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OR, THE RUSSIAN PRINCESS
AND THE ENGLISH EARL**

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Library of Choice Novels. No. 25. Vera; Or, The Russian Princess and the English Earl by
Charlotte Louisa Hawkins Dempster

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CHARLOTTE LOUISA HAWKINS DEMPSTER

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VÉRA;

OR,

THE RUSSIAN PRINCESS AND THE
ENGLISH EARL.



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THE RUSSIAN PRINCESS AND THE ENGLISH EARL.

"Novelists pluck this event here, and that fortune there, and tie them readily to their figures. . . . Great is the poverty of their inventions. *She was beautiful, and he fell in love*,—these are the main-springs; new names, but no new qualities in men or women."—*EXTRACT.*



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PART I.

IN WHICH THE WHEEL BEGINS TO TURN.

View mortal man, none ever will you find,
If the gods force him, that can shun his fate.
(Edipus at Colonus.—POTTER'S Translation.)

CHAPTER I.

BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING.

Two young men had been standing together in the morning-room of a house in Cadogan Place. The men were half-brothers, the day was the 7th of February, 1854, and the hour was 4 P. M.; and there, when the dialogue ceased, which it did rather abruptly, and when the door had closed on the last and younger of the speakers, the elder, Colonel Henry St. John, was left alone, smoking in front of the fire.

The time and the place of this conversation having been given, it only remains for me to add that the subject of it had been debt—debts to the amount of £780, incurred by Philip St. John, and which he was incapable of paying on this or any future day: moreover (and this complicated the affair not a little), he was at this moment, as an ensign in the Grenadier Guards, under immediate orders to leave England for the seat of war in the East.

I might enlarge in this place on his extravagance, and on the curious items which had, in a few months, swelled to

such a total; but I remember that when I used to tell stories to a bright-eyed audience in the nursery, that audience always cried out, "Begin at the very beginning;" and thus it may be as well in telling a story for children of larger growth to bear this hint in mind, and so perhaps interest the reader more genuinely in the fortunes of my hero.

To begin then "at the beginning."

His father, the late Colonel the Honorable John St. John, was twice married. His first wife brought him a son within a year of their marriage, and then, after some years of bad health, died, leaving her boy Henry, the hero of this book, to the tender mercies of servants, and of a widow of whom the world prophesied that he would not be long in consoling himself. But if, by this expression, a second marriage was intended, the world for once was wrong. The Honorable John St. John enjoyed his liberty for seven years, and he might perhaps have continued to do so for seven years more, had not ruin overtaken him, and rendered it incumbent on him to look out for a wife with money. He found one—a Miss Heathcote, a very rich, foolish, and ill-advised heiress, who at twenty-

one year of age bestowed herself and her fortune on the ex-M.P. for North—shire. Not only was the Honorable John at that moment bankrupt, but there had been some unfortunate circumstances connected with the fact, and with his career, which had made his own county what is vulgarly called "too hot" for him, and which had also had the effect of making his eldest brother's house as much too cold for him. In fact, Lord Kendal had simply refused to see his brother John again.

The story had been a bad one, albeit a common enough, or a likely enough one. It was that of a rich young widow to whom he had paid great attentions. Mrs. Lindley was his junior, and still very attractive; yet though her jointure was large she was not the less ruled by the two passions which finally brought about her undoing, she wished to increase her worldly goods by speculation, and she wished to obtain, and if needs be buy, a connection with the peerage. What sort of a step-father the Honorable John St. John might make to her two boys was a minor consideration, I fear, with her; but at all events she paid dearly for any hopes she had been led to entertain by him. Her money melted away in his larger speculations, her son's fortune was damaged, the big oaks and elms of his park had to be cut down, and, eight months later, when she had gone to Bath to retrench, she had the pleasure of reading in the *Times* John St. John's marriage to the Miss Heathcote aforesaid. How that Miss Heathcote came to be so much left to herself as to marry a man who had lost a fortune, a character, a seat in Parliament, and the colonelcy of a yeomanry regiment, all within a year of making her acquaintance, I know not; only Miss Heathcote was young, and silly, and as obstinate as only a very silly woman can be—and so, in Paris, at the chapel of the British Embassy, in May, 1835, she embarked in matrimony with this hero. With the details of their wedded life,

not always edifying, I will not weary the reader: suffice it to say that they were not such as to induce Lord Kendal to alter his opinion of his brother's conduct, and that two children were born to this couple—a daughter, born at Tours, Rue de la Scellerie, and christened Anne, and a son, also born at Tours, who received the name of Philip Heathcote.

But how had it fared in the mean time, through childhood, boyhood, and youth, with Henry St. John, the son by the first marriage? It had fared rather hardly as a child, and after that much less ill than might have been expected, thanks to the kindness of Lord Kendal, who, taking a fancy to the boy, had sent him to school as soon as was possible after his mother's death. That school answered well, and Lord Kendal of course paid for it; but, when Master St. John had outgrown the care of the very excellent lady in whose house he lived for three years, a painful interregnum then occurred in his education. It was mainly spent in France, and there it was that the young gentleman acquired that proficiency in foreign tongues which distinguished him in later life; but there he might also have learned many other and less desirable things, both from his father and from his father's companions, had not Lord Kendal again interfered, and again bought the right to superintend the training of the lad. Miss Heathcote's appearance on the scene about that time had given the signal, it is true, for at least a temporary reformation in his home, but Lord Kendal still forbade his brother the house, and the father and the step-mother, in spite of that condition, were quite ready to hand over to the peer the son, who was at least the presumptive heir to his title and to the estates.

Lord Kendal was a bachelor, a book-worm, and a recluse of so inveterate a kind, that he had built up the ground-floor windows of one side of the house lest he should be overlooked by the gardener's or the baker's boys; and his

life was as solitary as it was frugal. He kept a secretary, a stout cob, and a breed of mastiffs, for which Hurst Royal had long been famous: he wore a velvet cap and smoked incessantly, and he lived in the county, not because he knew the pig from the cow, or a mangold-wurzel from a hyacinth, but because he liked pure air, large rooms, quiet by night, and learned leisure by day. In politics he defined himself a Tory, and he was a Churchman in theory, albeit not one in practice, as he did not attend the services of the Church, having taken umbrage in early life at the bad logic of the parson, the coughing of the children, and the southernwood nose-gays of the old women. Many years ago, and when his brother John had been first returned for the county, he had taken some interest in politics, but that had been only ephemeral—the conduct of John St. John had been too discreditable, the electors had been found to be venal, and the agents to have faults more serious than were those of the curates and of the charity children. He gave largely to local charities, but his temper was not the less of the kind euphuistically called difficult—namely, too difficult for its owner to manage, and very difficult for his neighbors always to steer clear of.

The secret of Lord Kendal's celibacy was a quarrel with the only woman he had ever loved. He had been wrong in it, but he had (and perhaps for that very reason) kept it up with a firmness worthy of a better cause; and thus, when he had shut the door some years later in his brother's face, his interests and sympathies, but for the existence of Master Henry, would have begun and ended in his library.

The recluse's heart was thus sleeping, when, at the age of fourteen, the boy came to stir it, and to make the old house, the stables, the park, the mere, and the preserves, ring to young voices and young steps. Lord Kendal was very indulgent to him. He would lay aside

his great *opus*, "The Lives of Great Men," a sort of modern Plutarch, which he was preparing, to look at the contents of Henry's game-bag, and he even began to take an intelligent interest in ferrets, kingfishers and stag-beetles, all parts of the animal creation which had never before been properly brought under his notice. He grew thus to experience some of the cares and pleasures of fatherhood, and more of its pleasures than of its cares, for the boy was handsome, docile, truthful, and clever. There is a theory that gout and madness often skip over one generation to reappear in the next, and in that same way, while passing over the Honorable John, of impetuous memory, there really did seem to have descended to his son the honor, the industry, and the self-control, of the first, the lawyer Earl of Kendal.

Harrow and Christ Church followed each other for Henry, and then Lord Kendal bought a commission for his nephew, and sent into the Scots Fusileer Guards as fine a young fellow as ever wore her Majesty's uniform—a very good-looking one, I may also add. A good deal above the middle height, well-knit and well-proportioned, he looked very handsome in his uniform, and from under the fringe of his bearskin you saw dark-blue eyes, regular features, and a very pleasant mouth. His hair was so dark that it might almost have passed for black, but that on the cheek and above the mouth it had rich warm tints of brown. His voice, in speaking, was low and modulated, and he was naturally rather silent, though, perhaps, the least shy man in London. He explained this by saying that he had had to conquer all shyness as a lad. Much of his intercourse with his uncle had cost him an effort at first; and no wonder, since, till you had gained, and knew that you had gained, his regard, Lord Kendal was indeed a very awe-inspiring man. Then much of Henry's intercourse, after he grew up, with both father and step-