

**THE
GREATEST HEIRESS IN
ENGLAND.**

A NOVEL.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT.

Table of Contents

THE GREATEST HEIRESS IN ENGLAND.

CHAPTER I. NO. 6 IN THE TERRACE.

CHAPTER II. OLD JOHN TREVOR.

CHAPTER III. THE WILL.

CHAPTER IV. SISTER AND BROTHER.

CHAPTER V. AFTERNOON TALK.

CHAPTER VI. PHILIP.

CHAPTER VII. THE WHITE HOUSE.

CHAPTER VIII. EXPLANATIONS.

CHAPTER IX. A GREAT TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER X. CHATTER.

CHAPTER XI. AN AFTERNOON TEA.

CHAPTER XII. FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER XIII. THE LAST CLAUSE

CHAPTER XIV. A FALSE ALARM.

CHAPTER XV. THE SIGNING OF THE WILL.

CHAPTER XVI. THE READING OF THE WILL.

CHAPTER XVII. GUARDIANS.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE NEW LIFE.

CHAPTER XIX. LADY RANDOLPH'S MOTIVE.

CHAPTER XX. THE RUSSELLS.

CHAPTER XXI. POWER.

CHAPTER XXII. HOW THE RUSSELLS GOT ON.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE DEDICATION.

CHAPTER XXIV. SIR TOM.

CHAPTER XXV. A BAD RECEPTION.

CHAPTER XXVI. A RECEPTION OF A DIFFERENT KIND.

CHAPTER XXVII. LUCY'S FIRST VENTURE.

CHAPTER XXVIII. GOING HOME.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE TERRACE.

CHAPTER XXX. HOME AND FRIENDS.

CHAPTER XXXI. CHANGED.

CHAPTER XXXII. A NEW ADVISER.

CHAPTER XXXIII. VISITORS.

CHAPTER XXXIV. A CROQUET PARTY.

CHAPTER XXXV. POPULARITY.

CHAPTER XXXVI. THE HARE WITH MANY FRIENDS.

CHAPTER XXXVII. THE FIRST PROPOSAL.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. ONE DOWN, AND ANOTHER COME ON.

CHAPTER XXXIX. THE PICNIC.

CHAPTER XL. DISCOMFITURE.

CHAPTER XLI. PHILIP'S DECISION.

CHAPTER XLII. WHAT THE LADIES SAID.

CHAPTER XLIII. THE CUP FULL.

CHAPTER XLIV. WHEN THE NIGHT'S DARKEST IT'S
NEAREST THE DAWNING.

CHAPTER XLV. THE GUARDIANS.

CHAPTER XLVI. THE END.

**THE GREATEST HEIRESS
IN ENGLAND.**

CHAPTER I.

NO. 6 IN THE TERRACE.

A COUNTRY town, quiet, simple, and dull, chiefly of old construction, but with a few new streets and scattered villas of modern flimsiness, a river flowing through it, dulled and stilled with the frost; trees visible in every direction, blocking up the horizon and making a background, though only with a confused anatomy of bare branches, to the red houses; not many people about the streets, and these cold, subdued, only brightening a little with the idea that if the frost "held" there might be skating to-morrow. On one side the High Street trended down a slight slope toward the river, on the other ran vaguely away into a delta of small streets, which, in their turn, led to the common, on the edge of which lay the new district of Farafield. All towns it is said have a tendency to stray and expand themselves toward the west, and this is what had happened here. The little new streets, roads, crescents, and places all strayed toward the setting sun. The best and biggest of these, and at the same time the furthest off of all, was the Terrace, a somewhat gloomy row of houses, facing toward the common, and commanding across the strip of garden which kept them in dignified seclusion from the road a full view of the broken expanse of gorse and heather over which the sunsets played, affording to these monotonous windows a daily spectacle far more splendid than any official pomp. There were but twelve of these houses, ambitiously built to look like one great "Elizabethan mansion." Except one or two large old-fashioned substantial houses in the market-place, these were the largest and most pretentious dwellings in the town; the proud occupants considered the pile as a very fine specimen of modern domestic architecture,

and its gentility was undoubted. It was the landlord's desire that nobody who worked for his or her living should enter these sacred precincts. It is difficult to keep so noble a resolution in a country where so many occupations which are not conspicuous to the common eye live and grow; but still it was an exalted aim.

In this town there was a street, and in this street there was a house, and in this house there was a room. After this fairy-tale fashion we may be permitted to begin this history. The house, which was called No. 6 in the Terrace, was in no way remarkable externally among its neighbors; but within the constitution of the family was peculiar. The nominal master of the house was a retired clerk of the highest respectability, with his equally respectable wife. But it was well known that this excellent couple existed (in the Terrace) merely as ministers to the comfort of an old man who inhabited the better part of the house, and whose convenience was paramount over all its other arrangements. There was a link of relationship, it was understood, between the Fords and old Mr. Trevor, and though there was no great disparity of social condition between them, yet there was the great practical difference that old Trevor was very rich, and the Fords had no more than sufficient for their homely wants—wants much more humble than those of the ordinary residents in the Terrace, who were the *élite* of the town. This gave a tone of respect to their intercourse on one side, and a kind of superiority on the other. The Fords were of the opinion that old Mr. Trevor had greatly the best of the bargain. He had none of the troubles of a house upon his shoulders, and he had all its advantages. The domestic arrangements which cost Mrs. Ford so much thought cost him nothing but money; he had no care, no annoyance about anything, neither taxes to pay nor servants to look after, and everything went on like clock-work; his tastes were

considered in every way, and all things were made subservient to him. When coals or meat rose in value, or when one of the three servants (each more troublesome than the other, as it is the nature of maids to be) was disagreeable, what did it matter to old Mr. Trevor? And when that question arose about the borough rate, what had he to say to it? Nothing, absolutely nothing! all this daily burden was on the shoulders of Richard Ford and Susan his wife; whereas Mr. Trevor had nothing to do but to put his hand into his pocket, to some people the easiest exercise. He had the best of everything, the chief rooms, and the most unwearied attendance; and not only for him but for his two children, who were a still more anxious charge, as Mrs. Ford expressed it, was every good thing provided. Sometimes the excellent couple grumbled, and sometimes felt it hard that, being relations, there should be so much difference; but, on the whole, both parties were aware that their own comforts profited by the conjunction, and the household machinery worked smoothly, with as few jars and as much harmony as is possible to man.

At the time this history begins, Mr. Trevor was seated in the drawing-room, the best room in the house. The Fords occupied the front parlor below, where the furniture was moderate and homely; but all the skill of the upholsterer had been displayed above. The room had two long windows looking out over the common, not at this moment a very cheerful prospect. There was nothing outside but mist and dampness, made more dismal by incipient frost, and full of the sentiment of cold, a chill that went to your heart. The prospect inside was not much adapted to warm or cheer in such circumstances. The windows were cut down to the floor, as is usual in suburban houses, and though the draught had been shut out as much as possible by list and stamped leather, and by the

large rugs of silky white fur which lay in front of each window, yet there were still little impertinent whiffs of air blowing about. And the moral effect was still more chilly. It was not an artistic room, according to the fashion of the present day, or one indeed in which any taste to speak of had been shown. The walls were white with gilded ornaments, the curtains were blue, the carpet showed large bouquets of flowers upon a light ground. There were large prints, very large, and not very interesting, royal marriages and christenings, hanging, one in the center of each wall. Thus it will be seen there was nothing to distinguish it from a hundred other unremarkable and unattractive apartments of the ordinary British kind. A large folding screen was disposed round the door to keep out the draught, and the folding-doors which led into Mr. Trevor's bedroom behind were veiled with curtains of the same blue as those of the windows. The old man was seated by a large fire in a comfortable easy-chair, with a writing-table within reach of his hand. Mr. Trevor was not a man of imposing presence; he was little and very thin, wrapped in a dark-colored dressing-gown, with a high collar in which he seemed pilloried, and a brown wig which imparted a very aged juvenility to his small and wrinkled face. Gray hairs harmonize and soften wrinkles; but the smooth chin and bright brown locks of this little old man gave him a somewhat elfish appearance, something like that of an elderly bird. He sat with a pen in his hand making notes upon a large document opened out upon the writing-table, and his action and a little unconscious chirp to which he gave vent now and then increased his resemblance to an alert sparrow. And indeed, it might have been a claw which Mr. Trevor was holding up with a quill in it, and his little air of triumphant success and self-content, his head held on one side, and the dab he made from time to time upon his paper, gave him very much the air of a sparrow. He had laid down his

“Times,” which hung in a much crumpled condition, like a table-cover, over a small round table on his other hand, in order to make this sudden note, whatever it might be, and as he made it he chuckled. The paper on which he wrote was large blue paper, like that employed by lawyers, and had an air of formality and importance. It was smoothed out over a big blotting-book, not long enough quite to contain it, and had a dog’s-ear at the lower corner, which proved a frequent recurrence on the part of the writer to this favorite manuscript. When he had written all that occurred to him, Mr. Trevor put down his pen and resumed the “Times;” but the interest of the previous occupation carried the day even over that invaluable newspaper, which is as good as a trade to idle persons. He had not gone down a column before he paused, rested his paper on his knee, and chuckled again. Then he leaned over the writing-table and read the note he had made, which was tolerably long; then, with his “Times” in his hand, rose and went to the door, losing himself behind the screen. There he stood for a moment, wrapping his dressing-gown around his thin legs with a shiver, and called for “Ford! Ford!” Presently a reply came, muffled by the distance, from the room below. “I’ve put in another clause,” the old man called over the stair.

Ford below opened the door of his parlor to listen.

“Bless me! have you indeed, Mr. Trevor?” he replied, with less enthusiasm.

“Come up, come up, and you shall hear it,” said the other, fidgeting with excitement. Then he returned to his easy-chair, laughing to himself under his breath. He bent over the document and read it again. “They’ll keep her straight, they’ll keep her straight among them,” he said to himself. “She’ll be clever if she

goes wrong after all this,” and then he sat down again, chuckling and tucking the “Times” like a napkin over his knees.

All this time he had not been alone; but his companion was not one who claimed much notice. There was spread before the fire a large milky-white rug, like those that stopped the draught from the windows; and upon this, half-buried in the fur, lay a small boy in knickerbockers absorbed in a book. The child was between seven and eight; he was dressed in a blue velveteen suit, somewhat shabby. He was small even for his small age. His face was a little pale face, with fair and rather lanky locks. Sometimes he would lie on his back with his book supported upon his chest—sometimes the other way, with the book on the rug, and his head a little raised, leaning on his hands. This was his attitude at present; he took no notice of his father, nor his father of him; he was a kind of postscript to old Mr. Trevor’s life; no one had expected him, no one had wanted him; when he chose to come into the world it was at his own risk, so to speak. He had been permitted to live, and had been called John—a good, safe, serviceable name, but no special encouragement of any other kind had been given to him, to pursue the thankless path of existence. Nevertheless, little Jock had done so in a dogged sort of way. He had been delicate, but he had always gone on all the same. Lately he had found the best of all allies and defenders in his sister, but no one else took much notice of him, nor he of them; and his father and he paid no attention to each other. Mr. Trevor took care not to stumble over him, being thoroughly accustomed to his presence; and as for little Jock, he never stirred. He was on the rug in the body, but in soul he was in the forest of Ardennes, or tilting on the Spanish roads with Don Quixote. It was wonderful, some people thought, that such a baby should read at all, or reading, that he should have any books above

the level of those that are written in three syllables. But the child had no baby-books, and therefore he took what he could get. Are not the baby-books a snare and delusion, keeping children out of their inheritance? How can they understand Shakespeare, you will say? and I suppose Jock did not understand; yet that great person pervaded the very air about this little person, so that it glowed and shone. Only his shoulders, raised a little way out of the white silky fluff of the rug, betrayed the immovable creature, and his book was almost lost altogether in it. There he lay, thinking nothing of how his life was to run, or of the influences which might be developing round him. There was not a piece of furniture in the room which counted for less with Mr. Trevor than little Jock.

Ford was a long time coming; he had some business of his own on hand, which though not half so important, was, on the whole, more interesting to him than Mr. Trevor's business; and then he had a little argumentation with Mrs. Ford before he could get away.

“What is it now?” Mrs. Ford said fretfully, “what does he make such a fuss about? Sure there's nothing so very wonderful in making a will. I'd say, ‘I leave all I have to my two children,’ and there would be an end of it. He makes as much of it as if it was a book that he was writing. Many a book has been written with less fuss.”

“My dear,” said Ford, “there are many people who can write books and can not make a will; indeed the most of them have no need to, if all we hear is true. And you don't give a thought to the interests—I may say the colossal interests—that are involved.”

“Pooh!” said Mrs. Ford, “I think of our own interests if you please, which are all I care for. Is he going to leave us anything? that is what I want to know.”

“I am sorry you are so mercenary, my dear.”

“I am not mercenary, Mr. Ford; but I like to see an inch before me, and know what is to become of me. He’s failing fast, any one can see that; and if we’re left with the lease of a big house on our hands—” This was the danger that afflicted Mrs. Ford at all moments, and robbed her of her peace.

“Stuff!” Ford said. He knew a great deal about the important literary composition which the old gentleman was concocting; but “he was not at liberty” to mention what he knew. Sometimes it made him laugh secretly within himself to think how differently she would talk if she too knew. But then that is the case in most matters. He went upstairs at last deliberately, counting (as it seemed) every step, while Mr. Trevor sat impatient in his great chair, full of the enthusiasm of his own work, and thinking every minute an hour till he could show his friend, who was entirely in his confidence, who almost seemed like his *collaborateur*, the last stroke he had made. It was the *magnum opus* of Mr. Trevor’s life, the work by which he hoped to be remembered, to attain that immortality in the recollection of other men which all men desire. For a long time he had been working at it, a little bit at a time as it occurred to him. He was not like the thriftless literary persons to whom Ford compared him, who write whether they have anything to say or not, whether the fountain is welling forth freely or has to be pumped up drop by drop. Mr. Trevor composed his great work under the most favorable conditions. He had it by him constantly, night and day, and when something occurred to him, if it were in

the middle of the night, he would get up and wrap his dressing-gown round his shrunken person and put it down. He did not forget it either sleeping or waking. It was a resource for his imagination, an occupation for his life. Also it was likely to prove a considerable source of occupation to others after his death, if nobody stepped in to nick it into shape.

When he heard Ford's step on the stairs he began to chuckle again, already enjoying the surprise and admiration which he felt his last new idea must call forth. Ford was a very good literary confidant. He would find fault with a trifle now and then, which made his general approbation all the more valuable, as showing that there was discrimination in it. Mr. Trevor put away the "Times" from his knees, and drew the blotting-book with its precious contents a little nearer. He waited with as much impatience as a lover would show for the appearance of his love. And he had time to take off his spectacles, clean them carefully, rubbing them with his handkerchief, and put them on again with great deliberation before Ford, after very carefully and audibly closing the door behind him, appeared at last on the inner side of the screen which kept out the draught, that draught which rushed up the narrow ravine of the staircase as up an Alpine *couloir* white with snow.

CHAPTER II.

OLD JOHN TREVOR.

JOHN TREVOR had been a school-master for the greater part of his life. How he acquired so well sounding a name nobody knew. He had no relations, he always said, in the male line, and his friends on his mother's side were people of undistinguished surnames. And for the first fifty years of his life he had maintained a very even tenor of existence, always respectable, always a man who kept his engagements, paid his way, gave his entire attention, as his circulars said, to the pupils confided to his care; but even in his schoolmastership there was nothing of a remarkable character. After passing many obscure years as an usher, he attained to an academy of his own, in which a sound religious and commercial education was insured, as the same circular informed the parents and guardians of Farafield, by the employment of most competent masters for all the branches included in the course, and by his own unremitting care. But often the masters at Mr. Trevor's academy were represented solely by himself, and the number of his pupils never embarrassed or overweighted him. The good man, however, worked his way all the same; he kept afloat, which so many find it impossible to do. If the number of scholars diminished he lived harder, when it increased he laid by a little. He was never extravagant, never forgot that his occupation was a precarious one, and thus—turning out a few creditable arithmeticians to fill up the places in the little “offices” of Farafield, the solicitor's, the auctioneer's, the big builder's, and even in the better shops, where they were the best of cashiers, never wrong in a total—he lived on from year to year. His house was but a dingy one, with a large room for his pupils, and two upstairs, shabby enough, in which he

lived; but, by dint of sheer continuance and respectability, John Trevor, by the time he was fifty, was as much respected in Farafield as a man leading such a virtuous, colorless, joyless, unblamable existence has a right to be.

But at fifty a curious circumstance happened. John Trevor married. To say that he fell in love would perhaps scarcely represent the case. He had a friend who had been in India and all over the world, and who came home to Farafield with a liver-complaint, and a great deal of money, some people said. Trevor at first did not believe very much in the money. "I have enough to live upon," his friend said; and what more was necessary? No one knew very well how the money had been made—though that it was honestly acquired there was no doubt. He had been a clerk in an office in Farafield first, then because of his good conduct, which everybody had full faith in, and his business qualities (at which everybody laughed), he was sent to London by his employer, and received into an office there, from which he was sent to India, coming home with this fortune, but with worn-out health, to his native place. "Fortune? you can call it a fortune if you like. It is enough to live on," John Trevor repeated, "that is all I know about it. To be sure that *is* a fortune: for to have enough for your old days, and not to be compelled to work, what could a man desire more? But poor Rainy will not enjoy it long," his old school-fellow added regretfully. Rainy was older by five or six years than John Trevor; but fifty-six does not seem old when one is drawing near that age, though it is a respectable antiquity to youth. Rainy's sister had been a hard-working woman too; she had been a governess, and then had kept a school; then looked after the children of a widowed brother; and during her whole life had discharged the duties of the supernumerary woman in a large family, taking care of everybody

who wanted taking care of. When her brother returned to Farafield she had come to him to be his companion and nurse. He gave her a very nice home, everybody said, with much admiration of the brother's kindness and the sister's good-luck. They lived in Swallow Street, in one of the old houses, which were warmer and better built than the new ones, and kept two maids, and had everything comfortable, if not handsome, about, them. When poor Rainy died, Miss Rainy had a great deal of business to do which she did not at all understand. She had to refer to John Trevor perpetually in the first week or two, and she was not young any longer, nor ambitious, the good soul, and nobody had been so kind to her brother as John, and they had known each other all their lives. It came about thus quite naturally that they married. To be sure there were a great many people who said that Trevor married Miss Rainy for her money, as if poor old John at fifty had been able to have his choice of all the lovely young maidens of the district. But this was not the case; neither was it for love they married. They married for mutual support and company, not a bad motive after all. If there had been no money in the case, they would have contented themselves in their loneliness; but as she had a house and an independence, and he an occupation, they "felt justified," he said to all inquirers, in taking a step which otherwise they might not have contemplated. The consequences, however, were not at all such as they contemplated. Mrs. Trevor began, too late, with the energy of a workman who has no time to lose, the hard trade of a mother. She had one baby after another at headlong speed, losing them almost as soon as they were born, and losing her own health and tranquillity in the process. For some half dozen years the poor soul was either ill or in mourning. And at the end of that period she died. Poor Trevor saved his little Lucy out of the wreck, that was all; there were five or six little mounds in the

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