
Macmillan's Magazine, Volume 48

Morley John

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Author: Morley John

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MACMILLAN'S MAGAZINE.

MAY, 1883.

THE WIZARD'S SON.

CHAPTER XIX.

It would be difficult to describe the sensations with which Lord Erradeen found himself set at liberty, and on his way back, as he thought at first, to the easy mind, the quiet life, the undisturbed and undisturbing circumstances of his previous existence. He scarcely seemed to breathe till he had crossed the Border, and was outside of Scotland, feeling during that time, like a fugitive in full flight, incapable of thinking of anything except that he had eluded his pursuers and had escaped all possible risks and apprehensions. His trial had lasted nights and days, he could not tell how many. Now for the first time he had the calm, the leisure, the sense of safety, which were necessary for a review of all that he had gone through; he had seen the moon light up the pale line of the sea at Berwick, where Tweed falls into the waste of water, and the lights of Newcastle, turning into a shining highway the dark crescent of the Tyne, and then as the train pounded along through the darkness, with the throb and swing of life and speed, through the silence and night, his faculties seemed to come back to him, and his judgment to be restored. Through what a strange episode of existence had he passed since he saw the lights curve round the sides of

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that river, and the great bridge striding over above the roofs of the sleeping town! And now he had escaped—had he escaped? He had time at least and quiet to think it all out and see where he stood.

He had been for nearly three weeks altogether on Loch Houran, during which time he had gone through the severest mental struggle he had ever known. It seemed years to him now since the moment when he had been suddenly confronted by the strange and mysterious personage who had assumed a tone towards him and claimed a submission which Walter had refused to yield. That this man's appearance had awakened in him a sensation of overwhelming excitement mingled with fear, that he had come in an unaccountable way, that he had been seen apparently by no one in the old castle but himself, that nobody had betrayed any consciousness of knowing who he was or how he was there, and yet that he had come and gone with a perfect acquaintance and familiarity with the place, the family, the estates, the story of the race; these were details which, with a tremulous sensation in his mind, as of a panic nearly over, he gathered together to examine and find out, if possible, what they meant. He had been unable during the time that followed, when he had taken refuge in Auchnasheen, to exercise any discriminating faculty, or use his own

B

judgment upon these facts. At the moment of seeing and hearing occurrences which disturb the mind, reason is hampered in its action. Afterwards you may ask yourself, have you really heard and seen? but not when a definite appearance is before your eyes, or likely to re-appear at any moment, and a distinct voice in your ears. The actual then overmasters the soul; the meaning of it must be got at later. He had seen this man whose faculties and pretensions were alike so extraordinary, he had listened to the claim he made, he had been bidden to yield up his individual will and to obey under threatening of evil if he refused, and promises of pleasure and comfort if he consented. And Walter had said "No." He would have said No had an angel out of heaven appeared before him, making the same demand. He had been subjected to this strange trial at the very height of independence and conscious power, when he had newly begun to feel his own importance, and to enjoy its advantages. It had seemed to him absurd, incredible that such a claim should be made, even while the personality of the strange claimant had filled him with a sensation of terror, which he summoned all his forces to struggle against, without any success. He had been like two men during that struggle. One a craven, eager to fly, willing to promise anything might he but escape; the other struggling passicately against the stranger and refusing—refusing, night and day. When he went to Achnasheen the character of the conflict within him had become more remarkable still. The man who claimed his obedience was no longer visible, but he had been rent asunder between the power of his own resisting spirit and some strange influence which never slackened, which seemed to draw him towards one point with a force which his unwillingness to yield made into absolute agony. Still he had resisted, always resisted, though without strength to escape, until the moment had come when by sudden inspiration of natural justice and pity

he had broken loose—by that, and by the second soul struggling in him and with him, by Oona's hand holding him and her heart sustaining him. This was the history of these two tremendous weeks, the most eventful in his life. And now he had escaped out of the neighbourhood in which he could feel no safety, out of the influence which had moved him so strangely, and was able to think and ask himself what it was.

The night was dark, and, as has been said, the moon was on the wane. She shed a pale mist of light over the dark country, where now and then there broke out the red glow of pit or furnace fires. The train swung onward with a rock of movement, a ploughing and plunging, the dim light in the roof swaying, the two respectable fellow-passengers each in his corner, amidst his wraps, slumbering uneasily. Walter had no inclination to sleep. He was indeed feverishly awake; all his faculties in wild activity; his mind intensely conscious and living. What did it all mean? The events which had affected him to a passionate height of feeling with which his previous life had been entirely unacquainted—was it possible that there was any other way of accounting for them? To look himself in the face as it were, and confess now at a distance from these influences that the man to whom he had spoken in the language of to-day was one of the fabulous men in whom the ignorant believe, his own early ancestor—the still existing, undying founder of the house, was, he said to himself, impossible. It could not be; anything else—any hypothesis was more credible than this. There was no place for the supernatural in the logic of life as he had learned it. Now that he had recovered control of himself, it was time for him to endeavour to make out a reason for the hallucination in which he had almost lost himself and his sober senses. And accordingly he began to do it; and this is what he said to himself. His imagination had

been excited by all that had happened to him; the extraordinary change in his circumstances which seemed almost miraculous, and then the succession of incidents, the strange half-communications that had been made to him, the old, ruinous house in which he had been compelled to shut himself up, the wonderful solitude, full of superstitious suggestions, into which he had been plunged. All these details had prepared his mind for something—he knew not what. He felt a hot flush of shame and mortification come over him as he remembered how easily, notwithstanding all his better knowledge, he, a man of his century, acquainted with all the philosophies of the day, had been overcome by these influences. He had expected something out of nature, something terrible and wonderful. And when such a state of mind is reached, it is certain (he thought) that something will arise to take advantage of it. Probably all these effects had been calculated upon by the individual, whoever he was, who haunted Kinloch Houran to excite and exploit these terrors. Who was he? Even now, so far out of his reach, so emancipated from his influence that he could question and examine it, Walter felt a certain giddiness come over his spirit at this thought, and was glad that one of his fellow-passengers stirred and woke, and made a shivering remark, How cold it was, before he again composed himself to sleep. It was very cold. There was an icy chill in the air which penetrated through the closed windows. But nothing else could come in—nothing else! and it could be but a sudden reflection from his past excitement that made Walter feel for a moment as if another figure sat opposite to him, gazing at him with calm sarcasm, and eyes that had a smile in them. When the giddiness passed off, and he looked again, there was (of course) no one opposite to him, only the dark blue cushions of the unoccupied place. Who was this man then who held a sort of court in

Kinloch Houran, and demanded obedience from its proprietor? He was no creature of the imagination. Excited nerves and shaken health might indeed have prepared the mind of the visitor for the effect intended to be produced upon him; but they could not have created the central figure—the powerful personality from whom such influence flowed. Who was he? The circumstances were all favourable for a successful imposture, or even a mystification. Suppose it to be some member of the family aggrieved by the promotion of a far-off branch, some dependent with so much knowledge of the secrets of the race as to be able to play upon the imagination of a novice, with mysterious threats and promises; perhaps, who could tell, a monomaniac, the leading idea of whose delusion was to take this character upon him? Walter's breast lightened a little as he made out one by one these links of explanation. It was characteristic of his time, and the liberality of mind with which modern thought abjures the idea of absolute imposture, that the sudden suggestion of a monomaniac gave a great relief and comfort to him. That might explain all—a man of superior powers crazed in this point, who might have convinced himself that he was the person he claimed to be, and that it was the interest of the family he had at heart. Such a being, acquainted with all the mysterious passages and hiding places that exist in such old houses, able to appear suddenly from a secret door or sliding panel, to choose moments when nature herself added to the sense of mystery, hours of twilight and darkness when the half-seen is more alarming than anything fully revealed—this would explain so much that the young man for the moment drew a long breath of relief, and felt half-consciously that he could afford to ignore the rest.

And in the sense of this relief he fell asleep, and dreamed that he stood again at Mrs. Forrester's door in the Isle, and saw the light on the old tower