

The Minister's Wife

Mrs. Oliphant

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THE MINISTER'S WIFE



THE LETTER

THE MINISTER'S WIFE

CHAPTER I

THE Glebe Cottage at the head of Loch Diarmid was something between a primitive cottage and a little house of gentility, commonly called by that name. The hill-side of which it was the sole inhabitant had once been ecclesiastical soil belonging to the church of Lochhead, which was about a mile distant across the braes—and still, so far as this one dwelling was concerned, retained the name. It had originally been a building of one story thatched and mossy; but lately a few additional rooms had been built over one part of it, and covered with respectable slates. It was composite and characteristic, a human thing, growing out of human rules, and consequently more picturesque than if it had been the result of the most picturesque intention. The thatched end of the cottage was surrounded by no enclosure; the soft rich mossy grass of the hills broken by great bushes of heather pressed up to its very walls; while the other half, or western end, was cultivated and formed into a pretty homely garden. Hardy roses and honeysuckles, and a wavering wealth of fuchsias, hanging rich with crimson bells, clothed the southern front and west end—the refined part of the cottage. On the mountain side, there was nothing but the rough, low whitewashed wall, the overhanging thatch, the heather within a yard of the house. And here, some thirty years ago, lived a family of Diarmids, as curiously varied in internal constitution as was the aspect of their home.

The father of the household had been a soldier ‘in the war,’ and, though little more than a peasant by birth, had risen from the ranks and won his commission by sheer daring and bravery. It is very doubtful whether he was much the happier for it. When he had

won his epaulettes another piece of luck befell him: he caught the eye and fancy of a pretty, romantic girl, who married him for his valour and his inches and his red coat. To him she was an heiress, though the actual amount of her wealth was small. Probably he meant, in his gratitude and pride, to be a good husband and live happy ever after, and for this end bought the cottage he had been born in, and added some modern additions to it for the comfort of his lady-wife. But Duncan was Duncan still, notwithstanding his good fortune and his epaulettes; and his poor young wife, finding out her mistake, died at the end of a year or two, after bringing a pair of twin girls into the world. After this Captain Diarmid saw a great deal of service in all quarters of the world, and when he came back married again, a homely 'neighbour lass,' and died after she too had become the mother of two children. They all lived together in the Glebe Cottage—two sets of people as different as could well be conceived. During the Captain's lifetime a certain arbitrary link united them; but after his death it was not expected by the countryside that there could be any further family union between the twin sisters to whom everything belonged, and the homely widow with her girl and boy. It was a wonder to many of the genteel people of the neighbourhood when it was discovered that Margaret and Isabel meant to permit their father's widow, Jean Campbell, to share their house. Even old Miss Catherine at the Lochhead gave it as her opinion that 'Jean and her bairns had no claim on them.' But the sisters, it was evident, thought differently, though it was not without a certain conflict within and between themselves that the decision was made. They were then between nineteen and twenty, two girls who had grown up as Nature would, with little training of any description, but with that curious refinement of race or tradition which is so often to be found in those who, springing from a higher origin, have yet lived chiefly among the poor. They

were 'ladies born,' as was acknowledged by 'all the Loch'—and universal respect was paid them; although they were not, except on formal occasions, dignified by the title of 'the Miss Diarmids,' but were generally distinguished only as 'the Captain's Margaret,' and 'the Captain's Isabel.' Margaret had fallen into bad health some years before her father's death, and sickness and a more elevated type of character had made her as much the elder of the two as if her seniority had been a matter of years instead of minutes. It was she whose will had prevailed in respect of her stepmother.

'She was his wife after all,' Margaret had said, 'and they are our brother and sister. We have no right to forget that——'

'She had no right to be his wife!' said hasty Isabel, with sudden tears. 'If she were a poor body in a cot-house do you think I would grudge her anything? but I cannot bear it, because she's thought to belong to us—her and those weary bairns.'

'They are my father's bairns,' said the invalid; and then she added after a pause, 'And I hope they are God's bairns, Bell—and you too.'

'Me!' said Isabel, looking round, as with a hasty determination even to deny this bond of union; but when the meaning of the words reached her, a shade of compunction, a gleam of sorrow, shot one after another over her face which expressed all she thought, 'Oh, Margaret, no like you,' cried the impulsive girl, 'no like you!'

'Dinna break my heart,' said the other, falling in her emotion into the soft vernacular which both in their composed moments avoided; 'are we not all God's bairns? But we shut our hearts and shut our door the one on the other; the like of us can be grand and

proud and high—but the like of Him was neighbour and mair to all the poor folk. We ay forget that.’

‘*You* never forget,’ said Isabel; ‘I’ll do what you like, my dear, my dear! I’ll serve them on my knees night and day if you’ll but stay and be content.’

‘I’m very content to stay,’ said Margaret, with a smile,—‘too content. It’s not for me to judge; but, Bell, we’ll never be parted if I stay or if I go.’

To this the other girl made no answer, but fell down on her knees beside the invalid’s chair, and hid her face in her sister’s dress, weeping there in silence. Margaret laid her thin hand upon the bright hair and smoothed it tenderly. She was no older than the creature at her feet, and yet it seemed to be her child, warm with all the passion of life, whom she was caressing in her calm and patience. And she smiled, though Isabel saw it not.

‘I’ll go no further than to Him,’ she said, ‘and you’ve ay access to Him at all times. I’ll take a grip of His robe that’s made of light, and I’ll hear your voice when He’s listening to you. I’ll tell Him it’s my sister:—as if He needed us to tell Him,’ she added, with a soft laugh of contempt at herself; and her eyes lighted up in her pale face, and went away far beyond Isabel kneeling at her side, far beyond the homely walls and little humble house.

By and by Isabel’s weeping ceased, and she became aware, by her sister’s silence, and by the chill touch of the hand which rested on her head, that Margaret’s mind had stolen away from all their trials and troubles. She rose up softly, not disturbing her, and throwing one piteous look at the pale, soft countenance, withdrew to a corner. One or two hot, hasty tears fell on the work she had

taken up mechanically. It was little Mary's black frock, her other sister—Jean Campbell's little girl. That was how Isabel succinctly described the children; Jean Campbell's bairns; and was that to be all she would have for a sister when God had His way?

This was how it came to be settled that Jean Campbell and her bairns should remain in the Glebe Cottage. Jean had few qualifications for the office of guardian to these girls, but she was in some sort a protector to them, and took care of their goods and managed their humble affairs. She was not a woman of such elevation of character as might have fitted her to take the command of the situation; but she was one of those kind and faithful souls who so often hide the sweeter qualities of their nature under an almost harsh, quite uncaressing and undemonstrative appearance. She, too, had mother-wit enough to see through the Captain, though no doubt his rank had dazzled her at first; but now that Captain Duncan was gone, she would have defended his memory to her last breath, and she was very good and tender in her own way to his daughters. She accepted her position loyally, without any attempt to better or change it. The state of Margaret's health was too apparent to leave bystanders in any doubt: and Jean was often uneasy—it is impossible to disguise the fact—as to what might become of herself and her children in such a case.

But in the meantime she was very kind to her husband's daughters, and cared for their goods as if they had been her own, and was a faithful servant to them. She and her children were as comfortable in their end of the cottage as were Margaret and Isabel in their half, to which by times the gentlefolks of the district would come as visitors, out of consideration for the good blood which ran in their veins by their mother's side. It was Isabel who was the representative sister out-of-doors, and whom Miss Catherine

carried with her to return calls, and make such return as was possible to the civilities of her neighbours and connections. But it was Margaret who was the queen within and received all the homage. Day by day, however, carried the elder sister more out of the range of worldly affairs. It was, as Jean said, 'a decline' that had seized her. Not a violent disease, but a soft fading. The current of her life kept shrinking into always a narrower and a narrower channel. She still went every day to a certain spot on the hill-side above the house, where a little burn went trickling from stone to stone, and a mountain-ash drooped its leafy branches over a little green knoll. For many years it had been her daily custom to sit and ponder, or to pray in this silent grassy place. It was long before she knew that anyone watched her daily pilgrimage: but nothing escapes the keen inspection of a rural community. When it had just begun to be a toil to her to seek her little oratory, a poor mother from the village, who had been hanging wistfully about, accosted her with a humble petition that she would 'think upon' a suffering child 'when she gaed up bye to the brae.' It was too late then for her to change or to hide her custom, and by degrees she became used to the petition. She went up with tremulous, feeble step day after day, bearing upon her tender soul the burden of other people's troubles, penitences, and fears. Not a soul in the parish would willingly have gone that way to disturb the saintly creature, as she knelt under her rowan-tree, with the soft burn singing in her ear, and the soft breeze blowing her hair; and offered her offering and made her intercession. They were stern Puritans in the village below, and rampant Protestants; but they sent their white spotless virgin to intercede for them, with a faith which no doctrine could shake.

She was stealing down softly in the slowly falling twilight, when the country was brightening into spring, six months after her father's death. She had a warm shawl wrapped closely round her shoulders, and her step was not quite steady as she left the soft grass of the hill-side for the path. It was but a few yards to the cottage, but her strength was no more than equal to the exertion. There were two people standing waiting for her near the door; one of them a tall, vigorous, old lady, wrapped like herself in a large, soft, black and white shawl, who stood talking, with some eagerness, to the clergyman of the parish, a fresh, rural, middle-aged man, with clear eyes, clear complexion, and a general distinctness about him. It was Miss Catherine of the Lochhead who was speaking to the minister. Family names were unusual in the parish, for the population, with some trifling exceptions, were all Diarmids. Miss Catherine was in some respects the squire of the district. Her brother, it is true, was the real laird, but he was seldom at home, and Miss Catherine reigned in his stead. She was discussing the great topic of the moment with Mr. Lothian; and the two were not quite agreed.

‘Don’t speak to me about miracles,’ said Miss Catherine. ‘I’m not one of your believing kind. I don’t deny that some of the things are very surprising, but they’re all to be accounted for. We are surrounded by surprising things. I never lift my hand to my head, but when I think of it, it is a wonder to me—but as for direct miracles——’

‘Here is Margaret,’ said the minister; ‘we’ll ask her; you all believe her better than you’ll ever believe me.’

Margaret came up with her slightly faltering, uncertain step as he spoke; and the two gazed at her with that mingled awe and pity

which a creature standing on the boundary between life and death naturally calls forth in every sympathetic soul. Mr. Lothian drew her hand through his arm as her father might have done.

‘You should not walk so far till you get stronger,’ he said. Margaret looked at him with a smile, and shook her head.

‘You know I will never get stronger,’ she said. ‘It is not like you to say what you don’t mean. But you’ll come in. My feet are failing already, and it’s not often we see Miss Catherine here.’

‘My dear,’ said the old lady, speaking quickly as if to shake the tears out of her voice, ‘the horses are all busy at the plough, and I’m a poor walker. I always hear how you are all the same.’

‘You’re vexed to look at me,’ said Margaret. ‘I know what you mean. You’re like to break your heart when you see my face; but I’m not grieved for my part. I cannot see what great difference there can be between this world and the other. God is ay the same. I would like to see Isabel and know that the poor bairns are doing as they ought——’

‘Oh, Margaret, do not break my heart with your bairns,’ cried Miss Catherine, with tears in her eyes. ‘It’s you I’m thinking of—I care nothing for other folk.’

‘You would hate me if I thought that,’ said Margaret, with her soft smile; ‘and I would be very glad to have your advice. I’m troubled about Jamie’s education. Isabel is young; she’ll maybe not think as I do. I am very anxious for your advice.’

‘We were talking of different things,’ said Mr. Lothian, leading the invalid into the house. ‘We were discussing what has happened in the country-side. If anybody can convince Miss Catherine it is

you, Margaret. She will not believe the story everybody is full of—though I saw Ailie with my own eyes, one day helpless on her bed, the next walking down the hill-side far more strongly, my poor child, than you.’

‘It was hysterical; nothing will make me believe different,’ said Miss Catherine; ‘fanciful illness, fanciful cure. I’m not gainsaying the facts, but you’ll never get me to believe it was miraculous. What is Ailie Macfarlane that God should do miracles for her? If it had been Margaret here——’

‘But He knows I want no miracles,’ said Margaret; ‘I’m very content with what I get. I’m fond of both the bairns myself; but I give most to little Mary; not that she deserves it most, or that I like her best, but because her nature’s ay craving. It’s the same thing. Ailie craves, too, and God knows the nature He gave her; but for me—He sees I’m content.’

‘And you would be content if you were cut in little pieces for Isabel and Jean Campbell’s weans,’ cried Miss Catherine, with an indignation that was assumed to hide something else. ‘It takes little to content you.’

‘Everybody is so good to me,’ said Margaret. ‘You are not so good to Ailie Macfarlane. You take up her little words, and you’re angry at God for doing more for her than for me; but I take it as a compliment, for my part,’ said the girl, with a smile. She was so near her Father in Heaven, that she spoke of Him almost as she would have done of a father on earth.

‘Well—well,’ said Miss Catherine, impatiently, ‘we must all believe just what you like to tell us. Where is Isabel? I think she

might be here to look after you and keep you comfortable instead of wandering all the day among the hills.'

'She is never away from me,' said Margaret, warmly; 'she would carry me in her arms if I would let her. I sent her out for change, poor Bell! It would be a hard thing if I was to let her put all her happiness on me.'

'Better on you than on that English lad,' said Miss Catherine, with heat, 'that nobody knows. In my day, we were never allowed to speak to a young man till his kith and kin were known. You think you're wiser now—but I wish it may come to no harm,' said the old lady. She was an old woman given to opposition, but the strength of her indignation now lay in the absolute necessity she felt to do or say something which should not drop into weak lamentation and tears.

Margaret made no answer. She bent back in her invalid chair, and threw off the shawl which wrapped her, and untied the bonnet which surrounded her delicate face like a great projecting frame. As for the minister, his face flushed, and his hands grew restless with agitation; though on the surface of things it would have seemed that he had very little to do with the matter.

'There is no meaning in it,' said Mr. Lothian; 'they're children both; she is not the one, especially now—No, you need not think of that.'

And with this speech he rose up and went to the window, and gazed out, not knowing what to say. Miss Catherine held up her hands commenting on his excitement as women do—half contemptuous, half amused—

‘What is it to him that might be her father?’ she said, leaning over Margaret, in a whisper. And Margaret smiled with the indulgent quiet of old age.

‘Let them be,’ she said, softly; ‘God will guide it His own way. I’m not afraid for my Isabel. When I’m away you’ll see what is in her. My shadow is ay coming in, though you don’t think it, between her and you.’

At this moment the minister turned round, as with a little impatience, and interrupted the side-talk.

‘And as we speak of her, here comes Isabel,’ he said, with a hasty sigh. Both the women knew at once more distinctly than if he had said it, that the ‘English lad,’ young Stapylton, the one idler of the country-side, was with Isabel. As the young pair approached, the elder visitors prepared to go away. Miss Catherine was absorbed in her anxiety and grief for Margaret, but other feelings stirred in the mind of her companion. He was eager to leave the cottage before Isabel and her escort should appear, and hurried the old lady in her leave-taking.

‘We must not tire her out,’ he said, pressing Margaret’s hand with a certain petulant haste, which she forgave him. It was true he was old enough to be Isabel’s father; but even that reflection, though he had often insisted upon it in his own thoughts, had not moved him as it ought to have done. He could not wait to meet her, but nodded his head with a poor assumption of carelessness, and hurried Miss Catherine down the opposite path. Even Mr. Lothian’s secret sentiments had been discovered, like other things, by the country-side; and the old lady perceived what he meant, and

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