

LADY WILLIAM

BY
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I

THE village of Watcham is not a village in the ordinary sense of the word, and yet it is a very pretty place, with a charming picturesque aspect, and of which people say, 'What a pretty village!' when they come upon its little landing-place on the riverside, or drive through its old-fashioned green, where some of the surrounding houses look as if they had come out of the seventeenth century, and some as if they had come out of the picture-books of Mr. Randolph Caldecott. It is a village of genteel little houses where a great many people live who have pretensions, but are poor: and some who have no pretensions and yet are poor all the same, and find the little, fresh, airy villa houses, with their small rooms and little gardens, a wonderful relief from London, even from the suburbs which are almost as rural as Watcham. Watcham, however, has various advantages over Hampstead or Wimbledon. It is close by the river, where a little quiet boating may be had without any fear of plunging into the mob of excursionists from London on one side, who make some portions of that river hideous, or the more elegant mob of society on the other, who do not add to its charm. But I need not linger on the attractions of this little place, with which the reader will, no doubt, if he (or she) has patience enough, become well acquainted in time.

The church in Watcham is a pretty church of very old foundation, low in stature and small in size, its porch covered with climbing roses, its modest little spire rising out of a mantle of ivy. Inside I have always felt that there was a faint breath of generations past, perhaps not so desirable as the traces of them left on the walls—which mingled with the breath of the congregation,

and the whiff of incense, which was now and then added to the composite atmosphere. For the Rector was 'High,' and, though he never laid himself open to troublesome proceedings, was watched with great attention by a little band of parishioners very anxious to be aggrieved, who kept an eye upon all he did, in the hope of some day catching him at an unguarded moment, in the act of lighting a candle or donning a vestment which exceeded the rubric. But Mr. Plowden was quite aware of this watch, and delighted in keeping his critics up to the highest mark of vigilance without ever giving them the occasion they desired. The Rectory was an old red-brick house showing rather high and narrow above its garden wall, and the Plowden family consisted, besides the Rector, of his wife, a son, and two daughters, to whose credit the floral decorations, for which the church was famous, were laid, undeservedly, by the strangers and visitors who frequented the place—though this was always indignantly contradicted by the inhabitants, to whom it was well known that Miss Grey was the real artist who made the church so beautiful, and seemed to invent flowers when none were to be had by other persons, for the adornment of the little sanctuary. There were a few houses dotted about in their gardens in the neighbourhood of the church which contained the aristocracy of the place. These were generally very small, but, on the other hand, they were very refined, and contained old china and dainty pieces of old furniture such as might have made a dozen connoisseurs happy. They, however, were inhabited chiefly by ladies, though there was an old soldier and an old clergyman among them who stood out very strongly on the feminine background. The old clergyman, indeed, was no better than an old lady himself, and so considered in the place, which sent him on errands, and set but little store by his opinion; but the General! the General was very different. He had seen a great deal of service; and on occasions

when he went at strictly-regulated intervals to a levée or other great function, with all his medals upon his ancient bosom, he was a sight to see. It was believed generally in the village that he had won several victories with his own right hand, and the sword which hung in his room was believed to have been bathed in blood on many terrible occasions; but, as was to be expected, the old soldier bore no terrible aspect, but was very amiable and gentle to his neighbours. The Archdeacon, of whom nobody stood in any awe, was on occasion ten times more severe.

It will be perceived that society in Watcham was not without dignitaries. But the person who was of highest rank in the place, whom all the ladies had to acknowledge as unmistakably their superior, who had the undoubted right to walk out of a room and into a room before them all, was a lady who lived in one of the smallest of those little houses which were as Belgravia to the population of the village. Such a little house! It had a pretty little garden all round it, with a privet hedge and green gate, which in their insignificance, yet complete enclosure and privacy, were a sort of symbol of their owner and her position. For it could not be denied that she was Lady William, sister-in-law to a marquis, connected (by marriage) with half the aristocracy; and yet not only was she very poor, but she was of herself, so to speak, nobody, which was the exasperating particular in the tale. Nobody at all, the Rector's sister, once a governess, whose elevation by her marriage—and such a marriage!—over the heads of the best people in Watcham was an affront which they never got over, though these ladies were too well bred to make any quarrel, or to be anything but observant of the necessities of the situation. I do not pretend for a moment that it was ever suggested to Lady William in any way that her precedence annoyed her neighbours,

and that to have to walk humbly behind that governess-woman, as Mrs. FitzStephen, the General's wife, had hastily called her on her return to Watcham, was an accident of fate which made them furious. She was a woman full of perception, however, and she was quite aware of the fact, and derived from it a certain amusement. Above all was Lady William amused by it in respect to her sister-in-law, Mrs. Plowden, who, as a married woman, and the Rector's wife, not to speak of her own connections, had been vastly superior to Emily Plowden in her earlier days when that young woman was a governess and of no consequence at all. The first time Lady William dined at the General's, and was taken out by him before all the rest, the sight of Mrs. Plowden's face was almost too much for her gravity. Her elevation had cost her dear, and had brought her little, except that empty honour; but she was a woman with a fine sense of the ludicrous, and that moment compensated her for many troubles. She was the first lady in Watcham, where she had received many snubs once upon a time, and this was at once a balm and an amusement to her of the most agreeable kind.

But Lady William was very poor. They were none of them rich in that little society, but Lady William had less than any, less even than Miss Grey. The small annuity given her by her husband's family, given very grudgingly, and sometimes in arrears, was all she had to depend upon. She had, as people said severely, as if it had been her fault, nothing of her own. The Plowdens were not rich, and all that Emily Plowden had had been bestowed upon a prodigal brother, who had disappeared in the wilds of Australia, and never had been heard of more. What she had thus lost would not have added fifty pounds a year to her income; but fifty pounds a year when you have only two hundred is a great addition, and she was very much reproached for having made this sacrifice 'to that

good-for-nothing boy,' the neighbours said. I am afraid she thought it very foolish herself when she came to be what she was, middle-aged, with Mab growing up, and so little, so very little, nothing at all, so to speak, to keep her little household upon. Sometimes she would calculate to herself how much better off she would have been if she had still possessed the interest of her thousand pounds which poor Ned had carried with him, and which probably only enabled him to ruin himself more quickly. Sometimes she would amuse herself by speculating how much it would have brought in. Thirty-five pounds perhaps, or possibly forty-five if she had been very lucky: and how many comforts that might have got during the year; or she might have taken a little off it—two hundred pounds or so—for Mab's education. And Mab had really got no education, poor child. However, these were nothing but speculations, and had no bitterness in them. She did not grudge her money to poor Ned. Poor Ned! How often is there one in a family who is never spoken of but with that prefix, and how often he is the one who is the best beloved!

Lady William was quite worthy in externals of her elevation, being of what is called an aristocratic appearance, though it is an appearance which is to be found impartially in all classes, and I have often seen a young woman in a shop who was much more like a duchess than the owners of that title sometimes are. Perhaps it would be better to say that Lady William was conventionally correct in every way, with a rather tall and slight figure, an oval face, a deportment which strangers thought distinguished, and fine hands and feet, which are always considered to betoken gentle blood. But Mab, alas! who ought to have possessed more of these attractions, had none of them. She was rather short, and at seventeen she was certainly too stout. Stumpy was what Mrs.

Plowden at the Rectory said, and there can be no doubt that there was truth in that unlovely phrase. Her nose turned up, her face was round and her features blunt, her hair no colour in particular. As for waist the poor girl had none, and her feet were good useful beetle-crushers, which she encased by preference in square-toed shoes without heels. In short, it was impossible even for Mab herself to entertain any illusions as to her personal appearance. She was a plain and homely girl. 'Ah!' said the people who disliked the Plowdens, and those who did not know anything about it, except that her mother had been a governess; 'the common blood bursting out.' But, as a matter of fact, it was the noble family to which her father belonged whom Mab resembled. She was as like the present Marquis as it was possible for a girl to be like an elderly man. None of his daughters (heaven be praised, they said) were half so like him as the niece whom he barely acknowledged. Mab was the very quintessence of that distinguished man. She had very light hair of a faint greenish tinge, eyes equally light, but bluish. To see her beside her graceful mother was wonderful. And she did not show her blood like the Princess in the fairy tale by feeling the pea that was underneath two mattresses. Mab might have lain upon peas, and she would never have been any the wiser. Her perceptions were not delicate. She was not sensitive. In short she was the most perfectly robust and contented little soul there was in Watcham, and met all her little privations with a broad smile.

You could not imagine a more minute drawing-room than that in which this mother and daughter spent the greater part of their life. There was nothing poetical or romantic about the house. The door was exactly in the middle, with a window on each side, which indicated the two sitting-rooms, and three windows which represented as many bedrooms above. The reader will perceive that

it was the rudimentary house designed by infantile art in its first command of a slate or other pencil with which to express its ideas. The narrow passage into which the outer door opened, and from which you entered the sitting-rooms, was scarcely capable of containing two persons at once. By dint of having the smallest specimens possible of those pieces of furniture, Lady William had contrived to have a sofa and a piano in the drawing-room. There were also some low chairs and two or three of those little tables which are so useful in this tea-drinking age, but which are chiefly remarkable as handy things to throw down. You could scarcely throw down Lady William's tables, however, for there was not room enough for them to fall. The ladies were sitting together in this little room with a large basket on the floor between them, in which it was their habit to put their work if it was not suitable to be beheld by visitors. They were both engaged at this particular moment in the making of a dress, of a kind which is generally described by novelists as 'some kind of light woollen material.' Shopkeepers say simply 'material,' leaving the light woollen to the imagination. I think, as I love to be particular, that it was *biège*. There was a fashion-book, or perhaps a copy of the *Lady's Pictorial*—but I think the scene occurred before the commencement of that excellent periodical—lying among the folds of the stuff, half hidden by them. And this was Mab's spring dress, which her mother was making, aided by the less skilled yet patient efforts of Mab herself. 'Do you think you like that sleeve?' Lady William was saying, looking at it in her hand, with her head a little on one side, as an artist looks at his picture; 'these puffs are apt to look a little fantastic, especially when they are home-made——'

'You mean when they are on a fat little girl like me, mother.'

‘Well, Mab, you are a little—stout,’ Lady William said. She did not take it so lightly as Mab did, but half resented, half lamented, this unfortunate development.

‘Don’t say stout, please,’ said Mab. ‘Stout sounds such a determined thing. Call me fat, mother: it’s nicer—it might be accidental: or I might, as Mrs. FitzStephen says, fine down.’

Lady William shook her head with a suppressed sigh. She knew Mab would not fine down. ‘Never mind about words,’ she said, ‘but tell me——’

Here she was interrupted by a rattle of small shots, as of pebbles, on the door. She knew very well what it was. It was the knuckles of Patty, the little girl who was groom of the chambers, and head footman, and kitchenmaid, and general aid to the woman-of-all-work at the cottage. She opened the door when she had delivered this volley, and thrust in a curly head at about the height of the keyhole. ‘Please, my lydy,’ she said, breathless, ‘it’s Missis and the young lydies from the Rectory. I thought as you’d like to know——’

‘Are they coming here, Patty?’

‘Leastways, I think so, my lydy,’ Patty said.

‘Thank you, Patty; as soon as you’ve let them in, bring tea.’

There was no thought of closing the door to these privileged visitors. But the dress was carefully and swiftly disposed of in the big basket, which was thrust under the sofa. ‘They’ve nothing to do with your new frock,’ said Lady William, in an apologetic parenthesis. Mab, who required no apology, who had seen this little feat of legerdemain accomplished more often than she could

count, required no explanation; but she did not take up any other work. Lady William, on the other hand, had a piece of knitting provided for such occasions, and was working at it as if it were the chief occupation of her life when the Rectory ladies were ushered in. Mrs. Plowden had reversed the order which ruled in Lady William's house, for it was she who was short and stout, while her daughters were of the Plowden type, long and thin, like, and yet not like, their aunt, who was slim and tall, words that mean the same thing with a difference. The three figures came in like an army, filling the small room.

'Well, Emily, busy, as usual?' Mrs. Plowden said, a little breathless from her walk. 'And Mab idle, as usual?' she added, after she had taken breath.

'Just as we always are, aunt,' said Mab with a laugh, conscious of the half-finished dress.

'You might come, now and then, to the Sewing Society, Mabel,' said Emmy, her cousin. 'It's quite amusing, and it would show you how nice a quiet hour's sewing can be.'

'But Mab does not like parish things—and neither do I,' said the other, the heterodox daughter, under her breath.

'I wonder,' said Mrs. Plowden, 'that you don't set her in some way of employing herself systematically, Emily. Doing things by fits and starts loses half of the advantage. What should I ever have done with Emmy and Florry if I had not gone on in the most systematic way?'

'And look what examples we are,' said Florry, as usual under her breath.

‘Haven’t we made up our minds to agree to differ on these points?’ said Lady William. ‘I am sure you had something more amusing to tell me than the way you brought up your girls and how I have spoiled Mab.’

‘I don’t know if you will think it amusing. There was something else I had to tell you. Have you heard that Mrs. Swinford and her son have come back to the Hall?’

‘The Swinfords!’ said Lady William, with a start of excitement. ‘Have they come back? I thought they were never coming back any more.’

‘I don’t know what reason you had for such an idea. I never heard of it, and as James is the clergyman, and knows most about his parishioners—but, at all events, they have come back: and I want to know what your ideas are about calling. People stood a little aloof, I have always been told; but it’s a long time ago, and naturally the people here will take great notice of what you and I do, Emily. It will all depend upon what we do how Mrs. Swinford is received. Do you think you shall call?’

‘Call!’ cried Lady William. A little colour had come upon her face, a little agitation into her usual calm. The exclamation seemed like a kind of reply, but whether it meant ‘Call! of course I shall call!’ or ‘Call! how could you expect me to do such a thing?’ her sister-in-law could not tell; neither did she follow up that monosyllable with any further elucidation. She said, after a momentary pause, ‘How long it is ago, and how many things have happened since then!’

‘That is very true—but it’s always like that when people have been away for more than twenty years. Half the people that were

living then are dead, of course: and other things—why, none of the children were born.’

‘Nor dreamt of,’ said Lady William. It gave her a great deal to think about; but after a while Mrs. Plowden grew tired of waiting for some definite response to her question, and took up the theme on her own account.

‘As I am a new person here since her time it would be silly of me to keep up old prejudices. I know nothing about any old story. I am quite justified in saying so, for, of course, I was not even here. We had only a curacy, and your father was still alive: James did not get the living till a year after: and then, of course, I was a very young woman, thinking of none of these things. Your mother had a prejudice—but why should I take up her prejudices? And they are rich, and the son is an agreeable young man, people say; and probably they will entertain a good deal. It would be sinning against a merciful Providence if one refused to take advantage of what is brought to your very door. Everybody says that they will entertain, and probably a great deal.’

‘And Leo will want a wife,’ said Lady William.

‘Good gracious, Emily! don’t talk in that way before my girls! I keep all such ideas out of their minds. But what I meant to say was, if you think of going don’t you think we might go together? It would have a very good effect, and be an example for the parish. I suppose they have got quite French being so long away, and I have been so long out of the way of speaking it that—— But you are quite a linguist, Emily.’

‘You don’t suppose Mrs. Swinford will have forgotten her native tongue?’ Lady William said, with a laugh.

‘Well, if you think not—oh! I suppose not; but one gets so rusty in a language one never uses. Look at me! I spoke both French and German like a native when I left school; but, for want of practice, you could put me out completely by a single question. So I think, as you have always kept it up, I should feel more comfortable. And as they can’t all go, suppose we take the eldest. You and I and Emmy—three are quite enough to make a call. Don’t you see?’

‘I see,’ Lady William said; but it was not for a long time that Mrs. Plowden could get her to say more.

II

‘THE Swinfords come back,’ Lady William said to herself, as she sat on the little sofa in the twilight by the light of the little fire. She had been very silent after the Plowdens withdrew, saying little except on the subject of the frock, which was resumed as soon as these ladies were gone. And when Mab went out, as she had a way of doing when the light began to fail, Lady William put the work away, and sat down in the corner of the sofa, which was the cosiest spot in the little room, almost out of reach of the draught. This is an extremely difficult thing to attain in small rooms where the doors and windows are at right angles, and you never can get far enough off from one of them to avoid the stream of cold air which pours in under the door, or from the window, or somewhere else in the sweet uncertainty of cottage architecture. But that end of the sofa was nearly out of the way from them all: and there she sat when she did not go out, at that wistful hour when it is neither night nor day. Lady William was not old enough to like that wistful hour. She was young enough to prefer taking a run with Mab, being, though she was Mab’s mother, quite as elastic and strong, and as fond of fresh air and exercise as she: and she was philosopher enough to take care not to think more than was absolutely necessary; for I do not disguise that there were episodes in her past life which were not pleasant to go back upon, and that the future, when she gazed into it closely, was too precarious and alarming to inspect. But to-day Lady William’s mind had been stirred, and so many things had come up which forced themselves to be remembered that she had no resource but to allow herself to think. The Swinfords! They were the great people of the place.

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