

THE WIZARD'S SON

A Novel

VOL. I.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT

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THE WIZARD'S SON.

CHAPTER I.

The Methvens occupied a little house in the outskirts of a little town where there was not very much going on of any description, and still less which they could take any share in, being, as they were, poor and unable to make any effective response to the civilities shown to them. The family consisted of three persons—the mother, who was a widow with one son; the son himself, who was a young man of three or four and twenty; and a distant cousin of Mrs. Methven's, who lived with her, having no other home. It was not a very happy household. The mother had a limited income and an anxious temper; the son a somewhat volatile and indolent disposition, and no ambition at all as to his future, nor anxiety as to what was going to happen to him in life. This, as may be supposed, was enough to introduce many uneasy elements into their joint existence; and the third of the party, Miss Merivale, was not of the class of the peacemakers to whom Scripture allots a special blessing. She had no amiable glamour in her eyes, but saw her friends' imperfections with a clearness of sight which is little conducive to that happy progress of affairs which is called "getting on." The Methvens were sufficiently proud to keep their difficulties out of the public eye, but on very many occasions, unfortunately, it had become very plain to themselves that they did not "get on." It was not any want of love. Mrs. Methven was herself aware, and her friends were in the constant habit of saying, that she had sacrificed everything for Walter. Injudicious friends are fond of making such statements, by way, it is to be supposed, of increasing the devotion and gratitude of the child to the parent: but the result is, unfortunately, very often the exact contrary of

what is desired—for no one likes to have his duty in this respect pointed out to him, and whatever good people may think, it is not in itself an agreeable thought that "sacrifices" have been made for one, and an obligation placed upon one's shoulders from the beginning of time, independent of any wish or claim upon the part of the person served. The makers of sacrifices have seldom the reward which surrounding spectators, and in many cases themselves, think their due. Mrs. Methven herself would probably have been at a loss to name what were the special sacrifices she had made for Walter. She had remained a widow, but that she would have been eager to add was no sacrifice. She had pinched herself more or less to find the means for his education, which had been of what is supposed in England to be the best kind: and she had, while he was a boy, subordinated her own tastes and pleasures to his, and eagerly sought out everything that was likely to be agreeable to him. When they took their yearly journey—as it is considered necessary for him—places that Walter liked, or where he could find amusement, or had friends, were eagerly sought for. "Women," Mrs. Methven said, "can make themselves comfortable anywhere; but a boy, you know, is quite different." "Quite," Miss Merivale would say: "Oh, if you only knew them as well as we do; they are creatures entirely without resources. You must put their toys into their very hands." "There is no question of toys with Walter—he has plenty of resources. It is not that," Mrs. Methven would explain, growing red. "I hope I am not one of the silly mothers that thrust their children upon everybody: but, of course, a boy must be considered. Everybody who has had to do with men—or boys—knows that they must be considered." A woman whose life has been mixed up with these troublesome beings feels the superiority of her experience to those who know nothing about them. And in this way, without spoiling him or treating him with

ridiculous devotion, as the king of her fate, Walter had been "considered" all his life.

For the rest, Mrs. Methven had, it must be allowed, lived a much more agreeable life in the little society of Sloebury when her son was young than she did now that he had come to years, mis-named, of discretion. Then she had given her little tea-parties, or even a small occasional dinner, at which her handsome boy would make his appearance when it was holiday time, interesting everybody; or, when absent, would still furnish a very pleasant subject of talk to the neighbours, who thought his mother did a great deal too much for him, but still were pleased to discuss a boy who was having the best of educations, and at a public school. In those days she felt herself very comfortable in Sloebury, and was asked to all the best houses, and felt a modest pride in the certainty that she was able to offer something in return. But matters were very different when Walter was four-and-twenty instead of fourteen. By that time it was apparent that he was not going to take the world by storm, or set the Thames on fire; and, though she had been too sensible to brag, Mrs. Methven had thought both these things possible, and perhaps had allowed it to be perceived that she considered something great, something out of the way, to be Walter's certain career. But twenty-four is, as she said herself, so different! He had been unsuccessful in some of his examinations, and for others he had not been "properly prepared." His mother did not take refuge in the thought that the examiners were partial or the trials unfair; but there was naturally always a word as to the reason why he did not succeed—he had not been "properly prepared." He knew of one only a few days before the eventful moment, and at this time of day, she asked indignantly, when everything is got by competition, how is a young man who has not "crammed" to get

the better of one who has? The fact remained that at twenty-four, Walter, evidently a clever fellow, with a great many endowments, had got nothing to do; and, what was worse—a thing which his mother, indeed, pretended to be unconscious of, but which everybody else in the town remarked upon—he was not in the least concerned about this fact, but took his doing nothing quite calmly as the course of nature, and neither suffered from it, nor made any effort to place himself in a different position. He "went in for" an examination when it was put before him as a thing to do, and took his failure more than philosophically when he failed, as, as yet, he had always done: and, in the mean time, contentedly lived on, without disturbing himself, and tranquilly let the time go by—the golden time which should have shaped his life.

This is not a state of affairs which can bring happiness to any household. There is a kind of parent—or rather it should be said of a mother, for no parent of the other sex is supposed capable of so much folly—to whom everything is good that her child, the cherished object of her affections, does; and this is a most happy regulation of nature, and smooths away the greatest difficulties of life for many simple-hearted folk, without doing half so much harm as is attributed to it; for disapproval has little moral effect, and lessens the happiness of all parties, without materially lessening the sins of the erring. But, unfortunately, Mrs. Methven was not of this happy kind. She saw her son's faults almost too clearly, and they gave her the most poignant pain. She was a proud woman, and that he should suffer in the opinion of the world was misery and grief to her. She was stung to the heart by disappointment in the failure of her many hopes and projects for him. She was stricken with shame to think of all the fine things that had been predicted of Walter in his boyish days, and that not one

of them had come true. People had ceased now to speak of the great things that Walter would do. They asked "*What* was he going to do?" in an entirely altered tone, and this went to her heart. Her pride suffered the most terrible blow. She could not bear the thought; and though she maintained a calm face to the world, and represented herself as entirely satisfied, Walter knew otherwise, and had gradually replaced his old careless affection for his mother by an embittered opposition and resistance to her, which made both their lives wretched enough. How it was that he did not make an effort to escape from her continual remonstrances, her appeals and entreaties, her censure and criticism, it is very difficult to tell. To have gone away, and torn her heart with anxiety, but emancipated himself from a yoke which it was against the dignity of his manhood to bear, would have been much more natural. But he had no money, and he had not the energy to seize upon any way of providing for himself. Had such an opportunity fallen at his feet he would probably have accepted it with fervour; but Fortune did not put herself out of the way to provide for him, nor he to be provided for. Notwithstanding the many scenes which took place in the seclusion of that poor little house, when the mother, what with love, shame, mortification, and impatience, would all but rave in impotent passion, appealing to him, to the pride, the ambition, the principle which so far as could be seen the young man did not possess, Walter held upon his way with an obstinate pertinacity, and did nothing. How he managed to do this without losing all self-respect and every better feeling it is impossible to say; but he did so somehow, and was still "a nice enough fellow," notwithstanding that everybody condemned him; and had not even lost the good opinion of the little society, though it was unanimous in blame. The only way in which he responded to his mother's remonstrances and complaints was by seeking his pleasure and

such occupation as contented him—which was a little cricket now and then, a little lawn-tennis, a little flirtation—as far away from her as possible; and by being as little at home as possible. His temper was a little spoiled by the scenes which awaited him when he went home; and these seemed to justify to himself his gradual separation from his mother's house: but never induced him to sacrifice, or even modify, his own course. He appeared to think that he had a justification for his conduct in the opposition it met with; and that his pride was involved in the necessity for never giving in. If he had been let alone, he represented to himself, everything would have been different; but to yield to this perpetual bullying was against every instinct. And even the society which disapproved so much gave a certain encouragement to Walter in this point of view: for it was Mrs. Methven whom everybody blamed. It was her ridiculous pride, or her foolish indulgence, or her sinful backing-up of his natural indolence; even some people thought it was her want of comprehension of her son which had done it, and that Walter would have been entirely a different person in different hands. If she had not thought it a fine thing to have him appear as a useless fine gentleman above all necessity of working for his living, it was incredible that he could have allowed the years to steal by without making any exertion. This was what the town decided, not without a good deal of sympathy for Walter. What could be expected? Under the guidance of a foolish mother, a young man always went wrong; and in this case he did not go wrong, poor fellow! he only wasted his existence, nothing worse. Sloebury had much consideration for the young man.

Perhaps it added something to the exasperation with which Mrs. Methven saw all her efforts fail that she had some perception of this, and knew that it was supposed to be her fault. No doubt in her

soul it added to the impatience and indignation and pain with which she contemplated the course of affairs, which she was without strength to combat, yet could not let alone. Now and then, indeed, she did control herself so far as to let them alone, and then there was nothing but tranquillity and peace in the house. But she was a conscientious woman, and, poor soul! she had a temper—the very complacency and calm with which her son went upon his way, the approval he showed of her better conduct when she left him to his own devices, struck her in some moments with such sudden indignation and pain, that she could no longer contain herself. He, who might have been anything he pleased, to be nothing! He, of whom everybody had predicted such great things! At such moments the sight of Walter smiling, strolling along with his hands in his pockets, excited her almost to frenzy. Poor lady! So many women would have been proud of him—a handsome young fellow in flannels, with his cricket bat or his racquet when occasion served. But love and injured pride were bitter in her heart, and she could not bear the sight. All this while, however, nobody knew anything about the scenes that arose in the little house, which preserved a show of happiness and tender union long after the reality was gone. Indeed, even Miss Merivale, who had unbounded opportunities of knowing, took a long time to make up her mind that Walter and his mother did not "get on."

Such was the unfortunate state of affairs at the time when this history begins. The Methvens were distantly connected, it was known, with a great family in Scotland, which took no notice whatever of them, and, indeed, had very little reason so to do, Captain Methven being long since dead, and his widow and child entirely unknown to the noble house, from which it was so great an honour to derive a little, much-diluted, far-off drop of blood, more

blue and more rich than the common. It is possible that had the connection been by Mrs. Methven's side she would have known more about it, and taken more trouble to keep up her knowledge of the family. But it was not so, and she had even in her younger days been conscious of little slights and neglects which had made her rather hostile than otherwise to the great people from whom her husband came. "I know nothing about the Erradeens," she would say; "they are much too grand to take any notice of us: and I am too proud to seek any notice from them."

"I am afraid, my dear, there is a good deal in that," said old Mrs. Wynn, the wife of the old rector, shaking her white head. This lady was a sort of benign embodiment of justice in Sloebury. She punished nobody, but she saw the right and wrong with a glance that was almost infallible, and shook her head though she never exacted any penalty.

Here Miss Merivale would seize the occasion to strike in—

"Prejudice is prejudice," she said, "whatever form it takes. A lord has just as much chance of being nice as an—apothecary." This was said because the young doctor, newly admitted into his father's business, who thought no little of himself, was within reach, and just then caught Miss Merivale's eye.

"That is a very safe speech, seeing there are neither lords nor apothecaries here," he said with the blandest smile. He was not a man to be beaten at such a game.

"But a lord may have influence, you know. For Walter's sake I would not lose sight of him," said Mrs. Wynn.

"You cannot lose sight of what you have never seen: besides, influence is of no consequence nowadays. Nobody can do anything for you—save yourself," said Mrs. Methven with a little sigh. Her eyes turned involuntarily to where Walter was. He was always in the middle of everything that was going on. Among the Sloebury young people he had a little air of distinction, or so at least his mother thought. She was painfully impartial, and generally, in her anxiety, perceived his bad points rather than his good ones; but as she glanced at the group, love for once allowed itself to speak, though always with an accent peculiar to the character of the thinker. She allowed to herself that he had an air of distinction, a something more than the others—alas, that nothing ever came of it! The others all, or almost all, were already launched in the world. They were doing or trying to do something—whereas Walter! But she took care that nobody should hear that irrepressible sigh.

"I am very sorry for it," said Mrs. Wynn, "for there are many people who would never push for themselves, and yet do very well indeed when they are put in the way."

"I am all for the pushing people," said Miss Merivale. "I like the new state of affairs. When every one stands for himself, and you get just as much as you work for, there will be no grudges and sulkings with society. Though I'm a Tory, I like every man to make his own way."

"A lady's politics are never to be calculated upon," said the Rector, who was standing up against the fire on his own hearth, rubbing his old white hands. "It is altogether against the principles of Toryism, my dear lady, that a man should make his own way. It is sheer democracy. As for that method of examinations, it is one of the most levelling principles of the time—it is one of Mr.

Gladstone's instruments for the destruction of society. When the son of a cobbler is just as likely to come to high command as your son or mine, what is to become of the country?" the old clergyman said, lifting those thin white hands.

Mr. Gladstone's name was as a firebrand thrown into the midst of this peaceable little country community. The speakers all took fire. They thought that there was no doubt about what was going to come of the country. It was going to destruction as fast as fate could carry it. When society had dropped to pieces, and the rabble had come uppermost, and England had become a mere name, upon which all foreign nations should trample, and wild Irishmen dance war dances, and Americans expectorate, then Mr. Gladstone would be seen in his true colours. While this was going on, old Mrs. Wynn sat in her easy-chair and shook her head. She declared always that she was no politician. And young Walter Methven, attracted by the sudden quickening of the conversation which naturally attended the introduction of this subject, came forward, ready in the vein of opposition which was always his favourite attitude.

"Mr. Gladstone must be a very great man," he said. "I hear it is a sign of being in society when you foam at the mouth at the sound of his name."

"You young fellows think it fine to be on the popular side; but wait till you are my age," cried one of the eager speakers. "It will not matter much to me. There will be peace in my days." "But wait," cried another, "and see how you will like it when everything topples down together, the crown and the state, and the aristocracy, and public credit, and national honour, and property, and the constitution, and——"

So many anxious and alarmed politicians here spoke together that the general voice became inarticulate, and Walter Methven, representing the opposition, was at liberty to laugh.

"Come one, come all!" he cried, backed up by the arm of the sofa, upon which Mrs. Wynn sat shaking her head. "It would be a fine thing for me and all the other proletarians. Something would surely fall our way."

His mother watched him, standing up against the sofa, confronting them all, with her usual exasperated and angry affection. She thought, as she looked at him, that there was nothing he was not fit for. He was clever enough for Parliament; he might have been prime minister—but he was nothing! nothing, and likely to be nothing, doing nothing, desiring nothing. Her eye fell on young Wynn, the rector's nephew, who had just got a fellowship at his college, and on the doctor's son, who was just entering into a share of his father's practice, and on Mr. Jeremy the young banker, whose attentions fluttered any maiden to whom he might address them. They were Walter's contemporaries, and not one of them was worthy, she thought, to be seen by the side of her boy; but they had all got before him in the race of life. They were something and he was nothing. It was not much wonder if her heart was sore and angry. When she turned round to listen civilly to something that was said to her, her face was contracted and pale. It was more than she could bear. She made a move to go away before any of the party was ready, and disturbed Miss Merivale in the midst of a *tête-à-tête*, which was a thing not easily forgiven.

Walter walked home with them in great good humour, but his mother knew very well that he was not coming in. He was going to finish the evening elsewhere. If he had come in would she have

been able to restrain herself? Would she not have fallen upon him, either in anger or in grief, holding up to him the examples of young Wynn and young Jeremy and the little doctor? She knew she would not have been able to refrain, and it was almost a relief to her, though it was another pang, when he turned away at the door.

"I want to speak to Underwood about to-morrow," he said.

"What is there about to-morrow? Of all the people in Sloebury Captain Underwood is the one I like least," she said. "Why must you always have something to say to him when every one else is going to bed?"

"I am not going to bed, nor is he," said Walter lightly.

Mrs. Methven's nerves were highly strung. Miss Merivale had passed in before them, and there was nobody to witness this little struggle, which she knew would end in nothing, but which was inevitable. She grasped him by the arm in her eagerness and pain.

"Oh, my boy!" she said, "come in, come in, and think of something more than the amusement of to-morrow. Life is not all play, though you seem to think so. For once listen to me, Walter—oh, listen to me! You cannot go on like this. Think of all the others; all at work, every one of them, and you doing nothing."

"Do you want me to begin to do something now," said Walter, "when you have just told me everybody was going to bed?"

"Oh! if I were you," she cried in her excitement, "I would rest neither night nor day. I would not let it be said that I was the last, and every one of them before me."

Walter shook himself free of her detaining hold. "Am I to be a dustman, or a scavenger, or—what?" he said, contemptuously. "I know no other trades that are followed at this hour."

Mrs. Methven had reached the point at which a woman has much ado not to cry in the sense of impotence and exasperation which such an argument brings. "It is better to do anything than to do nothing," she cried, turning away from him and hastening in at the open door.

He paused a moment, as if doubtful what to do; there was something in her hasty withdrawal which for an instant disposed him to follow, and she paused breathless, with a kind of hope, in the half-light of the little hall; but the next moment his footsteps sounded clear and quick on the pavement, going away. Mrs. Methven waited until they were almost out of hearing before she closed the door. Angry, baffled, helpless, what could she do? She wiped a hot tear from the corner of her eye before she went into the drawing-room, where her companion, always on the alert, had already turned up the light of the lamp, throwing an undesired illumination upon her face, flushed and troubled from this brief controversy.

"I thought you were never coming in," said Miss Merivale, "and that open door sends a draught all through the house."

"Walter detained me for a moment to explain some arrangements he has to make for to-morrow," Mrs. Methven said with dignity. "He likes to keep me *au courant* of his proceedings."

Miss Merivale was absolutely silenced by this sublime assumption, notwithstanding the flush of resentment, the glimmer of moisture in the mother's eye.

CHAPTER II.

Walter walked along the quiet, almost deserted street with a hasty step and a still hastier rush of disagreeable thoughts. There was, he felt, an advantage in being angry, in the sensation of indignant resistance to a petty tyranny. For a long time past he had taken refuge in this from every touch of conscience and sense of time lost and opportunities neglected. He was no genius, but he was not so dull as not to know that his life was an entirely unsatisfactory one, and himself in the wrong altogether; everything rotten in the state of his existence, and a great deal that must be set right one time or another in all his habits and ways. The misfortune was that it was so much easier to put off this process till to-morrow than to begin it to-day. He had never been roused out of the boyish condition of mind in which a certain resistance to authority was natural, and opposition to maternal rule and law a sort of proof of superiority and independence. Had this been put into words, and placed before him as the motive of much that he did, no one would have coloured more angrily or resented more hotly the suggestion; and yet in the bottom of his heart he would have known it to be true. All through his unoccupied days he carried with him the sense of folly, the consciousness that he could not justify to himself the course he was pursuing. The daily necessity of justifying it to another was almost the sole thing that silenced his conscience. His mother, who kept "nagging" day after day, who was never satisfied, whose appeals he sometimes thought theatrical, and her passion got up, was his sole defence against that self-dissatisfaction which is the severest of all criticisms. If she would but let him alone, leave him to his own initiative, and not perpetually endeavour to

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