

**FATHER
STAFFORD**

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Father Stafford by Anthony Hope

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ANTHONY HOPE

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FATHER STAFFORD.

BY

ANTHONY HOPE,

Author of "A Man of Mark."



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FATHER STAFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

EUGENE LANE AND HIS GUESTS.

THE world considered Eugene Lane a very fortunate young man; and if youth, health, social reputation, a seat in Parliament, a large income, and finally the promised hand of an acknowledged beauty can make a man happy, the world was right. It is true that Sir Roderick Ayre had been heard to pity the poor chap on the ground that his father had begun life in the workhouse; but everybody knew that Sir Roderick was bound to exalt the claims of birth, inasmuch as he had to rely solely upon them for a reputation, and discounted the value of his opinion accordingly. After all, it was not as if the late Mr. Lane had ended life in the undesirable shelter in question. On the contrary, his latter days had been spent in the handsome mansion of Millstead Manor; and, as he lay on his deathbed, listening to the Rector's gentle homily on the vanity of riches, his eyes could wander to the window and survey a wide tract of land that he called his

own, and left, together with immense sums of money, to his son, subject only to a jointure for his wife. It is hard to blame the tired old man if he felt, even with the homily ringing in his ears, that he had not played his part in the world badly.

Millstead Manor was indeed the sort of place to raise a doubt as to the utter vanity of riches. It was situated hard by the little village of Millstead, that lies some forty miles or so north-west of London, in the middle of rich country. The neighbourhood afforded shooting, fishing, and hunting, if not the best of their kind, yet good enough to satisfy reasonable people. The park was large and well wooded; the house had insisted on remaining picturesque in spite of Mr. Lane's improvements, and by virtue of an indelible stamp of antiquity had carried its point. A house that dates from Elizabeth is not to be entirely put to shame by one or two unblushing French windows and other trifling barbarities of that description, more especially when it is kept in countenance by a little church of still greater age, nestling under its wing in a manner that recalled the good old days when the lord of the manor was lord of the souls and bodies of his tenants. Even old Mr. Lane

had been mellowed by the influence of his new home, and before his death had come to play the part of Squire far more respectably than might be imagined. Eugene sustained the *rôle* with the graceful indolence and careless efficiency that marked most of his doings.

He stood one Saturday morning in the latter part of July on the steps that led from the terrace to the lawn, holding a letter in his hand and softly whistling. In appearance he was not, it must be admitted, an ideal Squire, for he was but a trifle above middle height, rather slight, and with the little stoop that tells of the man who is town-bred and by nature more given to indoor than outdoor exercises; but he was a good-looking fellow for all that, with a bright humorous face—though at this moment rather a bored one—large eyes set well apart, and his proper allowance of brown hair and white teeth. Altogether, it may safely be said that not even Sir Roderick's nose could have sniffed the workhouse in the young master of Millstead Manor.

Still whistling, Eugene descended the steps and approached a group of people sitting under a large copper-beech tree. A still hot summer morning does not incline the mind or the body to activity, and all of them had sunk into