

THE LADY OF GLENWITH GRANGE.

PROLOGUE TO THE FOURTH STORY.

My practice in the art of portrait-painting, if it has done nothing else, has at least fitted me to turn my talents (such as they are) to a great variety of uses. I have not only taken the likenesses of men, women, and children, but have also extended the range of my brush, under stress of circumstances, to horses, dogs, houses, and in one case even to a bull--the terror and glory of his parish, and the most truculent sitter I ever had. The beast was appropriately named "Thunder and Lightning," and was the property of a gentleman-farmer named Garthwaite, a distant connection of my wife's family.

How it was that I escaped being gored to death before I had finished my picture is more than I can explain to this day. "Thunder and Lightning" resented the very sight of me and my color-box, as if he viewed the taking of his likeness in the light of a personal insult. It required two men to coax him, while a third held him by a ring in his nostrils, before I could venture on beginning to work. Even then he always lashed his tail, and jerked his huge head, and rolled his fiery eyes with a devouring anxiety to have me on his horns for daring to sit down quietly and look at him. Never, I can honestly say, did I feel more heartily grateful for the blessings of soundness of limb and wholeness of skin, than when I had completed the picture of the bull!

One morning, when I had but little more than half done my unwelcome task, my friend and I were met on our way to the bull's stable by the farm bailiff, who informed us gravely that "Thunder and Lightning" was just then in such an especially surly state of temper as to render it quite unsafe for me to think of painting him. I looked inquiringly at Mr. Garthwaite, who smiled with an air of comic resignation, and said, "Very well, then, we have nothing for it but to wait till to-morrow. What do you say to a morning's fishing, Mr. Kerby, now that my bull's bad temper has given us a holiday?"

I replied, with perfect truth, that I knew nothing about fishing. But Mr. Garthwaite, who was as ardent an angler in his way as Izaak Walton himself, was not to be appeased even by the best of excuses. "It is never too late to learn," cried he. "I will make a fisherman of you in no time, if you will

only attend to my directions." It was impossible for me to make any more apologies, without the risk of appealing discourteous. So I thanked my host for his friendly intentions, and, with some secret misgivings, accepted the first fishing-rod that he put into my hands.

"We shall soon get there," said Mr. Garthwaite. "I am taking you to the best mill-stream in the neighborhood." It was all one to me whether we got there soon or late and whether the stream was good or bad. However, I did my best to conceal my unsportsman-like apathy; and tried to look quite happy and very impatient to begin, as we drew near to the mill, and heard louder and louder the gushing of many waters all round it.

Leading the way immediately to a place beneath the falling stream, where there was a deep, eddying pool, Mr. Garthwaite baited and threw in his line before I had fixed the joints of my fishing-rod. This first difficulty overcome, I involuntarily plunged into some excellent, but rather embarrassing, sport with my line and hook. I caught every one of my garments, from head to foot; I angled for my own clothes with the dexterity and success of Izaak Walton himself. I caught my hat, my jacket, my waistcoat, my trousers, my fingers, and my thumbs--some devil possessed my hook; some more than eel-like vitality twirled and twisted in every inch of my line. By the time my host arrived to assist me, I had attached myself to my fishing-rod, apparently for life. All difficulties yielded, however, to his patience and skill; my hook was baited for me, and thrown in; my rod was put into my hand; my friend went back to his place; and we began at last to angle in earnest.

We certainly caught a few fish (in my case, I mean, of course, that the fish caught themselves); but they were scanty in number and light in weight. Whether it was the presence of the miller's foreman--a gloomy personage, who stood staring disastrously upon us from a little flower-garden on the opposite bank--that cast adverse influence over our sport; or whether my want of faith and earnestness as an angler acted retributively on my companion as well as myself, I know not; but it is certain that he got almost as little reward for his skill as I got for my patience. After nearly two hours of intense expectation on my part, and intense angling on his, Mr. Garthwaite jerked his line out of the water in a rage, and bade me follow him to another place, declaring that the stream must have been netted by poachers in the night, who had taken all the large fish away with them, and had thrown in the small ones to grow until their next visit. We moved away, further down the bank, leaving the imperturbable foreman still in the flower-garden, staring at us speechlessly on our departure, exactly as he had already stared at us on our approach.

"Stop a minute," said Mr. Garthwaite suddenly, after we had walked some distance in silence by the side of the stream, "I have an idea. Now we are out for a day's angling, we won't be balked. Instead of trying the water here again, we will go where I know, by experience, that the fishing is excellent. And what is more, you shall be introduced to a lady whose appearance is sure to interest you, and whose history, I can tell you beforehand, is a very remarkable one."

"Indeed," I said. "May I ask in what way?"

"She is connected," answered Mr. Garthwaite, "with an extraordinary story, which relates to a family once settled in an old house in this neighborhood. Her name is Miss Welwyn; but she is less formally known among the poor people about here, who love her dearly, and honor her almost superstitiously, as the Lady of Glenwith Grange. Wait till you have seen her before you ask me to say anything more. She lives in the strictest retirement; I am almost the only visitor who is admitted. Don't say you had rather not go in. Any friend of mine will be welcome at the Grange (the scene of the story, remember), for my sake--the more especially because I have never abused my privilege of introduction. The place is not above two miles from here, and the stream (which we call, in our county dialect, Glenwith Beck) runs through the ground."

As we walked on, Mr. Garthwaite's manner altered. He became unusually silent and thoughtful. The mention of Miss Welwyn's name had evidently called up some recollections which were not in harmony with his every-day mood. Feeling that to talk to him on any indifferent subject would be only to interrupt his thoughts to no purpose, I walked by his side in perfect silence, looking out already with some curiosity and impatience for a first view of Glenwith Grange. We stopped at last close by an old church, standing on the outskirts of a pretty village. The low wall of the churchyard was bounded on one side by a plantation, and was joined by a park paling, in which I noticed a small wicket-gate. Mr. Garthwaite opened it, and led me along a shrubbery path, which conducted us circuitously to the dwelling-house.

We had evidently entered by a private way, for we approached the building by the back. I looked up at it curiously, and saw standing at one of the windows on the lower floor a little girl watching us as we advanced. She seemed to be about nine or ten years old. I could not help stopping a moment to look up at her, her clear complexion and her long dark hair were so beautiful. And yet there was something in her expression--a dimness and vacancy in her large eyes--a changeless, unmeaning smile on her parted lips--which seemed to jar with all that was naturally attractive in her face;

which perplexed, disappointed, and even shocked me, though I hardly knew why. Mr. Garthwaite, who had been walking along thoughtfully, with his eyes on the ground, turned back when he found me lingering behind him; looked up where I was looking; started a little, I thought; then took my arm, whispered rather impatiently, "Don't say anything about having seen that poor child when you are introduced to Miss Welwyn; I'll tell you why afterward," and led me round hastily to the front of the building.

It was a very dreary old house, with a lawn in front thickly sprinkled with flower-beds, and creepers of all sorts climbing in profusion about the heavy stone porch and the mullions of the lower windows. In spite of these prettiest of all ornaments clustering brightly round the building--in spite of the perfect repair in which it was kept from top to bottom--there was something repellent to me in the aspect of the whole place: a deathly stillness hung over it, which fell oppressively on my spirits. When my companion rang the loud, deep-toned bell, the sound startled me as if we had been committing a crime in disturbing the silence. And when the door was opened by an old female servant (while the hollow echo of the bell was still vibrating in the air), I could hardly imagine it possible that we should be let in. We were admitted, however, without the slightest demur. I remarked that there was the same atmosphere of dreary repose inside the house which I had already observed, or rather felt, outside it. No dogs barked at our approach--no doors banged in the servants' offices--no heads peeped over the banisters--not one of the ordinary domestic consequences of an unexpected visit in the country met either eye or ear. The large shadowy apartment, half library, half breakfast-room, into which we were ushered, was as solitary as the hall of entrance; unless I except such drowsy evidences of life as were here presented to us in the shape of an Angola cat and a gray parrot--the first lying asleep in a chair, the second sitting ancient, solemn, and voiceless, in a large cage.

Mr. Garthwaite walked to the window when we entered, without saying a word. Determining to let his taciturn humor have its way, I asked him no questions, but looked around the room to see what information it would give me (and rooms often do give such information) about the character and habits of the owner of the house.

Two tables covered with books were the first objects that attracted me. On approaching them, I was surprised to find that the all-influencing periodical literature of the present day--whose sphere is already almost without limit; whose readers, even in our time, may be numbered by millions--was entirely unrepresented on Miss Welwyn's table. Nothing modern, nothing contemporary, in the world of books, presented itself. Of all the volumes

beneath my hand, not one bore the badge of the circulating library, or wore the flaring modern livery of gilt cloth. Every work that I took up had been written at least fifteen or twenty years since. The prints hanging round the walls (toward which I next looked) were all engraved from devotional subjects by the old masters; the music-stand contained no music of later date than the compositions of Haydn and Mozart. Whatever I examined besides, told me, with the same consistency, the same strange tale. The owner of these possessions lived in the by-gone time; lived among old recollections and old associations--a voluntary recluse from all that was connected with the passing day. In Miss Welwyn's house, the stir, the tumult, the "idle business" of the world evidently appealed in vain to sympathies which grew no longer with the growing hour.

As these thoughts were passing through my mind, the door opened and the lady herself appeared.

She looked certainly past the prime of life; longer past it, as I afterward discovered, than she really was. But I never remember, in any other face, to have seen so much of the better part of the beauty of early womanhood still remaining, as I saw in hers. Sorrow had evidently passed over the fair, calm countenance before me, but had left resignation there as its only trace. Her expression was still youthful--youthful in its kindness and its candor especially. It was only when I looked at her hair, that was now growing gray--at her wan, thin hands--at the faint lines marked round her mouth--at the sad serenity of her eyes, that I fairly detected the mark of age; and, more than that, the token of some great grief, which had been conquered, but not banished. Even from her voice alone--from the peculiar uncertainty of its low, calm tones when she spoke--it was easy to conjecture that she must have passed through sufferings, at some time of her life, which had tried to the quick the noble nature that they could not subdue.

Mr. Garthwaite and she met each other almost like brother and sister; it was plain that the friendly intimacy between them had been of very long duration. Our visit was a short one. The conversation never advanced beyond the commonplace topics suited to the occasion. It was, therefore, from what I saw, and not from what I heard, that I was enabled to form my judgment of Miss Welwyn. Deeply as she had interested me--far more deeply than I at all know how to explain in fitting words--I cannot say that I was unwilling to depart when we rose to take leave. Though nothing could be more courteous and more kind than her manner toward me during the whole interview, I could still perceive that it cost her some effort to repress in my presence the shades of sadness and reserve which seemed often ready to steal over her. And I must confess that when I once or twice heard the

half-sigh stifled, and saw the momentary relapse into thoughtfulness suddenly restrained, I felt an indefinable awkwardness in my position which made me ill at ease; which set me doubting whether, as a perfect stranger, I had done right in suffering myself to be introduced where no new faces could awaken either interest or curiosity; where no new sympathies could ever be felt, no new friendships ever be formed.

As soon as we had taken leave of Miss Welwyn, and were on our way to the stream in her grounds, I more than satisfied Mr. Garthwaite that the impression the lady had produced on me was of no transitory kind, by overwhelming him with questions about her--not omitting one or two incidental inquiries on the subject of the little girl whom I had seen at the back window. He only rejoined that his story would answer all my questions; and that he would begin to tell it as soon as we had arrived at Glenwith Beck, and were comfortably settled to fishing.

Five minutes more of walking brought us to the bank of the stream, and showed us the water running smoothly and slowly, tinged with the softest green luster from the reflections of trees which almost entirely arched it over. Leaving me to admire the view at my ease, Mr. Garthwaite occupied himself with the necessary preparations for angling, baiting my hook as well as his own. Then, desiring me to sit near him on the bank, he at last satisfied my curiosity by beginning his story. I shall relate it in his own manner, and, as nearly as possible, in his own words.