Mrs. Oliphant

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338107961

Table of Contents

PART I.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

THE FAMILY.

Table of Contents

It would be difficult to say how Penninghame Castle had got that imposing name. It was an old house standing almost on the roadside, at least at the termination of a rough country road leading from the village, which widened into a square space at the side of the house. The village road was lined with trees, and it pleased the Musgraves to believe that it had been in happier days the avenue to their ancient dwelling, while the rough square at the end had been the courtyard. The place itself consisted of a small mansion not important enough to be very distinctive in architecture, built on to the end of an old hall, the only remaining portion of a much older and greater house. This hall was entered directly by a great door of heavy oak, from which a slope of ancient causeway descended into the road below—an entrance which was the only thing like a castle in the whole *ensemble*, though it ought to have led to an ancient gateway and portcullis rather than to the great door generally wide open, through which, according to the story, a horseman once entered to scare the guests at their feast and defy the master at the head of the table. The hall was not used for such festive purposes now, nor threatened by such warlike intruders. It had known evil fortune in its day

and had been degraded into a barn, its windows blocked up, its decorations destroyed—but had come to life again for the last fifty years and had come back to human use, though no longer as of old. Round the corner was the front of the old mansion, built in that pallid grey stone, which adds a sentiment of age, like the ashy paleness of very old people, to the robust antiquity of mason-work more lasting than any that is done now. Successive squires had nibbled at this old front, making windows there and doorways here: windows which cut through the string-courses above, and a prim Georgian front door, not even in the centre of the old arched entrance which had been filled up, which gave a certain air of disreputable irregularity to the pale and stern old dwelling-place. Ivy and other clinging growths fortunately hid a great deal of this, and added importance to the four great stacks of chimneys, which, mantled in its short, large leaves and perpetual greenness, looked like turrets, and dignified the house. A lake behind somewhat coldly blue, and a great hill in front somewhat coldly green, showed all the features of that north country which was not far enough north for the wild vigour and vivifying tints of brown bracken and heather. The lake came closely up in a little bay behind the older part of the house where there was a rocky harbour for the boats of the family; and between this little bay and the grey walls was the flower-garden, old-fashioned and bright, though turned to the unkindly east. Beyond this was a kind of broken park with some fine trees and a great deal of rough underwood, which stretched along the further shore of the lake and gave an air of dignity to the dwelling on that side. This was still called “the Chase”

as the house was called the Castle, in memory it might be supposed of better days. The Musgraves had been Cavaliers, and had wasted their substance in favour of the Charleses, and their lands had been ravaged, their park broken up into fields, their avenue made a common road, half by hostile neighbours, half by vulgar intrusion, in the days when the Revolutionists had the upper hand. So they said, at least, and pleas of this kind are respected generally, save by the very cynical. Certainly the present occupants of the house believed it fervently, and so did the village; and if it was nothing more it was a great comfort and support to the family, and made them regard the rude approach to “the Castle” with forbearance. The public right of way had been established in those stormy times. It was a sign even of the old greatness of the house. It was better than trim lawns and smiling gardens, which would have required a great deal of keeping up. It was, however, a family understanding that the first Musgrave who made a rich marriage, or who in any other way became a favourite of fortune, should by some vague means—an act of parliament or otherwise—reclaim the old courtyard and avenue, and plant a pair of magnificent gates between the castle and the village: also buy back all the old property; also revive the title of Baron of Penninghame, which had been in abeyance for the last two hundred years; and do many other things to glorify and elevate the family to its pristine position; and no Musgrave doubted that this deliverer would come sooner or later, which took the bitterness out of their patience in the meantime and gave them courage to wait.

Another encouraging circumstance in their lot was that they were fully acknowledged as the oldest family in the county. Other and richer persons pushed in before them to its dignities, and they were no doubt very much left out of its gaieties and pleasures; but no one doubted that they had a right to take the lead, if ever they were rich enough. This, however, did not seem likely, for the moment at least. The family at Penninghame had, what is much to be avoided by families which would be happy, a history, and a very recent one. There were two sons, but neither of them had been seen at the Castle for nearly fifteen years, and with the name of the elder of these there was connected a dark and painful story, not much known to the new generation, but very well remembered by all the middle-aged people in the county. Young Musgrave had been for a year or two the most popular young squire in the north country, but his brightness had ended in dismal clouds of misfortune and trouble and bloodshedding, with perhaps crime involved, and certainly many of the penalties of crime. He had not been seen in the north country since the crisis which made all the world acquainted with his unfortunate name; and his younger brother had re-appeared but once in their father's house, which was thus left desolate, except for the one daughter, who had been its delight before and was now its only stay. So far as the county knew, young Musgrave still lived, though he was never mentioned, for there had been no signs of mourning in the house, such as must have intimated to the neighbours the fact of John's death—which also of course would have made Randolph the heir. And save that once, not even Randolph had ever come to break

the monotony of life in his father’s house. Squire Musgrave and his daughter lived there alone now. They had been alone these fifteen years. They had little society, and did not keep up a large establishment. He was old, and she was no longer young enough to care for the gaieties of the rural neighbourhood. Thus they had fallen out of the current of affairs. The family was “much respected,” but comparatively little heard of after the undesired and undesirable notoriety it had once gained.

Thus abandoned by its sons, and denuded of the strongest elements of life, it may well be supposed that the castle at Penninghame was a melancholy house. What more easy than to conjure up the saddest picture of such a dwelling? The old man, seated in his desolate home, brooding over perhaps the sins of his sons, perhaps his own —some injudicious indulgence, or untimely severity which had driven them from him; while the sister, worn out by the monotony of her solitary life, shut herself out from all society, and spent her life in longing for the absent, and pleading for them—a sad, solitary woman, with no pleasure in her lot, except that of the past. The picture would have been as appropriate as touching, but it would not have been true. Old Mr. Musgrave was not the erring father of romance. He was a well-preserved and spare little man, over seventy, with cheeks of streaky red like winter apples, and white hair, which he wore rather long, falling on the velvet collar of his old-fashioned coat. He had been an outdoor man in his day, and had farmed, and shot, and hunted, like others of his kind, so far as his straitened means and limited stables permitted; but when years and circumstances had impaired

his activity he had been strong enough to retire, of his own free will, while graceful abdication was still in his power. He spent most of his time now in his library, with only a constitutional walk, or easy ramble upon his steady old cob, to vary his life, except when quarter sessions called him forth, or any other duty of the magistracy, to which he still paid the most conscientious attention. The Musgraves were not people whom it was easy to crush, and Fate had a hard bargain in the old squire, who found himself one occupation when deprived of another with a spirit not often existing in old age. He had committed plenty of mistakes in his day, and some which had been followed by tragical consequences, a practical demonstration of evil which fortunately does not attend all the errors of life; but he did not brood over them in his old library, nor indulge unavailing compunctions, nor consider himself under any doom; but on the contrary studied his favourite problems in genealogy and heraldry, and county history, and corresponded with *Notes and Queries*, and was in his way very comfortable. He it was who first pointed out that doubtful blazoning of Marmion's shield, "colour upon colour," which raised so lively a discussion; and in questions of this kind he was an authority, and thoroughly enjoyed the little tilts and controversies involved, many of which were as warm as their subjects were insignificant. His family was dropping, or rather had dropped, into decay; his eldest son was virtually lost to his family and to society; his youngest son alienated and a stranger; and some of this at least was the father's fault. But neither the decay of the house, nor the reflection that he was at least partially to blame, made any great

difference to the squire. There had no doubt been moments, and even hours, when he had felt it bitterly; but these moments, though perhaps they count for more than years in a man’s life, do not certainly last so long, and age has a way of counterfeiting virtue, which is generally very successful, even to its personal consciousness. Mr. Musgrave was generally respected, and he felt himself to be entirely respectable. He sat in his library and worked away among his county histories, without either compunction or regret—who could throw a stone at him? He had been rather unfortunate in his family, that was all that could be said.

And Mary Musgrave, his daughter, was just as little disposed to brood upon the past. She had shed many tears in her day, and suffered many things. Perhaps it was in consequence of the family troubles which had come upon her just at the turning-point in her life that she had never married; for she had been one of the beauties of the district—courted and admired by everybody, and wooed by many: by some who indeed still found her beautiful, and by some who had learned to laugh at the old unhappiness of which she was the cause. Miss Musgrave did not like these last, which was perhaps natural; and even now there would be a tone of satire in her voice when she noted the late marriage of one or another of her old adorers. Women do not like men whose hearts they have broken, to get quite healed, and console themselves; this is perhaps a poor feeling, but it is instinctive, and though it may be stoutly struggled against in some cases, and chidden into silence in many, it still maintains an untolerated yet obstinate life. But neither the failure of the adorations she once inspired nor the family

misfortunes had crushed her spirit. She lived a not unhappy life, notwithstanding all that had happened. It was she who did everything that was done at Penninghame. The reins which her father had dropped almost unawares she had taken up. She managed the estate; kept the bailiff in order; did all business that was necessary with the lawyer; and what was a greater feat still, kept her father unaware of the almost absolute authority which she exercised in his affairs. It had to be done, and she had not hesitated to do it; and on the whole, she, too, though she had suffered many heartaches in her day, was not unhappy now, but lived a life full of activity and occupation. She was forty, and her hair began to be touched by grey—she who had been one of the fairest flowers of the north country. A woman always has to come down from that eminence somehow; whether she does it by becoming some one's wife or by merely falling back into the silence of the past and leaving the place free for others, does not much matter. Perhaps, indeed, it is the old maid who has the best of it. A little romance continues to encircle her in the eyes of most of those who have worshipped her youth. She has not married; why has she not married—that once admired of all admirers? Has it been that she, too, sharing the lot which she inflicted on so many, was not loved where she loved? or was it perhaps that she had made a mistake—sent away some one, perhaps, who knows, the very man who thought of her thus kindly and regretfully—whom she was afterwards sorry to have sent away? Nobody said this in words, but Mary Musgrave at forty was more tenderly thought of than Lady Stanton, who had been the rival queen of the county. Lady Stanton was

stout now-a-days; in men’s minds, when they met her sailing into a ball-room, prematurely indued with the duties of chaperon to her husband’s grown-up daughters, there would arise a half-amused wonder how they could have worshipped at her feet as they once did. “Can this muckle wife be my true love Jean?” they said to themselves. But Miss Musgrave, who was slim as a girl in her unwedded obscurity, and whose eyes some people thought as bright as ever, though her hair was grey, gave rise to no such irreverent thoughts. There were men scattered through the world who had a romantic regard, a profound respect still, for this woman whom they had loved, and who had preserved the distinction of loving no one in return. Nobody had died for love of her, though, some had threatened it; but this visionary atmosphere of past adoration supplied a delicate homage, such as is agreeable even to an old maiden’s heart.

And Miss Musgrave’s life was spent chiefly in the old hall, as her father’s was spent in his library. She had been full of gay activity in her youth, a bold and graceful horsewoman, ready for anything that was going; but, with the same sense of fitness that led the squire to his retirement, she too had retired. She had put aside her riding-habits along with, her muslins, and wore nothing but rich neutral-tinted silk gowns. Her only extravagance was a pair of ponies, which she drove into the county town when she had business to do, or to pay an occasional visit to her friends: but by far the greater part of her life was spent in the old hall, where all her favourites and allies came, and all her poor people from the village, who found her seated like a scriptural potentate in the gate,

ready to settle all quarrels and administer impartial justice. The hall was connected with the house by a short passage and two doors, which shut out all interchange of sound. There was nothing above it but the high-pitched roof, the turret chimneys, and the ivy, nor was any interposition of servants necessary to usher in visitors by that ever-open way. This was a thing which deeply affected the spirits and feelings of Eastwood, the only male functionary in the house —the most irreproachable of butlers. A door which opened straight into the lady's favourite sitting-room was felt by him to be an insult to the family; it was more like a farmhouse than a castle; and as for Miss Musgrave, she was just as bad —too affable, a deal too affable, talking to any one that came to her, the tramps on the road as well as the ladies and gentlemen whose unwilling steeds pranced and curveted on the old slope of causeway. This was a standing grievance to the butler, whoso complaint was that the "presteedge" of the family was in hourly jeopardy; and his persistent complaint had thrown a shade of dissatisfaction over the household. This, however, did not move the lady of the house. Eastwood and the rest did not know, though some other people did, that it was the proudest woman in the county whom they accused of being too affable, and who received all the world in the old hall without the assistance of any gentleman usher. There were no windows in the side of the hall which fronted the road, but only this huge oaken door, all studded with bars and elaborate hinges of iron. On the other side there was a recess, with a large square window and cushioned seats, "restored" by village workmen in a not very perfect way, but still preserving the

ample and noble lines of its original design. This windowed recess was higher than the rest of the hall, the walls of which were low, though the roof was lofty. But towards the front the only light was from the doorway, which looked due west, and beheld all the sunsets, flooding the ancient place with afternoon light and glories of evening colour. The slanting light seemed to sweep in like an actual visitor in all its sheen of crimson and purple, when the rest of the house was in the still and hush of the grey evening. This was where Miss Musgrave held her throne.

Thus Penninghame Castle stood at the moment this story begins. The lake gleaming cold towards the north, rippling against the pebbles in the little inlet which held the two boats, the broken ground and ancient trees of the Chase, lying eastward, getting the early lights of the morning, as did the flower-garden, which lay bright under the old walls. A little genial hum of the kindly north-country women-servants, who had been there for a lifetime, or who were the daughters and cousins of those who had been there for a lifetime, with Eastwood strutting important among them—the one big cock among this barndoor company—made itself audible now and then, a respectful subdued human accompaniment to the ripple of the lake and the whispering of the wind among the trees: and now and then a cheerful cackle of poultry, the sound of the ponies in the stable, or the squire’s respectable cob: the heavy steps of the gardener walking slowly along the gravel paths. But for these tranquil sounds, which made the stillness more still, there was nothing but quiet in and about the old house. There had been a time when much had happened there,

when there had been angry dissensions, family convulsions, storms of mutual reproach and reproof, outbursts of tears and crying. But all that was over. Nothing had happened at Penninghame for fifteen years. The old squire in his library and Mary in her favourite old chamber lived as though there were no breaks in life, no anguishes, no convulsions, as quietly as their trees, as steadily as their old walls, as if existence could neither change nor end. Thus they went on from day to day and from year to year, in a routine which occupied and satisfied, and kept the sense of living in their minds, but in a lull and hush of all adventure, of all commotion, of all excitement. Time passed over them and left no trace, save those touches imperceptible at the moment which sorrow or passion could surpass in effect in one day, yet which tell as surely at the end. This was how things were at Penninghame when this story begins.

CHAPTER II.

MARY.

Table of Contents

It was not one of Mary Musgrave's fancies to furnish her hall like a drawing-room. She had collected round her a few things for use, but she was not rich enough to make her favourite place into a toy, as so many people do, nor had she the opportunity of "picking up" rarities to ornament it, as she might have liked to do had she been in the way of them. The room had been a barn fifty years before. Then it became a family storeroom, was fitted up at one end with closets and cupboards, and held the household linen, and

sometimes the winter supply of fruit. It was Mary who had rescued it back again to gentler use; but she had not been able to re-decorate or renew it with such careful pretence at antiquity as is common nowadays. All that she could do for it was to collect her own doings there, and all the implements for her work. The windowed recess which got the morning sun was her business-room. There stood an old secretaire, chosen not because of its age or suitability, but because it was the only thing she had available, a necessity which often confers as much grace as the happiest choice. Opposite the doorway was an old buffet, rough, yet not uncharacteristic, which had been scrubbed clean by a generous housemaid when Miss Musgrave first took to the hall. And much it had wanted that cleansing; but the soap and the water and the scrubbing-brush had not agreed very well, it must be allowed, with the carved mahogany, which ought to have been oak. Between the open door and this big piece of furniture was a square of old Turkey carpet, very much faded, yet still agreeable to the eye, and a spindle-legged table of Queen Anne's days, with drawers which held Miss Musgrave's knitting and a book, and sometimes homelier matters, mendings which she chose to do herself, calculations which were not meant for the common eye.

She was seated here, on an afternoon of October, warm with the shining of that second summer which comes even in the north. The sunshine came so far into the room that it caught the edges of the carpet, and made a false show of gold upon the faded wool; and it was so warm that Miss Musgrave had drawn her chair farther into the room than usual, and sat in the shade to escape the unusual warmth.

At this moment she was not doing anything. She was sitting quite silent, the book she had been reading laid open upon her knee, enjoying the sun, as people enjoy it to whom it suddenly reveals itself after date when it is past expectation. In the end of October in the north country, people have ceased to think of warmth out of doors, or any blaze of kindly light from the skies—and the morning had been grey though very mild. The sudden glow had caught Mary as she sat, a little chilly, close to her opened door, thinking of a shawl, and had transfigured the landscape and the heavens and her own sentiments all at once. She was sitting with her hands in her lap, and the open book on her knee, thinking of it, surprised by the sweetness of it, feeling it penetrate into her very heart, though she had drawn her chair back out of the sun. No, not thinking—people do not think of the sunshine; but it went into her heart, bringing back a confused sweetness of recollection and of anticipation—or rather of the anticipations which were recollections—which had ceased to exist except in memory. Just so does youth expect some sudden sweetness to invade its life; and sometimes the memory of that expectation, even when unfulfilled, brings a half sad, half sweet amusement to the solitary. It was so with this lady seated alone in her old hall. She was Mary again, the young daughter of the house; and at the same time she was old Miss Musgrave smiling at herself.

But as she did so a footstep sounded on the rough pavement of the ascent. No one could come unheard to her retreat, which was a safeguard. She gave a little shake to her head, and took up the open book, which was no old

favourite to be dreamed over, but a modern book; and prepared herself for a visitor with that smoothing of the brow and closing up of mental windows which fits us to meet strange eyes. “It is only I,” said the familiar voice of some one who knew and understood this slight movement: and then she dropped the book again, and let the smile come back into her eyes.

“Only you! then I may look as I please. I need not put on my company garb,” she said, with a smile.

“I should hope not,” said the new-comer, reaching the door with that slight quickening of the breath which showed that even the half-dozen steps of ascent was a slight tax upon him. He did not even shake hands with her—probably they had met before that day—but took off his hat as he crossed the threshold, as if he had been going into a church. He was a clergyman, slim and slight, of middle size, or less than middle size, in somewhat rusty grey, with a mildness of aspect which did not promise much strength, bodily or mental. The Vicarage of Penninghame was a poor one, too poor to be worth reserving for a son of the family, and it had been given to the tutor of Mr. Musgrave’s sons twenty years ago. What had happened was natural enough, and might be seen in his eyes still, notwithstanding lapse of time and change of circumstances. Mr. Pennithorne had fallen in love, always hopelessly and mildly, as became his character, with the Squire’s daughter. He had always said it did not matter. He had no more hope of persuading her to love him than of getting the moon to come out of heaven, and circumstances having set marriage before him, he had married, and was happy enough as happiness goes. And he was the friend,

and in a measure the confidant, of this lady whom he had loved in the superlative poetical way—knew all about her, shared her life in a manner, was acquainted with many of her thoughts and her troubles. A different light came into his eyes when he saw her, but he was not at all unhappy. He had a good wife and three nice children, and the kind of life he liked. At fifty, who is there who continues to revel in the unspeakable blisses of youth? Mr. Pennithorne was very well content: but still when he saw Mary Musgrave—and he saw her daily—there came a different kind of light into his eyes.

"I was in mental *déshabille*," she said, "and did not care to be caught; though after all it is not everybody who can see when one is not clothed and in one's right mind."

"I never knew you out of your right mind, Miss Mary. What was it?—no new trouble?"

"You are always a flatterer, Mr. Pen. You have seen me in all kinds of conditions. No, we don't have any troubles now. Is that a rash speech? But really I mean it. My father is in very good health and enjoys himself, and I enjoy myself—in reason."

"You enjoy yourself! Yes, in the way of being good to other people."

"Hush!" she said, putting up her hand to stop him in his little speech, sincere as it was. "Shall I tell you what it was that put me out of order for any one's eyes but an old friend's? Nothing more than this sunshine, Mr. Pen. Don't you recollect when we were young how a sudden thought of something that was coming would seize upon you, and flood you with delight—as the sun did just now?"

“I recollect,” he said, fixing his mild eyes upon her, and shaking his head, with a sigh: “but it never came.”

“That may be true enough; but the thought came, and ‘life is but thought,’ you know; the thing might not follow. However, we are all quite happy all the same.”

He looked at her, still shaking his head.

“I suppose so,” he said; “I suppose so; quite happy! but not as we meant to be; that was what you were thinking.”

“I did not go so far. I was not thinking at all. I *think* that I think very seldom. It only caught me as the old thought used to do, and brought so many things back.”

She smiled, but he sighed.

“Yes, everything is very different. Yourself—to see you here, offering up your life for others—making a sacrifice——”

“I have made no sacrifice,” she said, somewhat proudly, then laughed. “Is that because I am unmarried, Mr. Pen? You wedded people, you are so sure of being better off than we are. You are too complacent. But *I* am not so sure of that.”

He did not join in her laugh, but looked at her with melting eyes—eyes in which there was some suspicion of tears. It was perhaps a trifle unkind of her to call him complacent in his conjugality. There were a hundred unspeakable things in his look—pity, reverence, devotion, not the old love perhaps, but something higher; something that was never to end.

“On the whole, we are taking it too seriously,” she said, after a pause. “It is over now, and the sun is going down. And you came to talk to me?—perhaps of something in the parish that wants looking to?”

“No—I came in only to look at you, and make sure that you were well. The children you were visiting the other day have the scarlet fever; and besides, I have had a feeling in my mind about you—a presentiment. I should not have been surprised to hear that there had been—letters—or some kind of advances made—— ”

“From whom?”

“Well,” he said, after a slight pause; “they are both brothers—both sons—but they are not the same to me, Miss Mary. From John; he has been so much in my mind these two or three days, I have got to dreaming about him. Yes, yes, I know that is not worth thinking of; but we were always in such sympathy, he and I. Don’t you believe in some communication between minds that were closely allied? I do. It is a superstition if you like. Nothing could happen to any of you but, if I were at ever so great a distance, I should know.”

“Don’t be too sure of that, Mr. Pen. Sometimes the dearest to us perish, and we know nothing of it; but I prefer your view. You dreamt of poor John? What did you see? Alas! dreams are the only ways of divining anything about him now!”

“And your father is as determined as ever?”

“We never speak on the subject. It has disappeared like so many other things. Why continue a fruitless discussion which only embittered him and wore me out? If any critical moment should come, if—one must say it plainly—my father should be like to die—then I should speak, you need not fear.”

“I never feared that you would do everything the best sister, the bravest friend, could do.”

“Do not praise me too much. I tell you I am doing nothing, and have done nothing for years; and sometimes it strikes me with terror. If anything should happen suddenly! My father is an old man; but talking to him now is of no use; we must risk it. What did you see in your dream?”

“Oh, you will laugh at me,” he said with a nervous flutter; “nothing—except that he was here. I dreamt of him before, that time that he came home—after—— ”

“Don’t speak of it,” said Miss Musgrave, with a corresponding shiver. “To think that such things should happen, and be forgotten, and we should all go on so comfortably—quite comfortably! I have nothing particular to make me happy, and yet I am as happy as most people—notwithstanding all that I have come through, as the poor women say.”

“That is because you are so unselfish—so—— ”

“Insensible—more like. I am the same as other people. What the poor folk in the village come through, Mr. Pen!—loss of husbands, loss of children, one after another, grinding poverty, and want, and anxiety, and separation from all they care for. Is it insensibility? I never can tell; and especially now when I share it myself. I am as happy sometimes as when I was young. That sunshine gave me a ridiculous pleasure. What right have I to feel my heart light?—but I did somehow—and I do often—notwithstanding all that has happened, and all that I have ‘gone through.’”

Mr. Pennithorne gave a vague smile, but he made no reply; for either she was accusing herself unjustly, or this

was a mood of mind which perhaps derogated a little from Mary Musgrave’s perfection. He had a way himself of keeping on steadfastly on the one string of his anxiety, whatever it might be, and worrying everybody with it—and here he lost the object of his faithful worship. It might—nay, must—be right since so she felt; but he lost her here.

“And speaking of happiness,” she went on after a pause, “I want the children to come with me to Pennington to see the archery. It is pretty, and they will like it. And they like to drive behind my ponies. They are quite well?—and Emily?”

“Very well. Our cow has been ill, and she has been worrying about it—not much to worry about you will say, you who have so much more serious anxieties.”

“Not at all. If I had a delicate child and wanted the milk, I should fret very much. Will you send up for some of ours? As usually happens, we, who don’t consume very much, have plenty.”

“Thank you,” he said, “but you must not think that little Emmy is so delicate. She has not much colour—neither has her mother, you know.” He was a very anxious father, and looked up with an eager wistfulness into her face. Little Emmy was so delicate that it hurt him like a foreboding to hear her called so. He could not bear Miss Musgrave, whose word had authority, to give utterance to such a thought.

“I spoke hastily,” she said; “I did not think of Emmy. She is ever so much stronger this year. As for paleness, I don’t mind paleness in the least. She has such a very fair complexion, and she is twice as strong as last year.”

“I am so glad you think so,” he said, with the colour rising to his face. “That is true comfort—for eyes at a little

distance are so much better than one’s own.”

“Yes, she is a great deal stronger,” said Miss Musgrave, “but you must send down for the milk. I was pale too, don’t you remember, when you came first? When I was fifteen.”

“I remember—everything,” he said; “even to the dress you wore. I bought my little Mary something like it when I was last in town. It was blue—how well I remember! But Mary will never be like you, though she is your godchild.”

“She is a great deal better; she is like her mother,” said Miss Musgrave promptly; “and Johnny is like his father, the best possible distribution. You are happy with your children, Mr. Pen. I envy people their children, it is the only thing; though perhaps they would bore me if I had them always on my hands. You think not? Yes, I am almost sure they would bore me. We get a kind of fierce independence living alone. To be hampered by a little thing always wanting something —wanting attention and care—I don’t think I should like it. But Emily was born for such cares. How well she looks with her baby in her arms—all was the old picture over again—the Madonna and the child.”

“Poor Emily,” he said, though why he could not have told, for Emily did not think herself poor. Mr. Pennithorne always felt a vague pity for his wife when he was with Miss Musgrave, as for a poor woman who had many excellent qualities, but was here thrown into the shade. He could not say any more. He got up to go away, consoled and made comfortable he could not quite tell why. She was always sweet he said to himself as he went home. What she had said about being bored by children was a mere delusion, or perhaps a little conscious effort of self-deception,

persuading herself that to have no children and to be independent was the best. What a wife she would have made! What a mother! he said this to himself quite impartially, knowing well that she never could have been wife for him, and feeling a pang at his heart for the happiness she had lost. Married life was not unmixed happiness always; it had its difficulties, he knew. But if *she* had married it was not possible that she could have been otherwise than happy. With her there could have been no drawbacks. Mr. Pennithorne looked upon the question from a husband's point of view alone.

When he was gone, Miss Musgrave sat still without changing her place, at first with a smile, which gradually faded away from her face, like the last suffusion of the sunshine, which was going too. She smiled at her fast friend, to whom she knew, notwithstanding his legitimate affection for his Emily, she herself stood first of created beings. It was a folly, but it did not hurt him, she reflected with a faint amusement; and Emily and the children, notwithstanding this sentiment, were first and foremost really in his heart. Poor Mr. Pen! he had always been like this, mildly sentimental, offering up an uninterrupted gentle incense. But he was not in the least unhappy, though perhaps he liked by times to think that he was. Few people were really unhappy. By moments life was hard; but the struggle itself made a kind of happiness, a strain of living which it was good to feel by times. This was her theory. Most people when they come to forty have some theory or another, some settled way of getting through their existence, and adapting themselves for it. Hers was this: that evil was very

much less than good in every way, and that people suffered a great deal less than they gave themselves credit for. Life had its compensations, daily and hourly, she thought. Her own existence had no exciting source of joy in it, but how far it was from being unhappy! Had she been unhappy she would have scoffed at herself. What! so many things to enjoy, so many good and pleasant circumstances around, and not happy! Would not that have been a disgrace to any woman? So she was apt to think Mr. Pennithorne extracted a certain cunning enjoyment from that vain love for herself which had been so visionary at all times, and which he persuaded himself had saddened his life. She thought it had been a harmless delusion: a secret advantage rather; something to fall back upon; a soft and visionary grievance of which he never wearied. And perhaps she was right. She sat looking after him with a smile on her face.

The sun had crept away from her open doorway as they had talked. It was stealing further and further off, withdrawing from the line of the road, from the village roofs, from the gleam of the lake—and like the sun her smile stole away, from her eyes first, and then from the lingering curves about her mouth. Why was it that he could think he felt some action upon him of John’s mind in the far distance, while she felt none? No kind of presentiment or premonition had come to her. It must be foolishness she was sure—superstition; for if sympathy could thus communicate even a vague thrill of warning from one to another through the atmosphere of the mind, surely she was a more likely object to receive it than Mr. Pennithorne! John knew her,—could not doubt her, surely. Therefore to her, if to any one, this secret

communication must have come. The smile disappeared altogether from her mouth as she entered upon this subject, and her whole face and eyes became grave and grey, like the dull coldness of the east, half-resentful of the sunset which still went on upon the other edge of the horizon, dispersing all those vain reflections to every quarter except that from which the sun rose. Could it be possible after all that John might trust Mr. Pennithorne with a more perfect confidence, as one unconnected and unconcerned with all that had passed, than he could give to herself? The thought, even though founded on such visionary grounds, hurt her a little; yet there was a kind of reason in it. He might think that she, always at her father's side, and able to influence him in so many ways, might have done more for her brother; whereas with Mr. Pennithorne, who could do nothing, the sentiment of trust would be unbroken. She sat thus idly making it out to herself, making wondering casts of thought after her brother in the darkness of the unknown, as inch by inch the light stole out of the sky. It was not a fine sunset that night. The sun was yellow and mournful; long lines of cloud broke darkly upon his sinking, catching only sick reflections of the pale light beneath. At last he was all gone, except one streaming yellow sheaf of rays that seemed to strike against and barb themselves into the damp green outline of the hill.

Her eyes were upon this, watching that final display, which, somehow in the absorption of her thoughts, kept her from observing an object near at hand, an old hackney-coach from Pennington town—where there was a railway station—which came along the road, a black, slow,

lumbering vehicle, making a dull roll of sound which might have been a country cart. It came nearer and nearer while Miss Musgrave watched the bundle of gold arrows flash into the hill-side and disappear. Her eyes were dazzled by them, and chilled by their sudden disappearance, which left all the landscape cold and wrapped in a greyness of sudden evening. Mary came to herself with a slight shiver and shock. And at that moment the dull roll of the cab ceased, and the thing stood revealed to her. She rose to her feet with a thrill of wonder and expectation. The hackney carriage had drawn up at the foot of the slope opposite to and beneath her. What was coming? Had Mr. Pennithorne been warned after all, while she had been left in darkness? Her heart seemed to leap into her throat, while she stood clasping her hands together to get some strength from them, and waiting for the revelation of this new thing, whatever it might be.

CHAPTER III.

THE NEW-COMERS.

Table of Contents

The cab was loaded with two boxes on the roof, foreign trunks, of a different shape from those used at home; and a woman’s face, in a fantastic foreign head-dress, peered through the window. Who could this be? Mary stood as if spell-bound, unable to make a movement. The driver, who was an ordinary cab-driver from Pennington, whose homely everydayness of appearance intensified the strangeness of the others, opened the door of the carriage, and lifted out,

first a small boy, with a scared face and a finger in his mouth, who stared at the strange place, and the figures in the doorway, with a fixed gaze of panic, on the eve of tears. Then out came with a bound, as if pushed from behind as well as helped a little roughly by the cabman, the foreign woman, at whose dress the child clutched with a frightened cry. Then there was a pause, during which some one inside threw out a succession of wraps, small bags, and parcels; and then there stepped forth, with a great shawl on one arm, and a basket almost as large as herself on the other, clearly the leading spirit of the party, a little girl who appeared to be about ten years old. “You will wait a moment, man, till we get the pay for you,” said this little personage in a high-pitched voice, with a distinctness of enunciation which made it apparent that the language, though spoken with very little accent, was unfamiliar to her. Then she turned to the woman and said a few words much more rapidly, with as much aid of gesture as was compatible with the burdens. Mary felt herself look on at all this like a woman in a dream. What was it all—a dream or reality? She felt incapable of movement, or rather too much interested in the curious scene which was going on before her, to think of movement or interference of any kind. When she had given her directions, whatever they were, the little girl turned round and faced the open door and the lady who had not moved. She gave these new circumstances a long, steady, investigating look. They were within a dozen yards of each other, but the chatelaine stood still and said nothing, while the little invader inspected her, and prepared her assault. The child, who looked the impersonation of life