often tried, and sometimes seductively enough for a chapter or two; but the writer still has to hark back, and to begin

again from the beginning—not always very comfortably after the abnormal brightness of his few opening pages; and the reader who is then involved in some ancient family history, or long local explanation, feels himself to have been defrauded. It is as though one were asked to eat boiled mutton after woodcocks, caviare, or macaroni cheese. I hold that it is better to have the boiled mutton first, if boiled mutton there must be.

The story which I have to tell is something in its nature akin to that of poor Mrs. Jones, who was happy enough down in Devonshire till that wicked Lieutenant Smith came and persecuted her; not quite so tragic, perhaps, as it is stained neither by murder nor madness. But before I can hope to interest readers in the perplexed details of the life of a not unworthy lady, I must do more than remind them that they do know, or might have known, or should have known, the antecedents of my personages. I must let them understand how it came to pass that so pretty, so pert, so gay, so good a girl as Mary Lovelace, without any great fault on her part, married a man so grim, so gaunt, so sombre, and so old as Lord George Germain. It will not suffice to say that she had done so. A hundred and twenty little incidents must be dribbled into the reader's intelligence, many of them, let me hope, in such manner that he shall himself be insensible to the process. But unless I make each one of them understood and appreciated by my ingenious, open-hearted, rapid reader—by my reader who will always have his fingers impatiently ready to turn the page—he will, I know, begin to masticate the real kernel of my story with infinite prejudices against Mary Lovelace.

Mary Lovelace was born in a country parsonage; but at the age of fourteen, when her life was in truth beginning, was transferred by her father to the Deanery of Brotherton. Dean Lovelace had been a

fortunate man in life. When a poor curate, a man of very humble origin, with none of what we commonly call Church interest, with nothing to recommend him but a handsome person, moderate education, and a quick intellect, he had married a lady with a considerable fortune, whose family had bought for him a living. Here he preached himself into fame. It is not at all to be implied from this that he had not deserved the fame he acquired. He had been active and resolute in his work, holding opinions which, if not peculiar, were at any rate advanced, and never being afraid of the opinions which he held. His bishop had not loved him, nor had he made himself dear to the bench of bishops generally. He had the reputation of having been in early life a sporting parson. He had written a book which had been characterised as tending to infidelity, and had more than once been invited to state dogmatically what was his own belief. He had never quite done so, and had then been made a dean. Brotherton, as all the world knows, is a most interesting little city, neither a Manchester nor a Salisbury; full of architectural excellences, given to literature, and fond of hospitality. The Bishop of Brotherton—who did not love the Dean—was not a general favourite, being strict, ascetic, and utterly hostile to all compromises. At first there were certain hostile passages between him and the new Dean. But the Dean, who was, and is, urbanity itself, won the day, and soon became certainly the most popular man in Brotherton. His wife's fortune doubled his clerical income, and he lived in all respects as a dean ought to live. His wife had died very shortly after his promotion, and he had been left with one only daughter on whom to lavish his cares and his affection.

Now we must turn for a few lines to the family of Lord George Germain. Lord George was the brother of the Marquis of Brotherton, whose family residence was at Manor Cross, about nine miles

from the city. The wealth of the family of the Germans was not equal to their rank, and the circumstances of the family were not made more comfortable by the peculiarities of the present Marquis. He was an idle, self-indulgent, ill-conditioned man, who found that it suited his tastes better to live in Italy, where his means were ample, than on his own property, where he would have been comparatively a poor man. And he had a mother and four sisters, and a brother with whom he would hardly have known how to deal had he remained at Manor Cross. As it was, he allowed them to keep the house, while he simply took the revenue of the estate. With the Marquis I do not know that it will be necessary to trouble the reader much at present. The old Marchioness and her daughters lived always at Manor Cross, in possession of a fine old house in which they could have entertained half the county, and a magnificent park—which, however, was let for grazing up to the garden-gates—and a modest income unequal to the splendour which should have been displayed by the inhabitants of Manor Cross.

And here also lived Lord George Germain, to whom at a very early period of his life had been entrusted the difficult task of living as the head of his family with little or no means for the purpose. When the old Marquis died—very suddenly, and soon after the Dean's coming to Brotherton—the widow had her jointure, some two thousand a year, out of the property, and the younger children had each a small settled sum. That the four ladies—Sarah, Alice, Susanna, and Amelia—should have sixteen thousand pounds among them, did not seem to be so very much amiss to those who knew how poor was the Germain family; but what was Lord George to do with four thousand pounds, and no means of earning a shilling? He had been at Eton, and had taken a degree at Oxford with credit, but had gone into no profession. There was a living in the family, and both father and

mother had hoped that he would consent to take orders; but he had declined to do so, and there had seemed to be nothing for him but to come and live at Manor Cross. Then the old Marquis had died, and the elder brother, who had long been abroad, remained abroad. Lord George, who was the youngest of the family, and at that time about five-and-twenty, remained at Manor Cross, and became not only ostensibly but in very truth the managing head of the family.

He was a man whom no one could despise, and in whom few could find much to blame. In the first place he looked his poverty in the face, and told himself that he was a very poor man. His bread he might earn by looking after his mother and sisters, and he knew no other way in which he could do so. He was a just steward, spending nothing to gratify his own whims, acknowledging on all sides that he had nothing of his own, till some began to think that he was almost proud of his poverty. Among the ladies of the family, his mother and sisters, it was of course said that George must marry money. In such a position there is nothing else that the younger son of a marquis can do. But Lord George was a person somewhat difficult of instruction in such a matter. His mother was greatly afraid of him. Among his sisters Lady Sarah alone dared to say much to him; and even to her teaching on this subject he turned a very deaf ear. 'Quite so, George,' she said; 'quite so. No man with a spark of spirit would marry a woman for her money'—and she laid a great stress on the word 'for'—'but I do not see why a lady who has money should be less fit to be loved than one who has none. Miss Barm is a most charming young woman, of excellent manners, admirably educated, if not absolutely handsome, quite of distinguished appearance, and she has forty thousand pounds. We all liked her when she was here.' But there came a very black frown upon Lord George's brow, and then

even Lady Sarah did not dare to speak again in favour of Miss Barm.

Then there came a terrible blow. Lord George Germain was in love with his cousin, Miss De Baron! It would be long to tell, and perhaps unnecessary, how that young lady had made herself feared by the ladies of Manor Cross. Her father, a man of birth and fortune, but not, perhaps, with the best reputation in the world, had married a Germain of the last generation, and lived, when in the country, about twenty miles from Brotherton. He was a good deal on the turf, spent much of his time at card-playing clubs, and was generally known as a fast man. But he paid his way, had never put himself beyond the pale of society, and was, of course, a gentleman. As to Adelaide De Baron, no one doubted her dash, her wit, her grace, or her toilet. Some also gave her credit for beauty; but there were those who said that, though she would behave herself decently at Manor Cross and houses of that class, she could be loud elsewhere. Such was the lady whom Lord George loved, and it may be conceived that this passion was distressing to the ladies of Manor Cross. In the first place, Miss De Baron's fortune was doubtful, and could not be large; and then—she certainly was not such a wife as Lady Brotherton and her daughters desired for the one male hope of the family.

But Lord George was very resolute, and for a time it seemed to them all that Miss De Baron—of whom the reader will see much if he go through with our story—was not unwilling to share the poverty of her noble lover. Of Lord George personally something must be said. He was a tall, handsome, dark-browed man, silent generally, and almost gloomy, looking, as such men do, as though he were always revolving deep things in his mind, but revolving in truth things not very deep—how far the money would go, and whether it would be possible to get a new pair of

carriage-horses for his mother. Birth and culture had given to him a look of intellect greater than he possessed; but I would not have it thought that he traded on this, or endeavoured to seem other than he was. He was simple, conscientious, absolutely truthful, full of prejudices, and weak-minded. Early in life he had been taught to entertain certain ideas as to religion by those with whom he had lived at college, and had therefore refused to become a clergyman. The bishop of the diocese had attacked him; but, though weak, he was obstinate. The Dean and he had become friends, and so he had learned to think himself in advance of the world. But yet he knew himself to be a backward, slow, unappreciative man. He was one who could bear reproach from no one else, but who never praised himself even to himself.

But we must return to his love, which is that which now concerns us. His mother and sisters altogether failed to persuade him. Week after week he went over to Baronscourt, and at last threw himself at Adelaide's feet. This was five years after his father's death, when he was already thirty years old. Miss De Baron, though never a favourite at Manor Cross, knew intimately the history of the family. The present Marquis was over forty, and as yet unmarried;—but then Lord George was absolutely a pauper. In that way she might probably become a marchioness; but then of what use would life be to her, should she be doomed for the next twenty years to live simply as one of the ladies of Manor Cross? She consulted her father, but he seemed to be quite indifferent, merely reminding her that, though he would be ready to do everything handsomely for her wedding, she would have no fortune till after his death. She consulted her glass, and told herself that, without self-praise, she must regard herself as the most beautiful woman of her own acquaintance. She consulted her heart, and found that in that direction

she need not trouble herself. It would be very nice to be a marchioness, but she certainly was not in love with Lord George. He was handsome, no doubt—very handsome—but she was not sure that she cared much for men being handsome. She liked men that ‘had some go in them,’ who were perhaps a little fast, and who sympathised with her own desire for amusement. She could not bring herself to fall in love with Lord George. But then, the rank of a marquis is very high! She told Lord George that she must take time to consider.

When a young lady takes time to consider she has, as a rule, given way; Lord George felt it to be so, and was triumphant. The ladies at Manor Cross thought that they saw what was coming, and were despondent. The whole country declared that Lord George was about to marry Miss De Baron. The country feared that they would be very poor; but the recompense would come at last, as the present Marquis was known not to be a marrying man. Lady Sarah was mute with despair. Lady Alice had declared that there was nothing for them but to make the best of it. Lady Susanna, who had high ideas of aristocratic duty, thought that George was forgetting himself. Lady Amelia, who had been snubbed by Miss De Baron, shut herself up and wept. The Marchioness took to her bed. Then, exactly at the same time, two things happened, both of which were felt to be of vital importance at Manor Cross. Miss De Baron wrote a most determined refusal to her lover, and old Mr. Tallowax died. Now old Mr. Tallowax had been Dean Lovelace’s father-in-law, and had never had a child but she who had been the Dean’s wife.

Lord George did in truth suffer dreadfully. There are men to whom such a disappointment as this causes enduring physical pain—as though they had become suddenly affected with some acute and yet lasting disease. And there are men, too, who suffer

the more because they cannot conceal the pain. Such a man was Lord George. He shut himself up for months at Manor Cross, and would see no one. At first it was his intention to try again, but very shortly after the letter to himself came one from Miss De Baron to Lady Alice, declaring that she was about to be married immediately to one Mr. Houghton; and that closed the matter. Mr. Houghton's history was well known to the Manor Cross family. He was a friend of Mr. De Baron, very rich, almost old enough to be the girl's father, and a great gambler. But he had a house in Berkeley Square, kept a stud of horses in Northamptonshire, and was much thought of at Newmarket. Adelaide De Baron explained to Lady Alice that the marriage had been made up by her father, whose advice she had thought it her duty to take. The news was told to Lord George, and then it was found expedient never to mention further the name of Miss De Baron within the walls of Manor Cross.

But the death of Mr. Tallowax was also very important. Of late the Dean of Brotherton had become very intimate at Manor Cross. For some years the ladies had been a little afraid of him, as they were by no means given to free opinions. But he made his way. They were decidedly high; the Bishop was notoriously low; and thus, in a mild manner, without malignity on either side, Manor Cross and the Palace fell out. Their own excellent young clergyman was snubbed in reference to his church postures, and Lady Sarah was offended. But the Dean's manners were perfect. He never trod on any one's toes. He was rich, and, as far as birth went, nobody—but he knew how much was due to the rank of the Germaines. In all matters he obliged them, and had lately made the Deanery very pleasant to Lady Alice—to whom a widowed canon at Brotherton was supposed to be partial. The interest between the Deanery and Manor Cross was quite close; and now

Mr. Tallowax had died, leaving the greater part of his money to the Dean's daughter.

When a man suffers from disappointed love he requires consolation. Lady Sarah boldly declared her opinion—in female conclave of course—that one pretty girl is as good to a man as another, and might be a great deal better if she were at the same time better mannered and better dowered than the other. Mary Lovelace, when her grandfather died, was only seventeen. Lord George was at that time over thirty. But a man of thirty is still a young man, and a girl of seventeen may be a young woman. If the man be not more than fifteen years older than the woman the difference of age can hardly be regarded as an obstacle. And then Mary was much loved at Manor Cross. She had been a most engaging child, was clever, well-educated, very pretty, with a nice sparkling way, fond of pleasure, no doubt, but not as yet instructed to be fast. And now she would have at once thirty thousand pounds, and in course of time would be her father's heiress.

All the ladies at Manor Cross put their heads together—as did also Mr. Canon Holdenough, who, while these things had been going on, had been accepted by Lady Alice. They fooled Lord George to the top of his bent, smoothing him down softly amidst the pangs of his love, not suggesting Mary Lovelace at first, but still in all things acting in that direction. And they so far succeeded that within twelve months of the marriage of Adelaide De Baron to Mr. Houghton, when Mary Lovelace was not yet nineteen and Lord George was thirty-three, with some few grey hairs on his handsome head, Lord George did go over to the Deanery and offer himself as a husband to Mary Lovelace.