

THE
**LAST OF THE
MORTIMERS.**
A Story in Two Voices.

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT

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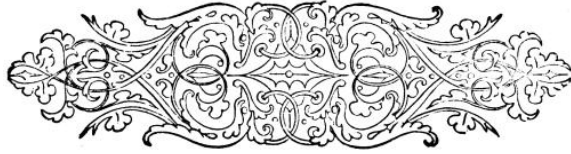
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**THE LAST OF THE
MORTIMERS.**

PART I.

THE LADIES AT THE HALL.

CHAPTER I.

I THOUGHT I heard a slight rustle, as if Sarah had taken off her spectacles, but I was really so interested in the matter which I was then discussing with Mr. Cresswell, our solicitor, that I did not look round, as I certainly should have done in any other circumstances; but imagine my utter amazement and the start which Mr. Cresswell gave, nearly upsetting the ink on the drab table-cover, which never *could* have got the better of it, when my sister Sarah, who never speaks except to me, and then only in a whisper, pronounced distinctly, loud out, the following words: “His Christian name was Richard Arkwright; he was called after the cotton-spinner; that was the chief thing against him in my father’s days.”

Now it was years and years ago since Sarah had lost her voice. It happened before my father died, when we were both comparatively young people; she had been abroad with him and caught a violent cold on her way home. She was rather proud in those days—it was before she took to knitting—and she had not forgotten then that she was once a beauty. When she saw that her voice was gone for good, Sarah gave up talking. She declared to me privately that to keep up a conversation in that hoarse horrid whisper was more than she could give in to, and though she was a very good Christian in principle she never could be resigned to that loss. At first she kept upstairs in her own room; but after my

father's death she came regularly to the drawing-room, giving everybody to understand that she was not to be spoken to. Poor dear old soul! she was as anxious to hear everything that was said to me as if she had come down off her stilts and taken part in the conversation; but you may suppose what a startling event it was to hear Sarah's voice.

I gave a jump, as was natural, and ran to her to see what had happened.

"Do be cautious, Milly," she said, fretfully, in her old whisper; for to be sure I had whisked down her ball of worsted, and caught one of her pins in my new-fashioned buttonholes. "At your age a gentlewoman should move about in a different sort of way. I am quite well, thank you. Please to go back to your occupation, and leave me to carry on mine in peace."

"But Sarah, my dear soul! you've got back your voice!" cried I.

Sarah smiled at me, not with her pretty smile. "People who are strong are always thinking such things," she said. "You don't know what it is to be afflicted; go back to your business, please."

"What does she say, Miss Milly?" cried Mr. Cresswell, quite eagerly, when I went back to the table.

"Oh, nothing at all; it's all a mistake, I suppose," said I, feeling a little nettled, "put it down all the same. I dare say it was one of those spirits we hear about nowadays. And a very useful bit of information too, which makes it all the more remarkable, for I never heard they did much good in that way. Richard Arkwright! Of all the names I ever heard, the oddest name for a Mortimer! but put it down."

Mr. Cresswell put it down as I said. "Richard Arkwright Mortimer is something more of an individual than Blank Mortimer, Esq., that's true," said he; "he ought to be something with that name. Begging your pardon, Miss Milly, though he was a Mortimer, he ought to have had either a profession or a trade with that name. Don't you think now," he said, lowering his voice, and making a sign at Sarah over his shoulder, "after having broken the ice, something more might be got out of *her*?"

I shook my head at first, being angry; then I nodded as I came to myself, and at last said—it was all I could say—"We'll see."

"Ah, ah, we'll see—that'll do, Miss Milly; but don't lose your temper, my dear lady," said Mr. Cresswell; "all the county reverences you for an angelic temper, as you well know."

"Stuff!" said I; "I've too much Welsh blood in me for that; but a pack of interlopers, like the rest of you, never know the real mettle of them that come of the soil; we're as clear of the soil as the ore in the Llangollen mines, we Mortimers; we can do what we have to do, whatever it may be."

Mr. Cresswell cast up his eyebrows a little, and gave a kind of glance towards Sarah and her knitting. "Well, well, it isn't bad ore, at all events," he said, with a chuckle: "but, after all, I suppose the first squire was not dug out of Llewellyn cliff?"

"It will be a vast deal more profitable to find out where the next squire is to come from," said I; "we are old women both of us; I'd advise you to set things agoing without delay. What would happen, do you suppose, if Sarah and I were both to die without finding an heir? What does happen, by the bye, when such a thing occurs; does it go to the crown?"

“My dear lady, I would not give much for the crown’s chance,” said Cresswell, with, a little shrug of his shoulders. “Heirs-at-law are never so far lost or mislaid but they turn up some time. Birds of the air carry the matter when there’s an estate in question. There’s nothing so safe to be found, in my humble opinion, as an heir-at-law.”

“For I shouldn’t much mind,” said I to myself, thinking over it, “if it went to the Queen. She might fix on the park for autumn quarters, sure, as well as on that outlandish Scotch castle of hers. It’s a great deal nearer, and I make sure it’s prettier; or if she gave it to the Prince of Wales as a present, or to any of the other children, I should not mind for my part. It is not by any means so bad a prospect as I supposed—it might go to the Queen.”

“But, then, what would be done with Mr. Richard Arkwright and his progeny? I’ll be bound he has ten children,” said Mr. Cresswell. “Somebody did leave Her Majesty an estate not so very long ago, and I rather think she sought out the heirs and made it up to them. Depend upon it, Mr. Richard Arkwright would have it out of her. Come, we must stick to the Mortimers, Miss Milly. I’ll go off and see after the advertisements; there’s plenty of time. I don’t believe you mean to be in any hurry out of this world, either Miss Sarah or you.”

“That’s as it may be—that’s as God pleases,” said I; “but you must wait a little first, and I’ll see if I can find out anything further about him. Perhaps some one can think on; we’ll see, we’ll see; more may come.”

Mr. Cresswell nodded his head confidentially. “You don’t remember anything about him yourself?” he said.

“Bless you, I am ten years younger than she is,” said I; “she was a young lady, I was only a child. I neither knew nor cared anything about the Lancashire cousin. Ten years make a great deal of difference when people are young.”

“And when they’re old as well,” said Cresswell, with a little nod of his head. Mr. Cresswell, of course, like all the other people, would never have looked at me when Sarah was present in old days; but now, when we were both old women, the sly old lawyer had wheeled about, and was rather an admirer of mine. I have had admirers since I was fifty; I never had many before.

“Now, are you going to stay to tea?” said I.

“Thank you. I have not the least doubt it would be for my own advantage; my cook is not to be named in the same breath with yours; but I promised to be home to dinner,” said Mr. Cresswell. “Thank you all the same; Sara will be waiting for me.”

“And how is the dear child?” said I.

“Very contrary,” said Mr. Cresswell, shaking his head. “To tell the truth, I don’t know what to make of her. I had twenty minds to bring her to-day and leave her with you.”

“Bring her next time. I never find her contrary,” said I. “But perhaps *you* never were young yourself?”

“Perhaps not, Miss Milly,” he said. “I have had a pretty tough life, anyhow; and it is hard to be thwarted at the last by the only creature one has to love.”

“It is harder not to have a single creature that one has a right to love,” said I a little sharply. “If we had your Sara belonging to us,

contrairy or not, we should not have to hunt up a far-off cousin, or advertise for an heir.”

A little passing gleam shot from the solicitor’s eye; he looked at me close for a moment, and then at Sarah, with a lip that moved slightly, as if he were unconsciously saying something within himself; I saw what it was as clear as daylight.

“She’s a good girl,” he said, faltering a little. “I daresay you’d soon have her in hand, Miss Milly; there’s no place she is so fond of as the Park; I’ll bring her out to-morrow.”

And he went away, never thinking that I had seen what was in his mind.

CHAPTER II.

OUR drawing-room was a very large one. The Mortimers had required large rooms in their day; and I will not say, if we had been young people, and disposed to have company, that we could not have kept it up with any of them; for my father, who lived in a very homely way, proud as he was, had laid up a good deal, and so had we. But though we kept no company, we had not the heart to turn the Mortimer family, of which we were the only remaining representatives, out of their old room. So we had a great screen, made of stamped leather, and which was like everything else, of my grandmother's days, stretched behind Sarah's chair, and with a very large bright fire, and a good lamp upon the round table, we managed to find the fireside very comfortable, though we were surrounded by all the ranges of old furniture in the old half-dark room. Old Ellis had to come stumbling as slowly as if the distance had been half a mile between us and the door, when he came into the room with anything; and I dare say impatient young people could not have put up with the rumble of chairs rolled aside, and footstools tripped over, with which he always gave us warning of his coming. For my part I was used to it, and took no notice. Where I sat, the prospect before me was, first, Sarah in her easy chair, close within shade of the screen, and beyond a darkling stretch of space, which a stranger might have made very mysterious, but which I knew perfectly well to be filled with just so many tables, chairs, ottomans, and miscellaneous articles, not one of which could have been stolen away without being missed. On the other side of the room, behind my own chair, was a grand piano in a corner and another waste of old furniture. Many people

wondered why we did not make a cosy little sitting-room of the boudoir, which had never been used since my mother's days. But Sarah, and I may say myself also, was of a different way of thinking. We liked the big room which once had not been at all too big for the Mortimers, and I am not sure that I did not even like the dark bit on either side of us, and the two big old-fashioned mirrors, like magic mirrors in a fairy tale, with a faint trembling of light over them, and all the shadowy depths of the room standing out in them, as if to double the size, which was already so much too great. Sometimes I used to stand and watch myself going across one of those big mirrors. It was a strange weird creature wandering about among the still, silent, deserted household gods. It was not surely me.

Not that I mean to represent myself as a sentimental person—not in the very slightest degree. I am past fifty and stout. My own opinion is that people had best be stout when they are past fifty, and I like my own little comforts as well as anybody of my years. When I was young I was far from being pretty. If I am to state frankly my own ideas on this subject, I would say that I think I might have passed for moderately good-looking, if I had not been sister to a beauty. But when we two were described as the beautiful Miss Mortimer and the plain Miss Mortimer, you may suppose how any little poor pretensions of mine were snubbed at once. To be good-looking was something not expected from Sarah's sister. But however the tables have rather turned of late. If you asked little Sara Cresswell, for example, who was the pretty Miss Mortimer, I do believe the dear child would say, with the greatest of innocence, "Miss Milly." At our time of life it doesn't matter very much, to be sure; but dear, dear, vanity does lie deep! I declare honestly it's a pleasure to me.

When Sarah and I are by ourselves, we don't have a great deal of conversation. She has lost her voice, as I said, which makes her decline talking; and I must say, though she never yields to acknowledge it, that I think she's lost her hearing a little, poor dear old soul! Every night in her life (except Sundays) she reads the Times. That paper gets great abuse in many quarters, especially in the country, where our old Squires, to be sure, are always at it for changing its opinions; but I say, great success, and long life to the Times! that is my opinion. How ever Sarah would get over those long evenings without that paper, I don't know. It quite keeps us in reading; and I do assure you, we know much more about most things that are going on than a great many *men* do, who are much more in the world. The Times comes in early, but Sarah never looks at it till after tea. I have to keep out of her sight, indeed, when I glance over it myself in the early part of the day, for Sarah does not approve of daylight reading. She thinks it a waste of time. We have not such a very great deal to occupy us either, as you may suppose; at least Sarah has little, except her knitting, for she will rarely allow me to consult her anything about the property, though she is the eldest. I wonder for my part that she does not weary of her life. She never comes down to breakfast, and I don't know very well what she and Carson find to busy themselves about till noon in her room upstairs; but at twelve o'clock punctually she comes down all dressed for the day. She does not dress as I do, in the ordinary dress that everybody wears, neither are Sarah's fashions the same as I remember in our youth, when our waists were just under our arms, and our gowns had "gores" in them. On the contrary, she has taken to a very long waist and tight sleeves, with a worked muslin shawl or scarf over her shoulders. In cold weather the muslin is lined with silk of delicate colours, and her cap, which is always light and pretty (Carson has great taste), trimmed to

correspond. Her hair, of course, she *always* wears in curls at the front. It is quite silver-white, and her face, poor dear soul, is a little pinched and sharp nowadays. When she takes her seat within shelter of the screen at twelve o'clock every day, the muslin shawl, lined with peach, is as pretty as possible in itself: to be sure Sara Cresswell might almost wear it to a ball; but I do declare I thought it looked very chilly to-day on Sarah. Nice white Shetland for instance, which is almost as pretty as lace, or, indeed, one of those beautiful soft fine woollen shawls, would look a great deal better over that purple silk gown, if she could only think so. But to be sure, Sarah will have her own way. There she sat knitting all the time Mr. Cresswell was talking with me, and there she does sit all day long with her basket of wools, and knitting-pins, and patterns. Every other day she takes a drive, goes to church once on Sundays, and reads the Times on all the week evenings. That is exactly how she lives.

Now perhaps this does not appear so odd to anybody else as it does to me; and I am sure I might have got used to it after a dozen years; but only Sarah, you see, has very good abilities, and is not the person to fix herself down like this. And she knows a great deal more of life than I do. My father and she were, I think, near upon ten years abroad after my mother died. What she was doing all that time I know no more than Carson does. Many a rumour went about that she was married, and many an anxious hour I had all by myself at the Park. But when she came back just Miss Mortimer, there was not a soul in the county but was surprised. Such a great beauty! and papa's eldest daughter and co-heiress! people said it was unaccountable. I can't say *I* thought it unaccountable. I never saw anybody that I could fancy myself, except perhaps——, and then *he* never asked me, you know. It might be precisely the same

with Sarah, though she was a beauty. But the wonder to me is that after having lived abroad so long, and having, as I have no doubt she had, a life of her own, which did not merely belong to my father's daughter, she should just have settled down like this. Many and many a time have I thought it all over, sitting opposite to her of an evening, when tea was over and she was reading the Times. There she sat quite straight up, her muslin shawl with the peach-bottom lining dropping down a little over her shoulders, and her thin hands in their black lace mits holding the paper. She had never reposed any confidence in me, you see. *I* did not know what might have happened to her when she was out upon the big waves of life. I dare say many a time when I wondered why she took no interest in my affairs, she was back upon that reserve of her own which I knew nothing about. But the odd thing to me is, that after having really had something that one could call a life, something happening to her own self,—don't you know what I mean?—she should have settled down so fixed and motionless here.

We dined early, which was a prejudice of mine; but as Sarah had a very uncertain appetite, we had always "something" to tea, which was the cause of Mr. Cresswell's allusion to our cook Evans. Further, we indulged ourselves by having this substantial tea in the drawing-room, which we never left after our early dinner. When tea was over on the night of Mr. Cresswell's visit, I had some little matters to do which kept me about the room, going from one place to another. As I stood in the shadow looking at the bright fire and lamp, and Sarah reading in her easy chair, I could not prevent a great many inquiries rising in my mind. What was Cousin Richard Arkwright Mortimer to her, for example? He had not been at the Park, nor heard of, so far as I know, for forty years. And then about her voice? On the whole it was very curious. I resolved to try hard

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