

THE LADIES LINDORES

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. II.

BY MRS OLIPHANT

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CHAPTER XXXI.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

"TWO OF THE SWEET'ST COMPANIONS IN THE WORLD."
—*Cymbeline*.

THE LADIES LINDORES.

CHAPTER XV.

Lord Millefleurs had given his family a great deal of trouble—not in the old-fashioned way of youthful folly or dissipation, which is too well known in every age, the beaten road upon which young men tread down the hearts of their progenitors, and their own best hopes, in all the wantonness of short-sighted self-indulgence. The heir of the house of Lavender had gone wrong in an entirely new-fashioned and nineteenth-century way. He was devoured by curiosity, not of the modes of pleasure, but about those other ways of living which the sons of dukes in general have no knowledge of. He got tired of being a duke's son, and it seemed to him that life lay outside the range of those happy valleys in which he was born. He had gone to America, that home of all kinds of freedom, and there had disappeared from the ken of ducal circles. He had not even written home, which was the inexcusable part of it, but had sunk out of sight, coming to the surface, as it were, only once or twice in a couple of years, when a sudden draft upon his banker revealed him to his anxious family, whose efforts to trace him during this time were manifold, but always unsuccessful. It was Beaufort who had been the means at last of restoring the virtuous prodigal, who in the meantime had been occupied, not by any vicious tastes or dangerous *liaisons*, but by the most entirely innocent, if eccentric, experiments in living. Beaufort found him, but not before the young man was willing to be found—a fact which, however, the anxious relations did not take into account, as detracting from the merit of the man whom they described as Millefleurs's deliverer, his better genius, and by many other flattering descriptions. In reality, Millefleurs had set out on his way

home, moved thereto by the energetic representations of a strong-minded, middle-aged maiden in Connecticut or California (how can a historian without data particularise?), who told him that a man was no gentleman who kept the women of his family in ignorance of his movements, and exposed them to all the tortures of anxiety. This puzzled the scientific adventurer. He had found out that daily work (which amused him very much) was not at all incompatible with the character of a gentleman; but he felt himself pulled up in his career when this new view of the subject was presented to him. After a little thought, he decided that Miss Sallie F—— was right. And he took off his working clothes, and put on the livery of civilisation, and found Beaufort, who had attacked the continent bravely but vaguely in search of him, on his way. Millefleurs was not proud. He let himself be brought home as if it was all Beaufort's doing, and made his peace with everybody. The consequence was, that the illustrious house of Lavender was ready to do anything in the world for that excellent Mr Beaufort, who had fished their heir out of troubles unknown; and, in respect to that heir himself, were bending all their faculties to the task of getting him married, and so put out of harm's way. It was a new sphere for the mental vivacity and curiosity of Millefleurs. He devoted himself to a study of the young ladies of the highest civilisation, just as he had devoted himself to the life of the dockyards and the backwoods. (Probably I should say to the mines and the cattle-ranches; but the reader who knows the fashion will here supply the appropriate phrase.) He found the study curious, and not at all unpleasant, and so went about scattering wild hopes about him wherever he moved. Was anything else possible? If the young ladies in our northern county had been (inevitably) fluttered and excited when Pat Torrance fixed his big light eyes upon them, knowing the value of him as, so to speak, an appointment, a post

for life which would remove all anxiety about their future comfort from their own minds and those of their parents, how much more when the Marquis of Millefleurs went hopping about the drawing-rooms, carrying on his researches in a far more genial and agreeable manner than Pat Torrance was capable of doing? And it was quite certain that nobody would ever be unhappy with Millefleurs. He was always cheerful, always considerate, ready to do anything for anybody. He was more like a daughter than a son, the Duchess declared, with tears in her eyes—foreseeing what she wanted, watching over her as nobody had ever done before: although it was no doubt very wrong—oh, very wrong!—to almost break her heart, leaving her two years without a letter; but he would not do so to his wife. Thus the—we will not say candidates, rather nominees—possible occupants of the delightful and every way desirable post of Marchioness of Millefleurs had every sort of inducement to "go in" for it, and scarcely any drawback at all.

The drawback was not worth speaking of—it was the most superficial of objections. This enterprising, amusing, good-tempered, quick-witted, accomplished, and lovable hero, was, as the girls said, the funniest little man that had ever been seen. He was shorter than most of the young ladies to whom he made himself so agreeable. He was plump and round, a succession of curves and gently billowing outlines; his eyes were like little black beads, though they were sparkling with life and animation; he had a round face like a boy of ten, with nice little puffy rosy cheeks, and a lip which completed the infantile effect of his appearance generally. A little air of the most agreeable self-satisfaction hung about him—what the vulgar and detractors generally call vanity and self-conceit, but which indeed was nothing of the kind, being only that confidence of pleasing which his natural temper gave him

in the first place, and his position confirmed. For how could he be ignorant that to be Marquis of Millefleurs was enough to make any man charming? It was to escape this that he had fled from society and been called Tommy by the American labourers, with whom he was just as popular as in Mayfair. It had been intended to keep this little gentleman in the background of this narrative as really a very secondary person in it; but, with his usual determination to be in the front of everything, he has pushed himself forward against the historian's will.

Having thus yielded to his natural tendency to show himself, we may proceed to say what we had intended without this preamble, that the peculiarity of Millefleurs's appearance took all seriousness from the fact of his rapidly increasing intimacy with them, in the foolish and inexperienced eyes not only of Edith but of her mother. Lady Lindores, though she had been alarmed and startled by the importance attached to his first visit, and the penalty paid for it, could not bring herself to regard him seriously. He seemed to her a boy, notwithstanding that the peerage was produced to her and dates set before her eyes,—and she shut her eyes altogether to any danger that might be involved in the frequency of his visits. She was very glad to see him whenever he came. Never was there a more delightful household retainer; his friendliness and affectionateness and half-feminine interest in all their concerns great and small, made him delightful to the women, who wanted no more of him. He was like a boy at home from school in this friendly house, where no incense was burned before him, and ran on their commissions, and took an interest in their work, and gave his opinion about their dress, with all the freedom of long acquaintance; and it naturally added in no small degree to the brilliancy of their appearance out of doors, and to the effect they

produced, that such an attendant should be constantly in their train. Lady Lindores was not insensible to this gratification; and had Millefleurs looked more grown up and less like a friend's son confided to her for the holidays, it is very likely that the chance of seeing her child elevated to the highest level of the social ladder would have been too much for her also, and turned her head a little. But whenever the idea glanced across her mind, as it was bound to do sometimes, if from nothing more than the discourses of Rintoul, she had but to look at the rounded outlines of her little hero, and all these visions dispersed in a laugh. To imagine him a bridegroom, not to say Edith's bridegroom, affected her with a sense of the ludicrous which it was beyond her power to restrain.

But this was extremely foolish, as everybody will perceive; and it was with a very different eye that Lord Lindores contemplated the frequent presence of this above-all-competitors-desirable young man. It was not only that he was a duke's son, though that in itself was much, but he was the son of a duke who was a Cabinet Minister, and eminently qualified to help on the scheme of ambition which inspired the Scotch Earl. His Grace knew the gain it would be to replace the Tory who had sat for Dee-and-Donshire for years with an out-and-out partisan of the existing Government; and there could be little doubt that he would appreciate the expediency of increasing the importance of any family to which his own should become allied. And then the prospects which would open before Edith were such as to dazzle any beholder. If her father had ever felt that he was to blame in respect to his elder daughter, here was something which surely would make amends for all. Millefleurs was no rustic bully, no compound of a navy and a squire, but the quintessence of English gentlemanhood, good-hearted, clever in his way, universally popular, the sort of

man whom, irrespective of all worldly advantages, a father would be glad to trust his child's happiness to. The idea that any reasonable objection could be grounded upon his appearance would have irritated Lord Lindores beyond all self-control. His appearance! he was not a hunchback, nor deaf, nor dumb, nor blind. Short of that, what on earth did it matter how a man looked? And no doubt Lord Lindores was in the right. But in reality, that which put all idea of him as a lover out of the mind of Lady Lindores and Edith was not any objection to his appearance, but the mere fact of his appearance, his boyish looks, his contour, his aspect of almost childhood. As has been said, when the suggestion was presented to her mind that Millefleurs might have "intentions" in respect to Edith, Lady Lindores the next time she saw him laughed. "What is the joke?" he had said to her half-a-dozen times; and she had answered, "There is no joke, only a ludicrous suggestion." "About me, perhaps," he said once, reducing her to great embarrassment. But she managed to elude his observation; and to Edith, fortunately, the idea never occurred at all. She declared herself to be very fond of him; she said there was no one so nice; she brightened when he came in, and listened to his chatter with unflinching pleasure. She said there was nobody she would miss so much when she went home. When he complained that he had never been in Scotland, she said, "You must come to Lindores." It was she, indeed, who gave the invitation. The Earl, who had not quite ventured upon this strong step, was present and heard her say it, and opened his eyes wide in admiration. What did it mean? Was it that these two had engaged themselves secretly without saying anything to father or mother? or did it mean nothing at all—the mere foolishness of a girl who did not care for, nay, did not even think for a moment, what people would say?

For the brief little weeks of the season flitted quickly away, and the date fixed for their departure drew near rapidly. By this time Millefleurs had got to be exceedingly intimate with the family. He went and came almost as he pleased, sometimes offering himself, sometimes coming in to luncheon without that ceremony,—always with something to do for them, or something to say to them, which linked one day to another. This was much, but it was not all that was wanted. Rintoul, looking on with eyes enlightened by that knowledge he had acquired of what "the fellows would say," did not feel half satisfied. He was the anxious member of the party. Even Lord Lindores, whose friends at the clubs discussed such matters less perhaps than the young men, and whose interests were more political, was not so alive to all the risks and all the changes of opinion as was Rintoul. He was nervous above measure about this business of Edith's. He even took his mother to task about it during the last week of their stay in town. "Isn't that fellow coming to the point?" he said.

"What fellow, and what point?" said Lady Lindores. It must be acknowledged that if ever a young man anxious for the true interests of his family was tried by the ignorance and stupidity—not to say callousness—of his relations, Rintoul was that man.

"Look here, mother," he said, exasperated; "just think for a moment what people will say, and ask yourself how you will like it. They will say Millefleurs has been amusing himself all this time, and never meant anything. I make no doubt that they say it already. He has been amusing himself—exposing her to all sorts of remarks; and then the end will come, and he will leave her *planté là*."

"Rintoul," said his mother, reddening with anger, "this one idea of yours makes you absurd. Who is it that has it in his power to leave

Edith *planté là*? To think that I should be forced to use such words! If you mean to make me uncomfortable about that boy——"

"He is no more a boy than I am, mother. I warned you of that. He knows very well what he is about. He has had the pleasure of your society, and he has enjoyed it all and amused himself very much. But he doesn't mean to commit himself. Do you think I don't know what people say? I don't mean that it is Edith's fault, or even your fault, mother; only, some women know how to manage. It is a thing that never could happen with some people. You will see, unless you exert yourself, that the last day will come, and you will be just where you were. I don't know whether staying a week or two longer would do any good," he added, ruefully. "If there is the chance that it might bring him to the point, there is also the chance that people would divine your motive, and say that was why you were staying on. Don't you think you could put a little steam on, when the result is so important, and bring him to the point?"

"Steam on! Do you mean to insult me, Rintoul?" his mother cried.

But this was too much for the young man, who felt himself to be the only one of the family to whom the true position of affairs was apparent. "If you cannot understand me, mother, I can't say anything more," he said, feeling as if he could almost have cried over her callousness. Why was it that nobody but he would see how serious the situation was?

All this time, however, while Millefleurs was frequenting the house almost daily, Lady Lindores's perception had been partly confused by the effort it cost her to avoid being drawn into what she felt must be an unnecessary confidential disclosure to Beaufort of the history of the family since they last met. Beaufort did not

insist upon accompanying his charge—for such, more or less, Millefleurs was, his family being too much alarmed lest he should disappear again, to leave him without this species of surveillance, which the good-natured young fellow allowed to be perfectly natural, and neither resisted nor resented; but he came sometimes, and he never relinquished his appeal to Lady Lindores. He was not posing in any attitude of a heart-broken lover. Even to her he expressed no despair. He took his life gravely, but not without cheerfulness, and had, she felt almost with a little pique, got over it, and been able to put Carry out of his life. But he wanted to know: that seemed all that was left of the old romance. He wanted to be told how it had happened—how his love had been lost to him. It did not seem to be resentment or indignation that moved him, but a serious kind of interest. And strangely enough, it seemed to Lady Lindores that he did not want to avoid her, or keep out of hearing of the name of the girl who had forsaken him. He seemed to like herself, Carry's mother, as well as ever, and to regard Edith with the same elder-brotherly air which had pleased her so much in the old days. Between the inquiring countenance which seemed without ceasing to ask an explanation from her, and the prattle of Millefleurs, which ran on in a pleasant stream, and to which it seemed so ridiculous to attach any serious meaning, Lady Lindores was kept in a perplexity and harassment of mind which took away altogether her pleasure in society at the end of their stay in London. After her impatient rejection of Rintoul's counsels, she began to consider them, as was natural; and much as all the particulars of the *chasse-aux-maris* disgusted her, she came at length, against her will, to recognise that there was something in what he said. "I have been imprudent, as usual," she said to herself. Alas that all the natural proceedings of life should be hampered by these rules of prudence!—these perpetual previsions of what might happen, to

which she felt it was impossible she could ever bow her spirit. But the idea that it would be said that a boy like Millefleurs had "amused himself" with her daughter—that he had loved and ridden away—that Edith, her high-spirited, pure-minded girl, had been left *planté là*—broke over Lady Lindores like a wave of passionate feeling: the suggestion was intolerable and odious. This happened when Millefleurs was in the room with her, in full tide of talk, and entirely at his ease. The sudden sensation disclosed itself in a flush of colour mounting in a moment to her very hair. Intolerable! The thought was so odious that she started to her feet and walked to the open window, as if the change of position would throw it off—and also, suffocated as she felt by that sudden fiery breath, to get fresh air, lest she should, as she said, make an exhibition of herself.

"You are ill, Lady Lindores," cried Millefleurs. Those little beady eyes of his saw everything. He ran forward to support her (he was just up to her shoulder), putting forward a reclining-chair with one hand, picking up a bottle of eau-de-Cologne with the other. He had all his wits about him. "I am used to it. Sometimes my mother *se trouve mal* in the same way. It will pass over," he said encouragingly to Edith, who, unused to anything of the kind, started up in alarm. "Dear Lady Lindores, put yourself here."

"I am not ill," she said, almost angrily. "Pray do not make any—fuss. How rude I am! but there is nothing the matter with me, I assure you. The room is warm, that is all."

Millefleurs looked at her curiously. He put down the eau-de-Cologne, and took his hand from the chair. For a moment he seemed about to speak, but then stood aside more serious than his wont. In terror lest he should have divined her thoughts, Lady Lindores returned to her seat, calming herself down with an effort,

and made the best attempt she could to resume their easy conversation of the moment before. She was vexed beyond measure when Edith, a short time after, left the room to go and look for something which Millefleurs was anxious to see. He took instant advantage of the opportunity thus afforded him. "Lady Lindores," he said, with that serious air as of a candid child, going up to her, "you are not ill, but you are vexed and angry, and it is something about me."

"About you, Lord Millefleurs! how could that be?—you have never given me the least occasion to be angry."

"That is why," he said, gravely. "I see it all. You have nothing to find fault with. I am quite innocent and harmless, yet I am in the way, and you do not know how to tell me so. For my part, I have been so happy here that I have forgotten all sorts of precautions. One does not think of precautions when one is happy. Dear Lady Lindores, you shall tell me exactly what I ought to do, and I will do it. I have all my life been guided by women. I have such faith in a lady's instinct. I might be confused, perhaps, in my own case, but you will hit upon the right thing. Speak to me freely, I shall understand you at a word," the droll little hero said. Now Lady Lindores was in a strait as serious as she had ever experienced in her life; but when she glanced up at him, and saw the gravity upon his baby face, his attitude of chubby attention, such a desire to laugh seized her, that it was all she could do by main force to keep her gravity. This insensibly relaxed the tension, and restored her to her usual self-command. Still there was no denying that the situation was a very peculiar one, and his request for guidance the strangest possible. She answered hurriedly, in the confusion of her mingled feelings—

"I don't know what there is to do, Lord Millefleurs, or how I can advise you. A sudden want of breath—a consciousness all at once that it is a very warm morning,—what can that have to do with you?"

"You will not tell me, then?" he said, with an air half disappointed, half imploring.

"There is nothing to tell. Here is Edith. For heaven's sake, not another word!" said Lady Lindores, in alarm. She did not perceive that she betrayed herself in this very anxiety that her daughter should suspect nothing. He looked at her very curiously once more, studying her face, her expression, even the nervousness of the hand with which she swept her dress out of her way. He was a young man full of experiences, knowing all the ways of women. How far she was sincere—how far this might be a little scheme, a device for his instruction, so that he might see what was expected of him without any self-betrayal on the lady's part—was what he wanted to know. Had it been so, he would at once have understood his *rôle*. It is usual to say that simplicity and sincerity are to the worldly-bred much more difficult to understand than art; but there is something still more difficult than these. "Pure no-meaning puzzles more than wit." Though Lady Lindores had far more meaning in her than nine-tenths of her contemporaries, she was in this one case absolutely incomprehensible from want of meaning. She had no more notion than a child what to do, or even what she wished to be done. If this little chubby fellow asked Edith to marry him, her mother believed that the girl would laugh in his face. There could be no question of Edith marrying him. But what then? Was Edith to be held up before the whole world (according to Rintoul's version) as the plaything of this little Marquis, as having failed to catch him, as being *planté là*. She was in the most painful dilemma,

not knowing any more than a child how to get out of it. She gave him a look which was almost pathetic in its incompetency. Lady Lindores was full of intellect—she was what is called a very superior woman; but nobody would have been more stupid, more absolutely without any power of invention in this crisis, which had never come within the range of her calculations, which she had not been able to foresee.

And that same afternoon Beaufort came by himself and was admitted, no one else being in the drawing-room—no one to shield the poor lady, who could not help remembering that this stranger was the man to whom she had once given a mother's kiss, receiving him as a son. He did not forget it either. He held her hand when she gave it him, and sat down by her with an expression of satisfaction which she was very far from sharing. "At last I find you alone," he said, with a sigh of content. Poor Lady Lindores had already been so greatly tried this morning, that she felt unable to keep up the strain. Why should she be forced to put on so many semblances?

"Mr Beaufort," she cried, "I cannot pretend to be glad to see you alone. Cannot you understand? You have been wronged,—we have treated you badly,—they say it is the injured person who is always most ready to forgive; but do not ask me to go into a matter which I have tried all these years to forget."

"And yet," he said, gently, "I do not mean to reproach you, Lady Lindores."

"That may be; I do not know that *you* have much occasion to reproach me. You were not yourself, perhaps, so much in earnest. No—I mean no reproach either; but you are a man of your century

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