

Oliphant Margaret

The Wizard's Son. Volume

2 of 3



Маргарет Олифант

The Wizard's Son. Volume 2 of 3

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Margaret Oliphant

The Wizard's Son, Vol. 2(of 3)

CHAPTER I

When Walter seated himself beside Oona in the boat, and Hamish pushed off from the beach, there fell upon both these young people a sensation of quiet and relief for which one of them at least found it very difficult to account. It had turned out a very still afternoon. The heavy rains were over, the clouds broken up and dispersing, with a sort of sullen stillness, like a defeated army making off in dull haste, yet not without a stand here and there, behind the mountains. The loch was dark and still, all hushed after the sweeping blasts of rain, but black with the reflections of gloom from the sky. There was a sense of safety, of sudden quiet, of escape, in that sensation of pushing off, away from all passion and agitation upon this still sea of calm. Why Oona, who feared no one, who had no painful thoughts or associations to flee from, should have felt this she could not tell. The sense of interest in, and anxiety for, the young man by her side was altogether different. That was sympathetic and definable; but the sensation of relief was something more. She looked at him with a smile and sigh of ease as she gathered the strings of the rudder into her hands.

"I feel," she said, "as if I were running away, and had got safe out of reach; though there is nobody pursuing me that I know of," she added, with a faint laugh of satisfaction.

The wind blew the end of the white wrapper round her throat towards her companion, and he caught it as she had caught the rudder ropes.

"It is I that am pursued," he said, "and have escaped. I have a feeling that I am safe here. The kind water, and the daylight, and you – but how should *you* feel it? It must have gone from my mind to yours."

"The water does not look so very kind," said Oona, "except that it separates us from the annoyances that are on land – when there are annoyances."

She had never known any that were more than the troubles of a child before.

"There is this that makes it kind. If you were driven beyond bearing, a plunge down there and all would be over –"

"Lord Erradeen!"

"Oh, I don't mean to try. I have no thought of trying; but look how peaceful, how deep, all liquid blackness! It might go down to the mystic centre of the earth for anything one knows."

He leant over a little, looking down into those depths profound which were so still that the boat seemed to cut through a surface which had solidity; and in doing this put the boat out of trim, and elicited a growl from Hamish.

It seemed to Oona, too, as if there was something seductive in that profound liquid depth, concealing all that sought refuge there. She put out her hand and grasped his arm in the thrill of this thought.

"Oh, don't look down," she said. "I have heard of people being caught, in spite of themselves, by some charm in it." The movement was quite involuntary and simple; but, on second thoughts, Oona drew away her hand, and blushed a little. "Besides, you put the boat out of trim," she said.

"If I should ever be in deadly danger," said Walter, with the seriousness which had been in his face all along, "will you put out your hand like that, without reflection, and save me?"

Oona tried to laugh again; but it was not easy; his seriousness gained upon her, in spite of herself.

"I think we are talking nonsense, and feeling nonsense; for it seems to me as if we had escaped from something. Now Hamish is pleased; the boat is trimmed. Don't you think," she said, with an effort to turn off graver subjects, "that it is a pity those scientific people who can do everything should

not tunnel down through that centre of the earth you were speaking of, straight through to the other side of the world? Then we might be dropped through to Australia without any trouble. I have a brother there; indeed I have a brother in most places. Mamma and I might go and see Rob now and then, or he might come home for a dance, poor fellow; he was always very fond of dancing."

Thus she managed to fill up the time till they reached the isle. It lay upon the surface of that great mirror, all fringed and feathered with its bare trees; the occasional colour in the roofs gleaming back again out of the water; a little natural fastness, safe and sure. As Oona was later in returning than had been expected, the little garrison of women in the isle was all astir and watching for her coming. Out of one of the upper windows there was the head of a young maid visible, gazing down the loch; and Mrs. Forrester, in her furred cloak, was standing in the porch, and Mysie half way down to the beach, moving from point to point of vision.

"They are all about but old Cookie," said Oona. "It is a terrible business when I am late. They think everything that is dreadful must have happened, and that makes a delightful sensation when I get home safe and well. I am every day rescued from a watery grave, or saved from some dreadful accident on shore, in my mother's imagination. She gives herself the misery of it, and then she has the pleasure of it," cried the girl, with the amused cynicism of youth.

"But to-day you bring a real fugitive with you – an escaped – what shall I call myself? – escaped not from harm, but from doing harm – which is the most dangerous of the two."

"You will never do harm to the poor folk," said Oona, looking at him with kind eyes.

"Never, while I am in my senses, and know. I want you to promise me something before we land."

"You must make haste, then, and ask; for there is Mysie ready with the boat-hook," said Oona, a little alarmed.

"Promise me – if it ever occurs that harm is being done in my name, to make me know it. Oh, not a mere note sent to my house; I might never receive it like the last; but to make me know. See me, speak to me, think even: – and you will save me."

"Oh, Lord Erradeen, you must not put such a responsibility on me. How can I, a girl that is only a country neighbour – "

"Promise me!" he said.

"Oh, Lord Erradeen, this is almost tyrannical. Yes, if I can – if I think anything is concealed from you. Here I am, Mysie, quite safe; and of course mamma has been making herself miserable. I have brought Lord Erradeen to luncheon," Oona said.

"Eh, my lord, but we're glad to see you," said Mysie, with the gracious ease of hospitality. "They said you were going without saying good-bye, but I would never believe it. It is just his lordship, mem, as I said it was," she called to Mrs. Forrester, who was hastening down the slope.

The mistress of the island came down tripping, with her elderly graces, waving her white delicate hands.

"Oh, Oona, my dear, but I'm thankful to see you, and nothing happened," she cried; "and ye are very welcome, Lord Erradeen. I thought you would never go away without saying good-bye. Come away up to the house. It is late, late, for luncheon; but there will be some reason; and I never have any heart to take a meal by myself. Everything is ready: if it's not all spoiled?" Mrs. Forrester added, turning round to Mysie, as she shook hands with the unexpected guest.

"Oh, no fear of that, mem," said the factotum, "we're well enough used to waiting in this house: an hour, half an hour, is just nothing. The trout is never put down to the fire till we see the boat; but I maun away and tell cook."

"And you will get out some of the good claret," Mrs. Forrester cried. "Come away – come away, Lord Erradeen. We have just been wondering what had become of you. It is quite unfriendly to be at Auchnasheen and not come over to see us. Oona, run, my dear, and take off your things. Lord Erradeen will take charge of me. I am fain of an arm when I can get one, up the brae. When

the boys were at home I always got a good pull up. And where did you foregather, you two? I am glad Oona had the sense to bring you with her. And I hope the trout will not be spoiled," she said with some anxiety. "Mysie is just too confident – far too confident. She is one that thinks nothing can go wrong on the isle."

"That is my creed too," said Walter with an awakening of his natural inclination to make himself agreeable, and yet a more serious meaning in the words.

"Oh fie!" said Mrs. Forrester, shaking her head, "to flatter a simple person like me! We have but little, very little to offer; the only thing in our favour is that it's offered with real goodwill. And how do you like Auchnasheen? and are you just keeping it up as it was in the old lord's time? and how is Mary Fleming, the housekeeper, that was always an ailing body?" These questions, with others of the same kind, answered the purpose of conversation as they ascended to the house – with little intervals between, for Mrs. Forrester was a little breathless though she did not care to say so and preferred to make pauses now and then to point out the variations of the landscape. "Though I know it so well, I never find it two days the same," she said. None of these transparent little fictions, so innocent, so natural, were unknown to her friends, and the sight of them had a curiously strengthening and soothing effect upon Walter, to whom the gentle perseverance of those amiable foibles, so simple and evident, gave a sense of reality and nature which had begun to be wanting in his world. His heart grew lighter as he watched the "ways" of this simple woman, about whose guiles and pretences even there was no mystery at all, and whose little affectations somehow seemed to make her only more real. It gave him a momentary shock, however, when she turned round at her own door, and directed his attention to his old castle lying in lines of black and grey upon the glistening water. He drew her hastily within the porch.

"It gets colder and colder," he said; "the wind goes through and through one. Don't let me keep you out in the chilly air."

"I think you must have caught a little cold," said Mrs. Forrester, concerned, "for I do not find it so chilly for my part. To be sure, Loch Houran is never like your quiet landward places in England: we are used up here to all the changes. Oona will be waiting for us by this time; and I hope you are ready for your dinner, Lord Erradeen, for I am sure I am. I should say for your lunch: but when it comes to be so far on in the day as this, these short winter days, Oona and me, we just make it our dinner. Oh, there you are, my dear! Lord Erradeen will like to step into Ronald's room and wash his hands, and then there will be nothing to wait for but the trout."

When they were seated at the table, with the trout cooked to perfection as fish only is where it is caught, Mrs. Forrester pressing him to eat with old-fashioned anxiety, and even Mysie, who waited at table, adding affectionate importunities, Walter's heart was touched with a sense of the innocence, the kindness, the gentle nature about him. He felt himself cared for like a child, regarded indeed as a sort of larger child to be indulged with every dainty they could think of, and yet in some ineffable way protected and guided too by the simple creatures round him. The mistress and the maid had little friendly controversies as to what was best for him.

"I thought some good sherry wine, mem, and him coming off the water, would be better than yon could claret."

"Well, perhaps you are right, Mysie; but the young men nowadays are all for claret," Mrs. Forrester said.

"Just a wee bittie more of the fish, my lord," said Mysie, in his ear.

"No, no, Mysie," cried her mistress. "You know there are birds coming. Just take away the trout, it is a little cold, and there's far more nourishment in the grouse."

"To my mind, mem," said Mysie, "there is nothing better than a Loch Houran trout."

All this had the strangest effect upon Walter. To come into this simple house was like coming back to nature, and that life of childhood in which there are no skeletons or shadows. Even his mother had never been so sheltering, so safe, so real. Mrs. Methven had far more intellect and passion than

Mrs. Forrester. It had been impossible to her to bear the failure of her ideal in her boy. Her very love had been full of pain and trouble to both. But this other mother was of a different fashion. Whatever her children did was good in her eyes; but she protected, fed, took care of, extended her soft wings over them as if they still were in the maternal nest. The innocence of it all moved Walter out of himself.

"Do you know," he said at last, "what I have come from to your kind, sheltering house, Mrs. Forrester? Do you know what everybody, even your daughter, thought of me two hours ago?"

"I never thought any harm of you, Lord Erradeen," said Oona, looking up hastily.

"Harm of him! Dear me, Oona, you are far, very far, from polite. And what was it they thought of you?" asked Mrs. Forrester. "Oona is so brusque, she just says what she thinks; but sure am I it was nothing but good."

"They thought," said Walter, with an excitement which grew upon him as he went on, "that I, who have been poor myself all my life, that never had any money or lands till a few weeks ago, that I was going to turn poor women and children out of their houses, out upon the world, out to the wet, cold mountain-side, without a shelter in sight. They thought I was capable of that. An old woman more than eighty, and a lot of little children! They thought I would turn them out! Oh, not the poor creatures themselves, but others; even Miss Oona. Is thy servant a dog – " cried the young man in a blaze of fiery agitation, the hot light of pain shining through the involuntary moisture in his eyes. "Somebody says that in the Bible, I know. Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?"

"Oh, my dear!" cried Mrs. Forrester, in her sympathy, forgetting all distinctions, and only remembering that he was very like her Ronald, and was in trouble, "nobody, nobody thought you would do that. Oh no, no, fie no! nobody had such a thought. If I could believe it of Oona I would not speak to her – I would – no, no, it was never believed. I, for one, I knew you would never do it. I saw it," cried the kind lady, "in your eyes!"

Though Walter had no real confidence in the independent judgment which she asserted so unhesitatingly, yet he was consoled by the softness of the words, the assurance of the tone.

"I did not think such things ever happened in Scotland," he said. "It is Ireland one thinks of: and that it should be supposed I would do it, has hurt me more than I can say – a stranger who had no one to stand up for me."

"That was just the way of it," said Mrs. Forrester, soothingly. "We think here that there is something strange in English ways. We never know how a thing will appear to them – that is how it was. But I said all through that it was impossible, and I just wrote to you last night (you would get my letter?) that you must not do it – for fear you might not have understood how it was."

"But there is another side to it," said Oona, "we must not forget, mother. Sometimes it is said, you know, that the poor folk can do no good where they are. We can all understand the shock of seeing them turned out of their houses: but then people say they cannot live there – that it would be better for themselves to be forced to go away."

"That is true, Oona," said her mother, facing round: "it is just a kind of starvation. When old Jenny went there first (she was in my nursery when I had one) there was just a perpetual craik about her rent. Her man was one of the Frasers, and a well-doing, decent man, till he died, poor fellow, as we must all do: and since that I have heard little about it, for I think it was just out of her power to pay anything. Duncan Fraser, he is a very decent man, but I remember the minister was saying if he was in Glasgow or Paisley, or some of those places, it would be better for his family. I recollect that the minister did say that."

"So, Lord Erradeen," said Oona, "without being cruel you might: but I – we all like you ten times better that you couldn't," said the girl impulsively.

"Ay, that we do," said her mother, ready to back up every side, "that we do. But I am not surprised. I knew that there was nothing unkind either in your heart or your face."

"There was no time," said Walter, "to think what was wise, or take into consideration, like a benevolent tyrant, what could be done for their good, without consulting their inclinations: which is what you mean, Miss Forrester – "

Oona smiled, with a little heightened colour. It was the commencement of one of those pretty duels which mean mutual attraction rather than opposition. She said, with a little nod of her head, "Go on."

"But one thing is certain," he said, with the almost solemn air which returned to his face at intervals, "that I will rather want shelter myself than turn another man out of his house, on any argument – far less helpless women and children. Did you laugh? I see no laughing in it," the young man cried.

"Me – laugh!" cried Mrs. Forrester, though it was at Oona he had looked. "If I laughed it was for pleasure. Between ourselves, Lord Erradeen (though they might perhaps be better away), turning out a poor family out of their house is a thing I could never away with. Oona may say what she likes – but it is not Christian. Oh, it's not Christian! I would have taken them in, as many as Mysie could have made room for: but I never could say that it was according to Christianity. Oh no, Lord Erradeen! I would have to be poor indeed – poor, poor indeed – before I would turn these poor folk away."

"There would be no blessing upon the rest," said Mysie, behind her mistress's chair.

"That is settled then," said Walter, whose heart grew lighter and lighter. "But that is not all. Tell me, if I were a benevolent despot, Miss Forrester – you who know everything – what should I do now? – for it cannot stop there."

"We'll go into the drawing-room before you settle that," said Mrs. Forrester. "Dear me, it is quite dark; we will want the candles, Mysie. There is so little light in the afternoon at this time of the year. I am sorry there is no gentleman to keep you in countenance with your glass of wine, Lord Erradeen. If you had been here when my Ronald or Jamie, or even Rob, was at home! But they are all away, one to every airt, and the house is very lonely without any boys in it. Are you coming with us? Well, perhaps it will be more cheerful. Dear me, Mysie, you have left that door open, and we will just be perished with the cold."

"Let me shut it," Walter said.

He turned to the open door with a pleasant sense of taking the place of one of those absent boys whom the mother regretted so cheerfully, and with a lighter heart than he could have thought possible a few hours ago. But at the first glance he stood arrested with a sudden chill that seemed to paralyse him. It was almost dark upon the loch; the water gleamed with that polished blackness through which the boat had cut as through something solid; but blacker now, shining like jet against the less responsive gloom of the land and hills. The framework of the doorway made a picture of this night scene, with the more definite darkness of the old castle in the centre, rising opaque against the softer distance. Seeing that Lord Erradeen made a sudden pause, Oona went towards him, and looked out too at the familiar scene. She had seen it often before, but it had never made the same impression upon her. "Oh, the light – the light again!" she said, with a cry of surprise. It came up in a pale glow as she was looking, faint, but throwing up in distinct revelation the mass of the old tower against the background. Walter, who seemed to have forgotten what he had come to do, was roused by her voice, and with nervous haste and almost violence shut the door. There was not much light in the little hall, and they could see each other's faces but imperfectly, but his had already lost the soothed and relieved expression which had replaced its agitated aspect. He scarcely seemed to see her as he turned round, took up his hat from the table, and went on confusedly before her, forgetting ordinary decorums, to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Forrester had already made herself comfortable in her usual chair, with the intention of for a few moments "just closing her eyes." Mysie had not brought the lights, and he stood before the surprised lady like a dark shadow, with his hat in his hand.

"I have come to take my leave," he said; "to thank you, and say good-bye."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Forrester, rousing herself, "you are in a great hurry, Lord Erradeen. Why should you be so anxious to go? You have nobody at Auchnasheen to be kept waiting. Toots! you must just wait now you are here for a cup of tea at least, and it will take Hamish a certain time to get out the boat."

"I must go," he said, with a voice that trembled: then suddenly threw down his hat on the floor and himself upon a low chair close to her, "unless," he said, "unless – you will complete your charity by taking me in for the night. Will you keep me for the night? Put me in any corner. I don't mind – only let me stay."

"Let you stay!" cried the lady of the isle. She sprang up as lightly as a girl at this appeal, with no further idea of "closing her eyes." "Will I keep you for the night? But that I will, and with all my heart! There is Ronald's room, where you washed your hands, just all ready, nothing to do but put on the sheets, and plenty of his things in it in case you should want anything. Let you stay!" she cried, with delighted excitement, "it is what I would have asked and pressed you to do. And then we can do something for your cold, for I am sure you have a cold; and Oona and you can settle all that business about the benevolent tyrant, which is more than my poor head is equal to. Oona, my dear, will you tell Mysie? – where is Mysie? I will just speak to her myself. We must get him better of his cold, or what will his mother think? He must have some more blankets, or an eiderdown, which will be lighter, and a good fire."

If her worst enemy had asked hospitality from Mrs. Forrester, she would have forgotten all her wrongs and opened her doors wide; how much more when it was a friend and neighbour! The demand itself was a kindness. She tripped away without a thought of her disturbed nap, and was soon heard in colloquy with Mysie, who shared all her sentiments in this respect. Oona, who stood silent by the fire, with a sense that she was somehow in the secret, though she did not know what it was, had a less easy part. The pang of sympathy she felt was almost intolerable, but she did not know how to express it. The quiet room seemed all at once to have become the scene of a struggle, violent though invisible, which she followed dumbly with an instinct beyond her power to understand. After an interval of silence which seemed endless, he spoke.

"It must be intended that we should have something to do with each other," he said, suddenly. "When you are there I feel stronger. If your mother had refused me, I should have been lost."

"It was impossible that she should have refused you, Lord Erradeen."

"I wish you would not call me by that ill-omened name. It is a horror to me; and then if all that is true – How is it possible that one man should lord it over an entire race for so long? Did you ever hear of a similar case? Oh! don't go away. If you knew what an ease it is to speak to you! No one else understands. It makes one feel as if one were restored to natural life to be able to speak of it, to ask advice. Nothing," he cried suddenly, getting up, picking up his hat as if about to leave the house, "nothing – shall induce me to go –"

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, "you must not go;" though she could not have told why.

He put down the hat again on the table with a strange laugh. "I was going then," he said, "but I will not. I will do exactly as you say." He came up to her where she stood full of trouble watching him. "I dare say you think I am going wrong in my head, but it is not that. I am being dragged – with ropes. Give me your hand to hold by. There! that is safety, that is peace. Your hand is as soft – as snow," cried the young man. His own were burning, and the cool fresh touch of the girl's hand seemed to diffuse itself through all his being. Oona was as brave in her purity as the other Una, the spotless lady of romance, and would have shrunk from no act of succour. But it agitated her to have this strange appeal for help made to her. She did not withdraw her hand, but yet drew away a little, alarmed, not knowing what to do.

"You must not think," she said, faltering, "that any one – has more power over another than – he permits them to have."

She spoke like one of the oracles, not knowing what she said; and he listened with a slight shake of his head, not making any reply. After a moment he yielded to the reluctance which made itself felt in her, and let her hand go.

"Will you come with me outside?" he said; "not there, where that place is. I think the cold and the night do one good. Can we go out the other way?"

Oona accepted this alternative gladly. "We can go to the walk, where it is always dry," she said, with an assumption of cheerfulness. "It looks to the south, and that is where the flowers grow best." As she led the way through the hall, Walter took up Mrs. Forrester's furred cloak which hung there, and put it round her with a great deal of tenderness and care. The girl's heart beat as he took this office upon him, as one of her brothers might have done. It was the strangest conjunction. He was not thinking of her at all, she felt, save as affording some mysterious help in those mysterious miseries: and yet there was a sweetness in the thought he took, even at this extraordinary moment, for her comfort. There could have been no such dangerous combination of circumstances for Oona, whose heart was full of the early thrill of romance, and that inextinguishable pity and attraction towards the suffering which tells for so much in the life of women. A softness and melting of the heart indescribable came over her as she felt his light touch on her shoulders, and found herself enveloped as it were, in his shadow and the sentiment of his presence. He was not thinking of her, but only of his need of her, fantastic though that might be. But her heart went out towards him with that wonderful feminine impulse which is at once inferior and superior, full of dependence, yet full of help. To follow all his movements and thoughts as well as she could with wistful secondariness; yet to be ready to guide, to save, when need was – to dare anything for that office. There had never been aught in Oona's life to make her aware of this strange, sweet, agitating position – the one unchangeable form of conjunction for the two mortal companions who have to walk the ways of earth together. But his mind was pre-occupied with other thoughts than her, while hers were wholly bent upon him and his succour. It was dangerous for her, stealing her heart out of her breast in the interest, the sympathy, the close contact involved; but of none of these things was he aware in the pre-occupation of his thoughts.

They walked up and down for a time together, behind the house, along the broad walk, almost a terrace, of the kitchen garden, where there was a deep border filled in summer with every kind of old-fashioned flowers. It was bare now, with naked fruit-trees against the wall, but the moon was hid in clouds, and it was impossible to see anything, except from the end of the terrace the little landing-place below, and the first curves of the walk leading up to the house, and all round the glimmer of the loch. The stillness had been broken by the sound of a boat, but it was on the Auchnasheen side, and though Oona strained her eyes she had not been able to see it, and concluded that, if coming to the isle at all, it must have touched the opposite point, where there was a less easy, but possible, landing-place. As they reached the end of the terrace, however, she was startled to see a figure detach itself from the gloom and walk slowly towards the house.

"The boat must have run in under the bushes, though I cannot see it," she said; "there is some one coming up the walk."

Walter turned to look with momentary alarm, but presently calmed down. "It is most likely old Symington, who takes a paternal charge of me," he said.

Soon after they heard the steps, not heavy, but distinctly audible, crushing the gravel, and to Oona's great surprise, though Walter, a stranger to the place, took no notice of the fact, these footsteps, instead of going to the door, as would have been natural, came round the side of the house and approached the young pair in their walk. The person of the new-comer was quite unknown to Oona. He took off his hat with an air of well-bred courtesy – like a gentleman, not like a servant – and said —

"I am reluctant to interrupt such a meeting, but there is a boat below for Lord Erradeen."

Walter started violently at the sound of the voice, which was, notwithstanding, agreeable and soft, though with a tone of command in it. He came to a sudden stop, and turned round quickly as if he could not believe his ears.

"There is a boat below," the stranger repeated, "and it is extremely cold; the men are freezing at their oars. They have not the same delightful inspiration as their master – who forgets that he has business to settle this final night –"

Walter gave a strange cry, like the cry of a hunted creature. "In God's name," he exclaimed, "what have you to do here?"

"My good fellow," said the other, "you need not try your hand at exorcising; others have made that attempt before you. Is Circe's island shut to all footsteps save yours? But, even then, you could not shut out me. I must not say Armida's garden in this state of the temperature –" he said.

"Who is it?" asked Oona in great alarm under her breath.

"Let me answer you," the intruder said. "It is a sort of a guardian who has the first right to Lord Erradeen's consideration. Love, as even the copybooks will tell, ought to be subordinate to duty."

"Love!" cried Oona, starting from the young man's side. The indignant blood rushed to her face. She turned towards the house in sudden anger and shame and excitement. Circe! Armida! Was it she to whom he dared to apply these insulting names.

Walter caught her cloak with both hands.

"Do you not see," he said, "that he wants to take you from me, to drive you away, to have me at his mercy? Oona! you would not see a man drown and refuse to hold out your hand?"

"This is chivalrous," said the stranger, "to put a woman between you and that – which you are afraid to meet."

To describe the state of excited feeling and emotion in which Oona listened to this dialogue, would be impossible. She was surprised beyond measure, yet, in the strange excitement of the encounter, could not take time to wonder or seek an explanation. She had to act in the mean time, whatever the explanation might be. Her heart clanged in her ears. Tenderness, pity, indignation, shame, thrilled through her. She had been insulted, she had been appealed to by the most sacred voice on earth – the voice of suffering. She stood for a moment looking at the two shadows before her, for they were little more.

"And if he is afraid why should not he turn to a woman?" she said with an impulse she could scarcely understand. "If he is afraid, I am not afraid. This isle belongs to a woman. Come and tell her, if you will, what you want. Let my mother judge, who is the mistress of this place. Lord Erradeen has no right to break his word to her for any man: but if my mother decides that you have a better claim, he will go."

"I will abide by every word she says," Walter cried.

The stranger burst into a laugh.

"I am likely to put forth my claim before such a tribunal!" he said. "Come, you have fought stoutly for your lover. Make a virtue of necessity now, and let him go."

"He is not my lover," cried Oona; "but I will not let him go." She added after a moment, with a sudden change of tone, coming to herself, and feeling the extraordinary character of the discussion. "This is a very strange conversation to occur here. I think we are all out of our senses. It is like the theatre. I don't know your name, sir, but if you are Lord Erradeen's guardian, or a friend of his, I invite you to come and see my mother. Most likely," she added, with a slight faltering, "she will know you as she knows all the family." Then, with an attempt at playfulness, "If it is to be a struggle between this gentleman and the ladies of the isle, Lord Erradeen, tell him he must give way."

The stranger took off his hat and made her a profound bow.

"I do so on the instant," he said.

The two young people stood close together, their shadows confounded in one, and there did not seem time to draw a breath before they were alone, with no sound or trace remaining to prove that the discussion in which a moment before their hearts had been beating so loudly had ever existed at all. Oona looked after the stranger with a gasp. She clung to Walter, holding his arm tight.

"Where has he gone?" she cried in a piercing whisper. She trembled so after her boldness that she would have fallen but for his sustaining arm. "Who is he? Where has he gone? That is not the way to the beach. Call after him, call after him, and tell him the way."

Walter did not make any reply. He drew her arm closer threw his, and turned with her towards the house. As for Oona, she seemed incapable of any thought but that this strange intruder might be left on the isle.

"He will get into the orchard and then among the rocks. He will lose himself," she cried; "he may fall into the water. Call to him, Lord Erradeen – or stop, we will send Hamish. Here is Hamish. Oh, Hamish! the gentleman has taken the wrong way – "

"It will just be a boat that has come for my lord," said Hamish. "I tellt them my lord was bidding all night, but nothing would satisfee them, but I had to come up and get his lordship's last word."

"Oh, he is not going, Hamish! but there is a gentleman – "

Walter interrupted her with an abruptness that startled Oona.

"Let them see that every one is on board – and return at once," he said.

"Oh there will just be everybody on board that ever was, for none has come ashore," said Hamish. "What was you saying about a gentleman, Miss Oona? There will be no gentleman. It is joost Duncan and another man with him, and they cried upon me, Hamish! and I answered them. But there will be no gentleman at all," Hamish said.

CHAPTER II

It was very dark upon Loch Houran that night. Whether nature was aware of a dark spirit, more subtle and more powerful than common man, roaming about in the darkness, temporarily baffled by agencies so simple that their potency almost amused while it confounded him – and shrank from the sight of him, who could tell? but it was dark, as a night in which there was a moon somewhere ought never to have been. The moon was on the wane, it was true, which is never like her earlier career, but all trace and influence of her were lost in the low-lying cloud, which descended from the sky like a hood, and wrapped everything in gloom. The water only seemed to throw a black glimmer into the invisible world where all things brooded in silence and cold, unseen, unmoving. The only thing that lived and shone in all this mysterious still universe was one warm window, full of light, that shone from the isle. It was a superstition of the simple mistress of the house that there should be no shutter or curtain there, so that any late "traveller by land or water" might be cheered by this token of life and possible help. Had that traveller, needing human succour, been led to claim shelter there, it would have been accorded fearlessly. "Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold." The little innocent household of defenceless women had not a fear. Hamish only, who perhaps felt a responsibility as their sole possible defender, might have received with suspicion such an unexpected guest.

The mysterious person already referred to – whose comings and goings were not as those of other men, and whose momentary discomfiture by such simple means perplexed yet partially amused him, as has been said, passed by that window at a later hour and stood for a moment outside. The thoughts with which, out of the external cold and darkness, which affected him not at all, he regarded the warm interior where simple human souls, sheltering themselves against the elements, gathered about their fire, were strange enough. The cold, which did not touch him, would have made them shiver; the dark, which to his eyes was as the day, would have confused their imaginations and discouraged their minds; and yet together by their fire they were beyond his power. He looked in upon their simplicity and calm and safety with that sense of the superiority of the innocent which at the most supreme moment will come in to dash all the triumphs of guile, and all the arts of the schemer. What he saw was the simplest cheerful scene, the fire blazing, the lamp burning steadily, a young man and a girl seated together, not in any tender or impassioned conjunction, but soberly discussing, calculating, arguing, thought to thought and face to face; the mother, on the other side, somewhat faded, smiling, not over wise, with her book, to which she paid little attention, looking up from time to time, and saying something far from clever. He might have gone in among them, and she would have received him with that same smile and offered him her best, thinking no evil. He had a thousand experiences of mankind, and knew how their minds could be worked upon and their imaginations inflamed, and their ambitions roused. Was he altogether baffled by this simplicity, or was there some lingering of human ruth in him, which kept him from carrying disturbance into so harmless a scene? or was it only to estimate those forces that he stood and watched them, with something to learn, even in his vast knowledge, from this unexpected escape of the fugitive, and the simple means by which he had been baffled for the moment, and his prey taken from him? For the moment! – that was all.

"Come, come now," Mrs. Forrester said. "You cannot argue away like that, and fight all night. You must make up your bits of differences, and settle what is to be done; for it is time we had the Books, and let the women and Hamish get to their beds. They are about all day, and up early in the morning, not like us that sit with our hands before us. Oona, you must just cry upon Mysie, and let them all come ben. And if you will hand me the big Bible that is upon yon table – since you are so kind, Lord Erradeen."

At this simple ceremonial – the kindly servant-people streaming in, the hush upon their little concerns, the unison of voices, from Oona's, soft with youth and gentle breeding, to the rough bass of Hamish, in words that spectator knew as well as any – the same eyes looked on, with feelings we

cannot attempt to fathom. Contempt, envy, the wonder of the wise over the everlasting, inexplicable superiority of the innocent, were these the sentiments with which he gazed? But in the night and silence there was no interpreter of these thoughts. How he came or went was his own secret. The window was closed soon after, the lights extinguished, and the darkness received this little community of the living and breathing, to keep them warm and unseen and unconscious till they should be claimed again by the cheerful day.

The household, however, though it presented an aspect of such gentle calm, was not in reality so undisturbed as it appeared. In Oona's chamber, for one, there was a tumult of new emotions which to the girl were incomprehensible, strange, and terrible, and sweet. Lord Erradeen was but a new acquaintance, she said to herself, as she sat over her fire, with everything hushed and silent about her; nevertheless the tumult of feeling in her heart was all connected with him. Curiously enough, the strange encounter in the garden – of which she had received no explanation – had disappeared from her thoughts altogether. The rise and sudden dawn of a new life in her own being was more near and momentous than any mysterious circumstances, however unlike the common. By-and-by she might come to that – in the mean time a sentiment "*nova, sola, infinita*," occupied all her consciousness. She had known him during the last week only: three times in all, on three several days, had they met; but what a change these three days had made in the life that had been so free and so sweet, full of a hundred interests, without any that was exclusive and absorbing. In a moment, without knowing what was coming, she had been launched into this new world of existence. She was humbled to think of it, yet proud. She felt herself to have become a sort of shadow of him, watching his movements with an anxiety which was without any parallel in her experience, yet at the same time able to interpose for him, when he could not act for himself, to save him. It seemed to Oona suddenly, that everything else had slipped away from her, receding into the distance. The things that had occupied her before were now in the background. All the stage of life was filled with him, and the events of their brief intercourse had become the only occupation of her thoughts. She wondered and blushed as she wandered in that maze of recollections, at her own boldness in assuming the guidance of him; yet felt it to be inevitable – the only thing to be done. And the strange new thrill which ran through her veins when he had appealed to her, when he had implored her to stand by him, came back with an acute sweet mixture of pleasure and pain. She declared to herself, Yes! – with a swelling of her heart – she would stand by him, let it cost her what it might. There had been no love spoken or thought of between them. It was not love: what was it? Friendship, fraternity, the instinctive discovery of one by another, that divination which brings those together who can help each other. It was he, not she, who wanted help – what did it matter which it was? in giving or in receiving it was a new world. But whether it was a demon or an angel that had thus got entrance into that little home of peace and security – who could tell? Whatever it was, it was an inmate hitherto unknown, one that must work changes both in earth and Heaven.

Everything that could trouble or disturb had vanished from the dark world outside before Oona abandoned her musings – or rather before she felt the chill of the deep night round her, and twisted up her long hair, and drew aside the curtains from her window as was her custom that she might see the sky from her bed. There had been a change in the midnight hours. The clouds at last had opened, and in the chasm made by their withdrawal was the lamp of the waning moon "lying on her back" with a sort of mystic disturbance and ominous clearness, as if she were lighting the steps of some evil enterprise, guiding a traitor or a murderer to the refuge of some one betrayed. Oona shivered as she took refuge in the snow-white nest which had never hitherto brought her anything but profound youthful repose, and the airy flitting dreams of a soul at rest. But though this momentary chill was impressed upon her senses, neither fear nor discouragement were in her soul. She closed her eyes only to see more clearly the face of this new influence in her life, to feel her pulses tingle as she remembered all the events of the three days' Odyssey, the strange magical history that had sprung into being in a moment, yet was alive with such endless interest, and full of such a chain of incidents.

What was to be the next chapter in it? Or was it to have another chapter? She felt already with a deep drawing of her breath, and warned herself that all would probably end here, and everything relapse into vacancy – a conclusion inconceivable, yet almost certain, she said to herself. But this consciousness only excited her the more. There was something in it of that whirl of desperation which gives a wild quickening to enjoyment in the sensation of momentariness and possible ending – the snatching of a fearful joy.

This sudden end came, however, sooner than she thought; they had scarcely met at the breakfast table when Lord Erradeen begged Mrs. Forrester to allow him to send for his servant, and make his arrangements for his departure from the isle, instead of returning to Auchnasheen. "I have not felt safe or at ease, save here, since I came to the loch," he said, looking round him with a grateful sense of the cheerful quiet and security. His eyes met those of Oona, who was somewhat pale after her long vigil and broken rest. She had recognised at once with a pang the conclusion she had foreseen, the interruption of her new history which was implied in the remorseless unintentional abruptness of this announcement. He was going away; and neither felt any inducement to stay, nor any hesitation in announcing his resolution. She had known it would be so, and yet there was a curious pang of surprise in it which seemed to arrest her heart. Notwithstanding, as in duty bound, she met his look with a smile in her eyes.

"Hoots," said Mrs. Forrester, "you flatter the isle, Lord Erradeen. We know that is just nonsense; but for all that, we take it kind that you should like our little house. It will always be found here, just faithful and friendly, whenever you come back. And certainly ye shall send for your man or make what arrangements suits you. There's the library quite free and at your service for any writing you may have to do, and Hamish will take any message to Auchnasheen, or wherever you please. The only thing that grieves me is that you should be so set on going to-day."

"That must be – that must be!" cried Walter: and then he began to make excuses and apologies. There were circumstances which made it indispensable – there were many things that made him anxious to leave Auchnasheen. No, it was not damp – which was the instant suggestion of Mrs. Forrester. There were other things. He was going back to Sloebury to his mother (Mrs. Forrester said to England), and it was so recently that he had entered upon his property, that there was still a great deal to do. After he had made this uncompromising statement of the necessities that he had to be guided by, he looked across the table at Oona once more.

"And Miss Forrester is so kind as to take in hand for me the settlement of the cotters. It will be her doing. I hope they will not blame me for that alarm yesterday, which was no fault of mine; but the new arrangement will be your doing altogether."

"I shall not take the credit," said Oona. "I had not even the boldness to suggest it. It was your own thought, and they will bless you so, that wherever you are, at Sloebury or the end of the world, you must feel your heart warm –"

She said this with great self-command; but she was pale, and there was a curious giddiness stealing over her. She seemed to feel the solid ground slip away from under her feet.

"My heart," he said, looking at her with a grateful look, "will always be warm when I think of the Isle, and all that has been done for me here."

"Now, Lord Erradeen," said Mrs. Forrester, "you will just make Oona and me vain with all these bonnie speeches. We are always glad to be friendly and neighbourlike, but what have we been able to do? – just nothing. When you come back again and let your friends see a little more of you, we will all do what we can to make the loch agreeable. But I hope it will be warmer weather, and more pleasure in moving about. You will be back no doubt, if not sooner, in time for the grouse?"

He grew pale in spite of himself, and Oona, looking at him, felt the steady earth slip more and more away.

"I don't know," he said, hurriedly, "when I may come back – not before I – not sooner than I can – I mean there are a great many things to look after; and my mother –"

His eyes seemed to seek hers again as if asking her sympathy, and appealing to her knowledge. "Not before I must – not sooner than I can help," that was what he meant to say. Oona gave him a faint smile of response. It was so wonderful that when she understood him so completely, he should understand her so little, and never suspect that there was anything cruel in those words. But she made the response he required, and strengthened him by that instinctive comprehension of him in which he put so strange a trust. There was an eagerness in all his preparations for going away which he almost forced upon her notice, so strong was his confidence in her sympathy. He lost no time about any of these arrangements, but sent Hamish with his boat to Auchnasheen for Symington, and wrote down his instructions for Shaw, and talked of what he was going to do when he got "home," with the most absolute insensibility to any feeling in the matter save his own. And it seemed to Oona that the moments flew, and the quick morning melted away, and before she could collect her thoughts the time came when her mother and she walked down to the beach with him, smiling, to see him off. There had never been a word said between them of that conversation in the garden on the previous night. Only when he was just about to leave, he cast a glance towards the walk where that encounter had taken place, and turned to her with a look such as cannot pass between any but those that have some secret link of mutual knowledge. Her mother was talking cheerfully of the view and the fine morning after the rain, walking before them, when he gave Oona that look of mutual understanding. "I owe you everything," he said, in a low tone of almost passionate fervour. Presently she found herself shaking hands with him as if he had been nothing more than the acquaintance of three days which he was, and wishing him a good journey. And so the Odyssey came to an end, and the history stopped in the course of making. She stood still for a little, watching the boat and the widening lines it drew along the surface of the water. "Sometimes to watch a boat moving off will give you a giddiness," Mrs. Forrester said.

CHAPTER III

There could be no greater contrast than that which existed between Walter Methven, Lord Erradeen, hurrying away with the sense of a man escaped with his life from the shores of Loch Houran, and Oona Forrester left behind upon the isle.

It was not only that he had all at once become the first object in her life, and she counted for little or nothing in his. That was not the question. She had been for sufficient space of time, and with sufficient stress of circumstances to make the impression one which would not die easily, of the first importance in his thoughts: and no doubt that impression would revive when he had leisure from the overwhelming pre-occupation which was in his mind. But it was that he was himself full of an anxiety and excitement strong enough to dwarf every other feeling, which made the blood course through his veins, and inspired every thought; while she was left in a state more like vacancy than anything else, emptied out of everything that had interested her. The vigorous bend of the rowers to the oars as they carried him away was not more unlike the regretful languor of the women as they stood on the beach, Mrs. Forrester waving her handkerchief, but Oona without even impulse enough in her to do that.

As for Walter, he was all energy and impulse. He arranged the portmanteaux which Symington had brought with his own hands, to leave room for the sweep of the oars, and quicken the crossing. His farewells were but half said. It seemed as if he could scarcely breathe till he got away. Every stroke of the oars lightened his heart, and when he was clear of that tragic water altogether, and sprang up upon the rude country waggonette which had been engaged at the inn to carry him to the station, his brow relaxed, and the muscles of his mouth gave way as they had not done since his first day on Loch Houran. He gave a look almost of hatred at the old castle, and then averted his face. When he reached the railway, the means of communication with the world he had known before, he was a different man. The horses had gone too slowly for him, so did the leisurely friendly trains on the Highland railway, with their broad large windows for the sake of the views. Travellers, as a rule, did not wish to go too fast while they skirted those gleaming lochs, and ran along under shadow of the mountains: they liked to have somebody to point out which was Loch Ool and which St. Monan's. It was too slow for Lord Erradeen, but still it was going away. He began to think of all the commonplace accessories of life with a sort of enthusiasm – the great railway stations, the Edinburgh Hotel, with its ordinary guests. He was so sick of everything connected with his Highland property and with its history, that he resolved he would make no pause in Edinburgh, and would not go near Mr. Milnathort. The questions they would no doubt put to him made him impatient even in thought. He would not subject himself to these; he would put away altogether out of his mind, if he could, everything connected with it, and all that he had been seeing and hearing, or, at least, had fancied he heard and saw.

But when Oona turned away from looking after the boat – which she was indeed the first to do, Mrs. Forrester waiting almost as long as it was within sight to wave her handkerchief if the departing guest should look back – she felt herself and her life emptied out all at once. When she began to think of it in the cold light of this sudden conclusion, a sense of humiliation came over her. She blushed with hot shame at this altogether unasked, unreasonable, unnecessary resignation of herself and her interests to a stranger. He was nothing but a stranger, she said to herself; there was no remarkable charm in him one way or another. She had not been at all affected by his first appearance. He was not handsome enough or clever enough, nor had he any special attraction to gain him so high a place. Somehow she had not thought of Walter in her first realisation of the new interest which had pushed away all the other occupations out of her existence: and she had not blushed in the high sense of expanded life and power to help. But now it moved her with a certain shame to think that the sudden departure of a man whom she scarcely knew, and to whom she was nothing, should thus have emptied out her existence and left a bewildering blank in her heart. She went slowly up the walk, and went to her room, and there sat down with a curious self-abandonment. It was all over, all ended and done.

When he came into her life it was accidentally, without any purpose in it on either side; and now that he had gone out of it again, there was no anger, no sense of wrong, only a curious consciousness that everything had gone away – that the soil had slipped from her, and nothing was left. No, there was no reason at all to be angry – nobody was to blame. Then she laughed a little at herself at this curious, wanton sort of trouble intended by nobody – which neither he had meant to draw her into, nor she to bring upon herself.

There was one thing however between her and this vacancy. He had left her a commission which any kind-hearted girl would have thought a delightful one – to arrange with the factor how the cotters were to be most effectually helped and provided for. It had been their thought at first – the young man being little better instructed than the girl on such matters – that to make Duncan Fraser and the rest the proprietors of their little holdings would be the most effectual way of helping them, and would do the property of Lord Erradeen very little harm – a thing that Walter, unaccustomed to property, and still holding it lightly, contemplated with all the ease of the landless, never thinking of the thorn in the flesh of a piece of alienated land in the midst of an estate, until it suddenly flashed upon him that his estates being all entailed, this step would be impossible. How was it to be done then? They had decided that Shaw would know best, and that some way of remitting the rents at least during the lifetime of the present Lord Erradeen must be settled upon, and secured to them at once. Oona had this commission left in her hands. She could have thought of none more delightful a few days ago, but now it seemed to make the future vacancy of life all the more evident by the fact that here was one thing, and only one, before her to do. When that was done, what would happen? – a return upon the pleasant occupations, the amusements, the hundred little incidents which had filled the past? After all, the past was only a week back. Can it ever return, and things be again as they were before? – Oona had never reasoned or speculated on these matters till this moment. She had never known by experiment that the past cannot return, or that which has been be once more; but she became aware of it in a moment now.

Then she got up and stood at her window and looked out on the unchanging landscape, and laughed aloud at herself. How ridiculous it was! By this time it made no difference to Lord Erradeen that she had ever existed. Why should it make any difference to her that he had come and gone? The new generation takes a view of such matters which is different from the old-fashioned sentimental view. After yielding to the new influence rashly, unawares, like a romantic girl of any benighted century, Oona began to examine it like an enlightened young intelligence of her own. Her spirit rose against it, and that vigorous quality which we call a sense of humour. There was something almost ludicrous in the thought that one intelligent creature should be thus subject to another, and that life itself should be altered by an accidental meeting. And if this was absurd to think of in any case, how much more in her own? Nobody had ever had a more pleasant, happy life. In her perfect womanliness and submission to all the laws of nature, she was yet as independent as the most free-born soul could desire. There was no path in all the district, whether it led to the loneliest cottage or the millionaire's palace, that was not free to Oona Forrester. The loch and the hills were open to her as her mother's garden, to the perfectly dauntless, modest creature, who had never in her life heard a tone or caught a look of disrespect. She went her mother's errands, which were so often errands of charity, far and near, with companions when she cared for them, without companions when she did not. What did it matter? The old cotter people about had a pretty Gaelic name for her; and to all the young ones Miss Oona of the Isle was as who should say Princess Oona, a young lady whom every one was bound to forward upon her way. Her mother was not so clever as Oona, which was, perhaps, a drawback; but she could not have been more kind, more tender, more loving if she had possessed, as our Laureate says, "the soul of Shakespeare." All was well about and around this favourite of nature. How was it possible then that she could have come to any permanent harm in two or three days?

Notwithstanding this philosophical view, however, Oona did nothing all that day, and to tell the truth felt little except the sense of vacancy; but next day she announced to her mother that she was

going to the Manse to consult with Mr. Cameron about the Truach-Glas cotters, and that probably she would see Mr. Shaw there, and be able to do the business Lord Erradeen had confided to her. Mrs. Forrester fully approved.

"A thing that is to make poor folk more comfortable should never be put off a moment," that kind woman said, "for, poor bodies, they have little enough comfort at the best," and she stood at the porch and waved her hand to her child, as the boat sped out of the shade of the isle into the cold sunshine which had triumphed for an hour or two over the clouds and rain. Oona found Mr. Shaw, as she had anticipated, in the village, and there was a very brisk and not altogether peaceable discussion in the minister's study, over this new idea. The factor, though he was so strongly set against all severe measures, and in reality so much on the side of the cotters, was yet taken aback, as was natural, by the new idea presented to him. He laughed at the notion of making them the owners of their little holdings.

"Why not give Tom Patterson his farm too? He finds it just as hard to pay the rent," he cried in minded ridicule and wrath. "There is no difference in the principle though there may be in the circumstances. And what if Lord Erradeen had a few hundred crofters instead of half-a-dozen? I'm speaking of the principle. Of course he cannot do it. It's all entailed, every inch of the land, and he cannot do it; but supposing he could, and that he were treating them all equally? It's just not to be done. It is just shifting the difficulty. It is putting other people at a disadvantage. A man cannot give away his land and his living. It is just a thing that is not to be done."

"He knows it is not to be done; he knows it is entailed, therefore – "

"Oh yes, Miss Oona; therefore – " cried the factor. "Little of it, very little, would have come his way if it had not been entailed. Whether or not it is good for the country, there can be no doubt it's the stronghold of a family. Very likely there would have been no Methvens (and small damage, begging his pardon that is a kind of a new stock), and certainly there would have been no property to keep up a title, but for the entail. It is a strange story, the story of them altogether." Shaw continued, "it has been a wonderfully managed property. I must say that for it; no praise to me, so I am free to speak. There was the late lord – the only one I knew. There was very little in him, and yet the way he managed was wonderful; they have just added land to land, and farm to farm. I do not understand it. And now I suppose we've arrived at the prodigal that always appears some time in a family to make the hoards go."

"No, no," said the minister, "you must not call the man a prodigal whose wish is to give to the poor."

"That is all very well," said Shaw; "the poor, where there are half-a-dozen of them, are easily enough managed. Give them their land if you like (if it was not criminal to cut a slice out of an estate), it does not matter much; but if there were a hundred? It is the principle I am thinking of. They cannot buy it themselves, and the State will not buy it for them, seeing they are only decent Scots lads, not blazing Irishmen. I cannot see where the principle will lead to: I am not against the kindness, Miss Oona, far from that: and these half-a-dozen Frasers, what would it matter? but if there were a hundred? The land is just my profession, as the Church is Mr. Cameron's, and I must think of it, all the ways of it; and this is a thing that would not work so far as I can see."

"But Lord Erradeen acknowledges that," said Oona. "What he wants to do is only for his time. To set them free of the rent they cannot pay, and to let them feel that nobody can touch them, so long as he lives – "

"And the Lord grant him wealth of days," said the minister; "a long life and a happy one!"

"You will not look at it," cried the factor, "from a common-sense point of view. All that is very pretty, and pleasing to the young man's – what shall I call it? – his kindness and his vanity, for both are involved, no doubt. But it will just debauch the minds of the people. They will learn to think they have a right to it; and when the next heir comes into possession, there will be a burning question raised up, and a bitter sense of wrong if he asks for his own again. Oh yes, Miss Oona, so long as

the present condition of affairs lasts it will be their own. A man with a rent of two or three pounds is just as liable as if it were two or three hundred. The principle is the same; and as I am saying, if there were a number of them, you just could not do it: for I suppose you are not a communist, Miss Oona, that would do away with property altogether?"

A sudden smile from among the clouds lit up Shaw's ruddy, remonstrative countenance, as he put this question, and Oona smiled too.

"I don't make any theories," she said; "I don't understand it. I feel as Lord Erradeen does, that whatever the law may be, I would rather be without a roof to shelter myself than turn one poor creature out of her home. Oh, I don't wonder when I remember the horror in his face! Think! could you sleep, could you rest – you, young and strong, and well off, when you had turned out the poor folk to the hill? – all for a little miserable money?" cried Oona, starting to her feet, "or for the principle, as you call it? I, for one," cried the girl, with flashing eyes, "would never have let him speak to me again."

"There you have it, Oona; there's a principle, if you like; there is something that will work," cried the old minister, with a tremulous burst of laughter. "Just you keep by that, my bonnie dear, and all your kind; and we'll hear of few evictions within the Highland line."

"That would be all very well," said the factor, "if every landlord was a young lad, like Lord Erradeen; but even then it might be a hard case, and Miss Oona would not find it as easy as she thinks; for supposing there were hundreds, as I'm always saying: and supposing there were some among them that could just pay well enough, but took advantage; and supposing a landlord that was poor too, and was losing everything? No, no, Miss Oona, in this world things are not so simple. My counsel is to let them be – just to let them be. I would bid them pay when they can, and that my lord would not be hard upon them. That is what I would do. I would tell them he was willing to wait, and may be to forgive them what was past, or something like that. After what happened the other day, they will be very sure he will not be hard upon them. And that is what I would advise him to do."

"You are not going to wash your hands of it, after all?" the minister said.

Shaw laughed. "Not just this time, Mr. Cameron. I always thought he was a fine lad. And now that he has good advisers, and amenable – " he added, with a glance at Oona, which fortunately she did not see.

And after this interview she went home, very silent, depressed as she had no right to be, feeling as if life was over, and all things come to an end.

CHAPTER IV

It would be difficult to describe the sensations with which Lord Erradeen found himself set at liberty, and on his way back, as he thought at first, to the easy mind, the quiet life, the undisturbed and undisturbing circumstances of his previous existence. He scarcely seemed to breathe till he had crossed the Border, and was outside of Scotland, feeling during that time like a fugitive in full flight, incapable of thinking of anything except that he had eluded his pursuers and had escaped all possible risks and apprehensions. His trial had lasted nights and days, he could not tell how many. Now for the first time he had the calm, the leisure, the sense of safety, which were necessary for a review of all that he had gone through: he had seen the moon light up the pale line of the sea at Berwick, where Tweed falls into the waste of water, and the lights of Newcastle, turning into a shining highway the dark crescent of the Tyne, and then as the train pounded along through the darkness, with the throb and swing of life and speed, through the silence and night, his faculties seemed to come back to him, and his judgment to be restored. Through what a strange episode of existence had he passed since he saw the lights curve round the sides of that river, and the great bridge striding over above the roofs of the sleeping town! And now he had escaped – had he escaped? He had time at least and quiet to think it all out and see where he stood.

He had been for nearly three weeks altogether on Loch Houran, during which time he had gone through the severest mental struggle he had ever known. It seemed years to him now since the moment when he had been suddenly confronted by the strange and mysterious personage who had assumed a tone towards him and claimed a submission which Walter had refused to yield. That this man's appearance had awakened in him a sensation of overwhelming excitement mingled with fear, that he had come in an unaccountable way, that he had been seen apparently by no one in the old castle but himself, that nobody had betrayed any consciousness of knowing who he was or how he was there, and yet that he had come and gone with a perfect acquaintance and familiarity with the place, the family, the estates, the story of the race; these were details which, with a tremulous sensation in his mind, as of a panic nearly over, he gathered together to examine and find out, if possible, what they meant. He had been unable during the time that followed, when he had taken refuge in Auchnasheen, to exercise any discriminating faculty, or use his own judgment upon these facts. At the moment of seeing and hearing occurrences which disturb the mind, reason is hampered in its action. Afterwards you may ask yourself, have you really heard and seen? but not when a definite appearance is before your eyes, or likely to re-appear at any moment, and a distinct voice in your ears. The actual then overmasters the soul; the meaning of it must be got at later. He had seen this man whose faculties and pretensions were alike so extraordinary, he had listened to the claim he made, he had been bidden to yield up his individual will and to obey under threatening of evil if he refused, and promises of pleasure and comfort if he consented. And Walter had said "No." He would have said No had an angel out of heaven appeared before him, making the same demand. He had been subjected to this strange trial at the very height of independence and conscious power, when he had newly begun to feel his own importance, and to enjoy its advantages. It had seemed to him absurd, incredible, that such a claim should be made, even while the personality of the strange claimant had filled him with a sensation of terror, which he summoned all his forces to struggle against, without any success. He had been like two men during that struggle. One a craven, eager to fly, willing to promise anything might he but escape; the other struggling passionately against the stranger and refusing – refusing, night and day. When he went to Auchnasheen the character of the conflict within him had become more remarkable still. The man who claimed his obedience was no longer visible, but he had been rent asunder between the power of his own resisting spirit and some strange influence which never slackened, which seemed to draw him towards one point with a force which his unwillingness to yield made into absolute agony. Still he had resisted, always resisted, though without strength to escape,

until the moment had come when by sudden inspiration of natural justice and pity he had broken loose – by that, and by the second soul struggling in him and with him, by Oona's hand holding him and her heart sustaining him. This was the history of these two tremendous weeks, the most eventful in his life. And now he had escaped out of the neighbourhood in which he could feel no safety, out of the influence which had moved him so strangely, and was able to think and ask himself what it was.

The night was dark, and, as has been said, the moon was on the wane. She shed a pale mist of light over the dark country, where now and then there broke out the red glow of pit or furnace fires. The train swung onwards with a rock of movement, a ploughing and plunging, the dim light in the roof swaying, the two respectable fellow-passengers each in his corner amidst his wraps, slumbering uneasily. Walter had no inclination to sleep. He was indeed feverishly awake; all his faculties in wild activity; his mind intensely conscious and living. What did it all mean? The events which had affected him to a passionate height of feeling with which his previous life had been entirely unacquainted – was it possible that there was any other way of accounting for them? To look himself in the face as it were, and confess now at a distance from these influences that the man to whom he had spoken in the language of to-day was one of the fabulous men in whom the ignorant believe, his own early ancestor – the still existing, undying founder of the house, was, he said to himself, impossible. It could not be; anything else – any hypothesis was more credible than this. There was no place for the supernatural in the logic of life as he had learned it. Now that he had recovered control of himself, it was time for him to endeavour to make out a reason for the hallucination in which he had almost lost himself and his sober senses. And accordingly he began to do it; and this is what he said to himself. His imagination had been excited by all that had happened to him; the extraordinary change in his circumstances which seemed almost miraculous, and then the succession of incidents, the strange half-communications that had been made to him, the old, ruinous house in which he had been compelled to shut himself up, the wonderful solitude, full of superstitious suggestions, into which he had been plunged. All these details had prepared his mind for something – he knew not what. He felt a hot flush of shame and mortification come over him as he remembered how easily, notwithstanding all his better knowledge, he, a man of his century, acquainted with all the philosophies of the day, had been overcome by those influences. He had expected something out of nature, something terrible and wonderful. And when such a state of mind is reached, it is certain (he thought) that something will arise to take advantage of it.

Probably all these effects had been calculated upon by the individual, whoever he was, who haunted Kinloch Houran to excite and exploit these terrors. Who was he? Even now, so far out of his reach, so emancipated from his influence that he could question and examine it, Walter felt a certain giddiness come over his spirit at this thought, and was glad that one of his fellow-passengers stirred and woke, and made a shivering remark, How cold it was, before he again composed himself to sleep. It was very cold. There was an icy chill in the air which penetrated through the closed windows. But nothing else could come in – nothing else! and it could be but a sudden reflection from his past excitement that made Walter feel for a moment as if another figure sat opposite to him, gazing at him with calm sarcasm, and eyes that had a smile in them. When the giddiness passed off, and he looked again, there was (of course) no one opposite to him, only the dark blue cushions of the unoccupied place. Who was this man then who held a sort of court in Kinloch Houran, and demanded obedience from its proprietor? He was no creature of the imagination. Excited nerves and shaken health might indeed have prepared the mind of the visitor for the effect intended to be produced upon him; but they could not have created the central figure – the powerful personality from whom such influence flowed. Who was he? The circumstances were all favourable for a successful imposture, or even a mystification. Suppose it to be some member of the family aggrieved by the promotion of a far-off branch, some dependent with so much knowledge of the secrets of the race as to be able to play upon the imagination of a novice, with mysterious threats and promises; perhaps, who could tell, a monomaniac, the leading idea of whose delusion was to take this character upon him? Walter's breast

lightened a little as he made out one by one these links of explanation. It was characteristic of his time, and the liberality of mind with which modern thought abjures the idea of absolute imposture, that the sudden suggestion of a monomaniac gave him great relief and comfort. That might explain all – a man of superior powers crazed in this one point, who might have convinced himself that he was the person he claimed to be, and that it was the interest of the family he had at heart. Such a being, acquainted with all the mysterious passages and hiding-places that exist in such old houses, able to appear suddenly from a secret door or sliding panel, to choose moments when nature herself added to the sense of mystery, hours of twilight and darkness when the half-seen is more alarming than anything fully revealed – this would explain so much, that the young man for the moment drew a long breath of relief, and felt half-consciously that he could afford to ignore the rest.

And in the sense of this relief he fell asleep, and dreamed that he stood again at Mrs. Forrester's door in the Isle, and saw the light on the old tower of Kinloch Houran, and felt the attraction, the drawing and dragging as of some force he could not resist; and woke up with the blow he gave himself against the rail that supported the netting on the opposite side of the carriage, against which he struck his head in his rush towards the place to which he had felt himself called. He staggered back into his seat, giddy and faint, yet thankful to feel that it was only a dream; and then had to begin his self-arguments over again, and trace once more every link of the chain.

A monomaniac – yes, that might be the explanation; but whence then that power which drew him, which he had fought against with all the powers of his being at Auchnasheen, which he had never given in to, but which, even in the reflection of it given in his dream, was vivid enough to awaken him to a new branch of the question? Magnetism, mesmerism, he had heard of, and scorned as other names for charlatanism; but when you are searching anxiously for the means of accounting for mysterious phenomena you are glad to seize upon explanations that at another moment would be little satisfactory. Walter said to himself that the madman of Kinloch Houran – the monomaniac, must possess these strange powers. He might know many secrets, though his wits were gone astray. He might be sane enough to have a purpose, and to cultivate every possible means of affecting the mind he wished to work upon. Such curious combinations of madness and wisdom were not beyond human experience. Perhaps at the end of all his arguments, having fully convinced himself, the thread of the reasoning escaped him, for he suddenly shuddered and grew pale, and shrank into his corner, drawing his wraps close round him and raising the collar of his coat to his very eyes, as if to shut out some bewildering, overwhelming sight. But by this time the wintry day was breaking, and the stir of awakened life reached the other travellers, who woke and stretched themselves, shivering in the chill of the dawn, and began to prepare for their arrival. One of them spoke to Walter, expressing a fear that he was ill, he looked so pale, and offering his services to "see him home." The young man indeed felt as if he had come through a long illness when he stepped forth upon the platform at King's Cross, and felt that he had escaped from his fever and his trouble, and had new ways and new thoughts – or rather the repose of old thoughts and old ways – before him for some time to come.

He remained in London all day, and after his bath and his breakfast, felt the rising of a new life, and began to remember all the good things which he had partially forgotten, but which surely were more than enough to counterbalance the evil things, of which, when you set your mind to it, after all, so feasible an explanation could be found. London was at its darkest, and nothing invited him in the foggy and murky streets; nevertheless he lingered with that mixture of old habit and mental indolence which wastes so much time and disperses so many admirable resolutions. He went in the morning to see the house which belonged to him in Park Lane, and which was at present empty. It was one of those which look out from pleasant, large bow-windows upon the brightness of the Park and the cheerful thoroughfare. Even at such a moment it had a kind of brightness – as much light as could be got in London. It gave Walter a real pleasure to think of furnishing it for his mother, of seeing her take her place there and enter upon a larger life, a mode of existence for which he felt – with a glow of pride in her – she was more qualified than for the smaller village routine at Sloebury. His energy

even went so far as to direct that the house should be put in order and prepared for occupation. And if he had gone home at once after this feat, not all the threatenings of his mysterious enemy would have prevented a pleasant re-beginning of his old life.

But he did not; he lingered about the streets, about the hotel to which he had gone in the morning, for no particular reason, and it was late when he started for Sloebury – late and dark and cold, and his sleepless night and all the excitements from which he had fled, began to tell upon him. When he reached the familiar station his cheerfulness and good-humour had fled. And all the pleasant anticipations of the home-coming and the comfort with which he had remembered that existence, free of all mystery, in which he had seldom done anything but what seemed good in his own eyes, abandoned him as he stepped into the drizzle of a dark and rainy December night, into the poor and badly-lighted streets that surround a railway everywhere, and turn the worst side of every town to the eyes of strangers. He sent Symington and his baggage off before him, and himself set out to walk, with that incomprehensible pleasure in a little further delay which is so general. Stepping out into the mean streets had all the effect upon Walter's tired frame and capricious and impatient mind, of sudden disenchantment. His imagination perhaps had been affected by the larger atmosphere from which he had come, and he had forgotten the dinginess and poverty, which never before had struck him with the same force. The damp drizzle which was all there was for air, seemed to suffocate him; the pavement was wet and muddy, dirt and wretchedness pervaded everything. Then he began to realise, as he walked, the scene he was going to, which he could call up before him with such perfect distinctness of memory. Home! It used to be the centre, in books, of all pleasant thoughts – the tired wanderer coming to rest and shelter, the prodigal out of hunger and misery to forgiveness and the fatted calf, the "war-beaten soldier" from his cold sentry's march, the sailor from the wet shrouds and gloomy seas – to good fires and welcomes, kisses and a hot supper. But that primitive symbol of imagination, like so many others, has got perhaps somewhat soiled with ignoble use; and it never was, perhaps, from this point of view that young men of Walter Methven's type regarded the centre of family life, to which they returned when there was nothing better to do, with a sort of penitential sense of the duties that were considered binding there, and the preposterous things that would be expected of them.

Lord Erradeen, who had been longing for that safe and sensible refuge where no exaggeration or superstition prevailed, suddenly felt it rise before him like a picture of still life as he walked towards it. His mother seated knitting at one side of the fire, with a preoccupied look, listening for his step outside, the evening newspaper and a novel from Mudie's on the table. Miss Merivale opposite working crewel work, and putting a question now and then as to when he was expected: the two lamps burning steadily, the tick of the clock in the foreground, so to speak, the soul of the silent scene. The other accessories of the piece were all conventional ones: fire blazing brightly, now and then breaking into the monologue of the clock with a sudden rush and jet of flame, or dropping of ashes; curtains drawn, sofas and chairs within the glow of the warmth, ready for the new-comer's choice. There would be a sudden springing up, a disturbance of the perfect order of all these arrangements, on his entrance. He would be made to sit down in far too warm a corner; his personal appearance would be commented upon; that he was looking well, or ill, or tired, or as fresh as possible. And then the cross-examination would begin. Walter reminded himself that this cross-examination was maddening, and that even as a boy at school he had never been able to bear it. When he had said that he was well, and consented, yes, that he had come home sooner than he expected, but no, that nothing was wrong, what was there more to say? To be sure he had intended to say a great deal more, to pour forth all his troubles into his mother's sympathetic bosom; but that in any case could only have been when the two were alone. And would she understand him if he did so? Cousin Sophy – he could hear her in imagination – would give a sharp shriek of laughter at the idea of anything mysterious, at any suggestion of the supernatural (in which, of course, by this time Walter did not believe himself, but that was another matter). She would shriek even derisively at the idea that mesmerism could have

affected any man in his senses. And his mother – what would she do? not shriek with laughter, that was not her way; but smile perhaps with a doubtful look to see whether it was possible that he could be in earnest in this incredible story of his. No, she would not believe him, she would think he was under the influence of some hallucination. She would look at him with a shock of something like contempt, an annoyed dismay that *her* son should be so credulous, or so weak. Walter's imagination leaped back to the other warm and softly-lighted room on the Isle, the innocent mother talking, who would have believed everything, the girl standing by who did understand, and that almost without a word. Ah, if that indeed were home! Thus with a sudden revulsion in his mind, shutting himself up, and double-locking the door of his heart, even before he had come to the door of the house, to which his mother, he knew, would rush to meet him, hearing and distinguishing his step – he went home.

Mrs. Methven, who had been on the watch all day, opened the door to him as he foresaw. She was trembling with anxiety and pleasure, yet self-restrained and anxious not to betray the excitement which probably he would think uncalled for; she took his wraps from him, and helped to take off his great-coat, giving an aid which was quite unnecessary, but which he, on his side commanding himself also, did his best to accept with an appearance of pleasure. "You have not dined," she said, "there is something just ready. We waited half an hour, but I thought you would prefer to come by this train. Come in and get thawed, and let me look at you, while they bring up your dinner." She took him by the arm as she spoke, and led him into the drawing-room where everything was exactly as he had imagined. And she drew him, as he had imagined, too close to the fire, and drawing the softest chair, said "Sit down, dear, and get warm."

"I am not a bit cold. I have walked, you know, from the station. How do you do, Cousin Sophy? Your room is too warm, mother, I always tell you so. However it looks very cheerful after the wet and mud outside," he said, with an attempt to be gracious.

"The rain makes everything dismal out of doors. Has it been raining all the way? You have had a dreadful journey, my poor boy."

"Of course it is warmer here than in Scotland," said Miss Merivale.

And then there was a pause, and his mother looked at him more closely by the light of the lamp. She was just going to say "You are not looking very well" – when Walter broke in.

"I hear a tray coming, and I am very hungry. I shall go into the dining-room, mother, and join you by-and-by."

"I will go too and wait upon you, Walter. I mean to wait upon you myself to-night. I hope your lordship has not grown too fine for that," she said with an attempt at playful ease. It was a relief to leave Miss Merivale, and have her son all to herself. She put his chair to the table for him, and brought the claret which had been warming, and handed him his plate with a smile of content. "It is pleasant to serve one's boy," she said, "and we don't want any third person. I have so much to hear, and to ask –"

An impatient prayer that she would not begin the moment he sat down to worry a fellow with questions was on Walter's lips; but he forbore, doing his very best to command himself. To sit in his old place, to feel his old impulse, to find the claret too warm, and the potatoes cold, was almost too much for him; but still like a hero he forbore. And she took advantage of his magnanimity. She never relaxed her watch upon him. That is the penalty one pays for having one's mother to serve one: a servant is silent at least. She asked him if he would not have a little more, just this little piece which was very nicely done? Some of the vegetables which were better cooked than usual? A little salad? Some stewed fruit with that Devonshire cream which he used to like? A little of his favourite cheese? She was not in general a fussy woman, but she was so anxious, after the *rapprochement* that had taken place on the eve of his going away, to please him, to preserve that tenderer strain of feeling – if it could be done this way! And yet all the time she was restraining herself not to say too much, not to worry him. A woman has to exercise such wiles often enough for her husband's benefit; but it is hard to go through the process again for her son.

He bore it all with a devouring impatience, yet self-restraint too – not entreating her in words to let him alone for heaven's sake! as he would so fain have done. Perhaps there was something to be said on his side also; his mind was laden with care and anxiety, and wanted repose above all; and this wistful over-anxiety and desire to propitiate by details was irritating beyond description. He did not know how to put up with it. Love itself is sometimes very hard to put up with – embarrassing, officious, not capable of perceiving that to let its object alone is the best. Mrs. Methven did not know how to propitiate him – whether to show her interest or to put on a form of indifference. All her urgency about his dinner, was it not to spare him the questions which she knew he did not love? But that succeeded badly, and her curiosity, or rather her anxiety, was great.

"How did you like Kinloch Houran?" she ventured to say at last. What a question! It seemed to Walter that a glance at his face would have shown her how inappropriate it was.

"Like Kinloch Houran!" he said. "If you want a categorical answer, mother – and I know you are never satisfied with anything else – not at all!"

"I am sorry for that, Walter, since it seems a place you must have a great deal to do with. Auchnasheen, then, was that better? You must teach me to pronounce the name."

"Auchnasheen, if possible, was worse," he said. "I shall never be able to endure either the one or the other, or forget the associations – don't make me think of them, please. When I got home I thought I should be able to escape all that."

"My dear, I beg your pardon: I did not know. Was the weather then so bad? They say it always rains – and the place very dull, of course, so far in the wilds? But you said in your letter that the lake was lovely, and that there were some pleasant people – "

He put up his hand, begging her to go no further. "It was lovely enough if you like, but I hate the place; isn't that enough? I shall never go back with my free will."

Mrs. Methven looked at him in astonishment. "I thought – " she said, "you remember how fantastic you thought it, and mediæval – that you had to make a periodical visit to the old home of the race?"

His very lips trembled with irritation. He had written about all that in the first days of his absence, and even after his arrival at Loch Houran, making fun of the old world stipulation. She might have divined, he thought, that it was a very different matter now. "I am sorry to keep you so long here, out of your own comfortable corner," he said. "You never like sitting in the dining-room. It is brutal of me to keep you here."

"No, Walter, it is my pleasure," she cried; then, poor soul, with that most uncalled-for, unprofitable desire for information, "And there are so many things I want to know – "

He commanded himself with a great effort. "Mother," he said, "I have not enjoyed my visit to Scotland. There are a great many things that perhaps I may be able to talk of hereafter if you will give me time, but that I don't want even to think of now. And I'm tired with my journey; and everything is not *couleur de rose*, as you seem to think. Let me alone, if you can, for to-night."

"Let you alone – if I can!" She was so startled, so bitterly disappointed, that for a moment or two she could not speak. And this aggravated Walter still more.

"Mother," he cried, getting up from his unsatisfactory meal, "I hope you are not going to make a scene the first night."

Thus, without any intention, with indeed the strongest desire to adopt a better way, this was how young Lord Erradeen resumed his intercourse with his mother. And yet Oona's mother, with all her little gentle affectations, with her kind effusiveness which there was no withstanding, had given him the sincerest sense of home and a refuge from trouble. Was it Oona's presence that explained all, or was there something more subtle underneath? There followed on this occasion no scene; but when Mrs. Methven returned to the drawing-room alone, leaving Walter, as she said, in peace to smoke his cigar after his dinner, Miss Merivale's keen eyes perceived at once that the traveller's meal had not been a happy ceremonial.

"I dare say he is tired," she said.

"Yes, he is tired – almost too tired to eat. Smoke is the grand panacea," said Mrs. Methven, with a smile.

"The worst of smoke is that it is so unsociable," said Miss Merivale, cheerfully, picking up her book. "I think I'll go to bed and leave you free for your talk with Walter when the cigar's done. Oh yes, you will get on better by yourselves. You will get more out of him if you are alone. But I dare say you won't get very much out of him. It will come by scraps – a little at a time; and he will be quite astonished that you don't know – by instinct, I suppose. Men are all like that."

It was very kind of Cousin Sophy. Mrs. Methven gave her a kiss of gratitude as she took her candle and went away. But the expedient after all did little good. Walter lingered over his cigar, growing less and less inclined for any confidences, while his mother lingered in the drawing-room, hoping he would come to her; and Cousin Sophy, by far the most comfortable of the three, established herself cosily in her easy-chair by her bed-room fire, with a yellow novel. Miss Merivale had aspirations beyond Mudie. She thought the French writers far more subtle and searching in their analysis of character than her compatriots ever were, and she liked their boldness, and the distinctness with which they cut away all pretences and showed humanity as it was. She had no opinion of humanity – but yet she was in her way very good-natured, and would even go out of her way to show kindness to one of her fellow-creatures, as she had done to-night. Though her own room looked comfortable, and was so indeed up to a certain point, Miss Merivale, if nobody else, was aware that there was a draught which there was no eluding, – a draught which, whatever you might do, caught you infallibly in the back of the neck. She had taken down the curtains and put them up again. She had changed the position of her seat. She had bought a folding screen. She had even changed her chair and procured a high-backed old-fashioned thing, something like that cushioned sentry-box in which porters delight; but in no way could she escape this draught, except in bed, and it was much too early to go to bed. Therefore she had made a distinct sacrifice of personal comfort in coming so soon up-stairs. She sat there and mused, asking herself what boys were born for, or at least by what strange mistake Providence ever committed them to the charge of women; and why it was that they could not be happy or natural with the people they belonged to. "I feel almost sure now," she said to herself, "that I shall have a stiff neck to-morrow, to no purpose, and that those two down-stairs are sitting in separate rooms, and will not say a word to each other."

It was a curious, very curious reading of an English home, could any spectator have looked through the secure covering of that respectable roof, or through the curtains that veiled the windows, and seen the two rooms in which these two persons sat each alone. How was it? Why was it? The mother had no thought but for her son. The son was not unkind or heartless, but full of good qualities. And yet at a moment when he had much to tell, and she was eager to hear, they sat in two separate rooms, as if they were fellow-lodgers and no more. Cousin Sophy, who was a sensible woman, with much kind feeling towards both, though she was not perhaps the kind of person from whom any high degree of unselfish devotion was to be looked for, sat and shook her head, and "wondered at it," as the ladies at Camelot did over Elaine. But it was a greater wonder than Elaine.

Was it, perhaps, the beginning of the fulfilment of that threat that everything would go ill with him, which had been made at Kinloch Houran? But if so it was no new ill, but only the further following out of an evil that had been growing for years.

CHAPTER V

Something of the same perversity which had turned all his good resolutions to nothing on the night of his arrival, affected Walter when he went out next morning into Sloebury. The place had narrowed and grown small in every way. There was no horizon, only lines of brick houses; no space, only the breadth of a street; no air to breathe for a man who had come from the wide solitude of the hills, and the keen freshness of the Highland breezes. Everything here was paltry, and monotonous, and small; the people who met him – and he met everybody, and there was not a man who could claim the slightest acquaintance with him, or a woman who had seen him once in her neighbour's drawing-room who did not now claim acquaintance with Lord Erradeen – seemed to have dwindled along with the scene. They had never been distinguished by intelligence or originality, but he had not been aware how paltry they were before. Had he seen Jeremy's new turn-out? all the men inquired of him. He had already heard of it from Miss Merivale, who had given him a sketch of the history of the town, and what had happened during his absence, at breakfast. It was a high phaeton, "which I suppose must be the fashion," Miss Merivale said. "You should really see it," cried all the young men, with details about the harness and the high-stepping mare which were endless. What did Lord Erradeen care for young Jeremy's phaeton or the high-stepping mare? but it was the only topic at Sloebury – that, and a report which Miss Merivale had also furnished him with about Julia Herbert. "Your old flame: no doubt it was to console herself in your absence," said Cousin Sophy. This was disagreeable too. Walter did not care to hear that the girl who had distinguished himself and been distinguished by him should make herself remarkable in a flirtation with another man. He did not want her indeed, but he objected to the transfer of her affections. And everything around looked so barren, stale, flat, and unprofitable. Perhaps it was the quickening of life which his recent experiences, painful though they had been, had brought him, which made him feel how dead-alive everything was. At Loch Houran his mind had gone back to the safe and peaceable commonplace of his native town with something like an enthusiasm of preference for its calm common sense, and superiority to the fever and excitements of that life upon the edge of the supernatural. Now it seemed to him that superstition itself, not to speak of the heats and chills of human passion, were higher things than this cynic-steadiness, this limit of matter-of-fact. What would Sloebury think of those things that had been so real to him, that had rent his very being asunder? He could imagine the inextinguishable laughter with which his story would be greeted, and blushed at the possibility of betraying himself. A seer of ghosts and visions, a victim of mesmerism! He would become in a moment the scorn, as he was at present, the envy, of the town. Not a soul of them would understand. His experiences must be buried in his own bosom, and no one here must ever know that he had got beyond that surface of life to which all their knowledge was confined. When he met Underwood indeed this determination wavered a little: but then Underwood looked at him with an eagerness of inspection which was still more offensive. What did the fellow mean? Did he think it likely that he, a stranger, a person whom the better people disapproved, should be chosen as the confidant of Lord Erradeen?

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