

OLIVER'S BRIDE

A True Story

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT

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CHAPTER I.

‘I HAVE not been always what I ought to have been,’ he said, ‘you must understand that, Grace. I can’t let you take me without telling you, though it’s against myself. I have not been the man that your husband ought to be, that is the truth.’

She smiled upon him with all the tenderness of which her eyes were capable, which was saying much, and pressed the hands which held hers. They had just, after many difficulties and embarrassments and delay, said to each other all that people say when, from being strangers, they become one and conclude to part no more. They were standing together in all the joyful agitation and excitement which accompany this explanation—their hearts beating high, their faces illuminated by the radiance of the delight which is always a surprise to the true lover, even when to others it has been most certain and evident. Their friends had known for weeks that this was what it was coming to; but he was pale with the ineffable discovery that she loved him, and she all-enveloped in the very bloom of a blush for pure wonder of this extraordinary certainty that he loved her. She looked at him and smiled, their clasped hands changing their action for the moment, she pressing his in token of utmost confidence as his hitherto had pressed hers.

‘I do not mean only that I do not deserve you, which is what any man would say,’ he resumed, after the unspoken yet unmistakable answer she had made him. ‘The best man on earth might say so, and speak the truth. No man is good enough for such as you; but I mean more than that.’

‘You mean flattery,’ she said, ‘which I would not listen to for a moment if it were not sweeter to listen to than anything else in the world. You don’t suppose I believe that; but so long as *you* do—’

Her hands unloosed and melted into his again, and he resumed the pressure which became almost painful, so close it was and earnest.

‘Dear,’ he said, with his voice trembling, ‘you must not think I mean that only. That would be so were I a better man. I mean that I am not worthy to touch your dear hand or the hem of your garment. Oh, listen: I have not been a good man, Grace.’

She released one of her hands and put it up softly and touched his lips.

‘All that has been is done with,’ she said, ‘for both of us—everything has become new—’

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘if you are content with that, it is so; it shall ever be so. Yet I would not accept that peace of God without telling you—without letting you know—’

‘Nothing,’ she said, ‘or I might have to confess, too.’

‘You,’ he cried, seizing her in his arms with a kind of rage. ‘Oh, never name yourself in such a comparison. You don’t know, you can’t imagine—’

Once more she stopped his mouth.

‘No more, no more; we are both content in what is, and happy in what is to come.’

‘Happy is too mild a word. It is not big enough, nor strong enough for me.’

She smiled with the woman’s soft superiority to the man’s rapture that makes her glad. Superiority yet inferiority, admiring, yet half disdain, the tide that carries him away—all for her, as if she was worth that! proud of him for the warmth of passion of which she is not capable, at which she shakes her head, not even he able to transport her to such a height of emotion as that to which she, only she, no other! can transport him. She began to be his critic and counsellor on the moment, as soon as it had been acknowledged that she was his love, and was to be his wife.

It had been a long wooing, much interrupted, supposed to be hopeless. They had loved each other as boy and girl seven or eight years before. It is to be hoped that no one will be wounded by the fact that Grace Goodheart was twenty-five; not an innocent angel of eighteen, but a woman who had her own opinions of the world. He was five years older. When she was seventeen and he twenty-two there had been passages between them which he had perhaps forgotten: but she had never forgot. At that period they were both poor. She an orphan girl in the house of her uncle, who was very kind to her, but announced everywhere that he did not intend to leave her his fortune; he a young man without any very definite intentions in life, or energy to make a way for himself. They had parted then without anything said, for Oliver was a gentleman, and would not spoil the future of the girl whom he could not ask to marry him. He had gone away into the world, and he had forgotten Grace. But there is nothing that a girl’s mind is more apt to fix upon than the vague conclusion, which is no end, of such an episode. There is in it something more delicate than an engagement which holds the imagination as fast as any betrothal. He has not

spoken, she thinks, for honour's sake. He has gone away, like a true knight, to gain fame or fortune, and so win her: and she is consciously waiting for him for long years, perhaps, till he comes back, following him with her heart, with her eyes as far as she can, ever open to all that is heard of him, collecting diligently every scrap of information. Grace had not been without her little successes in that time; others had seen that she was sweet as well as Oliver Wentworth; but she was so light-hearted and cheerful that no one could say it was for Oliver's sake, or for any reason but because she did not choose, that she would have no one in her own sphere. And then came that strange reversal of everything when the old uncle died without any will, and Grace, who it was always supposed must go out governessing at his death, was found to be his heiress. She was his next of kin; there was nobody even to divide it with, to fight for a share; and instead of being a little dependent orphan, she was an heiress and a very good match. How it was that Oliver Wentworth came back after this, was a question that many people asked; but however it was, it was not with any mercenary thought on his part. Whether his sister was equally disinterested, who would take no denial, but insisted on his visit, need not, perhaps, be inquired. He had come rather against his will, knowing no reason why Trix should be so urgent; and then he had met Grace Goodheart, whom he had not seen for so many years, again. To her it was a little disappointing that he came back very much as he had gone away, without having achieved either honour or fortune. But success is not dealt out in the same measure to every man; and if he had failed, how much more reason for consoling him? He had only failed in degree. He had not won either honour or fortune; but he was able to earn his daily bread, and perhaps hers. And when he saw her again, his heart had gone back with a bound to his first love, although in the meantime that

love had been forgotten. She was aware, more or less, of all this. She was even aware, more or less, of what he had wanted to tell her. She had followed him too closely with her heart not to know that he had not always kept himself unspotted from the world. This had cost her many a secret tear in the years which were past, but had not altered her mind towards him. There are women who can cease to love when they discover that a man is unworthy; indeed, it is one of the commonplaces both of fact and fiction, that love cannot exist without respect. It would be very well for the good people, and very ill for those who are not good, if this were always so. There are many, many, of women, perhaps the majority, who are not so high-minded, and who love those they love—God help them—whether they are worthy of love or not. Grace was one of those women. She heard, somehow—who can tell how, being intent to hear anything she could pick up about him—that he had not kept the perfect way. She heard that he had gone wrong, and perhaps heard no more for a year or two, and in her secret retirement wept and prayed, but made no outward sign; and then had heard some comforting news, and then again had been plunged into the anguish of those who know that their beloved are in misery and trouble, yet cannot lift a finger to help them. When he appeared again within her ken, she knew it was a man soiled with much contact of the world that met her, and not the pure-hearted boy of old. But he was still Oliver Wentworth, and that was everything. And when in honour and honesty he would have told her how unworthy he was, her heart leapt up towards him in that glory and delight of approbation which is perhaps the highest ecstasy of a woman. His confession, which she would not allow him to make, was virtue and excellence to her. She was more proud of him because he wanted to tell her that he was a sinner,

and acknowledge his unworthiness, than if he had been the most unsullied and excellent of men.

Wentworth's sister had always been Grace's friend. She was older than either of them, married, and full in the current of her own life. When Oliver came back to her after all was settled, and made what he believed was a revelation to her of his love and happiness, Mrs. Ford laughed in his face, even while she shared his raptures.

'Do you think I don't know all that?' she said. 'There never was anything so stupid as a man in love. Why, I have known it for the last eight years, and always looked forward to this day.' Which, perhaps, was not quite true, and yet was true in a way. For Trix had all along loved Grace for loving her brother, and had seen that, with such a wife, Oliver would be all that could be desired; yet had thought it best policy, on the whole, till Grace came into her fortune, to keep them out of each other's way.

'Trix,' he said very gravely, pulling his moustache, 'for eight years she has always been the first woman in the world for me.'

At which his sister, which was very unbecoming, continued to laugh. 'The first, perhaps, dear Noll,' she said, 'but we can't deny, can we, that there have been a few others—secondary? But you may be sure, so far as I am concerned, Grace shall never know a word of that.'

Oliver did not take the matter so lightly. From his rapture of content he dropped into great gravity and walked about the room pulling at his moustache, which was a custom he had when he was thinking. 'On the contrary,' he said, 'I should have liked her to

know before she took the last step that—that I haven't been a good fellow, Trix.'

'Oliver, I shouldn't like to hear any one else say so. Tom says' (this was her husband) 'that you've always been a good fellow in spite of—'

'In spite of what?'

'Well, in spite of—little indiscretions,' said Trix, looking her brother in the face, though she coloured as she did so in spite of herself.

'That means—' he said, and walked up and down and pulled his moustache more and more. It was a long time before he added, 'There is nothing that makes a man feel so ashamed of himself, Trix, as to feel that a woman like Grace—if there is anyone like her—'

'Oh, nobody, of course!' said his sister.

He gave her a look, half angry, half tender. 'You are a good woman, too; and to think that two girls like you should take a fellow at your own estimate, and pretend to think that he is a good fellow enough after all: as if that were all that her—her husband ought to be.'

'Well, Noll,' said Mrs. Ford, 'it is better not to go into details. Very likely we should not understand them if you did, though I am no girl, nor is she a baby either, for the matter of that; but whatever you have been or done, the fact is that you are just Oliver Wentworth, when all is said: and as Oliver Wentworth is the man Grace has been fond of almost since she was a child, and who has been my brother since ever he was born—'

‘Strange!’ he cried, with a curious outburst, half laugh, half groan, ‘to think she should have kept thinking of me all this time, while I—’

‘Have been in love with her, and considered her all the time the first woman in the world. You told me so just now.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that’s not a lie, though you may think it so. I did feel that when I thought of—’ and here he paused and gave his sister a guilty look.

‘When you thought of her at all; you needn’t be ashamed, Noll. That’s the man’s way of putting it. We women all know that; but now that she is before your eyes and you cannot help thinking of her—now it has come all right.’

Trix too gave a laugh which was half crying; and then she dried her eyes and came solemnly up to him with a very serious face, and caught him by the arm and looked into his eyes.

‘Oliver, now that all that’s over, and you’re an older man and understand that life can’t go on so; and now that you are going to marry Grace, the woman you have always loved—Oliver, for the love of God, no more of it now.’

He gazed at her for a moment with a flash of something like fury in his eyes, and then flung her arm far from him with fierce indignation. ‘Do you think I am a brute beast without understanding?’ he cried.

CHAPTER II

FOR a week or more after their betrothal these two lovers were very happy. To be sure there was a great deal of remark and some remonstrance addressed to Grace about the antecedents of the man she was going to marry. Various people spoke to her, and some even wrote, which is a strong step, asking her if she was aware that Oliver Wentworth had been supposed to be 'wild' or 'gay,' or something else of the same meaning. It is generally supposed that a village or a small town is the place for gossip, but I think Society is made up of a succession of villages, and that there is no place, not even London itself—that wilderness, that great Babylon—in which people are not talked about by their Christian names, and everything that can be discussed, with perhaps a little more, is not known about them. Ironborough was a very large town, but the Wentworths and the Goodhearts had both been settled there for a generation or two, and they were known to everybody. And not only was it known universally and much talked of that Oliver Wentworth had been 'wild,' and that he was poor, and consequently that he must be marrying solely for money; but it also raised a great ferment in the place that he should intend, instead of settling down ('and thankful for that') in Grace's charming house, which her old uncle, a man very learned in the art of making himself comfortable, had made so perfect—to carry off his wife to London with him, and live there for the advantage of his work, forsooth! as if his work could be of any such consequence in the *ménage*, or as if he would ever earn enough to pay the house rent. Oliver was like so many other young men, a barrister with very little to do. He had managed to keep himself

going by a few briefs and a little literature, as soon as he had fully convinced himself, by the process of spending everything else that he could lay his hands upon, that a man must live upon what he can make. He was not of so fine a fibre as some heroes, who feel themselves humiliated by their future wife's fortune, and whom the possible suspicion of interested motives pursues everywhere; but at the same time he was not disposed to be his wife's dependent, and he knew the world well enough to be aware that with the backing of her wealth he would probably make a great deal more of his profession than it had hitherto been possible for him to do. As for Grace herself, she talked of his profession, and of his work, and of the necessity for living where it would be most convenient to him, as if her entire fortune depended upon that, and Oliver's work was to be the support of the new household. A girl without a penny, whose marriage was to promote her to the delightful charge of a house of her own, and whose every new bonnet was to come from the earnings of her husband, could not have been more completely absorbed in consideration of all that was necessary for his perfect convenience in his work. She bewildered even Mrs. Ford by the way she took up this idea.

‘I honour you for what you say, and I love you for it, Grace; but still you know Oliver's profession is not what you would call very—lucrative, is it? and he could do his writing anywhere, you know!’

‘Indeed, I don't know anything of the kind,’ said Grace, indignantly. ‘He has to be constantly in the House when it is sitting. He has to know everything that is going on. Would you think your husband was well treated if he was made to manage his work, say from the seaside or a country house, for your sake and the

children's, instead of being on the spot? You know you would not, Trix.'

'Oh, well, perhaps that may be so; but then my husband—' faltered Trix, with a troubled look. She would have said: 'My husband is the breadwinner, and everything depends on him,' but she was daunted by the look in Grace's eyes, and actually did not dare to suggest that Oliver would be in a very different position. Mr. Wilbraham, the solicitor who managed Miss Goodheart's affairs, interfered in the same way, with similar results. She was in a position of almost unexampled freedom for so young a woman. She had neither guardians nor trustees. There was nobody in the world who had a right to dictate to her or even authoritatively to suggest what she ought to do—for the reason that all she had had come to her as it were inadvertently, accidentally, because her uncle, who always said he intended to leave her nothing, had died without a will. Mr. Wilbraham was the only man in the world who had any right to say a word, and he had no real right, only the right of an old friend who had known her all her life, and knew everything about her. He said, when the settlement was being discussed (in which respect Mr. Wentworth's behaviour was perfect—for all that he wished was to secure his wife in the undisturbed enjoyment of what was her own), that he hoped Miss Goodheart meant to remain, when she was married, among her own friends.

'I don't think you would like London after Ironborough,' he said, with perfect sincerity; 'and to get a house like this in town would cost you a fortune, you know.'

'It is not a question of liking,' said Grace, with all the calm of faith; 'of course, we must live where Mr. Wentworth's work

requires him to live. He cannot carry on his profession in the country.'

'The country!' said Mr. Wilbraham, with a sneer which his politeness to an excellent client could only soften. 'Does he call this the country? and Mr. Wentworth's profession, if you will permit me to say so, has, so far as I know—'

'It is the country though, you know,' said Grace, preserving her temper, though with a little difficulty, 'though not exactly what you could call fresh fields and pastures new.'

And when he looked up at her, Mr. Wilbraham made up his mind that it was best to say no more. A willful woman will have her way. Perhaps it was only the lavish and tender generosity of her nature, which would let no one see that she was conscious her position was different from that of the majority of women: but I think it went even a little further than this, and that Grace had got herself to believe that Oliver's work was all in all. She talked to him about it, till he believed in it too, and they planned together the localities in which it would be best to look for a house, in a place which should be quiet so that he might not be disturbed, and yet near everything that he ought to frequent and see; a place where they would, have good air and space to breathe, and yet a place where his chambers, and his newspaper office, and the House should be easily accessible; in short, just such a house as a rising barrister, who was at the same time a man of letters, ought to have. Grace, especially, was very anxious that it should not be too far away. 'As for me, you know, it does not matter a bit—one place is just the same as another to me; but everybody says a man's work loses when he is not always on the spot,' she said. Sometimes Oliver himself was tickled by her earnestness; but she was so very

much in earnest that he fell into her tone, and did not even venture to laugh at himself, which was a thing he had been very apt to do.

And those consultations were very sweet. It is doubtful whether anything in life is so sweet as the talks and anticipations of two who have thus made up their minds to be one, while as yet life keeps its old shape, the shape which they feel they have outgrown, and all is anticipation. Everything loses a little when it is realised. No house, to give a small example, is ever so convenient, so delightful, so entirely adapted for happy habitation, as the one which these two reasonable people actually hoped to find *To be Let* in London. It was to have a hundred advantages which never come together; it was to be exactly at the right distance from the turmoil of town; it was to have rooms arranged just in this and that way; it was to be very capable of decoration, and yet to have a character of its own. Oliver's library was to be the best room in the house, and yet the other sitting-rooms were to be best rooms too. 'I will not endure to have you pushed into a dark room, as poor Mr. Ford is,' said Grace. 'The master of the house, on whom everything depends, should always have the best. To be sure poor Mr. Ford does his work in his office, which is some excuse; but your study, Oliver, will tell for so much. You must let me furnish it out of my own head.'

He laughed a little, and coloured, and said, 'Seeing you will probably furnish it out of your own purse, Grace—'

At which she opened her eyes wide, and looked at him, then laughed too, a little, but gravely, as if it were not a subject for a jest, and said, 'Oh, I see what you mean. You mean me to be the accountant, and all that. Well, I am pretty good at arithmetic,

Oliver; and, of course, it might disturb your mind while you are busy, and I shall have nothing else to do.'

This was the way she took it, with a readiness of resource in parrying all allusions to her own wealth which was infinite, though whether she succeeded in this by dint of much thought, or whether it was entirely spontaneous, the suggestion of the moment, no one could quite make out. The result upon Oliver, as I have said, was that he began to believe in himself, too. Instead of laughing at his brief business, which had been his custom, he began to take himself and his work very seriously, and to think how he should apportion his time so as not to leave Grace too much alone—as if he had ever found any difficulty in finding time for whatever he wished to do! 'It is a pity,' he said, 'that this season is just the busiest time, both in chambers and in politics; but I must make leisure to take you about a little, Grace. To think of taking you about, and seeing everything again, fresh, through your dear eyes, is almost too delightful. Would the time were here!'

'It will come quite soon enough, Oliver. We have not even begun to look for the house yet, and there is all the furnishing and everything to do. Don't you think you had better run up to town and begin operations? We may not be able, you know, just at once, to light upon the house.'

'Don't you think you had better come with me, Grace?'

'I? Oh! Why should I go with you? Surely,' she said, with a laugh and a blush, 'you will be able to do that by yourself.'

'How could I do it by myself? I am no longer myself. I am only half of myself. Come and I shall go; but I am not going to leave myself behind me, and stultify myself. I shall not even be

one-half but only a fifth or sixth of myself: for there is you, who is the best part of me, and then my heart, which is next best, and my thoughts, which, along with my heart and you, really make up myself—all the best part.’

‘What an intolerable number of selves!’ she said; though, perhaps, it was not very clever, it pleased her in that state of mind in which we are all so easily pleased. She said no more, however, and drew away from him, while he jumped to his feet at the opening of the door. The old butler came in with a letter on a tray. There was something sinister in the look of the letter. It was in a blue envelope, and was directed in a very common, informal hand—*Immediate* written on it in large letters.

‘Please, sir, Mrs. Ford’s man has come to say as they don’t know if it is anythink of importance; but ‘as brought it seeing as immediate’s on it, in case it should be business, sir; and here, sir, is a telegram as has come too.’

The butler gave a demure glance at his mistress, who was still blushing a good deal, as she had done when she pushed away the chair.

‘Thank you, Jenkins!’ said Oliver.

He took the letter and looked at it before he opened it. He thought he had seen the handwriting before, but could not remember where. He felt a little afraid of it; he could not tell why. He turned it over in his hand and hesitated, and would have liked to put it in his pocket and carry it away with him for perusal afterwards. What could be so *Immediate* as to require his attention now—a bill, perhaps? He ran over the list of possibilities in that way, and did not remember anything.

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