

EFFIE OGILVIE:
THE STORY OF A YOUNG LIFE.

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BY
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CHAPTER XIII.

EFFIE came towards him smiling, without apprehension. The atmosphere out of doors had not the same consciousness, the same suggestion in it which was inside. A young man's looks, which may be alarming within the concentration of four walls, convey no fear and not so much impression in the fresh wind blowing from the moors and the openness of the country road. To be sure it was afternoon and twilight coming on, which is always a witching hour.

He stood at the corner of the byeway waiting for her as she came along, light-footed, in her close-fitting tweed dress, which made a dim setting to the brightness of her countenance. She had a little basket in her hand. She had been carrying a dainty of some kind to somebody who was ill. The wind in her face had brightened everything, her colour, her eyes, and even had, by a little tossing, found out some gleams of gold in the brownness of her hair. She was altogether sweet and fair in Fred's eyes—a creature embodying everything good and wholesome, everything that was simple and pure. She had a single rose in her hand, which she held up as she advanced.

“We are not like you, we don't get roses all the year round; but here is one, the last,” she said, “from Uncle John's south wall.”

It was not a highly-cultivated, scentless rose, such as the gardens at Allonby produced by the hundred, but one that was full of fragrance, sweet as all roses once were. The outer leaves had been a little caught by the frost, but the heart was warm with life and sweetness. She held it up to him, but did not give it to him, as at first he thought she was going to do.

“I would rather have that one,” he cried, “than all the roses which we get all the year round.”

“Because it is so sweet?” said Effie. “Yes, that is a thing that revenges the poor folk. You can make the roses as big as a child’s head, but for sweetness the little old ones in the cottage gardens are always the best.”

“Everything is sweet, I think, that is native here.”

“Oh!” said Effie, with a deep breath of pleasure, taking the compliment as it sounded, not thinking of herself in it. “I am glad to hear you say that! for I think so too—the clover, and the heather, and the hawthorn, and the meadow-sweet. There is a sweet-brier hedge at the manse that Uncle John is very proud of. When it is in blossom he always brings a little rose of it to me.”

“Then I wish I might have that rose,” the young lover said.

“From the sweet-brier? They are all dead long ago; and I cannot give you this one, because it is the last. Does winter come round sooner here, Mr. Dirom, than in—the South?”

What Effie meant by the South was no more than England—a country, according to her imagination, in which the sun blazed, and where the climate in summer was almost more than honest Scots veins could bear. That was not Fred’s conception of the South.

He smiled in a somewhat imbecile way, and replied, “Everything is best here. Dark, and true, and tender is the North: no, not dark, that is a mistake of the poet. Fair, and sweet, and true—is what he ought to have said.”

“There are many dark people as well as fair in Scotland,” said Effie; “people think we have all yellow hair. There is Uncle John, he is dark, and true, and tender—and our Eric. You don’t know our Eric, Mr. Dirom?”

“I hope I shall some day. I am looking forward to it. Is he like you, Miss Effie?”

“Oh, he is dark. I was telling you: and Ronald—I think we are just divided like other people, some fair—some——”

“And who is Ronald?—another brother?”

“Oh, no—only a friend, in the same regiment.”

Effie’s colour rose a little, not that she meant anything, for what was Ronald to her? But yet there had been that reference of the Miss Dempsters which she had not understood, and which somehow threw Ronald into competition with Fred Dirom, so that Effie, without knowing it, blushed. Then she said, with a vague idea of making up to him for some imperceptible injury, “Have you ever gone through our little wood?”

“I am hoping,” said Fred, “that you will take me there now.”

“But the gloaming is coming on,” said Effie, “and the wind will be wild among the trees—the leaves are half off already, and the winds seem to shriek and tear them, till every branch shivers. In the autumn it is a little eerie in the wood.”

“What does eerie mean? but I think I know; and nothing could be eerie,” said Fred half to himself, “while you are there.”

Effie only half heard the words: she was opening the little postern gate, and could at least pretend to herself that she had not

heard them. She had no apprehensions, and the young man's society was pleasant enough. To be worshipped is pleasant. It makes one so much more disposed to think well of one's self.

“Then come away,” she said, holding the gate open, turning to him with a smile of invitation. Her bright face looked brighter against the background of the trees, which were being dashed about against an ominous colourless sky. All was threatening in the heavens, dark and sinister, as if a catastrophe were coming, which made the girl's bright tranquil face all the more delightful. How was it that she did not see his agitation? At the crisis of a long alarm there comes a moment when fear goes altogether out of the mind.

If Effie had been a philosopher she might have divined that danger was near merely from the curious serenity and quiet of her heart. The wooden gate swung behind them. They walked into the dimness of the wood side by side. The wind made a great sighing high up in the branches of the fir-trees, like a sort of instrument—an Eolian harp of deeper compass than any shrieking strings could be. The branches of the lower trees blew about. There was neither the calm nor the sentiment that were conformable to a love tale. On the contrary, hurry and storm were in the air, a passion more akin to anger than to love. Effie liked those great vibrations and the rushing flood of sound. But Fred did not hear them. He was carried along by an impulse which was stronger than the wind.

“Miss Ogilvie,” he said, “I have been talking to your father—I have been asking his permission—— Perhaps I should not have gone to him first. Perhaps—It was not by my own impulse altogether. I should have wished first to—— But it appears that here, as in foreign countries, it is considered—the best way.”

Effie looked up at him with great surprise, her pretty eyebrows arched, but no sense of special meaning as yet dawning in her eyes.

“My father?” she said, wondering.

Fred was not skilled in love-making. It had always been a thing he had wished, to feel himself under the influence of a grand passion: but he had never arrived at it till now; and all the little speeches which no doubt he had prepared failed him in the genuine force of feeling.

He stammered a little, looked at her glowing with tremulous emotion, then burst forth suddenly, “O Effie, forgive me; I cannot go on in that way. This is just all, that I’ve loved you ever since that first moment at Allonby when the room was so dark. I could scarcely see you in your white dress. Effie! it is not that I mean to be bold, to presume—I can’t help it. It has been from the first moment. I shall never be happy unless—unless——”

He put his hand quickly, furtively, with a momentary touch upon hers which held the rose, and then stood trembling to receive his sentence. Effie understood at last. She stood still for a moment panic-stricken, raising bewildered eyes to his. When he touched her hand she started and drew a step away from him, but found nothing better to say than a low frightened exclamation, “O Mr. Fred!”

“I have startled you. I know I ought to have begun differently, not to have brought it out all at once. But how could I help it? Effie! won’t you give me a little hope? Don’t you know what I mean? Don’t you know what I want? O Effie! I am much older than you are, and I have been about the world a long time, but I have never loved any one but you.”

Effie did not look at him now. She took her rose in both her hands and fixed her eyes upon that.

“You are very kind, you are too, too—— I have done nothing that you should think so much of me,” she said.

“Done nothing? I don’t want you to do anything; you are yourself, that is all. I want you to let me do everything for you. Effie, you understand, don’t you, what I mean?”

“Yes,” she said, “I think I understand: but I have not thought of it like that. I have only thought of you as a——”

Here she stopped, and her voice sank, getting lower and lower as she breathed out the last monosyllable. As a friend, was that what she was going to say? And was it true? Effie was too sincere to finish the sentence. It had not been quite as a friend: there had been something in the air—But she was in no position to reply to this demand he made upon her. It was true that she had not thought of it. It had been about her in the atmosphere, that was all.

“I know,” he said, breaking in eagerly. “I did not expect you to feel as I do. There was nothing in me to seize your attention. Oh, I am not disappointed—I expected no more. You thought of me as a friend. Well! and I want to be the closest of friends. Isn’t that reasonable? Only let me go on trying to please you. Only, only try to love me a little, Effie. Don’t you think you could like a poor fellow who wants nothing so much as to please you?”

Fred was very much in earnest: there was a glimmer in his eyes, his face worked a little: there was a smile of deprecating, pleading tenderness about his mouth which made his lip quiver. He was eloquent in being so sincere. Effie gave a furtive glance up at him

and was moved. But it was love and not Fred that moved her. She was profoundly affected, almost awe-stricken at the sight of that, but not at the sight of him.

“Oh,” she said, “I like you already very much: but that is not—that is not—it is not—the same——”

“No,” he said, “it is not the same—it is very different; but I shall be thankful for that, hoping for more. If you will only let me go on, and let me hope?”

Effie knew no reply to make; her heart was beating, her head swimming: they went on softly under the waving boughs a few steps, as in a dream. Then he suddenly took her hand with the rose in it, and kissed it, and took the flower from her fingers, which trembled under the novelty of that touch.

“You will give it to me now—for a token,” he said, with a catching of his breath.

Effie drew away her hand, but she left him the rose. She was in a tremor of sympathetic excitement and emotion. How could she refuse to feel when he felt so much? but she had nothing to say to him. So long as he asked no more than this, there seemed no reason to thwart him, to refuse—what? he had not asked for anything, only that she should like him, which indeed she did; and that he might try to please her. To please her! She was not so hard to please. She scarcely heard what he went on to say, in a flood of hasty words, with many breaks, and looks which she was conscious of, but did not resent. He seemed to be telling her about herself, how sweet she was, how true and good, what a happiness to know her, to be near her, to be permitted to walk by her side as he was doing. Effie heard it and did not hear, walking on in her

dream, feeling that it was not possible any one could form such extravagant ideas of her, inclined to laugh, half-inclined to cry, in a strange enchantment which she could not break.

She heard her own voice say after a while, "Oh no, no—oh no, no—that is all wrong. I am not like that, it cannot be me you are meaning." But this protest floated away upon the air, and was unreal like all the rest. As for Fred, he was in an enchantment more potent still. Her half-distressed, half-subdued listening, her little protestation, her surprise, yet half-consent, and above all the privilege of pouring forth upon her the full tide of passionate words which surprised himself by their fluency and force, entirely satisfied him. Her youth, her gentle ignorance and innocence, which were so sweet, fully accounted for the absence of response.

He felt instinctively that it was sweeter that she should allow herself to be worshipped, that she should not be ready to meet him, but have to be wooed and entreated before she found a reply. These were all additional charms. He felt no want, nor was conscious of any drawback. The noise in the tops of the fir-trees, the waving of the branches overhead, the rushing of the wind, were to Fred more sweet than any sound of hidden brooks, or all the tender rustling of the foliage of June.

Presently, however, there came a shock of awakening to this rapture, when the young pair reached the little gate which admitted into the garden of Gilston. Fred saw the house suddenly rising before him above the shrubberies, gray and solid and real, and the sight of it brought him back out of that magic circle. They both stopped short outside the door with a consciousness of reality which silenced the one and roused the other. In any other circumstances Effie would have asked him to come in. She stopped

now with her hand on the gate, with a sense of the impossibility of inviting him now to cross that threshold. And Fred too stopped short. To go farther would be to risk the entire fabric of this sudden happiness.

He took her hand again, “Dear Effie, dearest Effie; good-night, darling, good-night.”

“O Mr. Fred! but you must not call me these names, you must not think—— It is all such a surprise, and I have let you say too much. You must not think——”

“That I am to you what you are to me? Oh no, I do not think it; but you will let me love you? that is all I ask: and you will try to think of me a little. Effie, you will think of me—just a little—and of this sweet moment, and of the flower you have given me.”

“Oh, I will not be able to help thinking,” cried Effie. “But, Mr. Fred, I am just bewildered; I do not know what you have been saying. And I did not give it you. Don’t suppose—oh don’t suppose—— You must not go away thinking——”

“I think only that you will let me love you and try to please you. Good-night, darling, good-night.”

Effie went through the garden falling back into her dream. She scarcely knew what she was treading on, the garden paths all dim in the fading light, or the flower-beds with their dahlias. She heard his footstep hurrying along towards the road, and the sound of his voice seemed to linger in the air—Darling! had any one ever called her by that name before? There was nobody to call her so. She was Uncle John’s darling, but he did not use such words: and there was no one else to do it.

Darling! now that she was alone she felt the hot blush come up enveloping her from head to foot—was it Fred Dirom who had called her that, a man, a stranger! A sudden fright and panic seized her. His darling! what did that mean? To what had she bound herself? She could not be his darling without something in return. Effie paused half-way across the garden with a sudden impulse to run after him, to tell him it was a mistake, that he must not think— But then she remembered that she had already told him that he must not think—and that he had said no, oh no, but that she was his darling. A confused sense that a great deal had happened to her, though she scarcely knew how, and that she had done something which she did not understand, without meaning it, without desiring it, came over her like a gust of the wind which suddenly seemed to have become chill, and blew straight upon her out of the colourless sky which was all white and black with its flying clouds. She stood still to think, but she could not think: her thoughts began to hurry like the wind, flying across the surface of her mind, leaving no trace.

There were lights in the windows of the drawing-room, and Effie could hear through the stillness the voice of her stepmother running on in her usual strain, and little Rory shouting and driving his coach in the big easy-chair. She could not bear to go into the lighted room, to expose her agitated countenance to the comments which she knew would attend her, the questions, where she had been, and why she was so late? Effie had not a suspicion that her coming was eagerly looked for, and that Mrs. Ogilvie was waiting with congratulations; but she could not meet any eye with her story written so clearly in her face. She hurried up to her own room, and there sat in the dark pondering and wondering. “Think of me a

little.” Oh! should she ever be able to think of anything else all her life?

CHAPTER XIV.

EFFIE came down to dinner late—with eyes that betrayed themselves by unusual shining, and a colour that wavered from red to pale. She had put on her white frock hurriedly, forgetting her usual little ornaments in the confusion of her mind. To her astonishment Mrs. Ogilvie, who was waiting at the drawing-room door looking out for her, instead of the word of reproof which her lateness generally called forth, met her with a beaming countenance.

“Well, Miss Effie!” she said, “so you’re too grand to mind that it’s dinner-time. I suppose you’ve just had your little head turned with flattery and nonsense.” And to the consternation of her stepdaughter, Mrs. Ogilvie took her by the shoulders and gave her a hearty kiss upon her cheek. “I am just as glad as if I had come into a fortune,” she said.

Mr. Ogilvie added a “humph!” as he moved on to the dining-room. And he shot a glance which was not an angry glance (as it generally was when he was kept waiting for his dinner) at his child.

“You need not keep the dinner waiting now that she has come,” he said. Effie did not know what to make of this extraordinary kindness of everybody. Even old George did not look daggers at her as he took off the cover of the tureen. It was inconceivable; never in her life had her sin of being late received this kind of notice before.

When they sat down at table Mrs. Ogilvie gave a little shriek of surprise, “Why, where are your beads, Effie? Ye have neither a

bow, nor a bracelet, nor one single thing, but your white frock. I might well say your head was turned, but I never expected it in this way. And why did you not keep him to his dinner? You would have minded your ribbons that are so becoming to you, if he had been here.”

“Let her alone,” said Mr. Ogilvie, “she is well enough as she is.”

“Oh yes, she’s well enough, and more than well enough, considering how she has managed her little affairs. Take some of this trout, Effie. It’s a very fine fish. It’s just too good a dinner to eat all by ourselves. I was thinking we were sure to have had company. Why didn’t you bring him in to his dinner, you shy little thing? You would think shame: as if there was any reason to think shame! Poor young man! I will take him into my own hands another time, and I will see he is not snubbed. Give Miss Effie a little of that claret, George. She is just a little done out—what with her walk, and what with——”

“I am not tired at all,” said Effie with indignation. “I don’t want any wine.”

“You are just very cross and thrawn,” said Mrs. Ogilvie, making pretence to threaten the girl with her finger. “You will have your own way. But to be sure there is only one time in the world when a woman is sure of having her own way, and I don’t grudge it to you, my dear. Robert, just you let Rory be in his little chair till nurse comes for him. No, no, I will not have him given things to eat. It’s very bad manners, and it keeps his little stomach out of order. Let him be. You are just making a fool of the bairn.”

“Guide your side of the house as well as I do mine,” said Mr. Ogilvie, aggrieved. He was feeding his little son furtively, with an expression of beatitude impossible to describe. Effie was a young woman in whom it was true he took a certain interest; but her marrying or any other nonsense that she might take into her head, what were they to him? He had never taken much to do with the woman’s side of the house. But his little Rory, that was a different thing. A splendid little fellow, just a little king. And what harm could a little bit of fish, or just a snap of grouse, do him? It was all women’s nonsense thinking that slops and puddings and that kind of thing were best for a boy.

“My side of the house!” said Mrs. Ogilvie, with a little shriek; “and what might that be? If Rory is not my side of the house, whose side does he belong to? And don’t you think that I would ever let you have the guiding of him. Oh, nurse, here you are! I am just thankful to see you; for Mr. Ogilvie will have his own way, and as sure as we’re all living, that boy will have an attack before to-morrow morning. Take him away and give him a little——. Yes, yes, just something simple of that kind. Good-night, my bonnie little man. I would like to know what is my side if it isn’t Rory? You are meaning the female side. Well, and if I had not more consideration for your daughter than you have for my son——”

“Listen to her!” said Mr. Ogilvie, “her son! I like that.”

“And whose son may he be? But you’ll not make me quarrel whatever you do—and on this night of all others. Effie, here is your health, my dear, and I wish you every good. We will have to write to Eric, and perhaps he might get home in time. What was that Eric said, Robert, about getting short leave? It is a very

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