

SLINGS AND ARROWS

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Slings and Arrows by Hugh Conway

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HUGH CONWAY

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CHAPTER I.

A Cynic.



AS the tale which I am about to tell is my own: as I myself am the hero—a pitiful enough hero—of these pages, I shall, by-and-by, be forced to say so much about my own affairs that I may well begin by sparing a few lines to those of another man, a man on whose grave the grass has been growing for many a long year.

His name was Julian Loraine. His home, from the day when first I knew him to the day of his death, was Herstal Abbey, a fine old house in that part of wooded Somersetshire where railways have not yet come.

Although Mr. Loraine was a man of wealth, and moreover by education and, I believe, family fully entitled to take a high social position, Herstal Abbey was not his ancestral home. He had acquired it by simple right of purchase; having bought out an old, improvident, but popular county family—bought it out so completely, that if he did not literally step into its shoes, he sat in its very chairs and used its very tables.

Such a wholesale buying up of one of their own class by an unknown man always annoys, perhaps frightens, county people, and Julian Loraine's neighbours for some time looked at him askance. He took none of those steps by which a new comer may occasionally gain access to the magic county circle. He brought no introductions. He gave no large subscription to the hunt—indeed, there was not much hunting in that part. He did not, in a covert way, let his willingness to give grand enter-

tainment be known. He simply completed the purchase of Herstal Abbey and its contents; took up his abode in the old house, and troubled nothing about his neighbours, which no doubt annoyed them all the more.

Little Julian Loraine cared for this. The truth is he was one of the most unsociable men alive, and his cynicism, if distributed through the county, would have made Somersetshire a region in which life would have been unbearable. He was—I pen the words reluctantly—an utter disbeliever in humanity. Perhaps the life which he had hitherto led brought him to this state of mind.

For in a very short time his neighbours found out that he was by no means the unknown man they thought him. People who knew London life had much to say about this Julian Loraine. It was soon made clear to the countryside that the new man's social claims to the right hand of fellowship were

indisputable; but other things were also made clear.

Lorraine had led a terrible life—the very fastest of the fast. The wonder was that he had survived—even greater wonder that he was still wealthy. At one time it was thought he had run through everything, for he had disappeared, and no one saw anything of him for years. But it turned out he had only been leading a roving life in far countries. Repenting, let us hope.—No; Julian Lorraine was not a nice man.

But, nice or not, no one had any longer the wish to keep Mr. Lorraine at arm's length. Had he cared for it, he might have enjoyed mixing with the pick of county society. But he treated civility almost as he treated coldness, with complete indifference; and it soon became understood that the owner of Herstal Abbey was a man who no longer cared to mix with his kind.

It was, of course, incomprehensible that anyone should buy a fine property and settle down to the life of a recluse: the more so, as the man was still in the prime of life, handsome, and wealthy. But Julian Loraine was an incomprehensible man. I, for one, have never been able to determine his true character. Perhaps I have shunned investigating it. Perhaps, had I tried, I should have been unable to gather trustworthy information as to his true nature, from the fact that the tales afloat concerning his early life would reach me last of all.

When he bought Herstal Abbey he was a widower with one son, a boy of seven. This boy he petted and neglected alternately. There were days when the child was with him from morn to eve; there were weeks in which he never saw him from Sunday morning to Saturday night; there were months during which Mr. Loraine went

wandering off, heaven knows where, leaving the child to the care of servants.

Whether at home or abroad, he kept up his establishment in a lavish, wasteful manner. He threw his money about in a cynical way, as one who cared not how it went. He expected his servants would rob him—no doubt they did. This he considered but human nature, and troubled nothing about it; but woe to the man or woman who in the slightest degree neglected anything which his comfort or whim demanded! His dependants soon understood their master's peculiarities, and by the exercise of due care managed to keep their places for years and years, and no doubt grew rich upon the money he wasted.

As will soon be seen, I have related all, or the greater part of the above, from hearsay. The following incident in Mr. Loraine's life I can vouch for, as I heard it from his own lips.

In the year 1853 he was returning from Australia. He did not tell me what had taken him there, but I suspect he went in search of health. He was in a sailing vessel—the *Black Swan* was her name. There were other passengers—men, women, and children. One night there was a crash, a horrible grinding sound, a recoil, and the *Black Swan* quietly settled down to the bottom of the ocean. Whether the disaster was due to a collision or to a sunken rock was never known. All was over in five minutes, and Julian Loraine found himself swimming for life, yet without a hope of saving it.

In swimming, as indeed in every manly exercise, Loraine was all but unrivalled; but even his great strength was gone when he felt a hand on his collar and was pulled all but insensible into a small boat, which, it appeared, was the only one that had been