

**WHAT YOU WILL.  
AN ARREGULAR  
ROMANCE**

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What You Will. An Arregular Romance by Anonymous

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An Irregular Romance



LONDON

JOHN W. PARKER AND SON WEST STRAND

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M D C C C L V I I I

[THE AUTHOR RESERVES THE RIGHT OF TRANSLATION]

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## CHAPTER I.

‘THE FACES IN THE FIRE.’

IT is night; a night given up to the wind and the rain. The wind, speeding on its mysterious journey, hurries wildly over the black, tempestuous seas—black, save where the waves break in foam, or chafe angrily against headland and bluff. Far out of sight of land it whistles through the cordage and shrouds of tossing ships, raising huge mountainous swells, which stagger them with successive blows, and dash the frothed foam-flakes over the star of light which gleams at the binnacle, and over the drenched sou'-wester of the man at the wheel: a time when nervous voyagers turn restlessly in their narrow berths, as in their broken dreams home-sights and home-sounds visit them again. Drifting the salt spray for miles inland, the wild wind scours the barren mountain tops, deserted by all living things but the eagle, or hawk, or screaming curlew. The rain-cloud, dense and fringed, pours its waters over hill, and meadow, and fallow. The wind drives

the rain in the teeth of the express train as it gleams forth out of the tunnel, and especially when it shoots across the steep embankment, so that the driver is glad to get the shelter of his engine, and looks sharply out into the darkness for the down train that is due, whose signal lamps, when at last he sights them, are dim and halo'd by the blinding rain. The wind is moaning sadly, and it dies away in fitful gusts.

Now it shakes and rustles the withered oak leaves in the hedge-row, and the knotted oak boughs over head creak dismally. Now the rain falls, not in a downright torrent, but by fits and starts, enveloping the slow and jaded wayfarer in a cold, damp haze. Now the wind drifts it in a sprinkling shower against cottage casements, from which the last lights of the winter evening are dying out. The wind, strange, mysterious power; invisible, intangible, but how strong! Fickle, too, in its moods as a child; now all laughter, and now full of sobs and moans! Very different is it to-night from that playful breeze which, in the soft summer noons of six months back, had sported over down and woodland, breathing of balmy odours as it sucked the sweet breath of lilies, and left them pale and wan. Where are the green leaves with which it toyed? They are lying dank and rotten at the foot of the parent tree which has thrown them off, and which rises bare, and sombre, and solemn, tapering off from the huge

trunk, moss-grown and patched with lichens, through each jagged and tortuous limb, up to the small interlacing fibres, which the wind breaks and scatters at its will. The cold, deserted birds'-nests, high up in the branches of the dripping copse, serve as so many cups to hold the rain. But enough of description. Everything may be summed up in a few words. The wind and the rain are without, and darkness that can be felt.

But in the house to which, on this night of all nights, we would bring you, there is light and warmth enough. You can see through the chinks of the window that there is a blazing fire in the sitting-room, and drenched and tired wanderers look wistfully thereat, as they pass up the village street, to find shelter and fire where best they can; for the house is one of a long line of straggling dwellings which make up the village of Acton Bars. And were it daylight, you might see, by many a carved scutcheon on the stone gateway, that it was once something better than what it is now,— a half ruinous farmhouse, whose best rooms are rented by a gentleman, who finds there sufficient attraction in the quiet and seclusion, of which there is more than enough at Acton Bars. Let us enter his room. If my reader is fond of books, his eyes will be gladdened; for there they are, piled in scholarly confusion from floor to ceiling. Two sides of the room are lined with them. Geological maps and plans lie about the chairs and tables.