THE
STORY OF VALENTINE
AND HIS BROTHER

BY
MRS OLIPHANT

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TO

MY ETON BOYS

C. F. O.
F. R. O.
F. W.

THE STORY OF VALENTINE;
AND HIS BROTHER.

CHAPTER I.

TWO ladies were seated in a great dim room, partially illuminated by fits and starts with gleams of firelight. The large windows showed a pale dark sky, in which twilight was giving place to night, and across which the brown branches of the trees, rough with the buds of March, tossed wildly in a hurricane of wind, burdened with intermittent blasts of rain—rain that dashed fiercely against the windows a handful at a time, then ceased till some new cloud was ready to discharge its angry shower. Something fiercely personal and furious was in the storm. It looked and felt like something not addressed to the world in general, but aimed individually by some angry spirit of the elements at the people who lived here high up above the brawling Esk amid the brown wintry woods at Rosscraig House.

The drawing-room was large, lofty, and full of old-fashioned furniture which would have enchanted a connoisseur. The two ladies, who were its only occupants, were scarcely discernible at first, though the firelight, gleaming about among the still life, caught here a green reflection from a wonderful cabinet of rarest Vernis-Martin, and there entangled itself in the bevelled sides of a strange old mirror, used to reflecting wizards. It was more easy to make out these accessories of existence than it was to identify the two voices which occupied and reigned over this still and darkling chamber. They were in one corner of the room near the fire; one, the prevailing voice, was soft but strong, with the vigour in it of mature life, just roughened here and there by a touch of age, which gave it an *aigre-doux* of distinct character—and came from an ample dark shadow in a great chair turned towards the fire. The

other, which gave forth only monosyllabic sounds of assent or wonder, sweet and tender, but feeble, belonged to a smaller person near the first, and facing her—whose countenance, turned towards the window, showed like a pale whiteness in the dark. This was the central light, the highest tone in the picture, except the pale gleaming of the sky from the windows, and the fitful red flash from the fire.

"Richard's story," said the stronger voice, "cannot be supposed to be very interesting to any but ourselves. If it is for mere curiosity, Mary——"

"Curiosity!"—there was a tone of reproach in the soft repetition—a reproach and an appeal.

"That was unkind. I did not mean it. I meant interest, friendship; but Mary, Mary, friendship is weak, and interest a poor bit feeble echo of feeling to them that are all bound up in one life, as I have been in my son!"

Here there was a little pause, and then the younger voice answered, faltering, "I have known him all my life. I have seen few men but him——"

This was preliminary to the story which old Lady Eskside had begun to tell when I opened to you, gentle reader, the door of this great dim room. She was deep in it by the time we shadows entered, among the shadows, to listen. And most of us can figure to ourselves what a mother would be likely to say of her only child—the child not of her youth even, which puts a kind of equality between mother and son, and brings them together, as it were, upon one table-land of life, sooner or later—but the child of her mature age, and therefore always a child to her. What she said of

him I need not repeat. The reader will make acquaintance with the man for himself, a different creature from the man as seen through his mother's eyes.

"Perhaps it is not a thing to remark to you," said the old lady, who was old enough not only to retain a Scotch accent, but to use occasionally a word peculiar to the north,—"but, Mary, you are not a bit girlie unacquainted with the world. You will recognise Richard in this that he married the woman.—God forgive me! I'm sorely tempted to think sometimes that vice is less deadly for this world than virtue. You know what most men would have done—they would have taken the girl as they would have gathered a flower; and neither she nor one belonging to her knew better, nor expected better; but my Richard, God bless him! was a fool, Mary,—he was a fool! His father says so, and what can I say different? He has always been a fool in that way, thank God! He married the woman; and then he sent to me when it was all over and nothing could be mended, to come and see, for God's sake, what was to be done."

"And you went?"

"I went after a struggle; I could not thole the creature,—the very name of her was odious to me. It was a ridiculous name—a play-actor's name. They called her Altamira. What do you think of that for Richard's wife? I thought she was some shopkeeper's daughter—some scheming, dressing, half-bred woman that had made her plan to marry him because his father was Lord Eskside—though, heaven knows, it's a poor enough lordship when all's said. Perhaps we women are too apt to take that view; naturally, when such a thing happens, we think it the woman's fault—the woman's doing. But Mary, Mary, when I saw the girl——"

“You freed her,” said the other, with a sighing sound in her low voice, “from the blame?”

“The blame!” cried the old lady, with some impatience; then, sinking her voice low, she said hurriedly—“the girl was no shopkeeper’s daughter, not even a cottage lass, nor out of a ploughman’s house, or a weaver’s house, or the lowest you can think. She was out of no house at all—she was a tramp. Mary, do you know what that means?—a creature hanging about the roads and fields, at fairs and races, wherever the roughest, and the wildest, and the most miserable congregate—that was Richard’s wife——”

“Oh, Lady Eskside!”

“You may well say, Oh! As for me, if I had ever fainted in my life I would have fainted then. She was a beautiful creature; but the sight of her brought a sickness to my very heart. She was like a wild hunted thing, frightened to death for me and everything that was civilised—looking out of her wild black eyes to see how she could escape—shrinking back not to be touched as if she thought I would give her a blow. Blame! you might as well blame a deer that it let itself be taken, poor, bonnie, panting, senseless thing! I blamed nobody, Mary; I was just appalled, neither more nor less, at the man’s folly that had done it. Think of a son of mine having so little command of himself! The madness of it! for it was no question of making a lady of her, a woman that could take his mother’s place. She had to be tamed first out of her gipsy ways, tamed like a wild beast, and taught to live in a house, and wear decent clothes as she had never done in her life.”

A low cry of dismay and wonder came from the listener's lips, and a strange pang which nobody knew of went through her heart—a pang indescribable, mingled of misery, humiliation, and a kind of guilty and bitter pride; guilty, though she was innocent enough. This was his choice, she said to herself; and that sharp and stinging contempt—more painful to herself than to the object of it—which a woman sometimes permits herself to feel for a man who has slighted her, shot through the gentlest soul in the world.

"I cannot tell you," said Lady Eskside, her voice sinking low so that her companion had to stoop forward to hear, "all that I went through. She broke away from us, and got back to her people more than once. Our ways were misery and bondage to her. At first she had to be dressed like a child—watched like a child. Her husband had no influence over her, and she was frightened for me: the moment she was out of our sight her whole mind was busy with schemes to get away."

"But what reason—what motive——" began the other, faltering.

"None," said Lady Eskside. "Listen, Mary; there was one thing. She was good, as people call good; there was no wickedness in her, as a woman. What wife meant, in any higher sense, she was ignorant of; but there was no harm—no harm. Always remember this, whatever may happen, and whatever you may hear. I say it—Richard's mother—that can have no motive to shield her. She wanted her freedom, nothing more. She was not an ill woman; nothing bad—in that way—was in her head. She would have put her knife into the man who spoke lightly to her, as soon as look at him. She was proud in her way of being Richard's wife. She felt the difference it made between her and others. But she was like a

wild animal, or a bird. She would not be caged, and there was too deep an ignorance in her to learn. There was no foundation to build upon—neither ambition, nor pride, nor any feeling that the like of us expect to find."

"And was there no—love?" The voice that made this inquiry trembled and had a thrill in it of feeling so mingled as to be indescribable—bitterness, wonder, pity, and a sense of contrast more overwhelming than all.

Lady Eskside did not reply at once. "Often and often I've asked myself that question," she said at length; "Was there love? How can I tell? There are different kinds of love, Mary. You and I even would love very differently, let alone you and her. With you there would be no thought of anything but of the person loved——"

"I am not at all in question, Lady Eskside," said the other, with the strangest delicate haughtiness.

"I beg your pardon," said the old lady, quickly. "You are right, my dear; there is no question of you. But still there are different kinds of love. Some think only of the person loved, as I said; but some are roused up into a kind of fierce consciousness of themselves through their very love. They feel their own individuality not less but more in consequence of it. This was that poor creature's way. Mixed with her wild cravings for the freedom she had been used to, and the wild outdoor life she had been used to, I think she had a sort of half-crazy feeling how unlike Richard she was; and this became all the stronger when I came. My dear," said Lady Eskside, suddenly, "the most untrained woman feels what another woman thinks of her far more than she feels any

man's criticism. I have thought and thought on this for years, and perhaps I put my own thoughts into her mind; but I cannot help fancying that sometimes, though she did not understand me in the least, poor thing, she caught a glimpse of herself through my eyes; and what with this, and what with her longing to be out of doors, she grew desperate, and then she ran away."

The listener made no reply. I don't think she cared to hear any excuse made for the wild woman who was Richard's wife—whom Richard had chosen instead of any other, and who had thus justified his choice.

"I stayed as long as I could, and tried all I could," Lady Eskside continued, "and then there came a time when I felt it was better for me to go away. I told Richard so, and I advised him to take her abroad—where she would have nobody to fly to. And so he did, and wandered about with her everywhere. I can't think but what she must have made some advances, in sense, at least, while they were so much together; but it takes a long time to tame a savage; it takes a long time to graft a new stock upon a wild tree."

"And have you never seen her again?"

"I saw her when her children were born. She was so far tamed then by weakness, and by the natural restraint of the circumstances," said Lady Eskside, "that I hoped she might be changed altogether. And she would talk a little—not so much as that one could find out how her mind was working—but yet a little—enough to swear by; and her voice was changed. It lost its wild sound and took finer modulations. You know how particular Richard always was in all his ways—you remember his voice."

The other drew back her chair a little. Somehow the sudden reference struck her like an arrow through and through. It was not her fault. For years she had been trying to think of Richard—as she ought to think—not too much, nor too kindly, but with gentle indifference and friendship; no, not indifference; old long friendship which may be permitted to remember. "Like his sister," she had often said to herself. But somehow these sudden words, "You remember his voice," struck poor Mary at unawares. They brought her down to the very ground. She tried with a choking sobbing sensation to get out the word "Yes." Remember it! She seemed to hear it and nothing else, till her head ached and swam, and there was a ringing in her ears.

"Ah!" Lady Eskside paused, with a wondering sense that something was going on in the dark more potent than mere interest in her story. But after a while, as even a story which is one's own takes a stronger hold upon one than the emotion of another, however deep—she recommenced, going back to herself. "Her voice had changed wonderfully. She spoke almost like an educated person—that gave me great hope. I thought, what with the children and what with this opening of new life in herself, that everything would be changed; and my heart was moved to her. When I left I kissed the children, and for the first time I kissed her; and I promised to send her a nurse, an excellent nurse I knew of, and came home quite happy. You recollect my coming home, and how proud I was of the twins—the darlings! Oh, Mary, Mary! little did I know——"

Mary put out her hand and took that of her old friend. She was too much moved herself to say anything. From this point she had a faint knowledge of the story, as everybody had.

“The next I heard was that she had disappeared,” said the old lady;—“disappeared totally, taking the babies with her. Richard went with me so far on my way home, and while he was absent his wife disappeared. There is no other word for it; she disappeared, and no one has ever heard of her again. Oh, Mary, what news for us all! There had been some gipsy wanderers, some of her own class, about the place, we found out afterwards; and whether they carried her off, or she went of her own will, nobody knows. Sometimes I have thought she must have been carried away, but then they would not have taken the children; and sometimes I have blamed myself, and thought that what I said about the nurse may have frightened her—God knows. We sought her everywhere, Mary, as you may suppose. I went myself up and down over all the country, and Richard went to America, and I cannot tell you where. We had the police employed, and every sort of person we could think of; but we have never heard any more of her to this day.”

“Nor of the children?” said Mary, drawing closer and holding still more tenderly her old friend’s hand.

“Nor of the children; two bonnie boys—oh, my dear, two lovely boys!” cried the old lady, with a sob. “I never saw such sweet children. You may fancy all I had said to my old lord when I came home, about them: one was to have my property, such as it is, and the other the Eskside lands. A single heir would have been better, Lord Eskside said, in his way, you know—but he was as proud as I was. Two boys!—no fear of the old house dying out. We began to plan out the new wing we had always thought of building. Oh, Mary, now you will understand how I can never laugh when the gentlemen make a joke with my poor old lord about the new wing!”

“Dear Lady Eskside! but you must not—you must not break down—for his sake.”

“No, I must never break down; and if I would I could not,” said the old lady; “it’s no my nature. I must keep up. I must stand firm till my last day. But, Mary, though it is my nature, I have to pay for it, as one pays for everything. Oh, the weary nights I have lain awake thinking I heard her wandering round the house, thinking I heard her at the window trying to get in. She knew nothing about Rosscraig—nothing; but, strange enough, I always think of her coming here. When the wind’s blowing as it blows to-night, when the leaves are falling in autumn—oh, Mary, have you never heard a sound like steps going round and round the house?”

“It is only the leaves falling,” said Mary; and then she added, suddenly, “I have heard everything that the heart hears.”

“And that’s more than the ears ever hear tell of,” said the old lady; “but oh, to live for years and never hear that without thinking it may be them—never to see beggar bairns on a roadside without thinking it may be them—to go watching and waiting and wondering through your life, starting at every noise, trembling at every sudden sound—God help us! what is that—what is that?” she cried, suddenly rising to her feet.

“Oh, Lady Eskside!” cried the other, rising too, and grasping her hand with a nervous shudder; “it is nothing—nothing but the storm.”

The old lady dropped heavily into her seat again. “Sometimes I cannot bear it,” she cried—“sometimes I cannot bear it! I get half-crazed at every sound.”

“The wind is very high,” said Mary, soothing her, “and the Esk is running wild over the linn, and the storm tearing the trees. It must be the equinoctial gales. If you only heard them as we do, roaring and raging over the sea!”

For a few minutes the two ladies sat quite still holding each other’s hands. The storm outside was wild enough to impose silence upon those within. The trees were tossing about as if in an agony, against the pale whiteness of the sky; now and then a deeper note would come into the tumult of sound, the hoarse roar of the river, which grew rapidly into a torrent at the foot of the hill; and then the wind would rush, like the avenging spirit through the bleeding wood in the Inferno, tearing off the limbs of the trees, which shrieked and cried in unavailing torment. The last lingering rays of twilight had disappeared out of the sky, the last gleams of firelight were sinking too—even the mirrors had sunk out of sight upon the walls, and nothing but the large windows filled with the mournful pallor of the sky, and Mary’s pale face, a spot of congenial whiteness, were even partially visible. After this story, and while they sat silent, conscious of the strange stillness within, and commotion outside, was it their imaginations that represented to them another sound striking into the roar of the storm? Lady Eskside did not start again as she had done before, but she grasped Mary’s hand tightly; while Mary, for her part, sat bolt-upright in her chair, thinking to herself that it must be imagination, that it was a mere trick of excitement which filled her ears with echoes of fanciful knockings. Who could be knocking at this hour? or how could such a sound be heard even, in the onslaught of the storm?

What was it? what could it be? Now, was that the forlorn peal of a bell? and now a gust of cold air as if the door in opening had admitted the storm in person, which swept through the house like a

mountain stream; and now a wild dash and clang as if the same door had closed again, shaking the very walls. Tighter and tighter Lady Eskside grasped Mary's hand. No words passed between them, except a faint "It is nothing—it is fancy," which came from Mary's lips unawares, and under her breath. Was it fancy? Was it some curious reverberation through the air of the countless anxieties which the old lady had hushed in her mind for years, but which until now she had never betrayed? For the next few minutes they heard their own hearts beating loud over the storm; and then there came another sound ludicrous in its methodical calm, which startled them still more than the sounds they had supposed themselves to hear.

"Something has happened, Mary!" cried Lady Eskside, withdrawing her grasp and wringing her hands. "Something has happened! some one has arrived, and Harding is coming to let us know."

"He is coming to light the lamps," said Mary, making one desperate effort to throw off the superstitious impression; and she laughed. The laugh sounded something terrible, full of mockery and contempt in the midst of the always resounding storm; the echo of it seemed to breathe all round the room, calling forth diabolical echoes. In the midst of these Harding came solemnly into the room. He was an elderly man, who had been many years in the house, and was deeply impressed by the solemnity of his own position. He came in without any light, and stood invisible at the door, another voice and nothing else. "My lady," said Harding, solemnly, "something has happened—something as is very mysterious and we can't understand. Would it be a great trouble to your ladyship if we was to ask you to come down-stairs?"