

**THE LAIRD OF NORLAW.**  
**A SCOTTISH STORY.**

Mrs. Oliphant

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# **THE LAIRD OF NORLAW.**

## CHAPTER I.

THE house of Norlaw stands upon the slope of a low hill, under shelter of the three mystic Eildons, and not very far from that little ancient town which, in the language of the author of "Waverley," is called Kennaquhair.

A low, peaceable, fertile slope, bearing trees to its top-most height, and corn on its shoulders, with a little river running by its base, which manages, after many circuits, to wind its way into Tweed. The house, which is built low upon the hill, is two stories in front, but, owing to the unequal level, only one behind. The garden is all at the back, where the ground is sheltered, but in front, the green, natural surface of the hill descends softly to the water without any thing to break its verdure. There are clumps of trees on each side, straying as nature planted them, but nothing adorns the sloping lawn, which is not called a lawn, nor used for any purposes of ornament by the household of Norlaw.

Close by, at the right hand of this homely house, stands an extraordinary foil to its serenity and peacefulness. The old castle of Norlaw, gaunt and bare, and windowless, not a towered and battlemented pile, but a straight, square, savage mass of masonry, with windows pierced high up in its walls in even rows, like a prison, and the gray stone-work below, as high under the first range of windows as the roof of the modern house, rising up blank, like a rock, without the slightest break or opening. To see this strange old ruin, in the very heart of the peaceful country, without a feature of nature to correspond with its sullen strength, nor a circumstance to suggest the times and the danger which made that

necessary, is the strangest thing in the world; all the more that the ground has no special capacities for defense, and that the castle is not a picturesque baronial accumulation of turrets and battlements, but a big, austere, fortified dwelling-house, which modern engineering could make an end of in half a day.

It showed, however, if it did nothing better, that the Livingstones were knights and gentlemen, in the day when the Border was an unquiet habitation—and for this, if for nothing else, was held in no little honor by the yeoman Livingstone, direct descendant of the Sir Rodericks and Sir Anthonys, who farmed the remains of his paternal property, and dwelt in the modern house of Norlaw.

This house was little more than a farm-house in appearance, and nothing more in reality. The door opened into a square hall, on either side of which was a large room, with three deep-set windows in each; four of these windows looked out upon the lawn and the water, while one broke each corner of the outer wall. On the side nearest the castle, a little behind the front level of the house, was an “outshot,” a little wing built to the side, which formed the kitchen, upon the ever-open door of which the corner window of the common family sitting room kept up a vigilant inspection. A plentiful number of bed-chambers up-stairs were reached by a good stair-case, and a gallery which encircled the hall; the architecture was of the most monotonous and simple regularity; so many windows on one side soberly poising so many windows on the other. The stair-case made a rounded projection at the back of the house, which was surmounted by a steep little turret roof, blue-slatted, and bearing a tiny vane for its crown, after the fashion of the countryside; and this, which glimmered pleasantly among the garden fruit trees when you looked down from the top of the hill—



and the one-storied projection, which was the kitchen, were the only two features which broke the perfect plainness and uniformity of the house.

But though it was July when this history begins, the flush of summer—and though the sunshine was sweet upon the trees and the water, and the bare old walls of the castle, there was little animation in Norlaw. The blinds were drawn up in the east room, the best apartment—though the sun streamed in at the end window, and “the Mistress” was not wont to leave her favorite carpet to the tender mercies of that bright intruder; and the blinds were down in the dining-room, which nobody had entered this morning, and where even the Mistress’s chair and little table in the corner window could not keep a vicarious watch upon the kitchen door. It was not needful; the two maids were very quiet, and not disposed to amuse themselves. Marget, the elder one, who was the byrewoman, and had responsibilities, went about the kitchen very solemnly, speaking with a gravity which became the occasion; and Janet, who was the house-servant, and soft-hearted, stood at the table, washing cups and saucers, very slowly, and with the most elaborate care, lest one of them should tingle upon the other, and putting up her apron very often to wipe the tears from her eyes. Outside, on the broad stone before the kitchen door, a little ragged boy sat, crying bitterly—and no one else was to be seen about the house.

“Jenny,” said the elder maid, at last, “give that bairn a piece, and send him away. There’s enow of us to greet—for what we’re a’ to do for a puir distressed family, when aince the will o’ God’s accomplished this day, I canna tell.”

“Oh, woman, dinna speak! he’ll maybe win through,” cried Jenny, with renewed tears.

Marget was calm in her superior knowledge.

“I ken a death-bed from a sick-bed,” she said, with solemnity; “I’ve seen them baith—and weel I kent, a week come the morn, that it was little good looking for the doctor, or wearying aye for his physic time, or thinking the next draught or the next pill would do. Eh sirs! ane canna see when it’s ane’s ain trouble; if it had been ony ither man, the Mistress would have kent as weel as me.”

“It’s an awfu’ guid judge that’s never wrang,” said Jenny, with a little impatience. “He’s a guid faither, and a guid maister; it’s my hope he’ll cheat you a’ yet, baith the doctor and you.”

Marget shook her head, and went solemnly to a great wooden press, which almost filled one side of the kitchen, to get the “piece” which Jenny showed no intention of bestowing upon the child at the door. Pondering for a moment over the basket of oat cakes, Marget changed her mind, and selected a fine, thin, flour one, from a little pile.

“It’s next to funeral bread,” she said to herself, in vindication of her choice; “Tammie, my man, the maister would be nae better if ye could mak’ the water grit with tears—run away hame, like a good bairn; tell your mother neither the Mistress nor me will forget her, and ye can say, I’ll let her ken; and there’s a piece to help ye hame.”

“I dinna want ony pieces—I want to ken if he’s better,” said the boy; “my mother said I wasna to come back till there was good news.”

“Whisht, sirrah, he’ll hear you on his death-bed,” said Marget, “but it’ll no do *you* ony harm, bairn; the Mistress will aye mind your mother; take your piece and run away.”

The child’s only answer was to bury his face in his hands, and break into a new fit of crying. Marget came in again, discomfited; after a while she took out a little wooden cup of milk to him, and set it down upon the stone without a word. She was not sufficiently hard-hearted to frown upon the child’s grief.

“Eh, woman Jenny!” she cried, after an interval, “to think a man could have so little pith, and yet get in like this to folk’s hearts!”

“As if ye didna ken the haill tale,” cried Jenny, with indignant tears, “how the maister found the wean afield with his broken leg, and carried him hame—and how there’s ever been plenty, baith milk and meal, for thae puir orphants, and Tammie’s schooling, and aye a kind word to mend a’—and yet, forsooth, the bairn maunna greet when the maister’s at his latter end!”

“We’ll a’ have cause,” said Marget, abruptly; “three bonnie lads that might be knights and earls, every one, and no’ a thing but debt and dool, nor a trade to set their hand to. Haud yer peace!—do ye think there’s no trade but bakers and tailors, and the like o’ that? and there’s Huntley, and Patie, and Cosmo, my bonnie bairns!—there never was three Livingstones like them, nor three of ony other name as far as Tyne runs—and the very bairn at the door has muckle to look to as they!”

“But it’s nae concern o’ yours, or o’ mine. I’m sure the maister was aye very good to me,” said Jenny, retiring into tears, and a *non sequitur*.

“No, that’s true—it’s nae concern o’ yours—*you’re* no’ an auld servant like me,” said her companion, promptly, “but for mysel’ I’ve sung to them a’ in their cradles; I would work for them with my hands, and thankful; but I wouldna desire that of them to let the like o’ me work, or the Mistress toil, to keep them in idleset. Na, woman—I’m jealous for my bairns—I would break my heart if Huntley was content to be just like his father; if either the Mistress or the lads will listen to me, I’ll gie my word to send them a’ away.”

“Send them away—and their mother in mourning? Oh, my patience! what for?”

“To make their fortune,” said Marget, and she hung the great pot on the great iron hook above the fire, with a sort of heroic gesture, which might have been amusing under other circumstances—for Marget believed in making fortunes, and had the impulse of magnificent hope at her heart.

“Eh, woman! you’re hard-hearted,” said her softer companion, “to blame the Maister at his last, and plan to leave the Mistress her lane in the world! I would make them abide with her to comfort her, if it was me.”

Marget made no answer—she had comforted herself with the flush of fancy which pictured these three sons of the house, each completing his triumph—and she was the byrewoman and had to consider the cattle, and cherish as much as remained of pastoral wealth in this impoverished house. She went out with her dark printed gown carefully “kilted” over her red and blue striped petticoat, and a pail in her hand. She was a woman of forty, a farm servant used to out-of-door work and homely ways, and had

neither youth nor sentiment to soften her manners or enlarge her mind. Yet her heart smote her when she thought of the father of the house, who lay dying while she made her criticism upon him, true though it was.

“Has he no’ been a good master to me? and would I spare tears if they could ease him?” she said to herself, as she rubbed them away from her eyes. “But folk can greet in the dark when there’s no work to do,” she added, peremptorily, and so went to her dairy and her thoughts. Tender-hearted Jenny cried in the kitchen, doing no good to any one; but up-stairs in the room of death, where the family waited, there were still no tears.

## CHAPTER II.

HALF a mile below Norlaw, “as Tyne runs,” stood the village of Kirkbride. Tyne was but one of the many undistinguished Tynes which water the south of Scotland and the north of England, a clear trout stream, rapid and brown, and lively, with linns and pools, and bits of woodland belonging to it, which the biggest brother of its name could not excel; and Kirkbride also was but one of a host of Kirkbrides, which preserved through the country, long after every stone of it had mouldered, the name of some little chapel raised to St. Bridget. This was an irregular hamlet, straggling over two mounds of rising ground, between which Tyne had been pleased to make a way for himself. The morsel of village street was on one bank of the water, a row of irregular houses, in the midst of which flourished two shops; while at the south end, as it was called, a little inn projected across the road, giving, with this corner, and the open space which it sheltered, an air of village coziness to the place which its size scarcely warranted. The other bank of the water was well covered with trees—drooping birches and alders, not too heavy in their foliage to hide the half dozen cottages which stood at different elevations on the ascending road, nor to vail at the summit the great jargonel pear-tree on the gable wall of the manse, which dwelt upon that height, looking down paternally and with authority upon the houses of the village. The church was further back, and partially hidden by trees, which, seeing this edifice was in the prevailing fashion of rural Scottish churches—a square barn with a little steeple stuck upon it—was all the better for the landscape. A spire never comes amiss at a little distance, when Nature has fair play and trees enough—and the hillock, with

its foliage and its cottages, its cozy manse and spire among the trees, filled with thoughts of rural felicity the stray anglers who came now and then to fish in Tyne and consume the produce of their labor in the gable parlor of the Norlaw Arms.

The doctor had just passed through the village. On his way he had been assailed by more than one inquiry. The sympathy of the hamlet was strong, and its curiosity neighborly,—and more than one woman retired into her cottage, shaking her head over the news she received.

“Keep us a’! Norlaw! I mind him afore he could either walk or speak—and *then* I was in service, in the auld mistress’s time, at Me’mar,” said one of the village grandmothers, who stood upon the threshold of a very little house, where the village mangle was in operation. The old woman stood at the door, looking after the doctor, as he trotted off on his stout pony; she was speaking to herself, and not to the little audience behind, upon whom, however, she turned, as the wayfarer disappeared from her eyes, and laying down her bundle on the table, with a sigh, “Eh, Merran Hastie!” she exclaimed, “he’s been guid to you.”

The person thus addressed needed no further inducement to put her apron to her eyes. The room was very small, half occupied by the mangle, which a strong country girl was turning; and even in this summer day the apartment was not over bright, seeing that the last arrival stood in the doorway, and that the little window was half covered by a curtain of coarse green gauze. Two other village matrons had come with their “claes,” to talk over the danger of their neighbor and landlord, and to comfort the poor widow who had found an active benefactor in “Norlaw.” She was comforted, grateful and grieved though she was; and the gossips, though they

looked grave, entered *con amore* into the subject; what the Mistress was likely to do, and how the family would be “left.”

“My man says they’ll a’ be roupit, baith stock and plenishing,” said the mason’s wife. “Me’mar himsel’ gave our John an insight into how it was. I judge he maun have lent Norlaw siller; for when he saw the dry-stane dike, where his ground marches with Norlaw, he gave ane of his humphs, and says he to John, ‘A guid kick would drive it down;’ says he, ‘it’ll last out *his* time, and for my part, I’m no a man for small fields;’ so grannie, there’s a family less, you may say already, in the country-side.”

“I’ll tarry till I see it,” said the old woman; “the ane of his family that’s likest Norlaw, is his youngest son; and if Me’mar himsel’, or the evil ane, his marrow, get clean the better of Huntley and Patrick, not to say the Mistress, it’ll be a marvel to me.”

“Norlaw was aye an unthrift,” said Mrs. Mickle, who kept the grocer’s shop in Kirkbride; “nobody could tell, when he was a young man, how he got through his siller. It aye burnt his pockets till he got it spent, and ye never could say what it was on.”

“Oh, whisht!” exclaimed the widow; “me, and the like of me, can tell well what it was on.”

“Haud a’ your tongues,” said the old woman; “if any body kens about Norlaw, it’s me; I was bairn’s-maid at Me’mar, in the time of the auld mistress, as a’ the town kens, and I’m well acquaint with a’ his pedigree, and mind him a’ his life, and the truth’s just this, whatever any body may say. He didna get his ain fancy when he was a young lad, and he’s never been the same man ever sinsyne.”



“Eh! was Norlaw crossed in love?” said the girl at the mangle, staying her grinding to listen; “but I’m no sorry for him; a man that wasna content with the Mistress doesna deserve a good wife.”

“Ay, lass; you’re coming to have your ain thoughts on such like matters, are ye?” said the old woman; “but take you my word, Susie, that a woman may be the fairest and the faithfu’est that ever stood on a hearthstane, but if she’s no her man’s fancy, she’s nae guid there.”

“Susie’s very right,” said the mason’s wife; “he wasna blate! for a better wife than the Mistress never put her hand into ony housewifeskep, and it’s her that’s to be pitied with a man like you; and our John says—”

“I kent about Norlaw before ever you were born, or John either,” said the old woman; “and what I say’s *fac*, and what you say’s fancy. Norlaw had never a thought in his head, from ten to five-and-twenty, but half of it was for auld Me’mar’s ae daughter. I’m no saying he’s a strong man of his nature, like them that clear their ain road, or make their ain fortune; but he might have held his ain better than he’s ever done, if he had been matched to his fancy when he was a young lad, and had a’ his life before him; that’s just what I’ve to say.”

“Weel, grannie, its awfu’ hard,” said the mason’s wife; “the Mistress was a bonnie woman in her day, and a spirit that would face onything; and to wear out her life for a man that wasna heeding about her, and be left in her prime a dowerless widow!—Ye may say what ye like—but I wouldna thole the like for the best man in the country-side, let alone Norlaw.”

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