Oliphant Margaret

The Ladies Lindores. Volume 1 of 3

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

The mansion-house of Dalrulzian stands on the lower slope of a hill, which is crowned with a plantation of Scotch firs. The rugged outline of this wood, and the close-tufted mass of the tree-tops, stand out against the pale East, and protect the house below and the "policy," as the surrounding grounds are called in Scotland; so that though all the winds are sharp in that northern county, the sharpest of all is tempered. The house itself is backed by lighter foliage – a feathery grove of birches, a great old ash or two, and some tolerably well-grown, but less poetical, elms. It is a house of distinctively local character, with the curious, peaked, and graduated gables peculiar to Scotch rural architecture, and thick walls of the roughest stone, washed with a weather-stained coat of yellow-white. Two wings, each presenting a gabled end to the avenue, and a sturdy block of building retired between them, – all strong, securely built, as if hewn out of the rock, formed the homely house. It had little of the beauty which a building of no greater pretensions would

probably have had in England. Below the wings, and in front of the hall-door, with its two broad flat stone steps, there was nothing better than a gravelled square, somewhat mossy in the corners, and marked by the trace of wheels; but round the south wing there swept a sort of terrace, known by no more dignified name than that of "The Walk," from which the ground sloped downwards, broken at a lower level by the formal little parterres of an old-fashioned flower-garden. The view from the Walk was of no very striking beauty, but it had the charm of breadth and distance – a soft sweep of undulating country, with an occasional glimpse of a lively trout-stream gleaming here and there out of its covert of crags and trees, and a great, varied, and ever-changing world of sky, – not a prospect which captivated a stranger, but one which, growing familiar day by day and year by year, was henceforth missed like something out of their lives by the people who, being used to it, had learned to love that silent companionship of nature. It was the sort of view which a man pauses, not to look at but to see, even when he is pacing up and down his library thinking of John Thomson's demand for farm improvements, or, heavier thought, about his balance at his bankers: and which solaces the eyes of a tired woman, giving them rest and refreshment through all the vicissitudes of life. People sought it instinctively in moods of reflection, in moments of watching, at morning and at twilight, whenever any change was going on in that great exhaustless atmosphere, bounded by nothing but the pale distance of the round horizon, – and when

was it that there was no change in that atmosphere? – clouds drifting, shadows flying, gleams of light like sudden revelations affording new knowledge of earth and heaven.

On the day on which the reader is asked first to visit this house of Dalrulzian, great things were happening in it. It was the end of one *régime* and the beginning of another. The master of the house, a young man who had been brought up at a distance, was coming home, and the family which had lived in it for years was taking its leave of the place.

The last spot which they visited and on which they lingered was the Walk. When the packing was over, the final remnants gathered up, the rooms left in that melancholy bareness into which rooms relapse when the prettinesses and familiarities of habitation have been swept away, the remaining members of the family came out with pensive faces, and stood together gazing somewhat wistfully upon the familiar scene. They had looked on many that were more fair. They were going to a landscape of greater beauty further south – brighter, richer, warmer in foliage and natural wealth; but all this did not keep a certain melancholy out of their eyes. The younger of the party, Nora Barrington, cried a little, her lip quivering, a big tear or two running over. "It is foolish to feel it so much," her mother said. "How is it one feels it so much? I did not admire Dalrulzian at all when we came."

"Out of perversity," said her husband; but he did not smile even at the cleverness of his own remark.

Nora regarded her father with a sort of tender rage. "It is all

very well for you," she said; "one place is the same as another to you. But I was such a little thing when we came here. To you it is one place among many; to me it is home."

"If you take it so seriously, Nora, we shall have you making up to young Erskine for the love of his house."

"Edward," cried Mrs Barrington in a tone of reproof, "I feel disposed to cry too. We have had a great many happy days in it. But don't let old Rolls see you crying, Nora. Here he is coming to say good-bye. When do you expect Mr Erskine, Rolls? You must tell him we were sorry not to see him; but he will prefer to find his house free when he returns. I hope he will be as happy at Dalrulzian as we have been since we came here."

"Wherefore would he no' be happy, mem? He is young and weel off: and you'll no' forget it's his own house."

Rolls had stepped out from one of the windows to take farewell of the family, whom he was sorry to lose, yet anxious to get rid of. There was in him the satisfied air of the man who remains in possession, and whose habits are unaffected by the coming and going of ephemeral beings such as tenants. The Barringtons had been at Dalrulzian for more than a dozen years; but what was that to the old servant who had seen them arrive and saw them go away with the same imperturbable aspect? He stood relieved against the wall in his well-brushed black coat, concealing a little emotion under a watchful air of expectancy just touched with impatience. Rolls had condescended more or less to the English family all the time they had been there, and

he was keeping up his *rôle* to the last, anxious that they should perceive how much he wanted to see them off the premises. Mrs Barrington, who liked everybody to like her, was vexed by this little demonstration of indifference; but the Colonel laughed. "I hope Mr Erskine will give you satisfaction," he said. "Come, Nora, you must not take root in the Walk. Don't you see that Rolls wishes us away?"

"Dear old Walk!" cried Nora; "dear Dalrulzian!" She rolled the *r* in the name, and turned the *z* into a *y* (which is the right way of pronouncing it), as if she had been to the manner born; and though an English young lady, had as pretty a fragrance of northern Scotland in her voice as could be desired. Rolls did not trust himself to look at this pretty figure lingering, drying wet eyes, until she turned round upon him suddenly, holding out her hands: "The moment we are off, before we are down the avenue, you will be wishing us back," she cried with vehemence; "you can't deceive *me*. You would like to cry too, if you were not ashamed," said the girl, with a smile and a sob, shaking the two half-unwilling hands she had seized.

"Me cry! I've never done that since I came to man's estate," cried Rolls indignantly, but after a suspicious pause. "As for wishing you back, Miss Nora, wishing you were never to go, – wishing you would grow to the Walk, as the Cornel says – " This was so much from such a speaker, that he turned, and added in a changed tone, "You'll have grand weather for your journey, Cornel. But you must mind the twa ferries, and no'

be late starting," – a sudden reminder which broke up the little group, and made an end of the scene of leave-taking. It was the farewell volley of friendly animosity with which Rolls put a stop to his own perverse inclination to be soft-hearted over the departure of the English tenants. "He could not let us go without that parting shot," the "Cornel" said, as he put his wife into the jingling "coach" from the station, which, every better vehicle having been sent off beforehand, was all that remained to carry them away.

The Barringtons during their residence at Dalrulzian had been received into the very heart of the rural society, in which at first there had sprung up a half-grudge against the almost unknown master of the place, whose coming was to deprive them of a family group so pleasant and so bright. The tenants themselves, though their turn was over, felt instinctively as if they were expelled for the benefit of our intruder, and entertained this grudge warmly. "Mr Erskine might just as well have stayed away," Nora said. "He can't care about it as we do." Her mother laughed and chid, and shared the sentiment. "But then it's 'his ain place,' as old Rolls says." "And I daresay he thinks there is twice as much shooting," said the Colonel, complacently: "I did, when we came. He'll be disappointed, you'll see." This gave him a faint sort of satisfaction. In Nora's mind there was a different consolation, which yet was not a consolation, but a mixture of expectancy and curiosity, and that attraction which surrounds an unconscious enemy. She was going to make acquaintance with

this supplanter, this innocent foe, who was turning them out of their home because it was his home – the most legitimate reason. She was about to pay a series of visits in the country, to the various neighbours, who were all fond of her and reluctant to part with her. Perhaps her mother had some idea of the vague scheme of match-making which had sprung up in some minds, a plan to bring the young people together; for what could be more suitable than a match between John Erskine, the young master of Dalrulzian, who knew nothing about his native county, and Nora Barrington, who was its adopted child, and loved the old house as much as if she had been born in it? Mrs Barrington, perhaps, was not quite unconscious of this plan, though not a word had been said by any of these innocent plotters. For indeed what manner of man young Erskine was, and whether he was worthy of Nora, or in the least likely to please her, were things altogether unknown to the county, where he had not been seen for the last dozen years.

Anyhow he was coming as fast as the railway could carry him, while Nora took leave of her parents at the station. The young man then on his way was not even aware of her existence, though she knew all about him – or rather about his antecedents; for about John Erskine himself no one in the neighbourhood had much information. He had not set foot in the county since he was a boy of tender years and unformed character, whose life had been swallowed up in that of an alien family, of pursuits and ideas far separated from those of his native place. It almost

seemed, indeed, as if it were far from a happy arrangement of Providence which made young John Erskine the master of this small estate in the North; or rather, perhaps, to mount a little higher, we might venture to say that it was a very embarrassing circumstance, and the cause of a great deal of confusion in this life that Henry Erskine, his father, should have died when he did. Whatever might be the consequences of that step to himself, to others it could scarcely be characterised but as a mistake. That young man had begun to live an honest, wholesome life, as a Scotch country gentleman should; and if he had continued to exist, his wife would have been like other country gentlemen's wives, and his child, brought up at home, would have grown like the heather in adaptation to the soil. But when he was so ill advised as to die, confusion of every kind ensued. The widow was young, and Dalrulzian was solitary. She lived there, devoutly and conscientiously doing her duty, for some years. Then she went abroad, as everybody does, for that change of air and scene which is so necessary to our lives. And in Switzerland she met a clergyman, to whom change had also been necessary, and who was "taking the duty" in a mountain caravansary of tourists. What opportunities there are in such a position! She was pensive and he was sympathetic. He had a sister, whom she invited to Dalrulzian, "if she did not mind winter in the North;" and Miss Kingsford did not mind winter anywhere, so long as it was for her brother's advantage. The end was that Mrs Erskine became Mrs Kingsford, to the great though silent astonishment of little John,

now eleven years old, who could not make it out. They remained at Dalrulzian for a year or two, for Mr Kingsford rather liked the shooting, and the power of asking a friend or two to share it. But at the end of that time he got a living – a good living; for events, whether good or evil, never come singly; and, taking John's interests into full consideration, it was decided that the best thing to be done was to let the house. Everybody thought this advisable, even John's old grand-aunt in Dunearn, of whom his mother was more afraid than of all her trustees put together. It was with fear and trembling that she had ventured to unfold this hesitating intention to the old lady. "Mr Kingsford thinks" – and then it occurred to the timid little woman that Mr Kingsford's opinion as to the disposal of Henry Erskine's house might not commend itself to Aunt Barbara. "Mr Monypenny says," she added, faltering; then stopped and looked with alarm in Miss Erskine's face.

"What are you frightened for, my dear? Mr Kingsford has a right to his opinion, and Mr Monypenny is a very discreet person, and a capital man of business."

"They think – it would be a good thing for – John; – for, Aunt Barbara, he is growing a big boy, – we must be thinking of his education – "

"That's true," said the old lady, with the smile that was the grimmest thing about her. It was very uphill work continuing a laboured explanation under the light of this smile.

"And he cannot – be educated – here."

"Wherefore no? I cannot see that, my dear. His father was educated in Edinburgh, which is what I suppose you mean by *here*. Many a fine fellow's been bred up at Edinburgh College, I can tell you; more than you'll find in any other place I ever heard of. Eh! what ails you at Edinburgh? It's well known to be an excellent place for schools – schools of all kinds."

"Yes, Aunt Barbara. But then you know, John: – they say he will have such a fine position – a long minority and a good estate – they say he should have the best education that – England can give."

"You'll be for sending him to that idol of the English," said the old lady, "a public school, as they call it. As if all our Scotch schools from time immemorial hadn't been public schools! Well, and after that – "

"It is only an idea," said little Mrs Kingsford, humbly – "not settled, nor anything like settled; but they say if I were to let the house – "

Aunt Barbara's grey eyes flashed; perhaps they were slightly green, as ill-natured people said. But she fired her guns in the air, so to speak, and once more grimly smiled. "I saw something very like all this in your wedding-cards, Mary," she said. "No, no, no apologies. I will not like to see a stranger in my father's house; but that's nothing, that's nothing. I will not say but it's very judicious; only you'll mind the boy's an Erskine, and here he'll have to lead his life. Mind and not make too much of an Englishman out of a Scotch lad, for he'll have to live his life here."

"Too much of an Englishman!" Mr Kingsford cried, when this conversation was reported to him. "I am afraid your old lady is an old fool, Mary. How could he be too much of an Englishman? Am *I* out of place here? Does not the greater breeding include the less?" he said, with his grand air. His wife did not always quite follow his meaning, but she always believed in it as something that merited understanding; and she was quite as deeply convinced as if she had understood. And accordingly the house was let to Colonel Barrington, who had not a "place" of his own, though his elder brother had, and the Kingsfords "went South" to their rectory, with which John's mother in particular was mightily pleased. It was in a far richer country than that which surrounded Dalrulzian, – a land flowing with milk and cheese, if not honey, – full of foliage and flowers. Mrs Kingsford, having been accustomed only to Scotland, was very much elated with the luxuriant beauty of the place. She spoke of "England" as the travelled speak of Italy, – as if this climate of ours, which we abuse so much, was paradise. She thought "the English" so frank, so open, so demonstrative. To live in "the South" seemed the height of happiness to her. Innocent primitive Scotch gentlewomen are prone to talk in this way. Mr Kingsford, who knew better, and who himself liked to compare notes with people who winter in Italy, did what he could to check her exuberance, but she was too simple to understand why.

John, her son, did not share her feelings at first. John was generally confused and disturbed in his mind by all that had

happened. He had not got over his wonder at the marriage, when he was carried off to this new and alien home. He did not say much. There was little opening by which he could communicate his feelings. He could not disapprove, being too young; and now that Mr Kingsford was always there, the boy had no longer the opportunity to influence his mother as, young as he was, he had hitherto done – "tyrannise over his mother," some people called it. All that was over. Much puzzled, the boy was dropped back into a properly subordinate position, which no doubt was much better for him; but it was a great change. To do him justice, he was never insubordinate; but he looked at his mother's husband with eyes out of which the perplexity never died. There was a permanent confusion ever after in his sense of domestic relationships, and the duty he owed to his seniors and superiors; for he never quite knew how it was that Mr Kingsford had become the master of his fate, though a certain innate pride, as well as his love of his mother, taught him to accept the yoke which he could not throw off. Mr Kingsford was determined to do his duty by John. He vowed when he gave the somewhat reluctant, proud little Scotsman – feeling himself at eleven too old to be kissed – a solemn embrace, that he would do the boy "every justice." He should have the best education, the most careful guardianship; and Mr Kingsford kept his word. He gave the boy an ideal education from his own point of view. He sent him to Eton, and, when the due time came, to Oxford, and considered his advantage in every way; and it is needless to say,

that as John grew up, the sensation of incongruity, the wonder that was in his mind as to this sudden interference with all the natural arrangements of his life, died away. It came to be a natural thing to him that Mr Kingsford should have charge of his affairs. And he went home to the rectory for the holidays to find now and then a new baby, but all in the quiet natural way of use and wont, with no longer anything that struck him as strange in his relationships. And yet he was put out of the natural current of his life. Boy as he was, he thought sometimes, not only of special corners in the woods, and turns of the stream, where he nibbled as a boy at the big sports, which are the life of men in the country – but above all, of the house, the landscape, the great sweep of land and sky, of which, when he shut his eyes, he could always conjure up a vague vision. He thought of it with a sort of grudge that it was not within his reach – keen at first, but afterwards very faint and slight, as the boy's sentiments died away in those of the man.

Meanwhile it was an excellent arrangement, who could doubt, for John's interest – instead of keeping up the place, to have a rent for it; and he had the most excellent man of business, who nursed his estate like a favourite child; so that when his minority was over, and Colonel Barrington's lease out, John Erskine was in a more favourable position than any one of his name had been for some generations. The estate was small. When his father died, exclusive of Mrs Erskine's jointure, there was not much more than a thousand a-year to come out of it;

and on fifteen hundred a-year his father had thought himself very well off, and a happy man. In the meantime, there had been accumulations which added considerably to this income, almost making up the sum which Mrs Kingsford enjoyed for her life. And John had always been treated at the rectory as a golden youth, happily exempted from all the uncertainty and the need of making his own way, which his stepfather announced, shaking his head, to be the fate of his own boys. Her eldest son, who was in "such a different position," was a great pride to Mrs Kingsford, even when it seemed to her half an injury that her other children should have no share in his happiness. But indeed she consoled herself by reflecting, an eldest son is always in a very different position; and no elder brother could have been kinder – voluntarily undertaking to send Reginald to Eton, "which was a thing we never could have thought of with no money," as soon as he came of age; and in every way comporting himself as a good son and brother.

There were, however, points in this early training which were bad for John. He acquired an exaggerated idea of the importance of this position of his. He was known both at school and college as a youth of property, the representative of a county family. These words mean more at Eton and Oxford than they require to do at Edinburgh or St Andrews. And in these less expensive precincts, Erskine of Dalrulzian would have been known for what he was. Whereas in "the South" nobody knew anything about the dimensions of his estate, or the limits of his income,

and everybody supposed him a young north-country potentate, with perhaps a castle or two and unlimited "moors," – who would be an excellent fellow to know as soon as he came into his own. This was John's own opinion in all these earlier days of youth. He did not know what his income was; and had he known, the figures would not have meant anything particular to him. A thousand a-year seems to imply a great deal of spending to a youth on an allowance of three hundred; and he accepted everybody's estimate of his importance with pleased satisfaction. After all the explanations which followed his coming of age, he had indeed a touch of disenchantment and momentary alarm, feeling the details to be less splendid than he had expected. But Mr Monypenny evidently considered them anything but insignificant – and a man of his experience, the youth felt, was bound to know. He had gone abroad in the interval between leaving Oxford and coming "home" to take possession of his kingdom. He was not dissipated or extravagant, though he had spent freely. He was a good specimen of a young man of his time – determined that everything about him should be in "good form," and very willing to do his duty and be *bon prince* to his dependants. And he anticipated with pleasure the life of a country gentleman, such as he had seen it in his mother's neighbourhood, and in several houses of his college friends to which he had been invited. Sometimes, indeed, it would occur to him that his recollections of Dalrulzian were on a less extensive scale; but a boy's memory is always flattering to a home which

he has not seen since his earliest years. Thus it was with a good deal of pleasant excitement that he set out from Milton Magna, his stepfather's rectory, where he had gone to see his mother and the children for a week or two on his return from the Continent. The season was just beginning; but John, full of virtue and hope, decided that he would not attempt to indulge in the pleasures of the season. Far better to begin his real life, to make acquaintance with his home and his "people," than to snatch a few balls and edge his way through a few crowded receptions, and feel himself nobody. This was not a thing which John much liked. He had been somebody all his life. Easter had been early that year, and everything was early. He stayed in town a week or two, saw all that was going on at the theatres, got all the last information that was to be had at the club on parliamentary matters, waited a day more "to see the pictures," and then set off on his homeward way. He had everything a young man of fortune requires, except a servant, for his habits were independent. He had been "knocking about," and there was no room at the rectory for such an appendage. So he took his own ticket, and himself saw his multifarious portmanteaus placed in the van which was to go "through." There were a great many mingled elements in his pleasure, – the satisfaction of "coming to his kingdom;" the pleasure of renewing old associations, and taking his natural place; the excitement of novelty – for it would all be as new to him, this home which he had not seen for a dozen years, as if he had never been there before. From thirteen to five-and-

twenty, what a difference! He began to look about him with a new sensation as the morning rose after that long night-journey, and he felt himself approaching home.

CHAPTER II

Old Rolls had been butler at Dalrulzian since John Erskine was a child. He had "stayed on" after Mrs Erskine's second marriage with reluctance, objecting seriously to a step-master at all, and still more to one that was an "English minister;" but the house had many attractions for him. He liked the place; his sister was the cook, a very stationary sort of woman, who had the greatest disinclination to move. She was a sort of human cat, large and smooth and good-natured, almost always purring, satisfied with herself and all who were moderately good to her; and, as was natural, she made the butler very comfortable, and was extremely attentive to all his little ways. When Colonel Barrington took the house, Rolls once more expressed his determination to leave. "What for?" said the placid Bauby; "the gentleman was keen to have a' the servants – a' the servants that would bide." "A' the servants! there's so many of us," said Rolls, derisively. There was indeed only himself, the cook, and one housemaid; the other, who had charge of John in his earlier days, and still was attached to him more or less, had gone with the family – and so, of course, had Mrs Kingsford's maid. "We'll mak' a grand show in the servants' hall – we're just a garrison," Rolls said. "We're plenty for a' the work there is the now," said the mild woman, "and they'll bring some with them. What ails ye to bide? You're real well aff – and me that kens exactly how you like

your meat. Where would you be studied as I study you? You may just be thankful it's in your power." "It was with the Erskines I took service," said Rolls. "I'm no sure that I could put up with strangers, and them just travelling English. Besides, I've never been clear that service is my vocation. A kent family is one thing, a foreign master another. Him and me would very likely no get on – or them and me would no get on. All went very well in the last reign. Hairy Erskine was a gentleman, like all his forebears before him; but how am I to tell who is this Cornel, or whatever they ca' him – a man I never heard tell of before? I'll give them over the keys, and maybe I'll wait till they're suited, but nobody can ask me to do more."

"Hoot, Tammas!" said his sister: which was the highest height of remonstrance she ever reached. Notwithstanding this, however, year after year Rolls had "stayed on." He was very distinct in pointing out to "the Cornel" the superiority of his native masters, and the disadvantage to Scotland of having so many of the travelling English taking up the houses of the gentry; but he was an excellent servant, and his qualities in this way made up for his defects in the other – if, indeed, those defects did not tell in his favour; for a Scotch servant who is a character is, like a ghost, a credit to any old and respectable house. The Barringtons were proud of old Rolls. They laid temptations in his way and made him talk whenever they had visitors; and his criticisms on the English, and the opinions which he freely enunciated on all subjects, had often kept the party in amusement. Rolls,

however, had not been able to defend himself against a certain weakness for the children, specially for Nora, who was very small when the family came to Dalrulzian, and whom he had brought up, as he flattered himself, regretting much all the time that she was not an Erskine and natural-born daughter of the house. Rolls did not by any means see the departure of the Barringtons unmoved, notwithstanding that he hurried them away. He stood for a long time looking after the "coach," which was a sort of rude omnibus, as it jolted down the avenue. The old servant stood in the clear morning air, through which every creak of the jingling harness and every jolt of the wheels sounded so distinctly, and the voice of Jock Beaton apostrophising his worn-out horse, and watched the lingering departure with feelings of a very mingled description. "There's *feenis* put to that chapter," he said to himself aloud. "We're well rid of them." But he lingered as long as the yellow panels could be seen gleaming through the trees at the turn of the road, without any of the jubilation in his face which he expressed in his words. At that last turn, just when the "coach" reached the highroad, something white was waved from the window, which very nearly made an end of Rolls. He uttered something which at first sounded like a sob, but was turned into a laugh, so to speak, before it fell into that tell-tale air which preserved every gradation of sound. "It's that bit thing!" Rolls said, more sentimental than perhaps he had ever been in his life. His fine feeling was, however, checked abruptly. "You're greetin' yourself, Tammas," said a soft round voice, interrupted

by sobs, over his shoulder. "Me greetin'!" – he turned round upon her with a violence that, if Bauby had been less substantial and less calm, would have driven her to the other end of the house; "I'm just laughin' to see the nonsense you women-folk indulge in: but it's paardonable in the case of a bit creature like Miss Nora. And I allow they have a right to feel it. Where will they find a bonnie place like Dalrulzian, and next to nothing in the way of rent or keeping up? But I'm thankful mysel' to see the nest cleared out, and the real man in it. What are you whimpering about? It's little you've seen of them, aye in your kitchen." "Me seen little of them!" cried Bauby, roused to a kind of soft indignation; "the best part of an hour with the mistress every day of my life, and as kind a sympathising woman! There'll be nae leddy now to order the dinners – and that's a great responsibility, let alone anything else." "Go away with your responsibility. I'll order your dinners," said Rolls. "Well," said Bauby, not without resignation, "to be a servant, and no born a gentleman, you've aye been awfu' particular about your meat." And she withdrew consoled, though drying her eyes, to wonder if Mr John would be "awfu' particular about his meat," or take whatever was offered to him, after the fashion of some young men. Meat, it must be explained, to Bauby Rolls meant food of all descriptions – not only that which she would herself have correctly and distinctly distinguished as "butcher's meat."

The house was very empty and desolate after all the din and bustle. The furniture had faded in the quarter of a century

and more which had elapsed since Harry Erskine furnished his drawing-room for his bride. That had not been a good period for furniture, according to our present lights, and everything looked dingy and faded. The few cosy articles with which the late tenants had changed its character had been removed; the ornaments and prettinesses were all gone. The gay limp old chintzes, the faded carpet, the walls in sad want of renewal, obtruded themselves even upon the accustomed eye of Rolls. The nest might be cleared, but it looked a somewhat forlorn and empty nest. He stood upon the threshold of the drawing-room, contemplating it mournfully. A little of that "cheeney and nonsense" which he had been highly indignant with Mrs Barrington for bringing, would have been of the greatest consequence now to brighten the walls; and a shawl or a hat thrown on a chair, which had called forth from old Rolls many a grumble in the past, would have appeared to him now something like a sign of humanity in the desert. But all that was over, and the old servant, painfully sensible of the difference in the aspect of the place, began to grow afraid of its effect upon the young master. If, after all, John should not be "struck with" his home! if, terrible to think of, he might prefer some house "in the South" to Dalrulzian! "But it's no possible," said Rolls to himself. He made a survey of all the rooms in the new anxiety that dawned upon him. The library was better; there were a good many books on the shelves, and it had not to Rolls the air of desertion the other rooms had. He lighted a fire in it, though it was the first week in May, and

took great pains to restore by it an air of comfort and habitation. Then he took a walk down the avenue in order to make a critical examination of the house from a little distance, to see how it would look to the new-comer. And Rolls could not but think it a most creditable-looking house. The fir-trees on the top of the hill threw up their sombre fan of foliage against the sky; the birches were breathing forth a spring sweetness – the thin young foliage softly washed in with that tenderest of greens against the darker background, seemed to appeal to the spectator, forbidding any hasty judgment, with the promise of something beautiful to come. The ash-trees were backward, no doubt, but they are always backward. In the wood the primroses were appearing in great clusters, and the parterres under the terrace were gay with the same. Rolls took comfort as he gazed. The avenue was all green, the leaves in some sunny corners quite shaken out of their husks, in all bursting hopefully. "It's a bonnie place," Rolls said to himself, with a sigh of excitement and anxiety. Bauby, who shared his feelings in a softened, fat, comfortable way of her own, was standing in the doorway, with her little shawl pinned over her broad chest, and a great white apron blazing in the light of the morning sun. She had a round face, like a full moon, and a quantity of yellow hair smoothed under the white cap, which was decorously tied under her chin. She did not take any of the dignity of a housekeeper-cook upon her, but she was a comfortable creature to behold, folding her round arms, with the sleeves rolled up a little, and looking out with a slight curve, like a shadow of

the pucker on her brother's brows, in her freckled forehead. She was ready to cry for joy when Mr John appeared, just as she had cried for sorrow when the Barringtons went away. Neither of these effusions of sentiment would disturb her greatly, but they were quite genuine all the same. Rolls felt that the whiteness of her apron and the good-humour of her face lit up the seriousness of the house. He began to give her her instructions as he advanced across the open space at the top of the avenue. "Bauby," he said, "when ye hear the wheels ye'll come, and the lasses with you; and Andrew, he can stand behind; and me, naturally I'll be in the front: and we'll have no whingeing, if *you* please, but the best curtsey you can make, and 'We're glad to see you home, sir,' or something cheery like that. He's been long away, and he was but a boy when he went. We'll have to take care that he gets a good impression of his ain house."

"That's true," said Bauby. "Tammas, I've heard of them that after a long absence have just taken a kind o' scunner – "

"Hold your tongue with your nonsense. A scunner at Dalrulzian!" cried Rolls; but the word sank into the depths of his heart. A scunner – for we scorn a footnote – is a sudden sickening and disgust with an object not necessarily disagreeable – a sort of fantastic prejudice, which there is no struggling against. But Rolls repeated his directions, and would not allow himself to entertain such a fear.

It was not, however, with any sound of wheels, triumphal or otherwise, that young Erskine approached his father's house. It

was all new and strange to him; the hills – the broad and wealthy carses through which he had passed – the noble Firth, half sea half river, which he had crossed over in his way, – all appeared to him like landscapes in a dream, places he had seen before, though he could not tell how or when. It was afternoon when he reached Dunearn, which was the nearest place of any importance. He had chosen to stop there instead of at the little country station a few miles farther on, which was proper for Dalrulzian. This caprice had moved him, much in the same way as a prince had sometimes been moved to wander about *incognito*, and glean the opinions of his public as to his own character and proceedings. Princes in fiction are fond of this diversion; why not a young Scotch laird just coming into his kingdom, whose person was quite unknown to his future vassals? It amused and gently excited him to think of thus arriving unknown, and finding out with what eyes he was looked upon: for he had very little doubt that he was important enough to be discussed and talked of, and that the opinions of the people would throw a great deal of light to him upon the circumstances and peculiarities of the place. He was curious about everything, – the little grey Scotch town, clinging to its hillside – the freshness of the spring colour – the width of the wistful blue sky, banked and flecked with white clouds, and never free, with all its brightness, from a suspicion of possible rain. He thought he recollected them all like things he had seen in a dream; and that sense of travelling *incognito* and arriving without any warning in the midst of a little world, all eagerly

looking for his arrival, but which should be innocently deceived by his unpretending appearance, tickled his fancy greatly. He was five-and-twenty, and ought to have known better; but there was something in the circumstances which justified his excitement. He skimmed lightly along the quiet country road, saying to himself that he thought he remembered the few clusters of houses that were visible here and there, one of them only big enough to be called a village, where there was "a merchant's" shop, repository of every kind of ware, and a blacksmith's smithy. Two or three times he stopped to ask the way to Dalrulzian out of pure pleasure in the question! for he never lost sight of that line of fir-trees against the horizon, which indicated his native hill; but after he had put this question once or twice, it must be added that young Erskine's satisfaction in it failed a little. He ceased to feel the excitement of his *incognito*, the pleasure of entering his dominions like a young prince in disguise. The imagination of the women at the village doors, the chance passengers on the way, were not occupied with the return of John Erskine; they were much more disposed to think and talk of the others who had no right, it seemed to him, to occupy their thoughts.

"Dalrulzian! you'll find nobody there the day," said a countryman whom he overtook and accosted on the road. "The family's away this morning, and a great loss they will be to the country-side."

"The family!" said John, and he felt that his tone was querulous in spite of himself. "I did not understand that there

was a family."

"Ay was there, and one that will be missed sore; both gentle and simple will miss them. Not the real family, but as good, or maybe better," the man said, with a little emphasis, as if he meant offence, and knew who his questioner was.

The young man reddened in spite of himself. This was not the kind of popular report which in his *incognito* he had hoped to hear.

"The laird is what they call in Ireland an absentee," said his companion. "We're no minding muckle in Scotland if they're absentees or no; they can please themsels. But there's nae family of the Erskines – nothing but a young lad; and the Cornel that's had the house was a fine, hearty, weel-spoken man, with a good word for everybody; and the ladies very kind, and pleasant, and neighbour-like. Young Erskine must be a young laird past the ordinar if he can fill their place."

"But, so far as I understand, the estate belongs to him, does it not?" Erskine asked, with an involuntary sharpness in his voice.

"Oh ay, it belongs to him; that makes but sma' difference. Ye're no bound to be a fine fellow," said the roadside philosopher, with great calmness, "because ye're the laird of a bit sma' country place – "

"Is it such a small place?" cried the poor young prince *incognito*, appalled by this revelation. He felt almost childishly annoyed and mortified. His companion eyed him with a cool half-satirical gaze.

"You're maybe a friend of the young man? Na, I'm saying nae ill of the place nor of him. Dalrulzian's a fine little property, and a' in good order, thanks to auld Monypenny in Dunearn. Maybe you're from Dunearn? It's a place that thinks muckle of itself; but nae doubt it would seem but a poor bit town to you coming from the South?"

"How do you know I come from the South?" said John.

"Oh, I ken the cut of ye fine," said the man. "I'm no easy deceived. And I daur to say you could tell us something about this new laird. There's different opinions about him. Some thinks him a lad with brains, that could be put up for the county and spite the Earl. I've no great objection mysel to the Earl or his opinions, but to tak' another man's nominee, if he was an angel out of heaven, is little credit to an enlightened constituency. So there's been twa-three words. You'll no know if he has ony turn for politics, or if he's a clever lad, or – "

"You don't seem to mind what his politics are," said the unwary young man.

His new friend gave him another keen glance. "The Erskines," he answered quietly, "are a' on the right side."

Now John Erskine was aware that he did not himself possess political opinions sufficiently strenuous to be acknowledged by either side. He agreed sometimes with one party, sometimes with another, which, politically speaking, is the most untenable of all positions. And so ignorant was he of the immediate traditions of his family, that he could not divine which was "the right side" on

which the Erskines were sure to be. It was not a question upon which his mother could have informed him. As Mr Kingsford's wife, an orthodox Church of England clergywoman, she was, of course, soundly Conservative, and thought she hated everything that called itself Liberal – which word she devoutly believed to include all kinds of Radical, revolutionary, and atheistical sentiments. John himself had been a good Tory too when he was at Eton, but at Oxford had veered considerably, running at one time into extreme opinions on the other side, then veering back, and finally settling into a hopeless eclectic, who by turns sympathised with everybody, but agreed wholly with nobody. Still it was whimsical not even to know the side on which the Erskines were declared with so much certainty to be. It pleased him at least to find that they had character enough to have traditionary politics at all.

"You must excuse me as a stranger," he said, "if I don't quite know what side you regard as the – right side."

His friend looked at him with a sarcastic gaze – a look John felt which set him down not only as devoid of ordinary intelligence, but of common feeling. "It's clear to see you are not of that way of thinking," he said.

As he uttered this contemptuous verdict they came opposite to a gate, guarded by a pretty thatched cottage which did duty for a lodge. John felt his heart give a jump, notwithstanding the abashed yet amused sensation with which he felt himself put down. It was the gate of Dalrulzian: he remembered it as if he

had left it yesterday. A woman came to the gate and looked out, shielding her eyes with her hand from the level afternoon sun that shone into them. "Have you seen anything of our young master, John Tamson?" she said. "I'm aye thinking it's him every sound I hear."

"There's the road," said the rural politician, briefly addressing John; then he turned to the woman at the gate. "If it's no him, I reckon it's a friend. Ye had better pit your questions here," he said.

"John Thomson," said John, with some vague gleam of recollection. "Are you one of the farmers?" The man looked at him with angry, the woman with astonished, eyes.

"My freend," said John Thomson, indignantly, "I wouldna wonder but you have plenty of book-learning; but you're an ignorant young fop for a' that, if you were twenty times the laird's freend."

John for his part was too much startled and amused to be angry. "Am I an ignorant young fop?" he said. "Well, it is possible – but why in this particular case – "

"Noo, noo," said the woman, who left the lodge, coming forward with her hands spread out, and a tone of anxious conciliation. "Dear bless me! what are you bickering about? He's no a farmer, but he's just as decent a man – nobody better thought of for miles about. And, John Tamson, I'm astonished at you! Can you no let the young gentleman have his joke without taking offence like this, that was never meent?"

"I like nae such jokes," said John Tamson, angrily; and he went off swinging down the road at a great pace. John stood looking after him for a moment greatly perplexed. The man did not touch his hat nor the woman curtsey as they certainly would have done at Milton Magna. He passed her mechanically without thinking of her, and went in at his own gate – not thinking of that either, though it was an event in his life. This little occurrence had given an impulse in another direction to his thoughts.

But the woman of the lodge called after him. She had made a slightly surprised objection to his entrance, which he did not notice in his preoccupation. "Sir, sir!" she cried – "you're welcome to walk up the avenue, which is a bonnie walk; but you'll find nobody in the house. The young laird, if it was him you was wanting to see, is expected every minute; but there's no signs of him as yet – and he canna come now till the four o'clock train."

"Thank you. I'll walk up the avenue," said John, and then he turned back. "Why did you think I was making a joke? and why was your friend offended when I asked if he was one of the farmers? – it was no insult, I hope."

"He's a very decent man, sir," said the woman; "but I wouldna just take it upon me to say that he was my freend."

"That's not the question!" cried John, exasperated – and he felt some gibe about Scotch caution trembling on the tip of his tongue; but he remembered in time that he was himself a Scot and among his own people, and he held that unruly member still.

"Weel, sir," said the woman, "if ye will ken – but, bless me!

it's easy to see for yourself. The farmers about here are just as well put on and mounted and a' that as you are. John Tamson! he's a very decent man, as good as any of them – but he's just the joiner after a', and a cotter's son. He thought you were making a fool of him, and he's not a man to be made a fool o'. We're no so civil-like – nor may be so humble-minded, for anything I can tell – as the English, sir. Baith the Cornel and his lady used to tell me that."

It was with a mixture of irritation and amusement that John pursued his way after this little encounter. And an uncomfortable sensation, a chill, seemed to creep over his mind, and arrest his pleasurable expectations as he went on. The avenue was not so fine a thing as its name implied. It was not lined with noble trees, nor did it sweep across a green universe of parks and lawns like many he had known. It led instead up the slope of the hill, through shrubberies which were not more than copsewood in some places, and under lightly arching trees not grand enough or thick enough to afford continuous shade. And yet it was sweet in the brightness of the spring tints, the half-clothed branches relieved against that variable yet smiling sky, the birds in full-throated chorus, singing welcome with a hundred voices, – no nightingales there, but whole tribes of the "mavis and the merle," north-country birds and kindly. His heart and mind were touched alike with that half-pathetic pleasure, that mixture of vague recollections and forgetfulness, with which we meet the half-remembered faces, and put out our hands to meet the grasp of

old friends still faithful though scarcely known. A shadow of the childish delight with which he had once explored these scanty yet fresh and friendly woods came breathing about him: "The winds came to me from the fields of sleep." He felt himself like two people: one, a happy boy at home, familiar with every corner; the other a man, a spectator, sympathetically excited, faltering upon the forgotten way, wondering what lay round the next curve of the road. It was the strangest blending of the known and the unknown.

But when John Erskine came suddenly, as he turned the corner of that great group of ash-trees, in sight of his house, these vague sensations, which were full of sweetness, came to an end with a sharp jar and shock of the real. Dalrulzian was a fact of the most solid dimensions, and dispersed in a moment all his dreams. He felt himself come down suddenly through the magical air, with a sensation of falling, with his feet upon the common soil. So that was his home! He felt in a moment that he remembered it perfectly, – that there had never been any illusions about it in his mind, – that he had known all along every line of it, every step of the gables, the number of the little windows, the slopes of the grey roof. But it is impossible to describe the keen sense of disenchantment which went through his mind as he said this to himself. It was not only that the solid reality dispersed his vision, but that it afforded a measure by which to judge himself and his fortunes, till now vaguely and pleasantly exaggerated in his eyes. It is seldom indeed that the dim image of what

was great and splendid to us in our childhood does not seem ludicrously exaggerated when we compare it with the reality. He who had felt himself a young prince in disguise, approaching his domains *incognito*, in order to enjoy at his leisure the incense of universal interest, curiosity, and expectation! John Erskine blushed crimson though nobody saw him, as he stood alone at the corner of his own avenue and recognised the mistake he had made, and his own unimportance, and all the folly of his simple over-estimate. Fortunately, indeed, he had brought nobody with him to share in the glories of his entry upon his kingdom. He thanked heaven for that, with a gasp of horror at the thought of the crowning ridicule he had escaped. It was quite hard enough to get over the first startling sensation of reality alone.

And yet it was the same house upon which the Barringtons had looked back so affectionately a few hours before – which the county regarded with approval, and which was visited by the best families. It would be hard to say what its young master had expected, – a dream-castle, a habitation graceful and stately, a something built out of clouds, not out of old Scotch rubble-work and grey stone. It was not looking its best, it must be added. The *corps du logis* lay in gloom, thrown into shade by the projecting rustic gable, upon the other side of which the setting sun still played; the yellowish walls, discoloured here and there by damp, had no light upon them to throw a fictitious glow over their imperfections. The door stood open, showing the hall with its faded fittings, gloomy and unattractive, and,

what was more, deserted, as if the house had been abandoned to dreariness and decay – not so much as a dog to give some sign of life. When the young man, rousing himself with an effort, shook off the stupor of his disappointment and vexation, and went on to the open door, his foot on the gravel seemed to wake a hundred unaccustomed echoes: and nobody appeared. He walked in unchallenged, unwelcomed, going from room to room, finding all equally desolate. Was there ever a more dismal coming home? When he reached the library, where a little fire was burning, this token of human life quite went to the young fellow's heart. He was standing on the hearth very gloomy, gazing wistfully at the portrait of a gentleman in a periwig over the mantelpiece, when the door was pushed open and old Rolls appeared with his coat off, carrying a basket of wood. Rolls was as much startled as his master was disappointed, and he was vexed to be seen by a stranger in so unworthy an occupation. He put down his basket and glanced at his shirt-sleeves with confusion. "I was expecting nobody," he said in his own defence. "And wha may ye be," he added, "that comes into the mansion-house of Dalrulzian without speering permission, or ringing a bell, or chapping at a door?" John smiled at the old man's perplexity, but said nothing. "You'll be a friend of our young master's?" he said, tentatively; then after an interval, in a voice with a quiver in it, "Your no meaning, sir, that you're the laird himself?"

"For want of a better," said John, amused in spite of himself.

"And you're old Rolls. I should have known you anywhere. Shake hands, man, and say you're glad to see me. It's like a house of the dead."

"Na, sir, no such things; there's no death here. Lord bless us! wha was to think you would come in stealing like a thief in the night, as the Bible says?" said Rolls, aggrieved. He felt that it was he who was the injured person. "It was all settled how you were to be received as soon as the wheels were heard in the avenue, – me on the steps, and the women behind, and Andrew, – the haill household, to wit. If there's any want of respect, it's your ain fault. And if you'll just go back to the avenue now and give us warning, I'll cry up the women in a moment," the old servant said.

CHAPTER III

That night dispersed illusions from the mind of John Erskine which it had taken all his life to set up. He discovered in some degree what his real position was, and that it was not a great one. He got rid of many of his high notions as he walked about the pleasant, comfortable, but somewhat dingy old house, which no effort of the imagination could make into a great house. He made acquaintance with the household. Mrs Rolls the cook, who curtseyed and cried for pleasure at the sight of him, and two smiling, fair-haired young women, and old Andrew the gardener – a quite sufficient household for the place, he felt, but very different from the army of servants, all so noiseless, punctilious, carefully drilled, whom he had seen at country-houses, with which he had fondly hoped his own might bear comparison. What a fool he had been! These good honest folk have little air of being servants at all. Their respect was far less than their interest in him; and their questions were more like those of poor relatives than hired attendants. "I hope your mammaw is well, Mr John," Bauby the cook had said. "Let the master alone with your Mr Johns," Rolls had interrupted; "he's come to man's estate, and you must learn to be more respectful. The women, sir, are all alike; you can never look for much sense from them." "Maybe you're right, Tammas," said Bauby; "but for all that I cannot help saying that its an awfu' pleasure to see Mr John, that was but that

height when I saw him last, come home a braw gentleman like what I mind his father." John could do nothing but stand smiling between them, hearing himself thus discussed. They made it very clear that he had come home where he would be taken ample care of – but how different it was from his thoughts! He thought of the manor-house at Milton Magna, and laughed and blushed at the ridiculous comparisons he had once made. It was a keen sort of self-ridicule, sharp and painful. He did not like to think what a fool he had been. Now he came to think of it, he had quite well remembered Dalrulzian. It was not his youthful imagination that was to blame, but a hundred little self-deceits, and all the things that he had been in the habit of hearing about his own importance and his Scotch property. His mother had done more than any one else to deceive him, he thought; and then he said to himself, "Poor mother!" wondering if, perhaps, her little romance was all involved in Dalrulzian, and if it was a sacred place to her. To think that the Kingsford household was prose, but the early life in which she had been Harry Erskine's wife and little John's mother, the poetry of her existence, was pleasant to her son, who was fond of his mother, though she was not clever, nor even very sensible. John thought, with a blush, of the people whom he had invited to Dalrulzian under that extraordinary mistake – some of his friends at college, young fellows who were accustomed to houses full of company and stables full of horses. There was nothing in the stables at Dalrulzian but the hired horse which had been provided by Rolls in a hired dogcart to bring him up from the station; and

as he looked round upon the room in which he sat after dinner, and which was quite comfortable and highly respectable, though neither dignified nor handsome, poor John burst into a laugh, in which there was more pain than amusement. He seemed to himself to be stranded on a desert shore. What should he do with himself, especially during the long summer, when there could be no hunting, no shooting, – the summer which he had determined to occupy, with a fine sense of duty, in making acquaintance with his house and his surroundings, and in learning all his duties as a country gentleman and person of importance? This thought was so poignant, that it actually touched his eyelids with a sense of moisture. He laughed – but he could have cried. There would turn out, he supposed, to be about three farms on this estate of his; and Scotch farmers were very different people from the small farmers of the South. To talk about his tenants would be absurd. Three pragmatical Scotchmen, much better informed in all practical matters at least than himself, and looking down upon him as an inexperienced young man. What a fool he had been! If he had come down in August for the shooting, – if there was any shooting, – and let his friends understand that it was a mere shooting-box – a "little place in Scotland," such as they hired when they came to the moors, – all would have been well. But he had used no disparaging adjectives in speaking of Dalrulzian. He had called it "my place" boldly, and had believed it to be a kind of old castle – something that probably had been capable of defence in its day. Good heavens! what a fool he had been!

He had thought he would be glad to get to bed, and felt pleased that he was somewhat tired with his journey; but he found that, on the contrary, the night flew by amidst these thoughts, – fathomless night, slow and dark and noiseless. Rolls had made repeated attempts to draw him into conversation in what that worthy called the fore-night; but by ten o'clock or so, the house was as still as death, not a sound anywhere, and the hours passed over him while he sat and thought. A little fire crackled and burned in the grate, with little *pétillements* and bursts of flame. There were a good many books on the shelves; that was always something: and Mrs Rolls had given him an excellent dinner, which he ought to have considered also as a very great alleviation of the situation. John scarcely knew what hour it was when, starting suddenly up in the multitude of his thoughts, he threw open the window which looked upon the Walk, and gazed out moodily upon the night. The night was soft and clear, and the great stretch of the landscape lay dimly defined under a half-veiled poetic sky, over which light floating vapours were moving with a kind of gentle solemnity. There was not light enough to distinguish the individual features of the scene, save here and there a pale gleam of water, a darkness of wood, and the horizon marked by that faint silvery edge which even by night denotes the limit of human vision. The width, the freshness, the stillness, the dewy purity of the air, soothed the young man as he stood and looked out. What was he, a human unit in the great round of space, to be so disconcerted by the little standing-ground he had?

He felt abased as he gazed, and a strange sense of looking out upon his life came over him. His future was like that – all vague, breathing towards him a still world full of anticipations, full of things hidden and mysterious – his, and yet not his, as was the soil and the fields. He could mortgage it as he could his estate, but he could not sell it away from him, or get rid of what was in it, whether it carried out his foolish expectations or not. Certainly the sight of this wide scenery, in which he was to perform his part, did him good, though he could not see it. He closed the window, which was heavy, almost with violence, as he came back to the ascertained, – to the limited walls with their books, the old-fashioned original lamp, and crackling fire.

But this sound was very unusual in the house in the middle of the night. Bauby, whose room was next her brother's, knocked upon the wall to rouse him. "D'ye hear that, Tammas? There's somebody trying to get into the house." Her voice came to Rolls faintly muffled by the partition between. He had heard the noise as well as she, but he did not think fit to answer save by a grunt. Then Bauby knocked again more loudly. "Tammas! Man, will ye no put on your breeks and go down and see what it is?" Rolls, for his part, was already in the midst of a calculation. So much plate as there was in the house he had brought up with him to his room. "They cannot steal tables and chairs," he said to himself; "and as for the young laird, if he's not able to take care of himself, he'll be none the better of me for a defender." Audibly he answered, "Hold your tongue, woman. If the master likes to take the air in

the sma' hours, what's that to you or me?" There was a pause of dismay on Bauby's part, and then a faint ejaculation of "Lord bless us! take the air!" But she was less easily satisfied than her brother. When John went up-stairs with his candle, he saw a light glimmering in the gallery above, and a figure in white, far too substantial to be a ghost, leaning over the banisters. "Eh, sir! is it you, Mr John?" Bauby said. "I was feared it was robbers;" and then she added in her round, soft, caressing voice, "but you mustna take the air in the middle of the night: you'll get your death of cold, and then, what will your mammaw say to me, Mr John?" John shut himself up in his room, half laughing, half affronted. It was many years since he had been under the sway of his "mamma" in respect to his hours and habits; and nothing could be more droll than to go back to the kind annoyance of domestic surveillance just at the moment when his manhood and independence were most evident. He laughed, but the encounter brought him back, after he had been partly freed from it, to a consciousness of all his limitations once more.

But things were better in the morning. Unless you have something bitter to reproach yourself with, or some calamity impending over you, things are generally better in the morning. John looked about him with more hopeful eyes. He had an excellent, a truly Scotch, breakfast, which, at five-and-twenty, puts a man in good-humour with himself; and there were one or two features about Dalrulzian which, in the morning sunshine, looked more encouraging. The stables were tolerably

good, made habitable, and furnished with some of the latest improvements by Colonel Barrington; and "the policy" was in admirable order, – the turf faultless, the shrubberies flourishing, the trees – well, not like the trees at Milton Magna, but creditable performances for the North. John's countenance cleared as he inspected everything. Rolls led or followed him about with great importance, introducing and explaining. Had he been an English butler, John would have dismissed him very summarily to his pantry; but it was part of the natural *mise en scène* to have a Caleb Balderstone attached to an old Scotch house. He was half proud of this retainer of the family, though he threatened to be something of a bore; even Bauby, and her care for his health, and her sense of responsibility to his "mammaw," was tolerable in this light. When one is born a Scotch laird, one must accept the natural accompaniments of the position; and if they were sometimes annoying, they were at least picturesque. So John put up with Rolls, and "saw the fun" of him with a kind of feeling that Dalrulzian was a Waverley novel, and he himself the hero. He had been seeing things so much through the eyes of his problematical visitors, that he was glad to see this also through their eyes. To them, these servants of his would be altogether "characteristic," and full of "local colour." And then the subtle influence of property began to affect the young man and modify his disappointment. "A poor thing, sir, but mine own," he said to himself. These were "my plantations" that crested the hill; the fishing on the river was said to be excellent, and belonged

to Dalrulzian; the moorland on the eastern side of the hill was "my moor." Things began to mend. When he went back again after his examination to the room from which he had started, John found a luncheon spread for him, which was not inferior to the breakfast, and Rolls, in his black coat, having resumed the butler, and thrown off the factotum, but not less disposed to be instructive than before.

"You may as well," young Erskine said, eating an admirable cutlet, "tell me something about my neighbours, Rolls."

"I'll do that, sir," said Rolls, with cordiality; and then he made a pause. "The first to be named is no to call a neighbour; but I hope, sir, you'll think far mair of her than of any neighbour. She's your ain best blood, and a leddy with a great regard for Dalrulzian, and not another friend so near to her as you. It came from Dalrulzian, and it'll come back to Dalrulzian with careful guiding," said Rolls, oracularly; "not to say that blood's thicker than water, as the auld Scots byword goes."

This address gave John some sense of perplexity; but after an interval he discovered what it meant. "It is my old Aunt Barbara of whom you are speaking," he said. "Certainly, I shall see her first of all."

"She is an excellent lady, sir; careful of her money. It will be real good for the estate when – But, bless me! I wadna have you to be looking forward to what may never come, – that is to say, that auld Miss Barbara, being real comfortable, sir, in this life, will not go out of it a moment sooner than she can help: and for a'

that we ken o' heaven, I wouldna blame her; for, grand as it may be, it will aye be a strange place. There's nobody more thought upon in the county than Miss Barbara Erskine at Dunearn. Weel, sir, and the neighbours. There's the Earl of Lindores first of a'. We maun give him the paw, as the French say. Maybe you've met with some of the family in London? You'll see plenty and hear plenty of them here. The Earl he is a very pushing man. He would like to take the lead in a' the county business; but there's many of the gentry that are not exactly of that opinion. And my lady Countess, she's of the booky kind, with authors, and painters, and that kind of cattle aye about the place. I'm not that fond of thae instructed leddies. Weemen are best no to be ower clever, in my poor opinion. Young Rintoul, that's the son, is away with his regiment; I ken nothing of him: and there's two young leddies – "

"Now I remember," said John. "You are the most concise of chroniclers, Rolls. I like your style. I once knew some of the Lindores family – cousins, I suppose. There were young ladies in that family too. I knew them very well." Here he paused, a smile stealing about the corners of his mouth.

"I ken nothing about their relations," said Rolls. "It was an awfu' melancholy story; but it's an ill wind that blaws nobody good. The late Earl was liked by everybody. But I'm saying nothing against this family. One of the young daughters is married, poor thing! The other one at hame, my Lady Edith, is a bonnie bit creature. She was great friends with *oor* young lady. But if you were to ask my opinion, sir – which is neither here nor

there," said Rolls, in insinuating tones – "I would say there was not one that was fit to hold the candle to Miss Nora. We had our bits of tiffs, the Cornel and me. There were some things he would never see in a proper light; but they were much thought o', and saw a' the best company. When you let a place, it's a grand thing to have tenants that never let down the character of the house."

"You mean the Barringtons," said John. He was not much interested in this subject. They had been unexceptionable tenants; but he could scarcely help regarding them with a little jealousy, almost dislike, as if they had been invaders of his rights.

"And they were awfu' fond of it," said Rolls, watching his young master's countenance. "Miss Nora above a'. You see she's grown up at Dalrulzian. It was all they could do to get her away from the Walk this last morning. I thought she would have grown till't. If you and Miss Nora was ever to meet," the old servant added, in his most engaging tones, "I cannot but believe you would be real good – freends – "

"I see you have provided for every contingency," said the young laird, with a laugh. His Caleb Balderstone, he said to himself, was almost better, if that was possible, than Scott's. But John's mind had been set afloat on a still more pleasant channel, and he let the old man maunder on.

"It's true she's English," said Rolls; "but that matters nothing in my opinion, on what they call the side of the distaff. I'll no say but it's offensive in a man: putting up so long with the Cornel and his ways of thinking, I'm no a bad authority on that. But weemen

are a different kind of creatures. A bit discrepancy, if ye may so call it – a kind of a different awkcent, so to speak, baith in the soul and the tongue, is just a pleasant variety. It gives new life to a family sometimes, and mends the breed, if you'll no think me coarse. A little of everything is good in a race. And besides being so good and so bonnie, Miss Nora will have a little siller of her ain, which spoils nothing. Not one of your great fortunes, but just a little siller – enough for their preens and rubbitch – of her ain."

Here, however, the pleasant delusion with which Nora's humble champion was delighting himself was suddenly dispersed by a question which proved his young master to be thinking nothing about Nora. "I used to know some of the Lindores family," John repeated, "a brother of the Earl. I wonder if they ever come here?"

"I ken nothing about their relations, sir," said Rolls, promptly. "It's thought the Earl's awfu' ambitious. They're no that rich, and he has an eye to everything that will push the family on. There's one of them marriet, poor thing!"

"I am afraid you are a fierce old bachelor," said John, rising from the table; "this is the second time you have said 'poor thing.'"

"That's my Lady Caroline, sir," said Rolls, with a grave face, "that's married upon Torrance of Tinto, far the richest of all our neighbour gentlemen. You'll no remember him? He was a big mischievous callant when you were but a little thing, begging your pardon, sir, for the freedom," said the old servant, with a

little bow of apology; but the gravity of his countenance did not relax. "It's not thought in the country-side that the leddy was very fain of the marriage – poor thing!"

"You are severe critics in the country-side. One must take care what one does, Rolls."

"Maybe, sir, that's true; they say public opinion's a grand thing: whiles it will keep a person from going wrong. But big folk think themselves above that," Rolls said. And then, having filled out a glass of wine, which his master did not want; he withdrew. Rolls was not quite satisfied with the young laird. He betook himself to the kitchen with his tray and a sigh, unburdening himself to Bauby as he set down the remains of the meal on the table. "I wouldna wonder," he said, shaking his head, "if he turned out mair English than the Cornel himsel'."

"Hoot, Tammas!" said Bauby, always willing to take the best view, "that's no possible. When ye refleck that he was born at Dalrulzian, and brought up till his thirteenth year – "

"Sic bringing up!" cried old Rolls; "and a step-faither that never could learn so much as to say the name right o' the house that took him in!"

Meanwhile John, left alone with his own thoughts, found a curious vein of new anticipations opened to him by the old man's talk. The smile that had lighted on the corners of his mouth came back and settled there, betraying something of the maze of pleased recollections, the amused yet tender sentiment, which these familiar yet half-forgotten names had roused again.

Caroline and Edith Lindores! No doubt they were family names, and the great young ladies who were his neighbours were the cousins of those happy girls whom he remembered so well. The Lindores had been at a Swiss mountain inn where he and some of his friends had lived for six weeks under pretence of reading. They had made friends on the score of old family acquaintance "at home;" and he never remembered so pleasant a holiday. What had become of the girls by this time? Carry, the eldest, was sentimental and poetical, and all the young men were of opinion that Beaufort the young University Don, who was at the head of the party, had talked more poetry than was good for him with that gentle enthusiast. Beaufort had gone to the Bar since then, and was said to be getting on. Had they kept up their intercourse, or had it dropped, John wondered, as his own acquaintance with the family had dropped? They were poor people, living abroad for economy and education, notwithstanding that Mr Lindores was brother to an earl. Surely sometimes the Earl must invite his relations, or at least he would be sure to hear of them, to come within the circle of their existence again. Young Erskine had almost forgotten, to tell the truth, the existence of the Lindores; yet when they were thus recalled to him, and the possibility of a second meeting dawned on his mind, his heart gave a jump of pleasure in his bosom. On the instant there appeared before him the prettiest figure in short frocks, with an aureola of hair about the young head – a child, yet something more than a child. Edith had been only sixteen, he remembered; indeed he found

that he remembered everything about her as soon as her image was thus lightly called back. What might she be now, in her grown-up condition? Perhaps not so sweet, perhaps married – a contingency which did not please him to think of. And what if he should be on the eve of seeing her again!

The smile of pleasure, of amusement, even of innocent vanity with which in this airy stage a young man contemplates such a possibility, threw a pleasant light over his face. He went out with that smile half hidden under his fair moustache, which gave it a kind of confidential character between him and himself so to speak. As he had nothing else to do, it occurred to him to take a walk on the road to Dunearn, where he had seen the French-Scotch *tourelles* of Lindores Castle through the trees the day before, and "take a look at" the place – why, he did not know – for no particular reason, merely to amuse himself. And as he went down the avenue, that old episode came back to him more and more fully. He remembered all the little expeditions, the little misadventures, the jokes, though perhaps they were not brilliant. Carry lingering behind with Beaufort, talking Shelley, with a flush of enthusiasm about her: Edith always foremost, chidden and petted, and made much of by everybody, with her long hair waving, and those fine little shoes which he had tied once – thick mountain shoes – but such wonderful Cinderella articles! All these recollections amused him like a story as he went down the avenue, taking away his attention from external things; and it was not till he was close upon the gate that he was

aware of the presence of two ladies, who seemed to have paused on their walk to speak to Peggy Burnet, the gardener's wife, who inhabited the lodge. His ear was caught by his own name, always an infallible means of rousing the most careless attention. He could not help hearing what Peggy was saying, for her voice was somewhat high-pitched, and full of rural freedom. "Oh ay, my leddy; the young maister, that's Mr John, that's the laird, came hame yestreen," Peggy was saying, "before he was expectit. The carriage – that's the bit dogcart, if you can ca' it a carriage, for there's nothing better left, nor so much as a beast to draw it that we can ca' oor ain – was sent to the station to meet him. When, lo! he comes linking along the road on his ain twa legs, and no so much as a bag or a portmanty behind him, and asks at the gate, Is this Dalrulzian? kenning nothing of his ain house! And me, I hadna the sense to think, This is him; but just let him in as if he had been a stranger. And no a creature to take the least notice! Mr Rolls was just out o' himsel, with vexation, to let the young maister come hame as if he had been ony gangrel body; but it couldna be called my fault."

"Surely it could not be your fault; if he wanted a reception, he should have come when he was expected," said a softer voice, with a little sound of laughter. Surely, John thought, he had heard that voice before. He hurried forward wondering, taking off his hat instinctively. Who were they? Two ladies, one elder, one younger, mother and daughter. They looked up at him as he approached. The faces were familiar, and yet not familiar. Was

it possible? He felt himself redden with excitement as he stood breathless, his hat off, the blood flushing to the very roots of his hair, not able to get out a word in his surprise and pleasure. They on their side looked at him smilingly, not at all surprised, and the elder lady held out her hand. "After so long a time you will scarcely know us, Mr Erskine," she said; "but we knew you were expected, and all about you, you see."

"Know you?" cried John, almost speechless with the wonder and delight. "Mrs Lindores! The thing is, can I venture to believe my eyes? There never was such luck in the world! I think I must be dreaming. Who would have expected to meet you here, and the very first day?"

Peggy Burnet was much disturbed by this greeting. She pushed forward, making an anxious face at him. "Sir! sir! you maun say my leddy," she breathed, in a shrill whisper, which he was too much excited to take any notice of, but which amused the ladies. They cast a laughing look at each other. "Didn't you know we were here?" the mother said. "Then we had the advantage of you. We have been speculating about you for weeks past – whether you would be much changed, whether you would come at once to Lindores to renew old acquaintance – "

"That you may be sure I should have done," said John, "as soon as I knew you were there. And are you really at Lindores? living there? for good? It seems too delightful to be true."

They were both changed. And he did not know why they should look at each other with such a laughing interchange

of glances. It made him somewhat uncomfortable, though his mind was too full of the pleasure of seeing them to be fully conscious of it. It was Edith, as was natural, who was most altered in appearance. She had been a tall girl, looking more than her age; and now she was a small, very young woman. At that period of life such changes happen sometimes; but the difference was delightful, though embarrassing. Yes, smaller, she was actually smaller, he said to himself, – "as high as my heart," as Orlando says: yet no longer little Edith, but an imposing stately personage at whom he scarcely ventured to look boldly, but only snatched shy glances at, abashed by her soft regard. He went on stammering out his pleasure, his delight, his surprise, hardly knowing what he said. "I had just begun to hope that you might come sometimes, that I might have a chance of seeing you," he was saying; whereupon Edith smiled gravely, and her mother gave a little laugh aloud.

"I don't believe he knows anything about it, Edith," she said.

"I was sure of it, mamma," Edith replied; while between them John stood dumb, not knowing what to think.

CHAPTER IV

The explanation which was given to John Erskine on the highroad between Dalrulzian and Lindores, as it is still more important to us than to him, must be here set forth at more length. There are some happy writers whose mission it is to expound the manners and customs of the great. To them it is given to know how duchesses and countesses demean themselves in their *moments perdus*, and they even catch as it flies that airy grace with which the chit-chat of society makes itself look like something of consequence. Gilded *salons* in Belgravia, dainty boudoirs in Mayfair, not to speak of everything that is gorgeous in the rural palaces, which are as so many centres of light throughout England – are the scenery in which they are accustomed to enshrine the subjects of their fancy. And yet, alas! to these writers when they have done all, yet must we add that they fail to satisfy their models. When the elegant foreigner, or what is perhaps more consonant with the tastes of the day, the refined American, ventures to form his opinion of the habits of society from its novels, he is always met with an amused or indignant protestation. As if these sort of people knew anything about society! Lady Adeliza says. It is perhaps as well, under these circumstances, to assume a humility, even if we have it not; and indeed the present writer has always been shy of venturing into exalted regions, or laying profane hands

upon persons of quality. But when a family of rank comes in our way by necessity, it would be cowardice to recoil from the difficulties of the portraiture. Should we fail to represent in black and white the native grace, the air noble, the exalted sentiments which belong by right to members of the aristocracy, the reader will charitably impute the blame rather to the impression made upon our nerves by a superiority so dazzling than to any defect of goodwill. Besides, in the present case, which is a great aid to modesty, the family had been suddenly elevated, and were not born in the purple. Lady Lindores was a commoner by birth, and not of any very exalted lineage – a woman quite within the range of ordinary rules and instincts; and even Lady Edith had been Miss Edith till within a few years. Their honours were still new upon them: they were not themselves much used to these honours any more than their humble chronicler; with which preface we enter with diffidence upon the recent history of the noble house of Lindores.

The late earl had been a man unfortunate in his children. His sons by his first marriage had died one after another, inheriting their mother's delicate health. His second wife had brought him but one son, a likely and healthy boy; but an accident, one of those simplest risks which hundreds are subject to, and escape daily, carried this precious boy off in a moment. His father, who had been entirely devoted to him, died afterwards of a broken heart, people said. The next brother, who was in India with his regiment, died there almost at the same time, and never knew

that he had succeeded to the family honours. And thus it was that the Honourable Robert Lindores, a poor gentleman, living on a very straitened income, in a cheap French town, with his wife and daughters, and as little expecting any such elevation as a poor curate expects to be made Archbishop of Canterbury, became Earl of Lindores and the head of the family, without warning or preparation. It does not perhaps require very much preparation to come to such advancement; and the new earl was to the manner born. But Mrs Lindores, who was a woman full of imagination, with nerves and ideas of her own, received a considerable shock. She had no objection to being a countess; the coronet, indeed, was pleasant to her as it is to most people. She liked to look at it on her handkerchiefs: there is no such pretty ornament. But it startled her mind and shook her nerves just at first. And it made a great, a very great, change in the family life. Instead of strolling about as they had done for years, with one maid for the mother and daughters, and a shabby cheap French servant, who was valet and factotum; going to all kinds of places; living as they liked; and though, with many a complaint, getting a great deal of pleasure out of their lives: there was an immediate shaking of themselves together – a calling in of stray habits and fancies, – a jump into their new place, as of an inexperienced and half-alarmed rider, not at all sure how he was to get on with his unaccustomed steed. This at least was the mood of Lady Lindores. The Earl knew all about it better than she did. Even to be merely the "honourable" had fluttered her senses a little; and

it had never occurred to her that anything further was possible. The family was poor – still poor, even when thus elevated as it were to the throne; but the poverty of the Honourable Robert was very different from that of the right honourable Earl. In the one case it was actual poverty, in the other only comparative. To be sure it was, when one had time to think, distressing and troubling not to have money enough to refurnish the Castle (the taste of the late lord had been execrable) and make many improvements which were quite necessary. But that was very different from not having money enough to possess a settled home of your own anywhere, which had been their previous condition. The Earl took his measures without a moment's delay. He dismissed the servants who had followed them in their poverty, and engaged others in London, who were more proper to the service of a noble family. They travelled quite humbly, indeed, in their old half-Bohemian way, until they reached London, and then all at once cast their slough. The ladies put on their clothes, which they had stopped to procure in Paris, and suddenly blossomed out (though in deep mourning) into the likeness of their rank. It was a thing to make the steadiest heart beat. Young Robin was at Chatham, a lieutenant in a marching regiment – a young nobody, pleased to be noticed even by the townsfolk; and lo! in a moment, this insignificant lieutenant became Lord Rintoul. It was like a transformation scene; he came to meet his people when they passed through London, and they could scarcely speak to each other when they met in their mutual wonder. "Poor little

Rintoul, all the same, poor little beggar!" Robin Lindores said. To think of the poor boy, cut off in a moment, whose death had purchased them all these honours, affected the young people with a strange awe, and almost remorseful pain. They felt as if somehow, without knowing it, they had been the cause of that terrible sudden removal of all the hopes that had rested on their little cousin's head. Lady Lindores herself declared that she dared not think of her predecessor, the mother of that poor boy, "the dowager," alas! poor lady. The dowager was younger than her successor in the family honours, having been a second wife. They were all silent with respectful awe when her name was mentioned; but the Earl said pshaw! and thought this superfluous. He was more used to it; he had been born in the purple, and now that he had come, though unexpectedly, to his kingdom, he knew how to fill that exalted place.

The Earl was a man of a character which never, up to this time, had been estimated as it deserved. He had been quite an easy-going sort of person in his former estate. In his youth he was said to have been extravagant. Since his marriage – which had been an imprudent marriage, in so far that he might perhaps have got a richer wife had he tried, but which was wise so far that the income upon which they lived chiefly came from that wife – he had let himself go quietly enough upon the current, there being no motive to struggle against it. The very best that they could make of it was simply to "get along;" and get along they did without putting any force upon their inclinations. He was

always able to secure his comforts, such as were indispensable; and as he liked the easier routine of a wandering life, he did not object, as he said, to make a sacrifice for the education of his children and their amusement, by living in places where the pleasures were cheap and there was no dignity to keep up. He had in this sense been very complying, both as a husband and a father, and had allowed himself to be guided, as his family thought, by their wishes quite as much, at least, as by his own. He had not in these days been in the least a severe father, or shown marks of a worldly mind. What was the use? The girls were too young as yet to have become valuable instruments of ambition, and he had not learnt to think of them as anything but children. But when this extraordinary change came in their existence, the easy *dilettante*– whose wants were limited to a few graceful knick-knacks, an elegant little meal, good music, when procurable, and a life undisturbed by vulgar cares – altered his very nature, as his family thought. Hitherto his wife and his girls had done everything for him, aided by the ubiquitous, the handy, the all-accomplished Jean or François, who was half-a-dozen men in one – cook, valet, footman, pattern man-of-all-work. They arranged the rooms in every new place they went to, so that the fact that these rooms were those of a hotel or lodging-house should be masked by familiar prettinesses, carried about with them. They gave a careful supervision to his meals, and arranged everything, so that papa should get the best out of his limited existence, and none of its troubles. And as there

was nothing against Mr Lindores – no bad repute, but with an honourable at his name – every English club, every *cercle*, was open to him. He always dressed carefully; now and then he helped a wealthier friend to a bargain in the way of art. He saw a great deal of society. On the whole, perhaps, for a man without ambition, and upon whom neither the fate of his children nor the use of his own life pressed very heavily, he got as much satisfaction out of his existence as most men; and so might have lived and died, no man knowing what was really in him, had not poor young Rintoul broken his neck over that fence, and drawn his father with him into the grave. From the moment when the letter, placed calmly by Mr Lindores's plate at breakfast, as though it meant nothing particular, had its black seals broken, he was another man. How distinctly they all recollected that scene! – a lofty French room, with bare white walls and long large windows, the green Persians closed to keep out the sunshine, one long line of light falling across the polished floor, where one of these shutters had got unfastened; the spacious coolness in the midst of heat, which is characteristic of such houses, like the atmosphere in M. Alma Tadema's pictures; the white-covered table with its flowers and pretty arrangements; the girls in their white cool dresses; and François lifting the small silver cover from his master's favourite dish. All the composure and quiet of this interior had been broken in a moment. There had been a sudden stifled cry, and Mr Lindores, pushing the table from him, disordering the dishes, over-setting his heavy chair as he

sprang to his feet, had finished reading his letter standing upright, trembling with excitement, his face flushed and crimson. "What is it?" they had all cried. "Robin?" Naturally, the son who was away was the first thought of the women. For a minute the father had made no reply, and their anxiety was beyond words. Then he put down the letter solemnly, and went to his wife and took her hand. "There is nothing wrong with Robin," he said; "but it comes by trouble to others, if not to us. My dear, you are the Countess of Lindores." It was some minutes before the real meaning of this communication penetrated their astonished minds; and the first proof of understanding which the new Lady Lindores gave was to cover her face and cry out, "Oh, poor boy! oh, poor Jane, poor Jane!" with a pang at her heart. It was not all grief for the other – could any one expect that? – but the poignant state of emotion which this strange terrible good fortune caused her, had a sharpness of anguish in it for the moment. The girls went away hushed and silenced, unable to eat their breakfasts, to find some black ribbons instead of the bright ones they wore. They wept a few tears as they went to their rooms over poor young Rintoul; but they had known very little of the boy, and the strange excitement of the change soon crept into their veins. Lady Caroline and Lady Edith! instead of the humble Miss Lindores. No wonder that it went to their heads.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.