Oliphant Margaret

The Wizard's Son. Volume 3of 3

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Содержание

Margaret Oliphant
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CHAPTER I

Was this then the conclusion of all things – that there was nothing so perfect that it was worth a man's while to struggle for it; that any officious interference with the recognised and existing was a mistake; that nothing was either the best or the worst, but all things mere degrees in a round of the comparative, in which a little more or a little less was of no importance, and the most strenuous efforts tended to failure as much as indifference? Walter, returning to the old house which was his field of battle, questioned himself thus, with a sense of despair not lessened by the deeper self-ridicule within him, which asked, was he then so anxious for the best, so ready to sacrifice his comfort for an ideal excellence? That he, of all men, should have this to do, and yet that, being done, it should be altogether ineffectual, was a sort of climax of clumsy mortal failure and hopelessness. The only good thing he had done was the restoration of those half-evicted cotters, and that was but a mingled and uncertain good, it appeared. What was the use of any struggle? If it was his own personal freedom alone that he really wanted, why here it was within his power to purchase it – or at least a moderate amount of it – a comparative freedom, as everything was comparative. His mind by this time had ceased to be able to think, or even to perceive with any distinctness the phrase or *motif* inscribed upon one of those confused and idly-turning wheels of mental machinery which had stood in the place of thought to him. It was the afternoon when he got back, and everything within him had fallen into an afternoon dreariness. He lingered when he landed on the waste bit of grass that lay between the little landing-place and the door of the old castle. He had no heart to go in and sit down unoccupied in that room which had witnessed so many strange meetings. He was no longer indeed afraid of his visitor there, but rather looked forward with a kind of relief to the tangible presence which delivered him from meetings of the mind more subtle and painful. But he had no expectation of any visitor; nor was there anything for him to do except to sit down and perhaps attempt to read, which meant solely a delivering over of himself to his spiritual antagonists – for how was it possible to give his mind to any fable of literature in the midst of a parable so urgent and all-occupying, of his own?

He stood therefore idly upon the neglected turf, watching the ripple of the water as it lapped against the rough stones on the edge. The breadth of the loch was entirely hidden from him by the projection of the old tower, which descended into the water at the right, and almost shut off this highest corner of Loch Houran into a little lakelet of its own. Walter heard the sound of oars and voices from the loch without seeing any one: but that was usual enough, and few people invaded his privacy: so that he was taken by surprise when, suddenly raising his eyes, he was aware of the polished and gilded galley from Birkenbraes, in which already Mr. Williamson, seated in the stern, had perceived and was hailing him. "Hallo, my Lord Erradeen! Here we've all come to see ye this fine afternoon. I told them we should find ye under your own vine and your own fig-tree." This speech was accompanied by a general laugh. The arrival of such a party, heralded by such laughter in a desolate house, with few servants and no readiness for any such emergency, to a young man in Walter's confused and distracted condition would not, it may be supposed, have been very welcome in any case, and at present in his exhaustion and dismay he stood and gazed at them with a sort of horror. There was not even a ready servitor like Hamish to assist in the disembarkation. Duncan had rowed cheerfully off upon some other errand after landing his master, and old Symington and old Macalister were singularly ill-adapted for the service. Lord Erradeen did his best, with a somewhat bad grace, to receive the boat at the landing-place. The gravity of his countenance was a little chill upon the merry party, but the Williamsons were not of a kind that is easily discouraged.

"Oh, yes, here we all are," said the millionnaire. "I would not let our English visitor, Mr. Braithwaite here, leave without showing him the finest thing on the loch. So I just told him I knew I might take the liberty. Hoot! we know ye have not your household here, and that it is just an old family ruin, and not bound to produce tea and scones like the Forresters' isle. Bless me! I hope we have a soul above tea and scones," Mr. Williamson cried with his hearty laugh.

By this time the young, hardy, half-clad rowers had scrambled out, and grouped themselves in various attitudes, such as would suit a new and light-hearted Michael Angelo – one kneeling on the stones holding the bow of the boat, another with one foot on sea and one on shore helping the ladies out. Walter in his dark dress, and still darker preoccupied countenance, among all those bronzed and cheerful youths looked like a being from another sphere: but the contrast was not much to his advantage either in bodily or mental atmosphere. He looked so grave and so unlike the joyous hospitality of a young housekeeper surprised by a sudden arrival, that Katie, always more on her guard than her father, looked at him with a countenance as grave as his own.

"I am not the leader of this expedition, Lord Erradeen," she said; "you must not blame me for the invasion. My father took it into his head, and when that happens there is nothing to be done. I don't mean I was not glad to be brought here against my will," she added, as his face, by a strain of politeness which was far from easy to him, began to brighten a little. Katie was not apt to follow the leading of another face and adopt the woman's *role* of submission, but she felt herself so completely in the wrong, an intruder where she was very sure she and her party, exuberant in spirits and gaiety, were not wanted, that she was compelled to watch his expression and make her apologies with a deference quite unusual to her. "I hope it will not be a very great – interruption to you," she said after a momentary pause.

"That could never matter," Walter said, with some stateliness. "I could have wished to have notice and to have received my friends at Auchnasheen rather than here. But being here – you must excuse the primitive conditions of the place."

"Hoot! there is nothing to excuse – a fine old castle, older than the flood – just the very thing that is wanted for the picturesque, ye see, Braithwaite; for as ye were remarking, we are in general too modern for a Highland loch. But you'll not call this modern," said Mr. Williamson. "Will that old body not open the door to ye when he sees ye have friends? Lord! that just beats all! That is a step beyond Caleb Balderstone."

"Papa!" cried Katie in keen reproof, "we have been quite importunate enough already. I vote we all go over to Auchnasheen – the view there is much finer, and we could send over for Oona – "

"Is it common in this country," said the member of Parliament, "to have two residences so very near? It must be like going next door for change of air when you leave one for the other, Lord Erradeen."

At this there was that slight stir among the party which takes place when an awkward suggestion is made; the young men and the girls began to talk hurriedly, raising up a sort of atmosphere of voices around the central group. This however was curiously and suddenly penetrated by the reply which – who? – was it Walter? made, almost as it seemed without a pause.

"Not common – but yet not unknown in a country which has known a great deal of fighting in its day. The old castle is our family resource in danger. We do our family business here, our quarrels: and afterwards retire to Auchnasheen, the house of peace (perhaps you don't know that names have meanings hereabouts?) to rest."

There was a pause as slight, as imperceptible to the ignorant, as evident to the instructed as had been the stir at the first sound of those clear tones. Walter himself to more than one observer had seemed as much startled as any of them. He turned quickly round towards the speaker with a sudden blanching of his face which had been pale enough before; but this was only momentary; afterwards all that was remarkable in him was a strange look of resolution and determined self-control. Perhaps the only one completely unmoved was the Englishman, who at once accepted the challenge, and stepped

forward to the individual who it was evident to him was the only duly qualified cicerone in the party, with eager satisfaction.

"That is highly interesting. Of course the place must be full of traditions," he said.

"With your permission, Walter, I will take the part of cicerone," said the new voice. To some of the party it seemed only a voice. The ladies and the young men stumbled against each other in their eager curiosity about the stranger. "I will swear there was nobody near Erradeen when we landed," said young Tom Campbell in the nearest ear that presented itself; but of course it was the number of people about which caused this, and it could be no shadow with whom the M.P. went forth delighted, asking a hundred questions. "You are a member of the family?" Mr. Braithwaite said. He was not tall, and his companion was of a splendid presence. The Englishman had to look up as he spoke and to quicken his somewhat short steps as he walked to keep up with the other's large and dignified pace. Katie followed with Walter. There was a look of agitation and alarm in her face; her heart beat she could not tell why. She was breathless as if she had been running a race. She looked up into Lord Erradeen's face tremulously, not like herself. "Is this gentleman – staying with you?" she said in a scarcely audible voice.

Walter was not agitated for his part, but he had little inclination to speak. He said "Yes" and no more.

"And we have been – sorry for you because you were alone? Is it a – relation? is it – ? You have never," said Katie, forcing the words out with a difficulty which astonished her, and for which she could not account, "brought him to Birkenbraes."

Walter could not but smile. A sort of feeble amusement flew over his mind touching the surface into a kind of ripple. "Shall I ask him to come?" he said.

Katie was following in the very footsteps of this altogether new and unexpected figure. There was nothing like him, it seemed to her, in all the country-side. His voice dominated every other sound, not loud, but clear. It subdued her little being altogether. She would not lose a word, yet her breath was taken away by an inexplicable terror.

"He is – like somebody," she said, panting, "out of a book," and could say no more.

Old Macalister came towards them from the now open door, at which stood Symington in attendance. The servants had been disturbed by the unusual sounds of the arrival. Macalister's old face was drawn and haggard.

"Where will ye be taking all thae folk?" he said, no doubt forgetting his manners in his bewilderment.

"Come back, ye'll get into mischief that road," he cried, putting out his hand to catch the arm of Braithwaite, who, guided by the stranger, was passing the ordinary entrance. He became quite nervous and angry when no heed was paid to him. "My lord, you're no so well acquaint yourself. Will you let that lad just wander and break his neck?" he cried, with a kind of passion.

"Never mind," said Walter, with a strange calm which was as unaccountable as all the rest. "Will you tell your wife to prepare for these ladies – when we come back."

Here Symington too came forth to explain somewhat loudly, addressing his master and Braithwaite alternately, that the roads were not safe about the old castle, that the walls were crumbling, that a person not acquaint might get a deadly fall, with unspeakable anxiety in his eyes. The party all followed, notwithstanding, led by the stranger, whom even the least of them now thought she could distinguish over Katie's head, but of whom the servants took no notice, addressing the others in front as if he had not been there.

"My lord, ye'll repent if ye'll no listen to us," Symington said, laying his hand in sudden desperation on Walter's arm.

"You fool!" cried the young man, "can't you see we have got a safe guide?"

Symington gave a look round him wildly of the utmost terror. His scared eyes seemed to retreat into deep caverns of anguish and fear. He stood back out of the way of the somewhat excited party,

who laughed, and yet scarcely could laugh with comfort, at him. The youngsters had begun to chatter: they were not afraid of anything – Still – : though it was certainly amusing to see that old man's face.

Turning round to exchange a look with Macalister, Symington came in contact with Mr. Williamson's solid and cheerful bulk, who brought up the rear. "I'm saying," said the millionnaire confidentially, "who's this fine fellow your master's got with him? A grand figure of a man! It's not often you see it, but I always admire it. A relation, too; what relation? I would say it must be on the mother's side, for I've never seen or heard tell of him. Eh? who's staying with your master, I'm asking ye? Are ye deaf or doited that ye cannot answer a simple question?"

"Na, there is nothing the matter with me; but I think the rest of the world has just taken leave of their senses," Symington said.

CHAPTER II

Julia Herbert had failed altogether in her object during that end of the season which her relations had afforded her. Walter had not even come to call. He had sent a hurried note excusing himself, and explaining that he was "obliged to leave town," an excuse by which nobody was deceived. It is not by any easy process that a girl, who begins with all a girl's natural pride and pretensions, is brought down to recognise the fact that a man is avoiding and fleeing from her, and yet to follow and seek him. Hard poverty, and the memories of a life spent in the tiny cottage with her mother, without any enlargement or wider atmosphere, and with but one way of escape in which there was hope or even possibility, had brought Julia to this pass. She had nothing in her life that was worth doing except to scheme how she could dress and present the best appearance, and how she could get hold of and secure that only stepping-stone by which she could mount out of it – a man who would marry her and open to her the doors of something better. In every other way it is worth the best exertions of either man or woman to get these doors opened, and to come to the possibility of better things; and a poor girl who has been trained to nothing more exalted, who sees no other way, notwithstanding that this poor way of hers revolts every finer spirit, is there not something pitiful and tragic in her struggles, her sad and degrading attempt after a new beginning? How much human force is wasted upon it, what heart-sickness, what self-contempt is undergone, what a debasement of all that is best and finest in her? She has no pity, no sympathy in her pursuit, but ridicule, contempt, the derision of one half of humanity, the indignation of the other. And yet her object after all may not be entirely despicable. She may feel with despair that there is no other way. She may intend to be all that is good and noble were but this one step made, this barrier crossed, the means of a larger life attained. It would be better for her no doubt to be a governess, or even a seamstress, or to put up with the chill meannesses of a poverty-stricken existence, and starve, modestly keeping up appearances with her last breath.

But all women are not born self-denying. When they are young, the blood runs as warmly in their veins as in that of men; they too want life, movement, sunshine and happiness. The mere daylight, the air, a new frock, however hardly obtained, a dance, a little admiration, suffice for them when they are very young; but when the next chapter comes, and the girl learns to calculate that, saving some great matrimonial chance, there is no prospect for her but the narrowest and most meagre and monotonous existence under heaven, the life of a poor, very poor single woman who cannot dig and to beg is ashamed – is it to be wondered at if she makes a desperate struggle anyhow (and alas! there is but one *how*) to escape. Perhaps she likes too, poor creature, the little excitement of flirtation, the only thing which replaces to her the manifold excitement which men of her kind indulge in – the tumultuous joys of the turf, the charms of play, the delights of the club, the moors, and sport in general, not to speak of all those developments of pleasure, so-called, which are impossible to a woman. She cannot dabble a little in vice as a man can do, and yet return again, and be no worse thought of than before. Both for amusement and profit she has this one way, which, to be sure, answers the purpose of all the others in being destructive of the best part in her, spoiling her character, and injuring her reputation – but for how much less a cause, and with how little recompense in the way of enjoyment! The husband-hunting girl is fair game to whosoever has a stone to throw, and very few are so charitable as to say, Poor soul! Julia Herbert had been as bright a creature at eighteen as one could wish to see. At twenty-four she was bright still, full of animation, full of good humour, clever in her way, very pretty, high-spirited, amusing – and still so young! But how profoundly had it been impressed upon her that she must not lose her time! and how well she knew all the opprobrious epithets that are directed against a young woman as she draws towards thirty – the very flower and prime of her life. Was she to blame if she was influenced by all that was said to this effect, and determined to fight with a sort of mad persistence, for the hope which seemed so well within her reach? Were she but once established as Lady Erradeen, there was not one of her youthful sins that

would be remembered against her. A veil of light would fall over her and all her peccadilloes as soon as she had put on her bridal veil. Her friends, instead of feeling her a burden and perplexity, would be proud of Julia; they would put forth their cousinhood eagerly, and claim her – even those who were most anxious now to demonstrate the extreme distance of the connection – as near and dear. And she liked Walter, and thought she would have no difficulty in loving him, had she ever a right to do so. He was not too good for her; she would have something to forgive in him, if he too in her might have something to forgive. She would make him a good wife, a wife of whom he should have no occasion to be ashamed. All these considerations made it excusable – more than excusable, almost laudable – to strain a point for so great an end.

And in her cousin's wife she had, so far as this went, a real friend. Lady Herbert not only felt that to get Julia settled was most desirable, and that, as Lady Erradeen, she would become a most creditable cousin, and one who might return the favours showed to her, but also, which is less general, felt within herself a strong inclination to help and further Julia's object. She thought favourably of Lord Erradeen. She thought he would not be difficult to manage (which was a mistake as the reader knows). She thought he was not so strong as Julia, but once fully within the power of her fascinations, would fall an easy prey. She did not think less of him for running away. It was a sign of weakness, if also of wisdom; and if he could be met in a place from which he could not run away, it seemed to her that the victory would be easy. And Sir Thomas must have a moor somewhere to refresh him after the vast labours of a session in which he had recorded so many silent votes. By dint of having followed him to many a moor, Lady Herbert had a tolerable geographical knowledge of the Highlands, and it was not very difficult for her to find out that Mr. Campbell of Ellermore, with his large family, would be obliged this year to let his shootings. Every thing was settled and prepared accordingly to further Julia's views, without any warning on the point having reached Walter. She had arrived indeed at the Lodge, which was some miles down the loch, beyond Birkenbraes, a few days after Walter's arrival, and thus once more, though he was so far from thinking of it, his old sins, or rather his old follies, were about to find him out.

Lady Herbert had already become known to various people on the loch-side. She had been at the Lodge since early in September, and had been called upon by friendly folk on all sides. There had been a thousand chances that Walter might have found her at luncheon with all the others on his first appearance at Birkenbraes, and Julia had already been introduced to that hospitable house. Katie did not recognise Lady Herbert either by name or countenance. But she recognised Julia as soon as she saw her.

"I think you know Lord Erradeen?" was almost her first greeting, for Katie was a young person of very straight-forward methods.

"Oh yes," Julia had answered with animation, "I have known him all my life."

"I suppose you know that he lives here?"

Upon this Julia turned to her chaperon, her relation in whose hands all these external questions were.

"Did you know, dear Lady Herbert, that Lord Erradeen lived here?"

"Oh yes, he has a place close by. Didn't I tell you? A pretty house, with that old castle near it, which I pointed out to you on the lock," Lady Herbert said.

"How small the world is!" cried Julia; "wherever you go you are always knocking up against somebody. Fancy Walter Methven living here!"

Katie was not taken in by this little play. She was not even irritated as she had been at Burlington House. If it might so happen that some youthful bond existed between Lord Erradeen and this girl, Katie was not the woman to use any unfair means against it.

"You will be sure to meet him," she said calmly. "We hope he is not going to shut himself up as he did last year."

"Oh tell me!" Julia cried, with overflowing interest, "is there not some wonderful ghost story? something about his house being haunted; and he has to go and present himself and have an interview with the ghost? Captain Underwood, I remember, told us – "

"Did you know Captain Underwood?" said Katie, in that tone which says so much.

And then she turned to her other guests: for naturally the house was full of people, and as was habitual in Birkenbraes a large party from outside had come to lunch. The Williamsons were discussed with much freedom among the visitors from the Lodge when they went away. Sir Thomas declared that the old man was a monstrous fine old fellow, and his claret worth coming from Devonshire to drink.

"No expense spared in that establishment," he cried; "and there's a little girl, I should say, that would be worth a young fellow's while."

He despised Julia to the bottom of his heart, but he thought of his young friends on the other side without any such elevated sentiment, and decided it might not be a bad thing to have Algy Newton down, to whom it was indispensable that he should marry money. Sir Thomas, however, had not the energy to carry his intention out.

Next day it so happened that Lady Herbert had to return the visit of Mrs. Forrester, who – though she always explained her regret at not being able to entertain her friends – was punctilious in making the proper calls. The English ladies were "charmed" with the isle. They said there had never been anything so original, so delightful, so unconventional; ignoring altogether, with a politeness which Mrs. Forrester thought was "pretty," any idea that necessity might be the motive of the mother and daughter in settling there.

"I am sure it is very kind of you to say so; but it is not just a matter of choice, you know. It is just an old house that came to me from the Macnabs – my mother's side. And it proved very convenient when all the boys were away and nothing left but Oona and me. Women want but little in comparison with gentlemen; and though it is a little out of the way and inconvenient in the winter season, it is wonderful how few days there are that we can't get out. I am very well content with the Walk when there is a glint of sunshine; but Oona, she just never minds the weather. Oh, you will not be going just yet! Tell Mysie, Oona, to bring ben the tea. If it is a little early what matter? It always helps to keep you warm on the loch, and my old cook is rather noted for her scones. She just begins as soon as she hears there's a boat, and she will be much disappointed if ye don't taste them. Our friends are all very kind; we have somebody or other every day."

"It is you who are kind, I think," Lady Herbert said.

"No, no; two ladies – it is nothing we have it in our power to do: but a cup of tea, it is just a charity to accept it; and as you go down to your boat I will let you see the view."

Julia, for her part, felt, or professed, a great interest in the girl living the life of a recluse on this little island.

"It must be delightful," she said with enthusiasm; "but don't you sometimes feel a little dull? It is the sweetest place I ever saw. But shouldn't you like to walk on to the land without always requiring a boat?"

"I don't think I have considered the subject," Oona said; "it is our home, and we do not think whether or not we should like it to be different."

"Oh what a delightful state of mind! I don't think I could be so contented anywhere – so happy in myself. I think," said Julia with an ingratiating look, "that you must be very happy in yourself."

Oona laughed. "As much and as little as other people," she said.

"Oh not as little! I should picture to myself a hundred things I wanted as soon as I found myself shut up here. I should want to be in town. I should want to go shopping. I should wish for – everything I had not got. Don't you immediately think of dozens of things you want as soon as you know you can't get them? But you are so good?"

"If that is being good! No, I think I rather refrain from wishing for what I should like when I see I am not likely to get it."

"I call that goodness itself – but perhaps it is Scotch. I have the greatest respect for the Scotch," said Julia. "They are so sensible." Then she laughed, as at some private joke of her own, and said under her breath, "Not all, however," and looked towards Kinloch Houran.

They were seated on the bench, upon the little platform, at the top of the ascent which looked down upon the castle. The sound of Mrs. Forrester's voice was quite audible behind in the house, pouring forth a gentle stream. The sun was setting in a sky full of gorgeous purple and golden clouds; the keen air of the hills blowing about them. But Julia was warmly dressed, and only shivered a little out of a sense of what was becoming: and Oona was wrapped in the famous fur cloak.

"It is so strange to come upon a place one has heard so much of," Julia resumed. "No doubt you know Lord Erradeen?"

The name startled Oona in spite of herself. She was not prepared for any allusion to him. She coloured involuntarily, and gave her companion a look of surprise.

"Do you know him?" she asked.

"Oh, so well! I have known him almost all my life. People said indeed – " said Julia, breaking off suddenly with a laugh. "But that was nonsense. You know how people talk. Oh, yes, we have been like brother and sister – or if not quite that – at least – Oh yes, I know Walter, and his mother, and everything about him. He has been a little strange since he came here; though indeed I have no reason to say so, for he is always very nice to me. When he came home last year I saw a great deal of him; but I don't think he was very communicative about – what do you call it? – Kinloch – "

"He was not here long," Oona said.

"No? He did not give himself time to find out how many nice people there are. He did not seem very happy about it when he came back. You see all his habits were formed – it was something so new for him. And though the people are extremely nice, and so hospitable and kind, they were different – from those he had been used to."

Oona smiled a little. She did not see her new acquaintance from the best side, and there came into her mind a slightly bitter and astonished reflection that Walter, perhaps, preferred people like *this* to other – people. It was an altogether incoherent thought.

"Does he know that you are here?" she said.

"Oh, I don't think he does – but he will soon find me out," said Julia, with an answering smile. "He always tells me everything. We are such old friends, and perhaps something – more. To be sure that is not a thing to talk of; but there is something in your face which is so sweet, which invites confidence. With a little encouragement I believe I should tell you everything I ever did."

She leant over Oona as if she would have kissed her: but compliments so broad and easy disconcerted the Highland girl. She withdrew a little from this close contact.

"The wind is getting cold," she said. "Perhaps we ought to go in. My mother always blames me for keeping strangers, who are not used to it, in this chilly air."

"Ah, you do not encourage me," Julia said. And then after a pause added, with the look of one preoccupied by her subject – "Is he there now?"

"I think Lord Erradeen is still at Kinloch Houran, if that is what you mean. That is another house of his among the trees."

"How curious! two houses so close together. If you see him," said Julia, rising to join her cousin who had come out to the door of the cottage with Mrs. Forrester, "if you see him, don't, please don't, tell him you have met me. I prefer that he should find it out. He is quite sure, oh, sooner than I want him, to find me out."

And then the ladies were attended to the boat in the usual hospitable way.

"You will get back before it is dark," said Mrs. Forrester. "I am always glad of that, for the wind is cold from the hills, especially to strangers that are not used to our Highland climate. I take

your visit very kind, Lady Herbert. In these days I can do so little for my friends: unless Sir Thomas would take his lunch with me some day – and that is no compliment to a gentleman that is out on the hills all his time – I have just no opportunity of showing attention. But if you are going further north, my son, the present Mr. Forrester of Eaglescairn, would be delighted to be of any service. He knows how little his mother can do for her friends, perched up here in the middle of the water and without a gentleman in the house. Hamish, have ye got the cushions in, and are ye all ready? You'll be sure to take her ladyship to where the carriage is waiting, and see that she has not a long way to walk."

Thus talking, the kind lady saw her visitors off, and stood on the beach waving her hand to them. The fur cloak had been transferred to her shoulders. It was the one wrap in which everybody believed. Oona, who moved so much more quickly, and had no need to pause to take breath, did not now require such careful wrapping. She too stood and waved her hand as the boat turned the corner of the isle. But her farewells were not so cordial as her mother's. Julia's talk had been very strange to Oona; it filled her with a vague fear. Something very different from the sensation with which she had heard Katie's confessions on the subject of Lord Erradeen moved her now. An impression of unworthiness had stolen into her mind, she could not tell how. It was the first time she had been sensible of any thought of the kind. Walter had not been revealed to her in any of the circumstances of his past life. She had known him only during his visit at Kinloch Houran, and when he was in profound difficulty and agitation, in which her presence and succour had helped him she could not tell how, and when his appeal to her, his dependence on her, had seized hold of her mind and imagination with a force which it had taken her all this time to throw off, and which, alas! his first appearance and renewed appeal to her to stand by him had brought back again in spite of her resistance and against her will. She had been angry with herself and indignant at this involuntary subjugation – which he had not desired so far as she knew, nor she dreamt of, until she had fallen under it – and had recognised, with a sort of despair and angry sense of impotence, the renewal of the influence, which she seemed incapable of resisting.

But Julia's words roused in her a different sentiment. Julia's laugh, the light insinuations of her tone, her claim of intimacy and previous knowledge, brought a revulsion of feeling so strong and powerful that she felt for the moment as if she had been delivered from her bonds. Delivered – but not with any pleasure in being free: for the deliverance meant the lowering of the image of him in whom she had suddenly found that union of something above her with something below, which is the man's chief charm to the woman, as probably it is the woman's chief charm to the man. He had been below her, he had needed her help, she had brought to him some principle of completeness, some moral support which was indispensable, without which he could not have stood fast. But now another kind of inferiority was suggested to her, which was not that in which a visionary and absolute youthful mind could find any charm, which it was difficult even to tolerate, which was an offence to her and to the pure and overmastering sentiment which had drawn her to him. If he was so near to Miss Herbert, so entirely on her level, making her his confidant, he could be nothing to Oona. She seemed to herself to burst her bonds and stand free – but not happily. Her heart was not the lighter for it. She would have liked to escape, yet to be able to bear him the same stainless regard, the same sympathy as ever; to help him still, to honour him in his resistance to all that was evil.

All this happened on the afternoon of the day which Walter had begun with a despairing conviction that Oona's help must fail him *when she knew*. She had begun to know without any agency of his: and if it moved her so to become aware of a frivolous and foolish connection in which there was levity and vanity, and a fictitious counterfeit of higher sentiments but no harm, what would her feelings be when all the truth was unfolded to her? But neither did she know of the darker depths that lay below, nor was he aware of the revelation which had begun. Oona returned to the house with her mother's soft-voiced monologue in her ears, hearing vaguely a great many particulars of Lady Herbert's family and connections and of her being "really an acquisition, and Sir Thomas just an honest English sort of man, and Miss Herbert very pretty, and a nice companion for you, Oona,"

without reply, or with much consciousness of what it was. "It is time you were indoors, mamma, for the wind is very cold," she said.

"Oh yes, Oona, it is very well for you to speak about me: but you must take your own advice and come in too. For you have nothing about your shoulders, and I have got the fur cloak."

"I am coming, mother," Oona said, and with these words turned from the door and going to the rocky parapet that bordered the little platform, cast an indignant glance towards the ruined walls so far beneath her on the water's edge, dark and cold, out of the reach of all those autumn glories that were fading in the sky. There was no light or sign of life about Kinloch Houran. She had looked out angrily, as one defrauded of much honest feeling had, she felt, a right to do; but something softened her as she looked and gazed – the darkness of it, the pathos of the ruin, the incompleteness, and voiceless yet appealing need. Was it possible that there was no need at all or vacancy there but what Miss Herbert, with her smiles and dimples, her laughing insinuations, her claim upon him from the past, and the first preference of youth, could supply? Oona felt a great sadness take the place of her indignation as she turned away. If that was so, how poor and small it all was – how different from what she had thought!

CHAPTER III

This was not the only danger that once more overshadowed the path of Lord Erradeen. Underwood had been left alone in one of those foreign centres of "pleasure," so called, whither he had led his so often impatient and unruly pupil. He had been left, without notice, by a sudden impulse, such as he was now sufficiently acquainted with in Walter – who had always the air of obeying angrily and against his will the temptations with which he was surrounded: a sort of moral indignation against himself and all that aided in his degradation curiously mingling with the follies and vices into which he was led. You never knew when you had him, was Captain Underwood's own description. He would dart aside at a tangent, go off at the most unlikely moment, dash down the cup when it was at the sweetest, and abandon with disgust the things that had seemed to please him most. And Underwood knew that the moment was coming when his patron and *protégé* must return home: but notwithstanding he was left, without warning, as by a sudden caprice; the young man, who scorned while he yielded to his influence, having neither respect nor regard enough for his companion to leave a word of explanation. Underwood was astonished and angry as a matter of course, but his anger soon subsided, and the sense of Lord Erradeen's importance to him was too strong to leave room for lasting resentment, or at least for anything in the shape of relinquishment. He was not at all disposed to give the young victim up. Already he had tasted many of what to him were the sweets of life by Walter's means, and there were endless capabilities in Lord Erradeen's fortune and in his unsettled mind, which made a companion like Underwood too wise ever to take offence, necessary to him – which that worthy would not let slip. After the shock of finding himself deserted, he took two or three days to consider the matter, and then he made his plan. It was bold, yet he thought not too bold. He followed in the very track of his young patron, passing through Edinburgh and reaching Auchnasheen on the same momentous day which had witnessed Julia Herbert's visit to the isle. Captain Underwood was very well known at Auchnasheen. He had filled in many ways the position of manager and steward to the last lord. He had not been loved, but yet he had not been actively disliked. If there was some surprise and a little resistance on the part of the household there was at least no open revolt. They received him coldly, and required considerable explanation of the many things which he required to be done. They were all aware, as well as he was, that Lord Erradeen was to be expected from day to day, and they had made such preparations for his arrival as suggested themselves: but these were not many, and did not at all please the zealous captain. His affairs, he felt, were at a critical point. It was very necessary that the young man should feel the pleasure of being expected, the surprise of finding everything arranged according to his tastes.

"You know very well that he will come here exhausted, that he will want to have everything comfortable," he said to the housekeeper and the servants. "No one would like after a fatiguing journey to come into a bare sort of a miserable place like this."

"My lord is no so hard to please," said the housekeeper, standing her ground. "Last year he just took no notice. Whatever was done he was not heeding."

"Because he was unused to everything: now it is different; and I mean to have things comfortable for him."

"Well, captain! I am sure it's none of my wish to keep the poor young gentleman from his bits of little comforts. Ye'll have *his* authority?"

"Oh, yes, I have his authority. It will be for your advantage to mind what I tell you; even more than with the late lord. I've been abroad with him. He left me but a short time ago; I was to follow him, and look after everything."

At this the housekeeper looked at the under-factor Mr. Shaw's subordinate, who had come to intimate to her her master's return. "Will that be all right, Mr. Adamson?" Adamson put his

shaggy head on one side like an intelligent dog and looked at the stranger. But they all knew Captain Underwood well enough, and no one was courageous enough to contradict him.

"It will, maybe, be as ye say," said the under-factor cautiously. "Anyway it will do us no harm to take his orders," he added, in an undertone to the woman. "He was always very far ben with the old lord."

"The worse for him," said that important functionary under her breath. But she agreed with Adamson afterwards that as long as it was my lord's comfort he was looking after and not his own, his orders should be obeyed. As with every such person, the household distrusted this confident and unpaid major domo. But Underwood had not been tyrannical in his previous reign, and young Lord Erradeen during his last residence at Auchnasheen had frightened them all. He had been like a man beside himself. If the captain could manage him better, they would be grateful to the captain; and thus Underwood, though by no means confident of a good reception, had no serious hindrances to encounter. He strolled forth when he had arranged everything to "look about him." He saw the Birkenbraes boat pass in the evening light, returning from the castle, with a surprise which took away his breath. The boat was near enough to the shore as it passed to be recognised and its occupants; but not even Katie, whose eyesight was so keen, recognised the observer on the beach. He remarked that the party were in earnest conversation, consulting with each other over something, which seemed to secure everybody's attention, so that the ordinary quick notice of a stranger, which is common to country people, was not called forth by his own appearance. It surprised him mightily to see that such visitors had ventured to Kinloch Houran. They never would have done so in the time of the last lord. Had Walter all at once become more friendly, more open-hearted, perhaps feeling in the company of his neighbours a certain safety? Underwood was confounded by this new suggestion. It did not please him. Nothing could be worse for himself than that Lord Erradeen should find amusement in the society of the neighbourhood. There would be no more riot if this was the case, no "pleasure," no play; but perhaps a wife – most terrible of all anticipations. Underwood had been deeply alarmed before by Katie Williamson's ascendancy; but when Lord Erradeen returned to his own influence, he had believed that risk to be over. If, however, it recurred again, and, in this moment while undefended by his, Underwood's, protection, if the young fellow had rushed into the snare once more, the captain felt that the incident would acquire new significance.

There were women whom he might have tolerated if better could not be. Julia Herbert was one whom he could perhaps – it was possible – have "got on with," though possibly she would have changed after her marriage; but with Katie, Underwood knew that he never would get on. If this were so he would have at once to disappear. All his hopes would be over – his prospect of gain or pleasure by means of Lord Erradeen. And he had "put up with" so much! nobody knew how much he had put up with. He had humoured the young fellow, and endured his fits of temper, his changes of purpose, his fantastic inconsistencies of every kind. What friendship it was on his part, after Erradeen had deserted him, left him planted there – as if he cared for the d – place where he had gone only to please the young'un! thus to put all his grievances in his pocket and hurry over land and sea to make sure that all was comfortable for the ungrateful young man! That was true friendship, by Jove; what a man would do for a man! not like a woman that always had to be waited upon. Captain Underwood felt that his vested rights were being assailed, and that if it came to this it would be a thing to be resisted with might and main. A wife! what did Erradeen want with a wife? Surely it would be possible to put before him the charms of liberty once more and prevent the sacrifice. He walked along the side of the loch almost keeping up with the boat, hot with righteous indignation, in spite of the cold wind which had driven Mrs. Forrester into the house. Presently he heard the sound of salutations on the water, of oars clanking upon rowlocks from a different quarter, and saw the boat from the isle – Hamish rowing in his red shirt – meet with the large four-oared boat from Birkenbraes and pause while the women's voices exchanged a few sentences, chorused by Mr. Williamson's bass. Then the smaller boat came on towards the shore, towards the point near which a carriage was waiting. Captain

Underwood quickened his steps a little, and he it was who presented himself to Julia Herbert's eyes as she approached the bit of rocky beach, and hurrying down, offered his hand to help her.

"What a strange meeting," cried Julia; "what a small world, as everybody says! Who could have thought, Captain Underwood, of seeing you here?"

"I might reply, if the surprise were not so delightful, who could have thought, Miss Herbert, of seeing you here? for myself it is a second home to me, and has been for years."

"My reason for being here is simple. Let me introduce you to my cousin, Lady Herbert. Sir Thomas has got the shootings lower down. I suppose you are with Lord Erradeen."

Lady Herbert had given the captain a very distant bow. She did not like the looks of him, as indeed it has been stated no ladies did, whether in Sloebury or elsewhere; but at the name of Erradeen she paid a more polite attention, though the thought of her horses waiting so long in the cold was already grievous to her. "I hope," she said, "that Lord Erradeen does not lodge his friends in that old ruin, as he does himself, people say."

"We are at Auchnasheen, a house you may see among the trees," said the captain. "Feudal remains are captivating, but not to live in. Does our friend Walter know, Miss Herbert, what happiness awaits him in your presence here?"

"What a pretty speech," Julia cried; "far prettier than anything Walter could muster courage to say. No, Captain Underwood, he does not. It was all settled quite suddenly. I did not even know that he was here."

"Julia, the horses have been waiting a long time," said Lady Herbert. "I have no doubt Lord Erradeen is a very interesting subject – but I don't know what Barber (who was the coachman) will say. I shall be glad to see your friends any day at luncheon. Tell Lord Erradeen, please. We are two women alone, Sir Thomas is on the hills all day; all the more we shall be glad to see him – I mean you both – if you will take pity on our loneliness. Now, Julia, we really must not wait any longer."

"Tell Walter I shall look for him," said Julia, kissing her hand as they drove away. Underwood stood and looked after the carriage with varied emotions. As against Katie Williamson, he was overjoyed to have such an auxiliary – a girl who would not stand upon any punctilio – who would pursue her object with any assistance she could pick up, and would not be above an alliance defensive or offensive, a girl who knew the advantage of an influential friend. So far as that went he was glad: but, heavens! what a neighbourhood, bristling with women; a girl at every corner ready to decoy his prey out of his hands. He was rueful, even though he was in a measure satisfied. If he could play his cards sufficiently well to detach Walter from both one and the other, to show the bondage which was veiled under Julia's smiles and complacency, as well as under Katie's uncompromising code, and to carry him off under their very eyes, that would indeed be a triumph; but failing that, it was better for him to make an ally of Julia, and push her cause, than to suffer himself to be ousted by the other, the little parvenue, with her cool impertinence, who had been the first, he thought, to set Walter against him.

He walked back to Auchnasheen, full of these thoughts, and of plans to recover his old ascendancy. He had expedients for doing this which would not bear recording, and a hundred hopes of awakening the passions, the jealousies, the vanity of the young man whom already he had been able to sway beyond his expectations. He believed that he had led Walter by the nose, as he said, and had a mastery over him which would be easily recovered if he but got him for a day or two to himself. It was a matter of fact that he had done him much, if not fatal harm; and if the captain had been clever enough to know that he had no mastery whatever over his victim, and that Walter was the slave of his own shifting and uneasy moods, of his indolences and sudden impulses, and immediate abandonment of himself to the moment, but not of Captain Underwood, that tempter might have done him still more harm. But he did not possess this finer perception, and thus lost a portion of his power.

He went back to Auchnasheen to find a comfortable dinner, a good fire, a cheerful room, full of light and comfort, which reminded him of "old days," which he gave a regretful yet comfortable

thought to in passing – the time when he had waited, not knowing what moment the old lord, his former patron, should return from Kinloch Houran. And now he was waiting for the other – who was so unlike the old lord – and yet had already been of more use to Underwood, and served him better in his own way, than the old lord had ever done. He was much softened, and even perhaps a little maudlin in his thoughts of Walter as he sat over that comfortable fire. What was he about, poor boy? Not so comfortable as this friend and retainer, who was drinking his wine and thinking of him. But he should find some one to welcome him when he returned. He should find a comfortable meal and good company, which was more than the foolish fellow would expect. It was foolish of him, in his temper, to dart away from those who really cared for him, who really could be of use to him; but by this time the young lord would be too glad, after his loneliness, to come back and find a faithful friend ready to make allowances for him, and so well acquainted with his circumstances here.

So well acquainted with his circumstances! Underwood, in his time, had no doubt wondered over these as much as any one; but that was long ago, and he had in the mean time become quite familiar with them, and did not any longer speculate on the subject. He had no supernatural curiosity for his part. He could understand that one would not like to see a ghost: and he believed in ghosts – in a fine, healthy, vulgar, natural apparition, with dragging chains and hollow groans. But as for anything else, he had never entered into the question, nor had he any thought of doing so now. However, as he sat by the fire with all these comfortable accessories round him, and listened now and then to hear if any one was coming, and sometimes was deceived by the wind in the chimneys, or the sound of the trees in the fresh breeze which had become keener and sharper since he came indoors, it happened, how he could not tell, that questions arose in the captain's mind such as he had never known before.

The house was very still, the servants' apartments were at a considerable distance from the sitting-rooms, and all was very quiet. Two or three times in the course of the evening, old Symington, who had also come to see that everything was in order for his master, walked all the way from these retired regions through a long passage running from one end of the house to the other, to the great door, which he opened cautiously, then shut again, finding nobody in sight, and retired the same way as he came, his shoes creaking all the way. This interruption occurring at intervals had a remarkable effect upon Underwood. He began to wait for its recurrence, to count the steps, to feel a thrill of alarm as they passed the door of the room in which he was sitting. Oh, yes, no doubt it was Symington, who always wore creaking shoes, confound him! But what if it were not Symington? What if it might be some one else, some mysterious being who might suddenly open the door, and freeze into stone the warm, palpitating, somewhat unsteady person of a man who had eaten a very good dinner and drunk a considerable quantity of wine? This thought so penetrated his mind, that gradually all his thoughts were concentrated on the old servant's perambulation, watching for it before it came, thinking of it after it had passed. The steady and solemn march at intervals, which seemed calculated and regular, was enough to have impressed the imagination of any solitary person. And the captain was of a primitive simplicity of mind in some respects. His fears paralysed him; he was afraid to get up, to open the door, to make sure what it was. How could he tell that he might not be seized by the hair of the head by some ghastly apparition, and dragged into a chamber of horrors! He tried to fortify himself with more wine, but that only made his tremor worse. Finally the panic came to a crisis, when Symington, pausing, knocked at the library door. Underwood remembered to have heard that no spirit could enter without invitation, and he shut his mouth firmly that no habitual "come in" might lay him open to the assault of the enemy. He sat breathless through the ensuing moment of suspense, while Symington waited outside. The captain's hair stood up on his head; his face was covered with a profuse dew; he held by the table in an agony of apprehension when he saw the door begin to turn slowly upon its hinges.

"My lord will not be home the night," said Symington, slowly.

The sight of the old servant scarcely quieted the perturbation of Underwood. It had been a terrible day for Symington. He was ashy pale or grey, as old men become when the blood is driven

from their faces. He had not been able to get rid of the scared and terror-stricken sensation with which he had watched the Birkenbraes party climbing the old stairs, and wandering as he thought at the peril of their lives upon the unsafe battlements. He had been almost violent in his calls to them to come down: but nobody had taken any notice, and they had talked about their guide and about the gentleman who was living with Lord Erradeen, till it seemed to Symington that he must go distracted. "Where there ever such fools – such idiots! since there is nobody staying with Lord Erradeen but me, his body servant," the old man had said tremulously to himself. At Symington's voice the captain gave a start and a cry. Even in the relief of discovering who it was, he could not quiet the excitement of his nerves.

"It's you, old Truepenny," he cried, yet looked at him across the table with a tremor, and a very forced and uncomfortable smile.

"That's not my name," said Symington, with, on his side, the irritation of a disturbed mind. "I'm saying that it's getting late, and my lord will not be home to-night."

"By Jove!" cried Captain Underwood, "when I heard you passing from one end of the house to the other, I thought it might be – the old fellow over there, coming himself – "

"I cannot tell, sir, what you are meaning by the old fellow over there. There's no old fellow I know of but old Macalister; and it was not for him you took me."

"If you could have heard how your steps sounded through the house! By Jove! I could fancy I hear them now."

"Where?" Symington cried, coming in and shutting the door, which he held with his hand behind him, as if to bar all possible comers. And then the two men looked at each other, both breathless and pale.

"Sit down," said Underwood. "The house feels chilly and dreary, nobody living in it for so long. Have a glass of wine. One wants company in a damp, dreary old hole like this."

"You are very kind, captain," said the old man; "but Auchnasheen, though only my lord's shooting-box, is a modern mansion, and full of every convenience. It would ill become me to raise an ill name on it."

"I wonder what Erradeen's about?" said the captain. "I bet he's worse off than we are. How he must wish he was off with me on the other side of the Channel."

"Captain! you will, maybe, think little of me, being nothing but a servant; but it is little good you do my young lord on the ither side of the Channel."

Underwood laughed, but not with his usual vigour.

"What can I do with your young lord," he said. "He takes the bit in his teeth, and goes – to the devil his own way."

"Captain, there are some that think the like of you sore to blame."

Underwood said nothing for a moment. When he spoke there was a quiver in his voice.

"Let me see the way to my room, Symington. Oh yes, I suppose it is the old room; but I've forgotten. I was there before? well, so I suppose; but I have forgotten. Take the candle as I tell you, and show me the way."

He had not the least idea what he feared, and he did not remember ever having feared anything before; but to-night he hung close to Symington, following at his very heels. The old man was anxious and alarmed, but not in this ignoble way. He deposited the captain in his room with composure, who would but for very shame have implored him to stay. And then his footsteps sounded through the vacant house, going further and further off till they died away in the distance. Captain Underwood locked his door, though he felt it was a vain precaution, and hastened to hide his head under the bed-clothes: but he was well aware that this was a vain precaution too.

CHAPTER IV

It was on the evening of the day after Captain Underwood's arrival that Lord Erradeen left Kinloch Houran for Auchnasheen. After labour, rest. He could not but compare as he walked along in the early falling autumnal twilight the difference between himself now, and the same self a year ago, when he had fled from the place of torture to the house of peace, a man nearly frantic with the consciousness of all the new bonds upon him, the uncomprehended powers against which he had to struggle, the sense of panic and impotence, yet of mad excitement and resistance, with which his brain was on flame. The recollection of the ensuing time spent at Auchnasheen, when he saw no one, heard no voice but his own, yet lived through day after day of bewildering mental conflict, without knowing who it was against whom he contended, was burned in upon his recollection. All through that time he had been conscious of such a desire to flee as hurried the pace of his thoughts, and made the intolerable still more intolerable. His heart had sickened of the unbearable fight into which he was compelled like an unwilling soldier with death behind him. To resist had always been Walter's natural impulse; but the impulse of flight had so mingled with it that his soul had been in a fever, counting no passage of days, but feeling the whole period long or short, he did not know which, as one monstrous uninterrupted day or night, in which the processes of thought were never intermitted. His mind was in a very different condition now. He had got over the early panic of nature. The blinding mists of terror had melted away from his eyes, and the novelty and horror of his position, contending with unseen dominations and powers, had almost ceased for the moment to affect his mind, so profoundly exhausted was he by the renewed struggle in which he had been engaged.

The loch was veiled in mist, through which it glimmered faintly with broken reflections, the wooded banks presenting on every side a sort of ghostly outline, with the colour no more than indicated against the dreary confusion of air and vapour. At some points there was the glimpse of a blurred light, looking larger and more distant than it really was, the ruddy spot made by the open door of the little inn, the whiter and smaller twinkle of the manse window, the far-off point, looking no more than a taper light in the distance, that shone from the isle. There was in Walter's mind a darkness and confusion not unlike the landscape. He was worn out: there was in him none of that vivid feeling which had separated between his human soul in its despair and the keen sweetness of the morning. Now all was night within him and around. His arms had fallen from his hands. He moved along, scarcely aware that he was moving, feeling everything blurred, confused, indistinct in the earth about him and in the secret places of his soul. Desire for flight he had none: he had come to see that it was impossible: and he had not energy enough to wish it. And fear had died out of him. He was not afraid. Had he been joined on the darkling way by the personage of whom he had of late seen so much, it would scarcely have quickened his pulses. All such superficial emotion had died out of him: the real question was so much superior, so infinitely important in comparison with any such transitory tremors as these. But at the present moment he was not thinking at all, scarcely living, any more than the world around him was living, hushed into a cessation of all energy and almost of consciousness, looking forward to night and darkness and repose.

It was somewhat surprising to him to see the lighted windows at Auchnasheen, and the air of inhabitation about the house with which he had no agreeable associations, but only those which are apt to hang about a place in which one has gone through a fever, full of miserable visions, and the burning restlessness of disease. But when he stepped into the hall, the door being opened to him by Symington as soon as his foot was heard on the gravel, and turning round to go into the library found himself suddenly in the presence of Captain Underwood, his astonishment and dismay were beyond expression. The dismay came even before the flush of anger, which was the first emotion that showed itself. Underwood stood holding open the library door, with a smile that was meant to be ingratiating and conciliatory. He held out his hand, as Walter, with a start and exclamation, recognised him.

"Yes," he said, "I'm here, you see. Not so easy to get rid of when once I form a friendship. Welcome to your own house, Erradeen."

Walter did not say anything till he had entered the room and shut the door. He walked to the fire, which was blazing brightly, and placed himself with his back to it, in that attitude in which the master of a house defies all comers.

"I did not expect to find you here," he said. "You take me entirely by surprise."

"I had hoped it would be an agreeable surprise," said the captain, still with his most amiable smile. "I thought to have a friend's face waiting for you when you came back from that confounded place would be a relief."

"What do you call a confounded place?" said Walter, testily. "You know nothing about it, as far as I am aware. No, Underwood, it is as well to speak plainly. It is not an agreeable surprise. I am sorry you have taken the trouble to come so far for me."

"It was no trouble. If you are a little out of sorts, never mind. I am not a man to be discouraged for a hasty word. You want a little cheerful society – "

"Is that what you call yourself?" Walter said with a harsh laugh. He was aware that there was a certain brutality in what he said; but the sudden sight of the man who had disgusted him even while he had most influenced him, and of whom he had never thought but with a movement of resentment and secret rage, affected him to a sort of delirium. He could have seized him with the force of passion and flung him into the loch at the door. It would have been no crime, he thought, to destroy such vermin off the face of the earth – to make an end of such a source of evil would be no crime. This was the thought in his mind while he stood upon his own hearth, looking at the man who was his guest and therefore sacred. As for Captain Underwood, he took no offence; it was not in his *rôle* to do so, whatever happened. What he had to do was to regain, if possible, his position with the young man upon whom he had lived and enriched himself for the greater part of the year, to render himself indispensable to him as he had done to his predecessor. For this object he was prepared to bear everything, and laugh at all that was too strong to be ignored. He laughed now, and did his best, not very gracefully, to carry out the joke. He exerted himself to talk and please throughout the dinner, which Walter went through in silence, drinking largely, though scarcely eating at all – for Kinloch Houran was not a place which encouraged an appetite. After dinner, in the midst of one of Underwood's stories, Walter lighted a candle abruptly, and saying he was going to bed, left his companion without apology or reason given. It was impossible to be more rude. The captain felt the check, for he had a considerable development of vanity, and was in the habit of amusing the people to whom he chose to make himself agreeable. But this affront, too, he swallowed. "He will have come to himself by morning," he said. In the morning, however, Walter was only more gloomy and unwilling to listen, and determined not to respond. It was only when in the middle of the breakfast he received a note brought by a mounted messenger who waited for an answer, that he spoke. He flung it open across the table to Underwood with a harsh laugh.

"Is this your doing, too?" he cried.

"My doing, Erradeen!"

Underwood knew very well what it was before he looked at it. It was from Lady Herbert, explaining that she had only just heard that Lord Erradeen was so near a neighbour, and begging him, if he was not, like all the other gentlemen, on the hills, that he would come ("and your friend Captain Underwood") to luncheon that day to cheer two forlorn ladies left all by themselves in this wilderness. "And you will meet an old friend," it concluded playfully. The composition was Julia's, and had not been produced without careful study.

"My doing!" said Captain Underwood. "Can you suppose that *I* want you to marry, Erradeen?"

It was a case, he thought, in which truth was best.

Walter started up from his seat.

"Marry!" he cried, with a half-shout of rage and dismay.

"Well, my dear fellow, I don't suppose you are such a fool; but, of course, that is what *she* means. The fair Julia – "

"Oblige me," cried Lord Erradeen, taking up once more his position on the hearth, "by speaking civilly when you speak of ladies in my house."

"Why, bless me, Erradeen, you gave me the note – "

"I was a fool – that is nothing new. I have been a fool since the first day when I met you and took you for something more than mortal. Oh, and before that!" cried Walter bitterly. "Do not flatter yourself that you did it. It is of older date than you."

"The fair Julia – " Underwood began; but he stopped when his companion advanced upon him threatening, with so gloomy a look and so tightly strained an arm that the captain judged it wise to change his tone. "I should have said, since we are on punctilio, that Miss Herbert and you are older acquaintances than you and I, Erradeen."

"Fortunately you have nothing to do with that," Walter said, perceiving the absurdity of his rage.

Then he walked to the window and looked out so long and silently that the anxious watcher began to think the incident over. But it was not till Walter, after this period of reflection, had written a note and sent it to the messenger, that he ventured to speak.

"You have accepted, of course. In the circumstances it would be uncivil – "

Walter looked at him for a moment, breaking off his sentence as if he had spoken.

"I have something to tell you," he said. "My mother is coming to Auchnasheen."

"Your mother!" Underwood's voice ran into a quaver of dismay.

"You will see that in the circumstances, as you say, I am forced to be uncivil. When my mother is here she will, of course, be the mistress of the house; and she, as you know – "

"Will not ask me to prolong my visit," said the captain, with an attempt at rueful humour. "I think we may say as much as that, Erradeen."

"I fear it is not likely," Walter said.

Captain Underwood gave vent to his feelings in a prolonged whistle.

"You will be bored to death. Mark my words, I know you well enough. You will never be able to put up with it. You will be ready to hang yourself in a week. You will come off to me. It is the best thing that could happen so far as I am concerned – wishing to preserve your friendship as I do – "

"Is it friendship, then, that has bound us together?" said Lord Erradeen.

"What else? Disinterested friendship on my part. I take your laugh rather ill, Erradeen. What have I gained by it, I should like to know? I've liked you, and I liked the last man before you. I have put up with a great deal from you – tempers like a silly woman, vagaries of all sorts, discontent and abuse. Why have I put up with all that?"

"Why indeed? I wish you had not," said the young man scornfully. "Yes, you have put up with it, and made your pupil think the worse of you with every fresh exercise of patience. I should like to pay you for all that dirty work."

"Pay me!" the captain said, faltering a little. He was not a very brave man, though he could hold his own; and there was a force of passion and youth in his "pupil" – with what bitterness that word was said! – that alarmed him a little. Besides, Walter had a household of servants behind him – grooms, keepers, all sorts of people – who held Captain Underwood in no favour. "Pay me! I don't know how you could pay me," he said.

"I should like to do it – in one way; and I shall do it – in another," said Walter still somewhat fiercely. Then once more he laughed. He took out a pocket-book from his coat, and out of that a cheque. "You have been at some expense on my account," he said; "your journey has been long and rapid. I consider myself your debtor for that, and for the – good intention. Will this be enough?"

In the bitter force of his ridicule and dislike, Walter held out the piece of paper as one holds a sweetmeat to a child. The other gave a succession of rapid glances at it to make out what it was. When he succeeded in doing so a flush of excitement and eagerness covered his face. He put out his

hand nervously to clutch it with the excited look of the child before whom a prize is held out, and who catches at it before it is snatched away. But he would not acknowledge this feeling.

"My lord," he said, with an appearance of dignity offended, "you are generous; but to pay me, as you say, and offer money in place of your friendship – "

"It is an excellent exchange, Underwood. This is worth something, if not very much – the other," said Walter with a laugh, "nothing at all."

Perhaps this was something like what Captain Underwood himself thought, as he found himself, a few hours later, driving along the country roads towards the railway station, retracing the path which he had travelled two days before with many hopes and yet a tremor. His hopes were now over, and the tremor too; but there was something in his breast pocket better, for the moment at least, than any hopes, which kept him warm, even though the wind was cold. He had failed in his attempt to fix himself once more permanently on Lord Erradeen's shoulders – an attempt in which he had not been very sanguine. It was a desperate venture, he knew, and it had failed; but, at the same time, circumstances might arise which would justify another attempt, and that one might not fail: and, in the mean time, his heart rose with a certain elation when he thought of that signature in his breast pocket. *That* was worth an effort, and nothing could diminish its value. Friendship might fail, but a cheque is substantial. He had something of the dizzy feeling of one who has fallen from a great height, and has not yet got the giddiness of the movement out of his head. And yet he was not altogether discouraged. Who could tell what turn the wheel of fortune might take? and, in the mean time, there was that bit of paper. The horse was fresh, and flew along the road, up and down, at a pace very different from that of Big John's steeds, which had brought Captain Underwood to Auchnasheen. About half-way along he came up to the waggonette from Birkenbraes, in which was Mr. Braithwaite and his luggage, along with two other guests, ladies, bound for the station, and escorted by Mr. Williamson and Katie, as was their way.

"Dear me, is that Underwood?" cried Mr. Williamson with the lively and simple curiosity of rural use and wont. "So you're there, captain," he said, as the dog-cart came up behind the heavier carriage.

"No, I'm not here – I'm going," said Underwood, quickly, "hurrying to catch the train."

"Oh, there is plenty of time; we are going too (Bless me," he said aside, "how many visitors think you they can have had in yon old place?) I am thinking ye have been with our young neighbour, Lord Erradeen."

"That is an easy guess. I am leaving him, you mean. Erradeen is a reformed character. He is turning over a new leaf – and full time too," Captain Underwood cried, raising his voice that he might be heard over the rattle of the two carriages. Notwithstanding the cheque which kept him so warm, he had various grudges against Walter, and did not choose to lose the opportunity for a little mischief.

"It is always a good thing," said Mr. Williamson, "to turn over a new leaf. We have all great occasion to do that."

"Especially when there are so many of them," the captain cried, as his light cart passed the other. He met the party again at the station, where they had to wait for the train. Katie stood by herself in a thoughtful mood while the departing guests consulted over their several boxes, and Captain Underwood seized the moment: "I am sorry to lose the fun," he said, in a confidential tone, "but I must tell you, Miss Williamson, what is going to happen. Erradeen has been pursued up here into his stronghold by one of the many ladies – I expect to hear she has clutched hold of him before long, and then you'll have a wedding."

"Is that why you are going away, Captain Underwood?"

"He has gone a little too far, you know, that is the truth," said the captain. "I am glad he is not going to take in any nice girl. I couldn't have stood by and seen that. I should have had to warn her people. Even Miss Julia, by Jove! I'm sorry for Miss Julia, if she gets him. But she is an old campaigner; she will know how to take care of herself."

"Is it because Lord Erradeen is so bad that you are leaving him, or because he is going to be good?" Katie asked. Captain Underwood on ordinary occasions was a little afraid of her; but his virtuous object fortified him now.

"Oh, by Jove! he goes too far," said Underwood. "I am not squeamish, heaven knows, but he goes too far. I can speak now that it's all over between him and me. I never could bear to see him with nice girls; but he's got his match in Miss Julia. The fair Julia – that is another pair of shoes."

"Who was he meaning with his fair Julias?" said Mr. Williamson as they drove away. "Yon's a scoundrel, if there ever was one, and young Erradeen is well rid of him. But when thieves cast out, honest folk get their ain. Would yon be true?"

Katie was in what her father called "a brown study," and did not care to talk. She only shook her head – a gesture which could be interpreted as any one pleased.

"I am not sure," said Mr. Williamson, in reply. "He knows more about Lord Erradeen than any person on the loch. But who is the fair Julia, and is he really to be married to her? I would like fine to hear all about it. I will call at Auchnasheen in the afternoon and see what he has to say."

But Katie remained in her brown study, letting her father talk. She knew very well who the fair Julia was. She remembered distinctly the scene at Burlington House. She saw with the clearest perception what the tactics were of the ladies at the Lodge. Katie had been somewhat excited by the prospect of being Oona's rival, which was like something in a book. It was like the universal story of the young man's choice, not between Venus and Minerva, or between good and evil, but perhaps, Katie thought, between poetry and prose, between the ideal and the practical. She was interested in that conflict and not unwilling in all kindness and honour to play her part in it. Oona would be the ideal bride for him, but she herself, Katie felt, would be better in a great many ways, and she did not feel that she would have any objection to marry Lord Erradeen. But here was another rival with whom she did not choose to enter the lists. It is to be feared that Katie in her heart classified Miss Herbert as Vice, as the sinner against whom every man is to be warned, and turned with some scorn from any comparison with her meretricious attractions. But she was fair and just, and her heart had nothing particular to do with the matter; so that she was able calmly to wait for information, which was not Oona's case.

It had been entirely at random that Lord Erradeen had announced his mother's approaching arrival to Underwood. The idea had come into his mind the moment before he made use of it, and he had felt a certain amusement in the complete success of this hastily-assumed weapon. It had been so effectual that he began to think it might be available in other conflicts as well as this: and in any case he felt himself pledged to make it a matter of fact. He walked to the village when Underwood had gone, to carry at once his intention into effect. Though it was only a cluster of some half-dozen houses, it had a telegraph-office – as is so general in the Highlands – and Walter sent a brief, emphatic message, which he felt would carry wild excitement into Sloebury. "You will do me a great favour if you will come at once, alone," was Walter's message. He was himself slightly excited by it. He began to think over all those primitive relationships of his youth as he walked along the quiet road. There was sweetness in them, but how much conflict, trouble, embarrassment! – claims on one side to which the other could not respond – a sort of authority, which was no authority – a duty which did nothing but establish grievances and mutual reproach. His mind was still in the state of exhaustion which Captain Underwood had only temporarily disturbed; and a certain softening was in the weakened faculties, which were worn out with too much conflict. Poor mother, after all! He could remember, looking back, when it was his greatest pleasure to go home to her, to talk to her, pouring every sort of revelation into her never-wearied ears; all his school successes and tribulations, all about the other fellows, the injustices that were done, the triumphs that were gained. Could women interest themselves in all that as she had seemed to interest herself? or had she sometimes found it a bore to have all these schoolboy experiences poured forth upon her? Miss Merivale had very plainly thought it a bore; his voice had given her a headache. But Mrs. Methven never had any headaches, or anything

that could cloud her attention. He remembered now that his mother was not a mere nursery woman – that she read a great deal more than he himself did, knew many things he did not know, was not silly, or a fool, or narrow-minded, as so many women are. Was it not a little hard, after all, that she should have nothing of her son but the schoolboy prattle? She had been everything to him when he was a boy, and now she was nothing to him; perhaps all the time she might have been looking forward to the period when he should be a man, and have something more interesting to talk over with her than a cricket-match – for, to be sure, when one came to think of it, she could have no personal interest in a cricket-match. A momentary *serrement* of compunction came to Walter's heart. Poor mother! he said to himself; perhaps it was a little hard upon her. And she must have the feeling, to make it worse, that she had a right to something better. He could not even now get his mind clear about that right.

As he returned from the telegraph-office he too met the waggonette from Birkenbraes, which was stopped at sight of him with much energy on the part of Mr. Williamson.

"We've just met your friend Captain Underwood. If you'll not take it amiss, Lord Erradeen, I will say that I'm very glad you're not keeping a man like that about you. But what is this about – a lady? I hear there's a lady – the fair – What did he call her, Katie? I am not good at remembering names."

"It is of no consequence," said Katie, with a little rising colour, "what such a man said."

"That's true, that's true," said her father; "but still, Erradeen, you must mind we are old friends now, and let us know what's coming. The fair – Toots, I thought of it a minute ago? It's ridiculous to forget names."

"You may be sure I shall let you know what's coming. My mother is coming," Walter said.

And this piece of news was so unexpected and startling that the Williamsons drove off with energy to spread it far and near. Mr. Williamson himself was as much excited as if it had been of personal importance to him.

"Now that will settle the young man," he said; "that will put many things right. There has not been a lady at Auchnasheen since ever I have been here. A mother is the next best thing to a wife, and very likely the one is in preparation for the other, and ye will all have to put on your prettiest frocks for her approval." He followed this with one of his big laughs, looking round upon a circle in which there were various young persons who were very marriageable. "But I put no faith in Underwood's fair – what was it he called her?" Mr. Williamson said.

CHAPTER V

Two days after, Mrs. Methven arrived at Kinloch Houran by the afternoon coach, alone.

She had interpreted very literally the telegram which had brought such a tremor yet such a movement of joy to her heart. Her son wanted her. Perhaps he might be ill, certainly it must be for something serious and painful that she was called; yet he wanted her! She had been very quiet and patient, waiting if perhaps his heart might be touched and he might recall the tie of nature and his own promises, feeling with a sad pride that she wanted nothing of him but his love, and that without that the fine houses and the new wealth were nothing to her. She was pleased even to stand aloof, to be conscious of having in no way profited by Walter's advancement. She had gained nothing by it, she wished to gain nothing by it. If Walter were well, then there was no need for more. She had enough for herself without troubling him. So long as all was well! But this is at the best a forlorn line of argument, and it cannot be doubted that Mrs. Methven's bosom throbbed with a great pang of disappointment when she sat and smiled to conceal it, and answered questions about Walter, yet could not say that she had seen him or any of his "places in Scotland," or knew much more than her questioners did. When his message arrived her heart leapt in her breast. There were no explanations, no reason given, but that imperative call, such as mothers love to have addressed to them: "Come;" all considerations of her own comfort set aside in the necessity for her which had arisen at last. Another might have resented so complete an indifference to what might happen to suit herself. But there are connections and relationships in which this is the highest compliment. He knew that it did not matter to her what her own convenience was, as long as he wanted her. She got up from her chair at once, and proceeded to put her things together to get ready for the journey. With a smiling countenance she prepared herself for the night train. She would not even take a maid. "He says, alone. He must have some reason for it, I suppose," she said to Miss Merivale. "I am the reason," said Cousin Sophy: "He doesn't want me. You can tell him, with my love, that to travel all night is not at all in my way, and he need have had no fear on that subject." But Mrs. Methven would not agree to this, and departed hurriedly without any maid. She was surprised a little, yet would not allow herself to be displeased, that no one came to meet her: but it was somewhat forlorn to be set down on the side of the loch in the wintry afternoon, with the cold, gleaming water before her, and no apparent way of getting to the end of her journey.

"Oh yes, mem, you might drive round the head of the loch: but it's a long way," the landlady of the little inn said, smoothing down her apron at the door, "and far simpler just crossing the water, as everybody does in these parts."

Mrs. Methven was a little nervous about crossing the water. She was tired and disappointed, and a chill had crept to her heart. While she stood hesitating a young lady came up, whose boat waited for her on the beach, a man in a red shirt standing at the bow.

"It is a lady for Auchnasheen, Miss Oona," said the landlady, "and no boat. Duncan is away, and for the moment I have not a person to send: and his lordship will maybe be out on the hill, or he will have forgotten, or maybe he wasna sure when to expect you, mem?"

"No, he did not know when to expect me. I hope there is no illness," said Mrs. Methven, with a thrill of apprehension.

At this the young lady came forward with a shy yet frank grace.

"If you will let me take you across," she said, "my boat is ready. I am Oona Forrester. Lord Erradeen is quite well I think, and I heard that he expected – his mother."

"Yes," said Mrs. Methven. She gave the young stranger a penetrating look. Her own aspect was perhaps a little severe, for her heart had been starved and repressed, and she wore it very warm and low down in her bosom, never upon her sleeve. There rose over Oona's countenance a soft and delicate flush under the eyes of Walter's mother. She had nothing in the world to blush for, and probably that

was why the colour rose. They were of infinite interest to each other, two souls meeting, as it were, in the dark, quite unknown to each other and yet – who could tell? – to be very near perhaps in times to come. The look they interchanged was a mutual question. Then Mrs. Methven felt herself bound to take up her invariable defence of her son.

"He did not, most likely, think that I could arrive so soon. I was wrong not to let him know. If I accept your kindness will it be an inconvenience to you?"

This question was drowned in Oona's immediate response and in the louder protest of Mrs. Macfarlane. "Bless me, mem, you canna know the loch! for there is nobody but would put themselves about to help a traveller: and above all Miss Oona, that just has no other thought. Colin, put in the lady's box intill the boat, and Hamish, he will give ye a hand."

Thus it was settled without farther delay. It seemed to the elder lady like a dream when she found herself afloat upon this unknown water, the mountains standing round, with their heads all clear and pale in the wonderful atmosphere from which the last rays of the sunset had but lately faded, while down below in this twilight scene the colour had begun to go out of the autumn trees and red walls of the ruined castle, at which she looked with a curiosity full of excitement. "That is – ?" she said pointing with a strange sensation of eagerness.

"That is Kinloch Houran," said Oona, to whose sympathetic mind, she could not tell how, there came a tender, pitying comprehension of the feelings of the mother, thus thrust alone and without any guide into the other life of her son.

"It is very strange to me – to see the place where Walter – You know perhaps that neither my son nor I were ever here until he – "

"Oh yes," Oona said hastily, interrupting the embarrassed speech; and she added, "My mother and I have been here always, and everybody on the loch knows everybody else. We were aware – "

And then she paused too; but her companion took no notice, her mind being fully occupied. "I feel," she said, "like a woman in a dream."

It was very still on the loch, scarcely a breath stirring (which was very fortunate, for Mrs. Methven, unaccustomed, had a little tremor for the dark water even though so smooth). The autumnal trees alone, not quite put out by the falling darkness, seemed to lend a little light as they hung, reflected, over the loch – a redder cluster here and there looking like a fairy lamp below the water. A thousand suggestions were in the air, and previsions of she knew not what, a hidden life surrounding her on every side. Her brain was giddy, her heart full. By-and-by she turned to her young companion, who was so sympathetically silent, and whose soft voice when she spoke, with the little cadence of an accent unfamiliar yet sweet, had a half-caressing sound which touched the solitary woman. "You say your mother and you," she said. "Are you too an only child?"

"Oh no! there are eight of us: but I am the youngest, the only one left. All the boys are away. We live on the isle. I hope you will come and see us. My mother will be glad – "

"And she is not afraid to trust you – by yourself? It must be a happy thing for a woman to have a daughter," Mrs. Methven said, with a sigh. "The boys, as you say, go away."

"Nobody here is afraid of the loch," said Oona. "Accidents happen – oh, very rarely. Mamma is a little nervous about yachting, for the winds come down from the hills in gusts; but Hamish is the steadiest oar, and there is no fear. Do you see now the lights at Auchnasheen? There is some one waiting, at the landing-place. It will be Lord Erradeen, or some one from the house. Hamish, mind the current. You know how it sweeps the boat up the loch?"

"It will just be the wash of that confounded steam-boat," Hamish said.

The voices bounded in the air without conveying any sense to her mind. Was that Walter, the vague line of darker shadow upon the shade? Was it his house she was going to, his life that she was entering once more? All doubts were put to an end speedily by Walter's voice.

"Is it Hamish?" he cried out.

"Oh, Lord Erradeen, it is me," cried Oona, in her soft Scotch. "And I am bringing you your mother."

The boat grated on the bank as she spoke, and this disguised the tremor in her voice, which Mrs. Methven, quite incapable of distinguishing anything else, was yet fully sensible of. She stepped out tremulously into her son's arms.

"Mother," he cried, "what must you think of me for not coming to meet you? I never thought you could be here so soon."

"I should have come by telegraph if I could," she said, with an agitated laugh: so tired, so tremulous, so happy, the strangest combination of feelings overwhelming her. But still she was aware of a something, a tremor, a tingle in Oona's voice. The boat receded over the water almost without a pause, Hamish under impulsion of a whispered word, having pushed off again as soon as the traveller and her box were landed. Walter paused to call out his thanks over the water, and then he drew his mother's arm within his, and led her up the bank.

"Where is Jane?" he said. "Have you no one with you? Have you travelled all night, and alone, mother, for me?"

"For whom should I do it, but for you? And did you think I would lose a minute after your message, Walter? But you are well, there is nothing wrong with your health?"

"Nothing wrong with my health," he said, with a half-laugh. "No, that is safe enough. I have not deserved that you should come to me, mother – "

"There is no such word as deserving between mother and son," she said tremulously, "so long as you want me, Walter."

"Take care of those steps," was all he said. "We are close now to the house. I hope you will find your rooms comfortable. I fear they have not been occupied for some time. But what shall you do without a maid? Perhaps the housekeeper – "

"You said to come alone, Walter."

"Oh yes. I was afraid of Cousin Sophy; but you could not think I wanted to impair your comfort, mother? Here we are at the door, and here is Symington, very glad to receive his lady."

"But you must not let him call me so."

"Why not? You are our lady to all of us. You are the lady of the house, and I bid you welcome to it, mother," he said, pausing to kiss her. She had a thousand things to forgive, but in that moment they were as though they had not been.

And there was not much more said until she had settled down into possession of the library, which answered instead of a drawing-room: had dined, and been brought back to the glowing peat fire which gave an aromatic breath of warmth and character to a Highland house. When all the business of the arrival had thus been gone through, there came a moment when it was apparent that subjects of more importance must be entered upon. There was a pause, and an interval of complete silence which seemed much longer than it really was. Walter stood before the fire for some time, while she sat close by, her hands clasped in her lap, ready to attend. Then he began to move about uneasily, feeling the compulsion of the moment, yet unprepared with anything to say. At length it was she who began.

"You sent for me, Walter?" she said.

"Yes, mother."

Was there nothing more to tell her? He threw into disorder the books on the table, and then he came back again, and once more faced her, standing with his back to the fire.

"My dear," she said hesitating, "it is with no reproach I speak, but only – There was some reason for sending for me?"

He gave once more a nervous laugh.

"You have good reason to be angry if you will; but I'll tell you the truth, mother. I made use of you to get rid of Underwood. He followed me here, and I told him you were coming, and that he could not stay against the will of the mistress of the house. Then I was bound to ask you – "

The poor lady drew back a little, and instinctively put her hand to her heart, in which there was a hot thrill of sensation, as if an arrow had gone in. And then, in the pang of it, she laughed too, and cried —

"You were bound, to be sure, to fulfil your threat. And this is why – this is why, Walter – "

She could not say more without being hysterical, and departing from every rule she had made for herself.

Meanwhile, Walter stood before her, feeling in his own heart the twang of that arrow which had gone through hers, and the pity of it and wonder of it, with a poignant realisation of all; and yet found nothing to say.

After a while Mrs. Methven regained her composure, and spoke with a smile that was almost more pathetic than tears.

"After all, it was a very good reason. I am glad you used me to get rid of that man."

"I always told you, mother," he said, "that you had a most absurd prejudice against that man. There is no particular harm in the man. I had got tired of him. He is well enough in his own way, but he was out of place here."

"Well, Walter, we need not discuss Captain Underwood. But don't you see it is natural that I should exaggerate his importance by way of giving myself the better reason for having come?"

The touch of bitterness and sarcasm that was in her words made Walter start from his place again, and once more turn over the books on the table. She was not a perfect woman to dismiss all feeling from what she said, and her heart was wrung.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.