A COUNTRY GENTLEMAN AND HIS FAMILY. IN THREE VOLUMES, VOL. III

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BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

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IN THREE VOLUMES

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A COUNTRY GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER I.

NEXT day Mr. Longstaffe called upon Mrs. Warrender, nominally about the alterations that had to be made in her house, but really with objects much more important. He made notes scrupulously of what she wanted, and hoped that she would not allow anything to be neglected that was necessary for her comfort. When these necessary preliminaries were over, there was a pause. He remained silent with an expectant air, waiting to be questioned, and though she had resolved if possible to refrain from doing so, the restriction was more than her faculties could bear.

"My son tells me," she said, as indifferently as possible, "that there is a great deal going on between him and you."

"Naturally," cried Mr. Longstaffe, with a certain heat of indignation. "He is making a marriage which is not at

all a common kind of marriage, and yet he would have liked it to be without any settlements at all."

"He could not wish anything that was not satisfactory to Lady Markland."

"Do you think so? then I must undeceive you. He would have liked Lady Markland to give herself to him absolutely with no precautions, no restrictions."

"Mr. Longstaffe, Theo is very much in love. He has always been very sensitive: he cannot bear (I suppose) mixing up business matters, which he hates, with——"

"It is all very well for him to hate business, though between you and me, if you will allow me to say so, I think it very silly. Ladies may entertain such sentiments, but a man ought to know better. If you will believe me, he wants to marry her as if she were sixteen and had not a penny! To make her Mrs. Theodore Warrender and take her home to his own house!"

"What should he do else? is not that the natural thing that every man wishes to do?"

"Yes, if he marries a girl of sixteen without a penny, as I said. Mrs. Warrender, I know you are full of sense. Perhaps you will be able to put it before him in a better light. When a man marries a lady, with an established position of her own like Lady Markland, and a great many responsibilities, especially when she is a sort of queen

mother and has a whole noble family to be accountable to——"

"I do not wonder that Theo should be impatient, Mr. Longstaffe; all this must be terrible to him, in the midst of his—— Why should not they marry first, and then these things will arrange themselves?"

"Marry first! and leave her altogether unsecured."

"I hope you know that my son is a man of honour, Mr. Longstaffe."

"My dear madam, we have nothing to do with men of honour in the law. I felt sure that you would understand at least. Suppose we had left Miss Minnie dependent upon the honour (though I don't doubt it at all) of the Thynne family."

"I don't mean in respect to money," said Mrs. Warrender, with a slight flush. "He will not interfere with her money, of that I am certain."

"No: only with herself; and she has been left the control of everything; and she must be free to administer her son's property and look after his interests. If you will allow me to say it, Mrs. Warrender, Lady Markland is a much better man of business than Theo."

Mr. Longstaffe had known Theo all his life, and had never addressed him otherwise than by that name, but it seemed an over-familiarity, a want of respect, even a sign

of contempt in the position in which Theo now stood. She replied with a little offence:

"That is very possible. He has had little experience, and he is a scholar, not a person of business. But why should the marriage be delayed? This is the worst moment for them both. I know my son, Mr. Longstaffe. All this frets him beyond description now; but when the uncertainty is over, and all these negotiations, everything will come round. He will never interfere or prevent her from doing what is necessary for her son. When they are once married all will go well."

This was a long speech for Mrs. Warrender, and she made it with interruptions, with trepidation, not quite so sure perhaps of her own argument as she had thought she was. The lawyer looked at her with a kind of respectful contempt.

"There may be a certain justice in what you say, that this is the worst moment: but I for one could never agree to anything so unbusiness-like as you seem to suggest. Marriage first, and business afterwards—no, no—and then there is the little boy. You would not have him sent off to nurse while his mother goes upon her honeymoon. Poor little fellow, so devoted as she was to him before!"

"A second marriage," said Mrs. Warrender, subdued, "can never be so simple, so easy, as one in which there are no complications."