Chapter 1

Canada and Oxford (1848–1873)

A Canadian Childhood

As the great St. Lawrence river streams out of Lake Ontario, with Canada on its western bank and New York State on its eastern, its waters flow over a bed of limestone. But here and there, partly obstructing the river’s passage, bosses of granite emerge from the water. They are the remnants of a band of tough Precambrian rock that is the geological underlay to the Thousand Islands. These shaggy, craggy islets, many more than a thousand in number, are thickly vegetated with pines and shrubs, and by the mid-nineteenth century they had become popular holiday havens. “Their beauty is so unlike anything that one may see anywhere else,” wrote Grant Allen on his return to the region. “Tiny little islands, placed in tiny little rivers, crowned with tiny little chalets, and navigated by tiny little yachts; it all reminds one so thoroughly of one’s childish dreamlands.”

The dreamy memories were his own, for this curious riverine locality was the country of his birth.

Grant Allen’s father, Joseph Antisell Allen (1814–1900), was an Irishman and Anglican clergyman, the son of a barrister. He attended Trinity College, Dublin, but left without a degree and spent some years hacking for a religious publisher in London. At some time between 1840 and 1842 (accounts differ) he emigrated to the New World along with tens of thousands of his compatriots, and presumably for the same reason: to try to better his condition. He must have succeeded far beyond his own expectations, because after being ordained at Montreal, and after occupying a couple of livings in Quebec, his fortunes improved dramatically. Somehow, around 1845, he met and married (Catharine) Charlotte Ann Grant, and Miss Grant was an heiress, the daughter of a Baron.

Charlotte Grant Allen (1817–1894), Grant Allen’s mother, had a romantic family background in which were mingled aristocratic French-Canadian, English, and Scottish bloods. Her mother was a Coffin, from a Devonshire family of admirals and generals. Her father’s family, the Grants, came originally from Blairfindy in Moray county, an area best known now for its picturesque
ruined castle and Glenlivet whisky. The Grants were Jacobites, and after Culloden the four sons of the laird fled Scotland to save their necks. By the end of the eighteenth century they had become a distinguished military family in Canada. Charlotte’s father, Charles William Grant, inherited the French title of Fifth Baron of Longueuil through his mother’s line, and the Grants owned considerable property in and around Kingston, the town in Ontario adjacent to the region of the Thousand Islands.

In 1833, because he needed to be in Kingston to pursue his political ambitions, the Baron built a large house just outside the town. “Alwington” stood in spacious grounds reaching down to the water, and consisted of a central rectangular block of two stories with a single-storey wing on each side, all in the local limestone. After 1844 this house became the family headquarters.

Joseph Allen the clergyman could hardly have afforded by his own labors to keep his wife in the style to which she was accustomed. That was not required of him, however; instead, the couple lived with her family at Alwington in leisured ease. Two children were born to them there before the arrival of their third child and second son on February 24, 1848. He was christened Charles Grant Blairfindie Allen. The components of this name reflect his mingled ancestry, and he was proud of his inheritance. It was an inheritance not financial, for he never saw a cent of the family fortune, but genetic. Allen liked to think of himself as a pure-bred, typical Celt, a race to which he ascribed many virtues, especially in the arts. He claimed at various times that such unlikely folk as Catullus and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were “really” Celts. Without following Allen into one of his most enduring crochets, we can surely concede that a blend of seigneurial French, witty Irish, sober pragmatic Devonshire, and canny, brave Scottish bloods was likely to make for a pretty effervescent mixture.

The town of Kingston that lay beyond the front gates of Alwington during Allen’s childhood was a small place whose chief distinction was some surprisingly grand public buildings. These were the relics of its brief glory as the capital of the Canadas, a status it had lost just before Allen was born, and they gave it a curious appearance. This was how it struck Allen in 1876, the first time he saw it again after fifteen years in England and Jamaica. He had left as a child; now he is seeing the town of his birth with thoroughly acclimatized English eyes, as a mature man:

a basking, blue stone-built town glowed in the foreground, its roofs all covered with tinned iron, and shining like gold in the morning sun. I could almost fancy myself in the East once more, looking out upon some domed and minaretted village of the Bosphorus. Building after building of a quaint debased American-Byzantine style, propped on pseudo-Doric pillars and surmounted by a false Italian dome (wood, tin-plated) stared upon us boldly, unabashed by its own pretentious absurdity. Incredibly monstrous they all are, if taken separately... yet looked on in the mass from the waterside, they really compose a pretty and harmonious picture. The effect is much heightened, too, by a few scattered martello towers, standing straight out of the shallow water, with red-rusted iron roofs, which contrast finely with the sun-gilded domes.