

THE
BELTON ESTATE
By ANTHONY TROLLOPE

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CONTENTS

| CHAP. | PAGE |
|---|------|
| I. THE REMNANTS OF THE AMEDROZ FAMILY | 1 |
| II. THE HEIR PROPOSES TO VISIT HIS COUSINS | 17 |
| III. WILL BELTON | 27 |
| IV. SAFE AGAINST LOVE-MAKING | 42 |
| V. NOT SAFE AGAINST LOVE-MAKING | 52 |
| VI. SAFE AGAINST LOVE-MAKING ONCE AGAIN | 65 |
| VII. MISS AMEDROZ GOES TO PERIVALE | 77 |
| VIII. CAPTAIN AYLMER MEETS HIS CONSTITUENTS | 90 |
| IX. CAPTAIN AYLMER'S PROMISE TO HIS AUNT | 103 |
| X. SHOWING HOW CAPTAIN AYLMER KEPT HIS PROMISE | 115 |
| XI. MISS AMEDROZ IS TOO CANDID BY HALF | 128 |
| XII. MISS AMEDROZ RETURNS HOME | 141 |
| XIII. MR. WILLIAM BELTON TAKES A WALK IN THE COUNTRY | 155 |
| XIV. MR. WILLIAM BELTON TAKES A WALK IN LONDON | 168 |
| XV. EVIL WORDS | 183 |
| XVI. THE HEIR'S SECOND VISIT TO BELTON | 197 |
| XVII. AYLMER PARK | 211 |
| XVIII. MRS. ASKERTON'S STORY | 226 |
| XIX. MISS AMEDROZ HAS ANOTHER CHANCE | 240 |

| CHAP. | | PAGE |
|---------|---|------|
| XX. | WILLIAM BELTON DOES NOT GO OUT HUNTING | 251 |
| XXI. | MRS. ASKERTON'S GENEROSITY | 268 |
| XXII. | PASSIONATE PLEADING | 279 |
| XXIII. | THE LAST DAY AT BELTON | 295 |
| XXIV. | THE GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY HOTEL | 310 |
| XXV. | MISS AMEDROZ HAS SOME HASHED CHICKEN | 323 |
| XXVI. | THE AYLMER PARK HASHED CHICKEN COMES TO AN END | 337 |
| XXVII. | ONCE MORE BACK TO BELTON | 352 |
| XXVIII. | MISS AMEDROZ IS PURSUED | 367 |
| XXIX. | THERE IS NOTHING TO TELL | 379 |
| XXX. | MARY BELTON | 393 |
| XXXI. | TAKING POSSESSION | 405 |
| XXXII. | CONCLUSION | 422 |

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CHAPTER I

THE REMNANTS OF THE AMEDROZ FAMILY

MRS. AMEDROZ, the wife of Bernard Amedroz, Esq., of Belton Castle, and mother of Charles and Clara Amedroz, died when those children were only eight and six years old, thereby subjecting them to the greatest misfortune which children born in that sphere of life can be made to suffer. And, in the case of this boy and girl, the misfortune was aggravated greatly by the peculiarities of the father's character. Mr. Amedroz was not a bad man,—as men are held to be bad in the world's esteem. He was not vicious,—was not a gambler or a drunkard,—was not self-indulgent to a degree that brought upon him any reproach ; nor was he regardless of his children. But he was an idle, thriftless man, who, at the age of sixty-seven, when the reader will first make his acquaintance, had as yet done no good in the world whatever. Indeed he had done terrible evil ; for his son Charles was now dead,—had perished by his own hand,—and the state of things which had brought about this woeful event had been chiefly due to the father's neglect.

Belton Castle is a pretty country seat, standing in a small but beautifully wooded park, close under the Quantock hills in Somersetshire ; and the little town of Belton clusters round the park gates. Few Englishmen know the scenery of England well, and the prettinesses of Somersetshire are among those which are the least known. But the Quantock hills are very lovely, with their rich valleys lying close among them, and their outlying moorlands running off towards Dulverton and the borders of Devonshire,—moorlands which are not flat, like Salisbury Plain, but are broken

into ravines and deep watercourses and rugged dells hither and thither; where old oaks are standing, in which life seems to have dwindled down to the last spark; but the last spark is still there, and the old oaks give forth their scanty leaves from year to year.

In among the hills, somewhat off the high road from Minehead to Taunton, and about five miles from the sea, stands the little town, or village, of Belton, and the modern house of Mr. Amedroz, which is called Belton Castle. The village—for it is in truth no more, though it still maintains a charter for a market, and there still exists on Tuesdays some pretence of an open sale of grain and butcher's meat in the square before the church-gate—contains about two thousand persons. That and the whole parish of Belton did once—and that not long ago—belong to the Amedroz family. They had inherited it from the Beltons of old, an Amedroz having married the heiress of the family. And as the parish is large, stretching away to Exmoor on one side and almost to the sea on the other, containing the hamlet of Redicote, lying on the Taunton high road,—Redicote, where the post-office is placed, a town almost in itself, and one which is now much more prosperous than Belton,—as the property when it came to the first Amedroz had limits such as these, the family had been considerable in the county. But these limits had been straitened in the days of the grandfather and the father of Bernard Amedroz; and he, when he married a Miss Winterfield of Taunton, was thought to have done very well, in that mortgages were paid off the property with his wife's money to such an extent as to leave him in clear possession of an estate that gave him two thousand a year. As Mr. Amedroz had no grand neighbours near him, as the place is remote and the living therefore cheap, and as with this income there was no question of annual visits to London, Mr. and Mrs. Amedroz might have done very well with such of the good things of the world as had fallen to their lot. And had the wife lived, such would probably have been the case; for the Winter-

fields were known to be prudent people. But Mrs. Amedroz had died young, and things with Bernard Amedroz had gone badly.

And yet the evil had not been so much with him as with that terrible boy of his. The father had been nearly forty when he married. He had then never done any good ; but as neither had he done much harm, the friends of the family had argued well of his future career. After him, unless he should leave a son behind him, there would be no Amedroz left among the Quantock hills ; and by some arrangement in respect to that Winterfield money which came to him on his marriage,—the Winterfields having a long-dated connexion with the Beltons of old,—the Amedroz property was, at Bernard's marriage, entailed back upon a distant Belton cousin, one Will Belton, whom no one had seen for many years, but who was by blood nearer the squire in default of children of his own than any other of his relatives. And now Will Belton was the heir to Belton Castle ; for Charles Amedroz, at the age of twenty-seven, had found the miseries of the world to be too many for him, and had put an end to them and to himself.

Charles had been a clever fellow,—a very clever fellow in the eyes of his father. Bernard Amedroz knew that he himself was not a clever fellow, and admired his son accordingly ; and when Charles had been expelled from Harrow for some boyish freak,—in his vengeance against a neighbouring farmer, who had reported to the school authorities the doings of a few beagles upon his land, Charles had cut off the heads of all the trees in a young fir plantation,—his father was proud of the exploit. When he was rusticated a second time from Trinity, and when the father received an intimation that his son's name had better be taken from the College books, the squire was not so well pleased ; but even then he found some delight in the stories which reached him of his son's vagaries ; and when the young man commenced Bohemian life in London, his father did nothing to restrain him. Then

there came the old story—debts, endless debts ; and lies, endless lies. During the two years before his death, his father paid for him, or undertook to pay, nearly ten thousand pounds, sacrificing the life assurances which were to have made provision for his daughter ; sacrificing, to a great extent, his own life income,—sacrificing everything, so that the property might not be utterly ruined at his death. That Charles Amedroz should be a brighter, greater man than any other Amedroz, had still been the father's pride. At the last visit which Charles had paid to Belton his father had called upon him to pledge himself solemnly that his sister should not be made to suffer by what had been done for him. Within a month of that time he had blown his brains out in his London lodgings, thus making over the entire property to Will Belton at his father's death. At that last pretended settlement with his father and his father's lawyer, he had kept back the mention of debts as heavy nearly as those to which he had owned ; and there were debts of honour, too, of which he had not spoken, trusting to the next event at Newmarket to set him right. The next event at Newmarket had set him more wrong than ever, and so there had come an end to everything with Charles Amedroz.

This had happened in the spring, and the afflicted father—afflicted with the double sorrow of his son's terrible death and his daughter's ruin—had declared that he would turn his face to the wall and die. But the old squire's health, though far from strong, was stronger than he had deemed it, and his feelings, sharp enough, were less sharp than he thought them ; and when a month had passed by, he had discovered that it would be better that he should live, in order that his daughter might still have bread to eat and a house of her own over her head. Though he was now an impoverished man, there was still left to him the means of keeping up the old home ; and he told himself that it must, if possible, be so kept that a few pounds annually might be put by for Clara. The old carriage-

horses were sold, and the park was let to a farmer, up to the hall door of the castle. So much the squire could do ; but as to the putting by of the few pounds, any dependence on such exertion as that on his part would, we may say, be very precarious.

Belton Castle was not in truth a castle. Immediately before the front door, so near to the house as merely to allow of a broad road running between it and the entrance porch, there stood an old tower, which gave its name to the residence,—an old square tower, up which the Amedroz boys for three generations had been able to climb by means of the ivy and broken stones in one of the inner corners,—and this tower was a remnant of a real castle that had once protected the village of Belton. The house itself was an ugly residence, three stories high, built in the time of George II, with low rooms and long passages, and an immense number of doors. It was a large unattractive house,—unattractive that is, as regarded its own attributes,—but made interesting by the beauty of the small park in which it stood. Belton Park did not, perhaps, contain much above a hundred acres, but the land was so broken into knolls and valleys, in so many places was the rock seen to be cropping up through the verdure, there were in it so many stunted old oaks, so many points of vantage for the lover of scenery, that no one would believe it to be other than a considerable domain. The farmer who took it, and who would not under any circumstances undertake to pay more than seventeen shillings an acre for it, could not be made to think that it was in any way considerable. But Belton Park, since first it was made a park, had never before been regarded in this fashion. Farmer Stovey, of the Grange, was the first man of that class who had ever assumed the right to pasture his sheep in Belton chase,—as the people around were still accustomed to call the woodlands of the estate.

It was full summer at Belton, and four months had now passed since the dreadful tidings had reached the castle. It was full summer, and the people of the

village were again going about their ordinary business ; and the shop-girls with their lovers from Redicote were again to be seen walking among the oaks in the park on a Sunday evening ; and the world in that district of Somersetshire was getting itself back into its grooves. The fate of the young heir had disturbed the grooves greatly, and had taught many in those parts to feel that the world was coming to an end. They had not loved young Amedroz, for he had been haughty when among them, and there had been wrongs committed by the dissolute young squire, and grief had come from his misdoings upon more than one household ; but to think that he should have destroyed himself with his own hand ! And then, to think that Miss Clara would become a beggar when the old squire should die ! All the neighbours around understood the whole history of the entail, and knew that the property was to go to Will Belton. Now Will Belton was not a gentleman ! So, at least, said the Belton folk, who had heard that the heir had been brought up as a farmer somewhere in Norfolk. Will Belton had once been at the Castle as a boy, now some fifteen years ago, and then there had sprung up a great quarrel between him and his distant cousin Charles ;—and Will, who was rough and large of stature, had thrashed the smaller boy severely ; and the thing had grown to have dimensions larger than those which generally attend the quarrels of boys ; and Will had said something which had shown how well he understood his position in reference to the estate :—and Charles had hated him. So Will had gone, and had been no more seen among the oaks whose name he bore. And the people, in spite of his name, regarded him as an interloper. To them, with their short memories and scanty knowledge of the past, Amedroz was more honourable than Belton, and they looked upon the coming man as an intruder. Why should not Miss Clara have the property ? Miss Clara had never done harm to any one !

Things got back into their old grooves, and at the end of the third month the squire was once more seen

in the old family pew at church. He was a large man, who had been very handsome, and who now, in his yellow leaf, was not without a certain beauty of manliness. He wore his hair and his beard long; before his son's death they were grey, but now they were very white. And though he stooped, there was still a dignity in his slow step,—a dignity that came to him from nature rather than from any effort. He was a man who, in fact, did little or nothing in the world,—whose life had been very useless; but he had been gifted with such a presence that he looked as though he were one of God's nobler creatures. Though always dignified he was ever affable, and the poor liked him better than they might have done had he passed his time in searching out their wants and supplying them. They were proud of their squire, though he had done nothing for them. It was something to them to have a man who could so carry himself sitting in the family pew in their parish church. They knew that he was poor, but they all declared that he was never mean. He was a real gentleman,—was this last Amedroz of the family; therefore they curtsied low, and bowed on his reappearance among them, and made all those signs of reverential awe which are common to the poor when they feel reverence for the presence of a superior.

Clara was there with him, but she had shown herself in the pew for four or five weeks before this. She had not been at home when the fearful news had reached Belton, being at that time with a certain lady who lived on the farther side of the county, at Perivale,—a certain Mrs. Winterfield, born a Folliot, a widow, who stood to Miss Amedroz in the place of an aunt. Mrs. Winterfield was, in truth, the sister of a gentleman who had married Clara's aunt,—there having been marriages and intermarriages between the Winterfields and the Folliots and the Belton-Amedroz families. With this lady in Perivale, which I maintain to be the dullest little town in England, Miss Amedroz was staying when the news reached her father, and when it was brought direct from London to herself. Instantly she

had hurried home, making the journey with all imaginable speed though her heart was all but broken within her bosom. She had found her father stricken to the ground, and it was the more necessary, therefore, that she should exert herself. It would not do that she also should yield to that longing for death which terrible calamities often produce for a season.

Clara Amedroz, when she first heard the news of her brother's fate, had felt that she was for ever crushed to the ground. She had known too well what had been the nature of her brother's life, but she had not expected or feared any such termination to his career as this which had now come upon him—to the terrible affliction of all belonging to him. She felt at first, as did also her father, that she and he were annihilated as regards this world, not only by an enduring grief, but also by a disgrace which would never allow her again to hold up her head. And for many a long year much of this feeling clung to her;—clung to her much more strongly than to her father. But strength was hers to perceive, even before she had reached her home, that it was her duty to repress both the feeling of shame and the sorrow, as far as they were capable of repression. Her brother had been weak, and in his weakness had sought a coward's escape from the ills of the world around him. She must not also be a coward! Bad as life might be to her henceforth, she must endure it with such fortitude as she could muster. So resolving she returned to her father, and was able to listen to his railings with a fortitude that was essentially serviceable both to him and to herself.

'Both of you! Both of you!' the unhappy father had said in his woe. 'The wretched boy has destroyed you as much as himself!' 'No, sir,' she had answered, with a forbearance in her misery, which, terrible as was the effort, she forced herself to accomplish for his sake. 'It is not so. No thought of that need add to your grief. My poor brother has not hurt me;—not in the way you mean.' 'He has ruined us all,' said the father; 'root and branch, man and woman, old and

young, house and land. He has brought the family to an end ;—ah me, to such an end !’ After that the name of him who had taken himself from among them was not mentioned between the father and daughter, and Clara settled herself to the duties of her new life, striving to live as though there was no great sorrow around her—as though no cloud-storm had burst over her head.

The family lawyer, who lived at Taunton, had communicated the fact of Charles’s death to Mr. Belton, and Belton had acknowledged the letter with the ordinary expressions of regret. The lawyer had alluded to the entail, saying that it was improbable that Mr. Amedroz would have another son. To this Belton had replied that for his cousin Clara’s sake he hoped that the squire’s life might be long spared. The lawyer smiled as he read the wish, thinking to himself that luckily no wish on the part of Will Belton could influence his old client either for good or evil. What man, let alone what lawyer, will ever believe in the sincerity of such a wish as that expressed by the heir to a property ? And yet where is the man who will not declare to himself that such, under such circumstances, would be his own wish ?

Clara Amedroz at this time was not a very young lady. She had already passed her twenty-fifth birthday, and in manners, appearance, and habits was, at any rate, as old as her age. She made no pretence to youth, speaking of herself always as one whom circumstances required to take upon herself age in advance of her years. She did not dress young, or live much with young people, or correspond with other girls by means of crossed letters ; nor expect that, for her, young pleasures should be provided. Life had always been serious with her ; but now, we may say, since the terrible tragedy in the family, it must be solemn as well as serious. The memory of her brother must always be upon her ; and the memory also of the fact that her father was now an impoverished man, on whose behalf it was her duty to care that every shilling spent in the

house did its full twelve pennies' worth of work. There was a mixture in this of deep tragedy and of little cares, which seemed to destroy for her the poetry as well as the pleasure of life. The poetry and tragedy might have gone hand in hand together; and so might the cares and pleasures of life have done, had there been no black sorrow of which she must be ever mindful. But it was her lot to have to scrutinize the butcher's bill as she was thinking of her brother's fate; and to work daily among small household things while the spectre of her brother's corpse was ever before her eyes.

A word must be said to explain how it had come to pass that the life led by Miss Amedroz had been more than commonly serious before that tragedy had befallen the family. The name of the lady who stood to Clara in the place of an aunt has been already mentioned. When a girl has a mother, her aunt may be little or nothing to her. But when the mother is gone, if there be an aunt unimpeded with other family duties, then the family duties of that aunt begin—and are assumed sometimes with great vigour. Such had been the case with Mrs. Winterfield. No woman ever lived, perhaps, with more conscientious ideas of her duty as a woman than Mrs. Winterfield of Prospect Place, Perivale. And this, as I say it, is intended to convey no scoff against that excellent lady. She was an excellent lady—unselfish, given to self-restraint, generous, pious, looking to find in her religion a safe path through life—a path as safe as the facts of Adam's fall would allow her feet to find. She was a woman fearing much for others, but fearing also much for herself, striving to maintain her house in godliness, hating sin, and struggling with the weakness of her humanity so that she might not allow herself to hate the sinners. But her hatred for the sin she found herself bound at all times to pronounce—to show it by some act at all seasons. To fight the devil was her work—was the appointed work of every living soul, if only living souls could be made to acknowledge the necessity of the

task. Now an aunt of that kind, when she assumes her duties towards a motherless niece, is apt to make life serious.

But, it will be said, Clara Amedroz could have rebelled ; and Clara's father was hardly made of such stuff that obedience to the aunt would be enforced on her by parental authority. Doubtless Clara could have rebelled against her aunt. Indeed, I do not know that she had hitherto been very obedient. But there were family facts about these Winterfield connexions which would have made it difficult for her to ignore her so-called aunt, even had she wished to do so. Mrs. Winterfield had twelve hundred a year at her own disposal, and she was the only person related to the Amedroz family from whom Mr. Amedroz had a right to have expectations on his daughter's behalf. Clara had, in a measure, been claimed by the lady, and the father had made good the lady's claim, and Clara had acknowledged that a portion of her life was due to the demands of Perivale. These demands had undoubtedly made her life serious.

Life at Perivale was a very serious thing. As regards amusement, ordinarily so called, the need of any such institution was not acknowledged at Prospect House. Food, drink, and raiment were acknowledged to be necessary to humanity, and, in accordance with the rules of that house, they were supplied in plenty, and good of their kind. Such ladies as Mrs. Winterfield generally keep good tables, thinking no doubt that the eatables should do honour to the grace that is said for them. And Mrs. Winterfield herself always wore a thick black silk dress,—not rusty or dowdy with age,—but with some gloss of the silk on it ; giving away, with secret, underhand, undiscovered charity, her old dresses to another lady of her own sort, on whom fortune had not bestowed twelve hundred a year. And Mrs. Winterfield kept a low, four-wheeled, one-horsed phaeton, in which she made her pilgrimages among the poor of Perivale, driven by the most solemn of stable-boys, dressed up in a great white coat, the most

priggish of hats, and white cotton gloves. At the rate of five miles an hour was she driven about, and this driving was to her the amusement of life. But such an occupation to Clara Amedroz assisted to make life serious.

In person Mrs. Winterfield was tall and thin, wearing on her brow thin braids of false hair. She had suffered much from acute ill health, and her jaws were sunken, and her eyes were hollow, and there was a look of woe about her which seemed ever to be telling of her own sorrows in this world and of the sorrows of others in the world to come. Ill-nature was written on her face, but in this her face was a false face. She had the manners of a cross, peevish woman; but her manners also were false, and gave no proper idea of her character. But still, such as she was, she made life very serious to those who were called upon to dwell with her.

I need, I hope, hardly say that a young lady such as Miss Amedroz, even though she had reached the age of twenty-five,—for at the time to which I am now alluding she had nearly done so,—and was not young of her age, had formed for herself no plan of life in which her aunt's money figured as a motive power. She had gone to Perivale when she was very young, because she had been told to do so, and had continued to go, partly from obedience, partly from habit, and partly from affection. An aunt's dominion, when once well established in early years, cannot easily be thrown altogether aside,—even though a young lady have a will of her own. Now Clara Amedroz had a strong will of her own, and did not at all—at any rate in these latter days—belong to that school of divinity in which her aunt shone almost as a professor. And this circumstance, also, added to the seriousness of her life. But in regard to her aunt's money she had entertained no established hopes; and when her aunt opened her mind to her on that subject, a few days before the arrival of the fatal news at Perivale, Clara, though she was somewhat surprised, was by no means disappointed. Now there was a certain Captain Aylmer in the question,

of whom in this opening chapter it will be necessary to say a few words.

Captain Frederic Folliott Aylmer was, in truth, the nephew of Mrs. Winterfield, whereas Clara Amedroz was not, in truth, her niece. And Captain Aylmer was also Member of Parliament for the little borough of Perivale, returned altogether on the Low Church interest,—for a devotion to which, and for that alone, Perivale was noted among boroughs. These facts together added not a little to Mrs. Winterfield's influence and professorial power in the place, and gave a dignity to the one-horse chaise which it might not otherwise have possessed. But Captain Aylmer was only the second son of his father, Sir Anthony Aylmer, who had married a Miss Folliott, sister of our Mrs. Winterfield. On Frederic Aylmer his mother's estate was settled. That and Mrs. Winterfield's property lay in the neighbourhood of Perivale; and now, on the occasion to which I am alluding, Mrs. Winterfield thought it necessary to tell Clara that the property must all go together. She had thought about it, and had doubted about it, and had prayed about it, and now she found that such a disposition of it was her duty.

'I am quite sure you're right, aunt,' Clara had said. She knew very well what had come of that provision which her father had attempted to make for her, and knew also how great were her father's expectations in regard to Mrs. Winterfield's money.

'I hope I am; but I have thought it right to tell you. I shall feel myself bound to tell Frederic. I have had many doubts, but I think I am right.'

'I am sure you are, aunt. What would he think of me if, at some future time, he should have to find that I had been in his way?'

'The future time will not be long now, my dear.'

'I hope it may; but long or short, it is better so.'

'I think it is, my dear; I think it is. I think it is my duty.'

It must be understood that Captain Aylmer was member for Perivale on the Low Church interest, and