

Kirsteen:

The Story of a Scotch Family
Seventy Years Ago

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KIRSTEEN. VOLUME 2

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KIRSTEEN
THE STORY
OF
A SCOTCH FAMILY SEVENTY YEARS AGO

VOL. I.

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT

WITH LOVE AND RESPECT

TO

CHRISTINA ROGERSON.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

“WHERE is Kirsteen?”

“Deed, mem, I canna tell you; and if you would be guided by me you wouldna wail and cry for Kirsteen, night and day. You’re getting into real ill habits with her to do everything for you. And the poor lassie has not a meenit to hersel’. She’s on the run from morning to night. Bring me this, and get me that. I ken you’re very weakly and life’s a great trouble, but I would fain have ye take a little thought for her too.”

Mrs. Douglas looked as if she might cry under Marg’ret’s reproof. She was a pale pink woman seated in a large high easy-chair, so-called, something like a porter’s chair. It was not particularly easy, but it was filled with pillows, and was the best that the locality and the time could supply. Her voice had a sound of tears in it as she replied:

“If you were as weak as I am, Marg’ret, and pains from head to foot, you would know better—and not grudge me the only comfort I have.”

“Me grudge ye ainything! no for the world; except just that bairn’s time and a’ her life that might be at its brightest; but poor thing, poor thing!” said Marg’ret, shaking her head.

The scene was the parlour at Drumcarro, in the wilds of Argyllshire, the speakers, the mistress of the house *de jure*, and she who was at the head of affairs *de facto*, Marg'ret the housekeeper, cook, lady's maid, and general manager of everything. Mrs. Douglas had brought Marg'ret with her as her maid when she came to Drumcarro as a bride some thirty years before; but as she went on having child after child for nearly twenty years, without much stamina of either mind or body to support that continual strain, Marg'ret had gradually become more and more the deputy and representative, the real substitute of the feminine head of the house. Not much was demanded of that functionary so far as the management of its wider affairs went. Her husband was an arbitrary and high-tempered man, whose will was absolute in the family, who took counsel with no one, and who after the few complaisances of a grim honeymoon let his wife drop into the harmless position of a nonentity, which indeed was that which was best fitted for her. All her active duties one by one had fallen into the hands of Marg'ret, whose first tender impulse to save the mistress whom she loved from toils unfitted for her, had gradually developed into the self-confidence and universal assumption of an able and energetic housekeeper born to organize and administer. Marg'ret did not know what these fine words meant, but she knew "her work," as she would have said, and by degrees had taken everything in the house and many things outside it into her hands. It was to her that the family went for everything, who was the giver of all indulgences, the only person who dared speak to "the maister," when clothes were wanted or any new thing. She was an excellent cook, a good manager, combining all the qualities that make a house comfortable, and she was the only one in the house who was not afraid of "the maister," of whom on the contrary he stood in a little awe. A wife cannot throw up her situation with the

certainty of finding another at a moment's notice as a good housekeeper can do—even if she has spirit enough to entertain such an idea. And poor Mrs. Douglas had no spirit, no health, little brains to begin with and none left now, after thirty years of domestic tyranny and “a bairntime” of fourteen children. What could such a poor soul do but fall into invalidism with so many excellent reasons constantly recurring for adopting the habits of that state and its pathos and helplessness? especially with Marg’ret to fall back upon, who, though she would sometimes speak her mind to her mistress, nursed and tended, watched over and guarded her with the most unfailing care. Drumcarro himself (as he liked to be called) scarcely dared to be very uncivil to his wife in Marg’ret’s presence. He knew better than to quarrel with the woman who kept so much comfort with so little expense in his spare yet crowded house.

“Who is your ‘poor thing, poor thing’?” said a cheerful voice, with a mimicry of Marg’ret’s manner and her accent (for Marg’ret said poor as if it were written with a French u, that sound so difficult to English lips) “would it be the colley dogue or the canary bird or maybe the mistress of the house?”

Marg’ret turned round upon the only antagonist in the house who could hold head against her, or whom she could not crush at a blow—Kirsteen, the second daughter, who came in at this moment, quite softly but with a sudden burst open of the door, a sort of compromise between the noise it would have been natural to her to make, and the quietness essential to the invalid’s comfort. She was a girl of nearly twenty, a daughter of the hills, strongly built, not slim but trim, with red hair and brown eyes and a wonderful complexion, the pure whiteness like milk which so often goes with those ruddy locks, and the colour of health and fine air on her

cheeks. I would have darkened and smoothed my Kirsteen's abundant hair if I could, for in those days nobody admired it. The type of beauty to which the palm was given was the pale and elegant type, with hair like night and starry eyes either blue or dark; and accordingly Kirsteen was not considered a pretty girl, though there were many who liked her looks in spite of her red hair, which was how people expressed their opinion then. It was so abundant and so vigorous and full of curl that it cost her all the trouble in the world to keep it moderately tidy, whereas "smooth as satin" was the required perfection of ladies' locks. Her eyes were brown, not nearly dark enough for the requirements of the time, a kind of hazel indeed, sometimes so full of light that they dazzled the spectator and looked like gold—also quite out of accordance with the canons of the day. She was slightly freckled: she was, as I have said, strongly built; and in the dress of the time, a very short bodice and a very straight and scanty skirt, her proportions were scarcely elegant, but her waist was round if not very small, and her arms, in their short sleeves, shapely and well formed, and whiter than might have been expected from their constant exposure to air and sun, for Kirsteen only put on her gloves on serious occasions. The air of health and brightness and vigour about her altogether, made her appearance like that of a burst of sunshine into this very shady place.

"Deed," said Marg'ret, putting her hands on each side of her own substantial waist in a way which has always been supposed to imply a certain defiance, "it was just you yoursel'."

"Me!" the girl cried with a sort of suppressed shout. She cast a laughing glance round with an apparent attempt to discover some cause for the pity. "What have I done wrong now?" Then her eyes came back to the troubled almost whimpering pathos of her

mother's looks, and a cloud came over her bright countenance. "What has she been saying, mother, about me?"

"She says I'm crying on you for something day and night, and that you never have a minute to yourself; and oh, Kirsteen, my dear, I fear it's true."

Kirsteen put her arms akimbo too, and confronted Marg'ret with laughing defiance. They were not unlike each other, both of them types of powerful and capable womanhood, the elder purely and strongly practical, the other touched with fancy and poetry and perhaps some of the instincts of gentle blood, though neither in father nor mother were there many graces to inherit. "You are just a leein' woman," said the girl with a flash of her bright eyes. "Why, it's my life! What would I do without my Minnie?—as the song says." And she began to sing in a fresh, sweet, but uncultivated voice:

"He turned him right and round about,
Said, Scorn not at my mither,
True loves I may get mony an ane
But Minnie ne'er anither."

Before Kirsteen's song came to an end, however, her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "What were you wanting, mother," she said hastily as she dropped the tune which was a very simple one, "to make her speak?"

"Oh, I was wanting nothing, nothing in particular. I was wanting my pillows shifted a little, and the big plaiden shawl for my knees, and one of my wires that fell out of my reach, and my other clew for I'm nearly at the end of this one. Ay! that's better; there is nobody that knows how to make me comfortable but you."

For Kirsteen in the meantime had begun to do, with swift and noiseless care, all that was wanted, finding the clew, or ball of worsted for the stocking her mother was knitting, as she swept softly past to get the big shawl, on her way to the side of the chair where she arranged the pillows with deft accustomed skill. It did not take a minute to supply all these simple requirements. Marg'ret looked on, without moving while all was done, and caught the look half-soothed, half-peevish, which the invalid cast round to see if there was not something else that she wanted. "You may put down that book off the mantelpiece that Robbie left there," Mrs. Douglas said, finding nothing else to suggest; "it will curl up at the corners, and your father will be ill-pleased—"

"Weel," said Marg'ret, "now ye've got your slave, I'm thinking ye've nae mair need of me, and there's the grand supper to think of, that the maister's aye sae keen about. When will ye have markit a' thae things, Miss Kirsteen? For I maun see to the laddie's packing before it's ower late."

"There's the last half dozen of handkerchiefs to do; but I'll not take long, and they're small things that can go into any corner. I'll do them now," said Kirsteen with a little sigh.

"There's nae hurry;" Marg'ret paused a little, then caught the girl by the sleeve, "just take another turn in the bonnie afternoon before the sun's down," she said in a low tone, "there's plenty of time. Run away, my bonnie lamb. I'll see the mistress wants naething."

"And you that have the supper and the packing and all on your hands! No, no. I'll do them now. You may go to your work," said Kirsteen with a look half tender, half peremptory. She carried her

work to the window and sat down there with the white handkerchiefs in her hand.

“And what colour will you mark them in, Kirsteen? You have neither cotton nor silk to do it.”

Kirsteen raised her head and pulled out a long thread of her red hair. “I am going to do it in this colour,” she said with a slight blush and smile. It was not an unusual little piece of sentiment in those days and the mother accepted it calmly.

“My colour of hair,” she said, smoothing with a little complaisance her scanty dark locks under her cap, “was more fit for that than yours, Kirsteen, but Robbie will like to have it all the same.”

Kirsteen laughed a little consciously while she proceeded with her work. She was quite willing to allow that a thread of her mother’s dark hair would be better. “I will do one with yours for Robbie,” she said, “and the rest with mine.”

“But they’re all for Robbie,” said the mother.

“Yes, yes,” Kirsteen replied with again that conscious look, the colour mantling to her cheeks, a soft moisture filling her eyes. The handkerchief was marked in fine delicate little cross stitches upon the white cambric, and though Mrs. Douglas’s dark hair was like a spider’s web, the red of Kirsteen’s shone upon the fine fabric like a thread of gold.

The handkerchiefs were not yet finished when two young men came into the room, one so like Kirsteen that there was no difficulty in identifying him as her brother, the other a swarthy youth a little older, tall and strong and well knit. Robbie was on the

eve of his start in life, leaving home, and Ronald Drummond, who was the son of a gentleman in the neighbourhood, was going with him. They were both bound with commissions in the Company's service for India, where half of the long-legged youths, sons of little Highland lairds and Lowland gentlemen, with good blood and plenty of pride and no money, the Quentin Durwards of the early nineteenth century, found an appropriate career. The period was that of the brief peace which lasted only so long as Napoleon was at Elba, long enough, however, to satisfy the young men that there was to be no chance of renewed fighting nearer home and to make them content with their destination. They had been bred for this destination from their cradles, and Robbie Douglas at least was not sorry to escape from the dullness of Drumcarro to a larger life. Several of his brothers were already in India, and the younger ones looked to no other fate but that of following. As for the girls they did not count for much. He was sorry to say good-bye to Kirsteen, but that did not weigh down his heart. He was in high excitement, eager about his new outfit, his uniform, all the novel possessions which were doubly enchanting to a boy who had never before possessed anything of his own. He was eighteen, and to become all at once a man, an officer, an independent individuality, was enough to turn the head of any youth.

Ronald Drummond was different. He was going from a much more genial home: he had already tasted the sweets of independence, having served in the last campaign in the Peninsula and been wounded, which was a thing that raised him still higher in the scale of life than the three years' advantage in respect of age which he had over his young comrade. He was neither so cheerful nor so much excited as Robbie. He came and stood over Kirsteen

as she drew closer and closer to the window to end her work before the light had gone.

“You are working it with your hair!” he said, suddenly, perceiving the nature of the long curling thread with which she threaded her needle.

“Yes,” she said, demurely, holding up her work to the light. “What did you think it was?”

“I thought it was gold thread,” he said. And then he took up one of the handkerchiefs already completed from the table. “R. D.,” he said. “That’s my name too.”

“So it is,” said Kirsteen, as if she had now discovered the fact for the first time.

“Nobody will do anything like that for me,” he added, pathetically.

“Oh, Ronald! if not the hairs of their heads but the heads themselves would do ye good ye should have them—and that ye know.”

“It is very true,” said Ronald, “and thank you, Kirsteen, for reminding me how good they are; but,” he added, after a moment, in a low voice, “they are not *you*.”

She gave vent to a very feeble laugh which was full of emotion. “No, they could not be that,” she said.

“And R. D. is my name too,” said the young man. “Kirsteen!” She looked up at him for a moment in the light that was fading slowly out of the skies. He had taken one of the handkerchiefs from the pile, and touching her sleeve with one hand to call her

attention, put the little glistening letters to his lips and then placed the handkerchief carefully in the breast pocket of his coat. Standing as he did, shutting out, as she complained, all the light from Mrs. Douglas, this little action was quite unseen, except by the one person who was intended to see it. Kirsteen could make no reply nor objection, for her heart was too full for speech. Her trembling hand, arrested in its work, dropped into his for a moment. He whispered something else, she scarcely knew what—and then Marg'ret marched into the room with the two candles which were all the lights ever used in Drumcarro parlour, and all was over and done.

CHAPTER II.

THERE was “a grand supper,” as Marg’ret had announced, at Drumcarro this evening, for which, though it was almost entirely a family party, solemn preparations were being made. The house was full of an unusual odour of good cheer, unusual goings and comings through the house betrayed the excitement and sense of a great event approaching which was diffused through the family. On ordinary occasions the family dinner took place between two and three o’clock in the afternoon, followed by tea at seven with much wealth of scones and jam, new-laid eggs and other home produce—and the day ended for the elders by the production of “the tray” with its case of spirit-bottles and accompanying hot water. Now and then by times, however, this great ceremonial of a supper took place, always on the eve of the departure of one of the boys to make their fortune in the world. These occasions were consequently not surrounded by the brightest recollections to the grown-up portion of the family, or to their mother. The supper indeed to her was a feast of tears, probably as great, though a more usual indulgence than the other characteristics of the festival. It was rarely that Mrs. Douglas ventured to weep in presence of her lord, but on that night he said nothing, made no comment upon her red eyes, and suffered the whimper in her voice without any harsh, “Hold your tongue, woman!” such as usually subdued her. And it was recognized in the house that it was the mother’s *rôle* and privilege on these occasions to cry. The children were not disturbed by it as they might have been by tears which they were less accustomed to see shed.

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