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[The Two Destinies](#)

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This Book:

[Contents](#)

Chapter 1 - Greenwater Broad

[Next Chapter](#)

LOOK back, my memory, through the dim labyrinth of the past, through the mingling joys and sorrows of twenty years. Rise again, my boyhood's days, by the winding green shores of the little lake. Come to me once more, my child-love, in the innocent beauty of your first ten years of life. Let us live again, my angel, as we lived in our first paradise, before sin and sorrow lifted their flaming swords and drove us out into the world.

The month was March. The last wild fowl of the season were floating on the waters of the lake which, in our Suffolk tongue, we called Greenwater Broad.

Wind where it might, the grassy banks and the overhanging trees tinged the lake with the soft green reflections from which it took its name. In a creek at the south end, the boats were kept--my own pretty sailing boat having a tiny natural harbor all to itself. In a creek at the north end stood the great trap (called a "decoy"), used for snaring the wild fowl which flocked every winter, by thousands and thousands, to Greenwater Broad.

My little Mary and I went out together, hand in hand, to see the last birds of the season lured into the decoy.

The outer part of the strange bird-trap rose from the waters of the lake in a series of circular arches, formed of elastic branches bent to the needed shape, and covered with folds of fine network, making the roof. Little by little diminishing in size, the arches and their net-work followed the secret windings of the creek inland to its end. Built back round the arches, on their landward side, ran a wooden paling, high enough to hide a man kneeling behind it from the view of the birds on the lake. At certain intervals a hole was broken in the paling just large enough to allow of the passage through it of a dog of the terrier or the spaniel breed. And there began and ended the simple yet sufficient mechanism of the decoy.

In those days I was thirteen, and Mary was ten years old. Walking on our way to the lake we had Mary's father with us for guide and companion. The good man served as bailiff on my father's estate. He was, besides, a skilled master in the art of decoying ducks. The dog that helped him (we used no tame ducks as decoys in Suffolk) was a little black terrier; a skilled master also, in his way; a creature who possessed, in equal proportions, the enviable advantages of perfect good-humor and perfect common sense.

The dog followed the bailiff, and we followed the dog.

Arrived at the paling which surrounded the decoy, the dog sat down to wait until he was wanted. The bailiff and the children crouched behind the paling, and peeped through the outermost dog-hole, which commanded a full view of the lake. It was a day without wind; not a ripple stirred the surface of the water; the soft gray clouds filled all the sky, and hid the sun from view.

We peeped through the hole in the paling. There were the wild ducks--collected within easy reach of the decoy--placidly dressing their feathers on the placid surface of the lake.

The bailiff looked at the dog, and made a sign. The dog looked at the bailiff; and, stepping forward quietly, passed through the hole, so as to show himself on the narrow strip of ground shelving down from the outer side of the paling to the lake.

First one duck, then another, then half a dozen together, discovered the dog.

A new object showing itself on the solitary scene instantly became an object of all-devouring curiosity to the ducks. The outermost of them began to swim slowly toward the strange four-footed creature, planted motionless on the bank. By twos and threes, the main body of the waterfowl gradually followed the advanced guard. Swimming nearer and nearer to the dog, the wary ducks suddenly came to a halt, and, poised on the water, viewed from a safe distance the phenomenon on the land.

The bailiff, kneeling behind the paling, whispered, "Trim!"

Hearing his name, the terrier turned about, and retiring through the hole, became lost to the view of the ducks. Motionless on the water, the wild fowl wondered and waited. In a minute more, the dog had trotted round, and had shown himself through the next hole in the paling, pierced further inward where the lake ran up into the outermost of the windings of the creek.

The second appearance of the terrier instantly produced a second fit of curiosity among the ducks. With one accord, they swam forward again, to get another and a nearer view of the dog; then, judging their safe distance once more, they stopped for the second time, under the outermost arch of the decoy. Again the dog vanished, and the puzzled ducks waited. An interval passed, and the third appearance of Trim took place, through a third hole in the paling, pierced further inland up the creek. For the third time irresistible curiosity urged the ducks to advance further and further inward, under the fatal arches of the decoy. A fourth and a fifth time the game went on, until the dog had lured the water-fowl from point to point into the inner recesses of the decoy. There a last appearance of Trim took place. A last advance, a last cautious pause, was made by the ducks. The bailiff touched the strings, the weighed net-work fell vertically into the water, and closed the decoy. There, by dozens and dozens, were the ducks, caught by means of their own curiosity--with nothing but a little dog for a bait! In a few hours afterward they were all dead ducks on their way to the London market.

As the last act in the curious comedy of the decoy came to its end, little Mary laid her hand on my shoulder, and, raising herself on tiptoe, whispered in my ear:

"George, come home with me. I have got something to show you that is better worth seeing than the ducks."

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise. I won't tell you."

"Will you give me a kiss?"

The charming little creature put her slim sun-burned arms round my neck, and answered:

"As many kisses as you like, George."

It was innocently said, on her side. It was innocently done, on mine. The good easy bailiff, looking aside at the moment from his ducks, discovered us pursuing our boy-and-girl courtship in each other's arms. He shook his big forefinger at us, with something of a sad and doubting smile.

"Ah, Master George, Master George!" he said. "When your father comes home, do you think he will approve of his son and heir kissing his bailiff's daughter?"

"When my father comes home," I answered, with great dignity, "I shall tell him the truth. I shall say I am going to marry your daughter."

The bailiff burst out laughing, and looked back again at his ducks.

"Well, well!" we heard him say to himself. "They're only children. There's no call, poor things, to part them yet awhile."

Mary and I had a great dislike to be called children. Properly understood, one of us was a lady aged ten, and the other was a gentleman aged thirteen. We left the good bailiff indignantly, and went away together, hand in hand, to the cottage.