

AT HIS GATES.

A Novel.

VOL. III.

BY MRS OLIPHANT

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END.

AT HIS GATES.

CHAPTER I.

The drawing-room within was very different from the wild conflict of light and darkness outside. There was music going on at one end, some people were reading, some talking. There were flirtations in hand, and grave discussions. In short, the evening was being spent as people are apt to spend the evening when there is nothing particular going on. There had been a good deal of private yawning and inspection of watches throughout the evening, and some of the party had already gone to bed, or rather to their rooms, where they could indulge in the happiness of fancying themselves somewhere else—an amusement which is very popular and general in a country house.

But seated in an easy-chair by the fire was a tall man, carefully dressed, with diamond studs in his shirt, and a toilette which, though subdued in tone as a gentleman's evening dress must be, was yet too elaborate for the occasion. The fact that this new guest was a stranger to him, and that his father was seated by him in close conversation, made it at once apparent to Ned that it must be Golden. Clara was close to them listening with a look of eager interest to all they said. These three made a little detached group by one side of the fire. At the other corner sat Mrs Burton, with her little feet on a footstool, as near as possible to the fender. She had just said good-night to the dignified members of the party, the people who had to be considered; the others who remained were mere young people, about whose proceedings she did not concern herself. She was taking no part in the talk at the other side of the fire. She sat and warmed her little toes and pondered; her vivid

little mind all astir and working, but uninfluenced by, and somewhat contemptuous of, what was going on around; and her chilly little person basking in the ruddy warmth of the fire.

Ned came up and stood by her when he came in. No one took any notice of him, the few persons who remained in the room having other affairs in hand. Ned was fond of his mother, though she had never shown any fondness for him. She had done all for him which mere intellect could do. She had been very just to the boy all his life; when he got into scrapes, as boys will, she had not backed him up emotionally, it is true, but she had taken all the circumstances into account, and had not judged him harshly. She had been tolerant when his father was harsh. She had never lost her temper. He had always felt that he could appeal to her sense of justice—to her calm and impartial reason. This is not much like the confidence with which a boy generally throws himself upon his mother's sympathy, yet it was a great deal in Ned's case. And accordingly he loved his mother. Mrs Burton, too, loved him perhaps more than she loved any one. She was doing her best to break his heart; but that is not at all uncommon even when parents and children adore each other. And then Ned was not aware that his mother had any share intentionally or otherwise in the cruel treatment he had received.

'Who is that?' he asked under his breath.

'A Mr Golden, a friend of your father's,' said Mrs Burton, lifting her eyes and turning them calmly upon the person she named. There was no feeling in them of one kind or another, and yet Ned felt that she at least did not admire Mr Golden, and it was a comfort to him. He went forward to the fire, and placed himself, as an Englishman loves to do, in front of it. He stood there for ten

minutes or so, paying no particular attention to the conversation on his right hand. His father, however, looked more animated than he had done for a long time, and Clara was bending forward with a faint rose-tint from the fire tinging the whiteness of her forehead and throat, and deeper roses glowing on her cheeks. Her blue eyes were following Mr Golden's movements as he spoke, her hair was shining like crisp gold in the light. She was such a study of colour, of splendid flesh and blood, as Rubens would have worshipped; and Mr Golden had discrimination enough to perceive it. He stopped to address himself to Clara. He turned to her, and gave her looks of admiration, for which her brother, bitterly enough biassed against him on his own account, could have 'throttled the fellow!' Ned grew more and more wrathful as he looked on. And in the mean time the late young ladies came fluttering to say good-night to their hostess; the young men went off to the smoking-room, where Ned knew he ought to accompany them, but did not, being too fully occupied; and thus the family were left alone. Notwithstanding, however, his wrath and his curiosity, it was only the sound of one name which suddenly made the conversation by his side quite articulate and intelligible to Ned.

'I hear the Drummond has a pretty daughter; that is a new weapon for her, Burton. I wonder you venture to have such a family established at your gates.'

'The daughter is not particularly pretty; not so pretty by a long way as Helen was,' said Mr Burton. 'I don't see what harm she can do with poor little Norah. We are not afraid of her, Clara, are we?' and he looked admiringly at his daughter, and laughed.

As for Clara she grew crimson. She was not a girl of much feeling, but still there was something of the woman in her.

'I don't understand how we could be supposed to be afraid of Norah Drummond,' she said.

'But I assure you I do,' said Mr Golden. 'Pardon me, but I don't suppose you have seen the Drummond herself, the Drummond mamma—in a fury.'

'Father,' said Ned, 'is Mr Golden aware that the lady he is speaking of is our relation—and friend? Do you mean to suffer her to be so spoken of in your house?'

'Hold your tongue, Ned.'

'Ned! to be sure it is Ned. Why, my boy, you have grown out of all recollection,' said Golden, jumping up with a great show of cordiality, and holding out his hand.

Ned bowed, and drew a step nearer his mother. He had his hands in his pockets; there were times, no doubt, when his manners left a great deal to be desired.

'Ah, I see! there are spells,' said Mr Golden, and he took his seat again with a hearty laugh—a laugh so hearty that there seemed just a possibility of strain and forced merriment in it. 'My dear Miss Burton,' he said, in an undertone, which however Ned could hear, 'didn't I tell you there was danger? Here's an example for you, sooner than I thought.'

'Mother,' said Ned, 'can I get your candle? I am sure it is time for you to go up-stairs.'

'Yes, and for Clara too. Run away, child, and take care of your roses; Golden and I have some business to talk over; run away. As

for you, Ned, to-morrow morning I shall have something to say to you.'

'Very well, sir,' said Ned solemnly.

He lighted his mother's candle, and he gave her his arm, having made up his mind not to let her go. The sounds of laughter which came faintly from the smoking-room did not tempt him; if truth must be told, they tempted Clara much more, who stood for a moment with her candle in her hand, and said to herself, 'What fun they must be having!' and fretted against the feminine fetters which bound her. Such a thought would not have come into Norah's head, nor into Katie Dalton's, nor even into that of Lady Florizel, though it was a foolish little head enough; but Clara, who was all flesh and blood, and had been badly brought up, was the one of those four girls who probably would have impressed most deeply a journalist's fancy as illustrating the social problem of English young womanhood.

Ned led his mother not to her own room, but to his. He made her come in, and placed a chair for her before the fire. It is probable that he had sense enough to feel that had he asked her consent to his marriage with Norah Drummond he would have found difficulties in his way; but short of this, he had full confidence in the justice which indeed he had never had any reason to doubt.

'Do you like this man Golden, mother?' he asked. 'Tell me, what is his connection with us?'

'His connection, I suppose, is a business connection with your father,' said Mrs Burton. 'For the rest, I neither like him nor hate him. He is well enough, I suppose, in his way.'

'Mrs Drummond does not think so,' said Ned.

'Ah, Mrs Drummond! She is a woman of what are called strong feelings. I don't suppose she ever stopped to inquire into the motives of anybody who went against her in her life. She jumps at a conclusion, and reaches it always from her own point of view. According to her view of affairs, I don't wonder, with her disposition, that she should hate him.'

'Why, mother?'

'Well,' said Mrs Burton, I am not in the habit of using words which would come naturally to a mind like Mrs Drummond's. But from her point of view, I should say, she must believe that he ruined her husband—drove him to suicide, and then did all he could to ruin his reputation. These are things, I allow, which people do not readily forget.'

'And, mother, do you believe all this? Is it true?'

'I state it in a different way,' she said. 'Mr Golden, I suppose, thought the business could be redeemed, to start with. When he drew poor Mr Drummond into active work in the concern, he did it in a moment when there was nobody else to refer to. And then you must remember, Ned, that Mr Drummond had enjoyed a good deal of profit, and had as much right as any of the others to suffer in the loss. He was ignorant of business, to be sure, and did not know what he was doing; but then an ignorant man has no right to go into business. Mr Golden is very sharp, and he had to preserve himself if he could. It was quite natural he should take advantage of the other's foolishness. And then I don't suppose he ever imagined that poor Mr Drummond would commit suicide. He

himself would never have done it under similar circumstances—nor your father.'

'Had my father anything to do with this?' said Ned hoarsely.

'That is not the question,' said Mrs Burton. 'But neither the one nor the other would have done anything so foolish. How were they to suppose Mr Drummond would? This sort of thing requires a power of realising other people's ways of thinking which few possess, Ned. After he was dead, and it could not be helped, I don't find anything surprising,' she went on, putting her feet nearer the fire, 'in the fact that Mr Golden turned it to his advantage. It could not hurt Drummond any more, you know. Of course it hurt his wife's feelings; but I am not clear how far Golden was called upon to consider the feelings of Drummond's wife. It was a question of life and death for himself. Of course I do not believe for a moment, and I don't suppose anybody whose opinion is worth considering could believe, that a poor, innocent, silly man destroyed those books—'

'Mother, I don't know what you are speaking of; but it seems to me as if you were describing the most devilish piece of villany——'

'People do employ such words, no doubt,' said Mrs Burton calmly; 'I don't myself. But if that is how it appears to your mind, you are right enough to express yourself so. Of course that is Mrs Drummond's opinion. I have something to say to you about the Drummonds, Ned.'

'One moment, mother,' he cried, with a tremor and heat of excitement which puzzled her perhaps more than anything she had yet met with in the matter. For why should Ned be disturbed by a thing which did not concern him, and which had happened so long

ago? 'You have mentioned my father. You have said *they*, speaking of this man's infamous——Was my father concerned?'

Mrs Burton turned, and looked her son in the face. The smallest little ghost of agitation—a shadow so faint that it would not have showed upon any other face—glided over hers.

'That is just the point on which I can give you least information,' she said; and then, after a pause, 'Ned,' she continued, 'you are grown up; you are capable of judging for yourself. I tell you I don't know. I am not often deterred by any cause from following out a question I am interested in; but I have preferred not to follow up this. I put away all the papers, thinking I might some day care to go into it more deeply. You can have them if you like. To tell the truth,' she added, sinking her voice, betrayed into a degree of confidence which perhaps she had never given to human creature before, 'I think it is a bad sign that this man has come back.'

'A sign of what?'

Mrs Burton's agitation increased. Though it was the very slightest of agitations, it startled Ned, so unlike was it to his mother.

'Ned,' she said, with a shiver that might be partly cold, 'nobody that I ever heard of is so strong as their own principles. I do not know, if it came to me to have to bear it, whether I could bear ruin and disgrace.'

'Ruin and disgrace!' cried Ned.

'I don't know if I have fortitude enough. Perhaps I could by myself; I should feel that it was brought about by natural means, and that blame was useless and foolish. But if we had to bear the comments in the newspapers, the talk of everybody, the reflections on our

past, I don't know whether I have fortitude to bear it; I feel as if I could not.

'Mother, has this been in your mind, while I have been thinking you took so little interest? My poor little mamma!'

The wicked little woman! And yet all that she had been saying was perfectly true.

'Ned,' she said, with great seriousness, 'this dread, which I can never get quite out of my mind, is the reason why I have been so very earnest about the Merewethers. I have never, you know, supported your father's wish that you should go into the business. On the contrary, I have always endeavoured to secure you your own career. I have wished that you at least should be safe——'

'Safe!' he cried. 'Mother, if there is a possibility of disgrace, how can I, how can any of us, escape from it—and more especially I? And if there is a chance of ruin, why I should be as great a villain as that man is, should I consent to carry it into another house.'

'It is quite a different case,' she cried with some eagerness, seeing she had overshot her mark. 'I hope there will be neither; and you have not the least reason to suppose that either is possible. Look round you; go with your father to the office, inspect his concerns as much as you please; you will see nothing but evidences of prosperity. So far as you know, or can know, your father is one of the most prosperous men in England. Nobody would have a word to say against you, and I shall be rich enough to provide for you. If there is any downfall at all, which I do not expect, nobody would ever imagine for a moment that you knew anything of it; and your career and your comfort would be safe.'

'O mother! mother!' Poor Ned turned away from her and hid his face in his hands. This was worse to him than all the rest.

'You ought to think it over most carefully,' she said; 'all this is perfectly clear before you. I may have taken fright, though it is not very like me. I may be fanciful enough' (Mrs Burton smiled at herself, and even Ned in his misery half smiled) 'to consider this man as a sort of raven, boding misfortune. But you know nothing about it; there is abundant time for you to save yourself and your credit; and this is the wish which, above everything in the world, I have most at heart, that, if there is going to be any disaster,—I don't expect it, I don't believe in it; but mercantile men are always subject to misfortune,—you might at least be safe. I will not say anything more about it to-night; but think it over, Ned.'

She rose as she spoke and took up her candle, and her son bent over her and touched her little cold face with his hot lips. 'I will send you the papers,' she said as she went away. Strange little shadow of a mother! She glided along the passage, not without a certain maternal sentiment—a feeling that on the whole she was doing what was best for her boy. *She* could provide for him, whatever happened; and if evil came he might so manage as to thrust himself out from under the shadow of the evil. She was a curious problem, this woman; she could enter into Mr Golden's state of mind, but not into her son's. She could fathom those struggles of self-preservation which might lead a man into fraud and robbery; but she could not enter into those which tore a generous, sensitive, honourable soul in pieces. She was an analyst, with the lowest view of human nature, and not a sympathetic being entering into the hearts of others by means of her own.

No smoking-room, no jovial midnight party, received Ned that night. He sat up till the slow November morning dawned reading those papers; and then he threw himself on his bed, and hid his face from the cold increasing light. A bitterness which he could not put into words, which even to himself it was impossible to explain, filled his heart. There was nothing, or at least very little, about his father in these papers. There was no accusation made against Mr Burton, nothing that any one could take hold of—only here and there a word of ominous suggestion which chilled the blood in his veins. But Golden's character was not spared by any one; it came out in all its blackness, more distinct even than it could have done at the moment these events occurred. Men had read the story at the time with their minds full of foregone conclusions on the subject—of prejudices and the heat of personal feeling. But to Ned it was history; and as he read Golden's character stood out before him as in a picture. And this man, this deliberate cold-blooded scoundrel, was sleeping calmly under his father's roof—a guest whom his father delighted to honour. Ned groaned, and covered his eyes with his hands to shut out the hazy November morning, as if it were a spy that might find out something from his haggard countenance. Sleep was far from his eyes; his brain buzzed with the unaccustomed crowd of thoughts that whirled and rustled through it. A hundred projects, all very practicable at the first glance and impossible afterwards, flashed before him. The only thing that he never thought of was that which his mother had called the wish of her heart—that he should escape and secure his own career out of the possible fate that might be impending. This, of all projects, was the only one which, first and last, was impossible to Ned.

The first step which he took in the matter was one strangely different. He had to go through all the ordinary remarks of the

breakfast-table upon his miserable looks; but he was too much agitated to be very well aware what people were saying to him. He watched anxiously till he saw his father prepare to leave the house. Fortunately Mr Golden was not with him. Mr Golden was a man of luxury, who breakfasted late, and had not so much as made his appearance at the hour when Mr Burton, who, above everything, was a man of business, started for the station. Ned went out with him, avoiding his mother's eye. He took from his father's hand a little courier's bag full of papers which he was taking with him.

'I will carry it for you, sir,' he said.

Mr Burton was intensely surprised; the days were long gone by when Ned would strut by his side, putting out his chest in imitation of his father.

'Wants some money, I suppose!' Mr Burton—no longer the boy's proud progenitor, but a wary parent, awake to all the possible snares and traps which are set for such—said to himself.

They had reached the village before Ned had begun to speak of anything more important than the weather or the game. Then he broke into his subject quite abruptly.

'Father,' he said, 'within the last few days I have been thinking of a great many things. I have been thinking that for your only son to set his face against business was hard lines on you. Will you tell me frankly whether a fellow like me, trained so differently, would be of real use to you? Could I help you to keep things straight, save you from being cheated?—do anything for you? I have changed my ideas on a great many subjects. This is what I want to know.'

'Upon my word, a wonderful conversion,' said his father with a laugh; 'there must be some famous reason for a change so sudden. Help *me* to keep things straight!—Keep ME from being cheated! You simpleton! you have at least a capital opinion of yourself.'

'But it was with that idea, I suppose, that you thought of putting me into the business,' said Ned, overcoming with an effort his first boyish impulse of offence.

'Perhaps in the long-run,' said Mr Burton jocularly; 'but not all at once, my fine fellow. Your Greek and your Latin won't do you much service in the city, my boy. Though you have taken your degree—and a deuced deal of money that costs, a great deal more than it's worth—you would have to begin by singing very small in the office. You would be junior clerk to begin with at fifty pounds a year. How should you find that suit your plans, my fine gentleman Ned?'

'Was that all you intended me for?' asked Ned sternly. A rigid air and tone was the best mask he could put upon his bitter mortification.

'Certainly, at first,' said Mr Burton; 'but I have changed my mind altogether on the subject,' he added sharply. 'I see that I was altogether deceived in you. You never would be of any use in business. If you were in Golden's hands, perhaps—but you have let yourself be influenced by some wretched fool or other.'

'Has Mr Golden anything to say to your business?' asked Ned.

The question took his father by surprise.

'Confound your impudence!' he cried, after a keen glance at his son and sputter of confused words, which sounded very much like

swearing. 'What has given you so sudden an interest in my business, I should like to know? Do you think I am too old to manage it for myself?'

'It was the sight of this man, father,' said Ned, with boyish simplicity and earnestness, 'and the knowledge who he was. Couldn't I serve you instead of him? I pledge you my word to give up all that you consider nonsense, to settle steadily to business. I am not a fool, though I am ignorant. And then if I am ignorant, no man could serve you so truly as your son would, whose interests are the same as yours. Try me! I could serve you better than he.'

'You preposterous idiot!' cried Mr Burton, who had made two or three changes from anger to ridicule while this speech was being delivered. 'You serve me better than Golden!—Golden, by Jove! And may I ask if I were to accept this splendid offer of yours, what would you expect as an equivalent? My consent to some wretched marriage or other, I suppose, allowance doubled, home provided, and my blessing, eh? I suppose that is what you are aiming at. Out with it—how much was the equivalent to be?'

'Nothing,' said Ned. He had grown crimson; his eyes were cast down, not to betray the feeling in them—a choking sensation was in his throat. Then he added slowly—'not even the fifty pounds a year you offered me just now—nothing but permission to stand by you, to help to—keep danger off.'

Mr Burton took the bag roughly out of his hand. 'Go home,' he said, 'you young ass; and be thankful I don't chastise you for your impudence. Danger!—I should think you were the danger if you were not such a fool. Go home! I don't desire your further company. A pretty help and defender you would be!'

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