

CLASSICS TO GO

THE MYSTERY OF Mrs. BLENCARROW



Mrs. OLIPHANT

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CHAPTER I.

THE BLENCARROW HOUSEHOLD.

THE house of Blencarrow, which, without being one of the great houses of the county, was as comfortable and handsome as a country gentleman not exactly of the highest importance could desire, stood in a pretty little park of its own, by the side of a bright little mountain river, either in Cumberland or Westmoreland or North Lancashire—for the boundaries of these counties are to me somewhat confused, and I cannot aver where one ends and another begins. It was built, as is not unusual in North-country houses, on the slope of a hill, so that the principal rooms, which were on a level with the great entrance, were on the other side elevated by at least one lofty story from the flower-garden which surrounded the house. The windows of the drawing-room commanded thus a delightful view over a finely diversified country, ending in the far distance in a glimpse of water with a range of blue hills behind, which was one of the great lakes of that beautiful district. When sun or moon caught this distant lake, which it did periodically at certain times of the day and night, according to the season, it flashed suddenly into life, like one of those new signals of science by which the sun himself is made to interpret between man and man. In the foreground the trees of the park clustered over the glimpses of the lively North-country river, which, sometimes shallow and showing all its pebbles, some times deepening into a pool, ran cheerfully by towards the lake. To the right, scarcely visible save when the trees were bare in winter, the red roofs of the little post-town, a mile and a half away, appeared in the distance with a pleasant sense of neighbourhood. But the scenery, after all, was not so interesting as the people inside.

They were, however, a very innocent, very simple, and unexciting group of country people. Mrs. Blencarrow had been a widow for five or six years, having lived there for some dozen years before, the most beloved of wives. She was not a native of the district, but had come from the South, a beautiful girl, to whom her husband, who was a plain gentleman of simple character and manners, could never be sufficiently grateful for having married him. The ladies of the district thought this sentiment exaggerated, but everybody acknowledged that Mrs. Blencarrow made him an excellent wife. When he died he had left everything in her hands—the entire guardianship of the children, untrammelled by any joint authority save that of her own brothers, whose names were put in the will as a matter of form, and without any idea that they would ever take upon them to interfere. There were five children, the eldest of whom was a slim girl of sixteen, very gentle and quiet, and not very strong; two boys of fourteen and twelve, at school; and two little ones, aged eight and nine respectively. They lived a very pleasant, well-cared-for, happy life. Mrs. Blencarrow's means, if not very large, were comfortable enough. The house was handsomely *montée*, the children had everything they could desire; the gloom of her first widowhood had been over for some time, and she 'saw her friends' like any other lady in the county, giving very pleasant dinner-parties, and even dances when the boys were at home for their holidays—dances, perhaps, all the more gay and easy because the children had a large share in them, and a gentle license prevailed—the freedom of innocence and extreme youth.

It is not to be supposed, when I say this, that anything which could in the remotest degree be called 'fast' was in these assemblies. Indeed, the very word had not been invented in those days, and Mrs. Blencarrow was herself an impersonation of womanly dignity. The country-people were

even a little afraid of her, if truth must be told. Without being stiff or prudish, there was a little air she had, at the faintest shade of impropriety, which scared an offender more than denunciation. She had a determined objection to scandal, even to gossip, and looked coldly upon flirtation, which was not then a recognised pastime as it is now. Nothing ever filled the neighbours with greater consternation than when a passing visitor from London, seeing Mrs. Blencarrow for the first time, declared that she was a woman who looked as if she had a history.

A history! When people say that, they do not mean anything noble or saintly; what it means is scandal, something that has been talked about. There was a general cry, which overwhelmed the unwary stranger. Mrs. Blencarrow a history! Yes, the very best history a woman can have—the record of a blameless life.

‘Nevertheless,’ said the unfortunate man, ‘there is something in her eyes——’

‘Oh yes, there is everything that is good in her eyes,’ said Lady Tremayne, who was young and enthusiastic, a sentiment in which most of the others agreed. At a later period, however, Mrs. Bircham, of The Leas, shook her head a little and said, ‘Now that one thinks of it, there is something curious in Mrs. Blencarrow’s eyes.’

‘They are very fine eyes, if that is what you mean.’

‘No; that is not what I mean. She looks you too full in the face with them, as if she were defying you to find out anything wrong about her. Now, when there is nothing wrong to find out, a woman has no occasion to defy you.’

‘It must be a strange kind of wrong that has not been found out in eighteen years.’

‘Well, it might have happened before she was married—before she came here at all; and when you know that there is something, however long the time may be, you never can

forget it, don't you know,' said Mrs. Bircham, shaking her head.

'You seem to speak from experience, my dear,' said her husband.

'No; I don't speak from experience,' cried the lady, growing red; 'but I have seen a great many things in my time. I have seen so many fine reputations collapse, and so many people pulled down from their pedestals.'

'And helped to do it, perhaps,' said Lady Tremayne. But she made the observation in an aside, for no one liked to encounter Mrs. Bircham's enmity and power of speech. She was one of those people who can develop a great matter from a small one, and smell out a piece of gossip at any distance; and a seed of this description sown in her mind never died. She was not, as it happened, particularly happy in her surroundings. Though she was irreproachable herself, there was no lack of histories in the Bircham family, and Kitty, her second daughter, was one of the little flirts whose proceedings Mrs. Blencarrow so much disapproved. Mrs. Bircham was often herself very angry with Kitty, but by a common maternal instinct could not endure to hear from another any echo of the same reproof which she administered freely.

Mrs. Blencarrow was, however, entirely unaware of this arrow shot into the air. She was still, though approaching forty, as handsome as at any period of her career, with all the additional charms of experience and understanding added to the still unbroken perfection of her features and figure. She was tall and pale, with large gray eyes, singularly clear and lustrous, which met every gaze with a full look, sometimes very imposing, and which always conveyed an impression of pride and reserve in the midst of their full and brave response to every questioning eye. Mrs. Bircham, who was not without discrimination, had indeed made a very fair hit in her description of her neighbour's

look. Sometimes those proud and steadfast eyes would be overbearing—haughty in their putting down of every impertinent glance. She had little colour habitually, but was subject to sudden flushes whenever her mind or feelings were affected, which wonderfully changed the character of her face, and came and went like the wind. She dressed always with a rich sobriety, in black or subdued colours—tones of violet and gray—never quite forgetting her widowhood, her friends thought, though always cheerful, as a woman with a family of children is bound for their sakes to be. She was an excellent woman of business, managing her estate with the aid of a sort of half-steward, half-agent, a young man brought up by her husband and specially commended to her by his dying lips. People said, when they discussed Mrs. Blencarrow's affairs, as the affairs of women and widows are always discussed, that it would have been better for her to have had a more experienced and better instructed man as steward, who would have taken the work entirely off her hands—for young Brown was not at all a person of education; but her devotion to her husband's recommendation was such that she would hear of no change. And the young fellow on his side was so completely devoted to the family, so grateful for all that had been done for him, so absolutely trustworthy, that the wisest concluded on the whole that she was doing the best for her son's interests in keeping Brown, who lived in the house, but in quite an humble way—one of the wisest points in Mrs. Blencarrow's treatment of him being that she never attempted to bring him out of his own sphere.

Besides Brown, her household included a governess, Miss Trimmer, who bore most appropriately that old-fashioned educational name; and an old housekeeper, who had been there in the time of Mrs. Blencarrow's mother-in-law, and who had seen her late master born—an old lady always in a brown silk dress, who conferred additional respectability on

the household, and who was immensely considered and believed in. She came next to their mother in the affections of all the children. It was a very harmonious, well-ordered house, ringing with pleasant noise and nonsense when the boys came home, quiet at other times, though never quite without the happy sound of children, save when the two little ones, Minnie and Jimmy, were out of the way. As for Emmy, the eldest, she was so quiet that scarcely any sound of her ever came into the house.

Such was the house of Blencarrow on a certain Christmas when the boys had come home as usual for their holidays. They came back in the highest spirits, determined that this should be the jolliest Christmas that ever was. The word 'jolly,' as applied to everything that is pleasant, had just come into use at school—I doubt even whether it had progressed into 'awfully jolly.' It sounded still very piquant in the ears of the youngsters, and still was reprov'd ('Don't be always using that dreadful word!') by mothers; the girls were still shy of using it at all. It was Reginald who declared it to be the jolliest Christmas that ever had been. The weather was mild and open, good for hunting, and the boys had some excellent runs; though all idea of frost and skating had to be given up. They were pleased with their own prowess and with everybody and everything round them, and prepared to act their part with grace and *bonhomie*—Reginald as master of the house, Bertie as his lieutenant and henchman—at the great ball which was to be given at Blencarrow on Christmas Eve.

The house was quite full for this great ceremonial. At Christmas the mixture of babes and grown-up young ladies and gentlemen is more easily made than at any other time of the year. The children mustered very strong. Those who were too far off to drive home that evening were with their parents staying at Blencarrow, and every available corner was filled. The house was illuminated all over; every