

Oliphant Margaret

The Wizard's Son. Volume 1 of 3



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CHAPTER I

The Methvens occupied a little house in the outskirts of a little town where there was not very much going on of any description, and still less which they could take any share in, being, as they were, poor and unable to make any effective response to the civilities shown to them. The family consisted of three persons – the mother, who was a widow with one son; the son himself, who was a young man of three or four and twenty; and a distant cousin of Mrs. Methven's, who lived with her, having no other home. It was not a very happy household. The mother had a limited income and an anxious temper; the son a somewhat volatile and indolent disposition, and no ambition at all as to his future, nor anxiety as to what was going to happen to him in life. This, as may be supposed, was enough to introduce many uneasy elements into their joint existence; and the third of the party, Miss Merivale, was not of the class of the peacemakers to whom Scripture allots a special blessing. She had no amiable glamour in her eyes, but saw her friends' imperfections with a clearness of sight which is little conducive to that happy progress of affairs which is called "getting on." The Methvens were sufficiently proud to keep their

difficulties out of the public eye, but on very many occasions, unfortunately, it had become very plain to themselves that they did not "get on." It was not any want of love. Mrs. Methven was herself aware, and her friends were in the constant habit of saying, that she had sacrificed everything for Walter. Injudicious friends are fond of making such statements, by way, it is to be supposed, of increasing the devotion and gratitude of the child to the parent: but the result is, unfortunately, very often the exact contrary of what is desired – for no one likes to have his duty in this respect pointed out to him, and whatever good people may think, it is not in itself an agreeable thought that "sacrifices" have been made for one, and an obligation placed upon one's shoulders from the beginning of time, independent of any wish or claim upon the part of the person served. The makers of sacrifices have seldom the reward which surrounding spectators, and in many cases themselves, think their due. Mrs. Methven herself would probably have been at a loss to name what were the special sacrifices she had made for Walter. She had remained a widow, but that she would have been eager to add was no sacrifice. She had pinched herself more or less to find the means for his education, which had been of what is supposed in England to be the best kind: and she had, while he was a boy, subordinated her own tastes and pleasures to his, and eagerly sought out everything that was likely to be agreeable to him. When they took their yearly journey – as it is considered necessary for him – places that Walter liked, or where he could find amusement, or had

friends, were eagerly sought for. "Women," Mrs. Methven said, "can make themselves comfortable anywhere; but a boy, you know, is quite different." "Quite," Miss Merivale would say: "Oh, if you only knew them as well as we do; they are creatures entirely without resources. You must put their toys into their very hands." "There is no question of toys with Walter – he has plenty of resources. It is not that," Mrs. Methven would explain, growing red. "I hope I am not one of the silly mothers that thrust their children upon everybody: but, of course, a boy must be considered. Everybody who has had to do with men – or boys – knows that they must be considered." A woman whose life has been mixed up with these troublesome beings feels the superiority of her experience to those who know nothing about them. And in this way, without spoiling him or treating him with ridiculous devotion, as the king of her fate, Walter had been "considered" all his life.

For the rest, Mrs. Methven had, it must be allowed, lived a much more agreeable life in the little society of Sloebury when her son was young than she did now that he had come to years, mis-named, of discretion. Then she had given her little tea-parties, or even a small occasional dinner, at which her handsome boy would make his appearance when it was holiday time, interesting everybody; or, when absent, would still furnish a very pleasant subject of talk to the neighbours, who thought his mother did a great deal too much for him, but still were pleased to discuss a boy who was having the best of educations, and at a

public school. In those days she felt herself very comfortable in Sloebury, and was asked to all the best houses, and felt a modest pride in the certainty that she was able to offer something in return. But matters were very different when Walter was four-and-twenty instead of fourteen. By that time it was apparent that he was not going to take the world by storm, or set the Thames on fire; and, though she had been too sensible to brag, Mrs. Methven had thought both these things possible, and perhaps had allowed it to be perceived that she considered something great, something out of the way, to be Walter's certain career. But twenty-four is, as she said herself, so different! He had been unsuccessful in some of his examinations, and for others he had not been "properly prepared." His mother did not take refuge in the thought that the examiners were partial or the trials unfair; but there was naturally always a word as to the reason why he did not succeed – he had not been "properly prepared." He knew of one only a few days before the eventful moment, and at this time of day, she asked indignantly, when everything is got by competition, how is a young man who has not "crammed" to get the better of one who has? The fact remained that at twenty-four, Walter, evidently a clever fellow, with a great many endowments, had got nothing to do; and, what was worse – a thing which his mother, indeed, pretended to be unconscious of, but which everybody else in the town remarked upon – he was not in the least concerned about this fact, but took his doing nothing quite calmly as the course of nature, and neither suffered from it, nor

made any effort to place himself in a different position. He "went in for" an examination when it was put before him as a thing to do, and took his failure more than philosophically when he failed, as, as yet, he had always done: and, in the mean time, contentedly lived on, without disturbing himself, and tranquilly let the time go by – the golden time which should have shaped his life.

This is not a state of affairs which can bring happiness to any household. There is a kind of parent – or rather it should be said of a mother, for no parent of the other sex is supposed capable of so much folly – to whom everything is good that her child, the cherished object of her affections, does; and this is a most happy regulation of nature, and smooths away the greatest difficulties of life for many simple-hearted folk, without doing half so much harm as is attributed to it; for disapproval has little moral effect, and lessens the happiness of all parties, without materially lessening the sins of the erring. But, unfortunately, Mrs. Methven was not of this happy kind. She saw her son's faults almost too clearly, and they gave her the most poignant pain. She was a proud woman, and that he should suffer in the opinion of the world was misery and grief to her. She was stung to the heart by disappointment in the failure of her many hopes and projects for him. She was stricken with shame to think of all the fine things that had been predicted of Walter in his boyish days, and that not one of them had come true. People had ceased now to speak of the great things that Walter would do. They asked "*What* was he going to do?" in an entirely altered tone,

and this went to her heart. Her pride suffered the most terrible blow. She could not bear the thought; and though she maintained a calm face to the world, and represented herself as entirely satisfied, Walter knew otherwise, and had gradually replaced his old careless affection for his mother by an embittered opposition and resistance to her, which made both their lives wretched enough. How it was that he did not make an effort to escape from her continual remonstrances, her appeals and entreaties, her censure and criticism, it is very difficult to tell. To have gone away, and torn her heart with anxiety, but emancipated himself from a yoke which it was against the dignity of his manhood to bear, would have been much more natural. But he had no money, and he had not the energy to seize upon any way of providing for himself. Had such an opportunity fallen at his feet he would probably have accepted it with fervour; but Fortune did not put herself out of the way to provide for him, nor he to be provided for. Notwithstanding the many scenes which took place in the seclusion of that poor little house, when the mother, what with love, shame, mortification, and impatience, would all but rave in impotent passion, appealing to him, to the pride, the ambition, the principle which so far as could be seen the young man did not possess, Walter held upon his way with an obstinate pertinacity, and did nothing. How he managed to do this without losing all self-respect and every better feeling it is impossible to say; but he did so somehow, and was still "a nice enough fellow," notwithstanding that everybody condemned

him; and had not even lost the good opinion of the little society, though it was unanimous in blame. The only way in which he responded to his mother's remonstrances and complaints was by seeking his pleasure and such occupation as contented him – which was a little cricket now and then, a little lawn-tennis, a little flirtation – as far away from her as possible; and by being as little at home as possible. His temper was a little spoilt by the scenes which awaited him when he went home; and these seemed to justify to himself his gradual separation from his mother's house: but never induced him to sacrifice, or even modify, his own course. He appeared to think that he had a justification for his conduct in the opposition it met with; and that his pride was involved in the necessity for never giving in. If he had been let alone, he represented to himself, everything would have been different; but to yield to this perpetual bullying was against every instinct. And even the society which disapproved so much gave a certain encouragement to Walter in this point of view: for it was Mrs. Methven whom everybody blamed. It was her ridiculous pride, or her foolish indulgence, or her sinful backing-up of his natural indolence; even some people thought it was her want of comprehension of her son which had done it, and that Walter would have been entirely a different person in different hands. If she had not thought it a fine thing to have him appear as a useless fine gentleman above all necessity of working for his living, it was incredible that he could have allowed the years to steal by without making any exertion. This was what the town decided,

not without a good deal of sympathy for Walter. What could be expected? Under the guidance of a foolish mother, a young man always went wrong; and in this case he did not go wrong, poor fellow! he only wasted his existence, nothing worse. Sloebury had much consideration for the young man.

Perhaps it added something to the exasperation with which Mrs. Methven saw all her efforts fail that she had some perception of this, and knew that it was supposed to be her fault. No doubt in her soul it added to the impatience and indignation and pain with which she contemplated the course of affairs, which she was without strength to combat, yet could not let alone. Now and then, indeed, she did control herself so far as to let them alone, and then there was nothing but tranquillity and peace in the house. But she was a conscientious woman, and, poor soul! she had a temper – the very complacency and calm with which her son went upon his way, the approval he showed of her better conduct when she left him to his own devices, struck her in some moments with such sudden indignation and pain, that she could no longer contain herself. He, who might have been anything he pleased, to be nothing! He, of whom everybody had predicted such great things! At such moments the sight of Walter smiling, strolling along with his hands in his pockets, excited her almost to frenzy. Poor lady! So many women would have been proud of him – a handsome young fellow in flannels, with his cricket bat or his racquet when occasion served. But love and injured pride were bitter in her heart, and she could not bear the sight. All

this while, however, nobody knew anything about the scenes that arose in the little house, which preserved a show of happiness and tender union long after the reality was gone. Indeed, even Miss Merivale, who had unbounded opportunities of knowing, took a long time to make up her mind that Walter and his mother did not "get on."

Such was the unfortunate state of affairs at the time when this history begins. The Methvens were distantly connected, it was known, with a great family in Scotland, which took no notice whatever of them, and, indeed, had very little reason so to do, Captain Methven being long since dead, and his widow and child entirely unknown to the noble house, from which it was so great an honour to derive a little, much-diluted, far-off drop of blood, more blue and more rich than the common. It is possible that had the connection been by Mrs. Methven's side she would have known more about it, and taken more trouble to keep up her knowledge of the family. But it was not so, and she had even in her younger days been conscious of little slights and neglects which had made her rather hostile than otherwise to the great people from whom her husband came. "I know nothing about the Erradeens," she would say; "they are much too grand to take any notice of us: and I am too proud to seek any notice from them."

"I am afraid, my dear, there is a good deal in that," said old Mrs. Wynn, the wife of the old rector, shaking her white head. This lady was a sort of benign embodiment of justice in Sloebury. She punished nobody, but she saw the right and wrong with a

glance that was almost infallible, and shook her head though she never exacted any penalty.

Here Miss Merivale would seize the occasion to strike in —

"Prejudice is prejudice," she said, "whatever form it takes. A lord has just as much chance of being nice as an — apothecary." This was said because the young doctor, newly admitted into his father's business, who thought no little of himself, was within reach, and just then caught Miss Merivale's eye.

"That is a very safe speech, seeing there are neither lords nor apothecaries here," he said with the blandest smile. He was not a man to be beaten at such a game.

"But a lord may have influence, you know. For Walter's sake I would not lose sight of him," said Mrs. Wynn.

"You cannot lose sight of what you have never seen: besides, influence is of no consequence nowadays. Nobody can do anything for you — save yourself," said Mrs. Methven with a little sigh. Her eyes turned involuntarily to where Walter was. He was always in the middle of everything that was going on. Among the Sloebury young people he had a little air of distinction, or so at least his mother thought. She was painfully impartial, and generally, in her anxiety, perceived his bad points rather than his good ones; but as she glanced at the group, love for once allowed itself to speak, though always with an accent peculiar to the character of the thinker. She allowed to herself that he had an air of distinction, a something more than the others — alas, that nothing ever came of it! The others all, or almost all,

were already launched in the world. They were doing or trying to do something – whereas Walter! But she took care that nobody should hear that irrepressible sigh.

"I am very sorry for it," said Mrs. Wynn, "for there are many people who would never push for themselves, and yet do very well indeed when they are put in the way."

"I am all for the pushing people," said Miss Merivale. "I like the new state of affairs. When every one stands for himself, and you get just as much as you work for, there will be no grudges and sulkings with society. Though I'm a Tory, I like every man to make his own way."

"A lady's politics are never to be calculated upon," said the Rector, who was standing up against the fire on his own hearth, rubbing his old white hands. "It is altogether against the principles of Toryism, my dear lady, that a man should make his own way. It is sheer democracy. As for that method of examinations, it is one of the most levelling principles of the time – it is one of Mr. Gladstone's instruments for the destruction of society. When the son of a cobbler is just as likely to come to high command as your son or mine, what is to become of the country?" the old clergyman said, lifting those thin white hands.

Mr. Gladstone's name was as a firebrand thrown into the midst of this peaceable little country community. The speakers all took fire. They thought that there was no doubt about what was going to come of the country. It was going to destruction as fast as fate could carry it. When society had dropped to pieces, and the

rabble had come uppermost, and England had become a mere name, upon which all foreign nations should trample, and wild Irishmen dance war dances, and Americans expectorate, then Mr. Gladstone would be seen in his true colours. While this was going on, old Mrs. Wynn sat in her easy-chair and shook her head. She declared always that she was no politician. And young Walter Methven, attracted by the sudden quickening of the conversation which naturally attended the introduction of this subject, came forward, ready in the vein of opposition which was always his favourite attitude.

"Mr. Gladstone must be a very great man," he said. "I hear it is a sign of being in society when you foam at the mouth at the sound of his name."

"You young fellows think it fine to be on the popular side; but wait till you are my age," cried one of the eager speakers. "It will not matter much to me. There will be peace in my days." "But wait," cried another, "and see how you will like it when everything topples down together, the crown and the state, and the aristocracy, and public credit, and national honour, and property, and the constitution, and – "

So many anxious and alarmed politicians here spoke together that the general voice became inarticulate, and Walter Methven, representing the opposition, was at liberty to laugh.

"Come one, come all!" he cried, backed up by the arm of the sofa, upon which Mrs. Wynn sat shaking her head. "It would be a fine thing for me and all the other proletarians. Something would

surely fall our way."

His mother watched him, standing up against the sofa, confronting them all, with her usual exasperated and angry affection. She thought, as she looked at him, that there was nothing he was not fit for. He was clever enough for Parliament, he might have been prime minister – but he was nothing! nothing, and likely to be nothing, doing nothing, desiring nothing. Her eye fell on young Wynn, the rector's nephew, who had just got a fellowship at his college, and on the doctor's son, who was just entering into a share of his father's practice, and on Mr. Jeremy the young banker, whose attentions fluttered any maiden to whom he might address them. They were Walter's contemporaries, and not one of them was worthy, she thought, to be seen by the side of her boy; but they had all got before him in the race of life. They were something and he was nothing. It was not much wonder if her heart was sore and angry. When she turned round to listen civilly to something that was said to her, her face was contracted and pale. It was more than she could bear. She made a move to go away before any of the party was ready, and disturbed Miss Merivale in the midst of a *tête-à-tête*, which was a thing not easily forgiven.

Walter walked home with them in great good humour, but his mother knew very well that he was not coming in. He was going to finish the evening elsewhere. If he had come in would she have been able to restrain herself? Would she not have fallen upon him, either in anger or in grief, holding up to him the examples of

young Wynn and young Jeremy and the little doctor? She knew she would not have been able to refrain, and it was almost a relief to her, though it was another pang, when he turned away at the door.

"I want to speak to Underwood about to-morrow," he said.

"What is there about to-morrow? Of all the people in Sloebury Captain Underwood is the one I like least," she said. "Why must you always have something to say to him when every one else is going to bed?"

"I am not going to bed, nor is he," said Walter lightly.

Mrs. Methven's nerves were highly strung. Miss Merivale had passed in before them, and there was nobody to witness this little struggle, which she knew would end in nothing, but which was inevitable. She grasped him by the arm in her eagerness and pain.

"Oh, my boy!" she said, "come in, come in, and think of something more than the amusement of to-morrow. Life is not all play, though you seem to think so. For once listen to me, Walter – oh, listen to me! You cannot go on like this. Think of all the others; all at work, every one of them, and you doing nothing."

"Do you want me to begin to do something now," said Walter, "when you have just told me everybody was going to bed?"

"Oh! if I were you," she cried in her excitement, "I would rest neither night nor day. I would not let it be said that I was the last, and every one of them before me."

Walter shook himself free of her detaining hold. "Am I to be a dustman, or a scavenger, or – what?" he said, contemptuously.

"I know no other trades that are followed at this hour."

Mrs. Methven had reached the point at which a woman has much ado not to cry in the sense of impotence and exasperation which such an argument brings. "It is better to do anything than to do nothing," she cried, turning away from him and hastening in at the open door.

He paused a moment, as if doubtful what to do; there was something in her hasty withdrawal which for an instant disposed him to follow, and she paused breathless, with a kind of hope, in the half-light of the little hall; but the next moment his footsteps sounded clear and quick on the pavement, going away. Mrs. Methven waited until they were almost out of hearing before she closed the door. Angry, baffled, helpless, what could she do? She wiped a hot tear from the corner of her eye before she went into the drawing-room, where her companion, always on the alert, had already turned up the light of the lamp, throwing an undesired illumination upon her face, flushed and troubled from this brief controversy.

"I thought you were never coming in," said Miss Merivale, "and that open door sends a draught all through the house."

"Walter detained me for a moment to explain some arrangements he has to make for to-morrow," Mrs. Methven said with dignity. "He likes to keep me *au courant* of his proceedings."

Miss Merivale was absolutely silenced by this sublime assumption, notwithstanding the flush of resentment, the

glimmer of moisture in the mother's eye.

CHAPTER II

Walter walked along the quiet, almost deserted street with a hasty step and a still hastier rush of disagreeable thoughts. There was, he felt, an advantage in being angry, in the sensation of indignant resistance to a petty tyranny. For a long time past he had taken refuge in this from every touch of conscience and sense of time lost and opportunities neglected. He was no genius, but he was not so dull as not to know that his life was an entirely unsatisfactory one, and himself in the wrong altogether; everything rotten in the state of his existence, and a great deal that must be set right one time or another in all his habits and ways. The misfortune was that it was so much easier to put off this process till to-morrow than to begin it to-day. He had never been roused out of the boyish condition of mind in which a certain resistance to authority was natural, and opposition to maternal rule and law a sort of proof of superiority and independence. Had this been put into words, and placed before him as the motive of much that he did, no one would have coloured more angrily or resented more hotly the suggestion; and yet in the bottom of his heart he would have known it to be true. All through his unoccupied days he carried with him the sense of folly, the consciousness that he could not justify to himself the course he was pursuing. The daily necessity of justifying it to another was almost the sole thing that silenced his conscience. His mother,

who kept "nagging" day after day, who was never satisfied, whose appeals he sometimes thought theatrical, and her passion got up, was his sole defence against that self-dissatisfaction which is the severest of all criticisms. If she would but let him alone, leave him to his own initiative, and not perpetually endeavour to force a change which to be effectual, as all authorities agreed, must come of itself! He was quite conscious of the inadequacy of this argument, and in his heart felt that it was a poor thing to take advantage of it; but yet, on the surface of his mind, put it forward and made a bulwark of it against his own conscience. He did so now as he hurried along, in all the heat that follows a personal encounter. If she would but let him alone! But he could not move a step anywhere, could not make an engagement, could not step into a friend's rooms, as he was going to do now, without her interference. The relations of a parent to an only child are not the same as those that exist between a father and mother and the different members of a large family. It has been usual to consider them in one particular light as implying the closest union and mutual devotion. But there is another point of view in which to consider the question. They are so near to each other, and the relationship so close, that there is a possibility of opposition and contrariety more trying, more absorbing, than any other except that between husband and wife. A young son does not always see the necessity of devotion to a mother who is not very old, who has still many sources of pleasure apart from himself, and who is not capable, perhaps, on her side, of the

undiscriminating worship which is grandmotherly, and implies a certain weakness and dimness of perception in the fond eyes that see everything in a rosy, ideal light. This fond delusion is often in its way a moral agent, obliging the object of it to fulfil what is expected of him, and reward the full and perfect trust which is given so unhesitatingly. But in this case it was not possible. The young man thought, or persuaded himself, that his mother's vexatious watch over him, and what he called her constant suspicion and doubt of him, had given him a reason for the disgust and impatience with which he turned from her control. He pictured to himself the difference which a father's larger, more generous sway would have made in him; to that he would have answered, he thought, like a ship to its helm, like an army to its general. But this petty rule, this perpetual fault-finding, raised up every faculty in opposition. Even when he meant the best, her words of warning, her reminders of duty, were enough to set him all wrong again. He thought, as a bad husband often thinks when he is conscious of the world's disapproval, that it was her complaints that were the cause. And when he was reminded by others, well-meaning but injudicious, of all he owed to his mother, his mind rose yet more strongly in opposition, his spirit refused the claim. This is a very different picture from that of the widow's son whose earliest inspiration is his sense of duty to his mother, and adoring gratitude for her care and love – but it is perhaps as true a one. A young man may be placed in an unfair position by the excessive claim made

upon his heart and conscience in this way, and so Walter felt it. He might have given all that, and more, if nothing had been asked of him; but when he was expected to feel so much, he felt himself half justified in feeling nothing. Thus the situation had become one of strained and continual opposition. It was a kind of duel, in which the younger combatant at least – the assailed person, whose free-will and independence were hampered by such perpetual requirements – never yielded a step. The other might do so, by turns throwing up her arms altogether, but not he.

It was with this feeling strong in his mind, and affecting his temper as nothing else does to such a degree, that he hastened along the street towards the rooms occupied by Captain Underwood, a personage whom the ladies of Sloebury were unanimous in disliking. Nobody knew exactly where it was that he got his military title. He did not belong to any regiment in her Majesty's service. He had not even the humble claim of a militia officer; yet nobody dared say that there was anything fictitious about him, or stigmatise the captain as an impostor. Other captains and colonels and men-at-arms of undoubted character supported his claims; he belonged to one or two well-known clubs. An angry woman would sometimes fling an insult at him when her husband or son came home penniless after an evening in his company, wondering what they could see in an under-bred fellow who was no more a captain (she would say in her wrath) than she was; but of these assertions there was no proof, and the vehemence of them naturally made the

captain's partisans more and more eager in his favour. He had not been above six months in Sloebury, but everybody knew him. There was scarcely an evening in which half-a-dozen men did not congregate in his rooms, drawn together by that strange attraction which makes people meet who do not care in the least for each other's company, nor have anything to say to each other, yet are possibly less vacant in society than when alone, or find the murmur of many voices, the smoke of many cigars, exhilarating and agreeable. It was not every evening that the cards were produced. The captain was wary; he frightened nobody; he did not wish to give occasion to the tremors of the ladies, whom he would have conciliated even, if he had been able; but there are men against whom the instinct of all women rises, as there are women from whom all men turn. It was only now and then that he permitted play. He spoke indeed strongly against it on many occasions. "What do you want with cards?" he would say. "A good cigar and a friend to talk to ought to be enough for any man." But twice or thrice in a week his scruples would give way. He was a tall, well-formed man, of an uncertain age, with burning hazel eyes, and a scar on his forehead got in that mysterious service to which now and then he made allusion, and which his friends concluded must have been in some foreign legion, or with Garibaldi, or some other irregular warfare. There were some who thought him a man, old for his age, of thirty-five, and some who, concluding him young for his age, and well preserved, credited him with twenty years more; but thirty-five or fifty-

five, whichever it was, he was erect and strong, and well set up, and possessed an amount of experience and apparent knowledge of the world, at which the striplings of Sloebury admired and wondered, and which even the older men respected, as men in the country respect the mention of great names and incidents that have become historical. He had a way of recommending himself even to the serious, and would now and then break forth, as if reluctantly, into an account of some instance of faith or patience on the battlefield or the hospital which made even the rector declare that to consider Underwood as an irreligious man was both unjust and unkind. So strong was the prejudice of the women, however, that Mrs. Wynn, always charitable, and whose silent protest was generally only made when the absent were blamed, shook her head at this testimony borne in favour of the Captain. She had no son to be led away, and her husband it need not be said, considering his position, was invulnerable; but with all her charity she could not believe in the religion of Captain Underwood. His rooms were very nice rooms in the best street in Sloebury, and if his society was what is called "mixed," yet the best people were occasionally to be met there, as well as those who were not the best.

There was a little stir in the company when Walter entered. To tell the truth, notwithstanding the wild mirth and dissipation which the ladies believed to go on in Captain Underwood's rooms, the society assembled there was at the moment dull and in want of a sensation. There had not been anything said for the

course of two minutes at least. There was no play going on, and the solemn puff of smoke from one pair of lips after another would have been the height of monotony had it not been the wildest fun and gratification. The men in the room took pipes and cigars out of their mouths to welcome the new-comer. "Hallo, Walter!" they all said in different tones; for in Sloebury the use of Christian names was universal, everybody having known everybody else since the moment of their birth.

"Here comes Methven," said the owner of the rooms (it was one of his charms, in the eyes of the younger men, that he was not addicted to this familiarity), "in the odour of sanctity. It will do us all good to have an account of the rector's party. How did you leave the old ladies, my excellent boy?"

"Stole away like the fox, by Jove," said the hunting man, who was the pride of Sloebury.

"More like the mouse with the old cats after it," said another wit.

Now Walter had come in among them strong in his sense of right and in his sense of wrong, feeling himself at the same moment a sorry fool and an injured hero, a sufferer for the rights of man; and it would have been of great use to him in both these respects to have felt himself step into a superior atmosphere, into the heat of a political discussion, or even into noisy amusement, or the passion of play – anything which would rouse the spirits and energies, and show the action of a larger life. But to feel his own arrival a sort of godsend in the dulness, and to hear nothing

but the heavy puff of all the smoke, and the very poor wit with which he was received, was sadly disconcerting, and made him more and more angry with himself and the circumstances which would give him no sort of support or comfort.

"The old ladies," he said, "were rather more lively than you fellows. You look as if you had all been poisoned in your wine, like the men in the opera, and expected the wall to open and the monks and the coffins to come in."

"I knew that Methven would bring us some excellent lesson," said Captain Underwood. "Remember that we have all to die. Think, my friends, upon your latter end."

"Jump up here and give us a sermon, Wat."

"Don't tease him, he's dangerous."

"The old ladies have been too much for him."

This went on till Walter had settled down into his place, and lighted his pipe like the rest. He looked upon them with disenchanted eyes; not that he had ever entertained any very exalted opinion of his company; but to-night he was out of sympathy with all his surroundings, and he felt it almost a personal offence that there should be so little to attract and excite in this manly circle which thought so much more of itself than of any other, and was so scornful of the old ladies who after all were not old ladies: but the graver members of the community in general, with an ornamental adjunct of young womankind. On ordinary occasions no doubt Walter would have chimed in with the rest, but to-night he was dissatisfied and miserable, not sure

of any sensation in particular, but one of scorn and distaste for his surroundings. He would have felt this in almost any conceivable case, but in the midst of this poor jesting and would-be wit, the effect was doubled. Was it worth while for this to waste his time, to offend the opinion of all his friends? Such thoughts must always come in similar circumstances. Even in the most brilliant revelry there will be a pause, a survey of the position, a sense, however unwilling that the game is not worth the candle. But here! They were all as dull as ditch water, he said to himself. Separately there was scarcely one whom he would have selected as an agreeable companion, and was it possible by joining many dulnesses together to produce a brilliant result? There was no doubt that Walter's judgment was jaundiced that evening; for he was not by any means so contemptuous of his friends on ordinary occasions; but he had been eager to find an excuse for himself, to be able to say that here was real life and genial society in place of the affected solemnity of the proper people. When he found himself unable to do this, he was struck as by a personal grievance, and sat moody and abstracted, bringing a chill upon everybody, till one by one the boon companions strolled away.

"A pretty set of fellows to talk of dulness," he cried, with a little burst, "as if they were not dull beyond all description themselves."

"Come, Methven, you are out of temper," said Captain Underwood. "They are good fellows enough when you are in the vein for them. Something has put you out of joint."

"Nothing at all," cried Walter, "except the sight of you all sitting as solemn as owls pretending to enjoy yourselves. At the rectory one yawned indeed, it was the genius of the place – but to hear all those dull dogs laughing at that, as if they were not a few degrees worse! Is there nothing but dulness in life? Is everything the same – one way or another – and nothing to show for it all, when it is over, but tediousness and discontent?"

Underwood looked at him keenly with his fiery eyes.

"So you've come to that already, have you?" he said. "I thought you were too young and foolish."

"I am not so young as not to know that I am behaving like an idiot," Walter said. Perhaps he had a little hope of being contradicted and brought back to his own esteem.

But instead of this, Captain Underwood only looked at him again and laughed.

"I know," he said: "the conscience has its tremors, especially after an evening at the rectory. You see how well respectability looks, how comfortable it is."

"I do nothing of the sort," Walter cried indignantly. "I see how dull you are, you people who scoff at respectability, and I begin to wonder whether it is not better to be dull and thrive than to be dull and perish. They seem much the same thing so far as enjoyment goes."

"You want excitement," said the other carelessly. "I allow there is not much of that here."

"I want something," cried Walter. "Cards even are better than

nothing. I want to feel that I have blood in my veins."

"My dear boy, all that is easily explained. You want money. Money is the thing that mounts the blood in the veins. With money you can have as much excitement, as much movement as you like. Let people say what they please, there is nothing else that does it," said the man of experience. He took a choice cigar leisurely from his case as he spoke. "A bit of a country town like this, what can you expect from it? There is no go in them. They risk a shilling, and go away frightened if they lose. If they don't go to church on Sunday they feel all the remorse of a villain in a play. It's all petty here – everything's petty, both the vices and the virtues. I don't wonder you find it slow. What I find it, I needn't say."

"Why do you stop here, then?" said Walter, not unnaturally, with a momentary stare of surprise. Then he resumed, being full of his own subject. "I know I'm an ass," he said. "I loaf about here doing nothing when I ought to be at work. I don't know why I do it; but neither do I know how to get out of it. You, that's quite another thing. You have no call to stay. I wonder you do: why do you? If I were as free as you, I should be off – before another day."

"Come along then," said Underwood, good-humouredly. "I'll go if you'll go."

At this Walter shook his head.

"I have no money you know. I ought to be in an office or doing something. I can't go off to shoot here or fish there, like you."

"By and by – by and by. You have time enough to wait."

Walter gave him a look of surprise.

"There is nothing to wait for," he said. "Is that why you have said so many things to me about seeing life? I have nothing. We've got no money in the family. I may wait till doomsday, but it will do nothing for me."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Underwood. "Oh, you needn't devour me with your eyes. I know nothing of your family affairs. I suppose of course that by and by, in the course of nature – "

"You mean," said Walter, turning pale, "when my mother dies. No, I'm not such a wretched cad as that: if I didn't know I should get next to nothing then, I – " (His conscience nearly tripped this young man up, running into his way so hurriedly that he caught his foot unawares.) Then he stopped and grew red, staring at his companion. "Most of what she has dies with her, if that's what you're thinking of. There is nothing in that to build upon. And I'm glad of it," the young man cried.

"I beg your pardon, Methven," said the other. "But it needn't be that; there are other ways of getting rich."

"I don't know any of them, unless by work: and how am I to work? It is so easy to speak. What can I work at? and where am I to get it? – there is the question. I hear enough on that subject – as if I were a tailor or a shoemaker that could find something to do at any corner. There is no reason in it," the young man said, so hotly, and with such a flush of resentful obstinacy, that the fervour of his speech betrayed him. He was like a man who had

outrun himself, and paused, out of breath.

"You'll see; something will turn up," said Underwood, with a laugh.

"What can turn up? – nothing. Suppose I go to New Zealand and come back at fifty with my fortune made – Fifty's just the age, isn't it, to begin to enjoy yourself," cried Walter, scornfully; "when you have not a tooth left, nor a faculty perfect?" He was so young that the half-century appeared to him like the age of Methusaleh, and men who lived to that period as having outlived all that is worth living for. His mentor laughed a little uneasily, as if he had been touched by this chance shot.

"It is not such a terrible age after all," he said. "A man can still enjoy himself when he is fifty; but I grant you that at twenty-four it's a long time to wait for your pleasure. However, let us hope something will turn up before then. Supposing, for the sake of argument, you were to come in to your fortune more speedily, I wonder what you would do with it – eh? you are such a terrible fellow for excitement. The turf?"

"All that is folly," said Walter, getting up abruptly. "Nothing more, thanks. I am coming in to no fortune. And you don't understand me a bit," he said, turning at the door of the room, to look back upon the scene where he had himself spent so many hours, made piquant by a sense of that wrongdoing which supplies excitement when other motives fail. The chairs standing about as their occupants had thrust them away from the table, the empty glasses upon it, the disorder of the room, struck him

with a certain sense of disgust. It was a room intended by nature to be orderly and sober, with heavy country-town furniture, and nothing about it that could throw any grace on disarray. The master of the place stood against the table swaying a somewhat heavy figure over it, and gazing at the young man with his fiery eyes. Walter's rudeness did not please him, any more than his abrupt withdrawal.

"Don't be too sure of that," he said, with an effort to retain his good-humoured aspect. "If I don't understand you, I should like to know who does? and when that fortune comes, you will remember what I say."

"Pshaw!" Walter cried, impatiently turning away. A nod of his head was all the good-night he gave. He hurried down as he had hurried up, still as little contented, as full of dissatisfaction as when he came. This man who thought he understood him, who intended to influence him, revolted the young man's uneasy sense of independence, as much as did the bond of more lawful authority. Did Underwood, *too*, think him a child not able to guide himself? It was very late by this time, and the streets very silent. He walked quickly home through the wintry darkness of November, with a mind as thoroughly out of tune as it is possible to imagine. He had gone to Underwood's in the hot impulse of opposition, with the hope of getting rid temporarily, at least, of the struggle within him; but he had not got rid of it. The dull jokes of the assembled company had only made the raging of the inward storm more sensible, and the jaunty and

presumptuous misconception with which his host received his involuntary confidences afterwards, had aggravated instead of soothing his mind. Indeed, Underwood's pretence at knowing all about it, his guesses and attempts to sound his companion's mind, and the blundering interpretation of it into which he stumbled, filled Walter with double indignation and disgust. This man too he had thought much of, and expected superior intelligence from – and all that he had to say was an idiotic anticipation of some miraculous coming into a fortune which Walter was aware was as likely to happen to the beggar on the streets as to himself. He had been angry with nature and his mother when he left her door; he was angry with everybody when he returned to it, though his chief anger of all, and the root of all the others, was that anger with himself, which burnt within his veins, and which is the hardest of all others to quench out.

CHAPTER III

Walter was very late next morning as he had been very late at night. The ladies had breakfasted long before, and there was a look of reproach in the very table-cloth left there so much after the usual time, and scrupulously cleared of everything that the others had used, and arranged at one end, with the dish kept hot for him, and the small teapot just big enough for one, which was a sermon in itself. His mother was seated by the fire with her weekly books, which she was adding up. She said scarcely anything to him, except the morning greeting, filling out his tea with a gravity which was all the more crushing that there was nothing in it to object to, nothing to resent. Adding up accounts of itself is not cheerful work; but naturally the young man resented this seriousness all the more because he had no right to do so. It was intolerable, he felt, to sit and eat in presence of that silent figure partly turned away from him, jotting down the different amounts on a bit of paper, and absorbed in that occupation as if unconscious of his presence. Even scolding was better than this; Walter was perfectly conscious of all it was in her power to say. He knew by heart her remonstrances and appeals. But he disliked the silence more than all. He longed to take her by the shoulders, and cry, "What is it? What have you got to say to me? What do you mean by sitting there like a stone figure, and *meaning* it all the same!" He did not do this, knowing it would be foolish, and

gave his constant antagonist a certain advantage; but he longed to get rid of some of his own exasperation by such an act. It was with a kind of force over himself that he ate his breakfast, going through all the forms, prolonging it to the utmost of his power, helping himself with deliberate solemnity in defiance of the spectator, who seemed so absorbed in her own occupation, but was, he felt sure, watching his every movement. It was not, however, until he had come to an end of his prolonged meal and of his newspaper, that his mother spoke.

"Do you think," she said, "that it would be possible for you to write that letter to Mr. Milnathort of which I have spoken so often, to-day?"

"Oh, quite possible," said Walter, carelessly.

"Will you do it, then? It seems to me very important to your interests. Will you really do it, and do it to-day?"

"I'll see about it," Walter said.

"I don't ask you to see about it. It is nothing very difficult. I ask you to do it at once – to-day."

He gazed at her for a moment with an angry obstinacy.

"I see no particular occasion for all this haste. It has stood over a good many days. Why should you insist so upon it now?"

"Every day that it has been put off has been a mistake. It should have been done at once," Mrs. Methven said.

"I'll see about it," he said carelessly; and he went out of the room with a sense of having exasperated her as usual, which was almost pleasant.

At the bottom of his heart he meant to do what his mother had asked of him: but he would not betray his good intentions. He preferred to look hostile even when he was in the mind to be obedient. He went away to the little sitting-room which was appropriated to him, where his pipes adorned the mantelpiece, and sat down to consider the situation. To write a letter was not a great thing to do, and he fully meant to do it; but after he had mused a little angrily upon the want of perception which made his mother adopt that cold and hectoring tone, when if she had asked him gently he would have done it in a minute, he put forth his hand and drew a book towards him. It was not either a new or an entertaining book, but it secured his idle attention until he suddenly remembered that it was time to go out. The letter was not written, but what did that matter? The post did not go out till the afternoon, and there was plenty of time between that time and this to write half-a-dozen letters. It would do very well, he thought, when he came in for lunch. So he threw down the book and got his hat and went out.

Mrs. Methven, who was on the watch, hearing his every movement, came into his room after he was gone, and looked round with eager eyes to see if the letter was written, if there was any trace of it. Perhaps he had taken it out with him to post it, she thought: and though it was injurious to her that she should not know something more about a piece of business in which he was not the sole person concerned, yet it gave her a sort of relief to think that so much at least he had done. She

went back to her books with an easier mind. She was far from being a rich woman, but her son had known none of her little difficulties, her efforts to make ends meet. She had thought it wrong to trouble his childhood with such confidences, and he had grown up thinking nothing on the subject, without any particular knowledge of, or interest in, her affairs, taking everything for granted. It was her own fault, she said to herself, and so it was to some extent. She would sometimes think that if she had it to do over again she would change all that. How often do we think this, and with what bitter regret, in respect to the children whom people speak of as wax in our hands, till we suddenly wake up and find them iron! She had kept her difficulties out of Walter's way, and instead of being grateful to her for so doing, he was simply indifferent, neither inquiring nor caring to know. Her own doing! It was easier to herself, yet bitter beyond telling, to acknowledge it to be so. Just at this time, when Christmas was approaching, the ends took a great deal of tugging and coaxing to bring them together. A few of Walter's bills had come in unexpectedly, putting her poor balance altogether wrong. Miss Merivale contributed a little, but only a little, to the housekeeping; for Mrs. Methven was both proud and liberal, and understood giving better than receiving. She went back to the dining-room, where all her books lay upon the table, near the fire. Her reckoning had advanced much since she had begun it, with Walter sitting at breakfast. Her faculties had been all absorbed in him and what he was doing. Now she addressed herself to

her accounts with a strenuous effort. It is hard work to balance a small sum of money against a large number of bills, to settle how to divide it so as that everybody shall have something, and the mouths of hungry creditors be stopped. Perhaps we might say that this was one of the fine arts – so many pounds here, so many there, keeping credit afloat, and the wolf of debt from the door. Mrs. Methven was skilled in it. She went to this work, feeling all its difficulty and burden: yet, with a little relief, not because she saw any way out of her difficulties, but because Walter had written that letter. It was always something done, she thought, in her simplicity, and something might come of it, some way in which he could get the means of exercising his faculties, perhaps of distinguishing himself even yet.

Walter for his part strolled away through the little town in his usual easy way. It was a fine, bright, winterly morning, not cold, yet cold enough to make brisk walking pleasant, and stir the blood in young veins. There was no football going on, nor any special amusement. He could not afford to hunt, and the only active winter exercise which he could attain was limited to this game – of which there was a good deal at Sloebury – and skating, when it pleased Providence to send ice, which was too seldom. He looked in upon one or two of his cronies, and played a game of billiards, and hung about the High Street to see what was going on. There was nothing particular going on, but the air was fresh, and the sun shining, and a little pleasant movement about, much more agreeable at least than sitting in a stuffy little room writing a

troublesome letter which he felt sure would not do the least good. Finally, he met Captain Underwood, who regarded him with a look which Walter would have called anxious had he been able to imagine any possible reason why Underwood should entertain any anxiety on his account.

"Well! any news?" the captain cried.

"News! What news should there be in this dead-alive place?" Walter said.

The other looked at him keenly as if to see whether he was quite sincere, and then said, "Come and have some lunch."

He was free of all the best resorts in Sloebury, this mysterious man. He belonged to the club, he was greatly at his ease in the hotel – everything was open to him. Walter, who had but little money of his own, and could not quite cut the figure he wished, was not displeased to be thus exhibited as the captain's foremost ally.

"I thought you might have come into that fortune, you are looking so spruce," the captain said, and laughed. But though he laughed he kept an eye on the young man as if the pleasantries meant more than appeared. Walter felt a momentary irritation with this, which seemed to him a very bad joke; but he went with the captain all the same, not without a recollection of the table at home, at which, after waiting three quarters of an hour or so, and watching at the window for his coming, the ladies would at last sit down. But he was not a child to be forced to attendance at every meal, he said to himself. The captain's attentions to him were

great, and it was a very nice little meal that they had together.

"I expect you to do great things for me when you come into your fortune. You had better engage me at once as your guide, philosopher, and friend," he said, with a laugh. "Of course you will quit Sloebury, and make yourself free of all this bondage."

"Oh, of course," said Walter, humouring the joke, though it was so bad a one in every way.

He could not quarrel with his host at his own table, and perhaps after all it was more dignified to take it with good humour.

"You must not go in for mere expense," the captain said; "you must make it pay. I can put you up to a thing or two. You must not go into the world like a pigeon to be plucked. It would effect my personal honour if a pupil of mine – for I consider you as a pupil of mine, Methven, I think I have imparted to you a thing or two. You are not quite the simpleton you used to be, do you think you are?"

Walter received this with great gravity, though he tried to look as if he were not offended.

"Was I a simpleton?" he said. "I suppose in one's own case one never sees."

"Were you a simpleton!" said the other, with a laugh, and then he stopped himself, always keenly watching the young man's face, and perceiving that he was going too far. "But I flatter myself you could hold your own at whist with any man now," the captain said.

This pleased the young man; his gravity unbended a little; there was a visible relaxation of the corners of his mouth. To be praised is always agreeable. Moral applause, indeed, may be taken with composure, but who could hear himself applauded for his whist-playing without an exhilaration of the heart? He said, with satisfaction, "I always was pretty good at games," at which his instructor laughed again, almost too much for perfect good breeding.

"I like to have young fellows like you to deal with," he said, "fellows with a little spirit, that are born for better things. Your country-town young man is as fretful and frightened when he loses a few shillings as if it were thousands. But that's one of the reasons why I feel you're born to luck, my boy. I know a man of liberal breeding whenever I see him, he is not frightened about a nothing. That's one of the things I like in you, Methven. You deserve a fortune, and you deserve to have me for your guide, philosopher, and friend."

All this was said by way of joke; but it was strange to see the steady watch which he kept on the young man's face. One would have said a person of importance whom Underwood meant to try his strength with, but guardedly, without going too far, and even on whom he was somehow dependent, anxious to make a good impression. Walter, who knew his own favour to be absolutely without importance, and that Underwood above all, his host and frequent entertainer, could be under no possible delusion on the subject, was puzzled, yet flattered, feeling that only

some excellence on his part, undiscovered by any of his other acquaintances, could account for this. So experienced a person could have "no motive" in thus paying court to a penniless and prospectless youth. Walter was perplexed, but he was gratified too. He had not seen many of the captain's kind; nobody who knew so many people or who was so much at his ease with the world. Admiration of this vast acquaintance, and of the familiarity with which the captain treated things and people of which others spoke with bated breath, had varied in his mind with a fluctuating sense that Underwood was not exactly so elevated a person as he professed to be, and even that there were occasional vulgarities in this man of the world. Walter felt these, but in his ignorance represented to himself that perhaps they were right enough, and only seemed vulgar to him who knew no better. And to-day there is no doubt he was somewhat intoxicated by this flattery. It must be disinterested, for what could he do for anybody? He confided to the captain more than he had ever done before of his own position. He described how he was being urged to write to old Milnathort. "He is an old lawyer in Scotland – what they call a writer – and it is supposed he might be induced to take me into his office, for the sake of old associations. I don't know what the associations are, but the position does not smile upon me," Walter said.

"Your family then is a Scotch family?" said the captain with a nod of approval. "I thought as much."

"I don't know that I've got a family," said Walter.

"On the contrary, Methven is a very good name. There are half-a-dozen baronets at least, and a peer – you must have heard of him, Lord Erradeen."

"Oh yes, I've heard of him," Walter said with a conscious look.

If he had been more in the world he would have said "he is a cousin of mine," but he was aware that the strain of kindred was very far off, and he was at once too shy and too proud to claim it. His companion waited apparently for the disclosure, then finding it did not come opened the way.

"If he's a relation of yours, it's to him you ought to write; very likely he would do something for you. They are a curious family. I've had occasion to know something about them."

"I think you know everybody, Underwood."

"Well, I have knocked about the world a great deal; in that way one comes across a great many people. I saw a good deal of the present lord at one time. He was a very queer man – they are all queer. If you are one of them you'll have to bear your share in it. There is a mysterious house they have – You would think I was an idiot if I told you half the stories I have heard – "

"About the Erradeens?"

"About everybody," said the captain evasively. "There is scarcely a family, that, if you go right into it, has not something curious about them. We all have; but those that last and continue keep it on record. I could tell you the wildest tales about So-and-so and So-and-so, very ordinary people to look at, but with stories that would make your hair stand on end."

"We have nothing to do with things of that sort. My people have always been straightforward and above-board."

"For as much as you know, perhaps; but go back three or four generations and how can you tell? We have all of us ancestors that perhaps were not much to brag of."

Walter caught Underwood's eye as he said this, and perhaps there was a twinkle in it, for he laughed.

"It is something," he said, "to have ancestors at all."

"If they were the greatest blackguards in the world," the captain said with a responsive laugh, "that's what I think. You don't want any more of my revelations? Well, never mind, probably I shall have you coming to me some of these days quite humbly to beg for more information. You are not cut out for an attorney's office. It is very virtuous, of course, to give yourself up to work and turn your back upon life."

"Virtue be hanged," said Walter, with some excitement, "it is not virtue, but necessity, which I take to be the very opposite. I know I'm wasting my time, but I mean to turn over a new leaf. And as the first evidence of that, as soon as I go home I shall write to old Milnathort."

"Not to-day," said Underwood, looking at his watch; "the post has gone; twenty-four hours more to think about it will do you no harm."

Walter started to his feet, and it was with a real pang that he saw how the opportunity had escaped him, and his intention in spite of himself been balked; a flush of shame came over his

face. He felt that, if never before, here was a genuine occasion for blame. To be sure, the same thing had happened often enough before, but he had never perhaps so fully intended to do what was required of him. He sat down again with a muttered curse at himself and his own folly. There was nothing to be said for him. He had meant to turn over a new leaf, and yet this day was just like the last. The thought made his heart sick for the moment. But what was the use of making a fuss and betraying himself to a stranger? He sat down again, with a self-disgust which made him glad to escape from his own company. Underwood's talk might be shallow enough, perhaps his pretence at knowledge was not very well founded, but he was safer company than conscience, and that burning and miserable sense of moral impotence which is almost worse than the more tragic stings of conscience. To find out that your resolution is worth nothing, after you have put yourself to the trouble of making it, and that habit is more strong than any motive, is not a pleasant thing to think of. Better let the captain talk about Lord Erradeen, or any other lord in the peerage. Underwood, being encouraged with a few questions, talked very largely on this subject. He gave the young man many pieces of information, which indeed he could have got in Debrett if he had been anxious on the subject; and as the afternoon wore on they strolled out again for another promenade up and down the more populous parts of Sloebury, and there fell in with other idlers like themselves; and when the twilight yielded to the more cheerful light of the lamps, betook themselves to whist, which

was sometimes played in the captain's rooms at that immoral hour. Sloebury, even the most advanced portion of it, had been horrified at the thought of whist before dinner when the captain first suggested it, but that innocent alarm had long since melted away. There was nothing dangerous about it, no stakes which any one could be hurt by losing. When Walter, warned by the breaking up of the party that it was the hour for dinner, took his way home also, he was the winner of a sixpence or two, and no more: there had been nothing wrong in the play. But when he turned the corner of Underwood's street and found himself with the wind in his face on his way home, the revulsion of feeling from something like gaiety to a rush of disagreeable anticipations, a crowd of uncomfortable thoughts, was pitiful. In spite of all our boastings of home and home influence, how many experience this change the moment they turn their face in the direction of that centre where it is conventional to suppose all comfort and shelter is! There is a chill, an abandonment of pleasant sensations, a preparation for those that are not pleasant. Walter foresaw what he would find there with an impatience and resentment which were almost intolerable. Behind the curtain, between the laths of the Venetian blind, his mother would be secretly on the outlook watching for his return; perhaps even she had stolen quietly to the door, and, sheltered in the darkness of the porch, was looking out; or, if not that, the maid who opened the door would look reproachfully at him, and ask if he was going to dress, or if she might serve the dinner at once: it

must have been waiting already nearly half an hour. He went on very quickly, but his thoughts lingered and struggled with the strong disinclination that possessed him. How much he would have given not to go home at all! how little pleasure he expected when he got there! His mother most likely would be silent, pale with anger, saying little, while Cousin Sophia would get up a little conversation. She would talk lightly about anything that might have been happening, and Walter would perhaps exert himself to give Sophia back her own, and show his mother that he cared nothing about her displeasure. And then when dinner was over, he would hurry out again, glad to be released. Home: this was what it had come to be: and nothing could mend it so far as either mother or son could see. Oh, terrible incompatibility, unapproachableness of one soul to another! To think that they should be so near, yet so far away. Even in the case of husband and wife the severance is scarcely so terrible; for they have come towards each other out of different spheres, and if they do not amalgamate, there are many secondary causes that may be blamed, differences of nature and training and thought. But a mother with her child, whom she has brought up, whose first opinions she has implanted, who ought naturally to be influenced by her ways of thinking, and even by prejudices and superstitions in favour of her way! It was not, however, this view of the question which moved the young man. It was the fact of his own bondage, the compulsion he was under to return to dinner, to give some partial obedience to the rules of the house, and to confess

that he had not written that letter to Mr. Milnathort.

When he came in sight of the house, however, he became aware insensibly, he could scarcely tell how, of some change in its aspect: what was it? It was lighted up in the most unusual way. The window of the spare room was shining not only with candlelight, but with firelight, his own room was lighted up; the door was standing open, throwing out a warm flood of light into the street, and in the centre of this light stood Mrs. Methven with her white shawl over her head, not at all concealing herself, gazing anxiously in the direction from which he was coming.

"I think I will send for him," he heard her say; "he has, very likely, stepped into Captain Underwood's, and he is apt to meet friends there who will not let him go."

Her voice was soft – there was no blame in it, though she was anxious. She was speaking to some one behind her, a figure in a great coat. Walter was in the shadow and invisible. He paused in his surprise to listen.

"I must get away by the last train," he heard the voice of the muffled figure say somewhat pettishly.

"Oh, there is plenty of time for that," cried his mother; and then she gave a little cry of pleasure, and said, "And, at a good moment, here he is!"

He came in somewhat dazzled, and much astonished, into the strong light in the open doorway. Mrs. Methven's countenance was all radiant and glowing with pleasure. She held out her hand to him eagerly.

"We have been looking for you," she cried; "I have had a great surprise. Walter, this is Mr. Milnathort."

Puzzled, startled, and yet somewhat disappointed, Walter paused in the hall, and looked at a tall old man with a face full of crotchets and intelligence, who stood with two great coats unbuttoned, and a comforter half unwound from his throat, under the lamp. His features were high and thin, his eyes invisible under their deep sockets.

"Now, you will surely take off your coat, and consent to go up-stairs, and make yourself comfortable," said Mrs. Methven, with a thrill of excitement in her voice. "This is Walter. He has heard of you all his life. Without any reference to the nature of your communication, he must be glad, indeed, to make your acquaintance – "

She gave Walter a look of appeal as she spoke. He was so much surprised that it was with difficulty he found self-possession to murmur a few words of civility. A feeling that Mr. Milnathort must have come to look after that letter which had never been written came in with the most wonderfully confusing, half ludicrous effect into his mind, like one of the inadequate motives and ineffable conclusions of a dream. Mr. Milnathort made a stiff little bow in reply.

"I will remain till the last train. In the mean time the young gentleman had better be informed, Mrs. Methven."

She put out her hands again. "A moment – give us a moment first."

The old lawyer stood still and looked from the mother to the son. Perhaps to his keen eyes it was revealed that it would be well she should have the advantage of any pleasant revelation.

"I will," he said, "madam, avail myself of your kind offer to go up-stairs and unroll myself out of these trappings of a long journey; and in the mean time you will, perhaps, like to tell him the news yourself: he will like it all the better if he hears it from his mother."

Mrs. Methven bowed her head, having, apparently, no words at her command: and stood looking after him till he disappeared on the stairs, following the maid, who had been waiting with a candle lighted in her hand. When he was gone, she seized Walter hurriedly by the arm, and drew him towards the little room, the nearest, which was his ordinary sitting-room. Her hand grasped him with unnecessary force in her excitement. The room was dark – he could not see her face, the only light in it being the reflection of the lamp outside.

"Oh, Walter!" she cried; "oh, my boy! I don't know how to tell you the news. This useless life is all over for you, and another – oh, how different – another – God grant it happy and great, oh, God grant it! blessed and noble! – "

Her voice choked with excitement and fast-coming tears. She drew him towards her into her arms.

"It will take you from me – but what of that, if it makes you happy and good? I have been no guide to you, but God will be your guide: His leadings were all dark to me, but now I see – "

"Mother," he cried, with a strange impulse he could not understand, putting his arm round her, "I did not write that letter: I have done nothing I promised or meant to do. I am sick to the heart to think what a fool and a cad I am – for the love of God tell me what it is!"

CHAPTER IV

All Sloebury was aware next morning that something of the most extraordinary character had happened to young Walter Methven. The rumour even reached the club on the same evening. First the report was that he had got a valuable appointment, at which the gentlemen shook their heads; next that he had come into a fortune: they laughed with one accord at this. Then, as upon a sudden gale of wind, there blew into the smoking-room, then full of tobacco, newspapers, and men, a whisper which made everybody turn pale. This was one reason, if not the chief, why that evening was one of the shortest ever known at the club, which did not indeed generally keep very late hours, but still was occupied by its *habitués* till ten or eleven o'clock, when the serious members would go away, leaving only the boys, who never could have enough of it. But on that evening even the young men cleared off about ten or so. They wanted to know what it meant. Some of them went round to Captain Underwood's where Walter was so often to be found, with a confidence that at least Underwood would know; the more respectable members of society went home to their families to spread the news, and half-a-dozen mothers at least went to bed that night with a disagreeable recollection that they had individually and deliberately "broken off" an incipient flirtation or more, in which Walter had been one of the parties

concerned. But the hopeful ones said to themselves, "Lizzie has but to hold up her little finger to bring him back." This was before the whole was known. The young men who had hurried to Captain Underwood's were received by that gentleman with an air of importance and of knowing more than he would tell, which impressed their imaginations deeply. He allowed that he had always known that there was a great deal of property, and perhaps a title concerned, but declared that he was not at liberty to say any more. Thus the minds of all were prepared for a great revelation; and it is safe to say that from one end of Sloebury to the other Walter's name was in everybody's mouth. It had been always believed that the Methvens were people of good connections, and of later years it had been whispered by the benevolent as a reason for Walter's inaction that he had grand relations, who at the proper moment would certainly interfere and set everything right for him. Others, however, were strenuous in their denial and ridicule of this, asking, was his mother a woman to conceal any advantages she had? – for they did not understand the kind of pride in which Mrs. Methven was so strong. And then it was clear that not only did the grand relations do nothing for Walter, but he did not even have an invitation from them, and went from home only when his mother went to the sea-side. Thus there was great doubt and wonder, and in some quarters an inclination to treat the rumour as a canard, and to postpone belief. At the same time everybody believed it, more or less, at the bottom of their hearts, feeling that a thing so impossible must be true.

But when it burst fully upon the world next morning along with the pale November daylight, but much more startling, that Walter Methven had succeeded as the next heir to his distant cousin, who was the head of the family, and was now Lord Erradeen, a great potentate, with castles in the Highlands and fat lands further south, and moors and deer forests and everything that the heart of man could think of, the town was swept not only by a thrill of wonder, but of emotion. Nobody was indifferent to this extraordinary romance. Some, when they had got over the first bewilderment, received it with delightful anticipations, as if the good fortune which had befallen Walter was in some respects good fortune also for themselves; whereas many others were almost angry at this sudden elevation over their heads of one who certainly did not deserve any better, if indeed half so well as they did. But nobody was indifferent. It was the greatest excitement that had visited Sloebury for years – even it might be said for generations. Lord Erradeen! it took away everybody's breath.

Among the circle of Walter's more intimate acquaintance, the impression made was still deeper, as may be supposed. The commotion in the mind of the rector, who indeed was old enough to have taken it with more placidity, was such that he hurried in from morning service without taking off his cassock. He was a good Churchman, but not so far gone as to walk about the world in that ecclesiastical garment.

"Can you imagine what has happened?" he said, bursting in

upon Mrs. Wynn, who was delicate and did not go to church in the winter mornings. "Young Walter Methven, that you all made such a talk about – "

This was unfair, because she had never made any talk – being a woman who did not talk save most sparingly. She was tempted for a moment to forestall him by telling him she already knew, but her heart failed her, and she only shook her head a little in protest against this calumny, and waited smilingly for what he had to say. She could not take away from him the pleasure of telling this wonderful piece of news.

"Why it was only the night before last he was here – most of us rather disapproving of him, poor boy," said the rector. "Well, Lydia, that young fellow that was a good-for-nothing, you know – doing nothing, never exerting himself: well, my dear! the most extraordinary thing has happened – the most wonderful piece of good fortune – "

"Don't keep me on tenterhooks, Julius; I have heard some buzzing of talk already."

"I should think you had! the town is full of it; they tell me that everybody you meet on the streets – Lydia!" said the rector with solemnity, drawing close to her to make his announcement more imposing, "that boy is no longer simple Mr. Walter Methven. He is Lord Erradeen – "

"Lord what?" cried the old lady. It was part of her character to be a little deaf, or rather hard of hearing, which is the prettier way of stating the fact. It was supposed by some that this was

one of the reasons why, when any one was blamed, she always shook her head.

"Lord Er-ra-deen; but bless me, it is not the name that is so wonderful, it is the fact. Lord Erradeen – a great personage – a man of importance. You don't show any surprise, Lydia! and yet it is the most astonishing incident without comparison that has happened in the parish these hundred years."

"I wonder what his mother is thinking," Mrs. Wynn said.

"If her head is turned nobody could be surprised. Of course, like every other mother, she thinks her son worthy of every exaltation."

"I wish she was of that sort," the old lady said.

"Every woman is of that sort," said the rector with hasty dogmatism; "and, in one way, I am rather sorry, for it will make her feel she was perfectly right in encouraging him, and that would be such a terrible example for others. The young men will all take to idling – "

"But it is not the idling, but the fact that there is a peerage in the family – "

"You can't expect," cried the rector, who was not lucid, "that boys or women either will reason back so far as that. It will be a bad example: and, in the mean time, it is a most astonishing fact. But you don't seem in the least excited. I thought you would have jumped out of your chair – out of the body almost."

"I am too rheumatic for that," said Mrs. Wynn with a smile: then, "I wonder if she will come and tell me," the old lady said.

"I should think she does not know whether she is on her head or her heels," cried the rector; "I don't feel very sure myself. And Walter! What a change, to be sure, for that boy! I hope he will make a good use of it. I hope he will not dart off with Underwood and such fellows and make a fool of himself. Mind, I don't mean that I think so badly of Underwood," he added after a moment, for this was a subject on which, being mollified as previously mentioned, the rector took the male side of the question. Mrs. Wynn received the protest in perfect silence, not even shaking her head.

"But if he took a fancy for horses or that sort of thing," Mr. Wynn added with a moment's hesitation; then he brightened up again – "of course it is better that he should know somebody who has a little experience in any case; and you will perceive, my dear, there is a great difference between a penniless youth like Walter Methven getting such notions in his head which lead only to ruin, and young Lord Erradeen dabbling a little in amusements which, after all, have no harm in them if not carried too far, and are natural in his rank – but you women are always prejudiced on such a point."

"I did not say anything, my dear," the old lady said.

"Oh, no, you don't say anything," cried the rector fretfully, "but I see it in every line of your shawl and every frill of your cap. You are just stiff with prejudice so far as Underwood is concerned, who really is not at all a bad fellow when you come to know him, and is always respectful to religion, and shows a

right feeling – but one might as well try to fly as to convince you when you have taken a prejudice."

Mrs. Wynn made no protest against this. She said only, "It is a great ordeal for a boy to pass through. I wonder if his mother –" And here she paused, not having yet, perhaps, formulated into words the thoughts that arose in her heart.

"It is to be hoped that she will let him alone," the rector said; "she has indulged him in everything hitherto; but just now, when he is far better left to himself, no doubt she will be wanting to interfere."

"Do you think she has indulged him in everything?" said the old lady; but she did not think it necessary to accuse her husband of prejudice. Perhaps he understood Captain Underwood as much better as she understood Mrs. Methven; so she said nothing more. She was the only individual in Sloebury who had any notion of the struggle in which Walter's mother had wrecked so much of her own peace.

"There cannot be any two opinions on that subject," said the rector. "Poor lad! You will excuse me, my dear, but I am always sorry for a boy left to a woman's training. He is either a mere milksop or a ne'er-do-well. Walter is not a milksop, and here has Providence stepped in, in the most wonderful way, to save him from being the other: but that is no virtue of hers. You will stand up, of course, for your own side."

The old lady smiled and shook her head. "I think every child is the better for having both its parents, Julius, if that is what you

mean."

This was not exactly what he meant, but it took the wind out of the rector's sails. "Yes, it is an ordeal for him," he said, "but, I am sure, if my advice can do him any good, it is at his service; and, though I have been out of the way of many things for some time, yet I dare say the world is very much what it was, and I used to know it well enough."

"He will ask for nobody's advice," said Mrs. Wynn.

"Which makes it all the more desirable he should have it," cried the rector; and then he said, "Bless me! I have got my cassock on still. Tell John to take it down to the vestry – though, by the way, there is a button off, and you might as well have it put on for me, as it is here."

Mrs. Wynn executed the necessary repair of the cassock with her own hands. Though she was rheumatic, and did not care to leave her chair oftener than was necessary, she had still the use of her hands, and she had a respect for all the accessories of the clerical profession. She was sitting examining the garment to see if any other feeblenesses were apparent, in which a stitch in time might save after labours, when, with a little eager tap at the door, another visitor came in. This was a young lady of three or four and twenty, with a good deal of the beauty which consists in fresh complexion and pleasant colour. Her hair was light brown, warm in tone; her eyes were brown and sparkling; her cheeks and lips bloomed with health. She had a pretty figure, full of life and energy – everything, in short, that is necessary to make

up a pretty girl, without any real loveliness or deeper grace. She came in quickly, brimming over, as was evident, with something which burst forth as soon as she had given the old lady the hasty conventional kiss of greeting, and which, as a matter of course, turned out to be the news of which Sloebury was full.

"Did you ever hear anything so wonderful?" she said. "Walter Methven, that nobody thought anything of – and now he is turned into a live lord! a real peer of parliament! they say. I thought mamma would have fainted when she heard it."

"Why should your mamma faint when she heard of it, July? It is very pleasant news."

"Oh, Aunt Lydia! don't you know why? I am so angry: I feel as if I should never speak to her again. Don't you remember? And I always thought you had some hand in it. Oh, you sit there and look so innocent, but that is because you are so deep."

"Am I deep?" the old lady asked with a smile.

"You are the deepest person I ever knew: you see through us all, and you just throw in a word; and then, when people act upon it, you look so surprised. I heard you myself remark to mamma how often Walter Methven was at our house."

"Yes, I think I did remark it," Mrs. Wynn said.

"And what was the harm? He liked to come, and he liked me; and I hope you don't think I am the sort of person to forget myself and think too much about a man."

"I thought you were letting him be seen with you too often, July, that is true."

"You thought it might keep others off that were more eligible? Well, that is what I supposed you meant, for I never like to take a bad view. But, you see, there was somebody that was eligible; and here has he turned, all at once, into the very best match within a hundred miles. If mamma had only let things alone, what prospects might be opening upon me now!"

"Half-a-dozen girls, I am afraid, may say just the same," said Mrs. Wynn.

"Well, what does that matter? He had nothing else to do. When a young man has nothing to do he must be making up to somebody. I don't blame him a bit; that is what makes us girls always ready for a flirtation. Time hangs so heavy on our hands. And only think, Aunt Lydia, if things had been allowed to go on (and I could always have thrown him off if anything better turned up), only think what might have happened to me now. I might be working a coronet in all my new handkerchiefs," cried the girl: "only imagine! oh, oh, oh!"

And she pretended to cry; but there was a sparkle of nervous energy all the same in her eyes, as if she were eager for the chase, and scarcely able to restrain her impatience. Mrs. Wynn shook her head at her visitor with a smile.

"You are not so worldly as you give yourself out to be," she said.

"Oh, that just shows how little you know. I am as worldly as ever woman was. I think of nothing but how to establish myself, and have plenty of money. We want it so! Oh, I know you are very

good to us – both my uncle and you; but mamma is extravagant, and I am extravagant, and naturally all that anybody thinks of is to have what is necessary and decent for us. We have to put up with it, but I hate what is necessary and decent. I should like to go in satin and lace to-day even if I knew I should be in rags to-morrow; and to think if you had not interfered that I might have blazed in diamonds, and gone to court, and done everything I want to do! I could strangle you, Aunt Lydia, and mamma too!" Upon which Miss July (or Julée, which was how her name was pronounced) gave Mrs. Wynn a sudden kiss and took the cassock out of her hands. "If it wants any mending I will do it," she said; "it will just give me a little consolation for the moment. And you will have time to think and answer this question: Is it too late now?"

"July, dear, it hurts me to hear you talk so – you are not so wild as you take credit for being."

"I am not wild at all, Aunt Lydia," said the girl, appropriating Mrs. Wynn's implements, putting on her thimble, threading her needle, and discovering at one glance the little rent in the cassock which the old lady had been searching for in vain, "except with indignation to think what I have lost – if I have lost it. It is all very well to speak, but what is a poor girl to do? Yes, I know, to make just enough to live on by teaching, or something of that sort; but that is not what I want. I want to be well off. I am so extravagant, and so is mamma. We keep ourselves down, we don't spend money; but we hate it so! I would go through a great

many disagreeables if I could only have enough to spend."

"And is Walter one of the disagreeables you would go through?"

"Well, no; I could put up with him very well. He is not at all unpleasant. I don't want him, but I could do with him. Do you really think it is too late? Don't you think mamma might call upon Mrs. Methven and say how delighted we are; and just say to him, you know, in a playful way (mamma could manage that very well), 'We cannot hope to see you now in our little house, Lord Erradeen!' and then of course he would be piqued (for he's very generous), and say, 'Why?' And mamma would say, 'Oh, we are such poor little people, and you are now a great man.' Upon which, as sure as fate, he would be at the Cottage the same evening. And then!" July threw back her head, and expanded her brown eyes with a conscious power and sense of capability, as who should say – Then it would be in my own hands. – "Don't you think that's very good for a plan?" she added, subsiding quickly to the work, which she executed as one to the manner born.

"I don't think anything of it as a plan – and neither do you; and your mother would not do it, July," the old lady said.

"Ah," said July, throwing back her head, "there you have hit the blot, Aunt Lydia. Mamma wouldn't do it! She could, you know. When she likes she is the completest humbug! – but not always. And she has so many notions about propriety, and what is womanly, and so forth – just like you. Poor women have no business with such luxuries. I tell her we must be of our time,

and all that sort of thing; but she won't see it. No, I am afraid that is just the difficulty. It all depends on mamma – and mamma won't. Well, it is a little satisfaction to have had it all out with you. If you had not interfered, you two, and stopped the poor boy coming – "

At this juncture John threw open the door, and with a voice which he reserved for the great county ladies, announced "Mrs. Methven." John had heard the great news too.

" – Stopped the poor boy coming," July said. The words were but half out of her mouth when John opened the door, and it was next to impossible that the new visitor had not heard them. A burning blush covered the girl's face. She sprang to her feet with the cassock in her arms, and gazed at the new comer. Mrs. Methven for the first moment did not notice this third person. She came in with the content and self-absorption of one who has a great wonder to tell. The little world of Sloebury and all its incidents were as nothing to her. She went up to old Mrs. Wynn with a noiseless swiftness.

"I have come to tell you great news," she said.

"Let me look at you," said the old lady. "I have heard, and I scarcely could believe it. Then it is all true?"

"I am sorry I was not the first to tell you. I think such a thing must get into the air. Nobody went out from my house last night, and yet everybody knows. I saw even the people in the street looking at me as I came along. Mrs. Wynn, you always stood up for him; I never said anything, but I know you did. I came first

to you. Yes, it is all true."

The old lady had known it now for several hours, and had been gently excited, no more. Now her eyes filled with tears, she could not have told why.

"Dear boy! I hope God will bless him, and make him worthy and great," she said, clasping her old hands together. "He has always been a favourite with me."

"He is a favourite with everybody," said July. No one had noticed her presence, and she was not one that could remain unseen. "Everybody is glad; there is not one that doesn't wish him well."

Did she intend to strike that *coup* for herself which her mother was not to be trusted to make? Mrs. Wynn thought so with a great tremor, and interrupted her in a tone that for her was hurried and anxious.

"July speaks nothing but the truth, Mrs. Methven; there is nobody that does not like Walter; but I suppose I ought now to drop these familiarities and call him Lord Erradeen?"

"He will never wish his old friends to do that," said Mrs. Methven. She already smiled with a gracious glance and gesture: and the feeling that these old friends were almost too much privileged in being so near to him, and admitted to such signs of friendship, came into her mind; but she did not care to have July share her expansion. "Miss Herbert," she said, with a little bow, "is very good to speak so kindly. But everybody is kind. I did not know my boy was so popular. Sunshine," she added, with a

smile, "brings out all the flowers."

She had not sat down, and she evidently did not mean to do so while July remained. There was something grand in her upright carriage, in her air of superiority, which had never been apparent before. She had always been a woman, as Sloebury people said, who thought a great deal of herself; but no one had ever acknowledged her right to do so till now. On the other hand, July Herbert was well used to the cold shade. Her mother was Mrs. Wynn's niece, but she was none the less poor for that, and as July was not a girl to be easily put down, she was acquainted with every manner of polite snubbing known in the society of the place. This of standing till she should go was one with which she was perfectly familiar, and in many cases it afforded her pleasure to subject the operator to great personal inconvenience; but on the present occasion she was not disposed to exercise this power. She would have conciliated Walter's mother if she could have done so, and on a rapid survey of the situation she decided that the best plan was to yield.

"I must go and tell mamma the great news," she said. "I am sure she will never rest till she rushes to you with her congratulations; but I will tell her you are tired of congratulations already – for of course it is not a thing upon which there can be two opinions." July laid down the cassock as she spoke. "I have mended all there is to mend, Aunt Lydia; you need not take any more trouble about it. Good-bye for the moment. You may be sure you will see one or other of us before night."

They watched her silently as she went out of the room. Mrs. Methven saying nothing till the door had closed, Mrs. Wynn with a deprecatory smile upon her face. She did not altogether approve of her grandniece. But neither was she willing to hand her over to blame. The old lady felt the snub July had received more than the girl herself did. She looked a little wistfully after her. She was half angry when as soon as July disappeared Mrs. Methven sank down upon a chair near her, huge billows of black silk rising about her, for she had put on her best gown. Mrs. Wynn thought that the mother, whose child, disapproved by the world, had been thus miraculously lifted above its censures, should have been all the more tolerant of the other who had met no such glorious fate. But she reflected that *they never see it*, which was her favourite expression of wonderment, yet explanation of everything. There were so many things that *they* ought to learn by; but they never saw it. It was thus she accounted with that shake of her head for all the errors of mankind.

Mrs. Methven for her part waited till even the very step of that objectionable Julia Herbert had died away. She had known by instinct that if *that* girl should appear she would be on the watch to make herself agreeable to Walter's mother. "As if he could ever have thought of her," she said to herself. Twenty-four hours before Mrs. Methven would have been glad to think that Walter "thought of" any girl who was at all in his own position. She would have hailed it as a means of steadying him, and making him turn seriously to his life. But everything was

now changed, and this interruption had been very disagreeable. She could scarcely turn to her old friend now with the effusion and emotion which had filled her when she came in. She held out her hand and grasped that of the old lady.

"I don't need to tell you what I am feeling," she said. "It is all like a tumultuous sea of wonder and thankfulness. I wanted it, for I was at my wits' end."

Mrs. Wynn was a little chilled too, but she took the younger woman's hand.

"You did not know what was coming," she said. "You wanted one thing, and Providence was preparing another."

"I don't know if that is how to state it; but at all events I was getting to feel that I could not bear it any longer, and trying for any way of setting things right: when the good came in this superlative way. I feel frightened when I think of it. After we knew last night I could do nothing but cry. It took all the strength from me. You would have thought it was bad news."

"I can understand that." The old lady relinquished the hand which she had been holding. "To be delivered from any anxieties you may have had in such a superlative way, as you say, is not the common lot – most of us have just to fight them out."

Mrs. Methven already felt herself far floated away from those that had to fight it out. The very words filled her heart with an elation beyond speech.

"And this morning," she said, "to wake and to feel it must be folly, and then to realise that it was true! One knows so well the

other sort of waking when the shock and the pang come all over again. But to wake up to this extraordinary incredible well-being – one might say happiness!"

The tears of joy were in her eyes, and in those tears there is something so strange, so rare, that the soul experienced in life looks upon them almost with more awe than upon the familiar ones of grief which we see every day. The old lady melted, and her chill of feeling yielded to a tender warmth. Yet what a pity that They never see it! How much more perfect it would have been if the woman in her happiness had been softened and kind to all those whom nothing had happened to! Imperceptibly the old lady in her tolerant experience shook her gentle old head. Then she gave herself in full sympathy to hear all the wonderful details.

CHAPTER V

The sentiments of the spectators in such a grand alteration of fortune may be interesting enough, and it is in general more easy to get at them than at those which fill the mind of the principal actor. In the present case it is better to say of the principal subject of the change, for Walter could not be said to be an actor at all. The emotions of the first evening it would indeed be impossible to describe. To come in from his small country-town society, to whom even he was so far inferior that every one of them had facilities of getting and spending money which he did not possess, and to sit down, all tremulous and guilty, feeling himself the poorest creature, opposite to the serious and important personage who came to tell him, with documents as solemn as himself, that this silly youth who had been throwing away his life for nothing, without even the swell of excitement to carry him on, had suddenly become, without deserving it, without doing anything to bring it about, an individual of the first importance – a peer, a proprietor, a great man. Walter could have sobbed as his mother did, had not pride kept him back. When they sat down at table in the little dining-room there were two at least of the party who ate nothing, who sat and gazed at each other across the others with white faces and blazing eyes. Mr. Milnathort made a good dinner, and sat very watchful, making also his observations, full of curiosity and a

certain half-professional interest. But Cousin Sophy was the only one who really got the good of this prodigious event. She asked if they might not have some champagne to celebrate the day. She was in high excitement but quite self-controlled, and enjoyed it thoroughly. She immediately began in her thoughts to talk of my young cousin Lord Erradeen. It was a delightful advancement which would bring her no advantage, and yet almost pleased her more than so much added on to her income; for Miss Merivale was not of any distinction in her parentage, and suddenly to find herself cousin to a lord went to her heart: it was a great benefit to the solitary lady fond of society, and very eager for a helping hand to aid her up the ascent. And it was she who kept the conversation going. She even flirted a little, quite becomingly, with the old lawyer, who felt her, it was evident, a relief from the high tension of the others, and was amused by the vivacious middle-aged lady, who for the moment had everything her own way. After dinner there was a great deal of explanation given, and a great many facts made clear, but it is to be doubted whether Walter knew very well what was being said. He listened with an air of attention, but it was as if he were listening to some fairy tale. Something out of the *Arabian Nights*

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