

# A WILD OLIVE-TREE

MRS. FLANDERS was in her first youth when she lost her husband. With the lapse of years, instead of a sorrow he became a pleasant memory. She remained in seclusion for awhile, and then, after a long season of travel with her boy, and of life afterward, while he was in college, in a villa over terraced gardens where the shadow of the ilex-trees made brighter the sunshine of the orange, where simply to breathe the lemon-laden air was luxury, and where the nightingales sang all night long, she came home and opened her house with frequent gaieties, fine dinners and theater parties, and now and then a costly ball, and evenings in which she held a sort of salon and sharpened her wit in the encounter with that of men and women of more or less celebrity. Pleased with her success, she permitted few people to see the other side of her nature, a nature whose chief exercise was in a complete adoration of her son Paul, a boy who had inherited so much of his mother that sometimes he seemed another self.

She had not been completely satisfied with Paul's college career. She was fond of respectability, and honored the conventional. She would not have her boy a milksop, as she phrased it; but she wished him to have the strength to go so far and no farther; not to hold himself back, but not to wish to go forward where it was distinctly ill-bred and more or less injurious. Since he had been a part of the gay life at home, too, there had been more than one occasion when her sensibility had been cruelly shocked by his want of self-control.

Hardly more than twenty-one, still a boy in his affectionate, caressing ways, with great power of loving, a singular attractiveness and much talent, he was made to help the world along, and yet he was already making himself felt as a part of the evil in it. Of late it was only one chance in a hundred that he would come home at night master of himself. His mother's heart stood still with horror at the thought, the certain knowledge, that there was nothing before her boy, the darling of her soul, but an inebriate asylum or a drunkard's grave.

She was not a woman given to expression. The boy himself did not know how dear he was to her. If he thought at all about it, he thought her interest centered in her social life, in her salon, in making her dinners and receptions brilliant, without much tenderness, but always animated concerning politics, books, music, the new play, laughing at what she styled sentimentality, the childishness of religious belief, of attempting to prove the unknown, of assuming the spiritual when everything we see is material. All the same, in this way he adored her. "My mother believes in nothing," she once heard the boy say, when his tutor wished him to go to the morning service. "I believe in nothing too." She did not know why that was unpleasant to her. She reproached herself for a weakness in finding it so.

She still was young, and fair to see; but her first gray hairs were coming; the first lines were cutting into the smooth face, with terror and suffering at her boy's behavior. But when she delicately alluded to the subject, he smiled in a superior way—he was a man, and a man must see life. When she asked him for her sake to put a check upon his inclinations, he poured out another glass and drank her health. When she begged him for the sake of his own future to arrest himself, he replied that he knew what he was about, and he would not be dictated to by even the most brilliant woman in the world.

She was in an unhappy frame when her old school-friend, Mary Bruce, a woman of some achievement in the world, came to visit her. Finding Mrs. Bruce, whom she had not seen in many years, with an entirely different outlook from her own upon life here and life to come, Mrs. Flanders did not make the visit a bed of roses, but spent most of the time they were together in argument that should convince her friend of the folly of her faith, or of the superiority of her

own mental equipment. It would have tried another person; it did try Mary Bruce. Sometimes she felt that she was dwelling in the tents of Kedar; but again she doubted if it was not a field for work; and as for the boy—for boy he was, in spite of his twenty-one years and more—it made her heart ache to suspect, to know, the truth.

"Dear," she said to her friend, the night before she was leaving, having extended her stay as long as it was possible, "I don't suppose argument ever

the truth. However, I shouldn't be if I thought it mattered; but in this world it is up to everyone to take care of himself. There doesn't seem to be anyone else to do it. If there is, I don't want to be taken care of in the style of things I see in every morning paper. And I rather would believe there is no ruler of the universe at all than such a cruel one as to make people suffer."

"Perhaps in this moment of suffering there is a presence of companionship. I know there would be with me. "When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee; when thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned."

"But they are burned."

"Well, I don't suppose the fact of the existence of a ruler of the universe depends upon whether one believes it or not."

"It does for me."

How came the universe here?"

"I suppose that's a conundrum," she said, pulling out a gray hair as she looked in the glass. "I never was good at guessing conundrums."

"Some one must have created it."

"And left it to run itself? I don't know what the some one is about; but as to fancying that he is stooping to help me down-stairs or up-stairs, I don't."

"You admit, though, that he would have to stoop."

"Oh, I don't admit anything. I don't deny anything, except that we are dealt with as individuals."

"I suppose, Helen, that when you go down-stairs you hope not to fall? Isn't that dealing with you as an individual—filling you with hope which is so constant that you are not even aware of it?"

"And when I do fall?" said Mrs. Flanders triumphantly. "There you are, you see! I've read of a snake that had four rows of teeth, each carrying poison. Very good for the snakes; but how about the man he bites?"

"The snake may be a survival of the period when monsters wallowed in the slime, and may cease as other monsters have done."

"You don't know that it will."

"The others have. Plainly the physical world has worked up out of slime; and that is what the human world is doing, and the spiritual world is doing, I don't know why the world was made that way. But I am sure that if there had been a better way it would have been used. If we were perfect in the beginning, what angels and archangels we should be! It would be harder to understand than the fact that we are working up toward perfection. But we are going to be perfect through constant struggle. The muscle doesn't grow that is not exercised. The worm never would become a butterfly that didn't struggle out of his sheath. And just as the whole body may have developed from a cell, the soul may develop from its primal spark to that full light of which, you know, he 'maketh his ministers a flaming sword.'"

"You have it all cut and dried. I should think you were quite in the counsels."

"Well, of course if you love God, you have a greater—what shall I say?—intimacy."

"What a preposterous notion!" cried Mrs. Flanders, running her jeweled chain through her fingers like a rain of light. "Intimacy with the mighty Maker of this universe beyond universe? Intimacy?"

"I am glad you say 'mighty,' dear; because then you see how fruitless it is to suppose you can fathom that mighty thought. As if that ant creeping along your skirt knew where you were going or what you were thinking!"

"Well, really, there is some difference between an ant and me!"

"Perhaps not so much as you think. The ant is called the most intelligent being after ourselves."

"I guess that ant fathoms my thought enough to know I am going to kill him, by the way he runs. How in the world he got in here—"

"Why not let the little fellow live?"

"Oh, according to your idea that nothing is lost I just dismiss him to a higher form of life. There!



To His Amazement His Mother Was Praying

convinced anyone. You have to feel things in religion before you believe them, maybe."

"I don't know how I am going to feel—at least, I do know just how I am going to feel—when I take up my paper and read things like these," said the other: "Great fire in such a city, a thousand families homeless; terrible railroad accident on such a line, so many killed and injured; dreadful panic in such a theater, women and children crushed and burned; collapse of a building on such a street, a hundred working-girls buried in the ruins; crime on the increase; shocking murder; child run over by an automobile; shameful embezzlement of the widows' and orphans' fund; and all the rest. And you think there is a loving Father overseeing it all, in tender relations to each individual. How is it possible to believe that there is an all-seeing and all-powerful ruler who also is not an evil-disposed one?" And Mrs. Flanders threw down her paper and adjusted her hair with composure.

"I don't see how you can be happy a moment, feeling so," said her friend.

"I don't see what my feeling happy has to do with