

THE OPTIMIST

**BY
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Dedicated

TO C. A. DAWSON-SCOTT IN
AFFECTIONATE ADMIRATION OF
THE NOVELIST AND THE WOMAN.

I

VALERIA AND OWEN QUENTILLIAN

(i)

THE ship swung slowly away from the side of the wharf. Several people on board then said, "Well, we're off at last!" to several other people who had only been thinking of saying it.

Owen Quentillian remembered another, longer, sea-voyage taken by himself at an early age. Far more clearly he remembered his arrival at St. Gwenllian.

It was that which he wanted to recall, aware as he was of the necessity for resuming a connection that had almost insensibly lapsed for several years.

He deliberately let his mind travel backwards, visualizing himself, a disconsolate, shivering morsel, being taken away from Papa and Mamma at the very station itself, and put into an open pony-cart beside Miss Lucilla Morchard.

The conversation between them, as far as he could recollect it, had run upon strangely categorical lines.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Canon Morchard's daughter. You can call me Lucilla."

"How old are you?"

"I'm fifteen, but you shouldn't ask grown-up persons their age."

“Oh, are you a grown-up person?”

“Of course I am. My mother is dead, and I look after the house and the children, and now I’m going to look after you as well.”

Lucilla had smiled very nicely as she said this.

“How many children are there?”

“Three, at home. My eldest brother is at school.”

“What are the names of the other ones?”

“Valeria and Flora and Adrian. Valeria and Flora are sometimes called Val and Flossie.”

He had discovered afterwards that they were seldom called anything else, except by their father.

“Why don’t Papa and Mamma come in this little carriage too?”

“Because there wouldn’t have been room. They will come in the brougham, later on.”

“They won’t go back to India without saying good-bye first, will they?” he asked wistfully.

He had known for a long time that Papa and Mamma were going back to India and leaving him at St. Gwenllian.

“No, I promise you they won’t do that,” had said Lucilla seriously.

Owen had felt entirely that her word was one to be relied upon. Very few grown-up persons gave him that feeling.

He remembered extraordinarily little about the house at St. Gwenllian. It was large, and cold, and there were a good many pictures on the walls, but the only two rooms of which he retained a mental photograph were the schoolroom, and the Canon's library.

He saw the latter room first.

Lucilla had taken him there at once.

He remembered the books against the wall—numbers and numbers of books—and the big black writing table, with a small bowl of violets next to a pile of papers, and above the writing-table a finely-carved ivory figure, crucified upon a wooden cross, set in a long plaque of pale-green velvet.

Lucilla had seemed to be disappointed because her father was out.

"He said he did so want to be here to welcome you himself, but he is always very busy. Some one sent for him, I think."

The youthful Owen Quentillian had cared less than nothing for the non-appearance of his future host and tutor. The prospect of the schoolroom tea had touched him more nearly.

But the schoolroom tea had turned out to be a sort of nightmare.

Even now, he could hardly smile at the recollection of that dreadful meal.

Eventually Val and Flossie had resolved themselves into good-natured, cheerful little girls, and Adrian into a slightly spoilt

and rather precocious little boy, addicted to remarks of the type hailed as “wonderful” in the drawing-room and “affected humbug” in the schoolroom.

But on that first evening, Val and Flossie had been two monsters with enormous eyes that stared disapprovingly, all the time, straight at Owen Quentillian and nobody else. Adrian had been an utterly incomprehensible, rather malignant little creature, who had asked questions.

“Can you see colours for each day of the week?”

Quentillian wondered whether he had looked as much alarmed as he had felt, in his utter bewilderment.

“I think Monday is blue, and Tuesday light green, and Wednesday dark green,” Adrian had then proclaimed, triumphantly, and casting his big brown eyes about as though to make sure that his three sisters had heard the enunciation of his strange creed.

“Adrian is not a bit like other little boys,” one of them had then said, with calm pride.

Owen Quentillian, unconscious of irony, had ardently hoped that she spoke truly.

Adrian had pinched him surreptitiously during tea, and had laughed in a way that made Owen flush when they had asked him what India was like and he had answered “I don’t know.”

He had thought the thick bread-and-butter nasty, and wondered if there was never any cake. A vista of past teas, with sugared cakes from the drawing-room, especially selected by

himself, and brought to his own little table on the back veranda by the Ayah, made him choke.

There had been a dreadful moment when he had snatched at the horrid mug they had given him and held it before his face for a long, long time, desperately pretending to drink, and not daring to show his face.

Lucilla, seated at the head of the table, had offered the others more tea, but she had said nothing to the little strange boy, and he still felt grateful to her.

The miserable, chaotic jumble that was all that his mind retained, of interminable slices of bread-and-butter that tasted like sawdust, of thick, ugly white china, of hostile or mocking gazes, of jokes and allusions in which he had no share, all came to a sudden end when he had given up any hope of ever being happy again so long as he lived.

Canon Morchard had come into the room.

And, magically, Val and Flossie had turned into quiet, insignificant little girls, looking gently and trustfully at their father, and no longer staring curiously at Owen Quentillian, and Adrian had become a wide-eyed, guileless baby, and the thick bread-and-butter and the ugly china no longer existed at all.

Only Lucilla had undergone no transformation.

She said "This is Owen Quentillian, Father," in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"I know, my child, I know."

His hand, large and protecting, had grasped the boy's hand, and after a moment he stooped and put his lips gently to Owen's forehead.

Quentillian remembered a presence of general benignity, a strangely sweet smile that came, however, very rarely, a deep voice, and an effect of commanding height and size.

Memory could not recapture any set form of words, but Quentillian endeavoured, whimsically, to recast certain speeches which he felt to be permeated with the spirit of the Canon.

"My dear little boy, I hope you may come to feel this as home. We shall all of us endeavour to make it so. Lucilla here is my little housekeeper—ask her for anything that you want. Valeria—my tomboy. She and you will have some grand romps together. Flora is younger; nearer your own age, perhaps. Flora plays the piano, and we hope that she may show great feeling for Art, by and bye. Little Adrian, I am sure, has already made friends with you. I call him the Little Friend of all the World. There are some very quaint fancies under this brown mop, but we shall make something out of them one of these days—one of these days."

Some such introduction there had certainly been. The Canon had been nothing if not categorical, and Quentillian could fancifully surmise in him a bewilderment not untinged with resentment had his Valeria one day tired of being a tomboy, and elected to patronize the piano, or Flora suddenly become imbued with a romping spirit, to the detriment of her artistic propensities.

But the Canon's children had always refrained from any *volte-face* calculated to disconcert their parent. Quentillian was almost sure that all of them, except Lucilla, had been afraid of him—even Adrian, on whom his father had lavished a peculiar cherishing tenderness.

Quentillian could remember certain sharp, stern rebukes, called forth by Valeria's tendency to untimely giggles, or Flora's infantile tears, or his own occasional sulks and obstinacy under the new *régime*. But he could only once remember Adrian in disgrace, and so abysmal had been the catastrophe, that imagination was unneeded for recalling it clearly.

Adrian had told a lie.

Quentillian re-lived the terrible episode.

"Which of you children took a message for me from Radly yesterday? Not you, Lucilla?"

"No, father."

"Mrs. Radly died last night." The Canon's face was suffused. "She asked for me all yesterday, and Radly actually left her in order to find some way of sending me a message. I hear now that he met 'one of the St. Gwenllian children' and sent an urgent summons which was never delivered. *Which was never delivered!* Good Heavens, children, think of it! I was here, in our own home-circle, enjoying a pleasant evening reading aloud, when that woman was dying there in the farm, craving for the help and comfort that I, her shepherd and pastor, could and *should* have given her."

He covered his face with his hand and groaned aloud.

"In all the years of my ministry," he said slowly, "I have never had a more bitter blow. And dealt me by one of my own household! Children," his voice boomed suddenly terrible, "which of you received Radly's message yesterday?"

Quentillian, in the retrospect, felt no surprise at the absence of any competition in laying claim to the implied responsibility.

At last Lucilla said tentatively:

"Val? Flora?"

"I never saw Radly at all, yesterday, nor any other day," said Val, her brown eyes wide open and fixed straight upon her father.

Flora's little, pretty face was pale and scared.

"It wasn't me. No one ever gave me any message."

Her voice trembled as though she feared to be disbelieved.

"Owen?" said the Canon sternly.

"No, sir."

"Adrian?" his voice softened.

"No, father."

The Canon hardly appeared to listen to Adrian's answer. His hand was on the little boy's brown curls, in the fond, half-absent, gesture habitual to him.

He faced the children, and his eye rested upon Owen Quentillian.

"If any one of you," he said sternly and slowly, "has been betrayed into telling me a lie, understand that it is not yet too late for full confession. Selfish heedlessness cannot be judged by its terrible consequences, and if I spoke too strongly just now, it was out of the depths of my own grief and shame. The forgetfulness was bad—very bad—but that I can forgive. A lie, I can *not* forgive. It is not too late."

His face was white and terrible as he gazed with strained eyes at the children.

Little Flora began to cry, and Lucilla put her arm round her.

"Understand me, children, denial is perfectly useless. I *know* that message was given to one of you, and that it was not delivered, and it is simply a question of hours before I see Radly and obtain from him the name of the child to whom the message was given. I accuse no one of you, but I implore the culprit to speak out. Otherwise," he hit the table with his clenched fist, and it seemed as though lightning shot from his blazing eyes, "otherwise I shall know that there dwells under my roof a liar and a coward."

Quentillian could hear still the scorn that rang in that deep, vibrant voice, terrifying the children.

Not one of them spoke.

And the Canon had gone out of the room with anguish in his eyes.

The nursery court-martial that followed was held by Lucilla.

"Flossie, it couldn't have been you, because you stayed in all yesterday with your cold. Owen and Val were out in the afternoon?"

"We went to see the woman with the new twins," said Val, indignantly. "We never met anyone the whole way, did we, Owen?"

"No."

Owen Quantillian had known all the time what was coming. He knew, with the terrible, intimate knowledge of the nursery, that Adrian was the only one of the Canon's children who did not always speak the truth.

Apparently Lucilla, also, knew.

She said "Oh, Adrian," in a troubled, imploring voice.

"I didn't," said Adrian, and burst into tears.

"I knew it was Adrian," said little Flora. "I saw Radly coming up the lane very fast, I saw him out of the night-nursery window, and I saw Adrian, too. I knew it was Adrian, all the time."

None of the children was surprised.

Adrian, confronted with their take-it-for-granted attitude, ceased his mechanical denials.

The preoccupation of them all, was Canon Morchard.

"It'll be less bad if you tell him yourself than if Radly does," Owen Quentillian pointed out.

"Of course, it makes it much worse having told him a lie," Val said crudely, "but perhaps he didn't much notice what you said. I'm sure he thought it was Owen, all the time."

How much better if it had been Owen, if it had been any one of them, save the Canon's best-loved child, his youngest son!

"You must come and tell him at once," Lucilla decreed—but not hopefully.

"I can't. You know what he said about a liar and a coward under his roof."

Adrian cried and shivered.

"He wasn't angry the time I broke the clock," said Flora. "He took me on his knee and only just talked to me. I didn't mind a bit."

"But you hadn't told a story," said the inexorable Val.

They all knew that there lay the crux of the matter.

Quentillian could see the circle of scared, perplexed faces still—Lucilla, troubled, but unastonished, keeping a vigilant hold on Adrian all the time, Val, frankly horrified and full of outspoken predictions of the direst description, Flossie in tears, stroking and fondling Adrian's hand with the tenderest compassion. He even visualized the pale, squarely built, little flaxen-haired boy that had been himself.

They could not persuade Adrian to confess.

At last Lucilla said: "If you don't tell him, Adrian, then I shall."

And so it had been, because Canon Morchard, re-entering the schoolroom, had, with a penetration to which his children were accustomed, instantly perceived the tears and the terror on Adrian's face.

"What is it, little lad? Have you hurt yourself?"

The kind, unsuspecting concern in his voice, as he held out his hand!

Quentillian was certain that a pause had followed the enquiry—Adrian's opportunity, conceded by Lucilla, even while she knew, as they all did, that he would take no advantage of it.

Then Lucilla had told.

Quentillian's thoughts went off at a tangent, dwelling for the first time, with a certain surprised admiration, upon Lucilla's resolute, almost matter-of-fact performance of her painful and alarming task.

Canon Morchard had been incredulous at first, and Lucilla had steadily repeated, and reiterated again and again, the dreadful truth.

A black time had followed.

It assumed the proportions of a twelve-month, in the retrospect. Could it have extended over a week? Strangely enough, Quentillian could not recall the exact fate of Adrian, but he knew that the Canon first fulminated words of wrath

and scorn, and at last had actually broken down, tears streaming down his furrowed face, and that the sight of this unrestrained display of suffering had caused the boy Owen to creep from the room, with the strange, sick feeling of one who had witnessed an indecency.

All the children except Lucilla, who indeed scarcely counted as one of them, had avoided Canon Morchard in the ensuing days. They had crept about the house silently, and at meals no one spoke until the Canon had left the room. Owen Quentillian, playing with a ball in the passage and inadvertently bouncing it against the closed study door, had been suddenly confronted by the Canon, and the look of grief and horror fixed upon that handsome face had rendered any spoken rebuke for levity unnecessary.

After all, they had left an impression, those Morchards, all of them, Quentillian reflected.

Lucilla had been calm, matter-of-fact, competent—perhaps a little inhuman. Val, impetuous, noisy, inclined to defiance, yet frankly terrified of her father. Flossie—impossible to think of her as Flora, unless the name was uttered in the Canon's full, deep tones—surely the prettiest of the three, gentler than Val, less self-assured than Lucilla, timid only with her father. Adrian, of course, did not speak the truth. His contemporaries had known it, although Canon Morchard had not realized the little boy's habitual weakness. But then he had never realized that the children were afraid of him.

Why had they all been afraid of him?

Quentillian decided that it must have been because of his own phenomenal rectitude, his high standard of honour, and above all and especially, his deep, fundamental sense of religion.

Canon Morchard, undoubtedly, lived "in the presence of God." Even the little boy Owen had known that, and, thinking backwards, Quentillian was convinced of it still.

He felt curious to see the Canon again. David Morchard had said to him in Mesopotamia: "Go and see him. They've none of them forgotten you, and they'll be glad of first-hand news. I've only been home once in five years."

The shrug of his shoulders had seemed to Quentillian expressive.

But evidently David had judged his family correctly. The Canon had written and invited his old pupil to stay with him.

"It will not only be joy untold to receive news of our dear lad, David, but a real pleasure to us all to welcome you amongst us once more. I have not forgotten my pupil of long-ago days, nor my daughters their erstwhile playfellow. You will find all at home, including Adrian. Dear fellow, I had hoped it was to be the Church for him, but he has been so open, so anxious to decide the whole important question *rightly*, that one can only leave the decision to him in all confidence. I would not hurry him in any way, but his brief Army days are over, thank God, and we have the untold pleasure of having him with us now, so

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