

THE PRODIGALS
AND THEIR INHERITANCE

BY MRS. OLIPHANT

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CHAPTER XXI

THE PRODIGALS

CHAPTER I

“IS it to-night he is coming, Winnie?”

“Yes, father. I have sent the dog-cart to the station.”

“It was unnecessary, quite unnecessary. What has he to do with dog-carts or any luxury? He should have been left to find his way as best he could. It is not many dog-carts he will find waiting at his beck and call. That sort of indulgence, it is only putting nonsense in his head, and making him think I don’t mean what I say.”

“But, father”—

“Don’t father me. Why don’t you speak like other girls in your position? You have always been brought up to be a lady; you ought to use the same words that ladies use. And mind you, Winifred, don’t make any mistake, I mean what I say. Tom can talk, none better, but he will not get over me; I have washed my hands of him. So long as I thought these boys were going to do me credit I spared nothing on them; but now that I know better—Don’t let him try to get over me, for it is no use.”

“Oh, papa, he is still so young; he has done nothing very bad, only foolishness, only what you used to say all young men did.”

“Things are come to a pretty pass,” said the father, “when girls like you, who call themselves modest girls, take up the defence of a blackguard like Tom.”

“He is not a blackguard,” cried the girl colouring to her hair.

“You are an authority on the subject, I suppose? But perhaps I know a little better. He and his brother have taken me in—me, a man that never was taken in in my life before! but now I wash my hands of them both. There’s the money for his journey and the letter to Stafford. No—on second thoughts I’ll not give him the money for his journey; he’d stay in London and spend it, and then think there was more where that came from. Write down the office of the Cable Line in Liverpool—he’ll get his ticket there.”

“But you’ll see him, papa?”

“Why should I see him? I know what would happen—you and he together would fling yourselves at my feet, or some of that nonsense. Yes, you’re right—on the whole, I think I will see him, and then you’ll know once for all how little is to be looked for from me.”

“Oh, papa! you do yourself injustice; your heart is kinder than you think,” cried Winifred, with tears.

Mr. Chester got up and walked from one end to the other of the long room. It was lighted up as if for a great entertainment, though the father and daughter were alone in it. He drew aside the curtains at the farther end and looked out into the night.

“Raining,” he said. “He would have liked a fly from the station much better than the dog-cart. These puppies with their spoiled constitutions, they can’t support a shower. I am kinder than I think, am I? Don’t let Tom presume on that. If I’m better than I think myself, I’m a deal worse than you think me. And he’s cut me to the heart, he’s cut me to the heart!” This was said with a little vehemence which looked like feeling. He resumed, a few minutes after: “What a fine thing it seemed for a man like me, that began in

a small way, to have two sons to be educated with the best, just as good as dukes, that would know how to make a figure in the world and do me credit. Credit! two broken-down young profligates, two cads that have never held up their heads, never made friends, never done anything but spend money all their lives! What have I done that this should happen to me? Your mother was but a poor creature, and her family no great things; but that my boys, my sons, should take after the Robinsons and not after me! Hold your tongue and let me speak. It should be a warning to you whom you marry; for, mind you, it's not only your husband he'll be, but the father of your children, taking after him, perhaps, to wring your heart." He had been walking about the room all this time, growing more and more vehement. Now he flung himself heavily into his chair. "Yes," he said, "it will be better that I should see him. He'll know then, once for all, how much he has to expect from me."

"Papa," cried Winifred, drying her eyes, "if my mother had lived"—

"If she had lived!" he said, with a tone in which it was difficult to distinguish whether regret or contempt most predominated. Perhaps it was because he was taken by surprise that there was any conflict of feeling. "We should have had some fine scenes in that case," he added, with a laugh. "She would have stuck to the boys through thick and thin; and perhaps you would have been more on my side, Winnie; they say the girls go with their father. True enough, you are the only one that takes after me."

"Oh, papa! George is the image of you."

He got up again from his chair as if stung by some intolerable touch.

“Hold your tongue, child!” he said hoarsely; then, seating himself with a forced laugh, “Kin in face, sworn enemies in everything else,” he said.

The room in which this conversation went on was large but not lofty, occupying the whole width of the house, which was an old country house of the composite character, so usual in England, where generation after generation adds and remodels to its fancy. It had been two rooms according to the natural construction of the house, and the separation between the two was marked by two pillars, one at either side, of marble, which had been brought from some ruinous Italian palace, and were as much out of place as could be conceived in their present situation. The room, in general, bore the same contradictory character; florid ornament and gilt work of the most *baroque* character alternating with articles of the latest fashion, and with pieces of antiquity such as have become the test of taste in recent years. Mr. Chester preferred cost above all other qualifications in the decoration of his house, and his magnificence was bought dearly at the expense not only of much money, but of every rule of harmony. He did not himself mind this. It need scarcely be added that he was not the natural proprietor of the manor-house which he had thus made gorgeous. He was a man of great ambition who had made his fortune in trade, and whom the desire, so universal and often so tragically foolish, though so natural, of founding a family, had seized in a somewhat unusual way. His two sons had received “the best education”; that is, they had been sent to a public school and afterwards to Oxford in the most approved way. They had not been used to much literature nor to a very refined atmosphere at home, and it is possible that the very ordinary blood of the Robinsons, their mother’s family, had more influence in their constitutions than that fluid which their

father thought of so much more excellent quality, which came to them from the Chester fountain.

The Chesters had been pushing men for at least two generations. From the fact that their name was the same as that of their native place, it was uncharitably reported that Mr. Chester's grandfather had been a foundling picked up in the streets. But as he figured in the pedigree which hung in the hall as George Chester, Esq., of the Cloisters, Chester, strangers at least had no right to lend an ear to any such tale, nor to inquire whether, as report said, it was as a lay clerk that he had found a place in that venerable locality. William Chester, the link between this mythical personage and Mr. Chester of Bedloe Manor, had begun the family fortunes in Liverpool half a century before, and his son, whose education was that of a choir boy in Chester Cathedral, as his father's had been, established upon that foundation a solid and, indeed, large fortune, which he had fondly hoped by means of George and Tom to hand down to a whole prosperous family of Chesters, transformed into landowners, great proprietors, perhaps—who could tell?—Lord Chancellors and Prime Ministers. The disappointment which comes upon such a man when his children, instead of doing him honour, turn out the proverbial spendthrifts and consumers of the newly-made fortune, does not meet with any great degree of sympathy in the world. A tacit “serve him right” is in the minds of most people. Much righteous indignation has been expended upon a very different matter, upon the ambition even of such a man as Scott to found a family: the moralist has been almost glad that it came to nothing, that the children of the great man were nobodies, that his hope was a mere dream. And how much more when the man had, like George Chester, nothing but his money and

a certain strenuous determination and force of character to recommend him!

But the disappointment was not less bitter to the new man than if he had been a monarch mourning over a degenerate son. Neither George nor Tom did anything but get into scrapes at the University. They had no heads for books, and they had the habit of rash expenditure, of self-indulgence, of considering themselves masters of everything that could be bought. Mr. Chester would have taken their extravagance in perfectly good part, he would have winked at their peccadilloes and forgiven everything had they done him credit as he said: nor was he very particular as to the nature of the credit; had either manifested any capacity for taking university prizes, or a good degree, that, though he would have understood it little, would have delighted him. Had they rowed in the eight or played in the eleven, he would have been doubly proud of the distinction. Failing those legitimate paths to honour, had they brought a rabble of the young aristocracy to Bedloe, had they gone visiting to great houses, had they found a place even among the train of any young duke or conspicuous person, he was so easily pleased that he would have been content. But they did none of these things. George, with the beautiful voice, of which his father was not proud, since it awakened memories of hereditary talent which he did not wish to keep before men's minds, had not used this gift as a way of making entrance into select circles, but roared it out in undergraduate parties made up of clergymen's sons, of young schoolmasters, of people, as he said bitterly, no better, nay, not so good as himself; and made friends with the lower class of the musical people, the lay clerks at the Cathedral, the people who gave local concerts. He was quite ready to join them, to sing with them, to take his pleasure among them, with a return to all the old

habits of the singing men at Chester, which was bitterness to the father's soul. It scarcely made it any worse that George fell into ways of dissipation and went wrong as well. *That* his father, perhaps, might have forgiven him had it been done in better company; but as it was, the sin was unpardonable. When news came to Bedloe that George was about to marry a poor organist's daughter, the proceedings Mr. Chester took were very summary; he stopped his son's allowance instantly, provided him with a clerkship at Sydney, and sent him off to the end of the world, requesting only that he might see him no more.

Then Tom became his hope. Tom had aspirations higher than George's, but he went, if possible, more hopelessly astray. Tom had, or seemed to have, something more of fancy and imagination than belonged to the rest of his family. He was the clever one, bound, or so at least his father hoped, to make a figure in the world; but he was idle, he was sarcastic and hot-tempered, he quarrelled with everybody whom he ought to have conciliated, and supported the company only of those who flattered and agreed with him, and helped him to gratify his various tastes and inclinations, which were not virtuous. If George had fallen among the lower class of professionals, Tom's company was, his father declared, composed of the out-scourings of the earth. And when the inevitable moment came in which Tom was plucked (or ploughed, as the word varies), his father's bitter disappointment and disgust came to the same result as in his brother's case. The civil letter in which his tutor lamented Tom's foolishness exasperated Mr. Chester almost to madness. No doubt he had bragged in his day of his two boys who were to carry all before them, and his humiliation was all the more hard to bear. He was uncompromising and remorseless in the revenge he took. According to his code, he who failed was the

most criminal of mankind. Whatever a man might do, so long as he attained something, if it were no more than notoriety, there were hopes of him; but failure was insupportable to the man of business—the self-made, and self-sustaining.

It was with a pang that he gave up the idea of all possibility as regarded his sons; but he did so with the same decision and promptitude with which he would have rejected a bad investment. He had still a child, who was, indeed, one of the inferior sex, a mere girl, not for a moment to be considered in the same light as a son, had the sons been worthy, but something to fall back upon when they failed. Winifred, so long as the boys were in the foreground of their father's life, had cost him little trouble. She had been so fortunate as to be provided with a good governess when her mother died; and, unnoticed, unthought of, had grown up into fair and graceful womanhood—in mind and manners the child of the poor gentlewoman who had trained her, and who still remained in the house as her companion and friend. Insensibly it had become apparent to Mr. Chester that Winnie was the one member of his family who was not a failure. The society around, the people whom he revered as county people, but despised as not so rich as himself, received her with genuine regard and friendship, even when they received himself with but formal civility. As for George and Tom, not even their prospective wealth during their time of favour had commended them to the county neighbours, whose pride Mr. Chester cursed, yet regarded with superstitious admiration. Winifred had broken through the stiffness of these exclusive circles, but no one else; and even while he fumed over the downfall of Tom, he had begun to console himself with the success of Winnie. At the recent county ball she had been, if not the beauty, at least the favourite of the evening. Lord Eden himself

had complimented her father upon her looks. He had tasted the sweetness of social success for the first time by her means. All was not then lost. He condemned Tom, as he had condemned George, by attainder and confiscation of all his rights; and Winifred was elected to the post of heir and representative of the Chesters. Perhaps the decision gave the father himself a pang. It was coming down in the world. A man with his sons about him has something of which to be glorious—but a mere girl! At the best it was a humiliation. But in default of anything better it was still a mode of triumph, after all. It secured his revenge upon the worthless boys who had done nothing for his name, and a place among those who recognised in Winnie, if not in any other member of the family, their equal in one way, their superior in another.

He was a man of rapid conclusions, and he had made up his mind on this point on the evening of the day on which he had heard of Tom's disgrace—for disgrace he had felt it to be, accepting no consolation from the fact that many young men not thereafter to be despised met with the same fate. He would not allow his son to return home, but had his fate intimated to him at once by the solicitor whom Mr. Chester chose to employ in business of this sort. It was to New Zealand this time that the unfortunate was to be sent. His passage-money and fifty pounds, and a desk in an office when he reached his destination—this was the fate of the unhappy youth, fresh from all indulgences and follies. No hope even was held out to him of ever retrieving his lost position; and Tom knew with what remorseless decision George had already been cut off. Perhaps he had not lamented as he might have done his brother's punishment, which left such admirable prospects to himself, but it left no doubt on his mind as to his own fate. He had asked, what George had not had the courage to ask, that he might come home

and take farewell of his sister, at least. And this had been granted to him. If any forlorn hope was in his mind of being able to touch the heart of his father, it was a very forlorn hope indeed, and one which he scarcely ventured to whisper even to himself.

He had arrived at the country station which was nearest Bedloe while his father and sister were talking of him, and had been received by the groom with that somewhat ostentatious sympathy and regard for his comfort with which servants are wont to show a consciousness of the situation. The groom was very anxious that Mr. Tom should be protected from the rain, the soft, continuous drizzle of a spring night. "I've brought your waterproof, sir; the roads is heavy, and we'll be a long time getting home"—

"Never mind the waterproof," said Tom; "I like the rain."

"It's cooling, sir; but after a while, when you're soaked through—if you get a chill, sir?"

"It don't matter much," said Tom. "How are they all at home?"

"Pretty nicely," said the man, "though Mrs. Pierce do say that she don't like master's looks, and Miss Winifred is that pale except when she flushes up"—

"How's Bayleaf?" This was Tom's hunter which he never mounted, yet felt a certain property in all the same.

"Nothing to brag of, sir. That poor animal, he's like a Christian. He knows as well when there's something up"—

"You had better drive on," said Tom. "How dark it is!"

“It’s all the rain, sir, like as if the skies themselves—But we’re glad as the equinoctials is over, and you’ll have a good season for your voyage. Shall you see Mr. George, sir, where you are going?”

At this Tom laughed, with a most unmirthful outburst. “No,” he said; “that’s the fun of the thing—he in one country and I in another. It’s all very nicely settled for us.”

“Let’s hope, sir,” said the man, “that when things get a little more civilised there will be a railway or something. We should all like to send our respects and duty to Mr. George.”

To this Tom made no reply. He was not in a very cheerful mood, nor did this conversation tend to elevate his spirits. There was nothing adventurous in his disposition. The distant voyage, the new world, the banishment from all those haunts in which he could find his favourite enjoyments, with an occasional compunction, indeed, but nothing strong enough to disturb the tenor of his way, were terrible anticipations to him. Some lurking hope there was still in his mind that his fate was impossible; that such a catastrophe could not really be about to happen; that his father would relent at the sight of him or at Winnie’s prayers. It did not enter into Tom’s thoughts that Winnie would ever forsake him. The thought of her own advantage would not move her. He was aware that, in the question of George, it had more or less moved himself, and that he had not, perhaps, thrown all that energy into his intercession for his brother which he hoped and believed Winnie would employ for himself. But then he had feared to irritate his father, who would bear more from Winnie than from any one. At this moment, while he drove shivering through the rain,—shivering with nervous depression rather than with cold, for the evening was mild enough,—he had no doubt that she was

doing her best for him. And was it possible that his father could hold out, that he could see the last of his sons go away to the ends of the earth without emotion? The very groom was sorry for him, Bayleaf was drooping in sympathy, the skies themselves weeping over his fate. When the fate is our own, it is wonderful how natural it seems that heaven and earth should be moved for us. In George's case he had seen the other side of the question. In his own the pity of it was far the most powerful. His mind was almost overwhelmed by the prospect before him, but as he drove along in the rain, with the groom's compassionate voice by his side in the dark, expressing now and then a respectful and veiled sympathy, there flickered before Tom's eyes a faint little light of hope. Surely, surely, this, though it had happened to his brother, could not happen to him? Surely the father's heart was not hard enough, or fate terrible enough, to inflict such a punishment upon *him*? Others, perhaps, might deserve it, might be able to bear it; but he—how could he bear it? Tom said to himself that in his case it was impossible, and could not be.

CHAPTER II

IN family troubles such as that which we have indicated, it is generally a woman who is the chief sufferer. She stands between the conflicting parties, and, whether she is mother or sister, suffers for both, unable to soften judgment on one hand, or to reduce rebellion on the other; or else securing a ground of reconciliation by entreaties and tears which she would not use on her own behalf, and often by the sacrifice of her own reason and power of judging, and conscious humiliation to all the imbecilities of peace-making. A woman in such circumstances has to pledge herself for reformations in which, alas! her heart has but little faith. She has to persuade the angry father that his son has erred less than appears, to invent a thousand excuses, to exhaust herself in palliation of offences which are far more offensive and terrible to her than to him whose wrath she deprecates; and she has to convince the impatient and resentful son that his father is acting rather in love than in anger, and that his sins have wounded as much as they have exasperated. Those women who have no judgment of their own to exercise, and who can believe everything, are the happiest in this ever-returning necessity: and indeed in many complications of life it is much better for all parties that the woman should be without judgment, the soft and boneless angel of conventional romance. Winifred Chester was not of this kind. She was a just and tender-hearted woman, full of affection and compassion, to whom nature gave the hard task of mediating between two parties whose conflicting errors she was, alas! but too well able to estimate—the father, whose indignation and rage were in fact sufficiently just,

yet so little righteous, and her brothers, of whom she knew that they neither felt any real compunction nor intended any amendment. There is, let us hope, some special indulgence for those luckless advocates of erring men who have to promise amendment which they can put no faith in, and plead excuses which to their own minds have no validity.

After the conversation which had been held in the great drawing-room, when Mr. Chester settled himself to a study of the evening papers which had just been brought in, Winifred left the room softly, and stole upstairs to the window of her brother's room, which commanded the avenue, and from which she could see his approach. The room was faintly lit with firelight and full of all the luxurious contrivances for comfort to which a rich man's sons are accustomed. Poor Tom! what would he do without them all, without the means of procuring them? Poor George! what was he doing, he who now had some years' experience of work and poverty? She stole behind the drawn curtains and looked out upon the darkness and the falling rain. There was little light in the wild landscape, and no sound but that of the rain pattering upon the thick ivy which clothed the older part of the house, and streaming silently down upon the trees, which were still bare, though swelling at every point with the sap of spring. The air was soft and warm; the rain and the darkness full of a wild sense of fertility and growth. Winifred's imagination depicted to her only too clearly the state of half-despair, yet unconviction, in which her brother's mind would be. He would not believe it was possible, and yet he would know. He was very well aware that his father was remorseless, yet he would not be able to understand how ruin could overtake *him*. The circumstances brought back before her vividly the other occasion on which she had implored in vain the reversal of the

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