

The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

The Ship's Doctor.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT.

The Gushat-house stood, as its name denotes, at the angle where two roads met. These were pleasant country roads both—one, shadowed by trees here and there, threading through rich and broad fields, led up into the wealthy inland country, the rich heart of Fife; the other, with scattered cottages, instead of the trees, growing after a while closer and closer together, was the straight road to the "town," and was open to the sea-view and the sea breezes. The town was the little town of Anstruther on the Fife coast; the sea was the Firth of Forth, half ocean half river; the time was fifty years ago. In this locality, and at that distant period, happened the very brief and simple story I have now to tell.

In the Gushat-house lived Mrs. Sinclair, and Nora, her daughter. The house was, in its humble way, a kind of jointure-house, though it belonged to no potent family, or county magnate. It had been for generations—since it was built indeed—the refuge of one widow or other, who had sufficient interest in the place or some connection with the soil. The present occupant had been the wife of the minister, and was the daughter of one of the smaller proprietors in the neighborhood. She was a woman whom the country did not disdain to visit and honor; but yet she was not rich nor a great lady in her own person. In those days life was simpler, more aristocratic perhaps, but less luxurious and far more homely. Nowadays the coast-towns in Fife are unendurable. In summer they are nothing but great receptacles of herrings, not in their silvery state as they come in glistening shoals in the boats from sea, but in the hideous course of economical preservation and traffic. Salt and smells, and busy women armed with knives, operating upon the once harmless drave, line all the stony little streets, and send up to heaven an unsavory testimony. You breathe herrings, if you are so unwise as to trust yourself in the season on that too prolific coast. But it was not so fifty years ago. Then the herrings came in to be eaten, not to be salted down in barrels, and they had not got the upper hand of everything. There was no lucrative trade going on, no salt and pungent harvest-time of the sea, but the homely winds were passable even in summer, though cleanliness was far from perfect. In place of the herrings there was the whale fishery, which sent out its ships periodically, and brought back with corresponding regularity the sailor-fishermen to their families when the expedition of the year was over. It was a trade more picturesque, more dangerous, and less disagreeable, at least to the bystander. Nobody could refuse to be interested in the solemn ships going forth to their struggle with the ice and the storms, and the monsters of the sea; nor in their exciting return, when the well-known rig would slowly in sight on the broad Firth, under eager telescopes which reported the signs she carried—the jubilant garland on the mast, sign of a successful fishing, or the melancholy flag half-mast high, which thrilled the whole town with alarm, no one knowing whose son or husband, or what family's father it might be. An interest almost more exciting, and certainly more frequent, would thrill through the little salt-water place when a gale came on suddenly at some time when "our boats" were at sea. So that the "town" was not without its points of human interest, before the herring-barrels, and hideous trade consequent thereupon, had appeared in the stony little streets.

And to Nora Sinclair it was a very interesting place. She was fond of the fish-folk, whom she had known all her life, and who for their part were fond of her. She and her mother were local princesses, as it were, in the parish; for the reigning minister was unmarried and unsympathetic. In those days, before the advent of King Herring, even the position of the minister was different. There was no dissent in the place except the little Episcopal church, "English chapel" as it was called, to which some of the adjacent gentry came, and which everybody regarded with half-indulgent half-contemptuous tolerance. It was tacitly admitted as a kind of necessity that the fine people should frequent the little conventicle; the common people granted them the indulgence with a half smile at their weakness of caste and training, but occupied the parish church themselves in close masses, filling the pews with characteristic rugged faces, and the air with a faint breath of fish and tar and salt water, the inalienable odor of a seafaring population. Nora Sinclair was in most things a young woman of refined tastes; but she had never had her eyes or her senses opened to these little imperfections. She took all the interest of a daughter of the place in its vicissitudes, and knew the boats and their crews, and was as anxious when it blew a gale as if she herself knew what it was to venture her heart on the dangerous chances of the sea. Her mother and she lived a not uncheerful life at the Gushat-house, metaphorically placid as it was, with one eye on the country and another on the sea. The families about were many of them connections of Mrs. Sinclair, who was, as has been said, of a very good stock—old Auchtermorie's daughter; and those who were not connections were old friends. The mother and daughter were not left alone when they had to change to the wistful widow's refuge, from the manse. Kind friends and cheerful company surrounded them. In the depth of winter, when the Firth was often black with storms, and the weather too gloomy for enjoyment, the two ladies would go across in the ferry-boat from Kinloch to Edinburgh, not without some trembling for the dangers of the passage, and settle themselves there for a few months, during which time Nora would have her gaieties, and be taken to a few balls, and have her share in the pleasures of her youth. Altogether it was a very endurable life.

It was in Edinburgh she first met with Willy Erskine, though he was a neighbor at home. He was one of the Erskines of Drumthwacket, of as good a family as any in Fife. One of Mrs. Sinclair's perplexities, of as good a family as any in Fife, was the Erskines and the Auchtermories were connected, but she never succeeded in clearing it up. That there was some connection she was sure, and Willy was very welcome when he paid those frequent visits in Heriot Row, where they were living, and sat so long that Nora grew tired of him, though he was a handsome young fellow. "Poor callant, so far away from home, what would he do but come and see me, that am his mother's near connection?" Mrs. Sinclair would say. And if she could have been angry with her Nora, it would have been for this cause.

"Not so very near, mamma," Nora would answer. "And if all our connections were to come as often—"

"They all show a very proper feeling, my dear," was her mother's reply; and nothing could be more true. Cousins to the fifth degree always turned up to take care of Nora at her balls—to dance with her when there—to cheer her mother's solitude when she was gone, according to their several ages

and sexes. The Sinclairs were a very well-connected family, and it was a circumstance which added much to the comfort of their life.

As for Willy Erskine, he was a very nice young fellow, everybody allowed. He was not rich to be sure. The Drumthwacket household is known not to be a rich one, and he is the third son. But he was doing what it was the proper thing for the third son to do. It had not been his vocation to go to India, like his second and fourth brothers, though, no doubt, that would have been the best way; and New Zealand and Australia had not been discovered, so to speak, in those days. His eldest brother was at the Bar, and Johnnie, the fifth, was to be the clergyman of the family; so that Willy's lot was clear of a naturally scientific turn of mind. He was pursuing his medical studies at Edinburgh University during those years when Nora and her mother came in the winter to Heriot Row. In summer it was quite a practicable thing to walk from Drumthwacket, which was only sixteen miles off, down to Anstruther on one pretense or other—an expedition which made it quite natural as well as necessary to "look in" at the Gushat-house somewhere near the time of the early dinner. The fare on Mrs. Sinclair's table was homely, but it never occurred to her to grumble at the frequent visitor, or put on company punctilios, or even a fresh table-cloth for Willy. The latter was a pleasant young fellow, the population of the Gushat-house were always very easy in their minds; for no lady in Fife had a better stock of "napery," and none were more delicately, femininely alive to the beauties of clean linen. Besides which everybody in those days washed at home, and clean table-cloths cost nothing—a matter of primitive luxury unknown in our days. Young Erskine would look in, and nobody was otherwise than pleased to see him; other people, too, looked in on other days. Sometimes there would be two or three strangers equally unexpected and welcome at the widow's table. There was glorious fish, fresh from the sea—cod with great milk-white flakes, and the delicious haddock of the Firth, which cost next to nothing, to take the edge off the wholesome appetites of these young people; and savory old Scotch dishes such as exist no more—Scotch collops, brown and fragrant; chickens, which were not called chickens, but "hens;" dainty curries, in which the homely rural gentry, with sons and brothers by the score in India, were as great critics as the old Indians themselves. To the board thus spread the country neighbors were always kindly welcome; and Mrs. Sinclair made his appearance. If Nora was more observant, she was also more tolerant than she had been in Edinburgh. She did not even seem to dislike it much when chance brought her in contact with the young student among the rocks, as sometimes happened. Though that age was not so advanced as our own, it was still possible, even at so rudimentary an epoch, to make good use of the sea-coast, and the marine creatures which the young man was studying to furnish such encounters. He called them by their Latin names ther such encounters. He walked with Nora up to the Gushat-house, and Mrs. Sinclair respected his habits of research. "It's little good he'll get out of the tangle on the rocks," she would say, "but it shows a diligent mind." At which praise Willy would blush and Nora smile.

But there was no haste, no rush upon the inevitable, no rash effort to put it to the touch, to win or lose it all. He would have lost his love altogether had he been precipitate. Nora was the only child of her mother, who was a widow. She had tender love to guard her, and full freedom to do as she pleased. She was the favorite of all the fish-folk, the beauty of the town, admired, imitated, caressed, and followed wherever she went. The Gushat-house was the cheeriest little house in all the country side, and Mrs. Sinclair was the most indulgent mother; naturally, therefore, Nora had no wish, not the most distant inclination, to sacrifice all this to become any man's wife. Love lays hold upon some people with a violent hand, but with others has to go softly, and eschew all turbulence. Nora began to like young Erskine's society. She began to feel a certain lightness diffuse itself over her heart, when she saw him coming down the long country road, crossing the shadows of the trees. When winter came, and these same trees were bare, and the journey to Heriot Row drew near, it was a pleasure to her to remember that Erskine was already there. Not that she went so far as to form a good resolution to be kinder to him, to permit his attendance more willingly. She was only pleased to think that he would be at hand to be snubbed or encouraged as the humor might seize her—a very improper spirit, as the youthful reader will perceive. But Nora was far from being a perfect young woman. Thus Willy himself, though he was deeply in earnest, was aware that there was no hurry. If any competitor should appear, ready to carry her off suddenly, then Willy Erskine would wake up too, and fly, violent and desperate to the assault. But no such catastrophe was threatening. Nora, everybody said, was "fancy-free." Even her saucy sallies, her little caprices proved this. Her lovers were her friends, in a quaint, rural sort of way. She did not wish to cast any of them from the latter eminence by regarding them in the former capacity. She might go on wandering through the metaphorical forest for years, some people said, and take the crooked stick at the end. Whether he was the crooked stick or not, Willy Erskine, like a wise general, kept a wary eye on her tactics, and held himself ready to take advantage of any weakening in her defenses. It had begun years ago, when they were boy and girl; it might last till they were middle-aged for anything that could be said to the contrary. He was always at Nora's disposal, to do anything she chose to ask him, and she was always friendly to Willy, ready to stand up for him when he was absent, and to give him the most solemn good advice when he permitted her the opportunity. Nora might have been his grandmother, to judge by the prudent counsel she gave him, and would try his devotion the next moment by laying upon him the most frivolous and troublesome commissions. Thus the time went on imperceptibly, marking its progress on these two at least by no remarkable events. Nora was bridesmaid so often to her youthful friends that she began to declare loudly that she had foretold her own luck and would never be a bride—but without any sort of faith in her own prediction. Yet, though this state of things was a very pleasant one, it was a necessity that, one time or other, it should come to an end.

The end was brought about, as it happened, by another event, of great importance to young Erskine, and in which Nora and her mother, as in duty bound, took a lively interest. The Willy's professional studies came to a conclusion, and the ladies went, well pleased to witness the curious ceremonial at which he was "capped," as it is called—the outward sign and token of his having attained the dignity of M. D. He had taken of his having attained with credit, and his friends were passed his examinations with a little party of Fife-folk at Heriot Row. The good people went to tea and supper, and made one substantial but light, and one still more substantial and very

heavy, meal. Then the health of the young doctor was drunk with kindly enthusiasm. "Willy, take you my advice and get a wife next," said one of the genial guests, and the suggestion was received with general applause.

"A doctor without a wife is like rigging without a ship," said another adviser. "There's two professions that must aye have the ballast of a petticoat. As for a soldier, like your brother Sandy, he's better without one, if he could be brought to think it; and John will be laid, and he can take his time. But a minister and a doctor have no choice. You'll ask us to your wedding next, if you'll be guided by me."

"What Captain Maitland says is very true," said Mrs. Sinclair; "a doctor's never well received in families till he's a married man. You're but young, and there's no hurry except for that. When I was a young woman myself, and needing doctors, not even a family connection would have led me to call in a man that was without a wife."

"Here's a man that has no mind to be without a wife," cried Willy. Perhaps he was a little excited with drinking his own health, or some one else's. I wish it only depended on me—"

"You can but try," said one, putting him on the shoulder. "Faint heart never won fair lady," said another. "I would not wonder if it was all settled a year ago!" said a third, and various looks, some veiled, some openly significant, were turned upon the corner where, amid a little knot of girls Nora sat apart. It was no revelation to Nora; but the thought of being thus openly indicated set her pride up in arms. She to marry Willy Erskine for any reason whatsoever, except her mistress's grace and pleasure? She to take him because he was a doctor and wanted a wife? She had to dance the first reel with him, when the room was cleared after supper, and Mrs. Sinclair went to the piano—partly because he was the hero of the occasion and she the daughter of the house, partly because they were such old friends; but she would scarcely grant the young fellow a look, even when her hand was in his in the pretty, animated dance. And Willy, in his excitement held that soft hand longer, and clasped it closer than was at all needful. Nora's girlish temper blazed up; but he could not see it, the foolish boy. His own heat and the pleasant intoxication of all those friendly plaudits and flattering good wishes, the seduction of the moment when all were gone but himself, and the careful mistress of the house had begun to put away the remnants of the feast and lock up her "garde-robe," were too much for him. Willy was so far left to himself as to arrest Nora in the hall when she had said good-night to the last guest. He was by way of leaving himself, when he stopped her and took her hand. "Say a kind word to me, Nora," he cried, drawing her into the dimly-lighted little room behind, which was called the library. Mrs. Sinclair was in the dining-room close by, with her confidential handmaiden putting away the things. They could hear her voice where they stood, and there was no harm in this little chance interview. "Say a kind word to me, Nora," he pleaded; "you know how fond I am of you. I've never thought of another since I was a boy at school. I've looked forward to this for years and years."

What have you looked forward to, Mr. Erskine?" said Nora, with the insolence of power.

"Nora—Nora, don't speak like that!" cried the young man. "I'm not worth it, but you must take me—you know you must take me; you're all the world to me. What do I care for my degree or anything else but for you? Say you'll take a poor fellow, Nora. You know you are all the world to me."

"Indeed I know nothing of the kind," said Nora. "I am very sleepy, and I don't care much about your degree. Must take you, indeed! I never do anything that I must do. What with their toasts, and their talk, and their nonsense they've turned your head. Good night."

And she went away from him, while he stood and looked after her stupefied. "Nora," he said, in a voice of such pain that Mrs. Sinclair heard, and left the things on the table. She came in while Nora stood still, haughty and offended, at the door. The mother saw at once what was the matter. She thought it was a lover's quarrel, and she saw there had been enough of it for the night. I thought you had gone with the Lindsays, Willy," looking at him in her motherly way, "and you must be wearied and fit for your bed. What's Nora making her little moue at now? But never mind her, my man; to-morrow's a new day."

"Yes, to-morrow's a new day," cried Willy. "I'll take no thought of what I've heard to-night. To-morrow I'm coming back."

And with that he rushed away. As for Nora, she flew upstairs, and went to bed, that she might not come in for that little sermon which was on her mother's lips. When she had shut herself into her own room she had a good cry. She had never had told any one the reason of her perversity. She was angry with herself and Willy, and the guests who had put such nonsense in his head, and all the world. Must take him very likely? If she, Nora Sinclair, ever had anything to say to a man who came to her with such a plea! She paused on the verge of a petulant vow. Perhaps, on the whole, it would be as well not to make any oaths on the subject. And, luckily, at that moment she fell asleep, which was the easiest way out of the dilemma. To-morrow would be, as Mrs. Sinclair said, a new day.

But, unfortunately, to-morrow is not always a new day. When Nora got up on the chilly spring morning she was, on the whole, rather more irritated and petulant than she had been the evening before. As for Mrs. Sinclair, it was her fixed opinion that the young folk should be left to themselves to make up their little matters. "They know each other's ways best," she said; "older folk do more harm than good when they interfere. So when Willy came in pale and breathless, the kind woman withdrew herself that the two might get over undisturbed. It was not a new day for young Erskine any more than it was for Nora. It was a feverish supplement to last night. He had not perhaps gone to bed calmly after all his excitement as a girl has to do. There was a rare-supper somewhere to which his friends had dragged him, and where probably Willy's brain had been heated by strong drinks. The morning found him parched with mental impatience and suspense, as well as with a certain degree of bodily feverishness and misery. It seemed to his heated eyes as if Nora meant to jilt him after all his devotion. He swore a big oath to himself as he rushed along to Heriot Row. "If she'll not take me now, after all," said Willy, "by—by—I'll go off to sea, and I'll never be heard of more."

In this natural mood the two met. It was not an amiable interview on either side. The young doctor took up precisely the line of argument which was most prejudicial to him. He pleaded his faithful services, his devotion which had lasted for years. He established a claim upon Nora, which she was not the girl to put up with. And she, on her side, scornfully denied any claim he had upon her. "It is that what you call love," said the indignant maiden, "to follow a girl about whether she likes or not, and then to tell her she must take you to pay for it." This, alas, was not the way of settling their affairs.

(To be Continued.)