

**THE
LADY'S WALK**

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

THE SHIP'S DOCTOR

THE LADY'S WALK

CHAPTER I

I WAS on a visit to some people in Scotland when the events I am about to relate took place. They were not friends in the sense of long or habitual intercourse; in short, I had met them only in Switzerland in the previous year; but we saw a great deal of each other while we were together, and got into that easy intimacy which travelling brings about more readily than anything else. We had seen each other in very great *déshabillé* both of mind and array in the chilly mornings after a night's travelling, which perhaps is the severest test that can be applied in respect to looks, and amid all the annoyances of journeys short and long, with the usual episodes of lost luggage, indifferent hotels, fusses of every description, which is an equally severe test for the temper; and our friendship and liking (I am at liberty to suppose it was mutual, or they would never have invited me to Ellermore) remained unimpaired. I have always thought, and still think, that Charlotte Campbell was one of the most charming young women I ever met with; and her brothers, if not so entirely delightful, were nice fellows, capital to travel with, full of fun and spirit. I understood immediately from their conversation that they were members of a large family. Their allusions to Tom and Jack and little Harry, and to Mab and Mary, might perhaps have been tedious to a harsher critic; but I like to hear of other people's relations, having scarcely any of my own. I found out by degrees that Miss Campbell had been taken abroad by her brothers to recover from a long and severe task of nursing, which had exhausted her strength. The little ones had all been down with scarlet fever, and she had not left

them night or day. "She gave up seeing the rest of us and regularly shut herself in," Charley informed me, who was the younger of the two. "She would only go out for her walk when all of us were out of the way. That was the worst of it," the young fellow said, with great simplicity. That his sister should give herself up to the nursing was nothing remarkable; but that she should deny herself their precious company was a heroism that went to her brother's heart. Thus by the way I learned a great deal about the family. Chatty, as they called her, was the sister-mother, especially of the little ones, who had been left almost in her sole charge since their mother died many years before. She was not a girl, strictly speaking. She was in the perfection of her womanhood and youth—about eight-and-twenty, the age when something of the composure of maturity has lighted upon the sweetness of the earlier years, and being so old enhances all the charm of being so young. It is chiefly among young married women that one sees this gracious and beautiful type, delightful to every sense and every requirement of the mind; but when it is to be met with unmarried it is more celestial still. I cannot but think with reverence that this delicate maternity and maidenhood—the perfect bounty of the one, the undisturbed grace of the other—has been the foundation of that adoring devotion which in the old days brought so many saints to the shrine of the Virgin Mother. But why I should thus enlarge upon Charlotte Campbell at the beginning of this story I can scarcely tell, for she is not the foremost figure in it, and I am unintentionally deceiving the reader to begin with.

They asked me to come and see them at Ellermore when we parted, and, as I have nothing in the way of a home warmer or more genial than chambers in the Temple, I accepted, as may be supposed, with enthusiasm. It was in the first week of June that we

parted, and I was invited for the end of August. They had “plenty of grouse,” Charley said, with a liberality of expression which was pleasant to hear. Charlotte added, “But you must be prepared for a homely life, Mr. Temple, and a very quiet one.” I replied, of course, that if I had chosen what I liked best in the world it would have been this combination, at which she smiled with an amused little shake of her head. It did not seem to occur to her that she herself told for much in the matter. What they all insisted upon was the “plenty of grouse,” and I do not pretend to say that I was indifferent to that.

Colin, the eldest son, was the one with whom I had been least familiar. He was what people call reserved. He did not talk of everything as the others did. I did not indeed find out till much later that he was constantly in London, coming and going, so that he and I might have seen much of each other. Yet he liked me well enough. He joined warmly in his brother’s invitation. When Charley said there was plenty of grouse, he added, with the utmost friendliness, “And ye may get a blaze at a stag.” There was a flavour of the North in the speech of all; not disclosed by mere words, but by an occasional diversity of idiom and change of pronunciation. They were conscious of this and rather proud of it than otherwise. They did not say Scotch, but Scots; and their accent could not be represented by any of the travesties of the theatre, or what we conventionally accept as the national utterance. When I attempted to pronounce after them, my own ear informed me what a travesty it was.

It was to the family represented by these young people that I was going when I started on August 20, a blazing summer day, with dust and heat enough to merit the name of summer if anything ever did. But when I arrived at my journey’s end there was just

change enough to mark the line between summer and autumn: a little golden haze in the air, a purple bloom of heather on the hills, a touch here and there upon a stray branch, very few, yet enough to swear by. Ellermore lay in the heart of a beautiful district full of mountains and lochs within the Highland line, and just on the verge of some of the wildest mountain scenery in Scotland. It was situated in the midst of an amphitheatre of hills, not of any very exalted height, but of the most picturesque form, with peaks and couloirs like an Alpine range in little, all glowing with the purple blaze of the heather, with gleams upon them that looked like snow, but were in reality water-white threads of mountain torrents. In front of the house was a small loch embosomed in the hills, from one end of which ran a cheerful little stream, much intercepted by boulders, and much the brighter for its interruptions, which meandered through the glen and fell into another loch of greater grandeur and pretensions. Ellermore itself was a comparatively new house, built upon a fine slope of lawn over the lake, and sheltered by fine trees—great beeches which would not have done discredit to Berkshire, though that is not what we expect to see in Scotland, besides the ashes and firs which we are ready to acknowledge as of northern growth. I was not prepared for the luxuriance of the West Highlands—the mantling green of ferns and herbage everywhere, not to say the wealth of flowers, which formed a centre of still more brilliant colour and cultivation amid all the purple of the hills. Everything was soft and rich and warm about the Highland mansion-house. I had expected stern scenery and a grey atmosphere. I found an almost excessive luxuriance of vegetation and colour everywhere. The father of my friends received me at a door which was constantly open, and where it seemed to me after a while that nobody was ever refused admission. He was a tall old man, dignified but homely, with white

hair and moustache and the fresh colour of a rural patriarch; which, however, he was not, but an energetic man of business, as I afterwards found. The Campbells of Ellermore were not great chiefs in that much-extended clan, though they were perfectly well-known people and had held their little estate from remote antiquity. But they had not stood upon their gentility, or refused to avail themselves of the opportunities that came in their way. I have observed that in the great and wealthy region of which Glasgow is the capital the number of the irreconcilables who stand out against trade is few. The gentry have seen all the advantages of combining commerce with tradition. Had it not been for this it is likely that Ellermore would have been a very different place. Now it was overflowing with all those signs of care and simple luxury which make life so smooth. There was little show, but there was a profusion of comfort. Everything rolled upon velvet. It was perhaps more like the house of a rich merchant than of a family of long descent. Nothing could be more perfect as a pleasure estate than was this little Highland property. They had “plenty of grouse,” and also of trout in a succession of little lochs and mountain streams. They had deer on the hills. They had their own mutton, and everything vegetable that was needed for the large, profuse household, from potatoes and cabbage up to grapes and peaches. But with all this primitive wealth there was not much money got out of Ellermore. The “works” in Glasgow supplied that. What the works were I have never exactly found out, but they afforded occupation for all the family, both father and sons; and that the results were of the most pleasing description as regarded Mr. Campbell’s banker it was easy to see.

They were all at home with the exception of Colin, the eldest son, for whose absence many apologies, some of which seemed

much more elaborate than were at all necessary, were made to me. I was, for my own part, quite indifferent to the absence of Colin. He was not the one who had interested me most; and though Charley was considerably younger than myself, I had liked him better from the first. Tom and Jack were still younger. They were well occupied at “the works,” and came home only from Saturday to Monday. The little trio in the nursery were delightful children. To see them gathered about Charlotte was enough to melt any heart. Chatty, they called her, which is not a very dignified name, but I got to think it the most beautiful in the world as it sounded all over that cheerful, much-populated house. “Where is Chatty?” was the first question everyone asked as he came in at the door. If she was not immediately found, it went volleying through the house, all up the stairs and through the passages—“Chatty! where are you?”—and was always answered from somewhere or other in a full, soft voice, which was audible everywhere though it never was loud. “Here am I, boys,” she would say, with a pretty inversion which pleased me. Indeed, everything pleased me in Chatty—too much, more than reason. I found myself thinking what would become of them all if, for example, she were to marry, and entered into a hot argument with myself on one occasion by way of proving that it would be the most selfish thing in the world were this family to work upon Chatty’s feelings and prevent her from marrying, as most probably, I could not help feeling, they would. At the same time, I perceived with a little shudder how entirely the whole thing would collapse if by any chance Chatty should be decoyed away.

I enjoyed my stay beyond description. In the morning we were out on the hills or about the country. In the evening it very often happened that we all strolled out after dinner, and that I was left by

Chatty's side, "the boys" having a thousand objects of interest, while Mr. Campbell usually sat in his library and read the newspapers, which arrived at that time either by the coach from Oban or by the boat. In this way I went over the whole "policy," as the grounds surrounding a country house are called in Scotland, with Chatty, who would not be out of reach at this hour, lest her father should want her, or the children. She would bid me not to stay with her, when no doubt it would be more amusing for me to go with the boys; and when I assured her my pleasure was far greater as it was, she gave me a gracious, frank smile, with a little shake of her head. She laughed at me softly, bidding me not to be too polite or think she would mind if I left her; but I think, on the whole, she liked to have me with her in her evening walk.

"There is one thing you have not told me of," I said, "and that you must possess. I cannot believe that your family has been settled here so long without having a ghost."

She had turned round to look at me, to know what it was that had been omitted in her descriptions. When she heard what it was she smiled a little, but not with the pleasant mockery I had expected. On the contrary, it was a sort of gentle smile of recognition of something left out.

"We don't call it a ghost," she said. "I have wondered if you had never noticed. I am fond of it, for my part; but then I have been used to it all my life. And here we are, then," she added, as we reached the top of a little ascent and came out upon a raised avenue, which I had known by its name of the Lady's Walk, without as yet getting any explanation what that meant. It must have been, I supposed, the avenue to the old house, and now encircled one portion of the grounds without any distinct meaning.

On the side nearest the gardens and house it was but slightly raised above the shrubberies, but on the other side rose to the summit of a high bank, sloping steeply to the river, which, after it escaped from the loch, made a wide bend round that portion of the grounds. A row of really grand beeches rose on each side of the path, and through the openings in the trees the house, the bright gardens, the silvery gleam of the loch were visible. The evening sun was slanting into our eyes as we walked along; a little soft yet brisk air was pattering among the leaves, and here and there a yellow cluster in the middle of a branch showing the first touch of a cheerful decay. "Here we are, then." It was a curious phrase; but there are some odd idioms in the Scotch—I mean Scots—form of our common language, and I had become accustomed now to accept them without remark.

"I suppose," I said, "there must be some back way to the village or to the farmhouse under this bank, though there seems no room for a path?"

"Why do you ask?" she said, looking at me with a smile.

"Because I always hear someone passing along—I imagine down there. The steps are very distinct. Don't you hear them now? It has puzzled me a good deal, for I cannot make out where the path can be."

She smiled again, with a meaning in her smile, and looked at me steadily, listening, as I was. And then, after a pause, she said, "That is what you are asking for. If we did not hear them it would make us unhappy. Did you never hear why this was called the Lady's Walk?"

When she said these words I was conscious of an odd enough change in my sensations—nay, I should say in my very sense of hearing, which was the one appealed to. I had heard the sound often, and, after looking back at first to see who it was and seeing no one, had made up my mind that the steps were on some byway out of sight and came from below. Now my hearing changed, and I could not understand how I had ever thought anything else; the steps were on a level with us, by our side—as if some third person were accompanying us along the avenue. I am no believer in ghosts, nor the least superstitious, so far as I had ever been aware (more than everybody is), but I felt myself get out of the way with great celerity and a certain thrill of curious sensation. The idea of rubbing shoulders with something unseen gave me a shock in spite of myself.

“Ah,” said Charlotte, “it gives you an—unpleasant feeling. I forgot you are not used to it like me.”

“I am tolerably well used to it, for I have heard it often,” I said. It was cowardly to get to the other side, but I fear I did so with an involuntary movement. Then I laughed, which I felt to be altogether out of place and fictitious, and said, “No doubt there is some very easy explanation of it—some vibration or echo. The science of acoustics clears up many mysteries.”

“There is no explanation,” Chatty said almost angrily. “She has walked here far longer than anyone can remember. It is an ill sign for us Campbells when she goes away. She was the eldest daughter, like me; and I think she has got to be our guardian angel. There is no harm going to happen as long as she is here. Listen to her!” she cried, standing still with her hand raised. The low sun shone full on her, catching her brown hair, the lucid clearness of her brown eyes,

her cheeks so clear and soft, in colour a little summer-brown too. I stood and listened with a something of excited feeling which I could not control. If I had followed my first impulse I am not sure that I should not have bolted through the shrubbery; but of course I did not. And the sound of this third person, whose steps were not to be mistaken though she was unseen, made my heart beat. It was no doubt the utmost folly; for there must be an explanation for it in nature: of that I could not doubt for a moment.

“You are startled,” she said, with a smile.

“Well, I should not be acting my part, should I, as I ought, if I did not feel the proper thrill. It must be disrespectful to a ghost not to be afraid.”

“Don’t say a ghost,” said Chatty; “I think *that* is disrespectful. It is the Lady of Ellermore; everybody knows about her. And do you know,” she added, “when my mother died—the greatest grief I have ever known—the steps ceased? Oh, it is true! You need not look me in the face as if there was anything to laugh at. It is ten years ago, and I was only a silly sort of girl, not much good to anyone. They sent me out to get the air when she was lying in a doze; and I came here. I was crying, as you may suppose, and at first I did not pay any attention. Then it struck me all at once—the Lady was away. They told me afterwards that was the worst sign. It is always death that is coming when she goes away.”

The pathos of this incident confused all my attempts to touch it with levity, and we went on for a little without speaking, during which time it is almost unnecessary to say that I was listening with all my might to those strange footsteps, which finally I persuaded myself were no more than echoes of our own.

“It is very curious,” I said politely. “Of course you were greatly agitated and too much absorbed in real grief to have any time to think of any explanation—the state of the atmosphere perhaps”—

She gave me an indignant look. We were nearly at the end of the walk, and at that moment I could have sworn that the footsteps, which had got a little in advance, here turned and met us coming back. I am aware that nothing could sound more foolish, and that it could only be some vibration or atmospheric phenomenon. But yet this was how it seemed: it was not an optical but an aural delusion. So long as the steps were going with us it was less impossible to account for it; but when they turned and audibly came back to meet us! Not all my strength of mind could prevent me from springing aside to let them pass. This time they came directly between us, and the agility of my start and withdrawal was naturally much more significant than the faltering laugh with which I excused myself. “It is a very curious sound indeed,” I said, with a tremor which slightly affected my voice.

Chatty gave me a reassuring smile. She did not laugh at me, which was consolatory. She stood for a moment as if looking after the visionary passenger. “We are not afraid,” she said, “even the youngest; we all know she is our friend.”

When we had got back to the side of the loch, where, I confess, I was pleased to find myself, in the free open air without any perplexing shadow of trees, I felt less objection to the subject. “I wish you would tell me the story; for of course there is a story?” I said.

“No, there is no story—at least nothing tragical or even romantic. They say she was the eldest daughter. I sometimes wonder,” Chatty said, with a smile and a faint increase of colour, “whether she might not be a little like me. She lived here all her life, and had several generations to take care of. Oh no, there was no murder or wrong about our Lady; she just loved Ellermore above everything; and my idea is that she has been allowed the care of us ever since.”

“That is very sweet, to have the care of you,” I said, scarcely venturing to put any emphasis on the pronoun; “but, after all, it must be slow work, don’t you think, walking up and down there for ever? I call that a poor sort of reward for a good woman. If she had been a bad one, it might have answered very well for a punishment.”

“Mr. Temple!” Chatty said, now reddening with indignation, “do you think it is a poor thing to have the care of your own people, to watch over them, whatever may happen—to be all for them and their service? I don’t think so; I should like to have such a fate.”

Perhaps I had spoken thus on purpose to bring about the discussion. “There is such a thing as being too devoted to a family. Are they ever grateful? They go away and marry and leave you in the lurch.”

She looked up at me with a little astonishment. “The members may vary, but the family never goes away,” she said; “besides, that can apply to us in our present situation only. *She* must have seen so many come and go; but that need not vex her, you know, because they go where she is.”

“My dear Miss Campbell, wait a bit; think a little,” I said. “Where she is! That is in the Lady’s Walk, according to your story. Let us hope that all your ancestors and relations are not there.”

“I suppose you want to make me angry,” said Chatty. “She is in heaven—have you any doubt of that?—but every day when the sun is setting she comes back home.”

“Oh, come!” I said, “if it is only at the sunset, that is not so bad.”

Miss Campbell looked at me doubtfully, as if not knowing whether to be angry. “You want to make fun of it,” she said, “to laugh at it; and yet,” she added, with a little spirit, “you were very nervous half an hour ago.”

“I acknowledge to being nervous. I am very impressionable. I believe that is the word. It is a luxury like another to be nervous at the fit moment. Frightened, you might say, if you prefer plain speaking. And I am very glad it is at sunset, not in the dark. This completes the circle of my Highland experiences,” I said; “everything now is perfect. I have shot grouse on the hill and caught trout on the loch, and been soaked to the skin and then dried in the wind; I wanted nothing but the family ghost. And now I have seen her, or at least heard her”—

“If you are resolved to make a joke of it I cannot help it,” said Chatty, “but I warn you that it is not agreeable to me, Mr. Temple. Let us talk of something else. In the Highlands,” she said, with dignity, “we take different views of many things.”

“There are some things,” I said, “of which but one view is possible—that I should have the audacity and impertinence to

laugh at anything for which you have a veneration! I believe it is only because I was so frightened”—

She smiled again in her lovely motherly way, a smile of indulgence and forgiveness and bounty. “You are too humble now,” she said, “and I think I hear someone calling me. It is time to go in.”

And to be sure there was someone calling her; there always was, I think, at all hours of the night and day.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

