

Literature.org:

[Authors](#)  
[Contact](#)

[Man and Wife](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)  
[Previous Chapter](#)  
[Next Chapter](#)

## Chapter 1 - The Owls

---

IN the spring of the year eighteen hundred and sixty-eight there lived, in a certain county of North Britain, two venerable White Owls.

The Owls inhabited a decayed and deserted summer-house. The summer-house stood in grounds attached to a country seat in Perthshire, known by the name of Windygates.

The situation of Windygates had been skillfully chosen in that part of the county where the fertile lowlands first begin to merge into the mountain region beyond. The mansion-house was intelligently laid out, and luxuriously furnished. The stables offered a model for ventilation and space; and the gardens and grounds were fit for a prince.

Possessed of these advantages, at starting, Windygates, nevertheless, went the road to ruin in due course of time. The curse of litigation fell on house and lands. For more than ten years an interminable lawsuit coiled itself closer and closer round the place, sequestering it from human habitation, and even from human approach. The mansion was closed. The garden became a wilderness of weeds. The summer-house was choked up by creeping plants; and the appearance of the creepers was followed by the appearance of the birds of night.

For years the Owls lived undisturbed on the property which they had acquired by the oldest of all existing rights--the right of taking. Throughout the day they sat peacefully and solemn, with closed eyes, in the cool darkness shed round them by the ivy. With the twilight they roused themselves softly to the business of life. In sage and silent companionship of two, they went flying, noiseless, along the quiet lanes in search of a meal. At one time they would beat a field like a setter dog, and drop down in an instant on a mouse unaware of them. At another time--moving spectral over the black surface of the water--they would try the lake for a change, and catch a perch as they had caught the mouse. Their catholic digestions were equally tolerant of a rat or an insect. And there were moments, proud moments, in their lives, when they were clever enough to snatch a small bird at roost off his perch. On those occasions the sense of superiority which the large bird feels every where over the small, warmed their cool blood, and set them screeching cheerfully in the stillness of the night.

So, for years, the Owls slept their happy sleep by day, and found their comfortable meal when darkness fell. They had come, with the creepers, into possession of the summer-house. Consequently, the creepers were a part of the constitution of the summer-house. And consequently the Owls were the guardians of the Constitution. There are some human owls who reason as they did, and who are, in this respect--as also in respect of snatching smaller birds off their roosts--wonderfully like them.

The constitution of the summer-house had lasted until the spring of the year eighteen hundred and sixty-eight, when the unhallowed footsteps of innovation passed that way; and the venerable privileges of the Owls were assailed, for the first time, from the world outside.

Two featherless beings appeared, uninvited, at the door of the summer-house, surveyed the constitutional creepers, and said, "These must come down"--looked around at the horrid light of noonday, and said, "That must come in"--went away, thereupon, and were heard, in the distance, agreeing together, "To-morrow it shall be done."

And the Owls said, "Have we honored the summer-house by occupying it all these years--and is the horrid light of noonday to be let in on us at last? My lords and gentlemen, the Constitution is destroyed!"

They passed a resolution to that effect, as is the manner of their kind. And then they shut their eyes again, and felt that they had done their duty.

The same night, on their way to the fields, they observed with dismay a light in one of the windows of the house. What did the light mean?

It meant, in the first place, that the lawsuit was over at last. It meant, in the second place that the owner of Windygates, wanting money, had decided on letting the property. It meant, in the third place, that the property had found a tenant, and was to be renovated immediately out of doors and in. The Owls shrieked as they flapped along the lanes in the darkness, And that night they struck at a mouse--and missed him.

The next morning, the Owls--fast asleep in charge of the Constitution--were roused by voices of featherless beings all round them. They opened their eyes, under protest, and saw instruments of destruction attacking the creepers. Now in one direction, and now in another, those instruments let in on the summer-house the horrid light of day. But the Owls were equal to the occasion. They ruffled their feathers, and cried, "No surrender!" The featherless beings plied their work cheerfully, and answered, "Reform!" The creepers were torn down this way and that. The horrid daylight poured in brighter and brighter. The Owls had barely time to pass a new resolution, namely, "That we do stand by the Constitution," when a ray of the outer sunlight flashed into their eyes, and sent them flying headlong to the nearest shade. There they sat winking, while the summer-house was cleared of the rank growth that had choked it up, while the rotten wood-work was renewed, while all the murky place was purified with air and light. And when the world saw it, and said, "Now we shall do!" the Owls shut their eyes in pious remembrance of the darkness, and answered, "My lords and gentlemen, the Constitution is destroyed!"