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WITHIN THE PRECINCTS BY MRS. OLIPHANT

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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BY

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VOL. III.

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CONTENTS

OF VOLUME III.

	Page
CHAPTER XXXIII. Lottie's Side of the Question	7
— XXXIV. A Crisis	31
— XXXV. Family Duty: according to Mrs. Despard	50
— XXXVI. Family Duty: by a Finer Artist	73
— XXXVII. Another Chance	91
— XXXVIII. Lottie Resentful	111
— XXXIX. Lottie Subdued	131
— XL. The Effect of Good Fortune: Law	153
— XLI. The Effect of Good Fortune: Rollo	167
— XLII. "—till Friday"	190
— XLIII. The End of the Dream	212
— XLIV. Après?	235
— XLV. Conclusion	252

WITHIN THE PRECINCTS.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LOTTIE'S SIDE OF THE QUESTION.

LOTTIE made her way down the Slopes alone, with feelings which had greatly changed from those of a few minutes ago. How happy she had been! The hour that had passed under the falling leaves had been like paradise; but the portals of exit from paradise are perhaps never so sweet as those of entrance. Her coming away was with a sense of humiliation and shame. As she wound her way down her favourite by-road winding among the shrubs and trees, she could not help feeling that she was making her escape, as if from some guilty meeting, some clandestine rendezvous. In all her life Lottie had never known this sensation before. She had been shy, and had shrunk from the gaze of people who had stared at her, in admiration of her beauty or of her singing, but in her shyness there had always been the pride of innocence; and never before had she been afraid to meet any eye, or

felt it necessary to steal away, to keep out of sight as if she were guilty. She had not done anything wrong, but yet she had all the feeling of having done something wrong—the desire to escape, the horror of detection. To some the secret meeting, the romance and mystery, would have been only an additional happiness, but Lottie, proud and frank and open-hearted, could not bear the very thought of doing anything of which she was ashamed. The sensation hurt and humiliated her. All had been very different *before*: to meet her lover unawares, yet not without intention, with a delightful element of chance in each encounter—to look out secretly for him, yet wonder innocently to find him—to let her steps be drawn here or there by a sense of his presence, with a fond pretence of avoiding him, a sweet certainty of meeting him—all these risks and hazards of emotion had been natural. But Lottie felt with a sudden jar of her nerves and mind that this ought not to continue so. She had felt a little wondering disappointment on the previous night when he had asked her to meet him again, without any suggestion that he should go to her, or make the new bond between them known. Even then there had been a faint jar, a sigh of unfulfilled expectation. But now their hurried parting, her own flight, the little panic lest they should be seen, and discovery follow, made Lottie's heart sick. How well she could imagine