

Oliphant Margaret

**The Ladies Lindores. Volume 2
of 3**



Маргарет Олифант

The Ladies Lindores. Volume 2 of 3

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Содержание

CHAPTER XV	5
CHAPTER XVI	12
CHAPTER XVII	19
CHAPTER XVIII	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

Margaret Oliphant

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CHAPTER XV

Lord Millefleurs had given his family a great deal of trouble – not in the old-fashioned way of youthful folly or dissipation, which is too well known in every age, the beaten road upon which young men tread down the hearts of their progenitors, and their own best hopes, in all the wantonness of short-sighted self-indulgence. The heir of the house of Lavender had gone wrong in an entirely new-fashioned and nineteenth-century way. He was devoured by curiosity, not of the modes of pleasure, but about those other ways of living which the sons of dukes in general have no knowledge of. He got tired of being a duke's son, and it seemed to him that life lay outside the range of those happy valleys in which he was born. He had gone to America, that home of all kinds of freedom, and there had disappeared from the ken of ducal circles. He had not even written home, which was the inexcusable part of it, but had sunk out of sight, coming to the surface, as it were, only once or twice in a couple of years, when a sudden draft upon his banker revealed him to his anxious family, whose efforts to trace him during this time were manifold, but always unsuccessful. It was Beaufort who had been the means at last of restoring the virtuous prodigal, who in the meantime had been occupied, not by any vicious tastes or dangerous *liaisons*, but by the most entirely innocent, if eccentric, experiments in living. Beaufort found him, but not before the young man was willing to be found – a fact which, however, the anxious relations did not take into account, as detracting from the merit of the man whom they described as Millefleurs's deliverer, his better genius, and by many other flattering descriptions. In reality, Millefleurs had set out on his way home, moved thereto by the energetic representations of a strong-minded, middle-aged maiden in Connecticut or California (how can a historian without data particularise?), who told him that a man was no gentleman who kept the women of his family in ignorance of his movements, and exposed them to all the tortures of anxiety. This puzzled the scientific adventurer. He had found out that daily work (which amused him very much) was not at all incompatible with the character of a gentleman; but he felt himself pulled up in his career when this new view of the subject was presented to him. After a little thought, he decided that Miss Sallie F – was right. And he took off his working clothes, and put on the livery of civilisation, and found Beaufort, who had attacked the continent bravely but vaguely in search of him, on his way. Millefleurs was not proud. He let himself be brought home as if it was all Beaufort's doing, and made his peace with everybody. The consequence was, that the illustrious house of Lavender was ready to do anything in the world for that excellent Mr Beaufort, who had fished their heir out of troubles unknown; and, in respect to that heir himself, were bending all their faculties to the task of getting him married, and so put out of harm's way. It was a new sphere for the mental vivacity and curiosity of Millefleurs. He devoted himself to a study of the young ladies of the highest civilisation, just as he had devoted himself to the life of the dockyards and the backwoods. (Probably I should say to the mines and the cattle-ranches; but the reader who knows the fashion will here supply the appropriate phrase.) He found the study curious, and not at all unpleasant, and so went about scattering wild hopes about him wherever he moved. Was anything else possible? If the young ladies in our northern county had been (inevitably) fluttered and excited when Pat Torrance fixed his big light eyes upon them, knowing the value of him as, so to speak, an appointment, a post for life which would remove all anxiety about their future comfort from their own minds and those of their parents, how much more when the Marquis of Millefleurs went hopping about the drawing-rooms, carrying on his researches in a far more genial and agreeable manner than Pat Torrance was capable of doing? And it was quite certain that nobody would ever be unhappy with Millefleurs. He was always cheerful, always considerate,

ready to do anything for anybody. He was more like a daughter than a son, the Duchess declared, with tears in her eyes – foreseeing what she wanted, watching over her as nobody had ever done before: although it was no doubt very wrong – oh, very wrong! – to almost break her heart, leaving her two years without a letter; but he would not do so to his wife. Thus the – we will not say candidates, rather nominees – possible occupants of the delightful and every way desirable post of Marchioness of Millefleurs had every sort of inducement to "go in" for it, and scarcely any drawback at all.

The drawback was not worth speaking of – it was the most superficial of objections. This enterprising, amusing, good-tempered, quick-witted, accomplished, and lovable hero, was, as the girls said, the funniest little man that had ever been seen. He was shorter than most of the young ladies to whom he made himself so agreeable. He was plump and round, a succession of curves and gently billowing outlines; his eyes were like little black beads, though they were sparkling with life and animation; he had a round face like a boy of ten, with nice little puffy rosy cheeks, and a lisp which completed the infantile effect of his appearance generally. A little air of the most agreeable self-satisfaction hung about him – what the vulgar and detractors generally call vanity and self-conceit, but which indeed was nothing of the kind, being only that confidence of pleasing which his natural temper gave him in the first place, and his position confirmed. For how could he be ignorant that to be Marquis of Millefleurs was enough to make any man charming? It was to escape this that he had fled from society and been called Tommy by the American labourers, with whom he was just as popular as in Mayfair. It had been intended to keep this little gentleman in the background of this narrative as really a very secondary person in it; but, with his usual determination to be in the front of everything, he has pushed himself forward against the historian's will.

Having thus yielded to his natural tendency to show himself, we may proceed to say what we had intended without this preamble, that the peculiarity of Millefleurs's appearance took all seriousness from the fact of his rapidly increasing intimacy with them, in the foolish and inexperienced eyes not only of Edith but of her mother. Lady Lindores, though she had been alarmed and startled by the importance attached to his first visit, and the penalty paid for it, could not bring herself to regard him seriously. He seemed to her a boy, notwithstanding that the peerage was produced to her and dates set before her eyes, – and she shut her eyes altogether to any danger that might be involved in the frequency of his visits. She was very glad to see him whenever he came. Never was there a more delightful household retainer; his friendliness and affectionateness and half-feminine interest in all their concerns great and small, made him delightful to the women, who wanted no more of him. He was like a boy at home from school in this friendly house, where no incense was burned before him, and ran on their commissions, and took an interest in their work, and gave his opinion about their dress, with all the freedom of long acquaintance; and it naturally added in no small degree to the brilliancy of their appearance out of doors, and to the effect they produced, that such an attendant should be constantly in their train. Lady Lindores was not insensible to this gratification; and had Millefleurs looked more grown up and less like a friend's son confided to her for the holidays, it is very likely that the chance of seeing her child elevated to the highest level of the social ladder would have been too much for her also, and turned her head a little. But whenever the idea glanced across her mind, as it was bound to do sometimes, if from nothing more than the discourses of Rintoul, she had but to look at the rounded outlines of her little hero, and all these visions dispersed in a laugh. To imagine him a bridegroom, not to say Edith's bridegroom, affected her with a sense of the ludicrous which it was beyond her power to restrain.

But this was extremely foolish, as everybody will perceive; and it was with a very different eye that Lord Lindores contemplated the frequent presence of this above-all-competitors-desirable young man. It was not only that he was a duke's son, though that in itself was much, but he was the son of a duke who was a Cabinet Minister, and eminently qualified to help on the scheme of ambition which inspired the Scotch Earl. His Grace knew the gain it would be to replace the Tory who had sat for Dee-and-Donshire for years with an out-and-out partisan of the existing Government; and

there could be little doubt that he would appreciate the expediency of increasing the importance of any family to which his own should become allied. And then the prospects which would open before Edith were such as to dazzle any beholder. If her father had ever felt that he was to blame in respect to his elder daughter, here was something which surely would make amends for all. Millefleurs was no rustic bully, no compound of a navvy and a squire, but the quintessence of English gentlemanhood, good-hearted, clever in his way, universally popular, the sort of man whom, irrespective of all worldly advantages, a father would be glad to trust his child's happiness to. The idea that any reasonable objection could be grounded upon his appearance would have irritated Lord Lindores beyond all self-control. His appearance! he was not a hunchback, nor deaf, nor dumb, nor blind. Short of that, what on earth did it matter how a man looked? And no doubt Lord Lindores was in the right. But in reality, that which put all idea of him as a lover out of the mind of Lady Lindores and Edith was not any objection to his appearance, but the mere fact of his appearance, his boyish looks, his contour, his aspect of almost childhood. As has been said, when the suggestion was presented to her mind that Millefleurs might have "intentions" in respect to Edith, Lady Lindores the next time she saw him laughed. "What is the joke?" he had said to her half-a-dozen times; and she had answered, "There is no joke, only a ludicrous suggestion." "About me, perhaps," he said once, reducing her to great embarrassment. But she managed to elude his observation; and to Edith, fortunately, the idea never occurred at all. She declared herself to be very fond of him; she said there was no one so nice; she brightened when he came in, and listened to his chatter with unflinching pleasure. She said there was nobody she would miss so much when she went home. When he complained that he had never been in Scotland, she said, "You must come to Lindores." It was she, indeed, who gave the invitation. The Earl, who had not quite ventured upon this strong step, was present and heard her say it, and opened his eyes wide in admiration. What did it mean? Was it that these two had engaged themselves secretly without saying anything to father or mother? or did it mean nothing at all – the mere foolishness of a girl who did not care for, nay, did not even think for a moment, what people would say?

For the brief little weeks of the season flitted quickly away, and the date fixed for their departure drew near rapidly. By this time Millefleurs had got to be exceedingly intimate with the family. He went and came almost as he pleased, sometimes offering himself, sometimes coming in to luncheon without that ceremony, – always with something to do for them, or something to say to them, which linked one day to another. This was much, but it was not all that was wanted. Rintoul, looking on with eyes enlightened by that knowledge he had acquired of what "the fellows would say," did not feel half satisfied. He was the anxious member of the party. Even Lord Lindores, whose friends at the clubs discussed such matters less perhaps than the young men, and whose interests were more political, was not so alive to all the risks and all the changes of opinion as was Rintoul. He was nervous above measure about this business of Edith's. He even took his mother to task about it during the last week of their stay in town. "Isn't that fellow coming to the point?" he said.

"What fellow, and what point?" said Lady Lindores. It must be acknowledged that if ever a young man anxious for the true interests of his family was tried by the ignorance and stupidity – not to say callousness – of his relations, Rintoul was that man.

"Look here, mother," he said, exasperated; "just think for a moment what people will say, and ask yourself how you will like it. They will say Millefleurs has been amusing himself all this time, and never meant anything. I make no doubt that they say it already. He has been amusing himself – exposing her to all sorts of remarks; and then the end will come, and he will leave her *planté là*."

"Rintoul," said his mother, reddening with anger, "this one idea of yours makes you absurd. Who is it that has it in his power to leave Edith *planté là*? To think that I should be forced to use such words! If you mean to make me uncomfortable about that boy – "

"He is no more a boy than I am, mother. I warned you of that. He knows very well what he is about. He has had the pleasure of your society, and he has enjoyed it all and amused himself very much. But he doesn't mean to commit himself. Do you think I don't know what people say? I don't

mean that it is Edith's fault, or even your fault, mother; only, some women know how to manage. It is a thing that never could happen with some people. You will see, unless you exert yourself, that the last day will come, and you will be just where you were. I don't know whether staying a week or two longer would do any good," he added, ruefully. "If there is the chance that it might bring him to the point, there is also the chance that people would divine your motive, and say that was why you were staying on. Don't you think you could put a little steam on, when the result is so important, and bring him to the point?"

"Steam on! Do you mean to insult me, Rintoul?" his mother cried.

But this was too much for the young man, who felt himself to be the only one of the family to whom the true position of affairs was apparent. "If you cannot understand me, mother, I can't say anything more," he said, feeling as if he could almost have cried over her callousness. Why was it that nobody but he would see how serious the situation was?

All this time, however, while Millefleurs was frequenting the house almost daily, Lady Lindores's perception had been partly confused by the effort it cost her to avoid being drawn into what she felt must be an unnecessary confidential disclosure to Beaufort of the history of the family since they last met. Beaufort did not insist upon accompanying his charge – for such, more or less, Millefleurs was, his family being too much alarmed lest he should disappear again, to leave him without this species of surveillance, which the good-natured young fellow allowed to be perfectly natural, and neither resisted nor resented; but he came sometimes, and he never relinquished his appeal to Lady Lindores. He was not posing in any attitude of a heart-broken lover. Even to her he expressed no despair. He took his life gravely, but not without cheerfulness, and had, she felt almost with a little pique, got over it, and been able to put Carry out of his life. But he wanted to know: that seemed all that was left of the old romance. He wanted to be told how it had happened – how his love had been lost to him. It did not seem to be resentment or indignation that moved him, but a serious kind of interest. And strangely enough, it seemed to Lady Lindores that he did not want to avoid her, or keep out of hearing of the name of the girl who had forsaken him. He seemed to like herself, Carry's mother, as well as ever, and to regard Edith with the same elder-brotherly air which had pleased her so much in the old days. Between the inquiring countenance which seemed without ceasing to ask an explanation from her, and the prattle of Millefleurs, which ran on in a pleasant stream, and to which it seemed so ridiculous to attach any serious meaning, Lady Lindores was kept in a perplexity and harassment of mind which took away altogether her pleasure in society at the end of their stay in London. After her impatient rejection of Rintoul's counsels, she began to consider them, as was natural; and much as all the particulars of the *chasse-aux-maris* disgusted her, she came at length, against her will, to recognise that there was something in what he said. "I have been imprudent, as usual," she said to herself. Alas that all the natural proceedings of life should be hampered by these rules of prudence! – these perpetual previsions of what might happen, to which she felt it was impossible she could ever bow her spirit. But the idea that it would be said that a boy like Millefleurs had "amused himself" with her daughter – that he had loved and ridden away – that Edith, her high-spirited, pure-minded girl, had been left *planté là* – broke over Lady Lindores like a wave of passionate feeling: the suggestion was intolerable and odious. This happened when Millefleurs was in the room with her, in full tide of talk, and entirely at his ease. The sudden sensation disclosed itself in a flush of colour mounting in a moment to her very hair. Intolerable! The thought was so odious that she started to her feet and walked to the open window, as if the change of position would throw it off – and also, suffocated as she felt by that sudden fiery breath, to get fresh air, lest she should, as she said, make an exhibition of herself.

"You are ill, Lady Lindores," cried Millefleurs. Those little beady eyes of his saw everything. He ran forward to support her (he was just up to her shoulder), putting forward a reclining-chair with one hand, picking up a bottle of eau-de-Cologne with the other. He had all his wits about him. "I am used to it. Sometimes my mother *se trouve mal* in the same way. It will pass over," he said encouragingly

to Edith, who, unused to anything of the kind, started up in alarm. "Dear Lady Lindores, put yourself here."

"I am not ill," she said, almost angrily. "Pray do not make any – fuss. How rude I am! but there is nothing the matter with me, I assure you. The room is warm, that is all."

Millefleurs looked at her curiously. He put down the eau-de-Cologne, and took his hand from the chair. For a moment he seemed about to speak, but then stood aside more serious than his wont. In terror lest he should have divined her thoughts, Lady Lindores returned to her seat, calming herself down with an effort, and made the best attempt she could to resume their easy conversation of the moment before. She was vexed beyond measure when Edith, a short time after, left the room to go and look for something which Millefleurs was anxious to see. He took instant advantage of the opportunity thus afforded him. "Lady Lindores," he said, with that serious air as of a candid child, going up to her, "you are not ill, but you are vexed and angry, and it is something about me."

"About you, Lord Millefleurs! how could that be? – you have never given me the least occasion to be angry."

"That is why," he said, gravely. "I see it all. You have nothing to find fault with. I am quite innocent and harmless, yet I am in the way, and you do not know how to tell me so. For my part, I have been so happy here that I have forgotten all sorts of precautions. One does not think of precautions when one is happy. Dear Lady Lindores, you shall tell me exactly what I ought to do, and I will do it. I have all my life been guided by women. I have such faith in a lady's instinct. I might be confused, perhaps, in my own case, but you will hit upon the right thing. Speak to me freely, I shall understand you at a word," the droll little hero said. Now Lady Lindores was in a strait as serious as she had ever experienced in her life; but when she glanced up at him, and saw the gravity upon his baby face, his attitude of chubby attention, such a desire to laugh seized her, that it was all she could do by main force to keep her gravity. This insensibly relaxed the tension, and restored her to her usual self-command. Still there was no denying that the situation was a very peculiar one, and his request for guidance the strangest possible. She answered hurriedly, in the confusion of her mingled feelings —

"I don't know what there is to do, Lord Millefleurs, or how I can advise you. A sudden want of breath – a consciousness all at once that it is a very warm morning, – what can that have to do with you?"

"You will not tell me, then?" he said, with an air half disappointed, half imploring.

"There is nothing to tell. Here is Edith. For heaven's sake, not another word!" said Lady Lindores, in alarm. She did not perceive that she betrayed herself in this very anxiety that her daughter should suspect nothing. He looked at her very curiously once more, studying her face, her expression, even the nervousness of the hand with which she swept her dress out of her way. He was a young man full of experiences, knowing all the ways of women. How far she was sincere – how far this might be a little scheme, a device for his instruction, so that he might see what was expected of him without any self-betrayal on the lady's part – was what he wanted to know. Had it been so, he would at once have understood his *rôle*. It is usual to say that simplicity and sincerity are to the worldly-bred much more difficult to understand than art; but there is something still more difficult than these. "Pure no-meaning puzzles more than wit." Though Lady Lindores had far more meaning in her than nine-tenths of her contemporaries, she was in this one case absolutely incomprehensible from want of meaning. She had no more notion than a child what to do, or even what she wished to be done. If this little chubby fellow asked Edith to marry him, her mother believed that the girl would laugh in his face. There could be no question of Edith marrying him. But what then? Was Edith to be held up before the whole world (according to Rintoul's version) as the plaything of this little Marquis, as having failed to catch him, as being *planté là*. She was in the most painful dilemma, not knowing any more than a child how to get out of it. She gave him a look which was almost pathetic in its incompetency. Lady Lindores was full of intellect – she was what is called a very superior woman; but

nobody would have been more stupid, more absolutely without any power of invention in this crisis, which had never come within the range of her calculations, which she had not been able to foresee.

And that same afternoon Beaufort came by himself and was admitted, no one else being in the drawing-room – no one to shield the poor lady, who could not help remembering that this stranger was the man to whom she had once given a mother's kiss, receiving him as a son. He did not forget it either. He held her hand when she gave it him, and sat down by her with an expression of satisfaction which she was very far from sharing. "At last I find you alone," he said, with a sigh of content. Poor Lady Lindores had already been so greatly tried this morning, that she felt unable to keep up the strain. Why should she be forced to put on so many semblances?

"Mr Beaufort," she cried, "I cannot pretend to be glad to see you alone. Cannot you understand? You have been wronged, – we have treated you badly, – they say it is the injured person who is always most ready to forgive; but do not ask me to go into a matter which I have tried all these years to forget."

"And yet," he said, gently, "I do not mean to reproach you, Lady Lindores."

"That may be; I do not know that *you* have much occasion to reproach me. You were not yourself, perhaps, so much in earnest. No – I mean no reproach either; but you are a man of your century too, according to the usual slang. You don't force events, or do what is impossible. Men used to do so in the old days."

He listened to her in silence, bowing his head two or three times. "I accept your reproof," he said, a faint colour coming over his face. "I am glad you have made it, – it helps me to understand. Lady Lindores, there is something else I want to speak to you about. Lord Lindores has invited me, with Millefleurs, in August – "

"With Millefleurs, in August? Has he asked Lord Millefleurs in August?" Lady Lindores cried.

This was a great blow to Beaufort's self-opinion. He had thought, naturally, that the embarrassment of his appearance as a visitor would have outweighed everything else. He grew more red this time, with the irritated shame which follows a slight.

"Certainly he has asked him. It is ridiculous that a young man so entirely able to take care of himself should have any one in charge of him; but as the Duke has implored me to keep his son company – Here is my situation, Lady Lindores. God knows I would not thrust myself where I might – where I should be – I mean, to cause the faintest embarrassment to – any one."

"Mr Beaufort," cried Lady Lindores, "do not come, either of you! – oh, never mind what I mean. What is the use of going over that old ground? It would cause embarrassment – to me if to no one else. And Lord Millefleurs – what does he want at Lindores? Let him stay away; persuade him to stay away."

"But that is settled without any power of interference on my part. Of course he thought you were aware. For myself, I am ready to give up my own prospects, to sacrifice anything – rather than give you a moment's anxiety."

Lady Lindores gazed at him for a moment with wide-open eyes, like a creature at bay. Then she let her hands fall on her lap. "It is I that need to be guided what to do," she said, with a sigh; "they are too many for me. Oh, Edward! had we but remained poor and obscure, as we were when you knew us – " She put out her hand instinctively, with a kind of involuntary appeal. He took it, going upon his knees with that movement, equally involuntary, which deep emotion suggests, and put it to his lips. They were both overcome by a sudden flood of old sympathy, old communion. "Has Carry forgotten me altogether – altogether? Is she happy? God bless her!" he said.

It was in this attitude that Edith, coming in suddenly, surprised these two imprudent people. She gave a cry of amazement, and, Lady Lindores thought, reproach. "Mother! Edward!" The old name came to her lips, too, in the shock.

"Edith," Lady Lindores cried, "your father has invited him with Lord Millefleurs to Lindores."

"But I will do nothing save as you advise," said Beaufort, rising to his feet.

Then the mother and the daughter consulted each other with their eyes. "Of course he will – not – " Edith stopped and faltered. She had begun almost with passion; but she was made to break off by the warning in her mother's eyes. Lady Lindores, too, had gone through a shock and panic; but now all the secondary elements came in – all those complications which take truth out of life.

CHAPTER XVI

The party at Tinto was increased by Dr Stirling and his wife, which made six, instead of four as the master of the house had intended. His meaning, so far as it was a meaning at all and not a mere impulse, was to get John Erskine by himself, and with skilful art to worm himself into the confidence of that open-hearted young man. Torrance had a great opinion of his own skill in this way. He thought he could find out from any man the inmost thoughts of his mind; and John seemed an easy victim, a young fellow without suspicion, who might without difficulty be led into betraying himself. Torrance had been overawed by the presence of Edith, and forced into conviction when his wife appealed to her sister on the subject of John; but he was without any confidence in the truth of others, and after a time he began to persuade himself that Lady Car's denial was not final, and that probably he should find out from John himself something that would modify her tale. When he heard that his wife had added to the party, he was furious. "I never said I wanted more people asked," he said. "If I had wanted people asked, I should have let you know. What do I want with a country parson, or minister, or whatever you call him? When I'm ill you can send for the minister. I've got nothing to say to him at present. It is for yourself, of course, you want him. When there's nobody better, he does to try your arts on, Lady Car."

"Yes," said Lady Car, with a faint smile, "I allow that I like to talk to him – for lack of a better, as you say." Sometimes she had spirit enough to be what he called aggravating, and Torrance grew red with a sense of scorn implied. He was not stupid enough, seeing that he was so little clever. He knew so much as to be constantly conscious that he was below the mark.

"Confound it!" he said, "if you were to talk to your husband, it would show more sense; but of course that would not answer your purpose." Why it would not answer her purpose he had not any idea; but it is not always necessary, especially in controversy, to know what you yourself mean, and Carry did not inquire. Sometimes she was aggravating, but sometimes she showed the better part of valour, and held her peace. That was always the wise way. And accordingly there were six people who sat down to the banquet at Tinto. It was truly a banquet though the party was so small. The table was covered with plate, huge silver epergnes, and loads of old-fashioned metal, – not old-fashioned, it must be recollected, in the right way, but in the wrong way – monstrosities of the age of William IV. or of the last George. Lady Caroline's taste had been quite inoperative so far as these ornaments were concerned. Her husband knew that she made light of them, and this usually influenced him in the long-run. But he knew also what they had cost, and would not yield a hair's-breadth. The table groaned under them as on the greatest feast-days; and Mrs Stirling, if nobody else, was always deeply impressed. "I tell the Doctor it's as good as reading a book upon the East to see that grand camel and the silver palm-trees," this excellent lady said. She thought it became a minister's wife to show a special interest in the East.

"Well, it's not often they're seen in the east – of Scotland, Mrs Stirling," said Tinto, with his large laugh. He had made the joke before.

"Oh fie, Mr Torrance! ye must not be profane," Mrs Stirling said: and they both laughed with a certain zest. Very few of Lady Car's guests admired the palm-trees; but Mrs Stirling, by a blessed dispensation of Providence, was always capable of this effort. "I hear they are not much in the way of art," Torrance said – "people are ill to please nowadays; but they're pure metal, and if they were only valued at so much an ounce –"

"You may well say they're ill to please. Bless me, Mr Torrance! one of them would be a fortune – just a fortune at that rate. When my little Jeanie is of an age to be married you must lock up these fine things, or there's no saying what I might be tempted to; but you never would miss one when there's so many," Mrs Stirling said. It was a dispensation of Providence. The Doctor himself devoutly wished he had his wife's faculty of admiration, when, after keeping her host in good humour all the

evening, she withdrew with Lady Car, giving him a warning glance. All three of the ladies addressed warning glances to the gentlemen left behind. Even Nora, who had not spoken three words to John, and had, as she said almost spitefully to herself, nothing whatever to do with him, could not help warning him with her eyes to keep the peace.

Now this was the time which Torrance had looked forward to, when he should cross-examine the new-comer, and get to the rights of the story respecting John's previous acquaintance with his wife. He was balked and he was angry, and all at once it became apparent to him that this was Lady Car's design, and that she had done it to screen herself. "Doctor, you like a good glass of wine," he said; "all parsons do, whatever be the cut of the cloth. Here's some stuff that will soon lay you under the table – unless you're seasoned like Erskine here, and me."

"I must take care, then, to give that stuff a wide berth," the Doctor said gravely, yet with a smile.

"Ay, ay, but you must drink fair. We'll be having you take shelter with the ladies. I don't mean to let Erskine off so easy. This is his first dinner in my house. It ought to have been a state dinner, you know – all the big-wigs in the county; but Erskine and Lady Car are old friends. I think you knew the family intimately at – where was the place?"

"I met Miss Lindores, as she was then, in Switzerland," said John, curtly. "It was to you that I was to apply, Dr Stirling, for particulars about the asylum Lord Lindores is so much interested in."

"And a most important work," said Dr Stirling. "It is a strange thing to think of in a country so well gifted as this by Providence, and with so much intelligence, what a balance we have on the other side! You'll have noticed almost every village has a 'natural' as the people call them, – a half-witted innocent creature like Davie Gellatley in 'Waverley.'"

"What did you say was the name of the place?" said Torrance. "I'm bent on making notes of all the places Lady Car's been in. She's a poet, you know. Some time or other they will be wanted for her biography, don't you see?"

"I have observed," said John, answering Torrance only with a little bow – "I have noticed already one or two. Could nothing be done for them?"

"But you don't answer me," said Torrance, "and when I tell you my motive! That's my father-in-law's last fad. What is he so anxious about the daft folk for, Dr Stirling? Is it a fellow-feeling?" He stopped to laugh, making the table ring. "He was at me for my support, and to write to the convener. Not I! I told him they had done well enough up to my time, and they would do well enough after my time. What are we to put ourselves about for? can you tell me that?"

"It is a disgrace to the county," said Dr Stirling. "No wonder the Earl was horrified, that has seen things managed so differently. Mr Erskine, if you will come and see me, I will tell you all about it. Sir John stands out, just because the idea is new to him, not from any real objection – for he's a good man and a charitable man at heart."

"You don't wonder at me, Doctor," said Torrance. "Do you think I'm not a good man or a charitable? I'm standing out too. I'm saying, what should we put ourselves about for? It's not us that makes them daft. And what's done for the county up to our time may do now. Little Tam, he can see to that: let him have the paying of it; it is not an amusement I'm fond of – "

"And yet, Mr Torrance," said the Doctor, – "and yet – you'll excuse me – here's what would almost build the place – "

This was an exaggeration. It was founded upon his wife's *naïve* admiration of the Tinto plate; but it did not displease the proud owner of all those pounds of silver. He laughed.

"You may take your word, it will never build the place, nor any such place," he said. "No, Doctor, that's not my line – nor the Earl's either, trust me. If you think he would strip his table or empty his purse for all the idiots in Scotland, you're mistaken. You think it's all benevolence and public spirit. Not a bit! He means to run Rintoul for the county, and it's popularity he's wanting. There's always wheels within wheels. My father-in-law thinks he's a very clever man, – and so he is, I suppose. They're a clever family; but I can see through them, though they don't think much of me."

Torrance had already consumed a good deal of wine. He had been crossed in his purpose, and his temper roused. His dark face was flushed, and his light eyes staring. Both his companions were men entirely out of sympathy with him, who were there because they could not help it, and who listened rather with angry shame that they should be parties to such discourse, than with any amiable desire to cover his shortcomings. They did not look at each other, but a slight uneasy movement on the part of both was as good as a mutual confidence, and both began to speak at once, with an anxious attempt to put an end to these unseemly revelations.

"What fine weather we've been having for the crops!" said Dr Stirling. And, "I wish you'd tell me what flies you use about here. I have had no luck at all on the river," cried John.

But their host was on his mettle, and felt himself a match for them both. "As for the weather, I've no land in my own hands – not such a fool! and I don't care a – that for the crops! Flies! you may have the finest in the world, but without sense you'll make nothing of them. Come with me, and I'll let you see how to make them bite. But as I was saying," Torrance went on, elevating his voice, "if you think his lordship is bent on the good of the county, you're mistaken, I can tell you. He means to get the seat for Rintoul. And who's Rintoul, to represent a county like this? A boy, in the first place – not fledged yet; what I call fledgling. And knows nothing about what we want. How should he? He never was in the county in his life till four or five years ago. You would have thought a man like old Lindores, that has been about the world, would have had more sense. That's just it; a man knocks about these little foreign places, and he thinks he knows the world. Now there's me. I would not take the trouble of Parliament, not for any inducement. It's no object to me. I prefer quiet and my own way. There's nothing that any Ministry could give me, neither office nor rise in life. I'm content to be Torrance of Tinto, as my father was before me: but at all events, I am one that knows the county and its ways. I could tell them what's wanted for Scotland. But no! a boy like Rintoul that knows nothing – without sense or experience, – he's the man. My father-in-law, for so clever as he is, has awful little sense."

"There is no seat vacant as yet," said Dr Stirling; "we might leave that question, Tinto, till the time comes."

"That's your old-fashioned way," said Torrance; "but his lordship is a man of his century, as they call it. He'll not wait till the last moment. He'll get himself known as the friend of Liberal measures, and all that. All his tools are in the fire now; and when the time comes to use them, they'll be hot and handy." Then he laughed, turning his eyes from one to another. "You're his tools," he said.

It was not possible for either of the listeners to conceal the irritation with which they received this sudden shot. They looked at each other this time with a sudden angry consultation. Dr Stirling touched his empty glass significantly with the forefinger of one hand, and held up the other as a warning. "It seems to me," he said, "that it would be an excellent thing about this time of the night to join the ladies. It will very soon be time for my wife and me to go."

"He is afraid of his wife, you see, Erskine," said Torrance, with his laugh. "We're all that. Keep out of the noose as long as you can, my lad. You may be very thankful for what you've missed, as well as what you've got."

"I suppose you mean something by what you are saying, Mr Torrance," said John, "but I do not understand what it is."

Upon this Torrance laughed louder than before. "He's confounded sly – confounded sly. He'll not let on he knows – that's because you're here, Doctor. Join the ladies, as you say – that is far the best thing you can do – and Erskine and I will have a glass more."

"A great deal better not, Tinto," said the Doctor; "you know it's not the fashion now: and Lady Caroline will wonder what's become of us. It's a little dark down the avenue, and my wife is nervous. You must come and shake hands with her before she goes."

Both the guests rose, but the master of the house kept his seat. "Come, Erskine, stay a bit, and tell me about – about – what was the name of the place? Let the Doctor go. He has his sermon to

write, no doubt, and his wife to please. Go away, Doctor, we'll join you presently," Torrance said, giving him a jocular push towards the door. "Come, Erskine, here's a new bottle I want your opinion of. If you ever drank a glass of claret like it, it will be a wonder to me."

John stood hesitating for a moment. Then he took his seat again. If he was to quarrel with this fellow, better, he thought, to have it out.

"You want to question me," he said; "then do so simply, and you shall have my answer. I am unaware what the point is; but whatever it is, speak out – I do not understand hints. I am quite at your service if I can furnish you with any information.

"Go away, Doctor," said Torrance, with another push. "Tell them we're coming. I'll be in time to shake hands with Mrs Stirling: join the ladies – that's the right thing to do."

The minister was in a great strait. He stood looking from one to another. Then he went out slowly, closing the door softly behind him, but lingering in the anteroom, that if any conflict of voices arose, he might be at hand to interfere. Torrance himself was sobered by the gravity of the proceeding. He did not speak immediately, but sat and stared at the companion with whom he was thus left *tête-à-tête*. He had not expected that John would have courage to meet this interrogation; and notwithstanding his pertinacity, he was disconcerted. Erskine met his gaze calmly, and said, "You wanted to ask me some questions. I am quite at your disposal now."

"Question? – no, not so much a question," faltered the other, coming to himself. "I'm sure – I beg your pardon – no offence was meant. I asked – for information."

"And I shall be glad to give you any I possess."

Torrance made a pause again; then he burst out suddenly – "Hang it, man, I didn't mean to give you any offence! I asked you – there couldn't be a simpler question – what was the name of the place where – you met my – you met the Lindores – "

"The place was a mountain inn on the way to Zermatt – a very secluded place. We were there only about six weeks. Mr Lindores (then) and his family were very friendly to us because of my name, which he knew. I suppose you have some ulterior meaning in these questions. What is it? I will answer you in all respects, but I ought to know what it means first."

Torrance was entirely cowed. "It means nothing at all," he said. "I daresay I am an idiot. I wanted to know – "

"We were there six weeks," repeated John – "an idle set of young men, far better pleased with mountain expeditions than with our books. We did little or nothing; but we were always delighted to meet a family-party so pleasant and friendly. There we parted, not knowing if we should meet again. I did not even know that Mr Lindores had come to the title. When I found them here it was the greatest surprise to me. I had never even heard – "

"Erskine," cried Torrance – by this time he had drunk several more glasses of wine, and was inclined to emotion – "Erskine, you're an honest fellow! Whoever likes may take my word for it. You're an honest fellow! Now my mind's at rest. I might have gone on suspecting and doubting, and – well, you know a man never can be sure: but when another fellow stands up to him honest and straightforward – " he said, getting up to his feet with a slight lurch towards John, as if he would have thrown himself upon his shoulder; and then he laughed with a gurgle in his breath, and thrust his arm through that of his reluctant guest. "We're friends for life," said Torrance; "you're an honest fellow! I always had a fancy for you, John Erskine. Letsh join the ladies, as that old fogy of a Doctor said."

The old fogy of a Doctor, who had been hanging about in alarm lest he might be called upon to stop a quarrel, had no more than time to hurry on before them and get inside the drawing-room door, before the master of the house pushed in, still holding John by the arm. "Here," Torrance cried, depositing his unwilling companion suddenly with some force in a chair by Lady Caroline's side – "here, talk to her! You can talk to her as much as you please. An honest fellow – an honest fellow, Lady Car!"

Then he made a somewhat doubtful step to Mrs Stirling, and stood over her diffusing an atmosphere of wine around him. Poor ladies! in the drawing-room, even in this temperate age, how often will a man approach them, and sicken the air in their clean presence with fumes of wine! The minister's wife was tolerant of the sins of the squires; but she coughed, poor soul, as she was enveloped in these powerful odours.

"Well, Mrs Stirling," Torrance said, with cumbrous liveliness, "your husband here, we could not get him away from his wine. We've been doing nothing but talk of coming up-stairs this quarter of an hour; but get the Doctor to budge from his wine – no! that was more than we could do," and he ended with a loud guffaw. The Doctor's wife coughed, and smiled a sickly smile upon the great man, and shook her head with a "Fie, William!" at her husband. "Dear me, dear me!" Mrs Stirling said after, as she walked down the avenue with her Shetland shawl over her head, holding close by her husband's arm, "when I think of poor Lady Caroline, my heart's sore. That muckle man! and oh, the smell of him, William! You're not so particular as you should be in that respect, the best of ye – but I thought I would have fainted with him hanging over me. And that fragile, delicate bit woman!" "She should not have married him," the Doctor said, curtly. But his wife was a merciful woman; and she did not feel sure how far a girl would have been justified in refusing such a marriage. She shook her head, and said, "Poor thing!" from the bottom of her heart.

"I am glad I have met with Mr Torrance's approval," John said; but Carry gave him so wistful a deprecating look, that he was silent. And he had not yet escaped from his uncomfortable host. When Mrs Stirling went away with her husband, Torrance, whose sole idea of making himself agreeable to a woman was by rough banter, transferred himself with another lurch to Nora. "And how's the old soldier?" he said. "I suppose he's going over all the men within fifty miles to see who will make the best husband, eh? It was all I could do to keep out of their hands when I was a bachelor. If they had had their will, Lady Car would never have had the chance of me: no great harm in that perhaps, you will say. But you must not be saucy, Miss Nora. Men are not so easy to get when all's said."

"No, indeed," said Nora – "men like you, Mr Torrance. I could not hope, you know, to be so lucky as Lady Car."

Upon this, though his head was not very clear, the uneasy Laird grew red, fearing satire. It was perfectly true, to his own thinking; but he was enlightened enough to know that Nora had another meaning. He would have liked to punish the little saucy chit, who held up (he thought) her little face to his so disdainfully in his own house. As lucky as Lady Car, indeed! She should have no luck at all, with that impudence of hers. It would serve her right if she never got the offer of any man. But he dared not say exactly what he thought. Conventional restraints, in such a case, were too much for the free-born wit even of Pat Torrance of Tinto.

"That's a great compliment to me, no doubt," he said; "but never be down-hearted. There is as good fish in the sea as ever came out of the net. There's our neighbour here, for instance," he said, stooping to speak confidentially, and jerking his thumb over his shoulder at John, with one of his usual bursts of laughter. "Now, what do you think of him, Miss Nora? A real honest fellow, I can testify, and a nice little property. What do you think of him?"

The tone was meant to be confidential, but it was loud enough to have reached any ear in the room; and it was Nora's turn to redden with anger intolerable. She jumped up, while he stood and laughed, shaking his sides. "I've given her a poser there," he said. "I've given her her answer there." He could not help returning to it, as, much against Nora's will, he accompanied her to the door and put her into the little pony-carriage which had come for her. "You must think of what I say, Miss Nora. You would be very comfortable. You'll see that's what the old soldier is driving at. And I don't think you could do better, if you'll take my advice."

John, who had followed down-stairs, not wishing to have any more than he could avoid of his host's society, saw the indignant countenance of Nora looking out wrathfully upon himself as the

carriage turned from the door. What had he done to deserve the angry look? But the other, standing somewhat unsteadily on the steps, greeted the departure with a laugh that was loud and long.

"One good turn deserves another," he said. "I've put her against you, Erskine, and that's the best thing I could do. Mind what you're about, my fine fellow, or you'll fall into some snare or other. I would not marry, if I were you. You have enough for one, but it wouldn't be enough for two. If you manage Dalrulzian well, you may be very comfortable as an unmarried man. Take my advice. Of course they will all be setting their caps at you. There's Aggie Sempill – she thought she had got me: but no, I knew better. Truly in vain is the snare set in the sight of any bird. There! you've Scripture for it. And now here's Nora Barrington – "

John grasped his arm violently. "Be silent!" he cried in his ear. The butler stood on the steps behind laughing decorously under his breath, as in duty bound, at his master's joke. John's new groom at his horse's head grinned respondent. What he would have given to take the big clown by the collar and fling him into the midst of the bushes! But this was not to be thought of. Such violent impulses have to be repressed nowadays.

"Well, well, we'll name no names," said Tinto. "They'll all be after you; no need to name names. And I'll tell them all you're an honest fellow. Don't you be led away by his lordship, no more than the women. Keep your vote to yourself, and your heart to yourself, that's my advice. Good night to you, John – you're a very decent fellow," cried the big voice in the darkness. Torrance had found out that this epithet annoyed young Erskine, and he liked it all the better in consequence. He shouted it after him into the night, as with another great laugh he went back into his house to Lady Car. Alas, poor Carry! The others went away, shook off the disagreeable presence, got out of the atmosphere of his wine and the roar of his laugh; but Carry, than whom there was no more fastidious, delicately nurtured woman – Carry sat helpless, scared, awaiting him. Whatever happened, she could not run away.

As for John, he flew down the avenue in the dark, taking that turn on the top of the scaur, which was allowed by everybody to be so dangerous, without knowing anything about it, guided by instinct and rage; for he had never been there before. When they had passed the danger, Peter, the groom, drew a long breath. "That's past, the Lord be thankit!" he said. It was natural that Peter should suspect his master of sitting long after dinner, and sharing the excitement of his host.

"What's past?" said John, angrily: he had nearly taken an inner gate, dogcart and all, as if it had been a fence. His horse was fresh, and his mind ablaze with irritation and impatience. "What's past?" he repeated, angrily, when the man clambered up again to his side.

"That corner, sir, they call the Scaur. There used to be a paling, but it fell to pieces, and this Laird – I beg your pardon, sir – young Tinto, that is a perfect deevil when he's on a horse, would never let it be mended. It's a' cleared away, and there's a grand view when there's daylight to see it, and doun-bye the sound o' the river roaring. If it werena for the horse's feet and the rate we're going, you would hear it now."

"You think we're going too fast – "

"Na – no me," said the groom, cautiously, "now that I see, sir, you ken what's what. But it's a fickle corner in the dark. Not to know is maybe the best way. When you ken, you're apt to be ower cautious or ower bold – one's as bad as the ither. A wrang step, a bit swing out on the open, and there would be no help for ye. Neither you nor me, sir, would have seen a freend belonging to us again."

"It is unpardonable," said John, "if this is so, to leave it without protection or notice."

"Well, sir, you see it's no just the richt road. It's a short cut. You take the left hand at thae lily-oaks. I thought you bid to ken, as you took it so bold, without a moment's thought. I wouldna advise you to do it again. Tinto, he's a perfect deevil on horseback, as I was saying. He's aye riding that way. They say he'll break his neck sometime or other, he's so wild and reckless – ower that scaur – "

"And no such great loss either," cried John, in his indignation. He hoped the words were not audible, in the rush of his horse's hoofs and jingle of the harness, the moment they had left his lips; and he was annoyed by the confidential tone of Peter's reply.

"Maybe no, sir. There's plenty is of that opinion. There was mair tint at Shirramuir."

John felt as if he had condescended to gossip with his servant about his neighbour, and was ashamed of himself. But as he reviewed the events of the evening his pulses beat higher and higher. That he should have pleased this big bully, and received the offer of his friendship, was something half humiliating, half ridiculous. But what could he do? The bonds of neighbourhood are stringent: that you must not, if possible, quarrel with, or markedly avoid, or put any slight upon, the man whose lands march with your own, is a self-evident proposition. And the husband of Carry Lindores! When John thought of this part of it, there escaped from him an almost groan of horror and pity. The rest of the party had dispersed, and were free of the big laugh, the rude jests, the fierce staring eyes; but Carry remained behind.

Peter the groom did not feel so sure that his new master had partaken too freely of the wine at Tinto, which everybody knew to be better and stronger than wine anywhere else, by the time they got to Dalrulzian. But he announced that he was "just one of Tinto's kind, a deevil when he's behind a horse," as he took his supper. This, however, was a suggestion which brought down upon his head the indignant displeasure of Bauby, who regretted audibly that she had kept the potatoes hot for such an ill-speaking loon – and of Rolls, who, accepting the praise implied, put down the superficial judgment of this new-comer as it deserved. "There will no man beat an Erskine for clear head and steady hands," he said, "if that's what you ca' being of Tinto's kind; but you'll observe, my lad, that we're a' of a reasonable age, and I'll have nane o' your rash opinions here."

CHAPTER XVII

"Oh yes, that's true – I'm an old Tory. I'm proud of the name," said Sir James, with his genial countenance. "If you'll believe me, my young friend, most changes are for the worse. When I remember, before I went to India, what a cheery world it was – none of those new-fangled notions were so much as thought of – we were all kindly one with another, as country neighbours should be. The parish school – that was good enough for me. I got the most of my schooling there. We had a grand dominie – there was not a more learned man out of St Andrews or Aberdeen. Old Robert Beatoun the blacksmith was at the school with me. We've been great friends ever since, but I cannot say that he ever took anything upon him in consequence. That's one of your new-fangled notions too – to part all the world into classes, and then, when their habits are formed and their ways of living settled, to proclaim they're all equal. No, no – they're not all equal; you may take my word for it, though I'm no Solomon."

"I don't think so, either, Sir James; but pardon me, if you found no evil in going to the same school as the old blacksmith – "

"Not a pin, sir – not a pin!" cried the old general. "We respected each other. We were great friends, but not associates. I had my own cronies, and he had his: but we always respected each other. And do you think to sit on the same bench with a wholesome country lad in corduroy breeks was worse for me than being packed up with a set of little dandies, taking care of their books and keeping their hands clean, and sent out of their own country till they're made strangers to it, as comes to pass with your Eton, and the rest of them – I ask your pardon, Erskine. I forgot you were there yourself – "

"There is no offence," said John. "I think I agree with you so far; but, Sir James, your theory is far more democratic, far more levelling – "

"Me democratic and levelling!" said Sir James. "That will be news. No, no; that was all in the course of nature. When a lad was to be pushed in the world, his friends pushed him. You cannot do that now. When you saw your friend with a houseful of children, you would say to him, 'What are you going to do with those fine lads of yours?' and if you knew a director, or had influence to hear of a writer-ship, or a set of colours. – Now, ye cannot help on your friend's boys, and ye cease to think of them. What little ye might do, ye forget to do it. Robert Beatoun's grandson, you'll tell me, got in high on the list for those competition-wallahs, as they call them. Well, I say nothing against it. The lad is a good lad, though he was never brought up in the way of having men under him, and he'll feel the want of that when he gets to India. The like of me – we were poor enough, but we had always been used to be of the officer kind. That makes a great difference; and if you think we did our work worse for having no bother about examinations – "

"That has proved itself, Sir James. Nobody pretends to say it did not work well."

"Then why change it?" said the old man. "And about your hospitals and things. When there was a poor natural, as they call it, in a village, everybody was good to the creature; and do you think the honest folk that had known it all its life would not put up with it, and feel for it, more than servants in an hospital? When we had a burden to bear, we bore it in those days, and did the best we could for our own. We didn't shuffle them off on the first person's shoulders that would take them up."

All this John had brought upon himself by his reference to Lord Lindores's scheme. Whatever might be well with respect to the election, he had felt that there could be but one voice in respect to a hospital; but John had soon been convinced that in that respect also there certainly was more than one voice.

"But I suppose," he said, feeling somewhat confused by this style of reasoning, for it was not a subject upon which the young man had thought for himself, – "I suppose, for the suffering and miserable – for those out of the common line of humanity, more badly off, less capable than their neighbours – hospitals are necessary."

"Let those that belong to them care for them, sir," cried Sir James. "I'm saying it in no hard-hearted way. Do you not think that when a trouble is sent upon a family, it's far better for the family to make a sacrifice – to draw close together, to bear it, and take care of their own? That's always been my opinion – that was the practice long syne. If ye had a thorn in the flesh, ye supported it. When one was ill, the rest took care of him. There were no hired sick-nurses in those days. When ye had a fever, your mother nursed you. If you were blind or lame, every one would give you a little, and nobody grudged your meat or your drink. And that was how Scotland was kept so independent, and the poor folk hated debt and beggary. Once you give your own duty over to other folks, you sacrifice that," the old soldier said, with conviction. Sir James was of the class of men who are never more entirely at home than when they are exercising the duties of beneficence – the sort of men who manage hospitals and establish charities by nature. Had the county hospital been existing, he it was, and not Lord Lindores, who would have given time and trouble to it; but Sir James was as full of prejudices as a hearty, healthy old gentleman has a right to be. He would not give in to the new thing; and his arguments were shrewd, although he himself would have been the last to be bound by them. He would have taken the burden off a poor man's shoulders and carried it himself without a compunction. Saying is one thing and doing another, all the world over; only it is usual that people profess not less, but more, benevolent sentiments than are natural to them. Sir James took the other way.

"You must excuse me saying," the old general went on, "that you must not trust too much to Lord Lindores. Part of it is political, there is no doubt about that. He's wanting to get a character for being public-spirited and a useful member of his party. They tell me he's thinking of bringing in his son in the case of an election, but that would never do – that is to say, from my point of view," said Sir James, laughing; "you're on the other side? – ah, to be sure, I had forgotten that. Well, I suppose we're all meaning the same thing, – the good of the country; but depend upon it, that's not to be procured in this way. The Lindores family are very excellent people – very worthy people; but they're new-fangled – they have lived abroad, and they have got foreign notions into their heads."

"Benevolent institutions are, above all others, English notions – or so, at least, I have always heard," John said.

This brought a slight flush on the old man's cheek. "Well, I believe you are right – I think you are right. I will not go against that. Still it is a great pity to bring foreign notions into a quiet country place."

They were walking up and down the lawn at Chiefswood, where a party of country neighbours were about to assemble. It was a kind of gathering which had scarcely been acclimatised in the North; and the pleasure of sitting out, though the seats were comfortably arranged in the most sheltered spot, was at the best an equivocal one; but fortunately the drawing-room, with its large bright windows overlooking the scene of the gentle gaieties provided for, was behind, and there already some groups had collected. John Erskine, without being aware of it, was the hero of the feast. He was the new-comer, and everybody was willing to do him honour. It was expected that he was to be the chief performer in those outdoor games which were not yet very well known to the young people. And it was somewhat disconcerting that he should have chosen this moment to discourse with old Sir James upon the county hospital, and the poor lunatics and imbeciles of the district, for whose benefit Lord Lindores was so anxious to legislate. Had it been any other subject, the old general would have dismissed the young man to his peers, for Sir James had a great notion that the young people should be left to entertain each other. But as it happened, the theme was one which had disturbed his genial mind. He was vexed at once in his prejudices, and in his honest conviction that the county, to which he was so glad to get back after his long exile, was the best managed and most happy of districts. He had found nothing amiss in it when he came home. It had been welcome to him in every detail of the old life which he remembered so well. There were too many changes, he thought, already. He would have liked to preserve everything. And to have it suggested by a new gingerbread, half-English, half-foreign intruder, with all the light-minded ways that belonged to the unknown races on the Continent, that the beloved county wanted reorganisation, almost betrayed the old man into ill-

humour. The guests kept arriving while he talked, but he talked on, giving forth his views loosely upon general questions. "We're going the wrong road," he said, "aye seeking after something that's new. The old way was the best. Communistic plans are bad things, whatever ye may say for them; and shuffling off your sick and your poor on other folk's hands, and leaving them to the public to provide for, what's that but communism? You'll never get me to consent to it," Sir James said.

"Where is the general?" Lady Montgomery was saying in the drawing-room. "Bless me! has nobody seen Sir James? He cannot expect me to go out without my bonnet, and get my death of cold setting all the young people agoing. No, no, I told him that. I said to him, you may put out the chairs, but if you think Barbara Erskine and me, and other sensible women, are going to sit there in a May day and get back all our winter rheumatism, you are mistaken, Sir James. But now, where is the general? Nora, you must just go and look for him, and say I'm surprised that he should neglect his duty. When I yielded to this kind of party, which is not my notion of pleasure, I told him plainly he must take the lawn part of it upon his own hands."

"And where's my nephew John?" said Miss Barbara Erskine, who sat in one of the seats of honour, within pleasant reach of a bright fire. "Nora, when you look for Sir James, you'll look for him too. I'm affronted, tell him, that he was not the first to find me out."

"I hear Mr Erskine is a great friend of the Lindores," said Mrs Sempill. "Having no son at home, I have not had it in my power, Miss Barbara, to show him any attention, but I hoped to make his acquaintance to-day. They tell me he knew the Lindores well in their former circumstances. That is, no doubt, a fine introduction for him to the county."

"If an Erskine of Dalrulzian wanted any introduction," said Miss Barbara, "it would be a very ill one, in my opinion. For there are as many that think ill of them as there are that think well of them, and they're not our kind of people. But John Erskine wants nobody to introduce him, I hope. His father's son, and my father's great-grandson, should have well-wishers enough."

"And a well-looking, well-spoken young man. He minds me of your uncle Walter, the one that went abroad," said old Mrs Methven of the Broomlees. She was older than Miss Barbara, older than the imagination could conceive. Her memory slipped all the recent generation, and went back to heights of antiquity unknown. Miss Barbara Erskine was still a young person to this old lady, and Sir James a frisky young soldier. "Walter Erskine was the first person I ever saw that wore his own hair without so much as a ribbon. It had a terrible naked look, but you soon got used to it. This one is like him. But you'll scarcely mind him. He was young when he left the county. I cannot remember if you were born."

"He's like his father, which is not so far back," Miss Barbara said.

"Bless me, bless me! where is the general?" cried Lady Montgomery. She was standing in front of the great bow-window which looked upon the lawn, with her beautiful Indian shawl on her shoulders. Grouped upon the grass were several parties of the younger people, not quite knowing what to do with themselves. Some of the ladies, wrapped in warm cloaks and shawls, were seated round, waiting for some novelty of amusement with which they were unacquainted, and wondering when it was going to begin. It seemed to Lady Montgomery the most dreadful neglect of duty that there was no one to set the young people agoing. "Will anything have happened to Sir James?" she said, in anxious Scotch, and cast a glance back at the pleasant fire, and wrapped her shawl more closely round, with a sense that Providence might require of her the heroic effort of stepping outside. But just then she perceived in the distance that her general had been captured, and was being led back in triumph to the lawn by Nora and Agnes Sempill, two of his chief favourites. John followed after them, looking by no means triumphant. When Lady Montgomery saw this, she gave a nod of satisfaction, and returned to the fire. "Whatever they're going to do, it'll begin now," she said. "If it's worth looking at, we can see it from the window; but for my part, I'm very anxious about putting folk to sit on the grass at this time of the year. I would not wonder to hear of bronchitis or inflammation after it – but it's none of my doing. Sir James is just daft about all the new-fashioned ways of amusing

young people. For my part, I say there's nothing like the old way. Just to clear out the rooms, and get the fiddlers, and let them dance. But that would be a daftish thing too, in daylight," the old lady said; for she was not at all up to the current of events.

It was, I believe, the venerable game of croquet which was the "new-fashioned thing" in question, and which all the people outside crowded round to see, while a few highly-instructed young persons, who had brought the knowledge from "the South," proceeded, with much modest importance, to exhibit for the benefit of their neighbours. "It's quite easy," they said, each feeling a sort of benevolent missionary. John Erskine was one of these *illuminati*, and he was the partner of Agnes Sempill, the girl who had trembled for a moment lest Mr Torrance of Tinto might be going to select her from the many that smiled upon him. She would have married him had this been; but it must be said for her that she was unfeignedly glad to have escaped. This having been the case, it will be apparent that poor Agnes was no longer in her first youth. She was five or six and twenty – young enough, yet not altogether a girl; and she knew, poor young woman, that she must marry the next man who offered himself, – they were so poor! and her mother did not fail to impress upon her that she was losing all her chances. She looked upon John Erskine, accordingly, with more critical interest than is ordinarily felt. He was about her own age, but she decided that he was too young; and she hoped, whatever he was going to do in the matrimonial way, that he would show his intentions at once, and not force her mother into unnecessary efforts. "Too young – but he might do very well for Mary," she said to herself; and then she turned to him to talk about croquet, as if there was no such important subject.

"It is such a thing to have something that can be played out of doors!" she said. "Well, not so much in Scotland, that is true, but still we want a little variety. Do you play golf, Mr Erskine? The ladies' golf is very nice; it is only *Putting*– but you won't understand what that means. At St Andrews there is the Ladies' Links – "

"Which sound romantic and picturesque, at least."

"Oh, it is not at all romantic – picturesque after a sort. Seaside slopes – what you call downs in England; but I can't describe it. Is it my turn? You should be able to get me nicely through that hoop next stroke you make. Sir James is always the first to get us any novelty that is going. He is always on the outlook for something. This is the very first in the county. They have not got croquet yet even at Lindores."

"Does Lindores generally set the fashion?" said John indiscreetly, not knowing what to say.

"The fashion! oh no, certainly not," cried Miss Sempill. "Of course they are the highest rank, and walk in and out before us all; but for anything else – You used to know them, I hear, Mr Erskine. Tell me something about them. Oh, we are neighbours, but not great friends. We do not move about very much; we are humble people, without carriages and horses. I suppose *they* lived very quietly before – "

"I only knew them," said John, learning to employ the universal formula, "abroad; and as the way of living is so different – "

"Ah! is it really so?" said Agnes, with quick interest; "do people really live so much cheaper abroad? I suppose you are not expected to keep up appearances in the same way; and then you get all your amusements so cheaply, and you can do a great deal, and go about a great deal, on very little. I have always heard that. But when you've a large family, the mere travelling must be a large item. I should think it would swallow up all the savings for the first year."

The question was one which interested her so much that she scarcely left time for a reply.

"I have often thought of it," she said. "The girls, poor things, get so little to amuse them here. Abroad, so far as one hears, there is nothing but amusement. Concerts and operas for next to nothing, and always a band playing somewhere – isn't it so? And you get houses quite cheap, and servants that will turn their hand to anything. I suppose the Lindores lived in quite a humble way out there?"

"They moved about a great deal, I believe," said John. "In summer, in the mountains, whether you are rich or poor, it does not make much difference."

This was all the young man knew. Miss Sempill interrupted him with an eager light in her eyes, "Doesn't it, really? Then that is the ideal place I have been looking for all my life – a place where, to be rich or poor, makes no difference – Oh, is it my turn again? what a nuisance! Mr Erskine is telling me of a place I have dreamt of all my life."

"But you must bestir yourself – you must bestir yourself," cried the old general. "Reflect, my dear; you're one of many – you must not mind your own enjoyment for the moment. Ay, my young friend, so you've been telling a lady of a place she's dreamed of all her life? – that's better than bothering your head about hospitals or my lord's schemes. Come, come, John Erskine, put your heart into it: here are some of the bonniest faces in the North waiting to see you play."

John was not dull to this inducement. It was a pretty group which gathered round as spectators, watching every stroke. All the Sempill girls, an eager group of pretty portionless creatures, eager for every kind of pleasure, and getting very little, envious in a sisterly way of Agnes, who knew the new game, and who had secured the new gallant. They were envious yet proud of her. "Our Agnes knows all about it," they said; "she has tried to teach us; but one person can never teach a game: when you see it played, you learn in a moment." They looked over each other's shoulders to see John play, which he did very badly, as was natural; and then they dropped him and followed the next player, Willie Montgomery, Sir James's grand-nephew, who, they all agreed, did a great deal better. Our young man, in spite of himself, felt a little discomfited. He came back to his partner to be consoled, – though, as he had failed to do her the service with her ball which she expected, she was a little dissatisfied too. She was disposed to be cross because her play in the new game had failed of its triumphant effect through her partner's fault. "You have not played much, Mr Erskine, I suppose? Oh, it does not matter – when nobody knows, one style of play is just as good as another; but I thought no one could have missed that ball. Never mind, it is not of the least importance. Tell me more about – abroad."

"If you will tell me," said John, much mortified by these remarks, "what you understand by abroad."

"Oh, it is all a little the same thing, isn't it? The first place you can think of – where the Lindores lived. I daresay it was just as important to them then as it is to us now to be economical, and spend as little as they could."

"The interest that people take in the place where I met the Lindores is astonishing," said John. "I had to go through a catechism at Tinto the other night."

"Ah! then you have been at Tinto. Do you think, Mr Erskine, they are so very unhappy as people say?"

"I do not know what people say," was all the answer John could make.

"There is nothing they don't say," cried Miss Sempill; "that he beats her – I have heard as much as that. I wonder if it can be at all her fault? I never cared for Pat Torrance myself, but nobody thought *that* of him before he was married. Do you think, perhaps, if she had taken a little more interest at first – One can never tell; he was always rough, but not such a savage as that."

"I have no opinion on the subject. I am only a stranger, you know," John said.

"Ah! but I can see your opinion in your face. You think it is he that is to blame. Well, so he is, no doubt; but there are generally faults, don't you think, on both sides? And then, you see, she was brought up abroad – one always feels that is a little risky for a girl. To be sure, you may turn upon me and say, why ask so many questions about it if you hold such an opinion of it? But there is a difference: we are all grown up but Lucy; and if mamma and five of us cannot take care of Lucy – Both of the Lindores have that disadvantage. Don't you think Lady Edith is a little high and mighty? She thinks none of us are good enough for her. They are not very friendly, neither the one nor the other. They don't feel at home among us, I suppose. No doubt it is our fault as much as theirs," this candid critic said.

Thus John heard nothing but the same sentiment over and over again repeated. His friends were not popular, and he himself stood in some danger of being reckoned as of their faction. There was no one so bold as to undertake the defence of Torrance; and yet there was a certain toleration accorded to him, as if his case had extenuating circumstances. John did not distinguish himself that afternoon as his friends expected him to do. His play was feeble, and did no credit to his training in "the South;" and as he continued to be interrogated by every new-comer about his own antecedents and his former acquaintance with the Lindores, it was difficult for him to repress all signs of impatience. There was not very much variety in the talk of the county, to judge by these specimens. They all asked how he liked the North, what he thought of the society, and something or other about the absent family. The monotony was broken when he was taken into the drawing-room to be surveyed by the old ladies. Old Mrs Methven, in her old yellow lace and shabby feathers, who looked to him like a superannuated cockatoo, pronounced once more that he was the image of Walter Erskine, who was killed in the French war, and who was the first man she ever saw in his own hair, without even a ribbon. "It looked very naked like," the old lady repeated; "no just decent, but you soon got used to it." When these greetings and introductions were over, Miss Barbara took his arm, and declared her intention of taking a turn on the green and inspecting the new game. But it was not the game which interested the old lady. She had a word of warning to say.

"John, my man! at your age you think little of good advice – above all, from an old woman; but just one word. You must not bind yourself hand and foot to the Lindores. You have your own place to uphold, and the credit of your family. We've all formed our opinion of *them*; and if you're to be considered as one of them, a kind of retainer of theirs – "

"Retainer!" cried John, deeply piqued. Then he made an effort to recover his temper. "You must see how unreasonable this is," he said, with a forced smile. "They are the only people I know. I have the greatest respect for them all, but I have done nothing to – identify myself with the family."

He spoke with some heat, and reddened, much to his annoyance. What way but one was there of identifying himself with them? and what hope was there that he would ever be permitted to do that? The mere suggestion in his own bosom made him red, and then pale.

"You take up their opinions – you support their plans; you're a partisan, or so they tell me. All that is bad for you, John, my man! You'll excuse me speaking; but who should take an interest in you if it's not me?"

"All this is absurd," he cried. "Take up their opinions! I think the Earl is right about a county hospital. I will support him in that with all my heart. Your favourite minister, Aunt Barbara – "

"I have no favourite minister," said Miss Barbara, somewhat sharply. "I never let myself be influenced by one of them. You mean the Doctor, I suppose? – he's far too advanced for me. Ay, that's just the man I'm meaning. He tells me you're taking up all the Lindores's plans – a great satisfaction to him, for he's a partisan too. Mind, I say nothing against the hospital. What other places have, we ought to have too. We have the same needs as our neighbours. If Perth has one, I would have one – that's my principle. But I would not take it up because it's a plan of Lord Lindores's. And I hear you and that muckle lout Pat Torrance were nearly coming to blows – "

"Is that the minister too?" John cried, angrily.

"No, it's not the minister; the minister had nothing to say to it. Don't you take up a prejudice against the minister. That's just as silly as the other way. It was another person. Pat Torrance is just a brute; but you'll make little by taking up the defence of the weaker side there. A woman should hold her tongue, whatever happens. You must not set up, at your age, as the champion of ill-used wives."

"So far from that," said John, with fierce scorn, "the tipsy brute swore eternal friendship. It was all I could do to shake him off."

But Miss Barbara still shook her head. "Let them redd their quarrels their own way," she said. "Stand you on your own feet, John. You should lay hands suddenly on no man, the Apostle says."

Mr Monypenny, is that you? I am reading our young man a lecture. I am telling him the old vulgar proverb, that every herring should hang by its ain head."

"And there's no' a truer proverb out of the Scriptures, Miss Barbara," said Mr Monypenny, a man of middle age, and grizzled, reddish aspect. It irritated John beyond description to perceive that the new-comer understood perfectly what was meant. It had evidently been a subject of discussion among all, from Sir James to the agent, who stood before him now, swaying from one leg to another, and meditating his own contribution to the arguments already set forth.

"Miss Erskine is very right, as she always is. Whatever her advice may be, it will carry the sympathy of all your well-wishers, Mr John, and they are just the whole county, man and woman. I cannot say more than that, and less would be an untruth."

"I am much obliged to my well-wishers, I am sure. I could dispense with so much solicitude on their part," cried John, with subdued fury. Old aunts and old friends may have privileges; but to be schooled by your man of business – that was more than flesh and blood could bear.

CHAPTER XVIII

It happened after this that John Erskine, by no will of his own, was drawn repeatedly into the society of the somewhat lonely pair at Tinto. Torrance had never been popular, though the county extended to him that toleration which a rich man, especially when young, is apt to receive. There were always benevolent hopes that he might mend as long as he remained unmarried; and after his marriage, his wife bore the blame of more than half his misdeeds. To tell the truth, poor Carry, being so unhappy, did not take pains to conciliate her neighbours. Some she took up with almost feverish eagerness, and she had two or three impassioned friends; but she had none of that sustaining force of personal happiness which makes it possible to bear the weariness of dull country company, and she had not taken any particular pains to please the county: so that, except on the periodical occasions when the great rooms were thrown open to a large party, she and her husband, so little adapted as they were to indemnify each other for the loss of society, lived much alone in their great house, with none of that coming and going which enlivens life. And since what he called the satisfaction which John had given him, Torrance had experienced a sort of rough enthusiasm for his new neighbour. He was never weary of proclaiming him to be an honest fellow. "That's the way to meet a man," he would say – "straightforward; if there's any mistake, say it out." And Erskine was overwhelmed with invitations to "look in as often as he pleased," to "take pot-luck," – to come over to Tinto as often as he wearied. Sometimes he yielded to those solicitations out of pity for poor Carry, who seemed, he thought, pleased to see him; and sometimes because, in face of this oppressive cordiality, it was difficult to say no. He did not enjoy these evenings; but the soft look of pleasure in poor Carry's eyes, the evident relief with which she saw him come in, went to John's heart. Not a word had passed between them on the subject which all their neighbours discussed so fully. No hint of domestic unhappiness crossed Carry's lips: and yet it seemed to John that she had a kind of sisterly confidence in him. Her face brightened when he appeared. She did not engage him in long intellectual conversations as she did Dr Stirling. She said, indeed, little at all to him, but she was grateful to him for coming, and relieved from that which she would not complain of or object to – the sole society of her husband. This consciousness touched John more than if he had been entirely in her confidence. A kind of unspoken alliance seemed to exist between them.

One evening when June was nearly over in the long never-ending Northern daylight, this tacit understanding was at once disturbed and intensified. John had been captured by his too cordial neighbour in the languid afternoon when he had nothing to do, and had been feeling somewhat drearily the absence of occupation and society. Torrance could not supply him with either, but his vacant condition left him without excuse or power to avoid the urgent hospitality. He had walked to Tinto in all the familiarity of county neighbourhood, without evening dress or ceremony of any kind. They had dined without the epergnes and mountains of silver which Torrance loved, in the low dining-room of the old house of Tinto, which still existed at one end of the great modern mansion. This room opened on the terrace which surrounded the house, with an ease not possible in the lofty Grecian erection, well elevated from the ground, which formed the newer part. Lady Caroline, who had left the gentlemen some time before, became visible to them as they sat at their wine, walking up and down the terrace with her baby in her arms. The child had been suffering from some baby ailment, and had been dozing a great part of the day, which made it unwilling to yield to sleep when evening came. The mother had brought it out wrapped in a shawl, and was singing softly to lull it to rest. The scene was very tranquil and sweet. Sunset reflections were hanging still about the sky, and a pearly brightness was diffused over the horizon – light that looked as if it never meant to fade. The trees of the park lay in clustered masses at their feet, the landscape spread out like a map beyond, the hills rose blue against the ethereal paleness of the distance. Close at hand, Lady Caroline's tall, pliant figure, so light and full of languid grace, yet with a suggestion of weakness which was always pathetic, went

and came – the child's head upon her shoulder, her own bent over it – moving softly, singing under her breath. The two men, sitting together with little conversation or mutual interest between them, were roused by the sight of this passing figure. Even Tinto's rude gaze was softened by it. He looked out at his wife and child with something more like human tenderness than was usual to him. Himself for a moment gave place in the foreground to this embodiment of the nearest and closest ties of life. He stopped in the talk which he was giving forth at large in his usual loud monologue, unaffected by any reply, and something softened the big balls of his light projecting eyes. "Let's step outside and finish our cigars," he said, abruptly. Lady Caroline herself looked different from her wont. The child against her heart soothed the pain in it: there is no such healing application. It was not a delightful child, but it was her own. One of its arms was thrown round her neck; its head, heavy with sleep, to which it would not yield, now nestled into her shoulder, now rose from it with a sleepy half-peevish cry. She was wholly occupied with the little perverse creature, patting it with one thin soft hand, murmuring to it. The little song she was crooning was contemptible so far as music went, but it was soft as a dove's cooing. She had forgotten herself, and her woes, and her shipwrecked life. Even when that harsher step came out on the gravel, she did not recognise it with her usual nervous start. All was soothed and softened in the magical evening calm, in the warm softness of the baby, lying against the ache in its mother's heart.

And Torrance, for a wonder, did not disturb this calm. He stopped to touch the child's cheek with his finger as his wife passed him, but as this broke once more the partial slumber, he subsided into quiet with a sense of guiltiness, puffing his cigar at intervals, but stepping as lightly as he could with his heavy feet, and saying nothing. A touch of milder emotion had come to his rude bosom. Not only was that great park, those woods, and a large share of the surrounding country, his own, but this woman with her baby was his, his property, though so much more delicate, and finer than he. This moved him with a kind of wondering sense of the want of something which amid so much it might yet be possible to attain – happiness, perhaps, in addition to possession. His breast swelled with pride in the thought that even while thus engrossed in the humblest feminine occupation, like any cottager, nobody could mistake Lady Car Torrance for anything less than she was. They might think her a princess, perhaps. He did not know any princess that had that carriage, he said to himself; but less or meaner, nobody could suppose her to be. And he was touched to see her with his child, her whole soul – that soul which had always eluded him, and retained its chill superiority to him – wrapped up in the baby, who was his as much as hers. There was in the air a kind of flutter of far-off wings, as if peace might be coming, as if happiness might be possible even between this ill-matched pair.

John Erskine was the spectator in this curious domestic scene. He looked on with wondering, half-pleased, half-indignant observation. He was almost angry that Carry should be lowered to the level of this husband of hers, even if it gave her for a time a semblance of happiness; and yet his heart was touched by this possibility of better things. When the child went to sleep, she looked up at the two men with a smile. She was grateful to her husband for his silence, for bringing no disturbance of the quiet with him; and grateful to John for having, as she thought, subdued Torrance by his influence. She made to them both that little offering of a grateful smile as she sat down on the garden-seat, letting the child rest upon her knee. The baby's head had slid down to her arm, and it lay there in the complete and perfect repose which a mother's arms, protecting, sustaining, warm, seem to give more than any bed. The air was so sweet, the quiet so profound, that Carry was pleased to linger out of doors. Not often had she shown any desire to linger in her husband's society when not bound by duty to do so. This evening she did it willingly. For the moment, a *faux air*

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