

THE PRIMROSE PATH

**A Chapter in the Annals of the Kingdom
of Fife**

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“A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute;
No more.”

—“the primrose path of dalliance!”

HAMLET, Act I., Scene III.

THE PRIMROSE PATH.

CHAPTER I.

THE old house of Earl's-hall stands on a long strip of land between two rivers, in that county affectionately known to its inhabitants as the kingdom of Fife. It is not a great house, but neither is it an insignificant one, though fortune has brought the family low which once held some primitive state in it: a quaint, gray dwelling, not formed for modern wants. To make an ordinary dining-room and drawing-room in it would be as impossible as to content an ordinary band of modern servants with the accommodation provided in the low vaulted chambers below, which are all the old house possesses in the way of kitchen or servants' hall; but when you see its gray gable and turret projecting from among a cloud of trees, the old Scotch manor-house looks as imposing as any castle. The belt of wood round the little park, or what in Scotland is called "the policy," is old too, and as well-grown as the winds will permit. It is true that a great turnip-field, reaching up to the walls of the garden which lies on the southern side, has been thrust in between the house and the wood, and the policy is as ragged as a poor pony badly groomed and badly fed; but these are imperfections which a little money could remedy very quickly. The house itself is very peculiar in form, and consisted once of two buildings built on two sides of a court, and united by a mere screen of wall, in which is an arched door-way surmounted by a coat of arms. Probably, however, the second of these buildings, which has now fallen into ruins, was a modern addition, the other being the ancient body of the house. It is of gray stone, three stories high, with a round turret at the western side, which rises higher than the rest by one flight of the old winding stone

staircase, and has a little square battlement and terrace at the top, from which you look abroad upon a wide landscape, not beautiful, perhaps, but broad and breezy, rich fields and low hills and vacant sea. To the right lies the village, with its church built upon a knoll in the rich plain, and its houses, gray, red, and blue, as the topping of chill bluish slate or rough-red generous tile predominates, clinging about the little height. Cornfields wave and nestle round this centre of rural population, and behind are the hills of Forfarshire, and a farther line of the Grampians, half seen among the mists. The softly swelling heights of the Lomonds lie in the nearer distance, and in the foreground the Eden sweeps darkly blue, with a line of breakers showing the bar at its mouth, toward the low sand-hills and stormy waters of St. Andrews Bay, a place in which no ship likes to find itself; while over the low sweep of the sands St. Andrews itself stands misty and fine, its long line of cliff and tower and piled houses ending in the jagged edge of the ruined castle, and the tall mystery of St. Rule's—the square tower which baffles archæology. Such is the scene, rural and fresh and green, with a somewhat chill tone of color, and many a token of the winds in the bare anatomy and shivering branches of the trees, and with no great amount of beauty to boast of: yet ever full of attraction and suggestion, as such a width of firmament, such a great circle of horizon, such variety of sea and land and hills and towers must ever be.

Through the door-way in the wall, which is rich with rough but effective ornamentation, boldly cut string-courses, which look as if there might once have been some kind of fortification to be supported, you enter a little court, from which the house opens—a square court, turfed and green, and containing a well and an old thorn-tree. The ruined portion of the house, roofless and

mouldering, is on the east side; the habitable part on the west, an oblong block of building; and at the well, on the day when this history opens, two figures, one old, one young, both full in the gleam of westering sunshine which breaks over the wall. One-half of the court is in deepest shade, but this all bright, so bright that the girl shades her eyes with one hand, while with the other she pumps water into the old woman's pail, who stands with arms a-kimbo, shaking her head, and giving vent to that murmur of remonstrative disapproval, inarticulate yet very expressive, which is made by the tongue against the palate.

“Tt-tt-tt,” says old Bell. “If ever there was a masterful miss and an ill-willy, and ane that will have her ain way!”

“How can I be masterful and a miss too?” said the girl, laughing. Her arm grew tired, however, with the pumping, and she left off before the vessel was half full. “There!” she said, “I’ll cry on Jeanie to do the rest for you. I’m tired now.”

“Oh, Miss Margret! but you need not cry upon Jeanie. I am fit enough, though I’m old, to do that much for mysel’.”

“It’s the sun has got into my eyes,” said the girl; and she strayed away into the shade, and seated herself upon a heavy old wooden chair that had been placed close to the door. The sun would not have seemed unbearably hot to any one accustomed to his warmer sway; but Margaret Leslie was not used to overmuch sunshine, and what she called the glare fatigued her. Such a mild glare as it was—a suffusion of soft light, more regretful at giving so little than triumphant in delight over its universal victory! It had been rainy weather, and the light had a wistful suddenness in it, like a smile in wet eyes. Margaret withdrew into the shade. She

was a girl of seventeen or so, the only daughter of this old gray house, the only blossom of youth about it except Jeanie in the kitchen, whom she did not “cry on” to help old Bell—not so much because old Bell declined the help, but because she herself forgot next moment all about it. Margaret had no idea that to say she would “cry upon” Jeanie was not the best English in the world. She was as entirely and honestly of the soil as her maid was; a little more careful, perhaps, of her dialect; not “broad” indeed, in her use of the vernacular, because of the old father up-stairs, but with an accent which would make a young lady of Fife of the present day shiver, and a proud and determined aversion to the “high English” which only disapproving visitors ever spoke—ladies who looked with alarm upon her, suggesting schools and governesses. Nowhere could there have been found a more utterly neglected girl than Margaret, whom nobody, except old Bell, had ever taken any care of, all her life. Bell had been very careful of her—had kept her feet warm and her head cool, had seen that she ate her porridge all the mornings of her childhood, and that there were no holes in her stockings; but what more could Bell do? She discoursed her young mistress continually, putting all kinds of homely wisdom into her head; but she could not teach her French, or to play the “piany,” which were the only accomplishments of which Bell was even aware.

“It’s no my fault,” the old woman said, putting out her open palms with a natural gesture of mild despair. “If I were to speak till I was hoarse (and so I have), what would that do to mend the maitter? The maister he turns a deaf ear, though I was to charm ever so wisely; and Miss Margret hersel’—oh, Miss Margret hersel’, if she could learn a’ that a young leddy should, in twa minutes by the clock, it might be done; but hold her to one thing I

canna—it wants somebody with more authority than me; and a bonny creature like that, and with a fortune coming till her from her mother! How is she ever to learn the piany, or a word but broad Scots out here?”

Little Margaret cared for such lamentations. She sat softly swinging the heavy chair against the wall, which was not an easy thing to do. She had not the aspect or physiognomy adapted for a hoyden; her features were small and refined; her color more pale than warm, lighted up by evanescent rose-flushes, but never brilliant; her hair singularly fine in texture and abundant in quantity, but of no tint more pronounced than brown, the most ordinary and commonplace of shades. Her face was a cloudy, shadowy little face, but possessed by a smile which came and went in the suddenest way, brightening her and everything about her. No particular art of the toilet aided or hindered the prettiness of her little slight figure. If she was not as God made her, she was at least as Miss Buist in the village made her—in a dress of blue serge, as near the fashion as possible, of which the peculiarity was that it was rather tight where it ought to be loose, and loose where it ought to be tight. But Margaret’s soul had not been awakened to the point of dress, and so long as it did not hurt, she minded little. Her shoes were made, and strongly made, by the village shoemaker; everything about her was of the soil. When she had swung her chair to the wall, she let it drop back again to its place, and swallowed a little yawn as she watched the water brim into the pail.

“What will I do, Bell?” she said. “What will I do next, Bell?”

(If any one thinks that Margaret ought to have said, “What shall I do?” they are to remember that this is not how we use our verbs in the kingdom of Fife.)

“Oh, Miss Margret! if you would but do one thing, just *wan* thing, without changin’ for wan hour by the clock!”

“You’ve been saying that as long as I can mind. You, you never change, and that’s why I like to be aye changing. There are so few things to do in the afternoon. The morning’s better—there’s something in the air. I’m always content in the morning.”

“Eh ay! you’re very content, flichterin’ about like the birds among the trees, wan moment on this branch, the ither on that; but the afternoon, Miss Margret, the afternoon’s the time for rest—if you’ve been doing onything the fore part of the day.”

“If you want to rest,” said Margaret; “you, perhaps, Bell, that are getting old, and papa— I’ve seen *him* sleepin’. Figure such a thing! Sleepin’! with the sun in the sky!”

“I can figure it real well,” said Bell; “it’s no often a poor body gets the chance: but just to close your eyes in the drowsy time, when a’s well redd up, the fire burning steady, and the kettle near the boil, and pussy bumming by your side, ah, that’s pleasant! it’s a kind o’ glimmer o’ heaven.”

“Heaven! the kettle on the boil, and pussy—that’s a funny heaven,” said Margaret, with a laugh.

“Weel, maybe it’s ower mateerial an image; but we’re poor fleshly creatures; and I was meaning a Sawbath afternoon, when you’ve come hame from the kirk, your Bible at hand, and a’ sae quiet,” said Bell, amending her first flight. “Jeanie stepping saft about the place, waiting till it’s time to mask the tea, and auld John on the other side of the fire, and nothing to do but to thank your Maker for a’ his mercies and think upon the sermon—if it was a

sound sermon,” Bell added, after a pause, taking up her pail; “for I wouldna say they’re a’ of the kind that ye would like to mind and think upon in a Sawbath afternoon in the gloamin’. Miss Margret, what do you say to run up the stair and see if your papaw’s wanting anything? That would aye be something to do.”

“Oh, Bell, if you only had more imagination! You always tell me to run and see if papa is wanting anything: and he never wants anything, except, perhaps, a book from the high shelf, where they’re all Greek, and I have to climb up upon the steps, and get no good.”

“And whase fault’s that?” said Bell, reproachfully. She had set down the pail again and paused, looking with mournful eyes at the young creature seventeen years old, who did not know what to do with herself. “Whase fault’s that? Did I no beg ye on my bended knees to learn your French book?—a’ wee words, as easy! I could have learned it mysel’; and then ye would have had a’ the shelves and a’ the books open to you, and your papaw’s learnin’ at your finger’s-end.”

“Do you think French and Greek are the same?” cried Margaret. “Why, they’re different print even—the a b c’s different; they are no more like the same thing than you and me.”

“I’m no saying they’re just the same,” said Bell, a little discomfited. “One thing’s aye different from another. When I was learnin’ it was aw, bay, say that they learned me, no clip-pit and short like your English. But the creature kens something after a’,” she said to herself as she went in-doors with her pail. “A thing like that, with a’ her wits about her, canna be near a learned man

without learning something. But no a note o' the piany!" Bell said, with a real sense of humiliation. For that want what could make up?

Margaret was left alone in the little court, and she soon tired of being alone. When she had remained there for about five minutes, watching the sun shine upon the ruin opposite to her, and print all the irregularities of the wall which connected it with the house upon the broken turf of the court, she got up suddenly and went up-stairs. Musing and dreaming were the only things upon which she could spend with pleasure more than "twa minutes by the clock," as Bell said. She would read, indeed, as long as any one pleased, but that was an unprofitable exercise, and tended to nothing; for what was it all but foolish stories and daft-like poetry, and play-acting and nonsense? These things were naught in the estimation of the people in the house who were anxious about Margaret's education. The only member of the household who took no thought of her education at all was the master, who sat up-stairs in solitary state. Even Jeanie, the handmaiden in the kitchen, was very anxious on Miss Peggy's account. She wanted to see her young mistress go to balls, and have pretty dresses from Edinburgh, and enjoy herself. What was the use of being bonny and young if you stayed aye in one auld house and nobody saw ye? Jeanie asked herself. And this was a question which much disturbed and occupied her mind. Old John, too, who was Bell's husband, and the male factotum, as she was the female, had his anxieties about Miss Peggy. When she began to want to have pairties and young folk about her, what should they all do? John demanded. He would be willing, and so would Bell, to "put themselves about" to the utmost; but what was to be done for chiney and plate? Wan dozen of everything might be enough for the family, but what would that do for a pairty? So that John's mind was disturbed also. But old Sir

Ludovic, what did he mind? Give him a book, and ye might mine the cellars, and throw your best bomb-shells at the tower, and he would never hear ye. Such was the general opinion of the house.

There was no entrance-hall in this primitive house; but only a little space at the "stair-foot," the bottom of the well through which the spiral staircase wound its narrow way; but though it was dark, and the twist of the unprotected steps a little alarming to a stranger, Margaret ran up as lightly as a bird. At about half the height of an ordinary flight of stairs there were two doors close to each other, forming a little angle. One of these Margaret pushed open softly. It led into a long room, running all the length of the building, panelled wherever the wall was visible, and painted white, as in a French house: one side, however, was covered entirely with bookshelves. The depth of the recesses in which the small windows were embedded showed the thickness of the wall. One at each end and one in the middle were all that lighted the long room, two or three others which had belonged to the original plan having been blocked up on account of the window tax, that vexatious impost. In the centre of the room stood a large old japanned screen, stretched almost across the whole breadth, and dividing it into two. On the south side, into which the door opened, a large writing-table was placed upon the old and much-worn Turkey-carpet which covered the middle of the floor; and seated at this, but with his back to the sunshine, which was pouring in, sat an old man in a chair, reading. The window behind him and the window in the side each poured its stream of sunshine between the deep cuttings of the ancient walls, five or six feet thick, but neither of these rays of warmth and light touched this solitary inhabitant. He was so much absorbed in his reading that he did not hear the door open. Margaret came in behind him and stood in the sunshine, the impersonation of

youth—the light catching her at all points, gleaming in her eyes, bringing color to her cheek, making her collar and the edge of white round her hands blaze against the darkness of her dress. But no ray touched the old man in his chair. He was as still as if he had been cut out of gray marble, his face motionless, the movement of his eyes as he read, the unfrequent movement necessary to turn the page, being all the sign of life about him. The book he was reading was a large old folio, propped up upon a sort of reading-desk in front of him. A large wide garment, something between a long coat and a dressing-gown, of dark-colored and much-worn velvet, and wrapped round his thin person, gave it some dignity; and he wore a little black velvet skull-cap, which made his fine head and thin white locks imposing. Margaret stood breathless, making no sound for a moment, and then said, suddenly, “You look like Archimage in the cave, papa!”

The old man made a faint movement of surprise; a wrinkle of impatience came into his forehead, a momentary smile to his lip. “Yes, yes, my little Peggy; go and play,” he said. She stood for a moment behind him, hesitating, looking round her with eager eyes in search of something, anything, to interest her. She was neither surprised nor wounded to find herself thus summarily disposed of: she was used to it. Finally, seeing nothing likely to interest her, Margaret turned lightly away, and disappeared through a second door which was close to the one by which she had entered. This brought her into a small rounded room, with one window, a little white-panelled Scotch-French boudoir, with a high mantel-piece and small antique furniture—a little square of Turkey-carpet on the floor, a pretty old marquetry cabinet, and some high-backed chairs of the same covered with brocaded silk from some great-grandmother’s gown. Margaret knew nothing about the value of

these old furnishings. She thought the walnut-wood table, with its elaborate clustered legs, a much finer article, though it was often in her way. There were some old pictures on the walls, some books, and more ornament and grace than in all the rest of the house put together. What did Margaret care? She sang an old tune to herself, drumming with her fingers upon the window-sill, and thinking what she should do. Then she drew open a drawer in the cabinet and took from it some old fancy-work, faded but fine, with a bundle of wools and silks in the same condition. It was the relic of some old lady's industry (Lady Jean, old Bell said; but how should she know?) which had been found in one of the periodical routings out of old presses and drawers in which Margaret delighted. The linen on which the work was half done was yellow and the colors faded, but it had struck the girl's fancy, and she had carried it off with her to finish (this time a hundred years, Bell said, satirically). Margaret took it out now and laid it on the table; then she went flying up the stone stairs, and all over the rooms, to find her thimble and her scissors, which were not to be found.

And while she tries to find these, what can we do better than let the reader know who old Sir Ludovic was, and how he came to have so young a child? Margaret's foot flying up-stairs, and the sound she made of doors and drawers opening, and now an impatient exclamation (for the way thimbles hide themselves and refuse to be found!) and now a little snatch of song, was all that was audible in the still old house. Bell and John and Jeanie in the kitchen had their cracks, indeed, as they took their tea; but sounds did not travel easily up the spiral stair, and the long room with its one inhabitant was as void of all movement as was the vacant little white-panelled chamber with Lady Jean's old work thrown on the

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