

THE WIZARD'S SON

A Novel

VOL. III.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT

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THE WIZARD'S SON.

CHAPTER I.

Was this then the conclusion of all things—that there was nothing so perfect that it was worth a man's while to struggle for it; that any officious interference with the recognised and existing was a mistake; that nothing was either the best or the worst, but all things mere degrees in a round of the comparative, in which a little more or a little less was of no importance, and the most strenuous efforts tended to failure as much as indifference? Walter, returning to the old house which was his field of battle, questioned himself thus, with a sense of despair not lessened by the deeper self-ridicule within him, which asked, was he then so anxious for the best, so ready to sacrifice his comfort for an ideal excellence? That he, of all men, should have this to do, and yet that, being done, it should be altogether ineffectual, was a sort of climax of clumsy mortal failure and hopelessness. The only good thing he had done was the restoration of those half-evicted cotters, and that was but a mingled and uncertain good, it appeared. What was the use of any struggle? If it was his own personal freedom alone that he really wanted, why here it was within his power to purchase it—or at least a moderate amount of it—a comparative freedom, as everything was comparative. His mind by this time had ceased to be able to think, or even to perceive with any distinctness the phrase or *motif* inscribed upon one of those confused and idly-turning wheels of mental machinery which had stood in the place of thought to him. It was the afternoon when he got back, and everything within him had fallen into an afternoon dreariness. He lingered when he landed on the waste bit of grass that lay between the little landing-place and the door of the old castle. He had no heart to go in and

sit down unoccupied in that room which had witnessed so many strange meetings. He was no longer indeed afraid of his visitor there, but rather looked forward with a kind of relief to the tangible presence which delivered him from meetings of the mind more subtle and painful. But he had no expectation of any visitor; nor was there anything for him to do except to sit down and perhaps attempt to read, which meant solely a delivering over of himself to his spiritual antagonists—for how was it possible to give his mind to any fable of literature in the midst of a parable so urgent and all-occupying, of his own?

He stood therefore idly upon the neglected turf, watching the ripple of the water as it lapped against the rough stones on the edge. The breadth of the loch was entirely hidden from him by the projection of the old tower, which descended into the water at the right, and almost shut off this highest corner of Loch Houran into a little lakelet of its own. Walter heard the sound of oars and voices from the loch without seeing any one: but that was usual enough, and few people invaded his privacy: so that he was taken by surprise when, suddenly raising his eyes, he was aware of the polished and gilded galley from Birkenbraes, in which already Mr. Williamson, seated in the stern, had perceived and was hailing him. "Hallo, my Lord Erradeen! Here we've all come to see ye this fine afternoon. I told them we should find ye under your own vine and your own fig-tree." This speech was accompanied by a general laugh. The arrival of such a party, heralded by such laughter in a desolate house, with few servants and no readiness for any such emergency, to a young man in Walter's confused and distracted condition would not, it may be supposed, have been very welcome in any case, and at present in his exhaustion and dismay he stood and gazed at them with a sort of horror. There was not even a ready

servitor like Hamish to assist in the disembarkation. Duncan had rowed cheerfully off upon some other errand after landing his master, and old Symington and old Macalister were singularly ill-adapted for the service. Lord Erradeen did his best, with a somewhat bad grace, to receive the boat at the landing-place. The gravity of his countenance was a little chill upon the merry party, but the Williamsons were not of a kind that is easily discouraged.

"Oh, yes, here we all are," said the millionaire. "I would not let our English visitor, Mr. Braithwaite here, leave without showing him the finest thing on the loch. So I just told him I knew I might take the liberty. Hoot! we know ye have not your household here, and that it is just an old family ruin, and not bound to produce tea and scones like the Forresters' isle. Bless me! I hope we have a soul above tea and scones," Mr. Williamson cried with his hearty laugh.

By this time the young, hardy, half-clad rowers had scrambled out, and grouped themselves in various attitudes, such as would suit a new and light-hearted Michael Angelo—one kneeling on the stones holding the bow of the boat, another with one foot on sea and one on shore helping the ladies out. Walter in his dark dress, and still darker preoccupied countenance, among all those bronzed and cheerful youths looked like a being from another sphere: but the contrast was not much to his advantage either in bodily or mental atmosphere. He looked so grave and so unlike the joyous hospitality of a young housekeeper surprised by a sudden arrival, that Katie, always more on her guard than her father, looked at him with a countenance as grave as his own.

"I am not the leader of this expedition, Lord Erradeen," she said; "you must not blame me for the invasion. My father took it into his

head, and when that happens there is nothing to be done. I don't mean I was not glad to be brought here against my will," she added, as his face, by a strain of politeness which was far from easy to him, began to brighten a little. Katie was not apt to follow the leading of another face and adopt the woman's *role* of submission, but she felt herself so completely in the wrong, an intruder where she was very sure she and her party, exuberant in spirits and gaiety, were not wanted, that she was compelled to watch his expression and make her apologies with a deference quite unusual to her. "I hope it will not be a very great—interruption to you," she said after a momentary pause.

"That could never matter," Walter said, with some stateliness. "I could have wished to have notice and to have received my friends at Achnasheen rather than here. But being here—you must excuse the primitive conditions of the place."

"Hoot! there is nothing to excuse—a fine old castle, older than the flood—just the very thing that is wanted for the picturesque, ye see, Braithwaite; for as ye were remarking, we are in general too modern for a Highland loch. But you'll not call this modern," said Mr. Williamson. "Will that old body not open the door to ye when he sees ye have friends? Lord! that just beats all! That is a step beyond Caleb Balderstone."

"Papa!" cried Katie in keen reproof, "we have been quite importunate enough already. I vote we all go over to Achnasheen—the view there is much finer, and we could send over for Oona——"

"Is it common in this country," said the member of Parliament, "to have two residences so very near? It must be like going next door

for change of air when you leave one for the other, Lord Erradeen."

At this there was that slight stir among the party which takes place when an awkward suggestion is made; the young men and the girls began to talk hurriedly, raising up a sort of atmosphere of voices around the central group. This however was curiously and suddenly penetrated by the reply which—who?—was it Walter? made, almost as it seemed without a pause.

"Not common—but yet not unknown in a country which has known a great deal of fighting in its day. The old castle is our family resource in danger. We do our family business here, our quarrels: and afterwards retire to Auchnasheen, the house of peace (perhaps you don't know that names have meanings hereabouts?) to rest."

There was a pause as slight, as imperceptible to the ignorant, as evident to the instructed as had been the stir at the first sound of those clear tones. Walter himself to more than one observer had seemed as much startled as any of them. He turned quickly round towards the speaker with a sudden blanching of his face which had been pale enough before; but this was only momentary; afterwards all that was remarkable in him was a strange look of resolution and determined self-control. Perhaps the only one completely unmoved was the Englishman, who at once accepted the challenge, and stepped forward to the individual who it was evident to him was the only duly qualified cicerone in the party, with eager satisfaction.

"That is highly interesting. Of course the place must be full of traditions," he said.

"With your permission, Walter, I will take the part of cicerone," said the new voice. To some of the party it seemed only a voice. The ladies and the young men stumbled against each other in their eager curiosity about the stranger. "I will swear there was nobody near Erradeen when we landed," said young Tom Campbell in the nearest ear that presented itself; but of course it was the number of people about which caused this, and it could be no shadow with whom the M.P. went forth delighted, asking a hundred questions. "You are a member of the family?" Mr. Braithwaite said. He was not tall, and his companion was of a splendid presence. The Englishman had to look up as he spoke and to quicken his somewhat short steps as he walked to keep up with the other's large and dignified pace. Katie followed with Walter. There was a look of agitation and alarm in her face; her heart beat she could not tell why. She was breathless as if she had been running a race. She looked up into Lord Erradeen's face tremulously, not like herself. "Is this gentleman—staying with you?" she said in a scarcely audible voice.

Walter was not agitated for his part, but he had little inclination to speak. He said "Yes" and no more.

"And we have been—sorry for you because you were alone? Is it a—relation? is it—? You have never," said Katie, forcing the words out with a difficulty which astonished her, and for which she could not account, "brought him to Birkenbraes."

Walter could not but smile. A sort of feeble amusement flew over his mind touching the surface into a kind of ripple. "Shall I ask him to come?" he said.

Katie was following in the very footsteps of this altogether new and unexpected figure. There was nothing like him, it seemed to her, in all the country-side. His voice dominated every other sound, not loud, but clear. It subdued her little being altogether. She would not lose a word, yet her breath was taken away by an inexplicable terror.

"He is—like somebody," she said, panting, "out of a book," and could say no more.

Old Macalister came towards them from the now open door, at which stood Symington in attendance. The servants had been disturbed by the unusual sounds of the arrival. Macalister's old face was drawn and haggard.

"Where will ye be taking all thae folk?" he said, no doubt forgetting his manners in his bewilderment.

"Come back, ye'll get into mischief that road," he cried, putting out his hand to catch the arm of Braithwaite, who, guided by the stranger, was passing the ordinary entrance. He became quite nervous and angry when no heed was paid to him. "My lord, you're no so well acquaint yourself. Will you let that lad just wander and break his neck?" he cried, with a kind of passion.

"Never mind," said Walter, with a strange calm which was as unaccountable as all the rest. "Will you tell your wife to prepare for these ladies—when we come back."

Here Symington too came forth to explain somewhat loudly, addressing his master and Braithwaite alternately, that the roads were not safe about the old castle, that the walls were crumbling, that a person not acquaint might get a deadly fall, with unspeakable

anxiety in his eyes. The party all followed, notwithstanding, led by the stranger, whom even the least of them now thought she could distinguish over Katie's head, but of whom the servants took no notice, addressing the others in front as if he had not been there.

"My lord, ye'll repent if ye'll no listen to us," Symington said, laying his hand in sudden desperation on Walter's arm.

"You fool!" cried the young man, "can't you see we have got a safe guide?"

Symington gave a look round him wildly of the utmost terror. His scared eyes seemed to retreat into deep caverns of anguish and fear. He stood back out of the way of the somewhat excited party, who laughed, and yet scarcely could laugh with comfort, at him. The youngsters had begun to chatter: they were not afraid of anything—Still—: though it was certainly amusing to see that old man's face.

Turning round to exchange a look with Macalister, Symington came in contact with Mr. Williamson's solid and cheerful bulk, who brought up the rear. "I'm saying," said the millionaire confidentially, "who's this fine fellow your master's got with him? A grand figure of a man! It's not often you see it, but I always admire it. A relation, too; what relation? I would say it must be on the mother's side, for I've never seen or heard tell of him. Eh? who's staying with your master, I'm asking ye? Are ye deaf or doited that ye cannot answer a simple question?"

"Na, there is nothing the matter with me; but I think the rest of the world has just taken leave of their senses," Symington said.

CHAPTER II.

Julia Herbert had failed altogether in her object during that end of the season which her relations had afforded her. Walter had not even come to call. He had sent a hurried note excusing himself, and explaining that he was "obliged to leave town," an excuse by which nobody was deceived. It is not by any easy process that a girl, who begins with all a girl's natural pride and pretensions, is brought down to recognise the fact that a man is avoiding and fleeing from her, and yet to follow and seek him. Hard poverty, and the memories of a life spent in the tiny cottage with her mother, without any enlargement or wider atmosphere, and with but one way of escape in which there was hope or even possibility, had brought Julia to this pass. She had nothing in her life that was worth doing except to scheme how she could dress and present the best appearance, and how she could get hold of and secure that only stepping-stone by which she could mount out of it—a man who would marry her and open to her the doors of something better. In every other way it is worth the best exertions of either man or woman to get these doors opened, and to come to the possibility of better things; and a poor girl who has been trained to nothing more exalted, who sees no other way, notwithstanding that this poor way of hers revolts every finer spirit, is there not something pitiful and tragic in her struggles, her sad and degrading attempt after a new beginning? How much human force is wasted upon it, what heart-sickness, what self-contempt is undergone, what a debasement of all that is best and finest in her? She has no pity, no sympathy in her pursuit, but ridicule, contempt, the derision of one half of humanity, the indignation of the other. And

yet her object after all may not be entirely despicable. She may feel with despair that there is no other way. She may intend to be all that is good and noble were but this one step made, this barrier crossed, the means of a larger life attained. It would be better for her no doubt to be a governess, or even a seamstress, or to put up with the chill meannesses of a poverty-stricken existence, and starve, modestly keeping up appearances with her last breath.

But all women are not born self-denying. When they are young, the blood runs as warmly in their veins as in that of men; they too want life, movement, sunshine and happiness. The mere daylight, the air, a new frock, however hardly obtained, a dance, a little admiration, suffice for them when they are very young; but when the next chapter comes, and the girl learns to calculate that, saving some great matrimonial chance, there is no prospect for her but the narrowest and most meagre and monotonous existence under heaven, the life of a poor, very poor single woman who cannot dig and to beg is ashamed—is it to be wondered at if she makes a desperate struggle anyhow (and alas! there is but one *how*) to escape. Perhaps she likes too, poor creature, the little excitement of flirtation, the only thing which replaces to her the manifold excitement which men of her kind indulge in—the tumultuous joys of the turf, the charms of play, the delights of the club, the moors, and sport in general, not to speak of all those developments of pleasure, so-called, which are impossible to a woman. She cannot dabble a little in vice as a man can do, and yet return again, and be no worse thought of than before. Both for amusement and profit she has this one way, which, to be sure, answers the purpose of all the others in being destructive of the best part in her, spoiling her character, and injuring her reputation—but for how much less a cause, and with how little recompense in the way of enjoyment!

The husband-hunting girl is fair game to whosoever has a stone to throw, and very few are so charitable as to say, Poor soul! Julia Herbert had been as bright a creature at eighteen as one could wish to see. At twenty-four she was bright still, full of animation, full of good humour, clever in her way, very pretty, high-spirited, amusing—and still so young! But how profoundly had it been impressed upon her that she must not lose her time! and how well she knew all the opprobrious epithets that are directed against a young woman as she draws towards thirty—the very flower and prime of her life. Was she to blame if she was influenced by all that was said to this effect, and determined to fight with a sort of mad persistence, for the hope which seemed so well within her reach? Were she but once established as Lady Erradeen, there was not one of her youthful sins that would be remembered against her. A veil of light would fall over her and all her peccadilloes as soon as she had put on her bridal veil. Her friends, instead of feeling her a burden and perplexity, would be proud of Julia; they would put forth their cousinhood eagerly, and claim her—even those who were most anxious now to demonstrate the extreme distance of the connection—as near and dear. And she liked Walter, and thought she would have no difficulty in loving him, had she ever a right to do so. He was not too good for her; she would have something to forgive in him, if he too in her might have something to forgive. She would make him a good wife, a wife of whom he should have no occasion to be ashamed. All these considerations made it excusable—more than excusable, almost laudable—to strain a point for so great an end.

And in her cousin's wife she had, so far as this went, a real friend. Lady Herbert not only felt that to get Julia settled was most desirable, and that, as Lady Erradeen, she would become a most

creditable cousin, and one who might return the favours showed to her, but also, which is less general, felt within herself a strong inclination to help and further Julia's object. She thought favourably of Lord Erradeen. She thought he would not be difficult to manage (which was a mistake as the reader knows). She thought he was not so strong as Julia, but once fully within the power of her fascinations, would fall an easy prey. She did not think less of him for running away. It was a sign of weakness, if also of wisdom; and if he could be met in a place from which he could not run away, it seemed to her that the victory would be easy. And Sir Thomas must have a moor somewhere to refresh him after the vast labours of a session in which he had recorded so many silent votes. By dint of having followed him to many a moor, Lady Herbert had a tolerable geographical knowledge of the Highlands, and it was not very difficult for her to find out that Mr. Campbell of Ellermore, with his large family, would be obliged this year to let his shootings. Every thing was settled and prepared accordingly to further Julia's views, without any warning on the point having reached Walter. She had arrived indeed at the Lodge, which was some miles down the loch, beyond Birkenbraes, a few days after Walter's arrival, and thus once more, though he was so far from thinking of it, his old sins, or rather his old follies, were about to find him out.

Lady Herbert had already become known to various people on the loch-side. She had been at the Lodge since early in September, and had been called upon by friendly folk on all sides. There had been a thousand chances that Walter might have found her at luncheon with all the others on his first appearance at Birkenbraes, and Julia had already been introduced to that hospitable house. Katie did not

recognise Lady Herbert either by name or countenance. But she recognised Julia as soon as she saw her.

"I think you know Lord Erradeen?" was almost her first greeting, for Katie was a young person of very straight-forward methods.

"Oh yes," Julia had answered with animation, "I have known him all my life."

"I suppose you know that he lives here?"

Upon this Julia turned to her chaperon, her relation in whose hands all these external questions were.

"Did you know, dear Lady Herbert, that Lord Erradeen lived here?"

"Oh yes, he has a place close by. Didn't I tell you? A pretty house, with that old castle near it, which I pointed out to you on the lock," Lady Herbert said.

"How small the world is!" cried Julia; "wherever you go you are always knocking up against somebody. Fancy Walter Methven living here!"

Katie was not taken in by this little play. She was not even irritated as she had been at Burlington House. If it might so happen that some youthful bond existed between Lord Erradeen and this girl, Katie was not the woman to use any unfair means against it.

"You will be sure to meet him," she said calmly. "We hope he is not going to shut himself up as he did last year."

"Oh tell me!" Julia cried, with overflowing interest, "is there not some wonderful ghost story? something about his house being

haunted; and he has to go and present himself and have an interview with the ghost? Captain Underwood, I remember, told us——"

"Did you know Captain Underwood?" said Katie, in that tone which says so much.

And then she turned to her other guests: for naturally the house was full of people, and as was habitual in Birkenbraes a large party from outside had come to lunch. The Williamsons were discussed with much freedom among the visitors from the Lodge when they went away. Sir Thomas declared that the old man was a monstrous fine old fellow, and his claret worth coming from Devonshire to drink.

"No expense spared in that establishment," he cried; "and there's a little girl, I should say, that would be worth a young fellow's while."

He despised Julia to the bottom of his heart, but he thought of his young friends on the other side without any such elevated sentiment, and decided it might not be a bad thing to have Algy Newton down, to whom it was indispensable that he should marry money. Sir Thomas, however, had not the energy to carry his intention out.

Next day it so happened that Lady Herbert had to return the visit of Mrs. Forrester, who—though she always explained her regret at not being able to entertain her friends—was punctilious in making the proper calls. The English ladies were "charmed" with the isle. They said there had never been anything so original, so delightful, so unconventional; ignoring altogether, with a politeness which

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