

THE WIZARD'S SON

A Novel

VOL. II.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT

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THE WIZARD'S SON.

CHAPTER I.

When Walter seated himself beside Oona in the boat, and Hamish pushed off from the beach, there fell upon both these young people a sensation of quiet and relief for which one of them at least found it very difficult to account. It had turned out a very still afternoon. The heavy rains were over, the clouds broken up and dispersing, with a sort of sullen stillness, like a defeated army making off in dull haste, yet not without a stand here and there, behind the mountains. The loch was dark and still, all hushed after the sweeping blasts of rain, but black with the reflections of gloom from the sky. There was a sense of safety, of sudden quiet, of escape, in that sensation of pushing off, away from all passion and agitation upon this still sea of calm. Why Oona, who feared no one, who had no painful thoughts or associations to flee from, should have felt this she could not tell. The sense of interest in, and anxiety for, the young man by her side was altogether different. That was sympathetic and definable; but the sensation of relief was something more. She looked at him with a smile and sigh of ease as she gathered the strings of the rudder into her hands.

"I feel," she said, "as if I were running away, and had got safe out of reach; though there is nobody pursuing me that I know of," she added, with a faint laugh of satisfaction.

The wind blew the end of the white wrapper round her throat towards her companion, and he caught it as she had caught the rudder ropes.

"It is I that am pursued," he said, "and have escaped. I have a feeling that I am safe here. The kind water, and the daylight, and you—but how should *you* feel it? It must have gone from my mind to yours."

"The water does not look so very kind," said Oona, "except that it separates us from the annoyances that are on land—when there are annoyances."

She had never known any that were more than the troubles of a child before.

"There is this that makes it kind. If you were driven beyond bearing, a plunge down there and all would be over——"

"Lord Erradeen!"

"Oh, I don't mean to try. I have no thought of trying; but look how peaceful, how deep, all liquid blackness! It might go down to the mystic centre of the earth for anything one knows."

He leant over a little, looking down into those depths profound which were so still that the boat seemed to cut through a surface which had solidity; and in doing this put the boat out of trim, and elicited a growl from Hamish.

It seemed to Oona, too, as if there was something seductive in that profound liquid depth, concealing all that sought refuge there. She put out her hand and grasped his arm in the thrill of this thought.

"Oh, don't look down," she said. "I have heard of people being caught, in spite of themselves, by some charm in it." The movement was quite involuntary and simple; but, on second

thoughts, Oona drew away her hand, and blushed a little. "Besides, you put the boat out of trim," she said.

"If I should ever be in deadly danger," said Walter, with the seriousness which had been in his face all along, "will you put out your hand like that, without reflection, and save me?"

Oona tried to laugh again; but it was not easy; his seriousness gained upon her, in spite of herself.

"I think we are talking nonsense, and feeling nonsense; for it seems to me as if we had escaped from something. Now Hamish is pleased; the boat is trimmed. Don't you think," she said, with an effort to turn off graver subjects, "that it is a pity those scientific people who can do everything should not tunnel down through that centre of the earth you were speaking of, straight through to the other side of the world? Then we might be dropped through to Australia without any trouble. I have a brother there; indeed I have a brother in most places. Mamma and I might go and see Rob now and then, or he might come home for a dance, poor fellow; he was always very fond of dancing."

Thus she managed to fill up the time till they reached the isle. It lay upon the surface of that great mirror, all fringed and feathered with its bare trees; the occasional colour in the roofs gleaming back again out of the water; a little natural fastness, safe and sure. As Oona was later in returning than had been expected, the little garrison of women in the isle was all astir and watching for her coming. Out of one of the upper windows there was the head of a young maid visible, gazing down the loch; and Mrs. Forrester, in her furred cloak, was standing in the porch, and Mysie half way down to the beach, moving from point to point of vision.

"They are all about but old Cookie," said Oona. "It is a terrible business when I am late. They think everything that is dreadful must have happened, and that makes a delightful sensation when I get home safe and well. I am every day rescued from a watery grave, or saved from some dreadful accident on shore, in my mother's imagination. She gives herself the misery of it, and then she has the pleasure of it," cried the girl, with the amused cynicism of youth.

"But to-day you bring a real fugitive with you—an escaped—what shall I call myself?—escaped not from harm, but from doing harm—which is the most dangerous of the two."

"You will never do harm to the poor folk," said Oona, looking at him with kind eyes.

"Never, while I am in my senses, and know. I want you to promise me something before we land."

"You must make haste, then, and ask; for there is Mysie ready with the boat-hook," said Oona, a little alarmed.

"Promise me—if it ever occurs that harm is being done in my name, to make me know it. Oh, not a mere note sent to my house; I might never receive it like the last; but to make me know. See me, speak to me, think even:—and you will save me."

"Oh, Lord Erradeen, you must not put such a responsibility on me. How can I, a girl that is only a country neighbour——"

"Promise me!" he said.

"Oh, Lord Erradeen, this is almost tyrannical. Yes, if I can—if I think anything is concealed from you. Here I am, Mysie, quite safe;

and of course mamma has been making herself miserable. I have brought Lord Erradeen to luncheon," Oona said.

"Eh, my lord, but we're glad to see you," said Mysie, with the gracious ease of hospitality. "They said you were going without saying good-bye, but I would never believe it. It is just his lordship, mem, as I said it was," she called to Mrs. Forrester, who was hastening down the slope.

The mistress of the island came down tripping, with her elderly graces, waving her white delicate hands.

"Oh, Oona, my dear, but I'm thankful to see you, and nothing happened," she cried; "and ye are very welcome, Lord Erradeen. I thought you would never go away without saying good-bye. Come away up to the house. It is late, late, for luncheon; but there will be some reason; and I never have any heart to take a meal by myself. Everything is ready: if it's not all spoiled?" Mrs. Forrester added, turning round to Mysie, as she shook hands with the unexpected guest.

"Oh, no fear of that, mem," said the factotum, "we're well enough used to waiting in this house: an hour, half an hour, is just nothing. The trout is never put down to the fire till we see the boat; but I maun away and tell cook."

"And you will get out some of the good claret," Mrs. Forrester cried. "Come away—come away, Lord Erradeen. We have just been wondering what had become of you. It is quite unfriendly to be at Auchnasheen and not come over to see us. Oona, run, my dear, and take off your things. Lord Erradeen will take charge of me. I am fain of an arm when I can get one, up the brae. When the boys were at home I always got a good pull up. And where did you

foregather, you two? I am glad Oona had the sense to bring you with her. And I hope the trout will not be spoiled," she said with some anxiety. "Mysie is just too confident—far too confident. She is one that thinks nothing can go wrong on the isle."

"That is my creed too," said Walter with an awakening of his natural inclination to make himself agreeable, and yet a more serious meaning in the words.

"Oh fie!" said Mrs. Forrester, shaking her head, "to flatter a simple person like me! We have but little, very little to offer; the only thing in our favour is that it's offered with real goodwill. And how do you like Auchnasheen? and are you just keeping it up as it was in the old lord's time? and how is Mary Fleming, the housekeeper, that was always an ailing body?" These questions, with others of the same kind, answered the purpose of conversation as they ascended to the house—with little intervals between, for Mrs. Forrester was a little breathless though she did not care to say so and preferred to make pauses now and then to point out the variations of the landscape. "Though I know it so well, I never find it two days the same," she said. None of these transparent little fictions, so innocent, so natural, were unknown to her friends, and the sight of them had a curiously strengthening and soothing effect upon Walter, to whom the gentle perseverance of those amiable foibles, so simple and evident, gave a sense of reality and nature which had begun to be wanting in his world. His heart grew lighter as he watched the "ways" of this simple woman, about whose guiles and pretences even there was no mystery at all, and whose little affectations somehow seemed to make her only more real. It gave him a momentary shock, however, when she turned round at her own door, and directed his attention to his old castle lying in

lines of black and grey upon the glistening water. He drew her hastily within the porch.

"It gets colder and colder," he said; "the wind goes through and through one. Don't let me keep you out in the chilly air."

"I think you must have caught a little cold," said Mrs. Forrester, concerned, "for I do not find it so chilly for my part. To be sure, Loch Houran is never like your quiet landward places in England: we are used up here to all the changes. Oona will be waiting for us by this time; and I hope you are ready for your dinner, Lord Erradeen, for I am sure I am. I should say for your lunch: but when it comes to be so far on in the day as this, these short winter days, Oona and me, we just make it our dinner. Oh, there you are, my dear! Lord Erradeen will like to step into Ronald's room and wash his hands, and then there will be nothing to wait for but the trout."

When they were seated at the table, with the trout cooked to perfection as fish only is where it is caught, Mrs. Forrester pressing him to eat with old-fashioned anxiety, and even Mysie, who waited at table, adding affectionate importunities, Walter's heart was touched with a sense of the innocence, the kindness, the gentle nature about him. He felt himself cared for like a child, regarded indeed as a sort of larger child to be indulged with every dainty they could think of, and yet in some ineffable way protected and guided too by the simple creatures round him. The mistress and the maid had little friendly controversies as to what was best for him.

"I thought some good sherry wine, mem, and him coming off the water, would be better than yon cauld claret."

"Well, perhaps you are right, Mysie; but the young men nowadays are all for claret," Mrs. Forrester said.

"Just a wee bittie more of the fish, my lord," said Mysie, in his ear.

"No, no, Mysie," cried her mistress. "You know there are birds coming. Just take away the trout, it is a little cold, and there's far more nourishment in the grouse."

"To my mind, mem," said Mysie, "there is nothing better than a Loch Houran trout."

All this had the strangest effect upon Walter. To come into this simple house was like coming back to nature, and that life of childhood in which there are no skeletons or shadows. Even his mother had never been so sheltering, so safe, so real. Mrs. Methven had far more intellect and passion than Mrs. Forrester. It had been impossible to her to bear the failure of her ideal in her boy. Her very love had been full of pain and trouble to both. But this other mother was of a different fashion. Whatever her children did was good in her eyes; but she protected, fed, took care of, extended her soft wings over them as if they still were in the maternal nest. The innocence of it all moved Walter out of himself.

"Do you know," he said at last, "what I have come from to your kind, sheltering house, Mrs. Forrester? Do you know what everybody, even your daughter, thought of me two hours ago?"

"I never thought any harm of you, Lord Erradeen," said Oona, looking up hastily.

"Harm of him! Dear me, Oona, you are far, very far, from polite. And what was it they thought of you?" asked Mrs. Forrester. "Oona is so brusque, she just says what she thinks; but sure am I it was nothing but good."

"They thought," said Walter, with an excitement which grew upon him as he went on, "that I, who have been poor myself all my life, that never had any money or lands till a few weeks ago, that I was going to turn poor women and children out of their houses, out upon the world, out to the wet, cold mountain-side, without a shelter in sight. They thought I was capable of that. An old woman more than eighty, and a lot of little children! They thought I would turn them out! Oh, not the poor creatures themselves, but others; even Miss Oona. Is thy servant a dog—" cried the young man in a blaze of fiery agitation, the hot light of pain shining through the involuntary moisture in his eyes. "Somebody says that in the Bible, I know. Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?"

"Oh, my dear!" cried Mrs. Forrester, in her sympathy, forgetting all distinctions, and only remembering that he was very like her Ronald, and was in trouble, "nobody, nobody thought you would do that. Oh no, no, fie no! nobody had such a thought. If I could believe it of Oona I would not speak to her—I would—no, no, it was never believed. I, for one, I knew you would never do it. I saw it," cried the kind lady, "in your eyes!"

Though Walter had no real confidence in the independent judgment which she asserted so unhesitatingly, yet he was consoled by the softness of the words, the assurance of the tone.

"I did not think such things ever happened in Scotland," he said. "It is Ireland one thinks of: and that it should be supposed I would do it, has hurt me more than I can say—a stranger who had no one to stand up for me."

"That was just the way of it," said Mrs. Forrester, soothingly. "We think here that there is something strange in English ways. We

never know how a thing will appear to them—that is how it was. But I said all through that it was impossible, and I just wrote to you last night (you would get my letter?) that you must not do it—for fear you might not have understood how it was."

"But there is another side to it," said Oona, "we must not forget, mother. Sometimes it is said, you know, that the poor folk can do no good where they are. We can all understand the shock of seeing them turned out of their houses: but then people say they cannot live there—that it would be better for themselves to be forced to go away."

"That is true, Oona," said her mother, facing round: "it is just a kind of starvation. When old Jenny went there first (she was in my nursery when I had one) there was just a perpetual craik about her rent. Her man was one of the Frasers, and a well-doing, decent man, till he died, poor fellow, as we must all do: and since that I have heard little about it, for I think it was just out of her power to pay anything. Duncan Fraser, he is a very decent man, but I remember the minister was saying if he was in Glasgow or Paisley, or some of those places, it would be better for his family. I recollect that the minister did say that."

"So, Lord Erradeen," said Oona, "without being cruel you might: but I—we all like you ten times better that you couldn't," said the girl impulsively.

"Ay, that we do," said her mother, ready to back up every side, "that we do. But I am not surprised. I knew that there was nothing unkind either in your heart or your face."

"There was no time," said Walter, "to think what was wise, or take into consideration, like a benevolent tyrant, what could be done for

their good, without consulting their inclinations: which is what you mean, Miss Forrester——"

Oona smiled, with a little heightened colour. It was the commencement of one of those pretty duels which mean mutual attraction rather than opposition. She said, with a little nod of her head, "Go on."

"But one thing is certain," he said, with the almost solemn air which returned to his face at intervals, "that I will rather want shelter myself than turn another man out of his house, on any argument—far less helpless women and children. Did you laugh? I see no laughing in it," the young man cried.

"Me—laugh!" cried Mrs. Forrester, though it was at Oona he had looked. "If I laughed it was for pleasure. Between ourselves, Lord Erradeen (though they might perhaps be better away), turning out a poor family out of their house is a thing I could never away with. Oona may say what she likes—but it is not Christian. Oh, it's not Christian! I would have taken them in, as many as Mysie could have made room for: but I never could say that it was according to Christianity. Oh no, Lord Erradeen! I would have to be poor indeed—poor, poor indeed—before I would turn these poor folk away."

"There would be no blessing upon the rest," said Mysie, behind her mistress's chair.

"That is settled then," said Walter, whose heart grew lighter and lighter. "But that is not all. Tell me, if I were a benevolent despot, Miss Forrester—you who know everything—what should I do now?—for it cannot stop there."

"We'll go into the drawing-room before you settle that," said Mrs. Forrester. "Dear me, it is quite dark; we will want the candles, Mysie. There is so little light in the afternoon at this time of the year. I am sorry there is no gentleman to keep you in countenance with your glass of wine, Lord Erradeen. If you had been here when my Ronald or Jamie, or even Rob, was at home! But they are all away, one to every airt, and the house is very lonely without any boys in it. Are you coming with us? Well, perhaps it will be more cheerful. Dear me, Mysie, you have left that door open, and we will just be perished with the cold."

"Let me shut it," Walter said.

He turned to the open door with a pleasant sense of taking the place of one of those absent boys whom the mother regretted so cheerfully, and with a lighter heart than he could have thought possible a few hours ago. But at the first glance he stood arrested with a sudden chill that seemed to paralyse him. It was almost dark upon the loch; the water gleamed with that polished blackness through which the boat had cut as through something solid; but blacker now, shining like jet against the less responsive gloom of the land and hills. The framework of the doorway made a picture of this night scene, with the more definite darkness of the old castle in the centre, rising opaque against the softer distance. Seeing that Lord Erradeen made a sudden pause, Oona went towards him, and looked out too at the familiar scene. She had seen it often before, but it had never made the same impression upon her. "Oh, the light—the light again!" she said, with a cry of surprise. It came up in a pale glow as she was looking, faint, but throwing up in distinct revelation the mass of the old tower against the background. Walter, who seemed to have forgotten what he had come to do, was roused by her voice, and with nervous haste

and almost violence shut the door. There was not much light in the little hall, and they could see each other's faces but imperfectly, but his had already lost the soothed and relieved expression which had replaced its agitated aspect. He scarcely seemed to see her as he turned round, took up his hat from the table, and went on confusedly before her, forgetting ordinary decorums, to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Forrester had already made herself comfortable in her usual chair, with the intention of for a few moments "just closing her eyes." Mysie had not brought the lights, and he stood before the surprised lady like a dark shadow, with his hat in his hand.

"I have come to take my leave," he said; "to thank you, and say good-bye."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Forrester, rousing herself, "you are in a great hurry, Lord Erradeen. Why should you be so anxious to go? You have nobody at Auchnasheen to be kept waiting. Toots! you must just wait now you are here for a cup of tea at least, and it will take Hamish a certain time to get out the boat."

"I must go," he said, with a voice that trembled: then suddenly threw down his hat on the floor and himself upon a low chair close to her, "unless," he said, "unless—you will complete your charity by taking me in for the night. Will you keep me for the night? Put me in any corner. I don't mind—only let me stay."

"Let you stay!" cried the lady of the isle. She sprang up as lightly as a girl at this appeal, with no further idea of "closing her eyes." "Will I keep you for the night? But that I will, and with all my heart! There is Ronald's room, where you washed your hands, just all ready, nothing to do but put on the sheets, and plenty of his

things in it in case you should want anything. Let you stay!" she cried, with delighted excitement, "it is what I would have asked and pressed you to do. And then we can do something for your cold, for I am sure you have a cold; and Oona and you can settle all that business about the benevolent tyrant, which is more than my poor head is equal to. Oona, my dear, will you tell Mysie?—where is Mysie? I will just speak to her myself. We must get him better of his cold, or what will his mother think? He must have some more blankets, or an eiderdown, which will be lighter, and a good fire."

If her worst enemy had asked hospitality from Mrs. Forrester, she would have forgotten all her wrongs and opened her doors wide; how much more when it was a friend and neighbour! The demand itself was a kindness. She tripped away without a thought of her disturbed nap, and was soon heard in colloquy with Mysie, who shared all her sentiments in this respect. Oona, who stood silent by the fire, with a sense that she was somehow in the secret, though she did not know what it was, had a less easy part. The pang of sympathy she felt was almost intolerable, but she did not know how to express it. The quiet room seemed all at once to have become the scene of a struggle, violent though invisible, which she followed dumbly with an instinct beyond her power to understand. After an interval of silence which seemed endless, he spoke.

"It must be intended that we should have something to do with each other," he said, suddenly. "When you are there I feel stronger. If your mother had refused me, I should have been lost."

"It was impossible that she should have refused you, Lord Erradeen."

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