

**LEIGHTON COURT:
A COUNTRY HOUSE
STORY**

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Leighton Court: A Country House Story by Henry Kingsley

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HENRY KINGSLEY

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STORY**

LEIGHTON COURT

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A COUNTRY HOUSE STORY

BY

HENRY KINGSLEY

NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1895

LEIGHTON COURT

Part I

Chapter I

THE River Wysclith, though one of the shortest in course of the beautiful rivers of Dartmoor, still claims a high place among them. None sooner quits the barren granite, and begins to wander seaward through the lower and richer country which lies between the Moor and the sea. None except Dart sends a larger body of water to the sea, and none forms a smaller or less dangerous estuary.

Indeed, its course is so exceedingly short, that the members of the Wysclith Vale Hunt, whose kennels were within a mile of the sea, were well acquainted, from frequent observation, with the vast melancholy bog in which it took its rise. More than once, more than twenty times, within the memory of old Tom Squire, the lean, little old huntsman, had the fox been run into in the midst of that great waste of turbary, from whence the infant stream issues; on ground which no man, leave alone a horse, dared to face. Laura Seckerton has a clever sketch in her portfolio, of the wild, desolate, elevated swamp as it appeared on one of these occasions. A sweep of yellow grass, interspersed with ling, and black bog pits: in the centre, far away from human help, a confused heap of struggling hounds killing their fox: round the edges, as near as they dared go, red-coated horsemen, most cleverly grouped in twos and threes; beyond all, a low ugly tor of

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weather-worn granite. Laura Seckerton could paint as well as she could ride, which is giving her very high praise indeed.

On a hot summer's day, if you had crossed the watershed from the northward, from the head-waters of the Ouse for instance ; and if you found yourself in this desolate lonely swamp, with no signs of animal life except the cry of the melancholy peewit, or the quaint dull note of the stonechat ; you would find it hard to believe that anything so wild, fierce, and loud as the river Wysclith, could be born of such solitary silence. But if you hold on your way, round the bases of the low granite tors, between the tumbled rocks and the quaking bog, for four or five miles, you will begin, afar off, to hear a tinkling of waters, you will meet a broad amber-coloured stream, and find that the many trickling rills from the great swamp have united, and are quietly preparing for their journey to the sea ; are making for that gap in the granite, below which the land drops away into an unknown depth, and from which you can see a vista of a gleaming glen miles below, in which the river, so quiet and so small up here, spouts and raves and roars like a giant as he is. Right and left, far, far below you, are crags, tors, castles of granite. Twenty streams from fifty glens, from a hundred sunny lonely hills, join our river far below ; until tired of fretting and fuming among the granite crags in the glen of ten thousand voices, he finds his way out into the champaign country, and you see him wandering on in wide waving curves towards his estuary. All this you can see even on a blighty easterly day ; with a clear south wind, Laura Seckerton used to say, that standing within two miles of the river's source, you can make out the fisher boats on the sands at its mouth, and the setting sun blazing on the windows of Leighton Court, which stands on a knoll of new red sandstone at the head of the tideway. I cannot say that either there or elsewhere I have ever distinguished drawing-room windows at a distance of eighteen miles as the crow flies : but I confess to

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have seen the vast tower and dark long façade of Berry Morecombe, which lies on the other side of the river, blocking the westerly sun and casting a long shadow over the sands towards Leighton Court, when I have stood on a summer's evening at the tip of the lonely marsh in which the Wysclith takes his rise, fifteen hundred feet above the sea. Standing just where he begins to live, and whimper like a new-born babe over his granite rocks.

Chapter II

THERE were only three families in this part of the country: the Downes, the Seckertons, and the Poyntzs. We shall meet them all directly; but it is necessary even here to say that the Downes (represented by Sir Peckwich Downes) were eminently respectable and horribly rich. That the Seckertons (Sir Charles Seckerton) were eminently respectable, very rich, though not so rich as the Downes; but that they had entirely taken the wind out of their, Downes', sails, by Sir Charles marrying Lady Emily Lee, a sister of the Earl of Southmolton, and by taking the hounds nearly at the same time. And lastly, coming to the Poyntzs (represented by Sir Harry Poyntz, younger by a generation than either of the other baronets), we are obliged to say that the family had grown so utterly disreputable, that a respectable Poyntz was considerably rarer than a white crow. The third family, these Poyntzs, were what the Americans call "burst up," and their seat, Berry Morecombe Castle, was now let on a lease to Mr. Huxtable, a Manchester cotton-spinner.

Sir William Poyntz, that very disreputable old gentleman, had been the last master of the hounds, and had handsomely finished his ruin by taking them. He was a sad old fellow, and kept a sad establishment there in the castle. The only signs of decency which the old fellow

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showed, was that he would not allow any of his sons, legitimate or other, to come near the place. Harry Poyntz, now the baronet, used to come and stay at Leighton Court; Robert, the younger, was only dimly remembered by a few of the older servants, as a petulant, wayward, handsome child. There was a third one yet, whom some remembered, a very beautiful, winning boy; but he had no name, he was not acknowledged.

When Sir Charles Seckerton took the hounds, Mr. Huxtable took the castle, and very shortly after the wife of the latter died, leaving him with a little girl, heir to all his wealth. Sir William Poyntz left Sir Charles Seckerton a legacy also; he left him old Tom Squire, the huntsman. He was a silent, terrier-faced little fellow, who seemed to know more than he chose to tell, as indeed he did. He was a jewel, however; he had hunted that difficult country for many years, and if you had not taken him with the hounds, you might as well have left the hounds alone.

A very difficult hunting country. Why, yes. Irish horses strongly in request, not to mention Irish whips and second horsemen. A stone-wall country in part, and in part intersected by deep lanes and high hedges. Not a safe or promising country by any means. Bad accidents were not unknown; one very severe one had but recently happened, just before my tale begins. The first whip, a young Irishman, O'Ryan by name, had ridden into one of those deep red lanes, which intersect the new red sandstone hereabouts, and had so injured his spine as to be a cripple probably for life. Sir Charles had pensioned him with a pound a week; and being determined to try an Englishman this time, wrote to a friend in Leicestershire for a first-rate man, fit to succeed old Tom Squire, the wiry terrier-faced ex-Poyntz retainer aforesaid, as huntsman, when he should retire to the chimney-corner, and twitter on the legends of the Poyntz family till he twittered no longer.

An answer had come by return of post. There had