

The New Utopia.

(From the Irish Monthly.)

CHAPTER IX.

EXDALE MANOR.

I INFORMED my reader in a previous chapter that my family had no claim whatever to figure in a romance, and that my sister Mary, in particular, had not the least pretension to be considered a heroine. neither was her husband, Charles Oswald anything of a hero; but he was an excellent fellow, and their marriage was a happy one, Mary supplying the plain good sense which served as ballast to her husband's animal spirits. Their family consisted of three children, of whom the "little Mary," that Grant had spoken of, was the eldest. Alexia, her younger sister, was somewhat of that type which among boys we term "a sad pickle;" and John, the son and heir, was yet in his cradle. The only other figure in the home group was Oswald's unmarried sister, Florence, of whom I could predicate no more on a first introduction than that she had fine, classical features, stamped, however, with that joyless intellectualism which mars all beauty on the face of woman. Mistake me not, dear reader, for an intellectual countenance is a magnificent object, and the index of a truly magnificent gift; but both the gift and the countenance need something else to soften their sharp edges and that *something* seemed wanting in Florence Oswald.

Exdale itself was a modest country-house, very different in style and dimensions from Oakham; but it had a charm which Oakham did not possess, it was filled to the brim with a genial, domestic atmosphere. Dear old Mary was regularly in her glory, as mistress of a house and head of a family. She had the true genius of that particular calling; she understood her husband's ways and wants, and always contrived to supply them; she made the most of a moderate income, and prevented his doing foolish things, without his ever dreaming that he was managed; she took in girls from the village school, and trained them to be good servants; but no one was ever plagued with their awkward ways whilst they were in course of training. The house looked as if somebody was always putting it to rights, and yet there was no fuss about it, and Mary herself was never seen in a bustle. She was not a heroine, certainly, but I will maintain against all comers that she was the queen of wives and mothers.

After the deserted suites of state apartments, and long, silent galleries of Oakham, the sound of family talk and children's prattle was a pleasant change, though the scene, by comparison, was a homely one, for what they called "the Park," at Exdale, was little better than a paddock, and instead of elegant fallow deer there were to be seen in it only half a dozen cows and an old pony. The latter was already in possession of Master Edward, his claims being stoutly contested by Alexia, and as passively acknowledged and submitted to by little Mary.

"It's a miniature picture of human life," I observed, as Oswald and I stood at the window and surveyed the group, "Mary representing the old school, and Alexia standing up for the rights of man—or rather of woman."

"In the present instance, Mary will be the winning horse," said Oswald; "I never yet knew a woman who gained the day by a war of independence."

"I don't know about that, Charley," said Florence, who had meanwhile joined us at the window; "I think I have heard of one Judith."

"Under correction." I ventured to remark, "Judith won the day less by resistance than by address."

"Just so," said Oswald; "if she had not known the art of making herself agreeable, she would never have brought home the head of Holofernes. And, see, it's just as I said it would be: Edward has vacated his seat in favour of Mary, and Alexia is left to go on foot. Capital lesson for you, Florry."

"A tame sort of conquest," she replied carelessly; she lets him lead the pony, as though she did not know how to hold the bridle. Alexia would have been half round the park by this time."

I glanced at the speaker and it seemed to me as though this little dialogue had given me the key to her character, one that disdained to lean on the strength of another, and would far rather suffer than submit.

We were summoned to dinner, the only other addition to our party being Wilfrid Knowles, who liked to be called "Father Wilfrid," and wore a Roman collar. Between him and Florence there seemed to exist a mutual interest based on conscious antagonism; he, stiff in his sense of sacerdotal superiority, she equally self-possessed in her audacious spirit of revolt.

"So Degg has done for himself at last," said Oswald, when preliminaries had been gone through, and everybody was feeling comfortable; it would prolong my life if I thought I should live to see that fellow get his deserts."

"Who is Degg and what has he done to do for himself I asked?" I inquired.

"I was telling you of him the other day: the editor of the *Western Censor*, and the greatest good-for-nothing in Berkshire. His Philippic, as he calls them, abusive as they are, have hitherto been so cleverly contrived as to escape legal chastisement; but in his last production, entitled 'The Australian Duke,' he has passed the boundary line, and Leven, at last has him fairly in his power, for he is bound to prosecute."

"What makes him so exceedingly savage with the duke?" I inquired.

"Oh," said Oswald, "he wanted to be returned member for Bradford at the last election, and Leven was supposed to have used his influence to save the borough from that disgrace."

"Besides which," added Knowles, "the Duke of Leven is a Christian, and Mr. Degg has an angry aversion to everything that savours of the faith."

"Really," said Florence, "I think you are all rather hard on poor

Degg; he writes extravagantly, as men of genius often do, and his sense of wrong and injustice is just like a fiery passion: but he cares for the working classes, and can't always control himself when he pleads their cause."

"Florry, don't talk nonsense," said her brother; Degg cares for the working classes just as I care for my ducks and chickens in my poultry-yard, which I care for extremely, with a view to my ultimate advantage."

"And what particular advantage do you think poor Degg will get from taking part with the weak against the strong?" said Florence.

"In the first place," said Oswald, he enjoys the sweets of notoriety, and the pleasant sensation of putting down his betters; and if Hapirock should ever again undertake the tinkering of our glorious constitution, I suspect Mr. Degg calculates on floating into parliament on the tide of universal suffrage."

"Well, so be it," said Florence, "worse men than he have before now sat in parliament."

"But, my dear Florence," said Mary, in a tone of remonstrance, "if he really is an infidel?"

"I don't see what right anyone has to say so; and, after all, as the word is commonly used, it's a relative term, and means simply people who don't believe exactly as much as we do ourselves. I dare say Mr. Aubrey would consider our best Oxford divines as hopeless infidels."

The blow was intended for Wilfrid, but he remained unscathed by it. "If Mr. Aubrey were to express such an opinion, it would not be far from the truth," he observed. "The Oxford of the present day is, unhappily, more than half infidel."

"Well, then, Mr. Knowles, on your own showing, poor Mr. Degg no more deserves to be sent to Coventry on that account than the most distinguished men of your own Alma Mater, so you are bound to judge him mercifully."

"She can hold her own pretty well, can't she?" said Oswald. "Take some champagne, Florry, and leave Degg to his doom. If there's justice in England he'll soon be in limbo."

"So you are going to Glenleven?" said Knowles, addressing me, by way of changing the subject; "I suppose it's your first visit?"

"Yes," I replied; ever since I've been in England, I've been so continually hearing of Glenleven, that I'm glad at last to satisfy my curiosity."

"It's a wonderful place, certainly," he observed; "I spent a week there last Lent, and enjoyed it immensely."

"Really, Mr. Knowles? Wasn't it rather a schismatical piece of enjoyment?" inquired Florence, "at least according to our Anglican notions?"

"No, indeed, Miss Oswald," said Knowles, who seemed to have an unflinching command of temper; "I, for one deeply deplore our unhappy separations."

Florence seemed to be considering how best to aim her weapon in retort, when I stepped in to rescue him from further badgering. "If you know Glenleven," I said, "you are probably acquainted with Leven's friend, the young German painter."

"Mr. Werner, you mean—Brother Norbert, as he is now called? yes, I know him very well."

"Of course we all know Mr. Werner," said Mary; "he was only an amateur painter, you know; in reality he was rather an important personage."

"How a man with his genius could go and bury it on the moors!" said Florence; it was an awful sacrifice."

"What a girl you are, with your everlasting genius," said Oswald; "I believe women think every man with a black beard is a genius."

"I never thought you one, Charley," said his incorrigible sister; "so I suppose your being fair accounts for it."

"Indeed, I hope he is not," said Mary; "geniuses seem to me to be always doing or saying something they'd better have left alone."

"One of Mary's home truths," said Oswald; "how d'ye like it, Florry?"

"There's a good deal of truth in the remark," said Wilfrid; "a genius is an erratic thing at best—much like a comet, as brilliant and as unsubstantial. For practical ends, a stable-lantern is infinitely more to the purpose."

"I suppose both comets and geniuses have their uses in our system." I observed, though everybody isn't sharp-sighted enough to discover it."

Florence gave me a quick glance of inspection, as though she might possibly some day or other find it worth her while to speak to me.

"The worst of it is," said Oswald, "that so many of your geniuses are just nothing but sky-rockets after all, and go out whilst you are staring at them."

"Well," said Florence, "sky-rockets are beautiful, and beauty is always of use; I appeal to Mr. Aubrey."

It struck me that she said this as it were to test me, and see what stuff I was made of. "To answer satisfactorily," I replied, "I fear I must be a bore, and ask you what you mean by beauty?"

"Well, what do you mean by it?"

"Suppose I were to call it the *splendour of goodness*?"

Ah! that will do famously," she replied; "if goodness is beauty, then beauty is goodness; so we conclude in favour of the sky-rockets."

Sad Sophistry, Miss Oswald," said Wilfrid Knowles, as he rose to open the door for the ladies. But he soon followed them, leaving Oswald and myself *tête-à-tête*.

Poor Oswald yawned as if relieved from a mental tension more or less irksome. "I suppose we must not grudge women the use of their tongues," he said, "though they talk sad nonsense with them. I always hold that what claws are to the lion and a beak to the eagle, that her tongue is to a woman."

THE *Kulturkampf* is bearing fruit in Germany. At the elections in 1871 there were only 180,000 votes for the socialists, in January 1877 there were upwards of 600,000.