

A LASS OF LENNOX
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A LASS OF LENNOX

CHAPTER I

ON the West coast of Scotland, between the royal burgh of Kilrockton and Loch Lennox, lies the fertile valley through which flows the impetuous river whence it derives the name of the Vale of Lennox. Times have changed since the poet-novelist sang of the beauties of Lennox Water. Populous villages and busy factories have grown up to soil the clear stream with their refuse, and darken the blue skies with their smoke, but still the valley grows beautiful in springtide, with greenening fields and budding trees, and still the river sings its rippling song. About midway up this valley, on the banks of the Lennox, stands the old village of Browhill, consisting mainly of one long street, which has half its length bounded by the river on one side, while the other half seems to have made fatuous efforts to throw off reputable side-streets, failing in which it has disconsolately straggled into a region of sparse gardens, disorderly hen-coops, and questionable pig-sties. One street, much affected by Hibernian immigrants, in the middle of the village, is indeed notable, inasmuch as an open stream flows in the centre thereof, which in the winter sometimes comes down moss-brown in spate from the moors, to overflow its banks and flood the tumble-down dwellings, while in due season the dried-up channel is plainly visible in all its lovely garnishment of fish-bones, crockery wreckage, and castaway rubbish.

This is the Burn, and is a select and sacred quarter, of which no man may be said to have become a freeman until he has duly tumbled into the stream, unwittingly acquiring from that baptism whatever privileges may accrue to him through the ceremony. It is a rite beautiful in its touching simplicity. At the foot of this classic street there is a steep slope up the Main Street, familiarly known as the Brae, and nigh to the top of this, a pair of great iron gates open into the carriage-way curving to the parish manse, while a narrow stile leads down to the old kirk, standing among its trees and grasses within a curve of the river.

Browhill Manse is a quaint and dignified stone building, two-storied, with peaked gables and stone chimneys, having an air of quiet comfort and repose about its oriel windows, the trim and well-ordered lawns in front, and the old-fashioned garden behind.

One morning in early September the Rev. Alexander MacGrigor was sitting in his study, after having breakfasted alone as usual downstairs. He had not been long presented to his native parish, to which he had brought great promise and high hope, which he had not disappointed, for never before had the church been so crowded, and the parish work so well done. Yet it cannot be said that he had much in his favour when he came among his people, since a prophet is not without honour save in his own country. It had not been an easy or pleasant task to take the place among the local gentry to which his position entitled him. They had been inclined to look down upon a man whose 'mother kept a shop, you know, in the village.' But he had won his way by the polish born of education, and a native courtesy inherited from his gentle mother. Among his own class, who had been ready, when he first came, to say disparagingly one to another, 'Oh, Sandy MacGrigor! I was in the schule wi' him,' or 'Oh, I ken't his faither fine,' he had shown such a cultured but unassuming manliness, that he had won respect and love. Yet in so doing he had not seemed to forget or wish others to forget his past; for while he had made his mother give up the shop by which the supplies for his education had been mainly earned until the days of bursaries and tutorships dawned, it was but to take the tender, worn woman to preside over the Manse. And here, having only lived to see her son entering on his high and sacred duties, her gentle spirit had passed away, casting the first great shadow on his life, for the loss of his father in early boyhood could scarcely be said to have done so.

This morning the Rev. Mr. MacGrigor was evidently ill at ease, pacing the carpet with restless steps. Presently he paused at the window, and remained looking out with hands tightly clasped behind him. As he stood there in the morning sunlight, looking across the quiet churchyard and green glebe, over the gleaming river and the meadows beyond to the Cairntop hills, rising through yellowing fields and belts of woodland into the far purple of their heathery heights, he seemed the very embodiment of peace. Yet in this man, with the pale earnest face, and full, curved lips, the fine nose, and brown eyes shining deeply under the broad forehead over which the dark curls clustered, dwelt an eager and restless spirit, and under the black coat beat a heart throbbing with high passions and strong desires. These he evermore tried to discipline, for some errors of hot blood in his college days still loomed large in his memory, and in face of his new responsibilities weighed heavily on his conscience. Yea, the very recollection of these earlier follies compelled him into setting before himself high ideals, the slightest swerving from which urged him to stern heart-searchings. The vivid poetic imagination which flashed into fervid oratory in his preaching, often carried him into visionary regions of duty into which flesh found it hard to follow. For the air of the Vale of Lennox was not altogether heroic, and already he found himself in danger of slipping contentedly into the humdrum life of the place. Indeed, on the previous evening he had been to a *soirée* in connection with a

neighbouring church, had gone with a high-toned and eloquent speech ready for his lips, but, catching the harmless humour of the evening, had let his polished periods go, and delivered instead a racy and anecdotal speech, which had been greeted with laughter and applause, which still rang rankling in his ears—as if good honest mirth ever yet harmed man or woman.

‘It has come to this,’ he said to himself, ‘am I to lift them up to my level or to step down to theirs? Am I, in fact, to lose myself wittingly in the grey forest of the commonplace? Never!’ he exclaimed aloud, ‘I had rather die!’

The old housekeeper, opening the door suddenly and catching these words, was too astonished to apologise for her intrusion.

‘Losh keep me, Mr. MacGrigor,’ she said, ‘what’s the maitter wi’ ye? To hear the likes o’ you talkin’ o’ deein’! It’s eneuch to——’

‘Janet,’ he answered quietly, turning round, ‘why did you not knock at the door?’

‘What way did I no’ knock? Because I thocht ye were at your brekfast yet.’

‘I have finished it long ago.’

‘Then it’s no’ muckle ye’ve ta’en,’ said the old woman. Thae suree cookies hasna ’greed wi’ ye. I tell’t ye to tak a guid tea afore ye gaed. Thae contrac’ cookies are aye runkled, mooldy, fushionless things.’

‘I didn’t take one, Janet, but——’

‘Weel it maun hae been thae chape conversation lozengers, or the soor grapes they stick on the pletform. I’ve been at ower mony surees no’ to ken.’

‘Now, Janet, if you have finished,’ he said, somewhat impatiently, ‘if you have finished, I would like to be alone.’

‘Ay, ay, I’m gaun. But I’m thinkin’ ye’re ower muckle alane. What would your mither, no’ to say your faither, that I ken’t or ye were thocht o’, hae said, if she had leeved to hear ye sayin’ that ye wished that ye were deid? An’——’

‘You have mistaken me, Janet. I was only saying that I would rather die than that a certain thing should happen.’

‘Oh, she’ll hae ye, Mr. MacGrigor, she’ll hae ye,’ went on the voluble old woman, jumping to her own conclusions, ‘an’ if she doesna there’s as guid fish in the sea as ever cam’ oot o’t.’

‘And who may she be?’ inquired the minister, with an amused smile.

‘Wha may she be?’ repeated Janet. ‘Wha would it be but Miss Gordon, to be sure. Oh, she’s a bonnie lass, an’ she’ll hae a guid tochar too. Ye’ll hae a gran’

chance at the picnic the day, if ye play your cairds richt and jist gang cannie. Oh ay, she'll hae ye, nae doot, an' ye'll mind my words.' she said, setting the seal to her prophecy as she slipped quietly away.

'Miss Gordon!' he said to himself, as he looked round the room and thought of the lonely house and life, 'yes, I suppose it might have been, but——'

Here Janet once more poked her head in at the door she had left ajar, to say, 'An' I forgot, Mr. MacGrigor, but ye said young Steevison was to be at the picnic too, an' I'm tell't his faither and hers have an unco notion o' makin't a match wi' him and Miss Gordon. But ye needna heed him, for they say he's awfu' faur gane on your ain auld flame Jess Aun'erson, an' she's guid enuch for a wild young scamp like him.'

With these words of imagined comfort she finally departed as abruptly as she had appeared, and without having observed how the minister started and flushed at the mention of Jessie Anderson's name. Janet had shut the door this time, and with a sigh he flung himself into his chair. But presently he arose, and went downstairs to prepare to go out. Having summoned Janet to tell her that if anyone called in his absence on urgent business he could be seen after eight that night or early next morning, he had to wait until she brushed his clothes carefully in the lobby, 'toshed him up for the leddies,' as she called it.

'An' its a gran' day ye're gaun to hae for the time o' the year,' she said, as the work-worn hands performed their kindly office, 'no' ower hot for rowin', an' no' ower cauld for picnickin'. An' weel ye deserve it too, for ye hav'na ta'en a holiday since ye cam' here. There, ye'll dae noo, I'm thinkin', ' she said with pride, after a critical survey, during which he had to turn patiently round for inspection. He took down his soft hat from its peg, selected a walking-stick, and was going out of the door, when she said quickly— 'Ye'll no' forget what I tell't ye, Mr. MacGrigor?'

'I am not likely to forget that,' he answered, with a meaning undreamt of by her, and with long, swift steps strode up the broad gravel way. Instead of going out by the iron gates on to the Brae, he turned down a narrow path within the grounds, which led along the wall and past the stables to where a small gate opened into the churchyard, and which was his private road to that and the church. From thence he could pass out by the great gate which opened on to the Main Street close to where along one side the river flows. Hard by the pathway, old Tam Broon, minister's man and general church factotum, was busily digging a tiny grave, whistling cheerily to himself the while.

'Good morning, Thomas,' said the minister, as he approached.

‘Guid mornin’ to ye, sir,’ answered the old man, pausing in his work and showing a jolly red face as he looked up.

‘Another child?’ said the minister sadly.

‘Oh ay, sir, there’s a wheen o’ weans drappin’ aff the noo. But thae wee anes mak’ it a hantle easier for daith an’ me, I’m thinkin’, but no’ sic a guid job for the jiners, of coorse. But every man to his ain trade, sir,’ added the gravedigger, scraping his foot briskly on the spade upon which he leant.

The minister looked round thoughtfully, as if scarce listening, ere he spoke.

‘I’ve been thinking, Thomas, that we must try and get a new bit of ground taken in. This is an old place, and getting too crowded. It is injurious to the living and irreverent to the dead. Don’t you think. Thomas. I am right?’

‘Think sae!’ answered Tam. ‘I’m sure o’t. It’s jist what I said the ither day to thae folk that cam’ powterin’ aboot to see whaur some frien’s o’ theirs were lyin’. And when I said it they went aff wi’oot a word. or giein’ a body as muckle as a sixpence, efter showin’ them a’ ower the grun—an’ the kirk forby.’

‘But how did you happen to speak to them about it at all, and what did you say?’ asked the minister, shrewdly suspicious, out of experiences of Tam’s ways, of what had actually occurred.

‘Oh, naething by or’ nar, sir. It was like this, ye see. Says they to me. “The kirkyerd maun be geyan ful’ by this time.”—“It’s a’ that.” says I, “and there’s like to be a fine shine for me some day.”—“What for?” says they.—“The mixin’.” says I.—“Mixin’ the what?” says they.—“The banes.” says I. “Dae ye no’ see, when a’s dune, an’ the risin’ time comes, it’ll be, “Tam Broon this,’ an’ ‘Tam Broon that,’ an’, I canna find this, an’ I canna find the next bit o’ me’—as if I wasna likely to be haein’ eneuch adae to piece mysel’ thegither.”—An’ syne aff they gaed, jist as I tell ye.’

‘And no wonder, Thomas,’ said the minister sternly. ‘How often have I told you?—but it’s no use talking’—this, as the old man showed signs of going on indifferently with his work. ‘However, look here, Thomas, I can’t stand it much longer. You have been drinking this morning already.’

‘A’ready!’ answered the old man reproachfully, looking at the clock on the church tower. ‘Why, it’s maist eleeven o’clock.’

‘Never mind that. Where have you been?’

‘Been! Ower the brig at. Jock Logan’s smiddy aboot the mendin’ o’ the gate lock.’

‘And of course you met two or three generous people as usual?’

‘Weel, it’s no jist impossible I did.’

‘The old story. Now, Thomas, isn’t it a strange thing that I can go all about the parish without meeting anyone who asks me in to take a glass?’

‘Verra likely, sir, verra likely,’ said the old reprobate demurely. ‘But it’s your ain fau’t; because ye’re no’ like me—ye’ll staun’ a gless to nane o’ them.’

Mr. MacGrigor looked at him for a moment, and turning on his heel walked silently away.

‘Had him there,’ chuckled the gravedigger, proceeding to light his pipe leisurely ere he resumed his work.

Passing into the Main Street the minister proceeded along it till he came to the old chain

bridge, which connected Browhill and Lennoxbridge, and on which the people of the valley had for years grudgingly paid a toll which they rightly held to be iniquitous.

Over the bridge he passed into the thriving little town of Lennoxbridge, which has grown by leaps and bounds until it dwarfs its older neighbour, which still however gives its name to the parish, of which the other is the more populous portion. Here he turned sharply to the right and proceeded up the waterside between the great calico-printing and Turkey-red dye-works, which line each side of the river, rolling up clouds of smoke and steam, filling the air with noisome smells, and polluting the water with poisonous refuse.

At last Mr. MacGrigor reached Mosshead Lade, and got beyond the huge works which mar the landscape, and are only tolerable because of the homes whose hearths they brighten, and whose tables they fill. Before him stretched a fine expanse of river, over which in the near distance the Balgoyne Suspension Bridge hung in slender and graceful beauty, while away beyond, the great shoulders of Ben Lennox heaved high into the clear September air. There is no prettier bit of walking left in the Vale than this smooth black cinder-path running between the Angler’s Wood with its sweet music of burn and bird, and the river, lingering restfully betwixt green banks where the rushes rustle and the gold of the marsh marigold gleams, as if to gather strength ere it narrows for its swift rush down the valley. On the other bank he could see Mr. Gordon’s old house of Laverockbank nestling among shrubbery and trees, with its long garden sloping down to the river wall, over which the thick ivy clambered to trail in the water and cling about the side of the steps, by which a punt lay swinging. At Balgoyne a boat was moored, in which some of the picnic party were already seated, while the others were on the shore, awaiting the minister’s arrival. Mr. MacGrigor found himself, after hearty but brief greeting, bundled unceremoniously by Jack

Stevenson across the thwarts into the stern among the ladies, who made room for him to work the tiller-ropes. In another moment the rowers had taken their seats, with Stevenson for stroke, and the boat was heading up stream between the old pier and the little islet opposite. As they neared the loch the current grew stronger, and under all the strenuous efforts of the rowers, which made the rowlocks creak and the tough oars bend, the boat hung for a little space almost motionless under the narrow neck of fir-crowned land past which the river sweeps impetuously as it breaks from the lake. But slowly, inch by inch, they won their way into the placid waters of Loch Lennox, and with poised oars, from the shining blades of which the glittering drops trembled and dripped, the oarsmen enjoyed a brief rest.

The near woods, creeping down to the shore and climbing up the hillside, were rich with the first faint touches of autumn; by the further Camphill shore the cattle stood placidly at the water's edge; while from embowered mansion and whitewalled cottage the blue smoke curled lazily into the pure air. Before them lay the fair island of Inch Bracken, and over its knolls the great hills within the Highland line lifted grandly up, as silent and changeless as through the storm and shine of shifting centuries. The rowers again bent to their work for a swift spin to Inch Bracken, the sound of their oars in steady swing floated over the water, and Mr. MacGrigor's spirits rose amazingly. They bubbled as brightly within him as the clear waters which raced so merrily along the keel to caress and linger round the helm for a moment, ere they danced and whirled away.

That irreverent young rascal Jack Stevenson suggested that if the minister could only emulate the lightning-change artiste of the music halls, and whisk himself into Oriental costume, he might pass for a bigamous Turk in the heart of his harem. Whereat Mr. MacGrigor pretended utter deafness, Miss Gordon blushed prettily and held down her head, while the other young ladies first tittered and then tried to look demure, with the exception of Jack's cousin, who said severely—

‘Don't be silly, Jack.’

To which that unabashed youth replied—

‘All right, my dear. I couldn't if I tried. But just ask the grand pasha to sing us a song, and I'll shut up.’

Then the ‘grand pasha,’ feeling altogether too happy to resent these liberties, and being pressed thereto by a bewildering chorus of sweet girl voices, graciously yielded, and sang ‘Row, Brothers, Row,’ in the chorus of which all lustily joined. When the last echoes of the song had died away, Stevenson asked gravely, ‘Wouldn't it have come more natural and been more professional, Mr. MacGrigor, to have sung ‘Row, brethren, row?’

‘Now, my dear fellow,’ said the minister with a quiet smile, ‘if I had known you were going to be so critical I might have selected another song.’

‘Not at all. The song is good enough for me. I’m not a critic. Why,’ he replied, ‘a critic would have said it was a happy selection for a man to make who belongs to a profession whose pride and privilege it is to preach while others practise.’

Mr. MacGrigor laughed good-naturedly.

Still they swept along, as strong arms and stout hearts sent the boat leaping ahead, with the music of the water surging at her bows and gurgling behind the stern. Presently they glided alongside the little pier running out into the pretty bay in front of the Inch Bracken gamekeeper’s house, and here they landed. At the foot of the grassy mound from which the ruins of Castle Gregor overlook the loch they picnicked merrily, after which, by a familiar but inscrutable process of natural selection or affinity, the party melted away in couples until Miss Gordon and Mr. MacGrigor found themselves alone by the rippling margin of the lake. Jack Stevenson had gone off with a pretty and lively girl from Kilrockton whom he had favoured with his attentions during their repast, and the minister remembered old Janet’s words as he looked into the blue eyes and sweet face that turned to him when he spoke.

‘The others seem to have gone off,’ he said, as if noticing it for the first time.

‘So they have,’ she answered with sweet hypocrisy, looking round as if in mild wonderment. ‘We may as well go in search of them. Unless, of course, you wish to stay here?’ he added.

‘Oh, no,’ she said, and they passed together along the shore, where Mr. MacGrigor, listening to the musical voice, watching the pretty figure—and sometimes, it must be confessed, touching the little hand—found his whole being stirred with a subtle influence, and Janet’s words kept running over and over in his head, ‘She’ll hae ye, she’ll hae ye.’

CHAPTER II

WHEN Janet had spoken of Jessie Anderson to Mr. MacGrigor as his old flame, she had only uttered a half truth about a youthful love. They two had been in the village school together, where he had fought her battles and helped her in her tasks, and ere he went to college, and she to work, they had fallen head over ears in love. He could never forget the night before his departure for the University, when they had climbed the quarry braes in the dusky moon-light with the lights twinkling in the valley below and the stars shining overhead. They had wandered up the road by the side of the glen, through which the burn murmured far below, while the soft wash of the wind among the fir-tops mingled with their whispers.

They had lingered by the wooden gate, beyond which the wild moorlands swept eastwards to Kilrain and the Cambus Fells, and, leaning on the rude bars, with heart to heart and warm lips entrancingly near each other, had plighted their young love in utter trust and hope. The world lay before them with its unknown and untrodden path to be travelled, but the cold world seemed warm and the shadowy way bright in the glow of their love. In him hope beat high, and his heart grew strong to battle with fate and fortune for her dear sake, and she, clasped in his arms and listening to his brave words, was happy in her trust. But a cloud crept over the moon, the eerie hoot of an owl broke from the sleeping woods, and she shivered with a sudden fear.

‘Let us go,’ he had said tenderly; ‘you are cold.’

And so together they had descended the hill, and when he left her at her father’s door, she would fain have called him back, just for one more kiss, one more promise. Her heart had seemed to whisper that he had gone for ever. But she was too late then. Already he was striding along in the moonlight past the poor houses that lay close to each side of the burn lower down.

Thus for a brief space they had parted, to meet at many a week-end when he came down to see his mother, and when they whispered to each other their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears, up there on the hillside by the edge of the moor. But slowly and imperceptibly they had drifted apart, each moved by different interests, he in the wider circle of the city, she within the narrow bounds of her valley home. Yet the change was not in her, but in him. To her the days brought the same dull round; to him they brought an ever-widening horizon.

To MacGrigor came a time of ambitions and aims, when he sought Jessie in vain, to share aspirations, which her poor little inexperienced head endeavoured to

understand in a pathetically hopeless fashion. To her it was enough that her lover was clever and successful, that he won college honours in the city and was well spoken of and praised in the village. She was proud of him, and thought he loved her. She asked no more. But with MacGrigor it was different. He was a man of warm affections, who longed for the sympathy which finds expression in words of appreciation and encouragement; and never guessing how the little innocent heart fluttered with silent delight as he discoursed, with all the fluent eloquence of youth, about what he had done and would do, nor dreaming with what inarticulate fervour she responded to his enthusiasms, he came to misunderstand her.

Worse was a later change. With worldly knowledge came worldly ambitions, with all their attendant meannesses. He began to doubt if his factory girl was fitted to fill the place he hoped to be able to offer to her—or another—some day, and if she would not shame him in company by errors of speech or manners.

It had come perilously near a selfish decision with Mr. MacGrigor, so far as renunciation of his youthful love was concerned, at the time when, after having graduated with honours and passed through the Divinity Hall with credit, he received the offer of the living of his old parish. This cruelly complicated matters to his mind. He had, as it seemed to him, to decide between the honour of his manhood and the honour of the world, between prosperous comfort and an uncertain future. He felt that he could not accept the patron's offer and also marry Jessie Anderson.

But after a sore fight with his better nature, he compromised matters with himself, and accepted the parish, in the hope that this inconvenient love would die of mutual neglect.

Jessie was too proud to put herself in his way. But Sunday after Sunday, dressed in her poor best, she would “climb the stairs under the tower when the great bell was booming overhead, to take her seat quietly and unnoticed far back in the shadowed gallery of the dim church. There, on the first day he preached, the minister saw her, saw her in the middle of his sermon, and paused for one brief moment that none noted save she. There, evermore, he marked her come, till at last, with a sudden stroke, his heart smote him, and there came to him a great fear that he loved her still.

Ere that day had come his mother had died, and he had an empty nest to share with the woman of his love, but still he hesitated, and many a bitter fight he had with himself ere he again decided to temporise and let things drift yet awhile. Of course there were not wanting virgins, old and young, who had looked upon the advent of a young unmarried minister as a special dispensation of Providence not to be lightly neglected, and who acted accordingly, with many outward and

visible manifestations of discreet interest. But his heart had beat no faster for the smiles with which they were accompanied.

As time went on it had begun to be whispered that something more attractive than Mr. Gordon's hospitable table drew the minister so frequently to Laverockbank House, and that there was for him an eloquence more persuasive than the platitudes of the estimable Tory.

Undoubtedly Alice Gordon was a charming young lady, well worth any man's winning. For Mr. MacGrigor, no choice could in some senses have been more judicious, and it was exactly this which was uppermost in his mind as he walked by her side on that September afternoon on Inch Bracken. Together they lingered for a little by the edge of the loch, looking across to the peaceful Valley of Weeping, where once the cry and clang of battle had swept as the clansmen fought together with true Highland ferocity. Now all was calm and beautiful under the blue heavens, and a little northward, between the shore and the fir-clad slopes of the Moss hills, the white walls of Blackcross, gleaming among the trees, marked the home of a civilised chieftain of a later age.

Turning their backs on this, they followed a narrow path which led up through rough grass and fading brackens to a low wood of hazel and stunted oak, through which glanced the graceful forms and branching antlers of the fallow deer, which fled, fleet and shy, at their approach.

'Isn't this delightful, Mr. MacGrigor?' asked Miss Gordon, looking up into his face with blue eyes which seemed to shine all the more brightly for the colour in her glowing cheeks.

'There are some companionships which would make a desert delightful,' he answered.

'You are very flattering to yourself,' she said archly.

'I was not speaking of myself, but of you.'

'Oh, indeed!' she said, making a pretty round mouth of pouting red. 'How kind you are!'

'Are you surprised,' he asked, 'that a man's life may become like a desert for want of a love which might make it rejoice and blossom as the rose?'

'Now, is that a conundrum, or only next Sunday's text?' she asked teasingly.

'Neither,' he answered, and it appeared that a rough bit of ground necessitated his taking one of her little hands in his. 'I was only clothing my thought in metaphor.'

‘Oh, I see,’ she went on in the same tantalizing way, ‘playing Dorcas to a stray thought! But hadn’t you better have left the poor foundling to the freedom of its natural condition? Or were you afraid of its being chilled in the September air?’

‘Miss Gordon,’ he answered somewhat grandiloquently, ‘not even the air of midmost winter can be more light and chilling than the light speech of a cold heart.’

‘What do you really mean?’ she said, with a sedate pretence of ignorance.

‘Only this—that to a lonely man there may sometimes come a passionate longing for love, and the winning and possession of that love is a joy for ever.’

‘Like a thing of beauty. Well?’

‘Well, I am a lonely man——’

‘But,’ she interrupted smartly, ‘you have not been altogether without the consolations of love, I believe.’

He started and turned a sudden-flushed face to her. For a moment they looked into each other’s eyes. Then they went on in silence, but his hand had let hers slip from its grasp and was clasped with his other hand behind him, gripping his stick.

They had passed into the wood, where the sunlight made shine and shadow through the branches, and intended to climb the hill from the summit of which they might look down upon the gleaming lake with its wide expanse to the south, where the valley of the Lennox sent up its smoke, and its fine stretch east and north where the fairy islands seemed to float on the surface under the sheltering bulwarks of the silent mountains. They had seen none of the others. Not a word was said. No sound was heard save that of their own feet, rustling among the brackens or crackling over the fallen twigs.

Suddenly, in the heart of the wood, and right before them, prone among the brackens under the trees, with ‘one ray of bright sunlight filtering on to the still pale face, lay the form of a man, and the upturned face was that of death, ghastly in the glare of that terrible ray of light resting upon it, like the index finger of outraged Heaven.

Miss Gordon gave one wild cry, and would have fallen had not the minister caught her. Gently he laid her down and quickly examined the man, whom, he knew by sight as one of the village wasters. He was beyond human help, and must have been so for hours, stabbed to the heart by some desperate hand. With a sickening sense of helpless horror Mr. MacGrigor turned from the dead to the living, and lifting the insensible girl, went back through the wood to the shore.

By the water's edge he laid her down, and supporting her head with one knee and arm, bathed her brow and temples. Slowly the colour crept back to her cheeks, but still he bent over the closed eyelids. She murmured some words softly and incoherently. More lowly still he bent to listen. Her lips were close to his.

An infinite pity came upon him, and all tenderly and lovingly he pressed his lips to hers, and even as he did so her eyes slowly opened, as if awaking from some dreamful sleep.

'Oh, it is you, it is you,' she whispered eagerly. 'I thought it was——' she shuddered and closed her eyes again. 'But it is you, dear, you,' she said, unclosing her eyes again. 'And you will not leave me,' she sobbed, throwing her arms about his neck and drawing his face down to her own, 'although I was so cold and, cruel.' Quietly he soothed her and tried to calm her; but even then, her quick woman's instinct told her that he had resumed his restraint, and was only as yet compassionate with the tenderness of the strong for the weak.

She blushed for very shame that she had so weakly given way to her feelings, and would have risen without his assistance had he permitted her, but the strong arms helped her to her feet, and she stood before the minister with averted eyes, looking out over the lake in thoughtful silence.

It was he who spoke first.

'Miss Gordon, can you forgive me for a liberty—nay, for a rudeness—that was but the madness of a moment?'

'Of a moment, only of a moment!' she repeated wistfully to herself; and then, clasping her hands over eyes to which the quick tears sprang, she cried—

'Forgive you? Yes, yes, that is easy. But how shall I ever, ever forgive myself? No, do not touch me,' she said angrily as he laid his hand gently on her shoulder, 'and don't look at me nor speak to me, but let us go back, at once to the others.'

Mr. MacGrigor was utterly silenced by the hysterical passion of the girl, which had scarce sobbed itself out when they reached the old castle-mound, where the rest of the party had already gathered to make merry with, game and song on the green sward.

Before young Stevenson could rally the newly arrived couple on their doleful appearance, the minister took him and the other gentlemen apart, and told them hastily of the ghastly discovery he and Miss Gordon had made, and together they hurriedly consulted as to what should be done. It was decided to tell the keeper at once, when either he or they could convey the intelligence to the police. "They found him about to, proceed to the Vale with his wife on a marketing expedition;

but as the good man was doubtful of the truth of their news, chiefly on the ground that 'sic an unheard o' thing' should have happened on his snug little island, they left the ladies 'with his wife, and proceeded together to the spot, only to find, that the minister had but spoken the dreadful truth. After which, the keeper was only too anxious to have the authorities informed, and his island rid of its unwelcome tenant.

'I ken't him fine by sicht, sir,' he said to the minister as they returned to the house; 'Soople Sandy they ca'd him—an' fine he ken't me. He aye took the ither side o' the road when he met me doon by, an' couldna look me in the face. He was a sair poacher, an' an awfu' crony o' that scoon'rel Jock Aun'erson.'

Mr. MacGrigor started at the mention of the name. It brought with it a new horror. He thrust the thought from him even as it rose, but it kept beating in his brain until they reached the house. There they found that the ladies had already everything packed in the boat for departure. They would not hear of waiting a moment longer on the island, and it was proposed to spend the rest of the day in rowing to Heather Inch and finishing their picnic there. They were already in the boat, and about to push off, when Mr. MacGrigor suddenly recollected having left his stick on the shore when he was bathing Miss Gordon's forehead. It had cost him some inconvenience when carrying her, and he had been glad to lay it down. He was ashore again at once, after apologising for delaying them, and went off at a rattling pace.

But the minister's return was not accomplished so swiftly as his brave start promised. He found his stick on the gravel, as he expected; but just as he was in the act of picking it up, his eyes fell on an open knife lying close, beside it. He lifted it quickly and examined it. An ugly looking weapon it was, with a double-edged blade held open by a strong spring. It was just such a weapon as might have been used in the dark deed up there in the wood. The blade was faintly red with recent surface rust, either from the damp of the night dews or from having been washed in the lake, and on rubbing this, slightly darker stains of use appeared underneath. He examined the black horn handle, and there, roughly but deeply cut, were the initials 'J. A.,' letters which burned themselves into his brain.

'Oh Jessie, Jessie,' he muttered, 'if my fear should prove true, God help you.'

An impulse, to which he had almost yielded, came upon him to hurl the knife far into the lake, to lie there rusting and rotting into nothingness and unknown of men. But, instead, he picked up his stick, and with the knife still open in his hand, slowly retraced, his steps. Strangely enough, it came to pass that ere he came back to the boat he had, after some trouble, pressed the spring, closed the blade, and thrust the weapon into his pocket.

When they were afloat once more Jack Stevenson tried to infuse some mirth into the company; but his efforts met with scant success, and the good old jokes seemed to have lost their perennial freshness. On reaching Heather Inch, Jack proved himself perversely and uncommonly attentive to Miss Gordon, probably because his light manner covered a warm heart easily moved by beauty in trouble, but she was reserved and indifferent. The minister had become unsociable and restless, and when they started on their return home, he insisted on taking an oar.

At Balgoyne they found the story carried by the keeper had spread like wildfire, for little knots of people had gathered in the deepening twilight to discuss the tragedy and await the return of the police who had left for the island. Mr. MacGrigor excused himself, on the plea of a nervous headache, from accompanying the others across Balgoyne Bridge to Laverockbank, where Mr. Gordon had invited his daughter's friends to conclude the day with a little evening party. He went home as he had come by the waterside.

As soon as he entered the Manse the minister went to his study, turned up the light, locked the door, and taking the knife from his pocket, laid it on the table. 'I wish I had never seen it,' he said fervently to himself. He flung himself in a chair. The night crept on, the fire went out unheeded, the passing hours struck unheard on the church clock. And still the lamp burned bright, and still the minister sat there, plunged in thought, alone.

It was midnight; from the old belfry the strokes of the hour floated over the hushed churchyard through the still night. There came a sudden, slight sound to the window. The minister started to his feet and listened. All was silent for a space. Then came the sound at the window once more. It was as of a pebble lightly flung against the glass. Once more he listened, and once more came the sound. This time there could be no doubt about it. The minister was in a state of high nervous tension; but he was no coward, and anything was better than this suspense. He unlocked the study door and went downstairs. Here all was still, and the lamp in the hall was burning low. He turned it up softly undid the bolts and bars of the stout door, and fearlessly flinging it open, looked out into the night.

CHAPTER III

WHILE yet Mr. MacGrigor stood in the doorway straining his eyes in vain, the sound of feet was heard on the gravel, and a tall figure turned the corner of the gable in the dim starlight. Instinctively the minister clenched his hand ready for instant self-defence. But, stepping forward, so that the light through the open doorway fell full upon a handsome face, marred and marked by dissipation and exposure to the elements, John Anderson stood before him.

‘It’s only me, Mr. MacGrigor,’ he said, touching his hat carelessly. ‘I hope I hav’na scared ye, disturbin’ ye at this time o’ nicht when a’ dacent folks are in bed—except you an’ me, of coorse.’

‘Never mind that,’ said the minister curtly. ‘What is it you want?’

‘What I’ll mebbe no’ get,’ replied the other. ‘But if it’s a’ the same to you, I would raither speak to ye in by.’

‘Couldn’t you tell me here?’

‘No’ verra weel. An’ forby,’ he added with a shiver, ‘it’s geyan cauld the nicht, an’ a fire micht warm a body’s banes.’

‘But my fire is out long ago,’ said the minister full of repugnance to harbour such a guest.

‘Fire or no fire,’ persisted Anderson. ‘fower wa’s are warmer than the nicht air. I hae something to say or I wouldna been here. Are ye gaun to let me in or no’?’

The minister hesitated still, but it occurred to him that this man had yet a human soul, red with guilt though it might be, a human soul that perhaps the stings and whips of remorse were scourging to confession.

‘Well,’ he at last replied, ‘if you must come in, I suppose you must. But it will have to be quietly, unless you wish to rouse my housekeeper, who may be awake ere now for aught I know.’

‘Nae fear o’ me steerin’ her. I’m ower auld a haun’ for that. Man,’ he whispered proudly, ‘I can gang by a keeper’s hoose at deid o’ nicht wi’oot as muckle as waukenin’ a sleepin’ dog.’

Silently he entered behind the minister, who quietly closed the door, and then, following his host with wonderful softness considering his heavy boots, went with him to the study. Here the poacher stood awkwardly by the table, cap in hand, but

with a grin of stolid approbation at the cosily-furnished room. The minister drew forward a chair, and sat down opposite Anderson, leaning his elbows on the table, and placing the tips of his fingers together.

‘Well, Anderson,’ asked Mr. MacGrigor, ‘why are you here, and what do you want?’

‘Weel, sir, ye see,’ answered the poacher slowly, and without lifting his eyes from the cap in his hands, ‘ye have aye had a warm hert to oor Jessie, an’ I’ve come to think that the wife an’ mysel’ are jist staun’in’ in the lassie’s gate an’ yours. I’m no blamin’ ye for cryin’ aff, mind, though it is breakin’ the lassie’s hert.’

Here he paused that his last words might have due effect, but as they were received with silence, whatever impression they had made, he proceeded, ‘I’m nae scholar mysel’, but I ken fine hoo ye’re placed,’

The minister had been thoughtfully scanning his folded finger-tips. He raised his head and asked, with tired deliberation

And is that all that you have disturbed me at this time of night to say? Because if it is——’

‘But it’s no’ a’,’ broke in the other. ‘If we gang oot the road, you twa can dae as ye like, an’ we’ll never shame nor bother ye mair in a’ time.’

‘Well?’ asked the minister, with his eyes still steadily upon him.

‘To dae that I maun hae sillar,’ said Anderson, nervously twisting his cap, ‘at least eneuch for my ain passage. I can send for the wife an’ the weans when I mak’ mair.’

‘Which you are a very likely man to do,’ commented Mr. MacGrigor sarcastically. ‘But, to bring this discussion to a point, you want me to supply you with money?’

‘Ye’ve hit the nail on the heid, sir.’

‘In other words, you want to sell your daughter, and me to buy you off.’

‘I never said sae,’ answered Anderson doggedly.

‘No, but I am putting it that way, in the meantime. Now, look here, Anderson,’ proceeded the minister, with calm intensity, ‘I am absolutely indifferent as to what your views regarding my relations with your daughter may be. If I choose to marry her and she is willing, I shall do so in spite of you, and will take good care that neither you nor yours ever interfere with me or mine. Understand that once and for all.’

‘Oh, I understaun’ ye richt eneuch. But, for a minister, I maun say ye seem to hae queer notions o’ a faither’s richts an’ a dochter’s duties.’ Mr. MacGrigor waved his hand impatiently.

‘A father, Anderson, may forfeit not only his privileges but his rights by his conduct,’ he said, ‘and it may come to be that a daughter’s first duty is to herself. If I understand! matters aright, that is exactly the position of you and your daughter, who supports herself and helps to support your family, while you spend your time in evil ways and waste your small means in drink.’

‘That’s as it may be,’ answered the poacher with a shrug of his broad shoulders. ‘But I daursay it’ll serve your ends weel eneuch as an excuse for treatin’ my lassie as ye wouldna daur dae a better man’s.’

This shaft went sharply home and made the minister wince, but it could not shake him from the position he had taken up; and the poacher, with the not infrequent cunning of ignorance, began apologetically—

‘Of coorse, ye ‘re an honourable gentleman, an’ ’ll dae what ye think richt in your ain guid time by the lassie. I’m nae scholar, as I said, an’ hae maybe putten the thing in a wrang lich! Dootless ye wouldna care to hurt the feelins o’ my wife an’ mysel by aloooin’ that it was because o’ us ye had begood to fecht shy o’ Jessie. Let us drap that. We can baith understaun’ what we like, an’ you’ll gie me the money jist because I’m need in’ it, an’ then—then——’

‘Go on,’ said the minister sternly.

But the man was gasping and choking; his hands had dropped the cap upon the floor and were clutching tremulously at the knotted cravat about his throat; his eyes were fixed and staring upon the knife lying on the table.

‘Liar and murderer!’ burst excitedly from the minister’s lips, as he started from his chair. ‘Liar and murderer!’

Haud your tongue, sir, for God’s sake,’ cried the poacher with flashing eyes. ‘I’ll thole nae man to ca’ me that. I sweir to ye before God that I never laid a haun’ on him.’

‘Don’t add to your crimes by perjuring your immortal soul,’ said Mr. MacGrigor more calmly, ‘but tell me one thing. Is that knife yours?’

‘It was aince mine.’

‘That is enough. You will oblige me by going as you came, and the sooner the better for yourself, as I may find it to be my duty to put the police on your track.’

‘No’ sae fast, no’ sae fast, Mr. MacGrigor,’ he answered coolly, placing his broad back against the door. ‘I cam’ for money, an’ I’m no’ gaun till I get it.’

‘Am I to understand that you threaten me?’ asked the minister, facing the reckless man without flinching.

‘Ye can understaun’ what ye like, an’ nae doot I could thrapple ye whaur ye staun’ if I cared.’

‘You have come to the wrong man, John Anderson, if you think you can frighten me into granting what you ask.’

‘An’ fine I ken that,’ said the poacher, adopting another tone. ‘I was only tryin’ ye. Ye were aye as fine a spirited lad as I ken’t. If ye hadna been, Jessie wouldna been breakin’ her hert for ye the day. An’ I ‘m sure ye’ve faur ower guid a hert to refuse to help ony frien’, let alane Jessie’s faither, when he’s as sair in need o’t as me.’

His cunning use of Jessie’s name was not without its intended effect upon the minister, who began to pace the floor uneasily. He had wronged the poor girl by neglect, he who had been but a moment before reproaching her father; he had slighted her love and saddened her heart; was it not possible that against his will he had now to pay the terrible penalty of helping her disreputable father? Besides, the man had solemnly declared that he was innocent of the crime, and, bad as his reputation was, he had never borne a character for brutal violence.

He might be speaking the truth; but if so, what was his reason for so hurriedly fleeing the country as he proposed to do? At last the minister stopped. He had evidently made up his mind.

‘Answer me this, Anderson,’ he said, ‘why do you want to fly? The reason you have given I treat as nothing. If you expect me to help you, you will surely understand that you must answer me straight.’

‘Weel, its jist this,’ he replied with sullen reluctance, ‘I saw it dune.’

‘You saw this crime committed, and were coward enough to stand by and permit it?’

There was nae time to interfere, for it was dune in the twinklin’ o’ an e’e. But it was a fair blow. Jim Adams is no’ the man to strike a foul ane. It was a maitter o’ life an’ daith. Either him or Soople Sandy had to go.’

‘And so it is Jim Adams that you accuse?’

‘I accuse naebody, mind that. The name jist slipped frae my lips, But this is hoo it staun’s. I’m blamin’ naebody, but I happen to ken that the man that did the job has gotten awa,’ an’ I’m no’ gaun to bide here to get landed for a job I never did, but couldna weel disprove. I hae mair respect for my neck. That’s hoo it staun’s.’

‘I see,’ said the minister thoughtfully; ‘and, if I give you this money, I help to remove an important witness of a terrible crime.’

‘No’ at a’. The only evidence you or onybody will ever hae is that bit o’ bane and steel ye hae lyin’ on the table, whaurever ye hae gotten it, for there’s nae man’ll ever tak’ John Anderson leevin’,’ said the poacher desperately.

‘These are reckless words, Anderson,’ answered the minister, ‘but I am inclined to believe you mean it. Now tell me how much money you require.’

There was an eager light in the poacher’s eyes as he replied, ‘Twenty poun’, sir; if ye hae as muckle by ye. Wi’ that in my pooch I can be oot o’ the country ere they can clap een or haun’s on me.’

‘Twenty pounds,’ said the minister reflectively. ‘Yes, I think I can manage that’—he was about to say ‘luckily’—but substituted ‘as it happens.’ —‘And if I give you that for your daughter’s sake will you promise me to lead a new life in a new land, and make as much atonement as a ‘man may for a past worse than wasted?’

‘I will, sir. Sae help me God,’ replied the poacher solemnly.

‘You shall have the money then,’ said Mr. MacGrigor; ‘but I doubt if you will find it serve your purpose. If you are tracked and taken, I shall trust you to keep silence as to the source from which you got this money,’

‘Ye can trust me for that, sir,’ answered the other fervently.

‘In giving you this money, my service—I would I could say sincerely my duty—to you ends. With the exception of what has taken place to-night I shall state what I know, and, of course, place the police in possession of that knife, as I fear I should have already done.’

‘Jist ae word, sir, aboot that. Dootless ye fan’ the knife whaur ye fan’ the ither, as I hae heard, an’ saw my ineetials on’t. But ye’ll no’ forget that them belonging to anither man, whase name I let slip the nicht, are the same as mine, an’ that he bocht the knife frae me.’

‘I shall not forget,’ said Mr. MacGrigor. ‘Meanwhile you have little time to lose. I will be back in a moment.’

When the minister returned, he brought the money with him and placed it in the poacher’s great hand, which shut eagerly over it, and having secured his end, Anderson seemed in nervous haste to depart. Mr. MacGrigor made no attempt to detain him, and it was with a sigh of relief that he shut the door behind him, and having securely fastened it, went wearily upstairs to his study. As he entered, his eyes instinctively turned to the table where the knife had lain. It was gone. The

truth flashed upon him instantly. The poacher had made use of his absence for the money to secure possession of the weapon, and this, not less than considerations of flight for safety, explained his sudden eagerness to be gone.

The minister might perhaps have been forgiven if he had indulged mentally in a copious use of strong language about his own credulous trust, and the falseness of humanity. But it did not seem to strike him in that way. It rather woke in him a feeling of pitiful sorrow for the wretched man whose state was so desperate, and whose nature had become so depraved that he could deceive a benefactor even at the moment when he was accepting his benefits. To Mr. MacGrigor there came a vision of days far back in his early boyhood when this very man who had stood before him that night, the wreck of all that makes manhood noble, had been far otherwise. He could even remember him gradually lapsing into drink and slipping into evil habits and evil company, and descending with his family from a comfortable home to a cheaper and lower quarter, where the wife had lost heart, learned the shiftless untidy habits of her neighbours, and slipped down with the husband who had once been her lover.

However, what disturbed the minister most after he had gone to bed, to lie tossing sleeplessly from very excess of tiredness, was the fear that the man whom he had befriended so irregularly had, after all, the mark of Cain upon him, and when sleep at length came to his weary eyes it was only to plunge him into dark dream-deeps from which he woke affrighted ever and again.

Next day was Saturday, and as Mr. MacGrigor was engaged to preach on Sunday for an old college friend in a distant parish, he was to have left early in the day. But he lay long, and was sitting moodily alone after a late breakfast when old Janet came in to inform him that Jack Stevenson had called and was waiting to see him.

Mr. MacGrigor went to him at once, and had no sooner bidden him good morning and shaken hands with him, than his visitor plunged at once into the heart of his subject.

‘Do you know, MacGrigor, they say that John Anderson did it?’

‘Did what?’

‘Killed that fellow you found on the island.’

‘And suppose he did, what then?’

‘What then,’ said Jack in astonishment; ‘it would break Jessie’s heart.’

‘My dear fellow,’ answered the minister, ‘you are taking the matter with premature seriousness. Now, tell me, who are they who say it, and what proof have they? Only gossip, I suppose.’

‘It’s no gossip,’ said Jack positively. ‘The police arrested Jim Adams in a public-house late last night. It is known that he and Anderson and the dead man started together in a boat on a poaching expedition.’

‘But I was told——’ The minister stopped abruptly. He had almost said in his surprise that he had been told that Jim Adams had got away. Correcting himself hastily, he said, ‘but it may have been Adams who did the deed.’

‘It scarcely looks like it. Adams declares it was Anderson, and it looks all the more like it that he cannot be found. But mind, I don’t believe it myself.’

This was rather disturbing news for Mr. MacGrigor, who, however, managed to conceal his feelings, and asked—

‘And is it about this you want to speak to me?’

‘Not altogether. It’s this. The police were at Anderson’s house last night and could neither find him nor hear of him. They concealed their real errand, but Jessie discovered it when she came to the works this morning and heard the news. She went off in a faint at first, and has been in a dreadful state ever since, speaking to no one.’ The minister listened with a beating heart.

‘Yes?’ he said softly.

‘Well, her foreman told me, and I went to see if I couldn’t do anything for her, to comfort her, and that kind of thing, when in steps the governor, and, seeing whom I was talking to, ordered me out of the room like a dog. And he came to me in my laboratory afterwards and raged and tore about, and said that if I ever spoke to the girl again, he would kick me out of the works and cut me off with a shilling.’

‘I don’t see how I can help you in this matter, Jack,’ said the minister.

‘Oh yes, you can. The great thing is to find Anderson and put him face to face with Adams. It can’t be worse, and it may be all right. I don’t believe Anderson to be guilty, and I wouldn’t trust Adams’ word against a heathen’s.

‘But until Anderson is found his absence will be counted as conclusive evidence of guilt. You see?’ asked Jack eagerly.

‘Yes, I see what you mean, and think you are right.’

‘I am glad you agree with me. Now, you see you are master of your own time and money, unlike me. Couldn’t you use a little of both in pressing a search and urging on the police? It is not for my own sake but for Jessie’s,’ he said anxiously.

‘I know, Jack, I know,’ said the minister, taking his honest hand warmly in his own. ‘You are a good fellow, and I will see what I can do after I think it over.’

Meanwhile, as I am going over to the police station to see the inspector, I will go as far as the bridge with you.'

They left the Manse together, but their brief walk was a comparatively silent one, for Jack was busy thinking of that morning's scene in the works and all it meant for him, while Mr. MacGrigor was pondering over the irony of fate that brought to him this appeal to find the man he had helped to get out of the road.

At the Bridgend they parted, and Mr. MacGrigor proceeded to the police station, whence, after a long private conversation with the inspector, he returned to the Manse to pack his portmanteau and make ready for his journey.

Having bade good-bye to Janet, who gave him her usual warning with regard to damp beds in a strange house and draughts from railway-carriage windows, he was proceeding up the Main Street in haste to catch his train, when, coming towards him with bent head and down-cast eyes, returning home for the usual Saturday half-holiday, he met Jessie Anderson.

CHAPTER IV

ACCORDING to all probabilities the sudden meeting between the minister and the poacher's daughter promised to be more embarrassing to the girl than to him. But as Mr. MacGrigor stepped in front of her with the manifest intention that she should not pass without speaking, she raised her big brown eyes swiftly and looked him full in the face. There was no emotion in her eyes. They told nothing; they asked nothing. The tragedies of life do not lie on the surface. That is why we pass them by.

'Jessie,' said Mr. MacGrigor at length.

'Yes?' she answered, quietly enough.

'What can I do to help you?'

'Nothing,' she replied blankly.

'Oh yes, there is something,' said the minister eagerly. 'There must be.'

'There must be,' repeated the girl mechanically.

'Yes, yes,' he added, 'I was sure of it. Tell me, what is it?'

'What is what?' she asked, as if she had not heard or had forgotten what he had already said.

'That I can do to help you,' he exclaimed.

'Nothing' she again said. 'Nothing. Nobody can do anything.'

'Oh yes, they can, at least I can,' he added.

'What can you do?'

This was exactly what he was not prepared to say when it was put before him in this plain, blunt way. His very helplessness was embarrassing, and awakened a provoking sense of self-consciousness. He became suddenly aware that Jessie and himself were not alone, but were standing on the pathway along which the workers of both sexes were streaming home by no means too hurriedly to bestow a good deal of natural attention and curiosity upon the minister and the girl. Jessie showed not the slightest uneasiness at one thing or another; the intensity of her mental suffering numbed her mind to what might otherwise have hurt. But with the minister it was otherwise. He felt he must do something; but what it should be he was not prepared to decide. It was left to the girl to do it for him. As if waking suddenly out of a reverie she said with startling abruptness—

‘You are going from home?’

‘Yes.’

‘You will miss your train if you are not sharp.’

This was ridiculously prosaic in the circumstances, perhaps, but he took out his watch and looked at it. The girl was right. He put his watch back into his pocket, but ere he could say a word, Jessie had slipped past him and was gone, leaving him to hurry on to the station with a sense of littleness and disappointment at his heart and the uncomfortable conviction that he had played a difficult but not impossible part very badly indeed.

Jessie walked home along the Main Street, and up the Burn, where idle women were lolling against the doorways gossiping in strong Milesian accents, while their dirty and ragged children tumbled and fought on the road, revelling in the dust and the afternoon sunshine. Through these the girl passed quickly, for she was waking to the consciousness that she was an object of unusual and unpleasant interest to the scandalmongers of that buzzing quarter. Her home was situated in one of several low-roofed white-walled houses adjoining the old school, and was therefore, as everyone knows, slightly more select than the dwellings further down, even poverty having its lines of demarcation. When Jessie entered the house her mother was sitting by the fire, having evidently been too much occupied with her troubles and the baby on her lap to bestow a thought upon dinner. Two of the children were quarrelling in a corner of the untidy and poorly furnished kitchen, Dan was standing by the table whittling at a piece of wood and considerably littering the floor with rubbish, while Katey stood near him crying heartily, and making her dirty little face still dirtier with her dirty little hands. This was the happy home to which poor Jessie returned, and its discomforts and miseries had at least the merit of rousing her out of herself. It flashed upon her that she had a new duty in the world to undertake, that she had a fresh task to perform and one more burden to bear. For whatever his errors and shortcomings, her father had still been the head of the house. He had not exercised his authority, but his presence had always been at least a shadowy centre to the eccentric revolutions of the family circle, and his place, such as it was, had to be filled.

‘Mither,’ she said, as she unfastened and laid aside her little shoulder shawl.

‘Ay. What is it noo?’ asked Mrs. Anderson querulously.

‘Have you no’ got the dinner ready yet?’

‘Dinner? Hae ye nae thocht for onything but your stummack?’

‘I wasna thinkin’ sae muckle o’ mysel’ as o’ the weans,’ said Jessie quietly.

‘Dinna talk to me aboot the weans. I canna thole to think aboot anything but their faither. An’ if ye cared for your faither as ye ocht to dae ye wouldna be grumblin’ sae muckle aboot your dinner. The neebours, dacent folk, that cam’ in this forenoon had mair feelin’ for him than his ain dochter.’

So the neighbours had indeed been in, as Jessie had suspected, for there was in the kitchen an aroma of whisky, which was a not infrequent accompaniment of a grand palaver of the lady braves of the , Burn round Mrs. Anderson’s camp fire. That good woman’s love for fire-water was not a frivolous one. She took it seriously. She had early discovered that what was good for her man was good for her, but she had never happened to stumble on a later knowledge, that what was bad for her man was bad for her. She also took a philosophic view of the question. Her dear gossips might take whisky because it made them hopeful and talkative, cheerful and bold, defiant and rebellious, or, what was more probable, simply because they liked it. Mrs. Anderson assumed a loftier ground.

‘It gars me think,’ she would say, and she might have added quite truthfully, ‘it whiles gars me greet.’

It may be that wine maketh glad the heart of man, but whisky had this day made sad the heart of woman, in the person of Mrs. Anderson. She was mournful even to lugubriousness. Her speech was suggestive of epitaphs, she seemed to drape her little world in crape, and the rhythmic motions of her drooping head were as the funereal waving of sable plumes. And she sat staring at the dust and ashes on her slovenly hearth.

‘What are ye daein’ noo, lassie?’ she asked without looking round.

‘Gettin’ the dinner ready,’ answered Jessie as she bustled about, ‘an’ reddin’ things up a wee.’

‘Dinner!’ said her mother deprecatingly. ‘If we eat we maun leeve. If we dinna we maun dee. What’s the guid o’ eatin’?’

‘To leeve, mither, to be sure.’

‘An’ what’s the guid o’ leevin’? They canna mak ye leeve if ye dinna eat. An’ they canna mak’ ye eat if ye winna.’

Mrs. Anderson was not the woman to rise to great heights of eloquence, it will be observed, but she had nevertheless stated, if she had not discovered, a profound truth. No one being prepared to dispute her statement she proceeded—

‘An’ when ye dee whaur’ll ye gang?’

Little Katey grew alarmed at the dolorous prospect her mother was so patiently painting, and began to cry heartily once more, and in so doing to

beslobber the little face from which Jessie had just washed the traces of her recent outburst. But Dan, the diligent, who had again begun to bestrew with wood-whittlings the floor Jessie had swept clean, had no such nervous forebodings. He had an opinion and was wont to offer his young views without hesitation, with a promptness entirely uncalled for.

‘I ken whaur ye’ll gang, mither,’ he said.

‘Ye ken whaur I’ll gang?’ said his mother, emerging from the silence into which the thought had plunged her. But she was if possible more melancholy, and spoke in more doleful tones than ever. She was no longer motionless. She swung herself softly to and fro above her sleeping baby. She was thinking. That was her way.

‘Ay,’ replied Dan, almost eagerly.

‘Whaur?’ she asked, stopping her swinging, and gazing into the fire, above which the potatoes were now boiling in the pot which Jessie had hung over it.

‘To hell, mither,’ answered Dan with a cheerful readiness born of self-confidence.

This was not what his mother expected, and the effect upon her was excusably startling. She leapt from her seat, thrust the astonished and awakened baby yelling under one sturdy arm, and made a rush at Dan.

‘Ye young imp o’ darkness,’ she cried, making an abortive clutch at the hair of the young scape-grace, as he ducked under her outstretched arm and made a wild dive for the door. But Katey being in the way, was incontinently upset, and having an excellent excuse for letting loose once more her ever-ready tears, wept copiously and howled frantically. Dan was baffled by his mother, who was too quick for him, and turning from the closed passage of escape flung himself under the table.

‘Here, Jessie, haud the wean,’ said her mother, handing her the baby, ‘till I catch that young rascal an’ break every bane in his body.’ The young rascal under the table heard and did not tremble. He laughed. He was a very bad boy.

Now Mrs. Anderson was growing somewhat fat and scant of breath. Dan was as slippery as an eel, as nimble as a squirrel, as tricky as a monkey. So his mother had no sooner chased him out from under the table and run round to one side to catch him than she found he had dodged in below the table again, from whence she had to dislodge him once more, only to find that the same comedy had to be enacted on the other side. All the while she was venting her anger in stormy words of abuse. Dan was always ready with his retorts.

‘You, ye young vagabond, to tell me that to my face!’ she said, while she paused for a

breath.

‘Faither has tell’t ye waur,’ quickly put in young irreverence from under the table.

‘It’s a lee; it’s a lee,’ she protested violently. ‘Hoo could he tell me waur?’

‘Fine,’ answered Dan. ‘He has tell’t you mony a time to gang there.’

This was true, but it was too much. It roused her sinking energies. She made a fresh attack but adopted new tactics. She armed herself with the poker. She, bethought herself to overturn the table. But Dan was too alert and agile, and when his refuge came clattering to the floor he contrived that it fell with its top towards his mother. She leant over it to get at him with the poker, and over-reaching herself tripped and fell, while the boy with a wild whoop of victory escaped through the door into the open air.

Mrs. Anderson had no time to nurse any outraged dignity she might have felt, and quickly rose to attend to the youngsters who, from Katey downwards, had been nearly frightened out of their wits by the hubbub, and were bawling lustily in chorus. Jessie had vainly striven to hush the baby and coax the others into silence. She was almost driven to distraction. After dinner, Mrs. Anderson subsided listlessly into her old place by the hearth, and Jessie having sent out the two toddlers in charge of Katey, whose tear-besmeared face she had once more made uncomfortably clean for that emotional youngster, washed up the dishes, set them back upon the rickety old dresser, and scrubbed the kitchen floor. Then, having cleaned the doorstep, whose red sandstone she ornamented with a simple device in pipeclay, she went upstairs to the small low-roofed garret in which she and the children slept.

The room was close and stuffy, and Jessie’s first action was to open the skylight and fix it by the curved support which hinged to it. Her next was to turn down the bed-clothes for an airing, and then she sat down to think.

In a general way she had decided what must be done. It was easy to say that her father would not be missed, or if so that it would be all for the better. It is easy to whisper that the mother or wife whose prodigal son or scapegrace husband has drained himself to death is well rid of him. But in that whisper love is left out of count. Jessie loved her father. Nothing could atone for his loss by flight. She believed him innocent of the crime of murder. No suspicion would ever shake her in that belief. Whatever her father might be, given to drink and reckless when in it, idle and improvident, a breaker of the benign game laws, Jessie knew that he was neither coarse nor brutal. He never assaulted his wife nor beat his children. In

spite of all his shiftlessness he always managed to provide something towards keeping a roof over his family, and feeding and clothing them, although in a primitive fashion. Some of the highly respectable people who ignored him in the street and made a point of condemning his practices, but who contrived in some mysterious way to have their tables occasionally supplied with inexpensive game and salmon, could possibly have thrown a little light, had they cared, upon the sources of the poacher's fluctuating earnings. Jessie had no doubt that her father's innocence would yet, in some way or other, be established, and that he would return. Her whole desire was that he should come back to find his home, not as he left it, but worthier of the name, and more enticing for a man to abide by his hearth. She felt that she held the key to the position. The only money for the future upkeep of the house would be her small wages. She had been accustomed, perhaps indiscreetly, to hand these to her father. Now she would retain them and lay them out for the general benefit as she thought fit. Her mother would probably grumble, she knew, but Mrs. Anderson was more weak and foolish than wrong-headed or vicious. She must speak to her brother about going to work too, although that day's performance had not given much promise of hope in him. Yet Dan was a good-hearted lad, impetuous and a trifle impudent perhaps, but fearless and ready, and devoted to his eldest sister, who was perhaps the only human being for whom he had any real sense of awe. But whether Dan took to it kindly or not, Jessie made up her mind that she would speak to him. By the time she had mapped out to the best of her ability a course for the household ship and made the bed, it was time to go downstairs and have tea, which her mother had recovered enough of energy and interest in life to make. The little ones had returned, but Dan had not yet reappeared, and Jessie thought it better not to mention his name to her mother. Later on, when Katey and her little brother and sister had been safely put to bed up in the garret, and Jessie came down, she found that her mother had laid the baby in bed and was preparing to go out.

'Ye'll mind the wean, Jessie, if it waukens,' she said, 'an' I'll gang oot for the messages, an' if I see Dan I'll send him hame.'

'I'll gang oot for the messages mysel', ' answered Jessie, quietly but firmly. 'Dan'll come hame when he's ready.'

This was not quite what Mrs. Anderson expected or desired, and she said so in her forcible feeble manner. But Jessie had made up her mind and kept it so. She had the purse and meant to retain it. Each knew perfectly well what the other was aiming at. It was a fight in which whoever won should hold the mastery hereafter. The stronger mind conquered. Jessie went out. Mrs. Anderson, left alone, shed weak tears.

Jessie was not long about despatching her trifling business, and returned without having seen any signs of Dan. In truth she did not waste any time in

looking for him. Saturday was a busy night of shopping and gossip. She was fearful of being spoken to or of hearing her father spoken of. She was in quite a tremor of excitement when she got home. The very commonplaces of the butcher, the baker, and the grocer had filled her with alarm. When the evening had drifted slowly past she went up to the little garret, having said Good-night to her mother. There, from a few precious volumes, given to her in happier days by Mr. MacGrigor, she took a book and sat down by the lamp to read. Herein largely lay the secret of her pretty correct command at will of good English. As she sat and read on, the night grew more silent. The brawlers now and again broke the stillness as they swaggered noisily in the distance, but that was all. At last she was roused by a stealthy footstep on the stair. The door opened and Dan's head poked in. Her heart beat quicker. She had thought it might be her father.

'Ye're no sleepin', Jessie,' he whispered.

'Sleepin'? No. Whaur hae ye been?' He came forward.

'I've gotten a job.' Her eyes grew bright with pride.

'Whaur?' she asked.

'In Fordingfiel', he answered, fumbling in his pocket.

'Hoo could ye get a job the nicht?' she said doubtfully.

'Fine,' he replied, without hesitation.

'Wha gied ye it?'

'Maister Steevison. I met him an' he offered me a job in the warks, an' I'm to start on Monday.'

His sister felt inclined to throw her arms round his neck and kiss him. But this would simply have knocked him into helpless astonishment, and not improbably have driven him to the conclusion that his sister had gone mad. So she merely said—

'That's richt, Dan. Hae ye had onything to eat?'

'Oh, ay, Maister Steevison gied me a sixpence an' I bocht some scones.' He was again fumbling in his pockets.

'Ye shouldna tak' money frae folk for daein' naething,' said Jessie.

'But it wasna for daein' naething,' urged the boy, 'for he gied me a letter to gie to you,' at last producing the envelope he had been so diligently searching for.

'I thocht I had lost it,' he said, as he handed it to his sister, without observing the blush that coloured her cheeks.

‘Ye’d better gang to your bed noo,’ she said as she took the letter from him. And Dan being tired and sleepy was not slow to obey. Jessie put away her book, but sat a little while with the letter in her hand before opening it.

CHAPTER V

‘I WISH a man could be allowed to please himself,’ said Mr. Jack Stevenson to himself, as he meditatively puffed his cigar in the smoking-room of his father’s house. He was seated in a very comfortable chair in front of an exceeding blithe and cheerful-looking fire. A softly-shaded lamp stood on the table where a cheap novel lay open with its brilliant paper covers upwards. It was one of Fenimore Cooper’s. The few pictures which hung about were not exactly what might be called works of art, for Jack had no great taste for that kind of thing. In fact, wall-paper with a sufficiently pronounced pattern would have been good enough for him, but he felt that he must concede something to the vagaries of fashion and allow for the prejudices of his acquaintances. A stuffed bull-dog which had hung about its owner’s heels when in life, to the great uneasiness of its owner’s friends, lowered heavily out from a glass case; a couple of rods reposed in one corner with a fishing-basket hung above them, which sportsmanlike emblems were balanced by a gun which occupied the opposite corner. The room was well furnished and quite deserved its title of ‘The Snuggery,’ by which it was known among Jack’s intimates and himself, and was none the less comfortable that the age of nick-nacks and the craze for æsthetic mysteries had not yet dawned.

‘I wish a man could be allowed to please himself.’

He dwelt on the thought. There were pleasing possibilities in it. He flicked the ash from his cigar and glanced at the gaudily covered book on the table. It gave him an inspiration.

‘Now if I were a Red Indian,’ he said to himself, ‘I would marry the maiden of my choice, or have somebody’s scalp. I would, by Jove,’

It did not seem to occur to him that, in the event of his seeking to console his blighted affections in this undoubtedly savage manner, there would be some risk of losing his own scalp. But it is possible, that to a young man very violently in hopeless love, the loss or retention of his scalp seems a very minor affair. Still, in any case, he had not any present opportunity of realising any such contingency. The door opened, and his father unceremoniously walked in. Mr. Stevenson, senior, owner of Fordingfield calico-printing works, was not a man of ceremony. He hated it. He prided himself on being a ‘self-made’ man. He ostentatiously cultivated what he called a plain, blunt manner, which his detractors said had broken his wife’s heart, when she had only lived long enough after their marriage to leave her son behind her. This was only evil-speaking, of course. His friends said that he hid a very warm heart under all his bluster. His faculty of

concealment must have been phenomenal. Having helped himself to one of Jack's cigars from the stand on the mantelpiece—it was always one of his jokes that Jack could afford a better cigar than himself—he lit it and sat silently down. His son had an idea what was coming and saw no reason why he should precipitate it. He gazed steadily into the fire and puffed at his cigar till it shone luminous behind the ash. At last his father broke the silence.

'I presume I made my meaning clear enough to you to-day, Jack,' he said in his most dry, matter-of-fact tones.

'You spoke plainly enough, at any rate,' replied his son.

'I generally do.' This was his way of describing the swearing with which he was wont to garnish his remarks, more particularly in the works.

'I have given you time to think it all over.' Here he paused to look at the lighted end of his cigar critically.

'Yes?' said Jack.

'And now I wish to know if I am to understand that you accept my terms.'

'Which are?' answered his son, with aggravating coolness.

'You are either a bigger fool than I took you for, or you are playing with me.'

'Perhaps,' suggested Jack mildly.

'Perhaps which.'

'Perhaps—Oh, I 'm sure I don't know. What were you talking about?'

'What was I talking about? Good heavens! you are indeed a bigger fool than I took you for. Must I go over the whole wretched business again?'

'Not unless you wish,' answered Jack with cheerless alacrity.

Jack was without doubt not in an ordinary frame of mind. His father was at first not without a suspicion that he had been drinking. But he dismissed the thought.

'Look here, said Mr. Stevenson emphatically, 'I'm going to stand no nonsense. I have asked you if you accept my terms.'

'And I have asked you what they are.'

'You have asked me what they are!' repeated his father scornfully. 'I told you already to-day.'

'You told me so much to-day and in such a way,' replied Jack slowly, 'that you must excuse me if——'

‘Excuse be damned. None of your polite cant with me,’ said his father angrily. ‘I have told you that if you are known to speak again to the daughter of that murderer——’

‘He is not a murderer.’

‘Don’t interrupt me. I say that if I know of your speaking to Jessie Anderson, I will pack you penniless out of my works, and by heavens! if I see you or her as much as looking at each other, I will bundle her out of the works, and she can starve with her mother and her mother’s brats at home.’

‘Well?’

‘If, on the other hand, you marry Miss Gordon, I will make you a partner in the business.’

‘But if I do not care for Miss Gordon?’

‘If you do not, you will be better to learn to do so.’

‘If I chance to know that she does not care for me?’

‘Then you would chance to know what is most likely, as long as you lower yourself to run after a common work-girl, as you have been doing.’

‘But if she happens to love another,’ persisted Jack stolidly.

‘If she happens to love the devil,’ burst out his father, breaking the frail walls of his patience.

‘Oh, no, I’m quite sure she wouldn’t do that,’ said Jack, tossing away the end of his cigar, and reaching up for another, which he coolly lit.

‘I’m not sure but that she would be doing so, should she happen to fall in love with you,’ replied his father genially.

‘We shall see,’ answered Jack.

‘Ah. Now that is what I call , talking sense,’ responded Mr. Stevenson, as gaily as it was possible for him to do. ‘“We shall see!” Yes, yes. That is better; altogether better,’

‘I have promised nothing,’ said his son quickly, rather startled by the view his unreasonable parent seemed to take of his somewhat hazy remark.

‘Very likely not. But you are going to do so,’ observed Mr. Stevenson encouragingly. He thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, stretched out his legs and lay back in his chair, peacefully surveying the ceiling. At such a moment he was most dangerous. He was on the pounce. He was waiting for Jack to commit himself.

That youth had not a great faculty for mental analysis. But experience had familiarised him with his father's tactics and taught him how to meet them, when they could be met. For the present he simply desired to gain time.

'Well,' he replied, 'if I am going to promise, it is surely not imperative that I should do so

this very moment.'

'Why do you say so?' asked his father.

'Because I should like a little more time for consideration.'

'How much time do you want?'

'Until to-morrow.'

'Very well,' said his father, rising; 'I will give you till then, Jack. But you understand,' he added, as he stood at the door, 'there is only one answer that I will take.'

'All right,' replied his son sulkily, and without wasting any more words Mr. Stevenson was gone.

Jack sat motionless for a little while. Then he passed his hand across his forehead and ran his fingers through his hair, like one awaking from a dream. Finally he rose abruptly, went across the room, and stood bolt upright before a mirror which was fitted to the top of a small sideboard there. He surveyed his own reflection silently. He was not at all a bad-looking fellow, on the whole. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, and healthy-complexioned, he looked the very picture of robust youth. His brow was perhaps a little too low, his nose just a trifle too much tilted, and his jaws slightly more square than they might have been. They suggested, though ever so gently, the stuffed bull-dog in the glass case. Moreover, his broad shoulders and well-knit frame indicated a compacted strength which did not tend to disturb the resemblance. Jack apostrophised himself in the mirror.

'Jack Stevenson, do you know that you are a cad and a coward?' Having, naturally, received no answer, he proceeded.

'Whether you know it or not, you are, and ought to be ashamed of yourself. You are a disgrace to yourself and unworthy of the girl you love. Can you go and tell her that? You can? Very well. Go and do it. Your father has forbidden you, my fine fellow. You will defy him? Oh, no, you won't. You can't afford such a luxury. He wisely takes care only to pay you a very moderate salary, of which you foolishly take care to spend every farthing. He has you in his power: This seemed so eminently satisfactory that Jack smiled ruefully on his reflection, which in turn smiled ruefully back to him.

‘Jack Stevenson,’ he said, after a brief silence, ‘you are a blockhead, an ass, an idiot.’ There really seemed no more to be said. It was quite conclusive. Jack seemed to recognise this, and turning away, went to his desk, and having opened it sat down to write a letter. For a blockhead, ass, and idiot, he seemed to have a tolerably good notion of what he was about, since he was not long in completing his brief epistle, folding and enclosing it in an envelope, which he hurriedly addressed. Then he went out.

Firbank House, which belonged to Mr. Stevenson, and in which he lived, stood back from Hill Street, and was separated from his works by a long garden, the railway, and a couple of fields between which a road ran.

Jack had gone down Hill Street and was crossing the bridge over the Lennox, when at the further end he spied Dan Anderson sitting on the low wall of the stone arch which continues the bridge roadway above Dungarvel Lade.

‘Hilloa, Dan, is that you?’ enquired Stevenso cheerily.

‘Ay.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Naething.’ Dan had jumped down, and was nervously scraping the ground with the toe of one boot.

‘Umph. When are you going home?’

‘I dinna ken.’

‘Will you go home now if I ask you?’

‘I’m no’ sure.’

‘But I want a boy to take a note to your sister, and the boy that takes it is to have a sixpence.’

‘I’ll gang.’

‘That is right. Here is the letter. You are to give it or show it to no one but Jessie. You understand?’

‘Brawly.’

‘And here is the sixpence. Wait a minute.’ Dan seemed in a desperate hurry to be gone. ‘Are you in school?’

‘Left it,’ replied the boy tersely.

‘Working then?’

‘Na,’

‘Well, if you like to come to the works on Monday morning, I think I can promise you a job,’

‘A’richt,’

‘You will come?’

‘Come! Ay, I’ll come to be sure. I’m wantin’ a job, for my faither’s awa’,’

‘That’s a good lad. Now don’t forget the letter.’

‘Nae fear o’ me.’

‘Good-night.’

‘Guid nicht.’

Dan sped off as fast as his legs could carry him to the nearest baker’s. When he had eaten the scones in which he invested, he felt considerably revived, for, truth to tell, hunger had somewhat damped his young spirits. Also he had an excellent peace-offering to present at home in this promise of a job. And it was thus that Jessie came to get her letter.

Jack Stevenson instead of re-crossing the bridge went up the Ardornoch road, walked through Johnstoun, and turned down by the mill-dam where the road runs round by Dalbreck to Balgoyne. Passing Laverockbank gate, he found himself thinking of Miss Gordon. She was a jolly little girl after all and would make a rattling good wife to somebody. But she was too clever for him with her music, her chatter of books, and ideas that he could not follow. He had a dull suspicion that she sometimes poked fun at him. Mr. MacGrigor, now, was just the man for her, more especially since, as he believed, the minister had long ceased to take anything but a friendly, or perhaps pastoral interest in Jessie.

So absorbed was he in his meditations that he had crossed Balgoyne Bridge and gone up the Avenue, turned down the Moss Road and passed the Lennoxbridge Lodge of Tulligruach Castle almost before he was aware, and very soon he was at the little gate admitting into the private path to Firbank and had let himself into the house.

He went down stairs late for breakfast next morning. This, however, as a Sunday experience, was very far from unusual. Generally it caused his father to growl, but this morning the rumblings of the parental wrath were silent.

Mr. Stevenson had already finished his breakfast, and was standing on the rug in front of the sleepily-blinking fire with his hands under his coat-tails. There is an advantage in this position. It conveys an idea of importance, even, it may be, a mild impression of majesty.

‘Good morning,’ quoth Mr. Stevenson, senior, affably from the rug.

‘Good morning,’ replied Mr. Stevenson, junior, morosely, seating himself at the table.

Jack proceeded with his meal in silence, conscious all the while that his father was watching him intently from his position of vantage.

‘Cut yourself?’ at length observed that estimable gentleman curtly, apparently referring to a slight streak of blood on Jack’s chin, which he had inconsiderately snipped with his razor.

Jack passed his hand carelessly over his chin and glanced at it.

‘I suppose so,’ he replied.

‘It doesn’t look very respectable to go to church with.’

‘I am not going to church.’

Mr. Stevenson straightened himself in surprise. Jack was a most regular church-goer, though what he went there for was best known to himself. It certainly was not for the sermon, as he never by any chance happened to listen to it.

‘Not going to church.’

‘No. I am going for a walk. Mr. MacGrigor will not be preaching. He is from home.’

Mr. Stevenson snorted sceptically. With all due respect for Mr. MacGrigor’s talents as a preacher, he knew better than to give him credit for drawing Jack to church by the attractions of his pulpit ministrations.

A new idea seemed to strike him however.

‘Have you made up your mind on the subject I spoke to you about?’ he asked.

‘Not yet,’ answered Jack uneasily. Nature had never intended him for a hypocrite or the part he was playing.

‘Thrash it out, my boy,’ said his father cheerily, rubbing his hands briskly in each other behind his back, and rising and falling jauntily on his toes. He felt sure that he saw in Jack’s uneasiness signs of capitulation.

‘Thrash it out my boy, and I shall expect you to give me my answer when you return from your walk.’

‘You shall have it,’ replied his dutiful son hastily, almost choking himself with a too abruptly bolted mouthful.

When it came to be time for him to go to church, Mr. Stevenson had brought himself into a very suitable frame of mind for the reception of Bible truths, and went briskly off with the pleasant conviction that all was well.

But, from his point of view, all was not well; for the last church-goer had scarcely flurried past the 'plate' ere Jack was climbing the hill behind Gravelbank to reach the top of the wood above the quarry by a circuitous route, and there to meet Jessie Anderson. He arrived at the moor gate before her, and forthwith worked himself into a very unusual state of excitement.

Dan had perhaps forgotten to deliver to his sister the note in which he had asked her to meet him here. Worse than that, he might have remembered to deliver it, but she had decided not to come. The minutes passed. His excitement grew to trepidation, his trepidation began to change to anger. She must be laughing at him, despising him, scorning him. And she—what was she? Bah! He could do without her. Miss Gordon was worth twenty of her. He would go up to Laverockbank that very night and tell Miss Gordon—Stay! What was that? Away down the rough pathway, hastening towards him by the edge of the firwood and under the shine and shadow of its overhanging branches, flitted a woman's figure. His heart gave a great leap within him. She came nearer. It was she, it was she. He felt ashamed for a moment of his doubts, and then all else was swept away before the rising joy that surged through his veins. He was quite as ecstatic for the moment as if everybody had been trying to make the path of his honest love as smooth as possible. He advanced eagerly to meet the girl. She raised her downcast face to his and the message which Jack read in it dispelled instantly his golden illusion. Her expression was one of questioning reproach.

'I thought you were not coming,' said the young fellow.

'I thought so myself,' she replied softly, 'till the very last moment.' It was true.

They went together to the gate and stood there. There was an awkward constraint between them. Jack found himself in a totally different frame of mind from what he had anticipated. He had intended to plunge at once into a declaration of his love, and fling himself—metaphorically of course—at Jessie's feet. It suddenly seemed to him rather a difficult thing to do. So he floated away into talk about the weather, and drifted helplessly about on a sea of commonplaces. At last his companion said,

'But this is surely not what you asked me to come here to listen to?'

This rather staggered him. He stammered confusedly and remarked, 'No—oh, no—of course not.'

Then he lapsed into a silence which was more awkward than ever. The girl began to feel positively sorry for him. He stooped down and picked up a fallen twig. He began breaking it into small pieces which he flung away.

‘I wanted to say—that is, I thought——’ His thoughts seemed to desert him once more.

‘You wanted to say?’ repeated Jessie encouragingly, and he nerved himself for the plunge.

‘Yes, I wanted to say to you that I love you, and to ask if—if you love me?’ This was blunt enough, much more blunt than he had intended to be, but it had the merit of going straight to the point.

‘But what is the good of talking like this?’ asked the girl. ‘You know your father will not have it.’

‘Of course I know. I am not to speak to you; we are not so much as to look at each other, or it will be the worse for both of us.’

‘Then you know as well as I do the folly of speaking like this.’

‘No, I don’t,’ Jack answered vehemently. ‘If you say the word now I will leave the works. I have friends who will advance me money, and I—we—will go abroad and begin life anew,’

‘And you expect me to desert my family in their trouble,’ said Jessie with maidenly dignity.

‘Your opinion of me is certainly somewhat peculiar.’ Jack’s confusion had led him into an unmistakable blunder. In fact, in the heat and hurry of his mind he had blurted out a proposal which had just that instant occurred to him. He hastened to make amends.

‘Of course. You are right. I am wrong. But if you will only tell me that you love me, I can wait and work, work as I have never done, and can submit to my father’s orders, confident in your truth, and in the hope that it will all come right some day.’

‘But I cannot tell you that I love you.’

To the young man this came like a buffet in the face.

‘You cannot tell me that you love me I why?’

‘Because I do not.’ If Jack had only known, he could not have chosen a worse place for their interview than the spot on which they stood. To Jessie it was sacred with memories of her meetings with Alec MacGrigor, and every moment these

came thronging to her more thickly from out the tender past. Jack had indeed made a very unfortunate choice of a trysting-place. But he was pathetically ignorant of this.

‘But you might change. I am sure you might change,’ he pled.

‘Oh, of course I might change,’ she said. ‘I suppose everybody changes.’

‘Yes, yes. Everybody changes.’ Jack eagerly grasped at the hope.

‘So that you too might change.’ This turning of the tables was scarcely appreciated.

‘I don’t think so,’ Jack said slowly. ‘But if you change there might be a hope, might there not?’

‘Not until my father is proved innocent.’

‘Why?’

‘Need you ask? I shall never bring my shame upon any man. And my father’s shame is

mine.’

‘But if he should be guilty.’ He had blundered once more. The girl’s cheeks blazed into crimson, and she drew herself up proudly.

‘My father is not guilty,’ she said vehemently. ‘And the man who suggests that he may be is no friend of mine.’ Not another word did she say, but, turning away, hastened down the road by which she had come, and Jack, leaning on the gate as he watched her receding figure, was lost in amazement.

When he recovered himself, the thought uppermost in his mind was one of resentment, that she should place her father before him and be so eager to associate herself with him. Jack not unnaturally felt that he had received a thorough slight in having this drunken father—innocent of his suspected crime though he might be—preferred to himself. Behind and beyond this he could not see. It was enough.

He went for a long walk on the breezy moorland, ill-content with himself, and vainly trying to comfort his injured pride. He got home in a bad temper, shut himself up in the Snuggery, smoked pipefuls of tobacco, and reviled gods and men as heartily as any cobwebbed philosopher sunk in the blues of pessimism. He had not lost his appetite, however, which was a good sign, and emerged from his retreat for dinner, when his father wisely let him alone, having arrived at a correct conclusion from wrong premises. He concluded that the leaven was working, and would presently leaven the whole lump.

But at night, when Jack had again returned to his retreat after supper, his father followed him.

He did not sit down, but stood by the fire with one arm leaning on the mantelshelf.

‘I suppose you have made up your mind, Jack?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘You accept my terms?’

‘Yes.’

‘I knew you would, and I am glad of it. I relied upon your common-sense.’

His son showed no overpowering joy at this tribute to his quality of common-sense but smoked sullenly and silently.

‘I saw the Gordons at church to-day. Miss Gordon was looking well. Her father invited you up to Laverockbank to-morrow night, and I said you would be glad to go. I suppose I was right?’

‘I suppose so.’

And thus the matter was settled.

CHAPTER VI

MR. THOMAS GORDON was a worthy gentleman of handsome and dignified presence, who carried his sixty odd years erectly and easily, entertained hospitably and almost lavishly, was always affable and invariably good-natured, had an amiable wife and a charming daughter, and, above all, freely gave where required of his ample fortune. This fortune he had made in the colonies, although he had returned to enjoy it in his native country. Laverockbank did not belong to him. He was only occupying it for a season until the grand new house, which he was having built for himself upon an estate he had purchased on the western shore of Loch Lennox, was ready. People knew all this, but they did not know that a considerable portion of his money was invested in the Fordingfield print works.

Mr. Gordon knew absolutely nothing about the calico-printing business and cared still less. All he was concerned about was that it should earn him a good interest for his capital and that the interest should be paid regularly. His ideas upon both of these points were met, and hitherto he had been abundantly satisfied. But recently a friend of his in town, a man with ideas, had come forward with a proposal that he should embark his capital in a new and promising enterprise which was sure to yield phenomenal dividends. He had excused himself on the ground that his money was tied up, but the idea of successful speculation was not without its fascinations for him and the possibility of withdrawing from his investment with Mr. Stevenson lingered in his mind. Besides, as is the way with these gentlemen, the architect and the contractor were between them contriving to make the building of his house and the laying out of his estate much more costly undertakings than had been originally anticipated. Certainly he could well afford to meet any demands made upon him, but the prospect of increased income to meet fresh expenditure is always tempting.

He had even gone the length of hinting to Mr. Stevenson that he might withdraw, but that gentleman had first laughed at the idea and then taken it so seriously indeed that Mr. Gordon had hastened to disclaim any such intention, for which he was afterwards sorry, since he felt he had committed himself.

But the mere suggestion of such a possibility was disturbing to Mr. Stevenson and set him thinking. Nor did he rest until he had formulated a plan which would ensure the retention in the business of Mr. Gordon's capital.

These two gentlemen were sitting one day in Laverockbank, lingering over their wine after dinner. They were in capital spirits. Mr. Stevenson had reported orders plentiful, prices good, and works running overtime.

‘I tell you what, Gordon,’ he said, (the business is developing. We shall want more capital soon.’

‘More capital?’ exclaimed Mr. Gordon in surprise.

‘More capital, I said, and a young partner.’

‘Where are you going to get them? We don’t want to bring in a stranger to have him poking his nose into our affairs.’

‘Certainly not. I agree with you, and have thought of that. I propose that I should make Jack a partner, in which case I shall invest some further capital on his behalf. But I should like to see him married first. It steadies a young fellow wonderfully,’ said Mr. Stevenson, toying with his glass.

‘Undoubtedly,’ admitted Mr. Gordon, helping himself to some more sherry. ‘But it depends somewhat on the wife he selects, you know.’

‘Oh, yes. That goes without saying. But the long and the short of it is—you know I am not a man to beat about the bush——’

Mr. Gordon nodded—‘the long and the short of it is, that I am not without hope of seeing Jack marrying your daughter.’

‘Marrying Alice?’ ejaculated Mr. Gordon. ‘Such an idea had never occurred to me.’

‘Very probably not,’ observed his partner a little drily. ‘But it has occurred to me. I hope you have no objections to my son.’

‘Objections! Oh dear, no. I was only thinking how strange it was that such an idea had never crossed my mind before.’

‘I rather wonder at it myself,’ said Mr. Stevenson. ‘It seems so natural. You perceive the advantage of it. I put into the business some more capital on my son’s behalf, you put in some more capital as Alice’s portion, or,’ he was careful to add, ‘as a part of it. And there you have a nice little family concern, you see, with, as you very justly suggested, no strangers poking their fingers into the pie.’ Mr. Gordon had referred to noses, but it was immaterial. He gazed intently at the table-cloth for a little ere he replied.

‘I quite admit,’ he at length said, ‘that the proposal sounds well; and I believe that if it can be carried out it will be highly satisfactory. But I need scarcely say that we must leave the young people free from all pressure, and I would suggest that meanwhile they should not have any idea of this provisional understanding between ourselves.’

Mr. Stevenson of course cordially agreed, but he had not felt himself bound by this informal compact, to conceal from his son that there was a partnership ready for him in the works, whenever he married Miss Gordon.

It was a few weeks since this conversation had taken place, and the relationship of the young people which had then been discussed did not seem to Mr. Gordon to have altered at all.

‘I want to give the young people a chance,’ he was now observing to his wife as they sat together at the window, looking out at the browning woods across the river, beyond which the slopes of Cairn top took the gold of the September afternoon sunshine. ‘I want to give the young people a chance, and it was for that reason I asked Jack to dine this evening. But they seem slow to take it, and I don’t wish the young fellow to think I am throwing Alice at his head.’

‘I shouldn’t wonder, though, if he does. Young men now-a-days have assurance enough to imagine anything,’ observed his wife, who, never having been blessed with sons of her own, was inclined to quarrel with the gifts which the gods had vouchsafed to others.

‘I don’t think the young men of to-day are at all different from the young men of yesterday. Human nature is eternally the same,’ observed Mr. Gordon, which he considered a deep saying .

‘I am sure you are wrong,’ objected his wife. ‘I am certain that, when you were a young man, you would never have been so vain as to imagine that a young lady was being thrown at you.’

‘On the contrary, that is precisely what I did once think concerning a certain young lady who shall be nameless.’

‘But you soon found out your mistake, I should think,’ replied Mrs. Gordon, settling her cap with an amusing assumption of superiority.

‘I did,’ retorted her husband gravely. ‘I found that I had wronged the young lady’s estimable parents by blaming them for what she herself was alone responsible for.’

‘It is not true, Charles,’ said Mrs. Gordon, with an affectation of indignation so severe that it promptly broke down under the strain. ‘Oh, don’t be so ridiculous,’ she went on, laughing. ‘You know it is not true.’

‘It is true, I assure you, perfectly true,’ proceeded her husband solemnly. ‘And now in me you behold the result—a broken-down, impoverished, despairing, hen-pecked husband. But I can stand it no longer, and I will not; I am going.’ and he rose and made for the door with the regulation stride of the melodramatic stage.

There he paused, and sinking his voice to the nearest approach to sepulchral tones of which it was capable, added, 'For a drive.'

'Charles, do come here for a moment and talk sense,' cried Mrs. Gordon, who perhaps was none the less loved, because she never failed to be absurdly amused by his heavy attempts at humour.

'Are you really going for a drive?' she asked.

'I am.'

'Where?'

'Well, I was thinking of going into Kilrockton to see Mr. Graham,' he replied, 'about a little bit of business.'

'Oh, bother these lawyers. I wish you would leave them alone.'

'It isn't my fault, my dear. They won't leave me alone. I am only wanting to get this lawyer to protect me from another lawyer.'

'Oh, of course. And some man will be getting this other lawyer to protect him against your lawyer.'

'Very likely, my dear. Indeed I may say, I hope so. But that is not what you called me

back for?'

'No, I thought you might be going down Browhill way, and might bring Mr. MacGrigor up for dinner, seeing that you have invited Jack Stevenson.'

'Seeing that I have invited Jack Stevenson! Upon my word, I don't see the connection,' said Mr. Gordon with some surprise.

'There is no reason that you should. But will you just call at the Manse as you are going past and ask the minister to be ready for you as you return?' asked his wife persuasively.

'I suppose I must, since you wish it, But,' he suggested, 'he was from home yesterday, and may not have returned.'

'I am quite aware of it.'

'In that case?'

'In that case, of course, you need not ask him.'

'Can I go now?' asked her husband submissively.

‘You may.’ Upon which he left the room, and went out to find his dog-cart already horsed and waiting for him, for he had given his orders in the forenoon, of which fact both his wife and daughter were perfectly aware.

Mr. Gordon jumped up and took the reins. The man gave the horse his head, went along and opened the gate, and his master drove off alone. He called at the Manse, and finding that Mr. MacGrigor had returned home, made him promise to be ready to drive up with him to Laverockbank as he came back from Kilrockton. Then he drove into the town of the rock, and drawing rein in front of the County Buildings, left his horse in charge of a willing youth and went in to Mr. Granam’s office, where he remained so long that the willing youth, who strove to beguile the tedium by whistling comic tunes in all kinds of melancholy keys, almost despaired of his return.

Meanwhile, when her husband had gone, Mrs. Gordon was not long left alone, as Alice returned from calling upon some friends, who lived near the Mill of Hadden, and with whom she had remained to lunch. She had been walking briskly, and her pretty cheeks had a delightfully fresh colour as she came gaily into the room and flung herself into the most comfortable chair she could find.

‘Is father gone to Kilrockton, as I overheard him telling Black this morning he intended to do?’ asked Alice, the moment she sat down.

‘Yes. He is not long gone.’

‘And did you remember to ask him to bring back Mr. MacGrigor with him for dinner?’ Alice inquired.

‘Of course, child. I was not likely to forget when you seemed so anxious about it,’ replied Mrs. Gordon.

‘I wasn’t a bit anxious about it, I’m sure. I only thought he would be company for you when father is upstairs playing billiards with Mr. Stevenson.’

‘How very thoughtful of you,’ commented her mother with playful satire.

‘Yet you don’t give me credit for it till I almost beg for it, which is not encouraging.’

She rose and crossed the room to sit down, at the piano. Opening it, she ran her fingers nimbly over the keys. Then she seemed to let them run away with her into sparkling fantasias and sprightly improvisings. She was a brilliant player, but she was capricious.

‘I do wish you would play something I can understand,’ said her mother at length, looking up from her embroidery work during a pause in the playing.

Alice laughed lightly.

‘Why mother,’ she said, ‘you are a perfect Philistine.’

‘I am quite content to be a Philistine if it means that one desires what one understands, in preference to what one does not understand.’

‘You have hit it exactly, and the very first time too. But do you not perceive what a superior thing it is to understand what others do not?’

‘I really perceive nothing of the kind,’ replied her mother.

‘You do not? Then probably you will also not perceive what a still more superior thing it is to pretend to understand what nobody understands.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t quite follow you, child. But what are you going to do now?’ asked Mrs. Gordon, as her daughter rose and began searching among the music which she took from the stand.

‘Haven’t you played enough?’

‘Oh,’ replied Miss Alice, ‘I thought you wished some more. But I’m going to sing now, if I can get what I want. I declare this music seems to get into wilder confusion every day,’ she said, making confusion worse confounded in her impatience.

‘I don’t wonder at it in the least. You pull your songs and pieces out anyhow and shuffle them back at random.’

At last Alice seemed to have selected all that she wanted and returned to the piano, where she sat singing for a long time. ‘By and by they had a light tea cosily together, and one way and another the time passed quickly and pleasantly till dinner-time drew near, and brought Mr. Jack Stevenson, who was shown up to the drawing-room, where the two ladies soon followed him. After they had exchanged the usual greetings and had comfortably settled down, Jack said—

‘By the way, I have forgotten to ask for Mr. Gordon.’

‘He is quite well,’ replied Mrs. Gordon, ‘and went into Kilrockton early in the afternoon. He has not returned yet, but we expect him every minute now.’

‘He may have had to wait on Mr. MacGrigor,’ suggested Alice quietly.

‘Mr. MacGrigor?’ said Jack, turning to her with some surprise. He had thought he was to be the only guest.

‘Yes,’ replied Mrs. Gordon for her daughter, who had glanced up quickly to her and let her eyes fall again, ‘I asked Mr. Gordon to call for him and bring him up if he were at home. I am sure the minister is too much left to himself. If he were not so much alone, I am certain he would long ago have forgotten this dreadfully common girl, to whom he in some way committed himself in his

foolish young days. As it is, I am told he loves her still. Very indiscreet of him, isn't it? Don't you think so, Mr. Stevenson?' she asked, and then she wondered why Mr. Stevenson's face got so red, and why he took so long to reply to such a simple question. There was nothing strange about it. The possibility that Mr. MacGrigor still loved Jessie Anderson had never occurred to him. He was not ignorant of his past love for her, but he had somehow dreamt that all that was dead and done with. Mr. MacGrigor had been singularly reticent upon this very subject to Jack, who had, in his matter-of-fact way, drawn from this fact the exactly opposite conclusion from that which an acuter student of human nature would have done. He had consequently treated any of the village gossip that reached him as so much idle tittle-tattle, believing himself justified by his own observation and experience. So the possibility involved in Mrs. Gordon's remarks came upon him like a bolt from the blue. But he answered evasively.

'Really, Mrs. Gordon, I don't think there can be any truth in it.'

'Of course, I hardly expected you to say anything else. You men will hardly admit any fault in each other.'

'While the ladies——' Jack mildly began but stopped short.

'I know what you were going to say,' said Alice with inconvenient frankness. 'While the ladies find their pleasantest occupation in picking each other's characters to pieces. Now, isn't that what you were going to say?'

But her mother would have none of this, and told her that she might leave people to express their own opinions in their own way. Still, there are some people who will not be snubbed, and of these Miss Alice Gordon was one.

'But to return to what I was saying,' continued Mrs. Gordon, 'I feel sure that I am right, from what I have heard, and I shouldn't wonder if Alice——'

'Pray don't drag me into the discussion,' broke in that young lady abruptly. 'I know nothing about it, I want to know nothing about it, I wash my hands of any connection with it whatever,' she protested.

'Well, well, there is no need to be so excited about it,' said Mrs. Gordon. 'But I thought, Mr. Stevenson, that if it is true—I will admit, mind you, that it is just possible it may not be—but if it is true, I think that you are called upon, as a friend of Mr. MacGrigor's, to remonstrate with him.'

'But,' said Jack, with some hesitation, 'even assuming that it is true, have you considered that Mr. MacGrigor might resent, and justly resent any such interference?'

'He might resent it, I grant you,' replied Mrs. Gordon; 'but what then? You have the satisfaction of knowing that you have done your duty.'

‘My duty!’ echoed Jack. The situation was growing decidedly embarrassing.

‘Yes, your duty,’ reiterated his hostess with emphasis. ‘This sweetheart of his is a low-bred, common, ignorant, vulgar girl.’ Jack winced uneasily and raged inwardly. Mrs. Gordon prated on dogmatically. ‘And to aggravate matters her father has just committed a murder.’

‘He is only suspected of having done so,’ the young man found courage to say.

‘Is suspected, I will say, if you prefer it. At any rate he is a fugitive from justice. That the minister, under these circumstances, should continue to court this girl would be a scandal to the parish and an injustice to himself. You certainly ought to speak to him, Mr. Stevenson,’ she concluded earnestly.

Whereat Jack, with that strange perversity of mind, which with the sanest of us will play pranks at the most critical moments, burst into an outrageously hearty laugh, for which he had to apologise immediately.

‘Of course I cannot expect you to take the same view of the matter as myself,’ said Mrs. Gordon complacently, ‘but you might at least, as a friend, sound him on the matter.’

Mr. Jack Stevenson seriously began to think he had had enough of this in all conscience, and wondered if Mr. Gordon were never coming.

Alice’s silence too was exasperating. He wished she would either speak or go away. As a final desperate stroke, he said to Mrs. Gordon, ‘But don’t you think, Mrs. Gordon, that any hint or advice, or whatever it ought to be, would come better from some older and more experienced person than I am, such as’—he hesitated for a moment— ‘as yourself for example.’

The bare suggestion seemed to petrify the good lady. She sat bolt upright in her chair, and stared at the audacious young man. When breath returned to her ample bosom and speech to her paralysed tongue, she said, ‘Me speak to him about it! The idea!’

There is no saying what might have next happened, but at that instant there was a stir in the hall below, and Alice, rising quickly, went and opened the door, when the sound of familiar voices came up distinctly.

‘It is Mr. MacGrigor and father,’ said Alice, returning to her chair, where she seated herself and relapsed into silence.

Jack looked relieved. Mrs. Gordon resumed her benignant manner, but hurriedly said to Jack in a low voice, ‘Of course, you will not mention my name on any account, if you should speak to Mr. MacGrigor on the subject.’

‘Oh, certainly not. By no means. You may rely upon me,’ replied the ingenuous youth, and satisfied with this assurance, the sagacious lady adroitly changed the subject just as her husband and Mr. MacGrigor entered the room.

CHAPTER VII

LAVEROCKBANK HOUSE, during the tenancy of Mr. Gordon, was famous for its dinners, and however small and select the party might be, no means were spared by host and hostess to maintain the brilliance of this reputation. But for some reason or another, the dinner on this particular evening seemed to be a distinct failure. Mr. Gordon had had an exceedingly long and annoying interview with Mr. Graham about an action with which he was threatened in connection with a right-of-way across a part of his estate, which he was determined to resist, and he was so full of this that he could talk to Mr. MacGrigor of nothing else. The minister, who knew all about the merits of the case, and was unquestionably on the side of those who were opposed to Mr. Gordon, felt a natural delicacy in obtruding his opinions too strongly on his host at his own table, and was consequently compelled to listen to arguments with which he could not agree. Mrs. Gordon began to think that she had possibly compromised herself by the way she had spoken to Mr. Stevenson, and tried to resume her dignity by an unwonted stateliness of mien which was meant to strike awe into that gentleman's heart, should he be inclined to forget himself. But Mr. Jack Stevenson had food for reflection of various kinds, none of which was very palatable, and all of which was highly indigestible. For some time, indeed, he was so exercised in his mind, that it only dawned very slowly upon him indeed, that Alice was favouring him with a delightful attention which it was as rare as it was pleasant for him to receive.

Jack was not in the least what might be called an impressionable man. It required a deal of hammering to get an idea into his head, even if his heart were like a tinder-box. But once it got there it remained there. He had, perhaps not without reason, got it into his head long ago that Miss Gordon laughed at him. He recognized that she was much more clever than he was. This made him suspicious. So when it dawned upon him that she was making herself particularly agreeable to him on this occasion, he became watchful. He had a vague idea that she was laying a trap for him, that she would presently lead him towards a pitfall into which he should stumble, to have the consolation of seeing her looking down and laughing upon him as he lay helplessly on his back at the bottom. But she was not to be baffled. Insensibly he was led on, and finding the path pleasant and made surpassingly easy for him, with no snares set and no pit-falls dug, he took courage and went bravely forward.

Jack found himself growing much more pleased with himself and the arrangement of things in general. The world was not such a bad place after all. It

could certainly produce some very excellent wine, and at least one very charming woman.

‘If there is one thing I dislike in a man it is those sickening airs of superiority which some of them affect,’ observed Alice to Jack. ‘Now you never do that.’

‘Why should I?’ returned Jack. ‘I am not a superior sort of fellow at all, so what is the good of pretending to be so?’

‘That is just it, you see. You make light of the qualities you possess. Some other men, as I said, affect qualities they do not possess. It fills me with disgust,’ and the young lady shrugged her shoulders lightly.

‘Fills you with disgust, does it?’ replied Jack.

‘That is either very complimentary to the other men or to myself. You have positively not made it very clear which it is.’

‘There now, that is just like you. I choose to make nasty remarks, and you protest forsooth that it is you who ought to accept them instead of those for whom they were intended. It is just like your good nature.’

‘You really give me credit where none is due. I am about as ill-natured as I could well be.’

‘Oh, Mr. Stevenson!’ exclaimed Miss Alice roguishly, ‘you are just doing what I think you would call “giving yourself away.” Don’t you see that you are making light of a quality you possess—just as I said you did?’

‘I can’t say that I do,’ replied Jack slowly.

Then a brilliant idea seemed to strike him. ‘But perhaps you include stupidity among my estimable qualities. If you do, I shall upset your fine theory by not disclaiming it,’ he said.

‘But I do not,’ she answered, with a sharpness that sounded sweet to his ears. ‘Seriously, Mr. Stevenson, you do not do justice to yourself. You are too modest. There is one quality of which I should like to see you giving evidence, but which I am sometimes afraid you do not possess.’

‘There is an admission,’ retorted Jack. ‘There is then one quality which I may not possess. Of course it is a good one?’

‘Certainly,’ she answered; ‘to my mind at least, or I would not wish you to give evidence of it.’

‘Name it please; do name it, and put me out of my agony.’

‘Ambition,’ said Alice with decision, turning to him with a flash in her eyes.

‘Ambition?’ he repeated in surprise. ‘Ambition!’ This was perhaps the very last thing he would have thought of.

‘Do you mean that I should be a member of Parliament?’ he asked. It was really the only thing that occurred to him.

‘A member of Parliament!’ she exclaimed scornfully. ‘A maker and breaker of pledges, a feather for faddists to blow about, the puppet of a party, the cackler of a clique, the tool of toadies and tuft-hunters! That were a worthy ambition truly.’

‘I told you I was stupid,’ said Jack apologetically.

He was a good deal bewildered by the girl’s outburst. ‘Upon my word, I thought it was a legitimate enough ambition for a man.’

‘For some men it undoubtedly is,’ she admitted, ‘but these men are few. They are the men of indomitable will, unscrupulous audacity, keen insight, to whom the world is a chessboard and men but pawns. You are not one of these.’

‘But I really do not see what you are driving at.’

‘What I am driving at is this. Each man ought to aim at the highest which is possible for him.’

‘I quite agree with you.’

‘I am glad to hear you say so.’

‘And the highest for me is just what I do not know.’

‘You don’t? Then let me tell you. You ought to make a good marriage.’ Jack looked at her in amazement to see if she were laughing at him. He thought she had led him into a trap after all. But she seemed perfectly serious. Mrs. Gordon evidently thought it time to interfere.

‘Really, Alice, that seems to me to be’ scarcely a subject which you are qualified to discuss with Mr. Stevenson.’

Her manner, however, conveyed that what she actually meant was that the subject was a highly improper one.

‘I am sorry to differ from you, mother,’ replied Alice briskly, ‘I am sure father will agree with me,’ she said, appealing to him and dragging him away from the miserable right-of-way grievance, greatly to Mr. MacGrigor’s relief. She resolved that if her conversation with Jack was to be interfered with it should become general, and that her mother should not gain possession of it.

‘What is it you suppose I am to agree with you about?’ asked her father.

‘I was saying that Mr. Stevenson ought to make a good marriage, and mother objected.’ This was not stating her case with precision, but she very likely conveyed the impression she intended.

Her father laughed.

‘I am astonished your mother should think that Mr. Stevenson ought not to make a good marriage,’ he said, upon which his wife protested that she had said nothing of the kind.

‘Well, well,’ he said, waiving the difference aside as a matter of no moment, ‘we need scarcely discuss that. Every young man ought to make a good marriage.’

‘But what is a good marriage?’ Mr. MacGrigor asked. ‘There is the rub.’

‘A good marriage,’ answered the incorrigible Alice, ‘is one which brings money, position and influence—such as Mr. Stevenson, for example, might make, were he to marry into a wealthy county family.’

Mr. Stevenson modestly invited them to leave him out of account, and looked uncommonly embarrassed in doing so.

‘What have you to say to such a worldly-wise heresy?’ said Mr. Gordon, appealing to the minister.

‘Oh, I think that a good marriage, I might say the best marriage, is one founded upon mutual affection and esteem.’

‘What a charming picture of disinterested union!’ remarked Alice satirically. ‘I wonder how it is that so many ministers manage in marrying to make their interests and their affections coincide so well?’

‘You forget you are speaking to Mr. MacGrigor,’ said her mother reprovingly.

‘Oh, not at all, I assure you. I said so just because I wanted some information, and thought Mr. MacGrigor might be prepared to supply it.’ But he had evidently no intention of doing so. He was in reality wondering what to make of this unconventional girl, and not a little puzzled to know if she were determined to revenge herself upon him for a certain little incident on Inch Bracken.

‘But why should you be so hard on the ministers?’ queried Mr. Jack Stevenson.

‘Because ministers should not be wed to wives at all. They should be married to the Church, like the priests of Rome. They should try to make earth like heaven, and I think they cannot begin better than by neither marrying nor giving in marriage—as regards themselves, I mean’ she added hastily.

This was very dreadful, and there is no knowing to what it might have led, had not Mrs. Gordon wisely discovered it was time the gentlemen were left to their wine, and withdrawn along with her daughter, whose extraordinary opinions no one seemed to care to controvert. Alice managed to whisper to Jack as she was rising that he must not let the gentlemen linger long over the wine, as she had been practising some songs which she was dying to sing to him.

When they joined the ladies in the drawing-room, Jack was soon in the gayest humour. It seemed that he was finding it a very pleasant and enjoyable evening, while Mr. MacGrigor felt that Alice might have bestowed a little less attention on Jack and a little more on himself. At length the minister gently remonstrated. 'You are singing so many songs, as you tell him, to Stevenson,' he said, 'that you might surely spare one for me, Miss Gordon.'

'I declare I had quite forgotten you,' she replied, turning round upon him with a saucy laugh. 'But since you have reminded me, of course I shall be glad to oblige you.'

The minister regretted on the instant that he had asked her at all, and was more than ever piqued at an open indifference which fell very little short of being rudeness.

She looked over her music carelessly and then turned to Jack, who was standing close by.

'Tell me what I shall sing to him, Mr. Stevenson.'

I do believe I have sung all the songs I care to sing,' she said coolly.

'I hope you won't trouble yourself on my account,' remarked Mr. MacGrigor.

'Oh dear, no. Don't distress yourself about me. I am sure Mr. Stevenson and I shall manage to satisfy you between us. Have you found anything yet that you think will do?' she asked Jack, who was fumbling awkwardly among the music, looking for he knew not what.

He had not found anything that he thought would do, and she had to help him, so that their hands and heads got, of course, very close together.

Mr. Gordon had gone out for a moment, leaving Mr. MacGrigor sitting beside Mrs. Gordon, who found it necessary to observe that Alice seemed scarcely herself to-night.

Mr. MacGrigor had really not noticed, but sincerely hoped not.

'She is such a strange girl, you know,' Mrs. Gordon thought fit to explain. 'She is sometimes a perfect puzzle to Mr. Gordon and myself.'

Mr. MacGrigor would not have believed it.

‘It is true, I assure you,’ said her mother. ‘I believe she actually does not understand herself sometimes.’

At which Mr. MacGrigor expressed his surprise, but was wise enough to conceal his doubts. He was convinced that the young lady knew very well what she was about.

A song had at last been found. Alice played over the prelude. The song was in a key which exactly suited her voice, and the quaint words had been wedded to music which seemed as if an echo of the poet’s thought.

‘Give me more love, or more disdain,’
she sang, with a passionate expression which was not lost upon the minister.

She was in the middle of the last verse when her father returned. Instead of seating himself again beside the minister he went and stood by his daughter.

When she had finished, and before the minister could thank her, her father abruptly said—

‘Why, Alice, the writer of that song seems to have been pretty free with his language. Your taste seems to be scarcely what it ought to be. What do you think of it, Mr. MacGrigor?’ he asked, turning to the minister.

‘I really have never heard the song before,’ replied that gentleman, ‘and would hardly like to express a decided opinion at the first hearing. It is surely a new song, Miss Gordon,’ he said, turning to her.

‘Oh, no,’ she answered readily enough; ‘it is pretty nearly three hundred years old, I believe, and was written by a gallant gentleman of the name of Carew.’

‘Ah! Carew,’ said the minister with little approval in his tone.

‘Yes, Carew,’ replied Alice, ‘an old writer, it is true, but the new men can write nothing approaching to the old.’

‘Which is perhaps not greatly to be regretted, if this is a sample,’ suggested Mr. Gordon, ‘But suppose we leave the old and new writers to fight it out between them, gentlemen? What say you to a game at billiards? I have just had the gases lit, the cloth is in splendid order, the balls and cues await you, and—I suppose you ladies have no objections?’

‘Oh, not at all,’ answered his wife.

Alice said nothing, but glanced at Jack, and Jack in turn glanced at Mr. MacGrigor, hoping that he might decline his host’s proposal. But the minister, who had experienced quite enough of Miss Alice’s caprices and singing for once, was only too glad to escape, although he cared nothing for billiards.

‘I shall be very glad to accompany you, Mr. Gordon,’ he said rising, ‘and have a smoke while you and Mr. Stevenson are playing. And I may be able to mark for you, if you don’t bewilder me too much with big breaks.’

Then curiously enough Miss Gordon discovered that she had a nasty headache and must have retired at any rate,—in fact, that she was rather glad her father had proposed billiards, as it spared her the unpleasantness of having to ask them to excuse her.

Jack Stevenson, honest soul, was filled with grief and displayed a most woe-begone appearance, lingering a little at the door behind the others. His evident, although silent, solicitude for Alice did not go unrewarded. She bade him stay for a moment, and going towards the window, in which some flowers were arranged, returned with a lovely rose which she fixed in his coat.

‘Now,’ she said, standing back to look at it, ‘your appearance is ever so much improved.’

‘It can stand a deal of improving,’ Jack said laughingly.

‘Now, don’t be having Mr. Stevenson keeping the others waiting,’ put in her mother considerably.

‘I’m not keeping him,’ protested Alice. ‘You can go, sir,’ she said roguishly to Jack, ‘and as I won’t likely see you again to-night, I will say good-night, and you can say the same to Mr. MacGrigor for me. And oh!’ she added, bringing him back, ‘I shall expect you to call soon and ask for my headache.’ Which Mr. Stevenson effusively assured her he would do, and then went to the billiard-room carrying his light heart and pretty button-hole with him, the possession of neither of which escaped the minister’s notice.

The two players seemed to enjoy their games remarkably well. Mr. Stevenson was delighted at being able to give easy shots away to his host. He felt that it was the right thing to do, especially to the father of such a charming girl as Alice. Mr. Gordon discovered that he was becoming a much better player than he could have believed, for he found himself able with a level start to beat his opponent, who had formerly been able to concede him a good twenty-five points in a hundred up, and yet run out easily. So he beamed with pleasure and pride, and was particularly pressing to Jack with the spirit decanter which stood on a convenient table. Mr. MacGrigor sat meditatively smoking a cigar, and just giving enough of attention to the players to be able to respond from time to time to their calls to have their scores marked up. He felt that he had been thoroughly fooled and played with; he had more than a suspicion that Alice had been the means of having him invited there that night for her own purposes, and that she had fulfilled these purposes to the letter. He was tired of it all and rather disgusted with himself. He longed to be

back in his Manse, and was not sorry when the time came for going, when the Good-nights had been said, and he found himself on the way home with Jack.

Jack had in the course of the night consumed a good deal more wine and spirits than he was in the habit of taking, and between this and the influence of Alice's smiles, he was in a most genially sympathetic mood, and inclined to be exceptionally talkative—even to the verge of indiscretion. The transition into the cool night air rather increased than diminished these tendencies.

He had much concerning himself to say to the minister, and not a little about other people. None of it was very important, but his good natured babble was amusing in its exaggerated self-importance. Mr. MacGrigor listened for some time in silence, slightly amused and a little pained.

But at length, just when they had got to Knaperton Toll, Jack's rambling remarks suddenly branched off in a new direction.

'I am awfully sorry for you, MacGrigor,' he said, taking the minister's arm. 'It was a little rough on you. But don't you be too upset. I don't think it was she who was to blame.'

'What are you talking about, Jack?' asked Mr. MacGrigor with some surprise.

'About her—Alice. The way she sat on you, you know,' explained Jack.

'Oh! Who said she was to blame?'

'Nobody said it, of course. But then, you see, we don't always say what we think. Now, I believe she was put up to it.'

'Put up to it? How do you mean?' asked the minister, a little bewildered.

'The old lady,' replied his companion, mysteriously.

'What old lady?' queried the other sharply.

'Her mother, of course,' said Jack sententiously.

'Doesn't like the way she says you go on with Jessie Anderson. Said so.'

'What business is it of hers, I should like to know? Who did she say it to?'

'To me. If you don't believe me, ask Alice. She was there.'

'She was?'

'Of course she was. And I was to speak to you about it, and tell you what a disgrace to the parish and a scandal to yourself—or perhaps it was the other way about—you would cause if you didn't stop it. But oh! I say!'

'What's the matter?'

‘I forgot. I wasn’t to tell you that she said so.’

‘You ‘re a little too late in remembering your instructions, I’m afraid,’ said Mr. MacGrigor drily.

‘It doesn’t matter, old man,’ replied Jack confidentially.

‘Of course you can hold your tongue better than I can, and you won’t say a word about it, I know’—which was doubtless a very comforting reflection to the indiscreet young man.

There was silence for a little between these two till Jack broke out again.

‘But you mustn’t think I’m against you even if you do love Jessie Anderson.’

‘It is very good of you to say so.’

‘Oh, not at all. What I say is that every man should be allowed to please himself.’ A dim idea was beginning to shape itself in Jack’s brain that it was possible MacGrigor loved Jessie, and if he did so that it would be well to encourage him. He had hitherto had a suspicion that the minister loved Alice; but events and the girl’s own pleasing attention to himself that night considerably altered the indifference with which he had hitherto treated this suspicion. He was the last man to become a schemer, but he could not help generalising in this way.

‘That every man should be allowed to please himself,’ replied Mr. MacGrigor reflectively, ‘is one thing; whether, even if he be allowed to please himself, he ought to do so, is another.’

The subtle distinction was entirely lost on Jack.

‘I don’t see what you’re aiming at,’ he answered.

‘But Jessie Anderson is a good girl, and a pretty girl, and I would do a good deal for her. I have got her brother into the works after a stiff row with the governor. They will need his wages at home.’

‘That was very thoughtful of you.’

‘Oh, no. We needed a boy at any rate, and this one happened to come my way. Now,

if Jessie——’

‘I do wish you would let the girl alone,’ remonstrated Mr. MacGrigor irritably.

‘But after what I heard to-day, I thought you and she might——’

‘What you think is, of course, no concern of mine,’ interrupted the minister. ‘But when it comes to talking, then I do wish you would mind your own business.’

The young man was completely taken aback. He had never known MacGrigor to speak in this way before.

They were now passing Dungarvel School, and had almost come to the end of the bridge, where they would part.

Jack recovered himself and said:

‘You needn’t cut up so rough about it, MacGrigor. I didn’t mean any harm, you know.’

‘I know. I know,’—answered the minister impatiently. ‘But’—he continued, dropping his voice and passing one hand nervously across his forehead, ‘but I suppose I must ask you to excuse me. I am feeling rather unwell.’

They were standing at the Bridgend, with the murmur of the river filling the sweet silence of the night.

‘Let me see you home, then,’ said Jack kindly.

‘Oh, nonsense,’ It is time you were in bed. You have to rise earlier than I have. It is only a passing trembling, I daresay, that has come over me. Good-night.’ He held out his hand.

‘Good-night. I shall see you soon.’

‘Oh yes, of course.’ And so they parted, Jack crossing the bridge, and Mr. MacGrigor going along the Main Street by the side of the river. But they were not to meet soon, nor for many days.

CHAPTER VIII

THE carrion crows of gossip perch patiently on every house and cottage ridge in the Vale of Lennox. Their food comes oozing up the chimneys, with the smoke, all the more palatable to them because of the soiling it suffers in its ascent of the sooty vent. Occasionally they bestir themselves at the sound of an opening door, and drop down below to peer across the threshold with impudent eyes. But whenever one of these pestilent birds has gorged itself on the ridge or leered by an open doorway it flaps its way heavily to the nearest of its repulsive kind and croaks hoarsely and volubly. Then on every housetop there is a great sidling to and fro of all the carrion crows, with noisome cawings and flapping of black wings. And yet people wonder in the Vale of Lennox why what was spoken in a whisper is presently proclaimed with a shout, and why the thing done in secret is so nakedly revealed.

Dr. Connell made a morning call at the Manse, and within an hour or two it was known throughout the Vale that the minister was seriously ill, while it was said with ready confidence that the seat of his sudden malady lay in his heart, which had been most shamefully outraged by that graceless flirt, Miss Gordon, during a small dinner-party at Laverockbank on the previous evening. Whereat the hoarse throats croaked and the black wings flapped indignantly, and the moral sense of the Vale was inexpressibly shocked.

Mr. MacGrigor, however, knew nothing of the suffering sustained by the community. He was, in fact, too ill to have any thoughts for the outside world. The rigors which had seized him during his walk homewards with Jack Stevenson on the previous evening proved the premonitory symptoms of rheumatic fever. Old Janet was a woman of infinite resource in dealing with colds, chills, and passing ailments, and she worried Mr. MacGrigor sorely by the application of many well-meant remedies, before she was constrained to admit that her ancient skill was not equal to the occasion, and was fain to send for the doctor in the early morning. Dr. Connell answered promptly to the summons, which arrived when he was in the middle of his breakfast, actually not waiting to open his second egg, which was indeed a proof of his friendship for the patient to whose bedside he had been so hurriedly summoned. That morning visit was only the first of a series, and there came a time when it required all Dr. Connell's courageous skill to reinforce the failing powers with which the minister heroically fought against the insidious enemy which was beleaguering and sorely pressing the citadel of life. Through it all, Janet played a brave part; taking no count of trying days and sleepless nights,

sacrificing herself with the uncomplaining and unselfish devotion of which only the great heart of a loving woman is capable.

There came a night which was to be memorable to one wakeful watcher evermore. Darkness had fallen upon the valley amid driving rain and sweeping storm. The scattered and feeble lamps flickered in the windy streets, gleaming fitfully upon streaming roadways and muddy puddles. One by one the lights in the village windows had gone out, but from behind the blind of an upper room in the Manse, a steady light was flung unchanging through the gloom. Within sat Janet by a blazing fire, listening to the storm without, but, with her elbow resting on her knee, and her cheek held in the hollow of her hand, keeping her face turned towards the bed upon which her kind old eyes watchfully rested. To-night Mr. MacGrigor was strangely restless, and his nurse was unusually anxious, being not without a fear that she should have sent the girl-help, whom she had got in since the minister fell ill, for the doctor before the night had grown so late. The sick man turned himself with a moan and flung his arm outside of the coverlet, upon which it lay feebly. Janet moved across and, lifting the exposed arm with gentle care, drew the covering softly over it. She stood for a moment watching, and was just about to return to her chair by the fireside when the minister's lips moved, and she heard the sound of a babbling whisper. Instinctively she placed her hand on his brow, and would have soothed the restless dreams of his fever. But at the touch of her rough and work-worn fingers, kindly as was their pitying movement, the minister fretfully turned away his head and lay with his face to the wall. Then his parched tongue was loosened and he spoke of the things that disturbed his clouded brain .

‘The knife! I have no knife. I tell you he took it away with him.’

‘Dearie, dearie me,’ sighed Janet. ‘I dae wish I had sent for the doctor. He’ll dae himsel’ ill if he gangs on like this. It’s only me—Jinat, your ain Jinat—that’s wi’ ye, Mr. MacGrigor,’ she said to him in coaxing assurance.

‘Don’t lie to me,’ he went on wearily; ‘but lawyers are all liars. That is why you cannot understand that I am speaking the truth. I tell you John Anderson has the knife. Yes, yes, I found it, but he came to me and stole it the night he went away.’

‘Oh, what can I dae, what can I dae?’ murmured the old woman excitedly in the dread silence which followed the minister’s wandering words of revelation. ‘I shouldna hearken, but I canna help it. It’s no my fau’t, it’s——’ but Mr. MacGrigor was again speaking.

‘Yes, I gave him money to go away. Why? Because he was Jessie’s father. No, I swear that I did not know he killed Soople Sandy. Why did I not tell you this before? Because he was Jessie’s—oh, my God! let me out of this. The air is

stifling. I am choking.' Again he moaned piteously in his helpless unconsciousness and moved uneasily, turning his head restlessly on the pillow, and aimlessly thrusting his arms, with their white wrists and thin hands, from underneath the coverlet. Once more Janet 'happed' him lovingly up, and now, looking upon the pale haggard face turned to the light, a great fear entered into her heart. The minister, as if exhausted, neither spoke nor moved again, and Janet, after watching by the bedside until she was assured that he had sunk into quietude again, went back to her chair by the fireside, to muse upon the things which she had heard.

The old housekeeper was troubled. She was uncertain whether her master had betrayed a secret, or whether his lips had only let loose the lurid imaginings of a diseased brain. If the words were but those of a fevered nightmare there was no more to be said. But if, and, however unwillingly, she felt bound to admit to herself that it was just possible, the sick-room had given up one of the secrets of life—and death, then—why, what then? she asked herself; but the answer was not easy to come by, and the present had its own duties and difficulties.

From that night Mr. MacGrigor began to mend, not only surely but swiftly, and the doctor proudly declared that he had never seen a more rapid recovery. Janet had a theory that her patient had unconsciously got a heavy burden from off his mind on the one night when his wandering wits had raved so distressingly, but upon this subject she kept a loyal silence, and breathed her secret to neither man nor woman.

The days went by, bringing returning strength to Mr. MacGrigor, who, from being able first to sit up in bed, and then to sit by the fire in his bed-room, was now able to be back for a steadily lengthening time each day in his familiar study. Here one day he was found by Dr. Connell, whose visits had become only occasional.

'I wanted to know, doctor,' said Mr. MacGrigor, 'if I may have a smoke? I have had a dreadful longing for a pipe during these last few days.'

'A smoke!' answered the doctor with a pleased smile. 'Certainly. Why, that's just what I have been waiting to hear, and it's the best news I have had about you yet.'

'I was afraid you might forbid me, or I would have asked you before this. The fact is,' he said, filling his pipe from a jar on the mantel-shelf, 'I have stood it till I could put up with it no longer.'

'You have been a martyr to a false fear,' laughed Dr. Connell. 'I tell you there's nothing rejoices me more than when a smoking patient begins to long for

his pipe or cigar again. It is the surest sign that he is beginning to be 'himself once more.'

'Speaking of that, doctor,' said the minister, with a long pull of satisfaction at the pipe he had lighted, 'are you quite sure that a man who has been very ill always begins to be himself when he rounds the dangerous corner?'

'Now, if you are going to fire off conundrums at me——'

'But it isn't a conundrum. It is a serious question,' protested the minister.

'Very well. We will call it a serious question,' said the doctor, pulling out his cigar case. 'But if I am going to discuss any questions with you, serious or otherwise, while you are smoking, I must be permitted a cigar. I never smoke, as a rule, when I am visiting,' he continued, cutting his cigar deliberately; 'but,' pausing to light it, 'I have no visits until after dinner.' After a puff or two, he withdrew his cigar from his lips, and having glanced at the lighted end to see that it was burning evenly, he turned to the minister.

'And now, what *do* you mean, MacGrigor?'

'I mean that I do not seem to be the same man as I was before this illness.'

'Of course not,' laughed the doctor. 'Before you committed the folly of entertaining an illness, you were a rattling good fellow.' Mr. MacGrigor made a hasty gesture of deprecation.

'You have at least retained your modesty, I see,' observed Dr. Connell imperturbably. 'But I repeat it, before your illness you were a rattling good fellow, in spite of your white choker, and the nice things that people who didn't know you in college said about you, while now you are a doddering convalescent, meekly smoking his first pipe.'

'I was not speaking in that sense at all, Connell,' replied the minister. 'You have missed my meaning altogether.'

'Very likely,' admitted the other cheerfully. 'So it should be plain to you that you must make your, meaning more obvious. I'm no good—I was going to tell you so a moment or two ago, but you interrupted me—I'm no good, not a bit, at guessing conundrums.'

'I will try and make myself more intelligible then,' said Mr. MacGrigor, 'if you will try and bring just a little bit of serious attention to bear on the subject.'

'Certainly, certainly,' assented the doctor briskly. 'I will assume my air of professional solemnity at a grave consultation. Will that do?' and blowing a great cloud of cigar-smoke from his lips, he lay back in his chair with an air of meditative abstraction and stared at the ceiling.

‘Upon my word, Connell,’ said Mr. MacGrigor, after staring at him for a moment or two and resisting an impulse to laugh, ‘I wonder how you manage to preserve your high spirits among the sobering scenes which must pretty well make up your experiences of life.’

‘I have wondered at it myself,’ replied the doctor, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. ‘But if I didn’t preserve them, then the sobering scenes, as you call them, wouldn’t be faced at all. Still, that isn’t what you were going to speak of, and I am still waiting, serious and solemn.’

‘Well, I have been wondering if, when a man is unconscious in illness, it may not be possible that his being, what we call *him*, wanders away from his body, which becomes tenantless——’

‘Of course it is possible,’ interrupted the doctor, ‘and then the man becomes what we term dead.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the minister impatiently; ‘but you are in too big a hurry. Just wait a moment till I am finished. Which becomes tenantless, I have said. Very well, then; may it not happen that the vacant but warm house of clay may be observed by some wandering being without the abode of a body, who will take possession of the empty domicile in the absence of its rightful tenant, and, refusing to quit upon his return, continue to occupy it?’

‘So it is a conundrum after all—psychological, if you will—but still a conundrum,’ exclaimed Dr. Connell with affected triumph.

‘I am not going to argue with you as to a definition,’ replied Mr. MacGrigor. ‘What I want is your opinion as to the facts.’

‘But, my dear fellow, you have put forward no facts. What you are dealing in are suppositions—mere suppositions.’

‘Admitting that, then, what is your opinion concerning such suppositions?’

‘May I inquire why you ask for my opinion?’

‘That is too bad now, Connell, I hardly expected you to adopt the expedient of ignorance which meets one question by asking another,’ said the minister reproachfully.

‘My dear MacGrigor, you are taking too much for granted. I am going to answer your question, at least to the extent of giving my opinion, but I must be allowed to do so in my own way.’

‘I beg your pardon. What was it, again, that you asked?’

‘I asked why you wished my opinion on this subject.’

‘Simply for this reason, as I think you might have taken for granted——’

‘I never take anything for granted,’ interjected the doctor.

‘Simply for this reason,’ repeated the minister, ‘that I have risen from my bed feeling like a different person, with new feelings, new views, new desires.’

‘Precisely. You have come back to life, bringing with you more serious ideas concerning it. You have had time to reflect upon wasted opportunities, neglected duties, the word not spoken in season, etc., and now you are going to enter with freshly consecrated vigour, and so forth, into the conflict against the powers of evil and all that kind of thing. I know all about it. My dear MacGrigor, yours is a common enough experience, requiring nothing of the occult explanation which you have obviously set your heart upon finding,’ The doctor leaned back with a cynical smile, and puffed his cigar with cool satisfaction.

‘I have let you talk,’ said the minister, getting up and laying his pipe on the mantel-shelf, and then standing in front of Dr. Connell with his back to the fire; ‘I have let you talk because you are altogether wrong, and have therefore proved that this ordinary explanation of yours will not do for me,’

‘Indeed,’ said the doctor calmly, ‘and why not for you, may I ask?’

‘Because my experience is exactly the reverse of what you have described.

‘Then, for Heaven’s sake, what is your experience?’

‘In saying that it is exactly the reverse of what you have described, I have told you all,’

‘I do wish you would be a little less mysterious and a little more explicit,’ the doctor protested. ‘I don’t want to seem stupid, MacGrigor, upon my soul I don’t, but you leave me as much at sea as ever.’

‘Well, to be plain with you, Connell, I don’t find that I have the same control over myself, or rather over this body of me’—and he indicated his outward self by a sweep of the hands—‘as I was wont to have.’

‘Ah!’ said the doctor with a chuckle, ‘I see. So you think that the inner influence, the ego in fact, which controls this body before me— or ought to control it, but doesn’t—may not be you, but some vagabond individuality of weak will power?’

‘Not at all,’ corrected the minister hastily. ‘I did not say I thought so. I merely made the suggestion in order to ask you if it were possible.’

‘Well, let us assume that it is not only possible, but has actually occurred. Then, my dear fellow, you—or rather I—am face to face with the serious question

as to what has become of you—whether you have found a new tenement or are still gadding homelessly about.’

‘That is manifestly absurd,’

‘Not at all. It is a logical deduction, that is if your hypothesis be accepted. But a truce to all this foggy philosophy. I am really interested in what you say about yourself. So—I ought to be going, but I shall finish my cigar—tell me a little more about yourself.’

‘I don’t know that I can explain it, I am almost ashamed to try it——’

‘You-needn’t be. I’m your doctor,’ interjected Dr. Connell.

‘Yes, you are my doctor, and therefore you should know without my telling you that hitherto I have lived a most ascetic life.’

‘Since you left college,’ again interposed the doctor, ‘but go on.’

‘Well, I don’t feel that I want to do that anymore.’

‘You don’t?’ said the doctor gravely, with a twinkle in his eyes.

‘No,’ went on the minister seriously. ‘I want to luxuriate and enjoy myself.’

‘A most excellent ambition,’ commented the doctor. ‘I cherish it most sedulously myself.’

His remarks were lost upon Mr. MacGrigor.

‘And I hate the thought of going into the pulpit again, and of paying my pastoral visits among my flock.’

‘I don’t wonder at it,’ said the doctor, with a mighty puff between each word.

‘I can’t see how I am to bring myself again to—

“Delight myself with gossip and old wives,
And ills, and aches, and teething, lyings-in,
And mirthful sayings, children of the place,
That have no meaning half a league away.”

‘Great Scott!’

‘No, great Tennyson. But let me go on. I revolt from it all and grow wicked at heart from the sheer obstinacy which impels me to go in an opposite direction from that in which duty seeks to drive me.’

‘I am delighted to hear it,’ remarked the doctor.

‘Delighted to hear it!’ echoed the other in surprise. ‘Why I lie awake of nights and pass the hours in warring with myself. And I want to break out, to get away

somewhere and kick over the traces—you'll perhaps tell me next that you are delighted to hear that too.'

'I am more than ever delighted to hear you say so. Give me your hand, MacGrigor,' and the doctor held out his hand, 'you do me infinite credit.' But the minister would not give him his hand. Instead, he stood looking at him in amazement.

'And this is the sort of thing, is it, that has set you "havering" about your body being possessed by something or other which is not you?' asked Dr. Connell.

Mr. MacGrigor nodded. He was past speaking for the moment.

'Man, you have sought a very round-about explanation, when a very simple one would have sufficed.'

'Have I?' asked the minister, a little resentfully.

'Ay have you. Your experience, as you call it, is the most natural thing in the world, and you're simply beginning to be in better health, Mr. Alexander MacGrigor, than you've been for many a day.'

'I am glad to hear it.'

'Umph! You are beginning to agree with me after all. But you're only coming to yourself—in the matter of health—and if you hold on you're nothing to the rampaging deil-ma'-care you may turn out to be.'

'Heaven forbid,' said the minister, with a genuine touch of alarm.

'Oh, you needn't be afraid,' remarked the doctor with a cheery laugh, 'I'll find a cure for you.'

'A cure?'

'Yes, and, a sure one. We'll have you married.'

'Married!'

'Yes, married. If my diagnosis is correct, and I think it is, marriage is the only cure for the trouble which I believe has supervened upon your late illness.'

'When will you quit jesting?' the minister asked with evident annoyance.

'My dear fellow, I am not jesting, as you will find.' He pulled out his watch and looked at it, flung the stump of his cigar in the fire, and rose.

'And I am quite serious too, when I say that I shall have to be going. I had no idea that I had stayed so long.'

‘It was very good of you, Connell, to share your valuable time with a lonely—
—,’

‘Now, no fine speeches, if you please MacGrigor. But you needn’t come with me to get my hat. I can’t have a promising example of my skill risking my reputation by getting needlessly into draughts too soon after his marvelous recover.’

‘As you will then, Connell,’ said the minister smiling. ‘Have you lost anything?’

‘No, oh no, it was only my gloves I was looking for,’ and he pulled them from his pocket.

‘But, by the way, MacGrigor, about your heart, is that all right?’

‘My heart!’

‘Oh it’s nothing, nothing,’ returned the doctor carelessly. ‘I was only wondering if it was quite right after all the doctoring you have been subjected to—no little irregularities or flutterings or that kind of thing?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Good, very good. I must examine it one of these days, just for curiosity you know. But in the meantime, now that you are in such a vigorous mood—wanting to kick over the traces, you know—I wouldn’t excite myself if I were you. And I think, yes, I think you had better avoid violent exercise, at least until I see you again.’

‘There is no fear of that, I can safely say.’

‘Yes, yes, I know, but I am just warning you. And now I am really off.’

‘Good-bye, then.’

‘Good-bye, and don’t forget that I have told you that the cure for your new complaint is marriage. If I come across a lady in my rounds that I think would make a suitable mistress for the Manse, I will send her along.’

The doctor was gone at last, and Mr. MacGrigor was left to reflect upon many things which arose out of the doctor’s conversation. In spite of the studied, indifferent way in which reference had been made to the state of his heart, he knew Dr. Connell’s methods well enough to guess that there was more in what he had said than he had desired should appear. Over this he brooded for some time. Then his thoughts turned upon marriage, and he laughed at the doctor’s jest about sending along a mistress to the Manse. Perhaps, after all, it might have a mistress of his own providing.

CHAPTER IX

SOME time had elapsed since that little dinner-party at Lennoxbank House. Autumn fields had yielded up their golden harvest of grain; the purple glow of the heather had long faded from the slopes of Cairntop; the pleasant boating-parties on Loch Lennox were become nothing more than memories; the Moss o' Balgoyne fair had come and gone and been forgotten. The smoke from the great chimney-stacks hung low and heavily among the dank mists which brooded over the valley. Away to the north the mighty shoulders of Ben Lennox upheaved more largely in their cape of gleaming white.

It was early one forenoon that Mrs. Ferguson from her window in the Main Street of Browhill looked out to see what she could see. To do this was one of Mrs. Ferguson's chief employments in life. It was altogether too serious and important a mission to be lightly undertaken or carried out in haphazard fashion. She did it systematically and thoroughly. She did not, as some of her more careless neighbours did, content herself with lazily peering out through the glass. She lifted the window, thrust her head out, and craned her neck.

It gave her the advantage of spying many things which less conscientious folk missed. Those good, easy bodies might see an occasional fight or a run-away horse, a Sunday-school trip or Friendly Society procession, a wedding-party or a funeral, or in fact any commotion which specially roused their attention, but that was all. Mrs. Ferguson was wiser, and many a precious bit of the flotsam and jetsam of gossip was picked up by her as it floated past on the slow tides of the village life.

This particular forenoon was that of her washing-day, and, as the washing-house was at the back of the house, she was as usual sorely haunted with the fear that she might be missing something that was going on in front. The allaying of this fear necessitated frequent journeys up-stairs, and she had her recompense at last. She had just left the 'byne,' wiped the 'sapples' roughly from her sturdy arms, gone up-stairs and 'ben' to the front window. Throwing it up once more in spite of the cold, and thrusting her head well out, she leant on her bare arms on the window-sill. And so it happened that she was at her post when Tam Broon and a pig came drifting past together. Tam Broon was at one end of the string and the pig at the other, or rather, to give the precedence due to importance, the pig was at one end of the string and Tam was at the other.

Mrs. Ferguson promptly hailed Tam, and the pig was brought up with a jerk. That is to say, the pig kindly consented to stand for a little.

‘Hulloa, Tam,’ shouted Mrs. Ferguson up aloft.

‘Hulloa, Jinat,’ responded Tam from below.

‘Whaur are ye gaun wi’ the pig?’

‘It’s no’ whaur I ‘m gaun wi’ the pig ye should spier, but whaur the pig’s gaun wi’ me.’

‘Ye needna gie’s ony o’ your havers like that, Tam,’ said Mrs. Ferguson reproachfully.

‘It’s no’ havers,’ answered Tam manfully, ‘it’s the guid’s truth. I had it hauf way ower the brig when it wouldna gang a step faur’er, an’ syne it wheeled roun’ an’ cam’ tearin’ back, squealin’ an’ maist ruggin’ the string oot o’ my haun’. It’s only bidin’ still the noo to think what it’ll dae next’

‘Pigs are maist cootairy brutes,’ Mrs. Ferguson condescendingly admitted. ‘But I say, Tam, hoo’s the minister keepin’?’

‘Oh, no’ that ill,’ answered Tam gruffly. Mrs. Ferguson’s opinion of Mr. MacGrigor was a very poor one. Tam knew this, and, as the minister’s man, resented it loyally.

‘That’s nae answer to a ceevil question, Tam Broon. Can ye no’ tell a body hoo Mr. MacGrigor’s keepin’?’

‘He micht be waur an’ he micht be better.’

‘Will he sune be oot?’

‘Mebbe ay if he hauds on, an’ mebbe no’ if he doesna haud on.’

‘I saw Miss Gordon passin’ yestre’en. I was thinkin’ ye micht ken if she ca’d at the Manse,’

‘It’s gey hard to say what a body kens an’ what a body doesna ken.’

‘Ye’re as thrawin’ as the pig,’ said Mrs. Ferguson wrathfully. But Tam had neither time to reply nor to hear any more that the carter’s wife might have had to say. The pig had been grunting and snouting about the ground in comparative docility for the last few minutes. But at Mrs. Ferguson’s reference to its bacon ship, either, because it had at last made up its mind to a line of procedure, or, what is more likely, because Tam Broon, in taking out a huge Turkey-red pocket-handkerchief with which to mop his brow, had unconsciously slackened the string, the pig once more wheeled round and went lumbering back towards the bridge, grunting and squealing, with Tam nobly sweating and swearing behind it. Mrs. Ferguson looked on approvingly, with a sweet sense of satisfaction that retribution was overtaking Tam for his sins against her. She felt with a pang that

the ends of justice were being defeated when she saw the pig going serenely across the bridge and finally disappearing at a rapid trot beyond the toll-house, at which Tam was not even permitted to stop to exchange a word with his friend the toll-keeper. But she comforted herself with the reflection that the wicked may spread himself like a green bay tree, yet he passes away and, lo, he is not; yea, he shall be sought but he cannot be found.

Mrs. Ferguson felt in her inner consciousness that after this little episode an immediate descent to the washing-tub, although it might not be unprofitable would be ineffably weary, flat, and stale. So she remained at the window, with an appetite whetted for more excitement and a mind stirred to eager receptivity. But nothing seemed inclined to come to pass. A solitary Kilmornack sour-milk cart rattled homewards with empty barrels, but its driver was too chilled and woebegone to pay any heed to the shout from that upper window. Mrs. Ferguson fumed. Two dogs met, stiffened themselves aggressively, sidled round each other with a wicked turn in their eyes and a vicious curl of the upper lip, and walked off with absurdly superior airs. The cold had taken the fighting out of them. Mrs. Ferguson waxed angry. Restless children in front of the Crescent across the river wandered down to the green bank by the water's edge, scrambled and hovered hopefully near to the river, but scuttled tantalisingly back without falling into it. Mrs. Ferguson grew depressed. Beside this even the washing-house seemed exciting, and she was just about to return to it when a gleam of hope flashed upon her. Jessie Anderson came drifting along in the distance, and Mrs. Ferguson waited till she came opposite.

'Hey, Jessie, my lass, ye're lookin' awfu' cauld an' donsie. Come roun' by for a meenit an' hae a cup o' tea wi' an auld wife.'

Jessie was in no mind to cry across the street to Mrs. Ferguson. So she went over, to stand under the window for a moment and excuse herself from going up to the house.

'It's awfu' kind o' ye,' she said, as she looked up, 'but——'

'Hoots, lassie,' answered Mrs. Ferguson, 'it's nae kindness at a'. I'm jist needin' an excuse to hae a cup mysel'. The kettle's boilin', so dinna staun' there, but gang up the close an' come awa' up-stairs.'

As Mrs. Ferguson, without waiting for any reply, abruptly withdrew her head and banged down the window decisively, Jessie felt that there was nothing left for her to do but go round.

Mrs. Ferguson met her at the stair-head and took her into the kitchen, where the gossiping but kindly body soon had the tea 'maskit,' as she called it, and the table set in a simple but orderly enough fashion.

‘Ye’re no’ lookin’ sae weel as ye ocht to dae,’ said Mrs. Ferguson, as they sat together over their tea. ‘That’ll be the way ye’re no’ workin’ the day?’

‘I’m a’ richt. There’s naething wrang. wi’ me,’ answered Jessie quickly. ‘But we’re slack in Fordingfiel’, an’ ye’ll be gled to hear I hae a chance to gang into service.’

‘It’s what I hae tell’t ye to dae a’ along. It’ll be the makin’ o’ ye, lassie,’ she said. ‘An’ whaur micht it be?’

‘At Laverockbank.’

‘Umph!’ snorted Mrs. Ferguson. ‘It’ll no’ dae ye muckle guid gaun amang a wheen upstarts like the Gordons. They’re no’ a hair better than mysel’. An’ I’ll lay a groat it’s that chirpit cratur, the dochter, that wants ye to gang?’

‘Ay, it’s Miss Gordon, if it’s her ye mean,’ answered Jessie with some annoyance. ‘But she’s no chirpit, an’ I wouldna ca’ her a cratur.’

‘Mebbe ye wouldna if ye’re thinkin’ ye’ll be behauden to her. But she’s naething but a puir chirpit cratur for a’ that. As if I didna ken her gran’faither fine—a sneevlin’, snuffy body, aye cringein’ aboot wi’ a creeshie hat an’ coat. Ye’ll learn naething at Laverockbank. It’s amang the gentry ye should gang, as I did mysel’ afore I mairried Wull.’

‘I thocht ye would hae been quite gled to hear o’t,’ said Jessie, in the hope of conciliating the querulous dame. ‘An’ I’m sure Miss Gordon means me weel.’

‘Means ye fiddlesticks,’ broke in Mrs. Ferguson.

‘It’s frae spite she’s daein’ it. She wants to tak’ doon your pride, as if a lassie wasna’ a’ the better o’ haein’ the richt kind o’ pride. No’ the stinkin’ pride o’ the lave, but the pride that baith you an’ me hae.’

‘I hae nae pride left, Mrs. Ferguson. It’s as muckle as I can dae to gang aboot, let alane haudin’ up my heid.’

‘An’ what for should ye no haud up your heid, I would like to ken? Ye ‘re no’ to blame for your faither’s ill daein’s. As lang as ye dae richt yoursel’ ye’ve a hantle mair richt to hae a dacent conceit o’ yoursel’ than a guid wheen o’ them that keep clashin’ an’ claverin’.’

‘I’m no’ blamin’ onybody, no’ onybody,’ said Jessie pathetically, ‘but it’s the tholin’ the thocht o’ everything that whiles wears my hert oot, till I maist canna bide it,’

‘An’ ye’ll hae mair to bide, my lassie, if ye gang to Laverockbank. But it’s no’ to be thocht o’, it’s no’ to be thocht o’. I’ll no’ hae the lassie I cairried in my arms to be bapteezed made a fule o’ by auld Creeshie Gordon’s gran’dochter. Fine I

ken what it a' means. She can get roun' you, but I'm ower auld i' the horn for her.' Jessie listened with a dull misgiving.

'But I dinna seem to ken richt what ye would be at,' she remarked.

'An' there's nae verra cry in' reason that ye need ken, for I sair misdoot me that if ye did ye wouldna understaun'. But Miss Alice as she's ca'd—though she should hae been ca'd Jean efter her grannie, only it wasna guid eneuch for the likes o' her—Miss Alice wants to lower ye in the een o' at least ae man-body we ken. Folk daurna look doon frae the mistress to the maid. An' a mistress, forby, has plenty o' chances o' humblin' her servants in the sicht o' ither folk. The gentry wouldna dae 't. But there's them that ape their ways that would dae 't.'

Mrs. Ferguson rose to answer a knock which had come to the door. She returned with an air of business-like importance about her.

'It's a lassie frae the Manse to say I maun hae the clathes I'm washin' sent hame the night,' she said to Jessie. 'An' I canna dae't, for I'm ower thrang,' she proceeded, leisurely seating herself again. 'Sae if ye'll jist ca' in as ye gang hame an' say they'll be ready first thing the morn's mornin', I'll be muckle obleeged to ye, for I'm feared the bit lassie that cam' the noo'll no' mind to say what I tell't her.'

'I would raither no' gang,' replied Jessie, in some confusion, 'for I'm thinkin' that Janet doesna like me at a'.'

'That's a' the mair reason that ye ocht to gang. Thrawin' folk are nane the waur o' bein' thrawed. It's nae guid o' bein' mealy-moothed wi' that kind o' folk. Miss Gordon was there yestre'en.'

'Miss Gordon!' exclaimed Jessie.

'Ay, was she. I saw her gaun mysel', an' Tam Broon would hae tell't me a' aboot it if the pig he had wi' him hadna been sae terrible kittle.'

From which it will be observed that Mrs. Ferguson built her gossip upon very frail foundations. They served her turn as well as more substantial ones could have done.

'It shows the hizzy that she is,' continued Mrs. Ferguson. 'She leads the minister on,—silly fule that he is—and then flings him ower for young Steevison. He'll rin her a fine rig yet, I'm thinkin'—an' serve her richt.'

'But if she did that, what way should she gang an' see him noo?' asked the girl.

'There's nae doot aboot it, I tell ye. I had it frae a neebour whase dochter kens a lassie whase lad's mate gangs wi' ane o' the servants at Laverockbank. An' she

tell't him. Sae that it's no' like a cairried story. It was that made him ill, an' noo she's lettin' on she's vexed, an' tryin' to mak' folk believe she didna dae't, Or I wouldna wonder if she's wearied o' Steevison a'ready, an' ettlin' to cry back Mr. MacGrigor.'

Jessie scarce knew what to say. Between Mrs. Ferguson's unresting garrulity, and all that it might or might not truly mean, the girl had arrived at a state of bewildered confusion.

'I didna ken onything about a' this,' submitted Jessie, just a little wearily.

'Mebbe no,' assented Mrs. Ferguson, 'but ye ocht to ken. I dinna believe that Mr. MacGrigor cares a preen for the lassie, but she's tryin' to mak' him dae't, an' that's about the richt set o't to my mind. He took a kind o' fancy to her, likely eneuch, to spite himsel' because he couldna weel mak' up his mind aboot some ither body we ken. But that'll come a' richt if the bools row richt, or my name's no' Jean Ferguson. Dae ye ken what I mean noo, lassie?'

'Ay, I think I dae,' answered Jessie, blushing. 'But ye're wrang. It canna come richt.'

'Hoots, lassie, ye needna try it on wi' me. I ken better. Ye're playin' the game no sae Hielan' at a', for a' the douce young cratur that we ca' ye. There's naething like keepin' oot o' their road to mak' the men think aboot ye. Fine I jalouse why ye dinna want to gang doon to the Manse.'

'There was naething o' the sort in my heid,' protested Jessie. 'It 's a' deid an' dune wi'. Naething can bring it back.'

'Naething's a gey big word to use in that respec', said Mrs. Ferguson. 'But time'll show,—time'll show,' she added sagely. 'It's a' this affair aboot your faither, an' when that blows ower it'll jist be like auld times.'

'But it's no' my faither,' answered Jessie sadly.

'Ay is 't,' remarked Mrs. Ferguson, bluntly and positively.

'No' a'thegither,' persisted the girl. 'I'm no' guid eneuch for him.'

'No' guid eneuch for him,' exclaimed the other angrily. 'When did he say that? An impudent upstart! Does he think folk hae forgotten that his mither kep' a wee grocery shop, an' sterved hersel' to eddicate him? An' to talk aboot folk no' bein' guid eneuch for him! A body micht say that they had sp'iled a grocer in makin' a meenister, if they didna ken he couldna even hae made onything but a bad grocer. No' guid eneuch! Fegs, I'll see him aboot that mysel'.'

Full well the girl knew that the doughty Mrs. Ferguson would think nothing of tackling the minister on the street any day, and the prospect alarmed her.

‘But it wasna him that said it,’ she explained.

‘It’s jist as weel for him,’

‘It’s mysel’ that baith says it an’ kens it.’ said Jessie.

‘Umph’ snorted Mrs. Ferguson. ‘If ye think that, there’s little guid o’ me sayin’ ony mair. But,’ she continued more quietly, ‘I dinna believe ye. Ye’re tryin’ to excuse him, an’ when a woman tries to hide a man’s fau’ts, there’s only ae thing folk can think.’

Jessie felt that the time had come to go. She had already been there too long. Her feelings were being probed in a way she scarcely relished and she plainly foresaw that any distaste she might show for this operation would be resented by Mrs. Ferguson. That excellent woman having had a good deal of her say, and having also the return of the Manse washing so abruptly called for, was not so anxious to detain Jessie longer, as she might otherwise have been.

‘I’m awfu’ vext,’ she told Jessie on the stair-head, ‘that ye’ll no’ tak’ my message to the Manse, for I doot I’ll hae to gang mysel’, an’ me sae thrang.’

‘I’m gaun to gang,’ replied the girl, and Mrs. Ferguson laughed inwardly at the result of her successful diplomacy. But she only remarked—

‘That’s richt. An’ if ye can find oot what they’re wantin’ the clathes dune sae sune for, ye micht let us ken when ye’ re gaun by. It’s no’ or’nar at a’.’

By this time they had descended to the foot of the stair, where they parted, Mrs. Ferguson going into the washing-house and Jessie down the close. Jessie turned along the Main Street and went up the Brae to the Manse gate. Here she hesitated, and then quickening her pace, passed within the gate and went down the avenue with an appearance much more brave than was her heart. She felt, indeed, that she could never have done it, and in broad daylight too, had it not been for Mrs. Ferguson’s suggestion that she was keeping out of the minister’s way in order to draw him on. As she passed by the finely-curtained windows and went round to the back door, the difference between Mr. MacGrigor’s position and her own came strongly upon her. She felt inclined to look at all the past as a dream, and to the future which it had once seemed to hold in promise as an utter impossibility. Filled with these thoughts, it was with some confusion that she delivered to old Janet Mrs. Ferguson’s message. She was glad when she had performed her task, and was free to hurry away from the door. She had passed the end of the Manse and was going quickly up the gravelled way, when she heard the front door opening, and then Janet’s voice came after her, calling her back. She turned reluctantly, with an uncomfortable conviction that there was a great deal of unpleasantness which she had not bargained for, connected with delivering a simple message.

It was with some trepidation that she advanced to the front door, where the old housekeeper stood with anything but approval on her face. She expected to be made the bearer of some particularly nasty reply to Mrs. Ferguson's message about the clothes.

But Janet simply said, 'Will ye come in? Mr. MacGrigor wants to see ye.'

Jessie only looked at her. Then Janet spoke again, harshly and impatiently, as it seemed to the girl.

'Will ye come in?'

'Ay,' answered Jessie, and full of wonder as to what it meant, she went in and followed.

CHAPTER X

JESSIE'S winsomeness was never more apparent to the young minister than when she followed old Janet into the study. There was a gracious sweetness about the maiden which enhanced the charm of her ripening and unconscious beauty. To Mr. MacGrigor it represented an influence that could be felt, and which instantly caused a pleasant stirring of his blood and a delightful quickening of his pulses. A reddening wave of blushing confusion swept over Jessie's cheeks and forehead as she saw the glow of pleasure which lighted the minister's face as he came forward and held out his hand to welcome her. At the touch of his hand, which seemed to draw her longingly towards him, Jessie's heart became as wax and all her senses were melted in yielding response. Janet frowned her narrow disapproval. The minister saw this and released the girl's hand, which he was conscious of having held too long.

'I am glad to see you, Jessie,' he said, with all effort to be coldly commonplace. 'Would you put a chair over here for her, Janet, where she will be out of the draught, and I can speak to her more easily?'

Janet obeyed grudgingly.

'Ye'll mind, sir, that the doctor said ye werna to excite yoursel', she remarked, throwing an aggressive glance at Jessie, and restlessly twiddling her thumbs.

Her interference annoyed him.

'I am not exciting myself, Janet,' he answered sharply. 'Please go and prepare some tea.' He waved his hand impatiently towards the door.

'He's no' the same man at a' since he had the fever,' repeated Janet to herself, 'no' the same man at a', as she slowly retired, carefully leaving the door wide open behind her.

'Janet,' imperatively called out the minister.

The housekeeper came back slowly and stood in the doorway, which framed her like a picture of wounded dignity in humble life.

'Shut the door behind you, please. And,' he added, with a slight softening in his tone, 'you will be quick with the tea.' He listened to her footsteps fading away along the passage and then turned gladly to Jessie.

'Come to me, dear,' he said tenderly, extending his hands towards her.

She stepped to his side and put her two hands in his. Their faces were near, and their eyes looked into each other, close together. Suddenly he loosed her hands and opened wide his arms to enfold her. She felt, rather than saw, the passionate action, and with answering abandonment threw her arms round his neck and was drawn palpitating towards him. 'Dearest!'—the word recalled her to herself. She opened her eyes languidly, and a slow smile fluttered round her parted lips.

'Dearest!' he repeated with breathless intensity, and she saw that the minister was quivering tremulously. She would have drawn herself away from him but at her first movement he only clasped her the closer.

'Don't, Alec, don't; you are forgetting, your weakness.'

'Weakness!' he answered, in a quick, breathless fashion, 'I never felt stronger in my life. You have brought me back my manhood. You have—you have—' but he broke off abruptly, and fell to kissing her lips and eyes in this hot, unreasoning way, new to him, and which was so strange and yet so fascinating to Jessie. Then the girl's tender solicitude for the man she loved conquered all else, and dragging her senses out of the tumultuous whirl in which they had been all but engulfed, she drew back and put a breathing space between them with firm, insistent arms. MacGrigor was as pale as death, and a great fear shook her. But his light laughter at the shadow on her face, albeit laughter with subtle bitterness and self-reproach in it, re-assured her. He released her. With a true instinct she went back to her chair. There she sat nervously smoothing her disordered hair while the minister, with slowly returning colour, watched her admiringly. He was thinking that never till now, when it was outlined in swelling curves beneath her upraised arms, had he realised the rounded beauty of her bosom. There had been a time when he would have flung the thought impatiently from him. Now, he lingered over it and took pleasure in it.

'Jessie,' he said at last, sitting down, 'I have been dreaming of you night and day, and have prayed to see you.'

'Then your prayers have been answered!'

'Yes,' he replied doubtfully; 'some of them at least.'

'So you will be happy now,' she ventured to say.

'Is anyone ever happy?' he said, half to himself. 'yes, perhaps I am happy,' he added, 'or at least would be happy if I had only the courage to take steps to have you here always.'

She flushed with frank pleasure.

'But why think of that?' she asked. 'You know it cannot be.'

‘Why can it not be?’ he demanded with almost angry suspicion.

‘Because of my father,’ she replied bravely.

‘Oh!’ he answered, with a sigh of relief, ‘Yes, yes, of course, I understand. But your father,’ he hesitated,—‘your father—have you heard of him yet?’

‘No; and I do not see how we are likely to hear of him unless he is pronounced “Not Guilty” at the trial.’

‘But I’m tell’t,’ she went on, unconsciously dropping into dialect, ‘I’m tell’t that Jim Adams puts a’ the blame on my faither, an’ hauds that his ain haun’s are clean frae Soople Sandy’s bluid.’

Mr. MacGrigor did not reply immediately.

‘Supposing then,’ he at last began slowly, ‘that the Court should believe Jim Adams and condemn your father——’

‘But they canna condemn him an’ him no’ there to defend himsel’,’ broke in Jessie passionately.

‘You do not see the point, I am afraid,’ continued the minister calmly. ‘The very fact that he has deliberately chosen not to be there to defend himself will most likely be taken as a proof that he cannot do so.’

‘Maist likely, you say?’ burst from Jessie’s lips excitedly.

‘Well, perhaps I put it too strongly,’ he said, with intent to soothe her. ‘Let me say instead, very possibly.’

‘Very possibly! Then we maun hae my faither back to face his accusers.’

‘But, my dear Jessie, that is at present impossible. We do not know where he is.’

‘Then I maun gang an’ look for him,’ she remarked quietly, with the proud courage of love.

‘You’ll do nothing of the sort,’ he said emphatically, feeling convinced that the girl’s sudden purpose was sincere, and must be destroyed before it had time to develop into a fixed resolve. ‘You’ll do nothing of the sort, Jessie. Listen to me.’

‘Well?’ she asked, looking away from him and down at the carpet.

‘What I was going to say is this. While your father remains undiscovered he is safe. He is equally secure whether Jim Adams lies or tells the truth, and whether the verdict against him is “Guilty” or “Not Guilty.” Should he return, on the other hand, it will only be his word against that of Jim Adams.’

‘And would you no’ tak’ his word against that of Jim Adams ony day?’ Jessie demanded.

‘My dear girl,’ he replied, in his most persuasive manner, ‘it is not what I think, but what the judge and jury will think, that you have got to consider. Unfortunately, as you yourself must admit, there is a prejudice abroad about your father, and even judges and juries are not above being susceptible to prejudice’

‘But there’s a prejudice, as ye ca’ it, against Jim Adams as weel.’

‘There is, of course. But that against your father has been increased by his flight. So that if he were to be brought back, as you suggest, I should not like to be answerable for his safety.’

‘Then ye say that he should be kept oot o’ the road?’

‘I do.’

‘For his ain sake?’

‘For his own sake,’ replied the minister.

‘An’ what about the disgrace if he is fan’ guilty in his absence?’ asked Jessie, still solicitous.

‘There will be no disgrace, if he is innocent.’

‘He is innocent,’ said the girl with brave confidence.

‘Then there will be no disgrace.’

‘To himsel’?’

‘To anybody.’

Jessie’s intellect was not won over by the specious pleas of the minister, but her heart assented with a sigh of conscious relief to arguments which offered at least some plausible reasons why her father should remain in the security of absence.

‘One other thing before you go,’ remarked the minister kindly; ‘are you quite—I mean are you any more comfortable at home?’

The girl glanced round the room before replying.

‘I daresay I’m as comfortable as I deserve.’

‘While some people are more comfortable than they deserve,’ commented the minister. ‘Is it not so?’

‘I don’t know about other people. But Miss Gordon,’ and the girl noted that he flushed uneasily at the name, ‘Miss Gordon wants me to go and be a servant at Laverockbank.’

‘A servant!’ he exclaimed in surprise.

‘Yes, and why not a servant?’

‘Why not? For many reasons, and especially at Laverockbank.’

‘Would Mrs. Gordon not make a good mistress?’

‘I have nothing to say against Mrs. Gordon.’

‘And Miss Gordon—have you anything to say against her?’

‘Nothing at all to say against Miss Gordon.’

‘Don’t you think she has been kind to offer me a situation?’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘Because, in the first place you do not require a situation, and in the second place this one would not suit you if you did.’

‘How do you know?’

‘How do I know? Because I know Miss Gordon and I know you, and I am certain that you would not get on together for two days.’

‘But it would not be Miss Gordon but her mother that would be my mistress,’

‘There you are wrong. It would be Miss Gordon.’

‘What makes you say so?’

‘Because Miss Gordon is the mistress of the house.’

‘She is?’

‘Beyond a doubt.’

‘And you think she and I would not get on together?’

‘I am sure of it.’

Jessie considered for a moment. Finally she looked up and said,

‘I suppose, then, that you don’t want me to go to Laverockbank?’

‘You must please yourself, of course, but, in my opinion, you will be much better and happier where you are.’

‘Then I will not go,’ she answered, and so, not for the first time that afternoon, she had submitted herself to him.

She rose to go, and Mr. MacGrigor, also arising, came and stood close to her, taking her hands in his.

‘I will see you again soon, Jessie,’ he said, caressing her cheek soothingly, and letting his fingers linger round a tiny ear. She was silent.

‘If chance does not favour us,’ he continued, ‘I shall write to you, and,’ putting his hands under her chin, and holding her face softly up to his, ‘I am always here and near you if you need me.’

She could endure no longer the tightening throbbing of her heart, bewilderingly between pain and pleasure.

‘Good-bye,’ she said, holding up her mouth to be kissed, like a child.

‘Good-bye,’ he said, kissing her, and before he could move, he was left standing there alone, while the light seemed to have faded and a shadow to have fallen upon the room. He turned to the bell mechanically and rang it. Janet entered, and looked astonished to find that the girl was gone.

‘Bring me a light, Janet.’

‘A licht?’ she repeated with puzzled surprise, almost fearing that the minister’s senses had departed. ‘It’s no’ near dark yet. I thocht ye were ringin’ to bid me bring ben the tea.’

‘Very well, bring it in. But stay,’ he added as she turned to go, ‘I will have it in the diningroom.’

‘But there’s nae fire in the dinin’ room, an’ it’ll be ower cauld for ye.’

‘There is no fear of that if you have kept the tea warm enough, Just bring it there, please.’

But moving into the dining-room from the study did not carry the minister away from his own thoughts, nor take from him the consciousness of having played an unworthy part. As he sat alone at tea, his reflections did by no means tend to strengthen his shaken self-respect. He held in his hands what he believed to be damning evidence against Anderson. He had now decided, for Jessie’s sake, to withhold it, so defeating the ends of justice, and bringing into the peril of death a man whom he believed might be innocent. He had been dishonest in giving his reasons why Jessie should not accept service at Laverockbank. But, chiefly, the change which had come upon the relations between Jessie and himself disturbed and alarmed him, and all the more because those other things with which he charged himself had alike their roots in this. His flesh and blood had asserted

themselves, and lorded it over that spiritual part of him which he had cultivated with such careful and painstaking assiduity, and he knew regretfully that they would so conquer again at the touch of the girl's warm and wooing flesh.

He had finished his tea and was toying absently with a spoon. He was weary and morbid, and the fireless room began to grow chilly in the gathering dusk. He rose and returned to his study, where Janet had already lighted the lamp, and seated himself in front of the fire. A verse from Ecclesiastes, as he remembered in other days long after, kept floating through his mind with insinuating iteration, 'All things come alike to all,' there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner . . .' He leant back in his chair, with hands resting on his knees, and his finger-tips playing thoughtfully against each other. 'All things come alike to all ; as is the good, so is the sinner.' He repeated the cynical words softly to himself, and a faint smile flickered over his face.

CHAPTER XI

INTO Jessie-Anderson's bosom a great discontent had entered. She was in revolt against the bitter injustice of fate, or fortune, or Providence, or whatever might be the dim but despotic power which thrust upon her its merciless decrees out of the shadows which lowered around her life. The days brought to her no peace, and the nights came with no healing on their dusky wings. Her eyes had been opened, and she was awakening to some knowledge of the squalid tragedy of her life. She resented it vehemently, and every pulse of her passionate blood throbbed wildly against it. Her instincts, inherited from ancestors who had known better days than those amid which she found herself, were fine and keen, and on the night when she returned to her home from the Manse, her heart jubilant with the thought that Alec's love for her still endured, the very violence of the contrast disturbed her and filled her with affright.

She was sitting alone in her little garret, in vague rebellion at life and all the humiliations and hardships which it meant for her.

From the room below came the wailing of the baby, who had been sickly for a few days, and the monotonous sound of her mother's feet as she tramped to and fro, trying to hush the crying child to sleep. Jessie sighed at being disturbed in her futile fancies, hesitated for a moment, and then went downstairs. Her mother lifted her eyes from the infant she held in her arms and greeted her eldest daughter with a weary but grateful smile. During the past weeks a considerable improvement had made itself manifest in Mrs. Anderson. In the absence of her shiftless father, Jessie's influence had made itself felt upon her mother and the home. When the drouthy neighbour-wives found that with John Anderson's disappearance the whisky had also vanished, they suddenly displayed a most creditable desire not to obtrude themselves on his sorrowing wife. Mrs. Anderson had consequently more time and energy to devote to her housework, in which, by slow degrees, and being naturally a woman of tidy habits and superior tastes, she began to take some little pride, even showing an unexpected and praiseworthy desire to help Jessie in her endeavour to make both ends meet. The result was that John Anderson's disappearance from his home was a blessing in disguise to its inmates. Little Jamie and Mirren were already asleep in the closet at the back of the kitchen, and now Katey went quietly up to the garret where she slept with Jessie.

'Let me tak' the wean, mither,' said Jessie, holding out her arms.

‘Na, na, lassie,’ answered her mother, rocking the baby in her arms, ‘ye’ve mair need o’ a rest than I hae, Jist ye sit doon at the fire an’ I’ll put the wean to sleep mysel.’

But Jessie insisted. ‘Noo, mither, that’s a’ nonsense. I’m jist tired sittin’, an’ cam’ doon to hae a walk wi’ the wean for a rest. Gie her to me.’ And her mother, without more argument, put the little one into Jessie’s arms.

The child had been dropping off to sleep, but was roused by the movement, and opened its mouth to cry again. But unclosing its eyes at the same instant, it beheld Jessie’s sweet face bending lovingly over it. Forthwith it smiled and made a little, inarticulate sound of joy. Jessie began to walk the floor with the baby, singing the while a tender lullaby.

‘Sleep, my bonnie baby,
Cuddle doon, my dear,
Nothing ill is steerin’,
Never hae a fear;
Lady Moon is watchin’,
While the worl’ gaes roun’,
Cuddle doon, my bairnie,
Sleep ye saft and soun’.’

As the girl crooned softly, walking to and fro, and swinging the baby gently in rhythmic motion, the babe closed its eyes in sweet content, opened them languidly once again and gazed solemnly into Jessie’s out of their innocent depths, and then closing them, with a tranquil smile slipped away into the serene and sunlit dreamland, of sinless souls. Jessie continued her rhythmic walking and rocking, to the low music of her voice, for some little time, and then with infinite care and tenderness laid her tiny burden in the cradle, ‘happed’ up the child snugly, and stepped across to her mother, only to find that she, too, had fallen asleep. She would not disturb her, and so, having softly peeped into the closet at Jamie and Mirren, stole out of the room, and crept upstairs again to her own little garret, where Katey was already sleeping peacefully.

Jessie felt the atmosphere of the stuffy little garret close and heavy, and, having carefully tucked the coverings round Katey to shield her from any possible draught, softly opened the narrow sky-light. She put her head out, and thirstily drinking in the cool night air, gazed up into the skies where the stars were palpitating in radiant purity. Those myriad orbs of night had many a time ere now won her away from the petty problems of her narrow life, by the mystic wonder which awoke in her heart as she beheld them, and to-night they wooed her away once more from earth, into sweet forgetfulness of her drudgery and the discontent which she strove so hard to stifle. A lulling murmur floated over from where the

waterfall sprang in white lines of foam down the terraces of red sandstone beside the Quarry road; above, the Scotch firs at the foot of the glen stood blackly out against the starlit sky. No sound or sign of discord marred the brooding calm of the night, and its peace passed into Jessie's soul and possessed it. Suddenly she was disturbed by the sound of footsteps coming up the Burn, the footsteps of some one in haste and whistling cheerily. They came nearer, and leaning out of the window she could see that the whistler was Dan, returning thus merrily from the night-school. She smiled to herself at the irresponsible light-heartedness of her brother; she was glad that he, at least, was happy. The boy stopped his whistling at the door, and Jessie called down to him.

'Is that you, Dan?'

'Ay,' he said, looking up.

'Tak' aff your boots in the entry, an' then come up here.'

Dan disappeared, and presently stood at the door of the garret, in his stocking-soles. But he had come upstairs against his will, having wished, for reasons of his own, to steal to bed unseen, and now he hung in the shadow at the head of the stair.

'Come here, Dan,' said his sister, looking curiously at the reluctant figure, keeping so awkwardly in the background.

'Weel?' asked Dan, not moving a foot. 'What is it?'

'I canna speak to ye there, an' ye mauna roar like that, for they're a' sleepin'. Come here, will ye?'

Dan reluctantly shuffled into the room, keeping his head steadily hanging down.

'Haud up your heid, Dan, what hae ye been daein'?' asked Jessie.

'Naething,' replied the boy sturdily.

'Were ye no at the nicht-schule?'

'Ay.'

'Weel, I want ye to tell me hoo ye're gettin' on,' she said encouragingly.

But still Dan held his head down, keeping his face from the dim light of the lamp, but evidently grown nervous now, from the restless way in which his stockinged toes kept clasping in absurd futility at the floor.

The girl went forward, laid her hands on the boy's shoulders, and drew him towards the light.

‘Haud up your heid,’ she insisted. He lifted his face, but it was with eyes that did not shirk hers, and a look in which there was no shame, but rather pride. Jessie drew back, and holding him at arm’s length, stared at him sorrowfully. Dan shrank no whit, and budged not an inch.

‘Oh Dan, Dan,’ she cried reproachfully, ‘ye’ve been fechtin’.’

Dan said nothing, only nodding in reply, but still with that curious look of pride in his face.

‘An’ ye’ve gotten a black e’e!’

Dan showed an abrupt curiosity.

‘Is’t awfu’ black, Jessie?’

‘No’ yet, but it’s swellin’ something fearfu’, an’ it’ll be black eneuch sune. An’ ye tell’t me ye would never fecht again!’

‘I shouldna tell’t ye that. I couldna help fechtin’.’

‘Wha wi’?’

‘Wull Sanders.’

‘An’ he licked ye?’

‘Licked me! nae fears. I licked him. He’ll hae a waur face than me the morn,’ and Dan grinned with satisfaction.

‘Waur nor you?’

‘Waur nor me! a lot waur nor me. I tell’t ye I licked him. Waur nor me!’ he repeated, rolling it like a sweet morsel under his tongue, ‘I’ve bashed baith his e’en for him, an’ bluided his nose forby.’

Dan’s unabashed glorying in his performance distressed his sister greatly.

‘I dinna ken what’ll come o’ ye, Dan, if ‘ye gang on like this. Ye’ll—ye’ll jist break my hert, Dan, that’s what ye’ll dae. What were you an’ Wull Sanders fechtin’ about?’

‘The maister said to Wull in the schule that he wonder’d to see a big fella like him lettin’ a wee chap like me get aheid o’ him in the lessons, an’ when we cam’ oot, Wull ca’d me the laddie that had lost his faither.’

‘He did, did he?’

‘Ay. An’ I tell’t him that his sister Bell had a wean that never had ony faither.’

‘Ye shouldna said that, Dan, aboot puir Bell’s wean,’ said Jessie, ‘an’ besides, it wasna Wull’s fau’t’

‘Weel, it wasna my fau’t aboot faither, but ony way, Wull said he would clout my heid for lee’in’ aboot Bell’s wean. An’ I tell’t him to try. it.’

‘I canna blame him for hittin’ ye then, Dan, an’ I maist wish he had licked ye,’ put in Jessie slowly.

‘But he didna hit me then,’ Dan replied briskly; ‘he said he was feared to fyle his haun’s wi’ me because my faither had killed a man. “Ye’re a leear,” says I. “Haud your dirty gab,” says he, “or they’ll mebbe hang me for killin’ you, the way they’re gaun to hang your faither for killin’ Soople Sandy,” ’

‘An’ then, Dan, ye said?’

‘I said naething. I jist cotch him ane on the lug, an’ we begood the fecht,’

‘An’ ye hit him whaur did ye say, Dan?’

‘I bashed baith his e’en an’ bluided his nose, an’ made him say that faither never did it.’

Jessie smiled, ‘I dinna ken noo if ye were wrang to feeht efter a’, Dan,’

‘But I ken,’ said the boy doggedly. ‘I was richt,’ and his sister, proud of his spirit and his championship of their father, put her hand lovingly round his neck, and took him nearer to her, Dan drew off, with a rude idea that Jessie was making a girl of him.

‘Is your e’e sair, Dan?’ asked Jessie gently.

‘A wee,’

‘Then I’ll come doon the stair and bath’ it for ye,’

‘Na,’ answered the boy, ‘Na, ye’ll no’. Is mither in her bed?’

‘No’ that I ken o’, She was sleepin’ in her chair at the fireside when I cam’ up.’

‘Weel, if ye’ll gang doon an’ tell her I’m up here wi’ you, an’ that she can gang to her bed, I’ll slip doon in a wee an’ bath my e’e in the burn,’

Jessie took her way down-stairs again and roused her mother, who undressed, grumbling sleepily, and turned into bed, Jessie put the lamp out and rejoined Dan, who slipped out and down to the burn, here cool and almost as clean as where it threaded its way through the moor and glen on the hillside above, and laved his hot eye, which throbbed with a greater pain than he would have confessed to anybody. Then he came across the road and into the house. Entering the darkened kitchen, he stumbled over a stool.

‘Wha’s that?’ demanded his mother from the bed.

‘It’s me, mither,’ he answered, hurriedly drawing off his clothes and pitching them anywhere into the darkness.

‘Weel, mind your big feet, an’ mak’ less noise, or ye’ll wauken the wean.’

Not a word did Dan reply, but in another minute had safely packed himself away in the little closet beside wee Jamie and Mirren. Long before the six o’clock bells rang next morning Dan was out and away, and when his mother saw, for the first time, his black eye on his return at breakfast time, he easily led her to believe that he had ‘dodded his e’e against a bit o’ wood that was stickin’ oot at a corner.’

Jessie was tired, and went to bed almost immediately after Dan had taken himself downstairs, having only lingered to watch with a full heart, out of the window, her brother bathing his eye in the burn below, making as she thought, a heroic little figure kneeling down there in the shadows under the starry dome, and destined for Heaven knew what of hardship and brave endurance. It was of this she thought as she prepared to go to bed, and again her helplessness and the uncertainty of the dark future for her and hers, woke within her bosom in simmering revolt. But, strangely enough, these thoughts faded from her mind when she laid her head on the pillow. Yet she did not sleep at once, as she had hoped to do. The thought came to her, first fluttering in her brain and then folding its wings and nesting there, of Bell’s ‘wean that had nae faither.’ Poor Bell, poor baby! Jessie knew all the sad story, and her heart bled for the girl and the child of her shame. She had known Bell a blithe light-hearted girl, before the coming of the child without a father, and she knew her now, looked upon at home as a disgrace, and in the works as a poor confiding fool. And yet, Bell did not seem to feel it much or to realise it at all, and perhaps, thought Jessie, it will by and by be forgotten—as if the world, which has such a short memory for virtue, ever forgets these things—and Bell might even perhaps marry, and the baby be—ah! yes, the baby! what of it? Jessie did not know, and while puzzling over the baby she fell asleep, and it got mixed with her dreams and herself.

She dreamed that she was walking up on the moor, and bore a baby in her arms. The rain was driving down, and the narrow bridle-path was running with peat-brown water. In and out of the spongy holes she plashed steadily on, till her feet grew weary and wet, and the burden in her arms grew as heavy as lead. The wind came howling in fierce gusts over the barren wastes, ever and again buffeting her cruelly in the face and beating back her breath. Closer and closer she wrapped the wet shawl round the baby, till a wild blast came, caught a corner of the shawl, and, sweeping in below it, tore it from the babe and her, and drove it flying over bog-hole and moss. Then she looked in the white face of the child, and saw that it was not her mother’s little Lizzie, as she had dreamed, and that she knew it not. Nevertheless her heart was yet strangely full of love for it. So she held it to her bosom, striving to shield it and give it heat, and still she pressed on.

But with the storm ever beating more wildly, and the burden at her breast ever growing more tiring to her arms, she felt that she could go no further when she beheld a man in black coming towards her. He would have passed her with averted face, but she called to him in her need. He paused and looked upon her, and lo! it was the minister. She held out the baby, imploring him to take it and bear it in his arms out of the storm, but he only smiled sadly and passed from them. Then she wept and went on her way, until the path came to where a deep black pool lay among the dark heather, with the rain-drops plashing wearily into it, and an evil thought came to her that here she might end all. But while she yet lingered and shivered on the margin of the pool with the ill thought ever growing stronger and more commanding, there came one behind her whose coming she had not heard, and laid a hand upon her shoulder. She started, and the evil thought vanished. She turned, and Jack Stevenson was standing beside her, with strong arms opened wide enough to receive the babe and herself. She saw his face light up as she faltered forward into his embrace. His arms enfolded them, and in a moment the storm had passed, the sun was shining in blue skies, in the depths of which the larks were carolling, and—she remembered no more, till morning came and awoke her to a new day, with its long round of duties and labours.

CHAPTER XII

MR. JACK STEVENSON was in a chronic state of irritation, and vastly angry with himself at being forced to take gloomy views of life. He had acquired of late a habit of laboriously analysing himself and, incidentally, one or two other persons, in his well-meant but blundering fashion, with the result that he had grown supremely unhappy. He was in a particularly unamiable frame of mind when his father brusquely introduced at the dinner-table one evening the subject of the match which he proposed his son should make with Miss Gordon.

‘Of all the damned fools I know,’ remarked his father, without warning but quite deliberately.

‘Yes?’ observed Jack, curiously, pausing with his glass on its way to his lips.

‘You are the damndest,’ concluded his father leisurely.

Jack raised his glass, sipped his wine slowly, set down his glass and wiped his lips, before replying.

‘Indeed! am I to suppose that you intend to convey some subtle flattery?’

‘I mean you to suppose nothing except that I am speaking the truth,’ answered the elder, showing more of his latent savagery.

‘You have a curious way of expressing it,’ retorted his son indifferently, well knowing that nothing angered his father like indifference.

‘Curious may be your description of it, I prefer to call it plain. And above all, it is my way, you observe, my own way.’

‘I have observed as much. It is so much your own way, that I cannot say I have ever known any gentleman to follow it.’

‘Any other gentleman you mean, sir.’

‘What did I say?’ asked Jack coolly.

‘Confound you,’ said his father impatiently, and losing his temper, ‘listen to me. I repeat what I said, that you are a——’

‘Never mind repeating what you’ said,’ interrupted Jack; ‘you’ve said it so often that——’

‘That you are at last beginning to believe it,’ sneered his father.

‘No, certainly not,’ replied Jack, ‘but——’ and he swallowed down his wine and pushed the glass carelessly away from him.

‘But what, sir?’ demanded his father hotly.

‘But that I have made up my mind——’

‘Your mind!’ His father laughed sarcastically, but the young man went on calmly.

‘Yes, my mind, or what I choose, as you might suggest, to call my mind’—his father laughed his coarse laugh once more—‘I have made up my mind not to hear it again.’

Mr. Stevenson stared incredulously at Jack.

‘What the devil do you mean?’ he demanded, drawing himself bolt upright in his chair and staring fiercely across the table.

‘Precisely what I say. I shall stand no more of your bullying.’

‘A wise cock generally selects his own dust-heap for this particular kind of crowing,’

remarked Mr. Stevenson offensively.

‘And I am on yours, you would suggest?’

‘The acuteness of your perception amazes me.’

‘You had better husband your amazement,’ answered Jack, with unruffled coolness, ‘you may need it all very soon.’

He rose from the table as he spoke, pushed his chair under it and stood facing his father, with his hands resting on the back of the chair.

‘You grow impertinent, sir,’ shouted his father, angrier than ever that his son should stand there dominating.

‘That may be your opinion.’

‘It is my opinion, and by God——’

‘I have told you already that I will not be sworn at by you—and I won’t.’ Jack moved towards the door.

‘Where are you going, sir?’

‘Going!’ responded Jack, with his hand on the door. ‘Upstairs, to my own dust-heap—that is, if I may call my room my own,’ and he was gone, leaving his father alone and more conscious of failure than he had been for a long time.

‘He is a hot-headed rascal,’ soliloquised Mr. Stevenson, ‘and I have perhaps pushed him far enough, but of course he is all the better of having a bit of spirit. He takes his spirit from me. But all the same he is a damned fool. He takes after his mother in that. However, I can’t afford to quarrel with the boy at present. He has got to secure Gordon’s money for me by securing Gordon’s daughter for himself.’ He rose and rang the bell: ‘Clear the table,’ he said to the servant who answered the bell, and then send Mr. John to me.’

When Jack re-entered the dining-room he found his father standing complacently upon the rug in front of the fire, his legs wide apart, his hands under his coat-tails, and a lighted cigar in his mouth. His father indicated a chair to him, with a wave of his Cigar.

‘Thanks, I prefer to stand.’

‘As you please. May I ask what is the matter with you?’

‘May I inquire if this is all you summoned me to ask?’

‘No,’ But—you’re sure you won’t sit down? very well,—but I wished to ask you what progress you have made during the last few weeks with Miss Gordon,’

‘None.’

‘I thought so, and that is why I said that you are a—’ he observed Jack’s face, and recollecting himself just in time, checked himself. ‘And—and—I meant to say that I am naturally anxious on the subject.’

‘You are?’

‘Yes, anxious and impatient.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you have had the field all to yourself, and admit that you have done nothing.’

‘I have had the field all to myself! I do not understand you.’

‘Perhaps you will next tell me that you do not know that Mr. MacGrigor has been ill?’

‘Of course I know that.’

‘And equally of course you have failed to make use of the opportunities which that gave you.’

‘Is that all you have to say?’

‘No. Are you in a hurry?’

‘Yes. I have an engagement and am going out.’

A suspicion flashed upon his father’s mind.

‘You are not meeting that girl Anderson again,’ he said, ‘at night?’

‘No. But I wish to heaven I were.’

‘Very likely,’ remarked his father with scornful indifference, ‘but with regard to Miss Gordon’—and here he attempted to assume an air of sweet reasonableness—‘I do wish, Jack, that you would hurry matters up.’

‘It may interest you, then, to know that I am going now to see her.’

‘Interest me! of course it interests me. I am particularly desirous that you should secure her——’

‘And her money.’

‘Well, yes, and her money, soon. Why, I could pull it off myself in a week.’

‘Then why don’t you try it yourself?’ asked Jack audaciously.

Mr. Stevenson started and stared at him in astonishment. ‘Are you mad to suggest such a thing?’ he gasped out indignantly.

‘It was you, not I, who suggested it.’

‘You are impertinent, sir, damnably impertinent.’

Jack ignored this angry outburst.

‘Have you any little tender message that I can give her?’ he asked with cool assurance.

‘Any message! To whom, pray?’

‘To Miss Gordon, of course. Some little loving word, but not too suddenly loving——’

‘Sir!’ thundered his father with stormy interruption, but Jack ignored his fuming bluster.

‘Not too suddenly loving, you know. Just a little tender message to pave the way, as it were, for your own coming.’

‘Go to the devil.’

‘It won’t do, I couldn’t think of taking such a message to a girl. I’ll think of something nice myself to say to her for you, as I walk to Laverockbank,’ and with this parting shot he departed and left his father to himself.

‘Mr. Stevenson was angry, very angry, with his son, but not nearly so much as might have been expected. He had observed for a few weeks some growing signs of a change in Jack, and had wondered what they exactly portended. Now that he conceived it meant the awakening of a mettlesome spirit in the young man he was not going to be altogether displeased. Provided always, of course, that his son confined his independent ideas within reasonable limits. Soon he was actually chuckling to himself at Jack’s impudent proposal that he, his father, should make love to the girl whom he had selected for his son to marry.

‘Whatever happens,’ he said to himself, ‘Gordon’s money, or a big slice of it at least, must be secured for the works. It would be the height of folly to let things go to smash for want of fresh capital,’ and with this thought he went to his room and undid a parcel of business books which he had sent up to the house before leaving the works that evening. Spreading these out before him on the table, he was soon engaged in mazes of figures and calculations, an employment which did not seem to yield him any great satisfaction, judging by the clouds which settled on his brows.

Meanwhile Jack, well pleased at the verbal encounter with his father, was on his way to Laverockbank House.

‘I think I have made him open his eyes,’ he thought, as he walked along swinging his stick carelessly, ‘and if he doesn’t take care I’ll make him open them even wider. How the old boy stared when I suggested to him that he should face up to Miss Gordon himself!’

Arrived at the door of Laverockbank House, Jack rang the bell and stood humming softly to himself as he waited at the top of the steps. When he was admitted, he was shown into the library, and the girl returned in a moment to say that Miss Gordon would be with him presently.

Miss Gordon did not keep him waiting long and when she entered came forward to greet him with both hands outstretched, and an air of effusive pleasure that almost staggered Jack.

‘How long this afternoon and evening have seemed, Jack,’ she said, as they sat down close together.

‘Yes, the days are getting dreadfully short,’ replied the young man with annoying want of perception.

‘Now, Jack, you know I didn’t mean that. You know perfectly well, you naughty boy, that I meant it seemed long waiting until you came.’

He could not help wondering what this pretty petulance meant.

‘And why?’ he ventured to ask.

‘Jack, you are rude to ask me such a question. But of course you are spoiled at home. Only children all are. They would spoil me if I would let them.’

‘But you don’t.’

‘Of course not,’ and she toyed innocently with the costly rings with which her father had made her fingers sparkle, ‘But isn’t it just too tiresome, Jack? Father has company to-night for dinner, and I would have had you asked,’ she added, observing his surprise—‘but I was afraid I might not have a chance of seeing you alone, in that case.’

‘Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter,’ said Jack lightly.

‘But that is just the tiresome thing, It does matter,’ and here she laid a hand on his. ‘Don’t you see? I have just slipped out for a moment to see you, and must go back almost at once.’

‘Oh! I see,’ remarked Jack stiffly. ‘Then I had better not detain you. But, of course, you are ready with the answer you promised me for to-night.’

‘Now, Jack, dear Jack, you are just horrid when you set your back up like that. It is ridiculous to rush in here like a whirlwind, and expect a girl to tell you in a moment whether she will marry you or not, so that you may bustle about your business without ceremony.’

‘Your qescription of the situation is scarcely accurate. But let that pass. Am I to have the

answer you promised me?’

‘Well, yes, I have been considering what you said.’

‘And you have decided——’

‘I have decided to marry you,’ and she hung down her head, with brightly flushing face and neck.

Jack was affected by the girl’s seeming emotion, and would have spoken tenderly to her, but she interrupted him.

‘Provided,’ she continued, ‘that you can secure your father’s approval.’

‘Your father’s approval, Alice,’ corrected Jack quickly.

‘No, not mine, but yours.’

‘I have secured it already,’ said the young man.

‘Why, he has been more—I mean, he has been nearly as anxious as myself to see me engaged to you.’

‘Perhaps,’ answered Miss Gordon, rising. ‘But now that we are engaged—for I suppose we are engaged, Jack?’ she said with a smile.

He laughed and nodded. He was altogether too puzzled with the girl to speak.

‘Well, now that we are engaged, you had better consult him on the subject of our marriage.’

‘And then?’

‘Well, then we’ll see what is to be done next.’

‘In the meantime, may I ask——’

‘You may ask nothing. In the meantime must rejoin my folks, and of course——’

‘Of course we shall see enough of each other by and by.’

‘Provided your father gives his consent.’

Jack laughed again; this provisional clause was really too funny to be treated seriously. Still, his mirth was a trifle artificial.

‘Isn’t this rather an odd way,’ he suggested, ‘to become engaged?’

‘I really can’t pretend to say, Jack. I have no experience to go upon,’

‘But it surely needs no experience to tell you that a little feeling, a little tenderness, and——’

‘Now, Jack, you’re becoming sentimental, and I must really order you off.’

‘Without even a single kiss, without——’

‘Without anything—or wait—there—you can kiss me once.’

She suffered his lips to rest lightly on her proffered cheek, then held out her hand to bid him good-night.

‘You are happy now?’ she said with a smile.

‘Happy is not the word for it,’ he answered—and he spoke the truth.

The night was yet early when Jack returned to Browhill. Instead of crossing the bridge and going home, he walked through the village, thinking to spend a quiet hour, over a cigar, with Mr. MacGrigor at the Manse. He was in no hurry to tell his father the joyful tidings. But at the Manse he learned from Janet that the minister was out, although she expected him home every minute.

‘Deed he should hae been hame afore this,’ said the old woman, ‘for the nicht air’s no’ for him yet. But, of coorse, Mr. Gordon’s cairriage cam’ for him, an’ he’ll likely come hame in it as weel, so it’ll no’ maitter sae muckle.’

Jack turned away with a dumb anger in his heart. So Mr. MacGrigor was one of the guests—perhaps the guest—for whose sake Alice had dismissed him so peculiarly. What did it mean? he asked himself, and he had found no satisfactory answer to the question by the time he reached home. There was a light burning in his father's room. Jack went upstairs at once and knocked at the door.

'Come in,' cried his father, and he entered.

Mr. Stevenson was sitting at his desk, which was covered with business books, while in front of him were several letters, newly-opened apparently, and which had probably come in with the late post. One letter he held in his hand and he looked up from it to greet his son with a frown.

'Back already, sir! Dismissed, I suppose?' he sneered.

'No, accepted.' His father started and let the letter drop from his hand.

'I said you were a damned fool.'

'Perhaps, after all. For obeying you.'

'None of your insults, sir. But do you mean to say you are accepted by the lovely Miss Gordon?'

'I do. Provided you consent to the marriage.'

'And by heavens I never shall,' cried his father, bringing his clenched fist fiercely down on his desk. 'Read that,' and he tossed to Jack the letter which he had been reading when his son entered the room.

CHAPTER XIII

MR. GORDON had written to Mr. Stevenson, giving him notice, according to the terms of the agreement between them, of his intention to withdraw the money which he had invested in Fordingfield Works. He had not come to this decision without a good deal of hesitation, not having forgotten the comparatively recent occasion on which he had hinted at something of the kind to Mr. Stevenson, and having an uneasy suspicion that the calico-printer would not only resent his decision, but would regard him as a wavering individual with an unsteady mind. But Mr. Gordon was impelled to take this step by several considerations. Mr. MacGrigor had been guilty of no exaggeration when he told Jessie that Miss Gordon was the mistress of Laverockbank House, for never did doting parents submit themselves more completely to the whims of an only child than did Mr. and Mrs. Gordon to the caprices of Alice. It was her promptings that awoke in her father the ambition of taking his place in the county, and which had shaped his hazy aspirations into the purchase of an estate and the building of the pretentious house which was now saddling him more and more every day with increasing worries and heavier expenditure. It was she who was forever suggesting those alterations in the original plans—alterations which her father invariably deprecated and as invariably ended by adopting—which gave to architect and builder the golden opportunities which, after their kind, they reveled in, for exceeding the first estimates indefinitely and making serious inroads upon Mr. Gordon's floating capital. It had become necessary for him, unless he were to be annoyingly hampered and crippled for ready money, to call up some of his capital and appropriate a portion of it. At the same time, his friend in town—the man with ideas—was urging Mr. Gordon not to let the chance of a life-time go by him, but to invest every penny he could spare in that new and promising enterprise which was to yield such phenomenal profits. Mr. Gordon had been favoured with a copy of the provisional prospectus—marked 'private and confidential'—of 'The Mountain and Molehill Mining Company, Limited.' One baronet and two members of Parliament—a Conservative and a Liberal, to prove what a sound concern this was which could unite opposing politicians, and also, of course, to bait the hook doubly—figured on the list of the proposed directors, and the prospectus appeared to prove incontestably that immense dividends were assured to whomsoever should have the sense to apply for shares, and who might, when he had applied, have the good fortune to have them allotted to him. Altogether, Mr. Gordon concluded that this was the very scheme for him. He had only to withdraw the money invested in Mr. Stevenson's works, put the half of it in 'The Mountain and Molehill Mining Company, Limited,' and he would secure as much

return as he now did for the whole sum, while the other half would be added most conveniently to that floating capital which was being so severely trenched upon by his new estate and house. He confided his plans to his wife, being altogether too hopeful and excited about them to keep them secret, and his wife, for very different reasons, ventured to explain to Alice, her father's, proposals. Mrs. Gordon was as much opposed to her husband's scheme as he was in favour of it, and she hoped that Alice would come to her aid and enable her to defeat it. But she was leaning upon a broken reed, for Alice, also for her own reasons, went over to her father's side.

Mr. Gordon having nervous objections which prompted him to avoid introducing the subject personally, wrote a letter to Mr. Stevenson in preference to having an interview.

It was within Miss Gordon's knowledge that this letter had been despatched in the morning, when, in the afternoon, by her adroit management, the Laverockbank carriage went to the Manse, and came back bringing the minister to dinner. Further, when she returned to the drawing-room, where they were dawdling through the hour after dinner, after having seen Jack Stevenson in the library, she took good care that the reverend gentleman should know who had been calling. He thought Jack might have been invited to join them in the drawing-room, and was surprised.

'Oh,' she said, reading his thoughts, 'Jack and I are too good friends to stand upon ceremony. The dear boy would have been bored to death—father is so dull to-night.'

'Without granting that your father is—is dull to-night, as you say'—here he glanced at Mr. Gordon, who was peacefully dosing in an easy-chair, his hands folded in front of him, his head thrown back, and his mouth palpably open—'without granting that, I think Mr. Stevenson would have enjoyed himself because—yes, I may as well say it—because you were here.'

'Now there you are, jumping to a ridiculous conclusion, just like any other man. Even your cloth——'

'Never mind my cloth,' he interrupted. 'I hate the word.'

'Well even your tie—or perhaps that word also meets with your reverend disapproval—so, let me see, even the fact of being a minister now you surely can't object to that?—does not exempt you from that weakness of man which he endeavours to disavow by foisting it upon woman.'

'You mean jumping to conclusions, I suppose?'

‘Precisely. Now, mother, don’t interrupt us, if you please,’ she said to her mother, who showed signs of coming across from the chair in the corner where she had been emulating the oblivious faculties of her husband, ‘Mr. MacGrigor and I are getting on famously.’ Mrs. Gordon placidly subsided.

‘You were saying, Mr. MacGrigor?’ she continued. ‘Oh, no, I was saying, what was I saying? Yes, I remember, I was going to say that you had jumped to an unwarranted conclusion.’

‘I am very sorry, I’m sure, Miss Gordon.’

‘You don’t look it, but you ought to be. I regard Mr. Stevenson almost in the light of a brother, and I don’t think brothers usually extract that peculiar enjoyment from the society of their sisters which you were good enough to indicate Mr. Stevenson might find in mine.’

Mr. MacGrigor put aside the inconsequent sophistry. He concluded that it was not intended he should regard it seriously.

‘I take it that you must have been seeing a good deal of each other lately,’ he remarked, ‘or this beautiful brotherly and sisterly regard could scarcely have been developed.’

‘Oh yes’ she replied naïvely. ‘We have met quite frequently of late. In fact, I suppose I might say that Mr. Stevenson has been quite regularly here since you were ill. You see, we had a common bond of interest in our anxiety about you.’

‘No doubt,’ observed Mr. MacGrigor drily. ‘And I daresay you could speak of nothing but me.’

‘Now you are trying to be sarcastic, Mr. MacGrigor, which argues an unbelieving and

uncharitable frame of mind.’

‘Not at all. I am in a most’ receptive and melting mood.’

‘How interesting! But melting moods sometimes lead to humiliations, so you had better be careful.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Yes. And that reminds me of something. Do you know that Mr. Stevenson and I not only thought and spoke of you in your illness, but thought—at least I did—of your friends, or one of them at any rate?’

‘It was very good of you, Miss Gordon,’ said the minister, wondering what was coming.

‘Good? I don’t know. At any rate I thought of the girl Anderson——’

‘Who?’ asked Mr. MacGrigor curtly.

‘The girl whose father is mixed up with the Inch Bracken murder,’ she remarked, carelessly, but watching the minister closely.

Mr. MacGrigor reddened with annoyance.

‘Jessie Anderson, I suppose you mean,’ he said.

‘Ah, yes, that is it—Jessie, Jessie Anderson, your friend who lives up the Burn.’

‘Well, what of my friend, who, as you needlessly remind me, does live up the Burn?’ he asked. ‘Now, do tell me all about it. I am in an agony of suspense,’ he urged, with an obvious exaggeration of feeling designed to confuse Miss Gordon.

‘Oh, it is nothing,’ observed that young lady; ‘really nothing to make a fuss about. Only——’

‘Only what?’

‘Only,’ she said looking casually over her shoulder as though to see if her father were never going to waken, ‘I thought to do you a service, and so’—here she yawned as if the subject were really too uninteresting to be pursued.

‘Really, Mr. MacGrigor, I think it is time we had some music, or I declare I shall go to sleep,’

‘But you haven’t told me yet about Jessie Anderson,’ Mr. MacGrigor remonstrated.

‘You would like to hear about her? You are really interested in the girl?’

‘Of course I am interested in her,’ he replied, with a conscious access of honesty, ‘and—need I say it?—in you.’

‘Now it is nice of you, really nice of you, to be so impartial in your interest,’ and she made a polite little bow to the minister.

‘Well, let me see, where had we got to? You thought to do me a service, I think you said, and so——’

‘I offered her a situation as housemaid here.’

Mr. MacGrigor did not say he had heard before of this offer and had himself advised that it should be declined.

‘It was very good of you,’ he remarked. ‘And of course she accepted?’

‘Accepted! No, she declined,’ replied Miss Gordon, with the suspicion of a sneer.

‘Well, I suppose she knew her own business best. But of course she thanked you?’

‘Oh yes, she thanked me, in her own way, that is to say. She came here—walked up to the house—to do it. So I saw her, and do you know, Mr. MacGrigor?’

‘Yes?’

‘Frankly, I couldn’t see the attraction.’ She turned her eyes full upon him, cool and audacious.

‘The attraction! I don’t quite understand,’ he said.

‘I mean that I don’t think she is pretty. Of course, there is a certain rude grace and winsomeness about her.’

‘Yes.’

‘But that is nothing. It will wear off—what little there is of it. Indeed, I fancy it is wearing off already.’

‘You have been very observant, Miss Gordon.’

‘Yes, I admit it. I was very observant, not that there was very much to observe, mind you. But hers is the kind of clay, I should say, that coarsens with work and worry.’

‘Poor girl, she has enough of both,’ said Mr. MacGrigor.

‘I daresay. But I say, father, when are you going to wake up?’ She broke off, turning, and raising her voice.

‘Wake up?’ said Mr. Gordon, pulling himself together and rubbing his eyes. ‘I have been sitting patiently here till you and Mr. MacGrigor should finish what must surely have been a very interesting conversation.’

‘Yes, sitting patiently waiting—like mother over there, I suppose.’

Mr. Gordon wheeled round in his chair and looked at his wife.

‘Nonsense, my dear,’ he said with injured dignity. ‘Why, your mother is sleeping.’

‘Exactly. And I wouldn’t disturb her for the world. But Mr. MacGrigor would like a little music to relieve the monotony.’

‘Really, Miss Gordon, I wouldn’t——’

‘Oh, yes, you would. I know you would, but you prefer to be polite at the expense of accuracy.’

‘Alice’ said her father in mild disapproval.

‘And I prefer to be accurate at the expense of politeness, and of course am set down as rude by a critical father. But you’re not really angry, are you, father? Say you’re not and make me happy.’

She dropped on her knees before her father in mock penitence, and laughing to see her in one of her whimsical moods, he bade her go to the piano. She arose and crossed over to the open piano, and Mr. MacGrigor placed a chair for himself beside her and sat down.

‘What shall I play, I wonder,’ she remarked, turning over some music that stood open before her. ‘Or shall I sing you a song, Mr. MacGrigor?’

The minister could not help remembering the daring song which she had sung on the evening when he and Jack Stevenson were here together.

‘I should be very glad if you would sing,’ he replied.

‘What shall it be, then? Oh yes, I know. Will you kindly hand me those songs lying on the top of the stand, Mr. MacGrigor?’

He passed her the songs, and having selected one, she placed it before her. Again, as on that other evening, it was an old song she had chosen. To-night, however, it was not a note of defiant challenge she was about to sound, but of pathetic and yearning lament. Softly she touched the notes of prelude, and now her voice was mingling with the accompaniment.

‘O waly, waly up the bank,
And waly, waly doon the brae,
And waly, waly by yon burnside,
Where I and my love were wont to gae!
I leant my back unto an aik,
I thought it was a trusty tree;
But first it bowed, and syne it brak,
Sae my true love did lichtly me.’

The past rose up before the minister, and out of its mists, there stole upon him the vision of Jessie, up there by the edge of the moonlit moorland, leaning on his breast in the dusky shadow of the fir-wood. There was remorse in the thought of it, gripping at his heart and catching at his throat, as the bitter cry of love, wronged and betrayed, broke through the song.

‘O waly, waly gin love be bonny,
A little time while it is new;
But when it’s auld, it waxeth cauld,
And fades away like morning dew;

O wherefore should I busk my heid,
Or wherefore should I kaim my hair?
For my true love has me forsook,
And says he'll never loe me mair.?’

Still the vision of the past rose before him, but now Jessie stood alone by the edge of the moorland. The night was dark, the wind broke over the wild waste like a moaning sea and washed mournfully through the swaying fir-tops. Below in the glen, the burn roared hoarsely down in flood, but there, with her white face, her dress fluttering in the cruel storm, Jessie still waited for the lover that never came.

‘’Tis not the frost that freezes fell,
Nor blawing snaw’s inclemencie;
’Tis not sic cauld that mak’s me cry,
But my love’s heart grown cauld to me;
But had I wissed before I kissed,
That love had been sae ill to win,
I had locked my heart in a case of gowd,
And pinned it wi’ a siller pin.’

‘But had I wissed before I kissed,’—a subtle inflection of the singer’s voice, and a slight sway of her head towards the minister as she sang those words dispelled the haunting vision which enthralled him, and instead there arose before him the scene on the shore of Inch Bracken when he bent above Miss Gordon tenderly, laid his lips pityingly upon hers, and was drawn down by her clasping arms as she awoke to consciousness. The last notes of the song died away. The singer sat motionless by the piano as if she were loth to disturb the effect which she knew she had produced on Mr. MacGrigor’s heart.

‘Thank you,’ he said at last, very softly and tenderly.

She turned and looked at him, almost wistfully he thought.

‘I’m sure, Alice,’ broke in her mother, who had been effectually roused from her after-dinner lethargy, ‘I don’t know why you persist in singing such melancholy songs. You make me feel positively unhappy, and I’m quite certain that you have made Mr. MacGrigor miserable.’

‘Please don’t interfere on my account, Mrs. Gordon,’ replied the minister, ‘I quite enjoy it.’

‘Enjoy feeling miserable?’ ventured Mr. Gordon, with one of his heavy attempts at humour.

‘How absurd you are,’ said Miss Gordon impatiently. ‘Mr. MacGrigor has said he enjoyed the song, and it is just as well, for I shall sing no more to-night, since it seems I can’t please you all. At least I’m not going to try,’ and she rose from the music-stool, annoyed at the intrusion of the common-place into the sentimental atmosphere she had been purposely creating. Mr. MacGrigor also rose, and intimated that he must be thinking of returning home to the Manse, as it was still against his doctor’s orders to be out late.

‘Nonsense,’ exclaimed Mr. Gordon, ‘you must have a cigar with me in the billiard-room. The fire is lit?’ he asked, turning to his wife.

‘Oh yes, an hour ago. But I will go and see that it is burning all right,’ and so saying she left the drawing-room.

‘I’m afraid I must really ask you to excuse me’ pleaded the minister, turning to his host. ‘But the doctor’s orders are peremptory, and I have already disobeyed them by remaining till this time.’

‘Well, well, if you must go you must. Just ring the bell, will you, Alice, please, and I’ll order the carriage. Or, stay, never mind, I’ll go and see Black myself. He’s a careless fellow unless he is looked after, and I suppose you had better have plenty of wraps, Mr. MacGrigor.’

‘It really isn’t worth while to have you taking all this trouble. I shall be home in a few minutes, since you are so good as to offer me your carriage.’

‘Tut, it’s no trouble at all,’ and Mr. Gordon bustled out of the room, leaving his daughter and the minister alone. There was a moment of awkward silence between them. Miss Gordon was the first to break it.

‘You have not told me what you thought of the song, Mr. MacGrigor,’ she said, almost shyly.

‘I have not had an opportunity till now.’

‘And now?’

‘I think it heart-breaking.’

To his surprise she broke into a little laugh, which he thought was mockery, but was only nervousness. The light laugh died away into a sigh, and there was no raillery in her voice when she said, ‘Why will you men always treat us as if we were children?’

‘I do not understand,’ he replied perplexedly.

‘Yes, that is just it. Men never do understand.

They say to us the things they think we would like to have said.’

‘I spoke from my heart.’

‘Forgive me,’ she said, laying a hand gently on his arm and drawing closer to him. ‘I thought I had angered you,’ she whispered softly.

‘Angered me!’

‘Yes,’ and she sighed. ‘But now I have—I know that you’—she hesitated, and flashed upon him a sunny smile.

‘But now you know what?’ he asked with an answering smile.

The door opened and Mrs. Gordon reappeared. It was an embarrassing situation. Alice was the first to recover herself.

‘I will tell you again,’ she whispered to the minister, and then to her mother she said, ‘It does not matter about the fire, mother, Mr MacGrigor has decided to go at once.’

Mrs. Gordon came forward to express her regret, and to ask, as a matter of polite solicitude for their guest, why Mr. Gordon had gone away and left them.

‘Oh, that is all right,’ answered her daughter quickly, ‘he will be back in a moment. He has gone to see about the carriage.’

Just then Mr. Gordon returned. ‘Black is bringing round the carriage, Mr. MacGrigor,’ he announced. ‘But you will have a glass of wine before you go; the night is very cold.’

‘Thank you, but I think not.’

‘Pooh! a single glass of good old port won’t——’

‘Now, father,’ interrupted Alice, ‘you mustn’t insist like that. And there is the carriage coming round now,’ she added, as the sound of wheels was heard in front of the house.

‘Very well, little tyrant, if you wish to get rid of Mr. MacGrigor as quickly as possible—eh, Mr. MacGrigor?—of course I have nothing to say.’

‘That is one objection I have to people sleeping all the evening,’ retorted his daughter. ‘They waken up and try to say smart things, hoping to make people believe they have been wide awake all the while.’

‘And some people keep awake only to prevent their saucy tongues from lying still,’ returned her father.

‘I am sorry you must go away so early,’ she said to the minister. ‘But you must see that he promises to come back again soon, father.’

‘Certainly, certainly. I shall send for him. But of course he will promise now, I have no doubt, if you wish him.’

‘With pleasure,’ assented the minister readily.

‘My visits here are a delightful break in the monotony of my life.’

Miss Gordon turned upon him a grateful smile.

‘No doubt, no doubt,’ remarked Mr. Gordon; ‘but some of these fine days you’ll be getting married, and you will have a different ‘story to tell.’

‘I don’t know,’ answered the minister, vaguely and in some confusion—shared, oddly enough, by Miss Gordon, ‘but if—that is, in that case, I hope you would find the Manse more hospitable than I am able—unfortunately, to make it at present.’

Whereat there were protestings, which led up to Mr. MacGrigor’s being accompanied to the door by all three. At the top of the steps the ladies shook hands with the minister, Miss Gordon’s hand lingering in his with a dainty pressure that had its own meaning. His host descended with him to the gravel, where the carriage lamps were gleaming in the keen night air and irradiating the space within which the horses impatiently champed their bits and tossed their heads. Mr. MacGrigor was in the carriage. He shook hands with Mr. Gordon, and looking up into the open doorway in which mother and daughter were framed in light, he saw Miss Gordon step slightly backwards. She lifted her hand to her lips and waved it lightly towards him, then turned and left her mother alone. The horses reared slightly as Black gave them the reins, plunged forward, and the minister was rolling homeward as fast as two good horses could draw him. And the thought that was in his heart was all of that girlish figure and the kiss which had been wafted to him from the lighted doorway.

CHAPTER XIV

‘BE not familiar with any woman; but commend all good women in general to God.’

Mr. MacGrigor abruptly stopped reading when he came to this passage in the little volume which he held in his hand, as he sat by his study window in the waning light. He had been long familiar with *The imitation of Christ* and must have read this passage many times before, but it had never struck him as it did now. All at once it became a grotesque incongruity, a flash of grim, cynical humour, scintillating oddly through the grey atmosphere of monastic asceticism. He was silent for a little while. Then he laid down the book on the table in the window recess, and rose to his feet, laughing softly to himself. He crossed the room and stood in front of the fire with his hands behind his back. The dusk slowly deepened. A lone islet of pale gold, which had floated in the afterglow above Cairn top, melted and sank beneath the rising tides of the sea of shadow. Here and there the twinkle of a star glimmered timidly and evasively, wavering far within the infinite deeps from which it would presently shine brightly forth. Within, the firelight cast flickering shadows on the walls and ceiling. It was the hour in which the minister had often felt himself moved by mystic influences, when he had experienced—

‘A sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.’

But in those last days a change had come upon him, of such a kind that its very nature rendered him incapable of perceiving its subtle operations. The Pantheism which had transfigured Theism for him had no longer any visions. The spiritual had become of the earth, earthy. There was ever a strong element of sensuousness in the poetic imagination to which his vivid and moving oratory owed so much of its power. The lower was now lording it over the higher.

‘Be not familiar with any woman; but commend all good women in general to God.’

Standing there he laughed again.

‘Good Master Thomas à Kempis knew something,’ he said to himself. ‘They were a sly lot these old monks. There is a fine cunning in the distinction which he contrives to draw between any woman and a good woman. I take it, Master Thomas, that you judged it was not safe to be familiar with even a good woman, and that it was hopeless ‘to commend any but good women to God. I wonder where you acquired your experience.’

Curiously, and yet perhaps naturally, his thoughts flew off at a sharp tangent, back to his college days and certain experiences at which Dr. Connell had once hinted. He hated to think of that time. It had been the ugly and significant preface to an act of moral cowardice. By that act he had signed articles which he did not believe, rather than retreat at the last moment from a false position, to bear thenceforward the social stigma of being a ‘stickit minister.’ His fellow-students had tried to laugh away his scruples, pointing out that all save blockheads signed the articles with mental reservations, and that they themselves would do so with light hearts and in good company. They did not convince him. But he acted on their advice because it squared with his interests. So he had entered the Church with a lie on his lips. An isolated act of moral cowardice may have a sinister and symptomatic significance. To do evil that good may come is the blundering expedient of moral incapacity.

Presently, Jessie Anderson came into his mind, and mentally he placed Miss Gordon beside her. Applying to them, with an amused smile, that quaint passage in the *Imitation*, he wondered in which category the shrewd and severe Thomas, could he condescend from his heaven of the saints, would place these two women. He thought he knew what the old monk would do, and decided that in so doing he would greatly err. The minister weighed and balanced separately the qualities of the two and came to his own decision.

Later on, the same evening, having been in his study all the afternoon, and growing restless, he went out for a walk. He sauntered along the broad gravel avenue to the Manse gate, where he hesitated for a moment, undecided whether to go down the Brae and along the Balgoyne Road, or to turn up and walk along the Kilrockton Road. He was still lingering there irresolute, when he heard steps coming up the Brae towards him and the sound of a woman’s voice humming a plaintive, old Scotch song softly to herself. At the sound of that voice his pulses instantly quickened. He waited, with eyes eagerly trying to pierce the dusky wall which rose up beyond the circle of light flung out by the street lamp just outside the gate. The voice grew silent but the footsteps drew nearer, and out of the perplexing shadow, into the light, stepped Jessie Anderson. He moved towards her. He whispered to himself that his imaginings had been shaping themselves to this meeting. She gave a slight start of, he thought, glad surprise.

‘Who would have thought of meeting you here, Jessie?’ he said, as he took her hand.

There was nothing particularly strange about it. Only it seemed so to him.

‘Oh, I was just going up the Brae to spier—I mean, to ask—for Maggie Fletcher. She works beside me, and wasna at her work the day.’

‘Maggie,’ he said reflectively. ‘Let me see. That’s the red-headed one, isn’t it?’

‘Well, she doesna like to be called red, but——’

‘But she is. Well, you needn’t worry about her. I was down at the post-office in the forenoon and saw her out with a basket on her arm shopping, I suppose.’

‘Then there canna be muckle—much—the matter wi’ her.’

‘Of course not.’

‘I am glad,’ said Jessie simply.

‘And so am I,’ said Mr. MacGrigor, in such a way that Jessie looked at him inquiringly.

‘You’ll not require to go and ask for her now,’ he added.

‘But perhaps Maggie would like to see me anyway,’ she said, wondering all the while what he would have her do.,

‘I have no doubt of it,’ he answered with a smile. ‘But she has you beside her so often—happy girl—that she will surely not grudge me, who have you so seldom, just a little of you for once.’

‘But we—we—can’t stand here long, can we?’ she suggested shyly, not in the least meaning that they should go elsewhere, but simply that it was not desirable they should be seen standing there by every chance passer-by.

‘No, of course not, of course not,’ repeated Mr. MacGrigor, absently, reluctant to part from her, and yet not well knowing what to do.

‘I wish I could ask you down to the Manse,’ he continued, quickly and nervously, as the thought came to him of the last time she had been there, ‘but——’

‘Yes, yes, I know. It would never do. People are so—so——’

‘Exactly. It’s a dreadful nuisance. Not that I would care, mind you, Jessie, if it were not for my position.’

His position—not hers. It was a trifle, perhaps, but an illuminating one. Its significance was lost on Jessie. She was not selfish enough to note it.

‘Don’t you whiles find it a fair worry to be always having to—to——?’ She paused, uncertain how to express her meaning correctly without perhaps offending him.

‘To keep up appearances, you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘Of course I do, horribly worrying.’ He spoke fervently. Just then he was struggling with an intense longing ‘to get away somewhere and kick over the traces,’ as he had once phrased it to Dr. Connell.

‘Would you care to know,’ he went on, ‘what I should like to do now, if it were not for “appearances,” that living nightmare of parsons?’

‘Of course I would like to know,’ said Jessie frankly.

‘I should like to walk straight down the Brae with you,’ he answered, leaning towards her and speaking in low tones, ‘and turn up the Burn, to climb the quarry braes and “stand by the old muir-gate with my arms round——’

The minister broke off suddenly. A man was coming towards them, getting home late from work, with his can in his hand.

Mr. MacGrigor straightened himself, and purposely let the lamplight fall full on his face. He knew the value of unconcern in disarming suspicion.

‘As I was saying,’ he observed, quite loudly, and with studied irrelevance, as the man came up to them, ‘that is always the trouble in Sunday-schools.’

‘Guid-nicht, Mr. MacGrigor,’ said the man cordially, as he passed slowly on.

‘Oh, it’s you, Simpson,’ answered the minister, as if he had not before observed him. ‘You’ll be wanting a “long lie” to-morrow morning.’

‘An’ no’ get it,’ laughed Simpson cheerily over his shoulder.

‘Good-night,’ called the minister after him.

‘Guid-nicht,’ said Simpson again.

Mr. MacGrigor watched the man disappearing. Then he turned to Jessie and spoke, again lowering his voice.

‘He’ll go straight home and tell his wife—unless she’s in bed, in which case he’ll tell her in the morning—that he came across the minister discussing Sunday schools at the Manse gate.’

His tone was touched with contempt. It may have been of himself; it may have been of honest Simpson.

‘I’d better be going, I think,’ said Jessie. It all seemed so futile and inconclusive, this furtive manœuvring, that it made her uneasy with a disturbing sense of meanness.

‘Not yet, not yet,’ protested the minister. He was disturbed by the same considerations as Jessie, but their effect upon him was different. They only stimulated thwarted desire. ‘I haven’t said one-half of what I want to say to you.’

‘What is the use of saying anything?’ she asked, almost bitterly. ‘It would be best to forget.’

‘I whiles think you have forgotten.’

‘Forgotten what?’

‘Everything—the walks up the hill, and the—the— meetings by the muir-gate, an’——’

‘And that last night in my study,’ he broke in, insensibly drawing nearer to her, and not noticing how she flushed under the lamplight. ‘I have forgotten nothing, that last night least of all. I think of it by day and dream of it by night. It comes between me and my work. Even now——’

‘Wheesht, wheesht,’ she interrupted urgently, lifting a warning hand.

He stopped, with a gesture of impatience. They heard footsteps, the light, confident footsteps of youth, descending the Brae, and approaching them rapidly.

The minister turned sharply. Dan swung into the light. He was returning home from the Braehead night-school. ‘Hulloa, Jessie,’ said the boy, stopping and looking at his sister with surprise. ‘Whaur are ye gaun at this time o’ nicht?’

‘I was gaun to spier for Maggie Fletcher.’

‘Weel, I’ll gang back wi’ ye,’ said Dan promptly, an’ then see ye hame.’

To Jessie, her brother’s presence had brought with it a breath of fresh air, dispelling a sultry and electric atmosphere. It bore a sense of cool relief. To Mr. MacGrigor it was an exasperating interruption. Dan ignored the minister, who stood in waiting silence, regarding the lad curiously.

‘I think I needna gang an’ see her noo,’ said Jessie. ‘Mr. MacGrigor saw her oot the day, so there canna be muckle the maitter wi’ her.’

‘Verra weel, then. We can gang hame,’

‘You’re surely in a dreadful hurry, Dan,’ observed Mr. MacGrigor, with a semblance of good humour .

‘Ay,’ answered Dan curtly. ‘I want my supper.’

The lad turned his clear eyes upon the minister. There was in them something like the light of challenge. He could be defiant enough when he liked, and he had no particular love for the Reverend Alexander MacGrigor. He had many a time heard his father speak in forcible language concerning the minister’s treatment of Jessie, and his young heart had risen up in vehement championship of his sister. Besides, he felt an instinctive antagonism to the minister, who recognised it intuitively.

‘I mustn’t keep you, then, I suppose,’ answered Mr. MacGrigor banteringly, ‘or else you’ll perhaps get dangerous.’

‘Oh, I’m no’ so dangerous as some folk,’ retorted Dan. ‘Are ye comin’, Jessie?’ he asked, turning to his sister.

‘Of course I’m comin’, Dan,’ replied Jessie, with a nervous laugh. ‘Good-night, Mr. MacGrigor.’

‘Oh, I’ll walk as far as the foot of the Brae with you,’ said the minister, ‘if Dan will allow me.’

But Dan would have none of it.

‘Ye needna heed,’ said the boy. ‘We ken the road oorsel’s weel eneuch,’

He caught his sister’s arm and moved on.

‘Good-night,’ said Jessie, and turned away with her brother.

‘Good-night,’ responded the minister, who stood looking after the brother and sister descending the Brae together until they vanished from his sight. Then he returned to the Manse, dreaming that he did well to be angry at the baffling currents of life. But Jessie had only passed from his sight to take possession of his imagination. She was for him no longer the old love but a new passion. Again and again his fevered fancy went back to that night when she was in his arms in the Manse.

The Imitation of Christ was lying where he had laid it down. He lifted the little volume and returned it to its place on its shelf. There was no need to refer to that passage again. He had got it by heart.

‘Be not familiar with any woman; but commend all good women in general to God.’

‘A most excellent maxim, no doubt,’ he said to himself. ‘But it is the precept of an anchorite

CHAPTER XV

THE Vale of Lennox was smothered in rain and swathed with mist. If nature has a weakness in this valley it is for weeping, and the copious flow of tears in her melting moods is surprising. The Lennox was swirling between its banks in turbid discolour, the dull brown of pouring flood mingling with the yellow refuse discharged from the calico-printing works and the ruddy outpourings of the Turkey-red works. Ben Lennox was hidden behind the murky clouds, and Cairntop gloomed sullenly through the shrouding mists which clung drearily along the heights and lay heavily upon the valley. The Main Street of Browhill was dismal and almost deserted. Only a coal-cart was slowly jolting along the streaming roadway, the patient brute between the shafts dragging disconsolately along with drooping head, the patient man behind the coal-bags plodding sullenly along, with a soaking sack around his shoulders and a cracked bell swinging discordantly in his hand. Pervading the dank air was the oppressive odour belched out daily from the works, adding its own stifling horror to the hideous offence of escaping steam and vomiting smoke. River and air were alike impure, the very skies were polluted, and the rain brought down its own deposits of filth.

In front of the bar in Fraser's public-house at the Browhill end of the Brig Tam Broon was standing, with a half-empty glass of whisky on the counter before him. Around him lounged half a dozen men, and on the other side of the bar Mr. Fraser himself, with shirt-sleeves rolled up, and a jovial air of busy hospitality about his comfortable person, was rubbing some glasses with a towel in the near neighbourhood of a cheerful fire. They were discussing, for the hundredth time, the Inch Bracken murder.

'I tell ye what it is,' said Tam. 'Jim Adams is gaun to be hanged.'

'Dinna be ower sure, Tam,' answered Bob Bissland, the shoemaker, known as Buffy Bob, 'wait till the trial.'

'Wait till the trial? Onybody could tell ye efter the trial,' replied Tam with great scorn, 'but I'm tellin' ye the noo. Jim Adams is gaun to be hanged.' He looked round for somebody else to contradict him. Nobody doing so, he was lifting up his glass with an air of merited importance when big Wull Ferguson the carter, who had been on the spree for a couple of days, took it upon himself to speak.

'What I would like to ken,' he began, when Tam, putting down his glass, turned upon him.

‘You! Ye’re aye wantin’ to ken. What is’t ye would like to ken noo? Whether it’ll haud wat eneuch to keep your wife frae comin’ to look for ye or no’?’

‘Ye needna fash your heid aboot the wife, Tam. She’s auld eneuch i’ the horn to tak’ care o’ hersel’,’ retorted Wull hazily, but with a mysterious aside in the shape of a whiskified wink to the company in general..

‘Nae doot,’ assented Tam graciously, ‘nae doot. But she’ll hae to leeve to the age o’ Methoosela to be auld eneuch i’ the horn to tak’ care o’ you, Wull.’

‘I’m thinkin’,’ observed Pate Maclean the blockprinter, who had been smoking and listening in silence, with both hands in his trouser pouches, ‘she would be ower runckled an’ toothless by that time to hae much haud ower Wull.’

‘It’s the guid’s truth,’ said Buffy Bob, ‘Wull’s jist like potty in the haun’s o’ a woman, but she has to be bonny an’ guid-temper’d. Eh, Wull?’ and Bob poked the big carter in the ribs. Wull took this as a compliment and grinned vacuously.

‘An’ even a woman sae gifted wi’ guid looks an’ guid temper as Wull’s Jean canna be expected to preserve them for near a thoosan’ year——’

‘Nine hunner’ an’ sixty-nine,’ interposed Tam, as minister’s man and representative of the kirk. ‘“An’ a’ the days o’ Methoosela were nine hunner’ an’ sixty-nine: an’ he dee’d.” Genesis fift’ an’ twinty-seventh.’

‘Ye should hae been a meenister, Tam,’ said Buffy Bob, who held the pulpit and the pew in equal derision, ‘ye’ve an awfu’ gift o’ the Scripturs.’ Tam was flattered, and lifting his glass, took another pull at his whisky.

‘Ye’re mebbe richt,’ he replied thoughtfully, drawing the back of his hand across his mouth slowly.

‘Richt! Of coorse he’s richt,’ observed Pate.

‘An’ ye micht hae been in the Manse yoursel’ an’ mairried to auld Jinat.’

‘What are you’ bletherin’ aboot, ye auld guidfor- naething?’ demanded Tam angrily.

‘Ye never could thole the women, could ye, Tam?’ put in Bob.

‘Me! I never saw the woman that I cared a dockan for.’

‘But they say,’ remarked Pate maliciously, ‘that ye asked Jinat to hae ye, an’ that she jist lauch’t at ye, an’ ca’d ye a silly auld cuddy.’

‘It’s a’ lees, blasted lees,’ returned Tam, scowling and growing even redder than usual.

‘I tell’t ye he couldna thole women,’ repeated Buffy Bob.

‘An’ they canna thole me,’ added Tam. ‘I’m the only man in the Vale that can put them whaur they hae to haud their tongues, whether they like it or no’.

‘An’ there’s nae woman likes to haud her tongue,’ commented Buffy Bob.

‘An’ that’s a fac’,’ suddenly observed Jamie Auld, the bell-ringer and bill sticker, who had hitherto listened silently. Jamie’s wife was a noted drab and scold, who was supposed not to allow the little man to call even his soul his own. ‘An’ that’s a fac’. Ye maun hae put a wheen o’ ill-tongued jauds under the mools in your time, Tam?’ There was a wistful admiration in the little man’s manner and tone which pleased Tam mightily.

‘I’ll hae anither hauf,’ he said to the landlord, pushing his glass forward. ‘An’ if ye’ll jist pass ower your glesses, ye’ll a’ hae a dram wi’ me.’

There was a quick draining up of heel-taps, even Wull Ferguson, who had fallen into a dose where he had sat down by the window, rousing sufficiently to hand his empty glass across.

Mr. Fraser replenished the glasses smartly. Wull Ferguson gulped down a mouthful of whisky and let his head sink drowsily forward again, while Tarn Broon went back to his subject as if he had never left it.

‘I hae that, Jamie, but there’s twa-three geyan teuch anes abune the grun’ yet.’

‘An’ Jamie could put his haun’ on aboot the teuchest o’ the hale rick-ma-tick,’ said Duffy Bob.

‘Him put a haun’ on her!’ sneered Pate.

‘Deil the fears o’ me,’ returned Jamie. ‘I’m no daft.’

But he returned to the subject, which seemed to have a strange fascination for his simple wits.

‘Aboot hoo mony dae ye think ye’ll hae shovelled into the grun’ in your day noo, Tam?’ he asked.

‘Ill-tongued wives ye mean, Jamie?’

‘Ay, ill-faur’d, bletherin’ bizzums.’

‘Weel, I couldna richtly say aff-haun’, for they’re a’ quaiet eneuch when they gang through my haun’s.’

‘Twa-three score onyway,’ suggested Jamie.

‘Score!’ said Tam loftily. ‘Hunner’s, ye mean.’

‘Hunner’s’ groaned Jamie, groaning not at the hundreds that were taken, but at the one that was left. ‘Hunner’s, did ye say?’

‘I said hunner’s.’ Tam was now loud and authoritative. ‘Hunner’s,’ he repeated.

‘Nine hunner’ and sixty-nine, Genesis fift’ an’ what d’ye ca’ it,’ Wull suddenly remarked, stirred in his sleepy doze by Tam’s voice. They all looked at him in surprise, but the carter had sunk back into drowsy indifference.

‘Never fash your thoom aboot Wull,’ pleasantly remarked Buffy Bob. ‘He’s jist doverin’, an’ if ye’ll only let him alane for a wee, he’ll wauken up kind o’ hauf sober. Wull’s a perfec’ meerale,’ he added, looking at him admiringly.

‘Dae ye mind the day ye berried Lucky Macallister?’ asked Pate at Tam.

‘Dae I no’ jist?’ replied Tam with a chuckle.

‘What was that?’ put in the bellman eagerly.

‘Nane o’ your coddin’,’ said Buffy Bob. ‘Ye mind o’t fine, Jamie.’

‘Sure’s daith, I dinna,’ protested the little man.

‘There, Mr. Fraser, jist fill up thae glesses again, an’ ye’ll tell us a’ about it, Tam.’

‘Oh it’s naething,’ said Tam, who wanted, to be pressed, proceeding to knock out the ashes of his pipe against the edge of the counter. ‘Bob can tell ye as weel as me.’

‘Na, na, Tam, ye maun tell us yoursel’,’ persisted Jamie. ‘Here, tak’ a screw o’ my twist, an’ gang on wi’ the story.’

Tam took the tin tobacco-box which Jamie offered him, pulled out a short length of black roll which it contained, and having shut down the lid upon it, screwed off an inch or so, and began to cut it with his knife.

Tam always studied effect, and made as much of a story as he could.

‘It was like this,’ he proceeded leisurely. ‘Auld Lucky Macallister had led her man an awfu’ life o’t, as Pate there kens——’

‘I dae that,’ assented Pate with a shake of his head.

‘An’ when she was bein’ berried, Davie was only too gled to see the hale thing disappearin’ frae sicht an’ gettin’ shovelled safely up.’

‘An’ nae wonder, puir man,’ observed Pate sympathetically.

‘Weel, it was an’ awfu’ wat day, teemin’ doon in bucketfu’s the same as the day, an’ the folk begood to gang awa’ afore I had the grave hauf filled, an’ at the hin’er end Davie was left staun’in’ alane, no’ carin’ a preen for the drookin’ he was gettin’.’

‘Davie never cared muckle for water,’ remarked Pate.

‘But at the hin’er end,’ went on Tam, ‘what wi’ Davie staun’in’ glowerin’ there wi’oot a word, an’ the rain soakin’ into my skin, I couldna bide it ony longer. Sae I jist struck wark for a wee an’ dauner’d awa’ up to the Black Bul’ for a dram.’

‘An’ what did Davie say?’ asked Jamie.

‘Davie? Naething. I didna gie him time.

But I had jist gotten my whisky frae Murdoch, when in cam’ Davie as wild as a tigger.’

‘Gor, an’ it took a lot to get his dander up,’ said Bob.

Tam ignored the interruption and proceeded with his story.

‘He was an’ awfu’ lookin’ scarecrow, wi’ his black clathes a’ sodden’ an’ shinin’ wi’ the rain, an’ the water dreepin’ on to the flure frae the big crape ends that hung doon frae his auld hat. “What dae ye mean,” says he, shakin’ his neif in my face, “comin’ awa’ an’ leavin’ your job doon by only hauf feenished?” “An’ what dae you mean,” says I, turnin’ on him as if I would thrapple him, “com in’ to me like a damn’t hearse?” Criftens! he near drapped wi’ fricht, an’ I was kind o’ vex’t for what I had said. “I was gaun back, Davie,” says I, “when I had ta’en my dram.” “Ye had nae richt to gang awa’ an’ tak’ a dram at a’ afore ye were dune wi’ your job,” says he, pluckin’ up hert again? “If ye dinna haud your bletherin’ tongue an’ get oot o’ this quicker than ye cam’ in”—an’ that was quick eneuch, I can tell ye—“I’ll no’ dae anither haun’s turn to the job the day,” says I. I could see him turnin’ white aboot the gills at the thocht o’t, but he had a game bit in his hert too, had Davie—he would hae been a fair deevil, I think, if Lucky hadna coo’d him—an’ he says, says he, “A’ richt, Tam, please yoursel’. But it’s no’ a bawbee ye’ll get frae me for this job.” “Verra weel,” says I, “I’ll howk her up.” “Ye’ll what?” says he, tremblin’ a’ ower. “I’ll howk her up, I’m tellin’ ye,” says I. “Ye daurna,” says he, but he was knocked quite fushionless noo, and was as white as a ghais.t “Daurna!” says I, lauchin’ in his face. “As sure’s my name’s Tam Broon, I’ll hae her oot the nicht an’ put her on the tap o’ the wa’, whaur ye’ll get a guid view o’ her as ye come in at the gate the morn to the kirk.” Wi’ that I took a bit taste o’ my dram, an’ let on I had forgotten a’ aboot the cratur. But Davie was maist greetin’ noo, an’ he couldna thole it ony langer.’

‘Nae wonder, the puir body,’ said Jamie sympathetically. ‘I ken hoo I would feel mysel.’

‘He was maist greetin’, I say,’ proceeded Tam serenely. “Ye canna mean it, Tam,” says he. “Ye’ll no’ dae’t. Feenish’t the nicht an’ I’ll pay ye dooble—pay ye

dooble, an' fore-haunded too if ye like,' an' he put his haun' in his pooch. "Wha's askin' to be paid fore-haunded?" says I, angry-like, but vexter than ever for the cratur, he was that chirpit an' chittrin' like.'

' "Ye're no' needin' to heed what I said," says he, awfu' humble an' beggin', "but I couldna rest the nicht unless I ken't she was a' richt !" "I 'm no' angry at ye" says I, for I couldna help peetyin' him when he begood like that. "She was a dacent woman Lucky, an' I can understaun' your feelin's." "She was a' that," says he, gie'in' his een a bit scuff wi' the back o' his haun' afore he said, wi' a kin' o' sech—"when she liked." 'Weel, weel," says I, 'she's gane the road we maun a' gang, Davie. We're here the day an' awa' the morn. If ye'll hae a dram wi' me we'll gang back an' feenish that job!" "Hang the fear o' me haein' a dram wi' you," says he, brichtenin' up a' at aince. 'Ye'll hae a dram wi' me.' Sae we had oor dram thegither an' gaed back.'

'An' ye feenished the job?' asked Jamie eagerly.

'I did a' that, an' it was ane o' the natest jobs ever I dune, an' Davie was as guid as his word, for he paid me dooble when I had clapped doon the last divot on the tap o' Lucky.'

'Man, Tam, ye're a great man,' observed the bill-sticker enthusiastically. 'We'll hae anither dram ower the heid o' that story. Here, Mr. Fraser, jist fill up thae glesses again.'

Wull woke up, and signalised his revival by an abrupt demand to 'Pass ower my gless wi' the lave.' His maudlin mind seemed to regain consciousness just where it had gone to sleep.

'What I want to ken,' were the first words with which he favoured the company, when he had indulged in a pull at his replenished glass and set it down at his side.

'For guidness sake let us hear what he wants to ken, an' be dune wi' t,' said Bob.

'Go on, Wull,' put in Pate encouragingly.

'Weel, I want to ken whaur Jock Aun'erson is?'

'Ye ,dae, dae ye?' replied Tam with a wink to the rest. 'Onything else ye would like to ken?'

'Mebbe ay an' mebbe no. If ye'll tell me that first I'll let ye ken whether I've onything

else to spier or no'.'

‘Ye’re haverin’ like an auld sweetie wife, Wull,’ Tam remarked crustily, annoyed at the carter’s persistency.

‘Go an’ boil your heid,’ retorted Wull angrily.

‘There’s naeboddy askin’ you whether I’m haverin’ or no’,’ and ‘with that he rose lumbering from his seat. ‘Ye think ye ken a thing or twa, Tam,’ he said advancing to him, and putting his face close to Tam’s, ‘but ye’ve a heap to learn yet.’

‘For instance!’

‘Hoo to haud your tongue.’

‘Wait till he’s gotten a wife,’ said Bob, ‘an’ she’ll mebbe put him in the way o’ pickin’ that up.’

‘Chah! It would tak’ her a wheen o’ dauds on his skull for her to ding that or onything else into’t. He’s nae sense to begin wi’.’

The landlord thought it well to interfere.

‘If ye canna haud a ceevil tongue in your heid, Wull,’ Mr. Fraser called across to him from behind the bar, ‘I’ll hae to send for your wife to fetch ye hame.’

‘Send for her if ye like,’ said Wull. ‘I dinna care that for her or you either,’ and he snapped his big fingers contemptuously at Fraser.

‘A’ richt; we ‘we’ll sune see aboot that,’ the landlord replied. ‘I’ll jist send the lass alang for her, an’ when she’s here onyway, I’ll spier if she canna settle that bit score that ye’ve rin up this week. Hey, Maggie!’ he cried, turning to the door which led from the back of the bar to an inner room.

‘For guid’s sake, let me oot o’ this,’ exclaimed Wull, shouldering his way to the door.

A roar of laughter went up, and Wull turned fiercely round and shook his great fist.

‘Ay, send for the wife noo, an’ show her the bit score if ye like, but if ye dae, ye’ll never see a penny o’t, as sure’s daith,’

The carter swung himself down the steps into the streaming rain, and lurching across the road, made his way along the Brig, steering straight—or at least as straight as he could—for Riddoch’s public-house at the other end of it.

When he was gone the landlord remarked with an affable smile, ‘He’s no’ a bad kind o’ chap, Wull, if he would only keep aff the dram.’

‘Ay; it’s an awfu’ peety o’ him,’ said the little bill-sticker, who was beginning to get maudlin.

Bob and Pate winked to each other and laughed, but Tam tossed up his glass and emptied it.

‘Wull’s a perfect fule,’ he said gruffly, as he put down his glass, ‘a muckle overgrown wean, that would be nane the waur o’ a guid skelpin’.

‘Weel, weel,’ said the landlord, ‘it wouldna dae if we were a’ alike.’

‘Hulloa,’ exclaimed Tam, who had gone to the door to see if it was still raining as heavily as ever, ‘there gangs the doctor. Wha’s no’ weel noo, I wonder?’

In a moment they were all at the door, watching Dr. Connell’s brougham as it rolled along the Main Street, the hoofs of the doctor’s horse plashing indifferently through the puddles, and the wheels flinging spurting mud and water on either side as they whirled along. The men went out into the middle of the road, and saw the carriage stop at the foot of the Brae. The doctor alighted with his umbrella in his hand, opened it, and went up the Burn.

‘I didna ken that onybody was no’ weel up the Burn,’ said Tam, in an aggrieved tone.

‘Ye needna think that everybody that fa’s ill wants you to ken, so that ye can gang an’ hang aboot their door in case they dee,’ observed Jamie daringly.

‘Haud your tongue, ye bletherin’ bantam,’ replied Tam, ‘or I’ll gang in an’ get your paste-pail and tim it ower your heid.’

‘It tak’s twa to mak’ a bargain,’ retorted Jamie saucily.

‘In that case, Jamie, I’m thinkin’ that it would tak’ fower o’ your size to dae’t. But I say, Bob, I’m gaun doon to see whaur the doctor’s gane. Are ye comin’?’

‘Ay. It’s maist time I was hame onyway. I’ve a pair o’ boots to sole for the morn’s mornin’ an’ I hav’na begood them yet. Are ye comin’, Pate?’

‘Na. I hav’na feenished my gless yet, an’ I’ll mebbe hae to help Jamie to staucher hame wi’ his pail.’

‘Will ye?’ said Jamie. ‘I’m muckle obleeged to ye, Pate, but I’m gaun hame the noo mysel’.

Jamie went back for his pail, with which he made his devious way home as best he might, leaving Pate Maclean to drink by himself until he was turned out later on, in the darkness and rain, very drunk indeed. Tam Broon and Buffy Bob went down the town, and turned up the Burn.

‘What’s up?’ asked Tam, as he and Bob stopped beside some of the frowsy females chattering in the low and narrow doorways.

‘Ye moight be ashamed av yersilf,’ said a tall, gaunt woman.

‘Shure an’ it’s a wake is the foinest music that the loikes av him ivver hears,’ said another.

‘I asked ye a ceevil question,’ replied Tam, ‘an’ I think the least ye micht dae would be to gie a body a ceevil answer.’

‘For the luv av Hivin listen to him,’ said the big Irishwoman. ‘Kape back from the man, Micky, or faith an’ he’ll ate ye, for he’s a terrible man for the childer, he is,’ and she drew the ragged and reluctant little Micky behind her skirt.

‘Verra weel,’ growled Tam, ‘keep the news to yoursel’, an’ muckle guid may it dae ye.’

‘An’ it’s mesilf was just goin’ to tell ye that——’

‘That what?’

‘That there’s some wan ill at Misthress Anderson’s. Shure an’ they’re havin’ the docthor in, though it’s the parish ’ll have to pay for him, bad cess to it.’

‘It’s no’ the first time ye’ve been on the parish yoursel’, Mrs. Docherty, ay, weans an’ man an’ a’. Sae I suppose ye’re feared that the puir craturs are mebbe takin’ a bite oot o’ your ain mooth.’

‘Be Saint Pathrick, if me man was here, it’s himsilf would——’

‘Ay, Mrs. Docherty, but he’s no’ here, an’ it’s better for the neebourhood that he is whaur he is, What was it he got last, Bob? Thirty days?’

‘Ay, thirty days, jist a fortnicht since; Drunk an’ disorderly.’

‘Av all the dhirly——’ began Mrs. Docherty in a screaming voice.

‘Come on oot o’ this, Bob,’ said Tam, ‘she would wauken the deid when she’s in ane o’ her tantrums. You gang up to Mrs. Aün’erson’s an’ spier what’s the maitter. They michtna like the sicht o’ my face the noo, an’ I’ll wait for ye at the foot o’ the Burn.’

CHAPTER XVI

FORDINGFIELD Works were running overtime, a big order having come in for the Indian Market, and Mr. Stevenson was continuously storming and swearing. The workers were accustomed to his passionate and unreasoning outbursts, but this steady storm of brutality was unusual. By some strange contradiction, however, he had simultaneously become more or less civil to Jack. His son had indeed been promoted from the laboratory to be assistant manager of Fordingfield, and one of his very first acts had been to secure for Jessie Anderson a substantial rise in her wages.

‘All right, Jack,’ his father had remarked when this arrangement was brought under his notice, ‘I understand. You can do as you like in this matter, as I told you already,’ so long as you are only amusing yourself. But mark you, I am going to have no serious love-making and, most of all, no nonsense about honour and that kind of thing.’

On this particular evening, Jack returned from a turn round the works, to find his father waiting for him in the little private room in which he had recently installed his son. Mr. Stevenson was looking particularly savage, and scowled over an open letter which he held in his hand.

‘I was waiting for you,’ he said, lifting his eyes as Jack entered ‘Shut the door.’

The young man obeyed.

‘I have had another letter from Gordon,’ proceeded his father, ‘in which he has the impudence to ask me to pay him out at once.’

‘And you——’

‘And I’ll see him hanged first. He cannot legally claim the money for four months—it was lucky I put that clause in the agreement—and by that time Gordon will see what he will see.’

‘But he must have some reason for pressing you like this,’ suggested Jack.

‘No doubt—but never mind. What I want to ask is if you are still running after his daughter in spite of the snub she gave you. I hear that you are.’

‘As a gentleman I could not do anything else.’

‘Never mind the gentleman part of the business. I asked you to drop Miss Gordon——’

‘As you asked me to take her on, I might suggest.’

‘Exactly, and said that if you did so you might amuse yourself with Anderson’s daughter.’

‘Yes.’

‘And now I find that you are playing a double game.’

‘There is nothing double about it,’ returned Jack hotly. ‘You cannot expect me, surely, to demean myself before the Gordons by ceasing my visits the moment they seek to withdraw their money from the works?’

‘You were always pig-headed,’ replied his father.

‘That, of course, is a matter of opinion,’ answered Jack. ‘But you may be interested to know that Miss Gordon and I came to an understanding last night.’

‘The devil you did.’

‘I did,’ said his son calmly. ‘Miss Gordon and I are to remain the best of friends.’

‘The best of fiddlesticks! She has thrown you over, man.’

‘She never accepted me.’

‘What?’

‘Her acceptance was contingent upon your consent.’

‘And I refused—I refused.’

‘For financial reasons.’

‘For many reasons—and everyone of them good. But I knew she wouldn’t have you, although you persisted in knocking your head against a stone wall. Do you think that otherwise I should have allowed you to go on fooling around her when I had determined and declared that you should never marry her?’

‘You knew?’

‘Yes, I knew. She has set her heart upon the minister, and good luck to all he’ll get with her.’

‘Why, her father is wealthy,’ said Jack, with some surprise.

‘Is he?’ replied his father sarcastically. ‘Time will show,’ and with that enigmatic prophecy his son had to be content.

‘But about this letter,’ continued his father, ‘I’m going to send it to Mr. Wilson to-night, and we’ll see what a lawyer can do to put the brake on our friend Gordon’s impetuosity.’

Up till lately Jack had never been treated by his father with the most remote approach to confidence, and it was daily becoming a deeper mystery to him that he should begin, although ever so slightly, to reverse the policy of the past. He was about to be enlightened on the subject.

‘Sit down, Jack,’ his father said, seating himself at the broad writing-table and laying the letter before him. The son seated himself on the other side and awaited with curiosity what his father was about to say.

‘Gordon has done me a great wrong,’ he said at last, ‘by demanding this money back at present, because by so doing he increases a wrong which he has already done me.’

Mr. Stevenson paused, but his son guessed rightly that he was not expected to interpose, and presently his father continued, speaking slowly and very bitterly.

‘I am losing pounds every day in the works, and all through him—all through him and his curséd daugh—I mean, yes, and his daughter.’

Jack was astonished at this speech.

‘But the works were never busier,’ he said; ‘they are going day and night.’

‘Exactly, the works never were busier, and they are going day and night,’ repeated Mr. Stevenson; ‘and day and night they are running at a heavy loss.’

‘Impossible!’ exclaimed Jack, now thoroughly aroused.

‘On the contrary, it is not only quite possible but absolutely certain. The works, I tell you, are running overtime on an order that was accepted at a heavy loss.’

‘Who accepted it?’

‘I did,’ replied his father calmly.

‘Why can’t you throw it up, then?’ asked his son.

‘Because it is a contract; and it so happens that the remedy you suggest would be worse than the disease.’

‘But if you accepted this order on a miscalculation?’

‘It was no miscalculation,’ interrupted his father. ‘I never make miscalculations of that kind.’

‘Then I cannot see how Mr. Gordon is to blame.’

‘You cannot see. No. But I will show you. It was imperative that I should endeavour to make Gordon believe that the works were so busy that he could find no better investment for his money, and so not only allow it to remain with me, but put more in. Now, do you follow me?’

‘I believe that I do—at least partly,’ replied Jack, hesitating, and beginning to be troubled by the fear that his father was preparing for himself unknown humiliations.

‘What is it that you do not thoroughly understand?’ asked his father.

‘What Mr. Gordon’s blame is in the matter.’

‘Gordon’s blame in the matter is this,’ proceeded Mr. Stevenson, “that he led me to understand he would allow his money to remain invested with me, and would invest more upon your marriage with his daughter. It was a private arrangement. But he has explained it to his womankind, with the result that he calls up his capital, and that the proposed marriage will not take place.’

‘I am sure that you do the ladies an injustice,’ responded Jack warmly.

‘I do not think I do, but that is neither here nor there. The point is, that Gordon is a fool, and has led me into a mess with his folly.’

Jack smiled slightly to himself at the idea of this fiercely stubborn man being led anywhere by any living soul against his will.

‘It is no laughing matter,’ said his father irritably, ‘as Gordon will find to his cost.’

‘You can never intend to go to law on such grounds as you have indicated?’ asked Jack, disturbed by a vague suspicion. His father laughed, and his laugh jarred unpleasantly on the young man’s ears.

‘No. I shall leave Gordon to do that. I am only going to get Wilson to reply to this letter on legal lines and in his lawyer way. That is all—meantime. ‘You have just been round the works?’

‘Yes.’

‘And found everything all right?’

‘I think so.’

‘There is nothing you specially wish me to attend to before I go home?’ asked Mr. Stevenson, moving towards the door.

‘No, I don’t know of anything.’

‘Then I shall go, and of course you will keep a sharp eye on the work. I’m not going to pay people overtime wages for sleeping.’

‘You won’t, if I can help it,’ replied Jack, picking up his hat and preparing to follow his father.

‘Very well, good-night,’ said Mr. Stevenson abruptly, and departed.

Jack followed leisurely, and having locked the door and put the key in his pocket, passed round the office buildings, proceeding in the direction of the gate-house, where he wanted to make some inquiries at the time-keeper. It was a dark night, and as he moved out of the patch of light flung downwards by a lamp, he almost ran into the arms of a girl who was coming towards him out of the blackness beyond. She avoided him by a quick movement and would have passed on, but he wheeled smartly, and saw that it was Jessie Anderson.

‘Jessie!’ he exclaimed, and she stood still.

‘Jessie,’ he repeated more softly and stepping towards her. She turned to him and the light of the lamp above fell upon her face.

‘I thought you had gone home long ago,’ he said.

‘So I had,’ she answered quietly. But her fingers moved restlessly as they peeped out from the folds of the shawl wrapped around her.

‘And what on earth brings you back at this time of night?’ he asked. He longed to think she had come back on the chance of seeing him.

‘I cam’ ower—came over,’ she said, correcting herself, ‘the Brig to bring Dan a bite of hot supper—that is all!’ All? why who or what was her brother Dan that his sister should thus trouble herself, and in this pitchy darkness too, for his sake? He grew suddenly envious of Dan, not of his hot supper—which would be frugal enough belike—but of the thoughtful ministry of his sister.

‘I think I had better be going on with it to him, before it gets cold,’ she added.

‘Very well. But——’ She paused for a moment, waiting upon the word for which he hesitated,—‘but you will be going home soon?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I am going to the gate-house, and will see you there,’ and he was gone from her before she could remonstrate or acquiesce.

Jack proceeded to the gate-house, where he made his inquiries. He was standing with his back to the blazing fire when Jessie came timidly in. Stepping

forward to open the door, he stood aside to let her pass out before him, and the next instant they were standing together in the blinding darkness of the river path.

‘You have shut yourself out, Mr. Stevenson,’ said Jessie, refusing to take it for granted that he was about to accompany her.

‘I know that. I cannot allow you to walk down the riverside by yourself at this time of night, and in such bewildering blackness.’

‘But you mustn’t, you really mustn’t come with me,’ she urged. ‘I shall be quite safe, and it is only a couple of minutes walk to the Bridge.’

‘You surely cannot grudge me, then, a couple of minutes of real pleasure? And even as a matter of common-sense,’ he added, ‘it will surely be better to walk together than to stand here arguing in the cold.’

‘And you will come no further than the Bridgeend?’

‘No.’

They kept close to the wall of the works, Jack walking next the river, which flowed unseen in the darkness, making an eerie sound as it lapped and gurgled against the bank.

‘I do wish you would let me help you, Jessie,’ said Jack.

‘I do not know—that is, I do not quite understand what you mean.’

‘Well, you might talk to me sometimes, give me your confidence, so to speak, but you always either keep out of my road or pass me like a flash. It hurts me horribly. I sometimes think it is worse than if I never saw you. What is the good of being close together if we never get near each other?’

‘Don’t, Mr. Stevenson, don’t,’ pleaded Jessie, quickening her steps. ‘I thought we had settled all that.’

‘So did I,’ he answered hurriedly, seeing how near they were drawing to the bridge; ‘but it won’t remain settled. Can’t you feel how it is? But perhaps you take pleasure in teasing me.’ He had taken a couple of steps ahead before he was aware the girl had stopped. He turned back. She was leaning against the wall. Instinctively he laid his hand tenderly on her shoulder.

‘Jessie,’ he whispered, ‘Jessie. Never mind what I said. I’m an awful fool and—and a beast, to upset you like this.’ At last she found her voice, but she was again moving on before she spoke.

‘I never thought of teasing you. I thought you had forgotten, and wondered why you were so kind, ‘and-now——’

‘And now what, Jessie?’

‘And now I know.’

‘You are not angry, Jessie?’

‘Angry! No. But I am sorry, so sorry, because——’

‘Because what? Because you hate me?’

‘Hate you? No, but——’ She broke off with a slight scream. They had reached the sharp bend in the road just beyond where it passes over the Fordingfield Lade, and underneath the lamp which there springs from the wall they found themselves suddenly face to face with the Rev. Mr. MacGrigor. The two young men eyed each other with searching suspicion. Then the minister turned to Jessie.

‘I called at your house and was coming to meet you,’ he said to her. ‘I have a message for you.’

‘For me?’

‘Yes. I will tell you as I walk home with you—that is, if you are going home and I am not intruding between you and Mr. Stevenson.’

‘You need not consider me. I was just about to turn,’ said Jack coldly.

‘Oh, very well,’ replied the minister curtly. Jack shook hands with Jessie and bade her good-night. But the two men parted without a farewell, as they had met without a greeting.

Jack returned by the river-side, slowly and gloomily, convinced that the minister had accompanied Jessie to the gate, and had been walking up and down the path until she returned. And Mr. MacGrigor was not without his suspicions that it was not to carry his supper to Dan, but to meet Jack, that Jessie had adventured out that night. Still, the minister belonged to that type of man whose ardour is only quickened by jealousy, and now with Jessie by his side his blood began to glow. The toll-keeper glanced at the couple, as they passed the lighted toll-house at the end of its bridge, and turned with a grin to big Wull, the carter, who was sitting on the seat behind him, basking in the heat of the stove.

‘You have an uncle in California, I think, Jessie?’ remarked Mr. MacGrigor, as they passed along the bridge.

‘I don’t know about California, but Uncle Bob went to America. But it is a long while ago. He went away when I was a wean.’

‘Oh, well, he is in California. Do you know if he ever wrote to your father?’

‘He whiles wrote when he first went away, but mither aye grat when his letters cam’. So that made faither angry an’ he must have written Uncle Bob to stop writin’, for the letters dropped comin’.

‘But what made your mother cry?’

‘I don’t know; but I think, that is, I have heard, that he was very fond o’ mither, an’ couldna thole to wait here efter she married faither, an’ went awa’ as sune as he could. An’ mither was vexed for him.’

‘Do you remember him?’

‘I jist mind o’ his comin’ to the hoose to say guid-bye. He lifted’ me up in his arms an’ kissed me, an’—oh, ay—I mind that he held me oot an’ glowered at me wi’ a kind o’ saftness in his een. Then he said I was awfu’ like my mither—faither wasna there—kissed me again, and put me doon. Then he shook haun’s wi’ my ‘mither, an’ she was greetin’, an’ sae he gaed awa’.

‘Ah!’ said the minister softly, as if he understood it all. ‘Well, I have just had a letter from your uncle asking about you, and I wish you to come to the Manse to-morrow night and see me before I reply to it.’

‘He wrote to you?’ said Jessie in surprise.

‘Not to me personally,’ explained Mr. MacGrigor, ‘but to the minister of the parish. But here we are at the foot of the Brae. There is no need for me coming up the Burn with you, I suppose?’

‘No,’ answered the girl, thinking all the while of her uncle’s letter, while the minister was already wondering in his nervous way what the few people who had met them in the Main Street would think of him.

‘You will not forget to come early to-morrow night about the letter?’ said Mr. MacGrigor, holding out his hand.

‘Of course not,’ Jessie answered. She went home too tired even to dream, when once her weary head was laid on the pillow. As for the minister, he was already looking forward to the morrow’s night, and until then his thoughts of Jessie’s warm and breathing beauty were to give him no peace. Of himself he dared not think lest he should despise himself

CHAPTER XVII

THE Reverend Alexander MacGrigor was waiting in his study for Jessie Anderson's coming, and as he waited, there rose still more vividly before him the memory of that other night when they two had tasted exultant delights which had lived in his blood ever since, and had poisoned it by their passion. He had suffered his imagination to become possessed, and this

'Confused the chemic labour of the blood,
And tickling the brute brain within the man's,
Made havoc among those tender cells, and check'd
His power to shape.'

All the hours since his parting with Jessie had shaped themselves to the hour of her coming, and he had fevered in anticipation. Thrust away into a pigeon-hole of his desk was an unfinished sermon at which he had spasmodically laboured during the day, vainly trying to complete it for the coming Sabbath. Finally, a passing glimpse of the futility and hypocrisy of it all had horrified him, and he had huddled the accusing and blotted pages out of sight. The jealousy roused by Jack Stevenson on the river-path had only served as fuel to the desires within him which now clamoured fiercely with brute unreasoning for possession. There was a knock, and the minister's face flushed up as he turned eagerly to the door and said, 'Come in.'

Janet opened the door, and thrusting her head into the room, said—

'That lassie Aun'erson's at the front door wantin' to see ye.' It was said in a way which distinctly invited Mr. MacGrigor to order her to send the girl about her business. But a look at his face showed her that the visitor was only too welcome,'

'Show her in here at once,' the minister said quickly. 'You should not have left her standing out there in the cold.'

'The cauld 'll dae her nae hairm, I'm thinkin'. Thae bodies hae nae consideration for ither folk, an' needna expect ony theirsels.'

'Did you not hear me?' he demanded impatiently.

'Hear' ye? Oh ay, I'm jist gaun to let her in the noo, but I wanted to let ye ken what I thocht,' said the old woman. She knew, however, when she had gone far enough, and there was a look in the minister's eyes which warned her that she had

reached the limit. So, without another word, and giving him no time to reply, the old housekeeper went away and brought back Jessie.

‘You are cold,’ said the minister, after the door was shut, and he still held the girl’s chill hand in his. ‘Sit down by the fire and warm yourself.’

He pointed to a low couch at the side of the fire, and wondered to find that he had grown cooler by reason of her very presence.

‘Yes, I am cold,’ she said carefully—for she had been ashamed when she remembered afterwards that her English had broken down during their walk on the previous night, ‘but I will soon get warm here.’ And she settled herself quite naturally in the corner of the couch next the fire.

‘Let me take off your shawl,’ said the minister, coming round in front of her and bending over her. She wondered why his fingers trembled so as they touched her throat, when he was fumbling with the pin which fastened her shawl under her chin, and so wondering she raised her face to his. Their eyes met. He could not resist the temptation and leant down and kissed her. It was an eager kiss, that set his heart beating again more fiercely than ever. With a sigh he flung her shawl backwards over the couch, regarded her with a long look, and then drawing his chair to the edge of the rug sat down with his feet on the fender and stared thoughtfully into the fire.

‘You asked me to come and see you about some message Uncle Bob had sent me,’ she said demurely.

‘Did I? ‘Oh yes, let me see,’ he answered vaguely, ‘your uncle wrote me asking, well, I don’t remember all he wrote and I am not sure at this moment where I have put his letter, but he wanted to know if you were all—to know in fact where you were living and how you were doing, and all that sort of thing.’

‘And didn’t he want to know about father, and mother, and all the rest of us—but especially about mother?’

‘Yes, I think he asked about both your father and your mother, indeed I am sure he did, but about the rest of you—never a word. Most likely, as you said he went away when you were so young, he doesn’t know about the rest of you.’

‘And I suppose you want me to tell you what to say in reply?’ she asked.

‘Oh no. I wanted to tell you—the fact is,’ he said hurriedly, ‘I have already written to him. And you have no idea what nice things I told him about you.’ He had turned away his eyes from the glowing coals to let them dwell upon her, and, speaking more slowly, seemed to watch the effect of his words upon her. The girl smiled at his avowed praise, and let her eyelids droop before his gaze.

‘No, no,’ she said, ‘I want to see nobody, nobody but you—Alec,’ and she flung her arms about his neck and clung hard to him. He kissed her on the brow and disengaged her arms gently.

‘Very well, then, Jessie, let me open the door,’ and passing out quietly, he went along the lobby. She followed him. He opened the front door noiselessly and held out his hand when she had stepped out of the light. She shivered as the cold struck her, but he did not seem to notice this.

‘Good-night, Jessie,’ he said.

‘Good-night.’

She was gone, and the door swung between them. Their eyes had not once met since the awakening.

The minister went back to his study, to be confronted instantly with the fierce self-reproaches that rose up accusingly before him. They tore the mists from his eyes, scattered the clinging clouds of deceit which had shrouded the naked truth, and revealed the depths into which he had fallen. For previous errors of life he had been chastised with whips. Now he was to be scourged with scorpions. He could not stay in the study. It reminded him of what he would fain have forgotten. He decided to go out for a night walk, in the hope that it might calm his perturbed mind, and was already in the lobby when Janet made her appearance. She glanced into the room and then turned to him in questioning surprise.

‘Ye’re alane, Mr. MacGrigor!’

‘Yes, Janet. Did you want me?’

‘Ay. There’s anither o’ thae Aun’erson lassies efter ye. She cam’ to the back-door—Katey, I think they ca’ her.’

‘And what does she want?’ asked Mr. MacGreigor.

‘Oh, she’s gane awa’ noo,’ replied the old woman. ‘I thocht she had been sent for her sister, but the trachled wean didna ken she was here.’

‘You told her, did you?’ said the minister with manifest displeasure.

‘I let it slip oot wi’oot thinkin’, but that’s neither here nor there. It was you the bit thing wanted,’ added the old woman, a little more tenderly than was her wont in speaking of any of the Andersons.

‘Me!’

‘Ay. Her wee sister Leezie—that’s the youngest—is gien up by the doctor, and her mither would like if ye would gang up the nicht.’

‘Did she say what was the matter with the child?’

‘She said there was something the maitter wi’ its throat. But ye ken the bairn has been no’ weel for a guid while noo.’

‘Yes. But I understood she was getting better, and that, in fact, the doctor had ceased his visits.’

‘So he had. But this sair throat has come on kind o’ suddent-like, an’ the wean hadna muckle strength to staun’ it. But are ye no gaun to gang up?’

‘Why do you ask?’ he replied.

‘Because if ye are,’ answered Janet, ‘I wouldna bide here ony langer than ye can help. Ye dinna ken what may happen afore ye get there, an’ it’s an’ awfu’ thing to hae reflections’—to which the minister’s heart gave a fervent assent. Still, to Janet’s perplexity, he lingered irresolutely.

‘But what good can I do?’ he said, almost to himself. Janet stared.

‘What guid micht ye no dae?’

‘I mean,’ he replied, ‘if the doctor has given up hope.’

‘Ye can haud oot a hope higher than any doctor can gie.’

He winced as if she had struck him a blow.

‘I will go at once,’ he said. But there was in his voice not a note of the calm confidence which might well ring from the lips of a messenger who goes to proclaim to poor humanity the triumphant message that ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’

Jessie had been so absorbed in her thoughts and little Katey so filled with the urgency of her message, that the two sisters had passed each other in the dark unnoticed between the Manse and their home.’ When Jessie arrived home and found that wee Lizzie’s throat had become seriously worse immediately after her departure, that the doctor had been hurriedly sent for, and had only arrived to declare the utter hopelessness of the case, she reproached herself bitterly. But her mother gave way to uncontrolled grief on her arrival, and Jessie with strong restraint kept back the unavailing tears, and sat down by the poor little cradle in which the sick child lay as if asleep. Her passionate fit of weeping having exhausted itself, Mrs. Anderson paced the floor backwards and forwards, moaning inarticulately, pausing at every turn by the cradle to bend above the closed eyes of the innocent child-face, and then turning away again with an agonised clasping of her hands above her heart. At length the mother became less restless and stood looking down at her babe, drifting helplessly and unconsciously away into the great unknown.

‘Mither,’ said Jessie softly, raising her eyes imploringly to her mother standing beside her, ‘will ye forgie me for bein’ oot?’

‘Wheesht, lassie, wheesht.’

‘But say you’ll forgie me,’ urged Jessie, still more softly, but yet more urgently.

‘Ay, ay lassie,’ whispered her mother. ‘But oh! my doo, my bonnie wee doo!’

A tear trickled from Jessie’s eyes and fell upon the baby’s hand, lying upon the thin coverlet like a white wax flower. The little one stirred. Jessie adjusted the coverlet and rocked the cradle gently. The door opened. Katey stole in on tiptoe to her mother’s side, and putting her arms round her waist leant up to her. Mrs. Anderson bent down to listen, and the child whispered in her ear, ‘I saw the auld wife, an’ she tell’t me she would get him to come.’

The mother patted her head and whispered to her to go to bed, and the wee lass crept away to rest, with a great awe in her eyes.

Silence again, during which the little life was peacefully floating out on the ebb-tide. There came a step in the passage, a pause at the door, and then a low knock. Mrs. Anderson crossed the floor noiselessly and opened the door. The minister had come. He entered, and Jessie’s mute surprise became a pain. But she sat motionless on her stool, with her eyes fixed, after one swift glance, on the pure face of her baby sister. Mrs. Anderson motioned Mr. MacGrigor to a chair at the side of the fire and, standing beside him, spoke in a whisper.

‘I hope ye’ll excuse me sendin for ye, sir. But wi’ my man awa’ an’ Jessie oot——’

‘Don’t say a word about it, Mrs. Anderson,’ he answered, also in whispers, ‘it is my—my duty to attend to my parishioners. But are you sure that it goes as sorely with the child as Katey told my housekeeper it did?’

‘She only tell’t ye what the doctor said. He said she might slip awa’ at ony meenit, mebbe in her sleep, but he was quite sure she couldna last ower the nicht.’

There was a movement in the cradle and mother and minister both turned quickly round. Jessie had stolen from the room. The mother stepped to the side of the cradle and knelt down.

The child was stirring into consciousness, and as the poor little mite unfolded her delicate, longlashed eyelids she smiled faintly into her mother’s face, and moved her arms weakly under the coverlet. Sadly enough the mother answered that wan smile. Then she rocked the cradle in dull hope, and tried to hush her tired child to sleep. But the little one was strangely restless. She was indifferent to the

rocking and was feebly trying to draw her hands from under the coverlet. She freed them and lifted her arms to her mother, plainly asking, with a helpless silence which was touching, to be taken in the loving mother-arms.

Mrs. Anderson lifted the child tenderly and pressed her to her bosom. But the little one was not to be contented thus, and the small pale face was uplifted. The mother understood, and kissed the child softly. Then the wee lassie pointed down to her cradle, and having been gently placed again therein, lay still, with closed eyes and placid face.

There came a sound of soft footsteps that descended the stairs and then paced to and fro in the passage without. Again the child opened her eyes.

‘It’s Jessie she’s listenin’ to,’ whispered Mrs. Anderson to the minister. ‘I think she wants her.’

‘May be.’

‘We’ll see,’ replied the mother, and going to the door she signed to Jessie to come in. As Jessie entered, her little sister stretched out her tiny arms to her, as she had done to her mother, and now she was lifted into Jessie’s arms. Again the small wan face was held up. Jessie understood, and kissed the child softly. Then, as before, the wee lassie signed that she would fain be laid back in her cradle. She had said her childish good-byes in her own simple but wondrously beautiful way. And now, again, in calm content, the little one closed her eyes, closed them never to be opened more to the joys and sorrows of earth, to the love of home and the indifference of the world. Calmly she slept, breathing so softly, that the watchers in the solemn room scarce knew when the silence of death stole down and laid its hallowed peace upon the lips and heart of the little sleeper. Peace and purity for evermore are for her, the little sinless soul now ascending, unseen of blind, mortal eyes, to God and His heaven. Peace and purity for her,—but for those who remain behind her,—sin and sorrow and tears, and perchance, in the end, pardon and the peace for which they shall pray.

It was to the mother’s heart that the change first struck, with an agonising stroke. But it brought no passionate outburst of grief. Despair gripped her heart and froze her tears. She knelt down and laid her rough hand upon the smooth brow, still warm, and pressed her lips upon the quiet mouth which would respond to hers no more.

‘My puir wee lamb,’ she said, drawing back slowly and rising from the cradle side. Jessie was weeping bitterly, shaken by convulsive sobs.

Her mother instinctively drew towards the girl and put her hand fondly upon her shoulder. Standing thus she looked at the minister. He had no eyes for the silent mother or the weeping daughter. He was gazing downwards at the cradle.

He seemed fascinated by the waxen beauty of the dead baby's face. And indeed he was wrapt in wondering awe at the loveliness of the peace which was betokened there. His sin rose up before him and so bitterly reproached him that he would gladly have changed places with the quiet dead.

‘Sleep, little baby, sleep!
Not in thy cradle bed,
Not on thy mother's breast,
Henceforth shall be thy rest,
But with the quiet dead.
Yes! with the quiet dead,
Baby, thy rest shall be!
Oh! many a weary wight,
Weary of life and light,
Would fain lie down with thee.’

Then it seemed to the minister that a voice spake to him and said, ‘Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.’

It startled him, and he glanced round the room. Mrs. Anderson had hesitated to disturb him before, but now she spoke.

‘Mebbe ye wouldna mind puttin’ up a bit prayer, Mr. MacGrigor,’ she said. ‘It’ll no bring back my wee lassie but it micht help Jessie’—who was still weeping—‘an’ me.’

Ah! the bitter irony of it—to think that a prayer of his—his—could help Jessie.

Mrs. Anderson had already led her daughter to a chair, and together they had knelt down, the girl trying hard to stifle her choking sobs. Mechanically the minister too sought a chair and knelt down. Then his shame swept over him in waves and his humiliation was complete.

He could not pray.

The waiting silence became a breathless torture. He could endure it no longer, and the cry which was pressing to his lips could not be kept back.

‘Oh God!’ he moaned in writhing agony.

His voice affrighted himself. He raised his bowed head passionately and started to his feet. His hat was on the table, near to him. He thrust out his hand and lifted it. He glanced at the kneeling women. At the sight of one of them, the storm that was shaking him grew still more wild. With two swift strides he was at the door. Almost before he realised it, he was out in the night, walking feverishly home, and had left the living uncomforted with their dead.

CHAPTER XVIII

SABBATH came, bringing welcome rest to the toilers in the busy valley and giving a sweet interlude of smokeless skies under which the implacable wheels and machinery were stayed and still. In the church-yard within the bend of the river was a newly-made grave, with a tiny mound above it, upon which the soft sunshine seemed to fall with a more tender warmth. But the worshippers had passed along the broad path and entered in at the open church-door with little thought of the quiet dead that lay mouldering into dust around them, and still less of the happy baby just put to rest in an obscure corner hard by the river wall.

They were an earnest people the church-going folk of the Vale of Lennox, whether Established, U.P., or Free, hearty in their singing, fervent in their praying, and critical as to sermons. But they were not emotional, unless in revival times.

To-day the pews of the parish church were destined to be swept by a passing wind of surprise, which soon died away into a slumberous calm.

After the rustling of leaves which followed Mr. MacGrigor's announcement of the chapter and verse of his text there was a common raising to the pulpit of faces which had upon them a questioning expectancy. John viii. 7. 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her,'—how would the minister deal with this delicate subject, and what had he to say upon it? At any rate, he might be trusted to treat it with good sense and reserve, some of the ladies reassured themselves, unlike the U.P. minister in Lennoxbridge, who revelled in blatant indelicacies, and bellowed pruriently in the name of religion and morality.

Mr. MacGrigor had excited curiosity which he did not satisfy, and raised hopes which he failed to fulfil. He drifted into trivial commonplaces and lost himself in irrelevant platitudes, only sticking to his text in the sense of coming back to it with curious iteration and repeating it over and over again. The words appeared to fascinate him as ever and again he came back to them—'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.'

Never had he been known to fail so utterly in holding the attention of his congregation, and as it slowly dispersed many were the discontented criticisms passed.

'I wouldna preach that sermon again if I was you,' said Tam Broon, when the minister was unrobing in the Session-house. Mr MacGrigor turned to him, with his gown still hanging on one shoulder.

‘What do you mean, Thomas?’ he asked.

‘Was I too strong?’

‘Too strong! Ach, ye were as weak as dishwater. I could hae done better mysel’.’

The minister seemed relieved, and disengaged himself leisurely from his gown.

‘What makes you say that, Thomas?’ he asked.

‘Ye mak’ me say’t yoursel’ wi’ the way ye kep’ pat—pattin’ at your text instead o’ grupp’in’t an’ squeezin’ the guts oot o’ t.’

‘I do wish, Thomas,’ said the minister, with some natural irritation, ‘that you would learn to know and keep your place.’

‘Keep my place, fegs! I’ve kep’ my place for twinty year, but it has been by aye daein’ my wark weel, which is mair than some folk can say.’

‘I am not going to argue with you,’ replied Mr. MacGrigor, who had put the sermon in his pocket, and wished to get away from Tam’s irreverent tongue. ‘You are incorrigible, and my dinner will be waiting for me.’

‘I’m thinkin’ ye’ll mebbe find that there’s mair than your dinner waitin’ on ye at the Manse.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Oh, no verra muckle. Only, Miss Gordon was at the kirk alane the day—or she nichtna hae gotten sae red in the gills.’

‘Well?’

‘I was at the door when she cam’ oot, an’ she tell’t the coachman to drive roun’ an’ gang up the Brae to the Manse, an’ syne she walked awa’ hersel’ up by the kirk-stile.’

‘Why did you not tell me this before?’

‘I thocht naething o’t till the noo. An’ forby, lassies are a’ the better o’ bein’ kep’ waitin’. It mak’s them think the mair o’ ye.’

‘When I want your opinion on that subject, Thomas, I will ask for it,’ said the minister shortly, and departed in a hurry.

Mr. MacGrigor found Mr. Gordon’s carriage standing in front of the Manse door. But he

went straight to his study and perplexed Janet by taking no notice of her intimation that Miss Gordon was waiting for him in the drawing-room.

‘I canna think what’s the maitter wi’ him at a’,’ she muttered to herself in the passage, after the minister had brushed indifferently past her, ‘gaein’ by me wi’oot takin’ ony mair heed than if I had been a flee.’

The old woman followed the minister, to his study and presented herself unceremoniously before him.

‘I was sayin’ that Miss Gordon was waitin’ to see ye.’

He turned upon her with an impatient irritation that surprised her.

‘But I don’t want to see Miss Gordon—or you, or anybody,’ he said. ‘Go away.’

Go away! She stared at him. She had never before been so spoken to by him.

‘What are you waiting for?’ he asked testily. ‘Have you no ears? I told you to go away.’

With the passing of her first surprise her own temper rose up to meet his.

‘Heard ye? Ay, I heard ye fine. But what am I to say to Miss Gordon?’

‘Say what you like to her, only go away and leave me alone.’

Janet retired slowly, too proud to make haste when ordered in such a fashion, and went straight to where Miss Gordon was waiting. She found that young lady apparently lost in admiration of a photograph of the minister which she had picked up from the table. Perhaps the sound of Janet’s coming had served Miss Gordon a trick. At any rate, she restored the photograph quickly to its place, and her smile faded into a look of disappointment as the old woman made her appearance.

‘He says he canna see ye, mem,’ said Janet, delivering her message abruptly.

Miss Gordon was both annoyed and surprised.

‘You are sure there is no mistake? He quite knows who his visitor is?’

‘There’s mae mistak’ aboot it, mair’s the peety. Brawly he kens wha ye are, an’ was

expeckin’ him to come fleein’ ben to ye the meenit I tell’t him ye were here.’

‘But why will he not see me?’

‘That’s mair than I ken, mem, an’ mair than I would hae liked to bide an’ spier,’

‘I’m sure I’ve done nothing to offend him—at least nothing that I know of,’ she added thoughtfully.

‘Oh it’s no you yoursel’, but onybody, everybody—I mean it’s naebody that he wants to see.’

‘This is very curious, surely.’

‘It’s a’ that, mem, an’ mair,’ assented Janet. ‘It’s an unheard o’ thing in this hoose, till the day, onyway.’

‘Are you certain that Mr. MacGrigor is well enough?’

Instead of replying at once, Janet raised a wrinkled forefinger and turned her head in the

attitude of listening.

‘I’m thinkin’ ye ‘re no needin’ to spier at me,’ she said, in low tones, ‘for he’s comin’ himsel’,’

Mr. MacGrigor was indeed in the room before she had well uttered the words. As he entered he bestowed upon Janet a glance that made her scuttle away hastily, and then he went straight forward to Miss Gordon, with open hand cordially outstretched.

‘I am truly sorry to have kept you waiting,’ he said apologetically, ‘but I had one or two little things that had to be done the moment I came in. But, of course, Janet explained that to you?’

The young lady found herself plunged into troublous doubt as to Janet’s veracity, or—but

it could not be—his.

‘I am very sorry to have disturbed you,’ she remarked.

‘But you haven’t disturbed me in the least,’ he replied, seating himself near her.

‘I mean, I hope I haven’t interfered with those things you were busy about, you know.’

‘Busy! What things? Oh I suppose Janet has been gossiping to you in her imaginative way.’

Miss Gordon was more than ever troubled.

‘You are sure,’ she said, ‘that you are quite—quite——’

‘Quite what?’ he almost demanded.

‘Quite well,’ she added, with some hesitation.

‘Am I quite well?’ he laughed. ‘What makes you ask such a ridiculous question?’

‘Because—because I thought you were not quite yourself in the pulpit to-day.’

‘You are surely fanciful to-day, Miss Gordon?’

‘I don’t think so,’ she answered quietly. ‘You know you stuck in one of your prayers.’

‘I didn’t think anybody would notice it,’ he said, half to himself.

‘I don’t think anybody did, except myself. And now, Mr. MacGrigor,’ she continued speaking more cheerfully and naturally, ‘if you won’t think me a great nuisance, I am going to ask you to undertake an errand for me to-day.’

‘An errand! To-day?’

‘Yes. But you will find it one of mercy, and perhaps——’

‘Of mercy, and perhaps?’

‘Of love.’

He gave her a searching look, beneath which she felt her colour rising.

‘And where is this wonderful errand to take me?’ he asked.

‘You needn’t look so serious,’ she said. ‘It is a simple matter, quite a trifling affair indeed.’

But simple and trifling as the affair might be, she was evidently nervous in approaching it.

‘I am afraid I have never been what people call a thoughtful person,’ she said at last, ‘but—but I have been thinking, a little at least, during the last few days.’

Still the minister waited.

‘I heard, you know,’ she went on, ‘that one of the Anderson children had died, and I am sure that your friends’—the minister winced at the word—‘must be in great trouble. I am sure, in fact, that they must be dreadfully pinched for money—but you will know.’

‘I know nothing about it,’ he protested with strange and sudden vehemence. ‘Why should I? I have never even thought about it.’

Miss Gordon gave a little stifled, incredulous ‘Oh!’

‘At anyrate,’ she said, ‘you cannot deny that they must needs be very sorely pressed, and that a little money would be thoroughly welcome.’

‘No doubt,’ he assented grudgingly. ‘Money is always welcome to everybody.’

‘You are really in a very odd humour to-day, Mr. MacGrigor. But I have set my mind on this thing, and I am not going to be thwarted.’

‘You have set your mind on what thing?’

‘On giving the girl Anderson—Jessie, isn’t it?—some money for her mother and the family.’

‘But why consult me on the subject?’

‘Because I wish you to take the money and give it to her.’

She could not comprehend the strange look which came into his eyes as she spoke, nor the unaccountable fierceness with which he thrust her proposal from him.

‘I cannot offer money to her.’

‘I do not understand,’ she said, with a suggestion of reproach in her voice. ‘Is it that you do not wish to see the girl, or merely that you do not wish to call at the house?’

‘I neither want to see her nor yet to call at the house.’

‘I thought you were at the house on the day of the funeral?’

‘I was not. I was in town when the funeral took place.’

‘And I thought—I do hope you will excuse me, Mr. MacGrigor—I thought that you cared for this girl.’

‘I did, but—you have no right to say so,’ he broke out passionately, ‘you make me say what I wish had been unsaid. But if I did care for her I would not go to her with money.’

‘Not now, in her time of trouble?’

‘Least of all now. I do not wish to insult her,’ he added slowly.

‘Positively, I do not understand your attitude.’

‘Of course you do not,’ he answered quickly. ‘And there is no need that you should.’

‘Then I am afraid I must go,’ she said. ‘I have kept the horses waiting too long already.’

‘You will take the money to her yourself?’ he said inquiringly as they rose together.

‘I suppose so. But it cannot matter to you, since you are so indifferent.’

‘I am not in the least indifferent to anything you do.’

‘So you think to make amends for your incivility by paying me compliments before I go.’

‘I had not the remotest intention of being uncivil to you, Miss Gordon, and you must forgive me if I have seemed to be so.’

‘As for that, you are freely pardoned,’ and she held out a dainty gloved hand. He took it in his and kissed it courteously.

She took advantage of his apparent softening to return to a question which her heart was set upon having settled.

‘And you have really ceased to care for this girl Jessie Anderson?’ she asked, bending on him her most seductive smile.

‘I don’t think I have said so.’

‘No,’ she said doubtfully, ‘perhaps not. But I know that you have.’

‘You—what makes you say so?’ he asked hastily.

‘Because I can see that you do not like to be reminded of her. You have quarrelled, don’t tell me you haven’t. I know all about it’—the minister winced, she noticed, as she had already once seen him do. ‘Your face pleads guilty for you,’ she went on, as if with purposed malice.

This was beyond his endurance.

‘I am afraid you are forgetting the horses,’ he stammered desperately out.

‘How mindful you are—about horses,’ she retorted sarcastically, nettled at his avoidance of her remarks. ‘But I daresay you are right. I shall send them home, and walk up myself to the Andersons.’

‘You are going there, then?’

‘Certainly, if you will be kind enough to see me to the door.’

‘With pleasure,’ he said, bowing slightly.

‘With pleasure, no doubt. Why do you not say at once that you are glad to get rid of me?’

‘Because, for one thing, it would not be true.’

‘Then you do enjoy my company, although I do tease you?’ she said.

‘Some other day—I will tell you,’ he replied.

They were at the door. Mr. MacGrigor heard her order the coachman to drive home, and stood watching her as she walked up the short avenue to go to that poor little home, of which he would have given his life not to think.

CHAPTER XIX

MISS GORDON went straight from the Manse to the home of the Andersons, causing quite a flutter among the inhabitants of the Burn as she passed along its prehistoric pavement. The men, smoking and lounging at the doors, took their pipes from their mouths, spat lazily, and called into the house, over their shoulders, for their wives to come and have a look at the unwonted spectacle of a finely-dressed lady. The wives came out with a rush, tousy and slovenly, cuffing aside any unfortunate children who got in their way—and they swarmed in the Burn—and, shouldering their husbands against the doorway, stood with brawny arms akimbo and gazed. But the young lady paid no heed to these attentions, holding on her way with a light step until she came to the first door in the row of low-roofed houses past the old school, where, if she remembered rightly, Jessie had told her she lived, on the one occasion upon which they had met. The outer door stood wide. She entered the passage and knocked at the door which opened to the left in the middle of the flagged entry. It was a timid enough knock, but the summons was heard. Miss Gordon guessed that it was Mrs. Anderson herself who came to the door and stood staring at her as if she were beholding a vision.

‘Is this where Mrs. Anderson lives?’ inquired Miss Gordon, with a smile intended to be reassuring.

‘Wha?’ asked Mrs. Anderson, the wondering vacancy of her expression still further deepening.

‘Mrs. Anderson,’ repeated the visitor.

‘That’s my name,’ answered the other, now exchanging her wonderment for suspiciousness and surveying the young lady critically.

‘Ah! then I am right after all. I began to think I had made a mistake,’ said Miss Gordon.

‘I wouldna like to say whether ye hae or no’,’ said Mrs Anderson, very cautiously and without any encouragement.

‘It isn’t you I want to see, of course,’ proceeded Miss Gordon. But that ‘of course’ probably offended the good dame, for she promptly interrupted:

‘Then ye’ve made a mistak’ efter a’.’

‘Not at all,’ replied the young lady coolly. ‘I want to see Jessie Anderson, and I suppose that you are her mother, and that I shall find her here.’

‘Ay, I’m her mither,’ replied Mrs. Anderson, trying to be impressive, while all the while she was growing more curious.

‘Can I see her, then?’

‘I dinna ken,’ said Mrs. Anderson. ‘She’s upstairs the noo, in her ain room.’

‘I suppose I can go upstairs?’

‘I daursay ye micht. But ye’ll hae to chap at the door, an’ she’s no aye verra heed’in’ aboot openin’ it.’

‘I will try, at any rate,’ and, with a whisk of her skirts, she went along to the farther end of the passage and began to ascend the narrow wooden staircase, which creaked sharply even under her light tread.

Mrs. Anderson came out into the passage, watched her to the top, and waited until she had seen her knocking.

The door was quickly opened, and Miss Gordon disappeared.

Mrs. Anderson retreated to her kitchen, and busied her dull brain trying to imagine what it all meant.

Jessie had not been to church that day, and having spent some hours in the kitchen along with her mother and the young ones, had been glad to steal upstairs to her own bed- room, small and uncomfortable as it was. It was not often during the drive and hurry of the week’s work that she had time for thinking, and she had always treasured the quietude of her Sunday afternoons.

To-day she had flung herself upon the bed, where she lay trying to steady her mind to take a clear view of life. She had heard something of what passed between her mother and Miss Gordon at the foot of the stair, and had already jumped lightly to the floor when Miss Gordon knocked. She opened the door in a state of complete bewilderment, of which Miss Gordon took quick advantage by slipping into the room before speaking.

‘I think you had better shut the door,’ said her visitor, as Jessie still stood with her fingers upon the handle. Mechanically she obeyed, all the while never taking her gaze off Miss Gordon, whose keen eyes were summing up the contents of the little room in a glance that had no need to be very searching. The small row of books, on the tiny shelf at the side of the angle below where the roof sloped from the window, attracted her attention, and she scanned, their titles deliberately. She turned to the girl.

‘Are these your own books?’ she asked, quite unconscious of her own impertinence.

‘Yes.’

‘And you have read them-all?’

‘Yes; often.’

‘Well, I never,’ she exclaimed rather sillily, and for the first time began to regard Jessie with a glimmering of respect. ‘But can’t I sit down anywhere?’ she asked.

‘There is a chair in the corner,’ said Jessie, pointing to a wooden one which looked far from inviting by reason of its uncompromising hardness and rigid angularity.

‘But there is not one for yourself.’

‘I will stand.’

‘Nonsense. I want you to sit beside me, because I wish to have a chat with you.’

‘Well, then, I will sit on the edge of the bed.’

It was thus they sat together to have the chat which Miss Gordon promised herself, and which she began bluntly and at once.

‘Do you know you were rather rude to me when I last spoke to you?’ she asked.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Very likely you don’t. But, at any rate, I hope you are going to be a little more reasonable to-day than when you refused to come into service at Laverockbank.’

‘What is it you wish to say to me?’ asked Jessie, looking down at one foot, which she kept swinging restlessly to and fro.

‘I have just come from the Manse.’

‘Yes?’ said Jessie faintly, and the swinging foot had become quite still.

‘I had a talk with Mr. MacGrigor, with the result that I had to come and see you myself.’

It seemed to Miss Gordon that the girl was in danger of swaying forward and falling from the edge of the bed to the floor. So effectually did she recover herself, however, that she surprised Miss Gordon by demanding, with a certain proud motion of her head—

‘And what might it be that could make you come and see me yourself?’

The young lady preferred her in her humbler moods, although she confessed to herself that the little work-girl looked very pretty indeed when she chose to put on airs.

‘I had a message which I wished Mr. MacGrigor to deliver, but as he refused to come, I had to do so myself,’ explained Miss Gordon.

‘He refused to come!’ said Jessie.

‘Yes, refused point-blank.’

‘Then it must have been a nasty message, and I must decline to listen to it,’ declared Jessie boldly, preparing to descend to the floor.

‘Not at all,’ interposed Miss Gordon. ‘Sit where you are and listen. If it had been a nasty message he would have told me to go home and not deliver it. On the contrary, he forbade nothing, and knows that I am here.’

‘Well, then, what is the message?’

‘Dear me, you are in a dreadful hurry. You must first let me explain a little. You see, I heard about the loss of your little sister and it set me thinking about you. I felt sure that the expenses inseparable from such a sad event must have overtaxed your resources. And I came to a decision.’

‘I am afraid our affairs have given you a great deal of trouble,’ remarked Jessie, so quietly that the young lady had no suspicion of any lurking sarcasm. But that may have been her error.

‘Oh, the trouble was nothing,’ continued Miss Gordon. ‘And then, I was going to say, I remembered that Mr. MacGrigor was a friend of yours, and thought that he too would be thinking of your troubles in the same way as I was.’

‘So you went to him?’

‘So I went to him. And found he had not been bothering his head about you.’

‘Did he tell you so?’ asked Jessie.

‘Well, he did not perhaps use these exact words. What he said, I believe, when I suggested—I am sure you will excuse me—that you must be dreadfully pushed for money at such a time as this, was that he knew nothing about it, and had never even given it a thought.’

‘If you have no other message but this, I don’t think you need have come here to deliver it.’

‘Wait. I am not done yet. I wanted to send money to you and I wished Mr. MacGrigor to bring it. He refused and said he wanted nothing to do with this house or with you.’

‘I am sure he never said so. Mr. MacGrigor is not so cruel as that, or as you would make him out to be.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Miss Gordon, who began, with an odd perverseness which had the cruelty of jealousy in it, to take a delight in inflicting what she saw was pain on a girl for whom, until a few moments ago, she felt really sorry. ‘Perhaps not. Again I will give you his own words. He said “I want neither to see her,”—that was you—“nor yet to call at the house.”’

‘I cannot believe it,’ said Jessie, with what sounded almost like a moan.

‘You need not do so unless you like,’ answered Miss Gordon. ‘But you see how I was placed. He would not come, and so I was forced to come myself.’

‘To speak evil of him?’

‘No. To speak the truth, and to help you.’

‘I would not accept any help from you, no not a penny, even if I were starving. And oh! I do wish you would go away.’

‘Do you know what you are saying?’

‘Yes, quite well.’

‘And do you know what you are refusing?’

‘Perfectly. I have no need of your money. I have plenty. It is you who do not believe me now. Well then—see!’

The girl leapt from the bed and went to the little row of books. Taking out a volume, she opened it, and showed between the leaves a ten-pound note.

‘Perhaps you will be convinced now, and go away.’

Miss Gordon rose with offended pride, and the conviction that she had been shamefully treated.

‘I came to offer you help,’ she said coldly, ‘and this is the result—you put me out.’

Jessie said never a word; but, closing the book, replaced it, and going to the door threw it open.

Miss Gordon had no option but to accept this plain invitation to depart at once. Much as she resented it, she had no idea of provoking a ‘scene.’ She was frigidly polite now.

‘I am so sorry to have troubled you to open the door,’ she said with a smile, ‘I could have done it myself. But there, you have been smarter than I, and now I

shall leave you to the quiet of your bedroom—I suppose it is a bedroom?’ she added maliciously.

‘It is just what I choose to make it,’ answered Jessie coolly. ‘Good-bye, and many thanks for your kind intentions.’ She held out her hand. But Miss Gordon was gathering up her skirts in preparation for descending the stair. When she had adjusted them to her satisfaction she turned to the girl with a parting smile and said a word or two, in the pleasantest fashion possible, which carried a bitter sting with them .

‘Good-bye. Don’t think any more about Mr. MacGrigor than he thinks about you.’

She tripped down the stairs quickly, darted along the passage, and was gone, leaving Jessie to retreat into her little room and ponder over what she had heard.

Again the girl flung herself upon her bed, and lay thinking about what Miss Gordon had said concerning Mr. MacGrigor. Her heart waxed hot within her at the thought that he had denied all interest in her, and cried out that it was but the idle tale of a vindictive woman. And yet, she remembered how he had departed from the house on the night little Lizzie died, and she recalled the fact that he had avoided coming to the child’s funeral, sending a substitute to perform the simple service, along with a message that he had been suddenly called to town. If what this young lady had said were true—and she shuddered at the thought—it would altogether alter a conclusion to which she had come with regard to a matter from which her heart had been drawing the tenderest comfort.

As she lay thus, she heard Dan’s footsteps in the passage below and knew that he had returned from his walk up the breezy hill. He went into the kitchen. She heard the murmur of voices, and guessed that her mother was telling him about the lady visitor.

Jessie rose, and called downstairs—

‘Is that you, Dan?’

‘Ay,’ responded Dan, appearing in the passage, with a slice of bread in his hands.

‘I want you to come up here.’

‘Will it no bide for a meenit or twa?’ asked Dan, taking a voracious bite at the bread.

‘Na, I want ye jist the noo.’

‘Verra weel,’ spluttered Dan with his mouth full, and then called thickly out to his mother in the kitchen, ‘I’ll no’ be lang till I be back doon.’

He sprang up the stairs and went into the room. Jessie shut the door carefully and waited with her ear against it until she had heard her mother close the other, which Dan had left open, downstairs.

Then she turned to her brother, before whose appetite the huge chunk of bread had disappeared like a mere trifle, and who stood patiently swallowing down the last of it with energetic jerks. 'Dan,' said his sister, so eagerly that the boy regarded her with ludicrous amazement, 'it wasna the minister that gied ye the ten poun's ye brocht to me?'

'I never said it was,' answered the boy, with a curious expression of guilt which belied his protestation of innocence.

'Na, but ye didna say that it wasna him when I spiered at ye.'

'Did I no'?' he remarked with a simulated indifference, intended to suggest that the matter was really not worth discussing.

'Dan,' said his sister, with a seriousness that shook the boy up, 'I'm awfu' vex't at ye. Ye as guid as tell't me a lee.'

Dan twisted his fingers uneasily together and hung down his head.

'It wasna a richt lee, Jessie,' he asserted with an unconvinced faintness of denial.

'There's nae hauf-way hoose between the truth an' a lee, Dan,' she replied reproachfully, and the boy felt as if he were curling up and his sister had grown taller. 'Tell me, why did ye no' say wha gied ye the money?'

'Because he garred me promise no' to tell.'

'Noo ye're becomin' honest again. But what way did ye let me believe it was the minister.'

'Because——' here Dan hesitated for a moment, and then blurted it out in a shamefaced way, 'Because I ken't ye would like to believe it.'

This was honest enough, in truth, but the girl had now no word of commendation for his honesty.

'Ye did wrang, Dan, ye did wrang,' she exclaimed, with a pathetic quaver in her voice that touched the boy's heart.

'Can I no' put it richt noo?' he asked.

'Na,' answered Jessie, with a little gasp like a catching sigh. 'There's no' mony things, Dan, that can be put richt when aince they're put wrang. I mean quite rieht, ye ken, jist as if they had never been wrang. But there's ae thing ye can dae that'll help to put it richt.'

The boy's eyes brightened.

'What's that?' he asked eagerly.

'Ye maun let me ken wha gied ye the money.'

The boy's face fell and his eyes lost their eager light. His sister saw the change.

'I dinna want ye to tell me onything. Ye hae only to haud your tongue. If I guess wha gied ye the money, ye've only to say naething, an I'll understaun'. Was it Mr. Stevenson gied it to ye?'

Dan was silent.

'Oh, Dan,' burst out the girl, 'I wish ye had tell't me this afore.'

'I hav'na tell't ye yet,' protested Dan, who was all aglow with the sense of having been entrapped.

But Jessie was unconscious of this, only her own thoughts possessing her mind.

'Ye'll hae to tak' back the money, Dan,' she said, 'an' tell him I canna tak' it frae him.'

'I'll dae naething o' the kind.'

'But I tell ye that ye'll hae to dae't.'

'No' me,' persisted Dan doggedly, 'or else I'll tell him when I tak' it back that ye were keepin't because ye thocht it was frae the minister, but sent it back when ye fan' oot it was frae him.'

'Ye're only jokin', Dan,' pleaded Jessie. 'Ye couldna dae that.'

'Could I no'?' asked Dan, who suddenly discovered that he had got the whip-hand of his sister. 'That's jist what I would dae.' He grew bolder still as he saw the effect of his words, and added, 'An' I'll dae't the nicht if ye like.'

'Ye've mair ill in your heid than I thocht ye had, Dan,' remarked his sister, adroitly dropping the pressure which she saw was useless. 'Ye can gang doon to your mither.'

'Will I tell her what ye've been sayin'?' asked Dan mischievously, sidling to the door.

'Ye'll haud your tongue,'

'Jist the way ye bid me haud it when ye asked if it was Mr. Steevison that——'
'But his remarks were cut short, for Jessie swooped upon him, and before he

realised it he had been bundled out of the room, and had nothing left to do but to go downstairs, where, there was at least some comfort in knowing, lay the loaves of bread from which the thick slices came.

Jessie's thoughts were now as torture to her, for against her will they kept whispering that Miss Gordon had spoken the truth concerning Mr. MacGrigor's indifference. Amid it all, there rose up before her a vision of Jack Stevenson, patient, tender and thoughtful, in spite of discouragement, and she felt towards him a stirring of the heart which she was at a loss to determine, but which, in a dim way, she regarded as gratitude.

CHAPTER XX

THE Inch Bracken murder was again in everybody's mouth, for it was the eve of Jim Adams' trial for the death of Soople Sandy. The excitement of the nine days' wonder which had followed the flight of John Anderson had been revived, and speculation was renewed with an intensity which was all the greater because of the complete failure of the police to unravel the 'mystery of his disappearance,'

Time had already done something to soften the agonising bitterness of spirit which the tragedy had wrought in the Anderson household, and the law's delay had even lulled the sore hearts there into lapses of brief forgetfulness. But the inexorable days had run their course, and on the morrow, justice was to sit in judgment upon this deed of blood, which was once more the morbid centre of a countryside's imagination and gossip.

In the Manse, Mr. MacGrigor was out of temper with himself, and petulantly angry with the world and its wagging. His philosophy had failed him long ago, and the old comfort of religion evaded him, or rather mocked him, by its elusive shadows. Worst of all was a haunting suggestion which now ever whispered its temptations in his ear. Of course he was to be a leading witness at the trial—as one of the finders of Soople Sandy's body. That was a matter of common knowledge. But until a certain recent happening he had been strong in his resolve to conceal, for Jessie's sake, his discovery of the knife, and the midnight visit paid to him by Anderson. He had kept out of sight, even from himself, the fact that he had practically been an accomplice in Anderson's flight, and endeavoured to convince himself that silence would be best, on the highest grounds.

Jessie now stood to him in a new and humiliating relationship, which he found himself every day more desperately anxious to repudiate. All his love had poured itself out in passion, and had, he assured himself, exhausted itself. But there was that within him which warned him that the same process which had cooled his own feelings had but stimulated those of Jessie, and he never dreamed that Miss Gordon had, with loose and bitter tongue, endeavoured for her own ends to prejudice the girl against him.

He discovered, not without shame, that there seemed to be one way of setting Jessie against himself. He had only to open his lips against her father, only to tell what he knew—and he felt sure there would be an end of it. The girl would despise him for it—but no matter. It would free him from the inconvenience of her love. Of course, she too had her secret, concerning which she could unseal her lips, to the scandal of the parish and the indignation of the virtuous. But she dared

not. That secret would sleep with her till the judgment day, unless—but he drove the thought from him. And yet, he hesitated. If his evidence convicted Anderson of murder, it would not only turn Jessie's heart as a flint against himself, but it would, in the judgment of the world, make it forever impossible that the minister of the parish should have any but a severely pastoral interest in the daughter of a criminal. And yet again he hesitated.

He was thus meditating when Janet made her appearance in the study.

'Ye'll be gaun wi' the nine train the morn's mornin', I suppose?' she said.

'The nine train!' he answered absently. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Ye'll no ken when ye'll be hame, I suppose?' continued the old woman, anxious to rouse him from his absorbed mood.

'What was that you said?' he asked, coming back from his world of scheming subtleties.

'I was spierin' when ye would be back the morn's nicht frae the trial. The trial's the morn' ye ken,'

The mention of the trial appeared to rouse him into full consciousness.

'I don't know when I'll be back. The trial may not finish to-morrow, and I may wait in town over night.'

'Ye would be better onyway to come hame and sleep in your ain blankets. Ye could gang up again next mornin' if need be.'

'Tut,' said Mr. MacGrigor impatiently, 'what is the use of worrying me about these trifles tonight? Can't you imagine that I have other things to think about?'

'I dinna need to imagine. I ken,' answered the old woman, with an emphatic nod of her head.

'Then you might have more sense than to come here worrying me with your small talk about blankets and so forth,' said the minister with unaccountable temper. Then, more calmly, he asked, 'when you said so positively just now that you knew, what did you mean? What is it you know?'

'Oh a wheen o' things,' she replied, with grudging evasion, for she still felt hurt. 'But ye needna fash your heid aboot them the nicht. They'll keep fine till the morn's mornin', but they'll no thole to be keepit ony langer.'

'Just as you please, Janet,' he remarked. 'I don't want to hurt your feelings,' he went on, with the first smile she had seen on his face that day, 'but it appears to me uncommonly as if you were indulging in what you yourself call "auld wife's havers."'

‘It’s nae havers, Mr. MacGrigor.’

‘Upon my word, I know of no other term to apply to it, unless you explain yourself a little more clearly.’

He rose and leant against the mantelpiece, easily and carelessly, as if the thing would have amused him had it not bored him.

‘I tell’t ye that I ken’t, an’ I want to ken if ye’re gaun to let them ken.’

‘Who are you talking about? And what am I to tell them?’ he asked with a quivering eagerness, that derived its sudden life from a leaping instinct which by some subtle process linked her words with the thoughts which had been harassing him all day.

‘Are ye gaun to tell the Coort that ye fan’ the knife?’

He gasped and started, but steadying himself against the mantelpiece, strove to affect calmness and ignorance.

‘What knife?’ he demanded.

‘The knife that Soople Sandy was killed wi’; the knife Jock Aun’erson cam’ here an’ stole frae ye the nicht he went awa’,’ answered the old woman with a dignified directness that amazed him, even while her words staggered him.

‘So you were listening at the door when he was here!’ he burst out in vehement anger. ‘You played the spy!’

‘I played nae spy,’ answered Janet, quietly and unmoved. ‘What I’m sayin’ is what ye said in your fever, an’ naebody kens but me. Will ye say it again the morn? An’ will ye tell them too, that ye gi’ed him money to gang awa’—because he was the faither o’ the lass ye lo’ed?’

He was stunned by the knowledge these words revealed. But it dawned upon him that his hand was being forced by fate in the very way which would compel him so to act that he would set Jessie against him, and thus free himself without leaving in his heart the sense of baseness which would undoubtedly be left behind by any voluntary betrayal of her father.

‘I spoke hastily, Janet,’ he said. ‘I know you will forgive me, for I am worried now, by many things, beyond belief.’

But the old woman’s dignity had been ruffled, and she did not respond immediately to his

change of front.

‘That’s a’ richt, Mr. MacGrigor,’ she said, ‘but fine words butter nae parsnips. Are ye gaun to speak the truth, the hale truth, and naething but the truth? That’s mair to the p’int, I’m thinkin’.’

‘Upon my word, Janet,’ he said with a laugh, ‘you should have been a judge—or a sheriff at least, instead of a minister’s housekeeper.’

‘In that case, I’m thinkin’ I wouldna be the first auld wife that has sitten on the bench, if a’ that folk says be true. But ye hav’na answer’d me yet.’

‘Really, Janet, you are most persistent.’

‘I want to see ye daein’ justice, to yoursel’ an’ ither folk.’

‘Justice, Janet, justice! But what of mercy? I hear nothing of that.’

‘There can be nae mercy, Mr. MacGrigor, whaur there’s injustice. Mind that. That’s my last word the nicht, but ye’ll mebbe think on’t before the morn’s mornin’.’

Without another word she took her departure. But when she came in with the breakfast next morning, she returned uninvited to the subject.

‘Hae ye made up your mind yet?’ she asked.

‘I had made it up before you went away so abruptly last night,’ he’ answered, with his eyes fixed on the ham and eggs to which he was helping himself.

‘Ye had! Ye’re gaun to tell them?’

‘Yes. I am going to tell them.’

‘Ye’ll mak’ a clean breist o’t?’

‘I fancy so. That is—but I’m rather in a hurry, Janet, you know, and must get through with my breakfast, or I’ll miss my train.’

Left to himself, he felt easier in his mind, for the old woman’s presence was a reproach. He had lied, and lied intentionally, to her. He had no purpose of making a clean breast of it. He might make it known that he had found the knife, with the incriminating initials upon it, and that the knife had disappeared. But he was certainly not going to be such a fool as to proclaim to the world that he had had Anderson in the Manse on the night of his flight, that he had given him money to go away, and that he had afforded him an opportunity to steal the knife. And besides, although he hated himself for the thought, he perceived that any revelation of the assistance he had given to Anderson, would awake gratitude in Jessie instead of the repulsion which a partial revelation would produce, and would involve him still more deeply in her affections. He had no fear of collapsing under cross-examination, for he felt himself going forward to the

ordeal of appearing in the witness-box with a coolness he had experienced before on one or two trying occasions—the collected and steady frame of mind which comes at times, and those the most unlikely, to men naturally nervous.

It was in a calm and confident mood that he left the Manse to catch his train. As he went down the Brae and along the Main Street, with his bag in his hand, the people he met turned their heads after they had passed, and regarded him with peculiar interest, while a couple of shopkeepers, taking the morning air together at their neighbouring doors, nodded across to him and remarked to each other, ‘There’s the minister awa’ to the trial.’

At the station there was an unusual crowd, and the minister thus missed Miss Gordon and her father, who were at the other end of the platform.

The train came in, and the guard put Mr. MacGrigor into an empty first-class smoking compartment

‘Oh, by the way, guard,’ he remarked, as that official was shutting the carriage-door, ‘you didn’t observe Mr. Gordon on the platform, did you?’

‘Mr. Gordon of Laverockbank? oh yes, he is at the other end of the train, with Miss Gordon and young Mr. Stevenson.’

‘Ah! Many thanks for letting me know. I had intended to ask you to tell them I would join them later on. But you need not trouble now. I prefer to smoke. Thank you.’

The guard blew his whistle and waved his arm.

The train moved out of the station, and sped down the Vale, while Mr. MacGrigor settled himself in his seat. Drawing out a cigar, he lit it, and smoked meditatively.

When the train drew up at Kilrockton station, he thrust his head out of the window, and looked along the platform. Seeing Mr. Graham, the lawyer, who was his legal adviser as well as Mr. Gordon’s, he beckoned urgently to him,

‘Good morning, Mr. Graham,’ he said, stretching out his hand in greeting. ‘I was looking for you. Of course you are coming with this train?’

‘Yes,’ answered the lawyer; ‘but, to tell you the truth, I was looking out for Mr. Gordon, who was going up by this train too.’

‘You had better come in here. Mr. Gordon is in the other end of the train, with his daughter and Mr. Stevenson.’

‘Mr. Stevenson!’ said Mr. Graham in surprise.

‘Yes, Mr. Stevenson—Jack Stevenson.’

‘Oh, the young one! I wondered if—yes, I’ll come in with you,’ he broke off, opening the door. ‘I had some business to discuss with Mr. Gordon, but it won’t do to discuss it if Mr. Jack Stevenson is there.’

Which was true, for the business had to do with the growing quarrel between old Mr. Stevenson and Mr. Gordon over the capital the latter wished to withdraw from Fordingfield.

‘That’s right,’ said the minister. ‘Have a cigar. I couldn’t have let you join Mr. Gordon in any case, for I have some most ‘important information to give you.’

‘Not about the trial is it?’

‘Yes, that is just what it is about,’ answered the minister coolly. ‘Let me give you a light.’

‘Thanks. But isn’t it rather late to be talking about giving me information about the trial?’

‘I couldn’t have given it to you before. I have just discovered that the knife must have been stolen from me.’

The lawyer stared,

‘The knife! What knife?’ he asked, taking his cigar from his lips.

‘The knife I found on Inch Bracken—the knife with which the murder was committed.’

‘I never heard of it before,’ said the lawyer drily, very drily.

‘You seem rather doubtful, Mr. Graham.’

‘Very doubtful, Mr. MacGrigor, would be an exceedingly mild way of putting it. I am more than doubtful, so much more so that I repeat I never heard of it before. Nor, I am sure, has any other body, or I should have known of it.’

‘Ah! then I must be mistaken in thinking I had told you of it,’ he said, while the lawyer watched him through the smoke of his cigar, with eyes slightly narrowing and growing suspicious and critical. ‘But, in any case, you know now.’

‘This is the most extraordinary story,’ said Mr. Graham in the calmest possible fashion, ‘that I have ever listened to, Mr. MacGrigor, if you will forgive my saying so. You have had in your possession most material evidence in connection with this murder—and you said nothing to the police. That material evidence, in the shape of a knife, was stolen——’

‘Must have been stolen, I said,’ interrupted the minister.

‘It is immaterial. The knife is supposed by you, let us say,’ to have been stolen from you—and still you say nothing to the police.’

‘And therefore I say nothing to the police,’ corrected Mr. MacGrigor.

‘I don’t quite follow your reasoning, I am afraid.’

‘What was the good of giving information concerning something which has ceased to exist, as far as I am concerned?’

‘Do you know, Mr. MacGrigor,’ said the lawyer after a long pause, during which he turned his head so that he appeared to be looking out of the carriage window, while in reality he had shut his eyes, ‘do you know that you make me think—but perhaps, of course, it may be only my fancy—that you never intended to say a word about this?’

‘Well, what if I did not?’

‘Only two things. I would give a good deal to know, first, what made you wish to hold your tongue, and secondly, what has made you change your mind?’

‘Now, look here, Mr. MacGrigor,’ he continued presently, the minister preserving a thoughtful silence, ‘are you going to tell the Court to-day about the finding and disappearance of this knife of which you speak?’

‘Of course I am, or I wouldn’t have mentioned the matter to you.’

‘You have considered fully the consequences of doing so—to yourself, I mean?’

‘To myself and other people—yes. But I wanted your advice on the subject.’

‘You can have it in a sentence.’

‘It is?’

‘Hold four tongue.’

‘Why?’

‘Because—and of course you will remember that I am speaking in a friendly way—because the prosecution will simply take you to pieces.’

‘You think so?’

‘I am sure of it. Again I say, my advice to you is to hold your tongue.’

‘But that is just what I have made up my mind not to do.’

‘Very well, Mr. MacGrigor. A wilful man must have his way. But here we are already, well up to time, and you haven’t yet told me any particulars about this evidence which you found and lost so mysteriously.’

‘You haven’t given me the chance,’ answered Mr. MacGrigor, rising to take his bag from the rack. ‘I will tell you as we walk to the Court.’

‘You had better wait till we get there, I can easily find a room where we can be private,’ said Mr. Graham, letting down the window as the train stopped. ‘Meanwhile we had better meet the Gordons and Stevenson and go along with them.’

‘Yes, perhaps we had better,’ assented the minister, following Mr. Graham on to the platform.

They waited till Mr. Gordon came along, with his daughter and Jack Stevenson close behind him. Alice did not fail to note the dryness with which Mr. MacGrigor and Jack regarded each other, nor the strained, anxious look which the minister’s face had gathered since last she saw him.

CHAPTER XXI

THE Inch Bracken murder trial had come to a sensationally sudden conclusion—this much the Vale of Lennox knew, because early in the afternoon it had been flashed over the wires to Lennoxbridge and Browhill that the jury had found a verdict of Not Proven against Jim Adams, and that sentence of outlawry had been pronounced against John Anderson. This meager but pregnant information only whetted the appetite for more, and the impatience created by the necessity of waiting until the evening papers arrived intensified the excitement which had been steadily rising since the morning. Speculation as to the course which events had taken during the trial was as natural as breathing. Tam Broon had a notion that he would find some of his cronies discussing the subject in Fraser's public house and had dropped in here early in the afternoon to have a crack with them, the minister being from home and nothing doing in the burial business. He was a little surprised to find nobody but Buffy Bob there, leaning with both elbows on the counter, and assuming airs of importance, as the only customer in the bar.

'Hulloa! what are you daein' here, Bob, at this time o' day?' asked Tam brusquely.

'Naething the' noo,' promptly answered Bob, who had an empty glass in front of him. 'But if ye ca' for a bit hauf for me alang wi' your ain, it would gie me something to dae.'

'I micht hae ken't as muckle,' said Tam, calling for two half glasses. 'That thrapple o' yours'll never be slockened till I hae ye putten into the grun' doon by.'

'I was jalousin' ye thocht I was booked for a place whaur folk hae to ca' for a drink a gey lang while afore they can get even a drap o' water.'

'That's in the meenister's depairtment, no' in mine,' replied Tam, pouring a thimbleful of water into his whisky. 'But it's no' draps but bucketfu's ye'll get whaur I'll hae the puttin' o' ye. There was fower foot o' water washin' at the bottom when I berried your faither.'

'Ay. But that was in a wat winter, when the Lennox was in flood, an' the meenister's glebe was like a lochan.'

'Weel, there's nae fears o' you deein' in a dry summer, when ye've a fine thirst on ye to keep ye seep, seep, seepin' frae morn to nicht. Ye'll drap aff in a wat winter, richt eneuch, like your faither afore ye.'

‘I thocht the prophecyin’ would hae been in the meenister’s depairtment too,’ replied Bob. ‘But that minds me that ye were geyan cocksure about anither maitter no’ sae lang since. Hae ye heard ony news o’t yet?’

‘What are ye bletherin’ aboot? Hae I heard ony news aboot what?’

‘Oh naething, Tam, naething special,’ replied Bob, winking furtively to Mr. Fraser, who was busy cleaning his nails with a sardine opener. ‘But ye were sae determined sure the ither day that Jim Adams was gaun to be hanged, that I thocht ye micht hae come in here to tell us ye had gotten doon the verdic’ afore ither folk, an’ wanted to crawl ower us.’

‘Verdic’! The verdic’ ’ll no be gien till late the nicht, and mebbe no’ till the morn—for the meenister took his bag wi’ him in case he had to stop ower the nicht.’

‘Then ye’ve nae news,’ said Bob, again winking to the landlord. ‘An’ whaur hae ye cam’ frae the noo,’ he continued, after a pause, in quite an indifferent way.

‘Cam’ frae—I cam’ frae the kirk, straicht frae the kirk, whaur I’ve been soopin’ the passages. An’ a dry, stoury job it was, sae I’ll hae a hauf wi’ you noo, Bob, if ye dinna mind.’

‘Wi’ pleasure,’ answered Buffy Bob with unwonted alacrity. ‘Twa haufs, Mr. Fraser. But see here, Tam, ye say the verdic’ ’ll be gien either the day or the morn?’

‘Every fule kens that.’

‘An’ ye said that Jim Adams ’ll be hanged?’

‘I said it afore, an’ I say it again. There’s nae doot aboot it He’ll be hanged.’

‘Will ye wager on’t, Tam?’ asked Bob insinuatingly.

‘Wager—ay, I’ll wager on ’t.’

‘Come on, then. Mak’ your bet a bottle o’ Fraser’s best, since ye’re sae sure, to a hauf

mutchkin.’

Tam hesitated. The odds were a bit too long, and rather frightened him.

‘I thocht as muckle,’ sneered Bob. ‘Ye’re henned.’

‘Deil the fear o’ me,’ cried Tam, nettled into recklessness. ‘I’ll tak’ the wager—you’re a witness, Mr. Fraser. I’ll bet you a bottle o’ the best to a hauf-mutchkin, Bob, that Jim Adams is hanged.’

‘Dune!’ said Buffy Bob. ‘Gie’s your haun’ on’t.’ Tam and he clasped hands, and at that moment Jamie Auld came flying in at the door unceremoniously, having tripped on the top step in his haste.

‘Here, Mr. Fraser,’ said Tam, ‘gie the puir body a hauf, an’ no’ hae him pechin’ there wi’ his mooth open till he tak’s a sair throat,’ and he relapsed into a laugh as he surveyed Jamie, still panting.

‘Ye’re a queer fish, Tam,’ said Fraser putting down Jamie’s dram. ‘But, I say, Jamie, ye hav’na gien me your message yet.’

‘For guid’s sake let a body hae a moothfu’, first,’ answered Jamie, stepping forward and lifting the glass which he drained in one gulp.

‘Noo,’ said he, smacking his lips. ‘The papers ’ll no’ be in till the next train, an’ there’s a crood getherin’ a’ready at the station expeckin’ that Jim Adams ’ll come wi’ the same train as the papers.’

‘I’ll be back in a meenit,’ said Buffy Bob, making a bolt for the door.

‘What the deevil,’ cried Tam, seizing Jamie by the arm, ‘what the deevil was that ye said? I’m no gaun to hurt ye,’ he added, beholding Jamie’s silent, scared face.

‘But ye *are* hurtin’ me,’ answered Jamie, squirming. ‘Lowse haud o’ my airm if I’m to tell ye onything.’

Tam released him.

‘What was that ye said about Jim Adams?’

‘Does Tam no’ ken?’ asked Jamie of the publican, with an odd look at him. Fraser turned to re-arrange the glasses on the shelf behind him and, in doing so, gave a stealthy shake of his head, which was only meant for Jamie. But Tam observed it and flashed out. ‘There’s been some infernal ploy gaun on atween you an’ that bletherin’ idiot Buffy Bob to get the better o’ me. But I’ll be even wi’ ye yet, mind that, Fraser, big man an’ a’ as ye think yoursel’ since ye got the lug o’ the justices an’ gied up your butler’s job for a leecence. It wasna for naething ye mairried the laird’s hoosekeeper an’ faithered her wean. It’s a blasted queer thing, Fraser, that she’s never had anither since ye mairried her.’

‘Tamn your eyes, Tam Broon,’ angrily cried Fraser, ‘if ye do not gang oot o’ my door in one moment, I will put ye oot into the road by the scruff o’ the neck.’

Tam laughed at him and snapped his fingers across the counter. ‘Keep your bounce, Fraser, for the first fule ye meet that doesna ken ye.’ answered the minister’s man. ‘Put me oot into the road by the scruff o’ the neck I ‘ He laughed jeeringly.

‘What’s the joke?’ asked Fraser sarcastically.

‘The joke?’ said Tam. ‘I hope ye’ll like the joke when ye hear it’—and putting his hand in his trousers-pocket, he drew out some money and flung it on the counter. ‘That’s to pay for the bottle ‘, your best that you and Buffy Bob hae dune me oot o’ atween ye. I’m thinkin’ ye’ll no’ want to help Bob to drink it, if it’s what ye sell as your “best” ower the coonter, an’ if Bob drinks it a’ himsel’, guid help him—it ’ll save me giein’ him what he deserves.’

Jamie Auld had looked on speechless while the two men wrangled across the bar. He had actually trembled once, and now the little man shook again, as Tam turned upon him, and seeing him standing there open-mouthed and timorous, thrust out his big hand and gripped him by the shoulder.

‘When did the word come?’ demanded Tam.

‘Oot wi’t,’ and he gave Jamie an admonitory shake.

‘Sure as daith, Tam, I dinna ken when the telegram cam’,’ replied Jamie.

‘Whatna telegram?’

‘The telegram that—that Mr. Fraser got,’ blurted out Jamie.

‘Umph!’ growled Tam, ‘I jaloused as muckle. An’ what micht hae been in the telegram, Jamie?’

‘Oh, a wheen o’ things micht hae been in it,’ began Jamie, seeing a desperate hope of escape.

‘Hang ye, ye drivellin’ wee snipe, I’ll shake the guts oot o’ ye if ye dinna answer me straicht. What was in the telegram? Oot wi’t, an’ never fash your thoomb to be glowerin’ ower to Fraser, the muckle Hielan’ stot.’

‘The telegram said,’ whined Jamie, seeing that he was to be in no way helped by the publican, ‘that Soople Sandy’s murder was fan’ “No’ Proven” against Jim Adams.’

‘Brimstone and bleezes! An’ Jock Aun’erson—what o’ him?’

‘He’s ootlawed.’

‘Puir deevil! But see here, Jamie, tell me ae thing mair an’ I’m dune wi’ ye. Of coorse ye were here afore, an’ saw this telegram?’

‘Ay; Mr. Fraser showed it to me.’

‘Was Buffy Bob here, an’ did Fraser show it to him?’

‘Ay.’

‘That’s eneuch, Jamie. Noo, Fraser, I said I hoped ye would like the joke when ye heard it. I tell’t ye I would be even wi’ ye for the trick ye’ve aided and abetted Buffy Bob to play on me. The joke’s this. Ye’re expeckin’ to hae Jim Adams in here when he gets doon, an’ to’ hae. folk croodin’ in to look at him an’ hear his story, an’ drink—a’ for the guid o’ the hoose. I’ve an inklin’ that Buffy Bob’s awa’ ower to the station to meet an’ fetch him, as’ weel as to get oot o’ my gate. I ken Jim Adams a hantle sicht better than either you or Buffy Bob dae, an’ I’m awa’ ower to meet him mysel’.’

‘What has that to dae wi’ me?’

‘This,’ said Tam with a pugnacious thrust forward of his head. ‘I’ll tak’ guid care that Jim Adams doesna come to your hoose, but gangs up the Brae wi’ me to the “Black Bul’,” an’ I’m thinkin’ ye’ll loss mair than ye’ll mak’ ower that bottle o’ your “best.” Noo, dae ye like the joke, Mr. Fraser?’

Fraser pretended to laugh.

‘Of coorse, Tam, of coorse, it’s a verra guid joke.’

‘It’s jist as weel ye like it, Mr. Fraser, for I mean it.’ And there was something in Tam’s tone that convinced the landlord, for his laugh died suddenly out.

‘Come awa,’ Jamie,’ said Tam abruptly to the bill-sticker, who had been a little easier in his mind for the last few moments at finding himself unheeded.

‘Haud on a meenit, till I hae anither dram. I’ve only had a hauf.’

‘You come awa’ wi’ me, and no mak’ yoursel’ a bigger fule than ye are by drinkin’ Fraser’s methylated.’

‘Oot ye go wi’ him,’ roared Fraser, ‘an’ no’ keep that leein’ coffin-tramper hangin’ about my hoose.’

‘Never heed him, Jamie,’ said Tam, taking him by the arm and leading him to the door, ‘we’re gaun to hae a nicht o’ t, an’ nae sair heids the morn’s mornin’. Guid-day, Mr. Fraser. I’ll ca’ in an’ tell the doctor to be ready to rin in a hurry to bring roun’ Buffy Bob when he’s feenished that bottle o’ your “best.” Come on, Jamie,’ and the minister’s man, with the little bill-sticker sheepishly following him, left Fraser to his own reflections.

They had just passed the toll-house, and reached the foot of Hill Street, which runs up through the railway bridge close to the station.

‘By jings,’ exclaimed Jamie, ‘we’re ower late. The train’s in, and awa’ ower the brig to Balgoyne, an’ the folk are com in’ oot o’ the station.’

‘Let them come,’ said Tam, ‘it’s a’ the better for me. You tak’ my word for’t, if Jim Adams has cam’ doon wi’ this train we’ll meet him an’ Buffy Bob makin’ for Fraser’s.’

‘Toots, I had forgotten about that.’

‘Weel, I’ll let ye see something ye’ll no forget in sic a hurry. Hulloa, my man, what did I tell ye? Here they are, an’ Wull Ferguson an’ Pate Maclean alang wi’ them. Noo, Jamie, ye jist watch hoo I’ll send Buffy Bob scootin’ aboot his business.’

Tam walked straight up to Adams. Buffy Bob stepped cautiously back, but Pate and Wull sidled closer.

‘Gled to see ye again, Jim, wi’ your neck hale,’ said Tam.

‘Listen to him,’ put in Buffy Bob, from a safe distance. ‘He was wagerin’ no’ an ‘oor since that ye would be hanged.’

‘Haud your gab, ye yelpin’ cratur, an’ tak’ your hook oat o’ this. Fraser bid me tell ye that he wants ye this verra meenit, or he’ll hae a fine craw to pick wi’ ye. Aff ye go; I’ll see Jim Adams ower the Brig a’ richt,’

Buffy Bob hesitated for a moment, glanced at Jamie—but got no enlightenment, and went on ahead.

‘Ye’re lookin’ gey weel, Jim, considerin’,’ said Tam, having taken Buffy Bob’s place at his right elbow. ‘But ye micht look mair cheerfu’ ower yer escape frae the gallows.’

He kept looking at Jim’s sullen, hang-dog face, and thought, ‘An’ I’m jiggered if it ‘s no’ on the gallows ye should hae been instead o’ walkin’ doon through Lennoxbridge wi’ dacent folk.’

‘An’ ye’re awfu’ quaiet—faur ower quaiet, man,’ added Tam.

‘I’ve gotten used to haudin’ my tongue,’ sulkily answered Jim.

‘A’ the mair reason ye should let it wag, noo that ye hae gotten the chance. But here, you chaps, gang on aheid to the “Black Bul”——’

To the “Black Bul”!’ interrupted Pate in surprise. ‘We were gaun to Fraser’s.’

‘What dae I care whaur ye were gaun? Gang on, I say, to the “Black Bul”—— you an’ Wull—an’ tell Murdoch that we’re comin’ alang. He’s to gie us a room to oorsel’s, an’ hae a bottle o’ richt auld stuff on the table to begin wi’,’

They had now passed the toll-house and were crossing the Brig.

‘But there’s Fraser at his door waitin’ for us, alang wi’ Buffy Bob,’ said Wull.

‘You let them alane an’ dae as I tell ye, if ye mean to hae a nicht at my expense. You an’ Pate can hae what ye want till I come, an’ get Murdoch to put it doon to me. But ye ‘ll hae to be quick aboot it, or we’ll jist be in at your heels. On ye go.’

Such inducements were quite enough to start the two drouths off in hot haste, and to send them past Fraser’s on the opposite side of the road without a halt.

As Tam and his companions turned on to the riverside path at the Brig-end of the Main Street and came opposite Fraser’s, Buffy Bob made to come across to them.

‘Bide ye whaur ye are, Bob, if ye ken when ye’re weel aff,’ cried Tam. ‘There’s a bottle o’ whisky waitin’ for ye if ye’ll gang inside there, an’ a leatherin’ waitin for ye if ye get within airm’s length o’ me.’

Bob turned back to the door, within which he disappeared, followed by Fraser, who only lingered behind him a moment to shake his great fist at Tam.

Jim Adams stalked along as gloomily and preoccupied as if a burden had just been laid upon his mind instead of having been rolled away. Tam, watching him carefully but quietly, formed his own conclusions. Jamie Auld, recovering his spirits in the proud consciousness of being privileged to be publicly in the company of the notoriety of the day, felt himself, poor little man, a full half inch taller.

‘Dae ye think I want thae twa to be fuddlin’ themsel’s fou afore we get there. Nae fear; I ken Wull and Pate ower weel to ‘gie them muckle scouth,’

When they joined Wull and Pate—who had made away with an incredible amount of whisky in the short time which elapsed before the arrival of the others, and the five men were settled round the table in Murdoch’s best private room, and were getting well into the bottle before them, Jim Adams’ tongue began to wag more freely.

‘For some reason or other, best known to himself, Tam let the conversation slip into the hands of Wull and Pate, after Adams had been drawn so far as to give a description of the trial, and especially of the scene which had brought it to an abrupt conclusion, resulting in the verdict which almost immediately followed. The little billsticker grew so maudlin that nobody paid any attention to him.

Tam sat listening, and watching Adams, who now sat brooding, with his chin sunk forward on his chest, and the old hang-dog expression lurking in his evil face.

‘I’ll tak’ my oath,’ muttered Tam to himself, ‘that the man should be hanged. I’m richt, the law’s wrang, an’ the meenister’s a damn’t fule.’

‘What’s that?’ said Wull, turning to him.

‘Naething particular, Wull. I was only speakin’ to mysel’. But if you an’ Pate, no’ to mention Jamie, ’ll keep this guid man company till I come back, I’ll slip oot for hauf an’ ’oor or sae to look efter a wee bit job I had forgotten.’

‘Of coorse, Tam, of coorse, me and Pate’ll dae onything to obleege a frien’.’

‘For a dram,’ added Tam. ‘But I’ll jist order in anither bottle as I gang oot, an’ if ye feenish’t afore I come back, ye’ll jist hae to ca’ for what ye want at your ain expense.’

Tam left them, and having paid for another bottle of whisky, went out, after waiting for a little at the bar to count his money.

‘Eleeven shillings gane in ae efternoon! Weel, I’ve made a fule o’ mysel’, but I’ve ta’en the wind oot o’ Fraser’s sails onyway.’

But to this day, Tam never likes to think of these eleven shillings, which went melting like snowflakes in whisky. Still, he had drunk curiously little, for him, of the whisky he had so extravagantly paid for, and it was with a comparatively clear head that he stepped into the open air, and made his way down the Brae and up the Burn to the home of the Andersons

CHAPTER XXII

‘YE’LL no gang to your wark the day, lassie,’ Mrs. Anderson had said to Jessie in the morning, when she came downstairs long ere daybreak to make herself a cup of tea before going out into the raw air.

‘I daurna bide at hame, mither,’ Jessie had replied, turning to where her mother had propped herself up on one elbow in the ‘concealed’ bed. ‘Young Mr. Stevenson’s gaun up to the trial, an’ his faither’ll be lookin’ roun’ the works, an’ it would be worth my place if he should find oot that I was takin’ a day aff.’

‘He maun be as hertless as his son is kind. To think o’ him expeckin’ ye to hae a hert for your wark, an’ your absent faither bein’ on his trial at the bar o’ justice!’

‘Little he cares for that, mither. An’ besides, I’m no heedin’ aboot bein’ awa the day, for folk micht think I was feared, mebbe ashamed, ’deed, for my faither, when weel I ken that he’s as innocent—an’ will be found as innocent by the Coort—as the babe unborn—the babe unborn,’ she repeated slowly and absently to herself, with a sigh which her mother thought was meant for her father.

‘A’ richt then, lassie, ye ken best yoursel’,’ said her mother, letting her head sink back again on to the pillow. ‘Tak’ a guid warm cup o’ tea, and hap yoursel’ weel afore ye gang oot, for thae foggy mornin’s are fell cauld.’

Jessie swallowed her tea, and having wrapped herself up in her old shawl, went out into the thick, grey morning air, leaving her mother to go to sleep again till it was time for her to get up and make the breakfast.

Jessie went through her morning’s work with a brave heart, gratefully responsive to the sympathetic little touches of kindness which revealed themselves in the more subdued demeanour of the buoyant work-girls who purposely approached her from time to time, and in the words of quiet cheerfulness with which they tried to brighten the cloud over-shadowing her. The breakfast hour went past, the day wore on, the bell rang the workpeople out for dinner, and rang them in again. It was then, with the long afternoon before her, that Jessie’s spirits began to give way. She grew restless and despondent. Quick and sensitive to impressions, she became conscious that the sympathetic cheerfulness of the other girls had softened into compassionate reticence. Instinctively she felt that some news of evil augury had come to hand. She could not understand it, but she dreaded to think of what it might mean. With her heart-strings tightening, she held her peace, for she could not bring herself to ask what was the meaning of it: At length she could bear the suspense no longer.

‘I wish, Maggie,’ she said to one of the girls, ‘ye would rin roun’ an’ ask Dan to come an’ speak to me a meenit, if he can get awa’ frae the job he’s at.’

Maggie departed at once.

‘Dan’ll be sure to ken, if anything has happened,’ whispered Jessie to herself, as she left her work for a minute or two, to go to the door and wait for Dan. For she knew, job or no job, that he would come straight to her.

He returned along with Maggie, who nodded kindly to Jessie and passed inside, leaving Dan alone with his sister.

‘There’s something wrang, Dan. I thocht I saw it in the lassies’ faces, an’ noo I see it in yours. What is it? Tell me, tell me—is faither——?’

Dan hesitated, saw there was no use in delaying, and plunged into it.

‘There’s a telegram cam’. An’ Jim Adams is let aff.’ But even Dan, brave little heart as he was, halted there.

‘But faither, Dan, what o’ faither?’ she cried, gripping Dan hard by the arm.

‘Faither’s ootlawed,’ answered Dan in a whisper, with a big lump in his throat, and keeping his face away from Jessie.

‘Ootlawed! Faither an ootlaw—oh, my God!’—and she would have fallen at Dan’s feet, had he not flung out his arms and caught her. Maggie Fletcher, hearing Jessie’s agonised cry, darted towards the door, in time to see the girl swaying for a second, with arms outstretched and hands clasped above her head, and then falling senseless into Dan’s arms.

Dan and Maggie carried her inside, and there the warm hearts of the girls poured themselves out in tender ministrations, while Dan ran forth to tell his foreman, Andrew Bryce, and ask permission to go for the doctor to Jessie. But Andrew, who was an elder in the Hill Street Free Kirk, was as canny-going as he was big-hearted, and thought it would be better to have a look at Jessie himself to see if there was any need to send for the doctor, and if so, if he could do anything for her in the meantime. He accompanied Dan back, to find that Jessie had recovered consciousness, and had been laid by kindly hands on a soft bundle of calico, until her strength should return to her.

‘My puir lass,’ said Andrew, bending tenderly over her, ‘has onybody been castin’ up things to ye?’

‘Na, na,’ answered Jessie, faintly, and with the flicker of a grateful smile. ‘Everybody’s been kind, faur kinder than I deserve.’

‘But we canna hae ye lyin’ here like this, puir thing. It’s at hame ye should be. Hey, Dan,’ he said, putting his hand in his pocket, ‘ye’ll gang as fast’s your legs

can cairry ye an' get a drap o' brandy for Jess. It's the first thing'll dae her guid, an' then we'll be able to get her hame.'

'It's nae use gaun for brandy, Mr. Bryce,' said Dan. 'She wouldna let a drap o't ower her lips.'

'An' I'm no' need in 't, thank ye.' added Jessie herself, struggling to her feet, with the help of Andrew, part of whose creed was that it was no use trying to argue with or contradict a woman. And Andrew aught to have been an authority, seeing he was a widower who had been twice married and had a family of grown-up daughters.

'Whaur's Lindsay?' asked Andrew of Maggie Fletcher, wondering where the girls' foreman had gone.

'He went awa' to see Mr. Steevison, an' hasna come back yet.'

'Weel, if ye think ye're fit to tak' the road, Jessie, ye'd better gang hame. Maggie'll see ye safe to the door—eh, Maggie?' The girl nodded.

'An' I'll mak' it richt wi' Lindsay, for there's nae sayin' when he'll get back if he's closeted wi' the governor.'

Maggie helped Jessie on with her shawl, and having wrapped her own around her, the two girls went away together.

Dan's quick ears caught some disturbing whispers from the gossip which went on around him later in the afternoon, and which he guessed to have their origin in an early evening paper which one of the men had contrived to get smuggled in, and which had been surreptitiously read. Dan went out of the works with a rush when the six o'clock bell rang, and sped at a rapid trot down the Waterside and across the Brig. Opposite the newsagent's shop, next door but one to Fraser's, he halted, to hang about the middle of the road, courting the shadow on the edge of the light streaming from the windows. Here, devoured by longing, he gazed at the newspapers' contents bills, pasted on boards displayed outside of the news-shop, but which he vainly tried to read. He was ashamed—and his heart sank within him to know that he was ashamed—to go forward into the light. He stood there peering, and his hands stole into his trouser-pockets—not a bawbee was there, or he might have got some stray laddie to steal across and buy a paper. Dan turned away, in utter misery. His heart was hungry, hungry to know why they had been so cruel to his father. But there was not the glint of a tear in his eyes when he walked into the house, to sit down at the table where his mother and Jessie—pale and weary-looking—sat at tea, silent and dejected. The youngsters played about the kitchen unheeded.

It was the hour of shadow and despair in that poor household. It had fallen upon it with all the suddenness of an unexpected disaster, since the hand-to-mouth existence which custom and necessity combined had long made a part of the Andersons' life, had acquainted them with the philosophy which takes no thought for the things of to-morrow, and recognises with a pathetic patience that sufficient for the day is the evil thereof. As yet they did not know and could not imagine why John Anderson had been outlawed and Jim Adams sent forth a free man. Curiously enough, Mrs. Anderson and Jessie, instead of being hungry with desire, like Dan, to know what had led up to this—for them—dire catastrophe, were afraid of knowing the truth. Their woman's love wanted neither to be offered nor to accept any justification of the punishment that had been meted out to their erring but still loved one. They shrank from the fear, the terrible, haunting fear, of being convinced against their own wills, and, even dreading to hint at such a fear to each other, took refuge in silence.

The oppressive silence weighed upon Dan, but, looking at his mute, sad-faced mother and sister, he held his peace manfully till after supper. Then, unable to endure it any longer, Dan spoke.

'If ye gie me a ha'penny, Jessie, I'll gang oot an' get a laddie to gang in for a paper.'

His mother broke her silence wrathfully.

'Ye'll get nae ha'penny frae Jessie to bring papers into this hoose—lees, lees frae beginnin' to end! If ye want to gang oot—gang oot; but if ye want to bide in—haud your tongue.'

Dan bit his lip to keep himself from crying out in hot resentment. But he did not go out. He drew his chair into the fireside, and sat with his hands in his empty trouser-pockets and his legs thrust out to let his feet rest on the fender, a picture of dejected youth.

The night crept on, but still Dan sat there motionless. He heard Jessie clearing away the table, washing up the dishes, and putting them past. He heard his mother putting the two younger ones to bed, and sending Katey upstairs to hers. Then he listened to them talking in low tones, about anything, it appeared, but what they ought to be talking about. It was torture to him, and never had a night seemed so slow and interminable.

Heavy footsteps sounded in the entry, followed by a knock at the door. Jessie stepped across the floor to open the door. Mrs. Anderson rose from her seat at the table in the middle of the room and stood expectant. Dan let his feet fall from the fender and cocked his ears.

‘It’s you, Tam!’ exclaimed Jessie. ‘Come awa’ in,’ and Tam Broon walked in, to the surprise of Mrs. Anderson, and the great relief of Dan, who pulled his hands out of his pockets and wheeled round to sit sideways on his chair, his eyes grown hungry and eager again.

‘Ye’ll wonder to see me here, Mrs. Aun’erson,’ remarked Tam, laying his hat on the table, and seating himself in the chair which Jessie offered him.

‘I’m by wonderin’ at onything, Tam,’ answered Mrs. Anderson with a sigh, resuming her seat.

‘I hope I’m no intrudin’,’ apologised Tam, to whose ears the sigh somehow sounded like a reproach. ‘But I couldna gang to my bed wi’oot comin’ up to tell ye that I’m sure there’s been an awfu’ miscairriage o’ justice the day, an’ an innocent man has been wranged behin’ his back.’

Jessie’s face glowed with gratitude and a new hope. ‘Ye believe that faither didna dae’t?’ she exclaimed with tremulous eagerness. ‘I dae. An’ what’s mair. I’ve spent twa-three ’oors wi’ Jim Adams the nicht, an’ my name’s no’ Tam Broon if that’s no’ the man that did the deed.’

The mention of Jim Adams’s name sent a thrill of repulsion through the hearts of the three eager listeners,

‘Ye canna mean that ye’ve been in Jim Adam’s company the nicht?’ said Jessie.

‘I’ve been a’ that. ‘Deed I jist left him to come here.’

Mrs. Anderson looked shocked and pained. She would fain have expressed her indignation, but her curiosity was growing too strong.

‘I’ve watched him,’ continued Tam, ‘and I’ve hearkened to him forby, an’ ye can tak’ my word for’t, that the man has the bluid o’ Soople Sandy on his conscience.’

‘What did he say?’ asked Jessie.

‘Oh he jist tell’t us a’ aboot it. Hoo the meenister—an’ I’m sure Mr. MacGrigor’s gane mad, he’s never been himsel’ since his illness—hoo the meenister—but ye’ll hae heard it a’ or read it in the papers a’ready.’

‘No’ a word,’ broke in Dan, who felt that his opportunity had come at last. ‘We ken naething but—but the result.’

‘Guid’s truth!’ said Tam, ‘this is maist extraornar’.

‘Tell us what he said, Tam,’ said Jessie excitedly, the mention of Mr. MacGrigor having added fresh fuel to the burning desire which had been kindled within her.

‘I maun tell ye,’ he began, ‘that the verra first thing the Coort did was to ca’ for John Aun’erson an’ Jim Adams. Of coorse, only Adams appeared. Wi’ that, up jumps the Croon’s lawyer an’ asks for a verdic’ o’ ootlawry against John Aun’erson, seein’ he wasna there, an’ it was granted, as a mere maitter o’ form.’

The two women looked at each other, as though their hearts were crying out against the cruelly short shrift given, in his absence, to the man they loved. But they held their peace.

‘Then the Coort asked the Croon’s lawyer if he was prepared to go on against Adams alane. He said he was, so the jury was sworn an’ the trial began.

‘Weel,’ said Tam, clearing his throat, ‘it had gane on for a while in a kind o’ humdrum, jogtrot way, an’ naebody was heedin’ very muckle, for maist o’t was only cauld kail het again. Jim Adams swears, in fact, that auld Lord Dundreheid had begun to dose an’ dotter on the bench, an’ couldna keep his heid frae noddin’. But it cam’ to Mr. MacGrigor’s turn to gang into the witness-box an’ tell his story about him an’ Miss Gordon findin’ Soople Sandy’s body in the wood on Inch Bracken.’

‘Ay?’ interpolated Dan.

‘That made things wauken up a wee, but there was nae great stir yet, for everybody ken’t that bit o’ the story aff by heart. But there was a stirrin’ o’ the dry banes afore the lawyer bodies were dune wi’ the meenister. He went oot o’ the box to let Miss Gordon into’t to tell her story, an’ her version bein’ the same as Mr. MacGrigor’s they let her gang pretty quick. But they had the meenister back in the box again at aince. Of coorse, ye’ll mind that no’ bein’ there mysel’, an’ only hearin’ t frae Jim Adams, I’m mebbe no’ giein’ ye the exact—procedure, I think they ca’t—but I’ll gie ye’t as near as Adams gied it to me.’ They nodded silently.

‘Weel, ane o’ the lawyers got up, an’ says he to Mr. MacGrigor, “We’re muckle obleeged for the verra clear way you an’ Miss Gordon hae tell’t us aboot the discovery o’ the murdered man’s body. Hae ye onything mair to tell the Coort wi’ regaird to a discovery ye made yoursel’ later on?” There was an awfu’ hush then, for folk suspected they were gaun to hear something startlin’, an’ the sudden quaietness made Lord Dundreheid wauken up .

‘Then Mr. MacGrigor tell’t hoo he had gane back for his stick, an’ had fan’ an open knife, by the edge o’ the water, wi’ what looked liike bluidstains, but micht hae been rust, on the blade. He was asked to describe the knife, an’ ye could hae

heard a pin fa' when he gripped the edge o' the box an' waited lang afore answerin'. He wetted his lips wi' his tongue, an' giein' a glint o' his e'e ower at Jim Adams, tell't them that the ineetials "J. A." were cut into the heft. There was a rustle in the Coort when the lawyer pointed oot that there was naething in this maitter o' the ineetials to clear up the doot that lay atween Jim Adams an' John Aun'erson, an' then he asked at the meenister, what he did wi' the knife after he fan' it. He said he put it in his pooch an' took it hame wi'oot showin' it or sayin' a word aboot it to onybody, which made folk begin to glower at ane anither an' wonder what was comin' next. He was then asked if he had the knife wi' him, an' replied that he had ta'en it hame, meanin' to haun' it to the polis, but he had forgotten aboot it, an' when he minded an' looked for't it had disappeared, an' he had never seen it since.

'Auld Lord Dundreheid rubbed his chin an' looked doon at the lawyers, an' the lawyers rubbed their haun's an' looked up at Lord Dundreheid. Then my Lord puts him a question, if he can accoot for its disappearance, an' on this bein' asked at him he went as white as a cloot.

' "Certain things," he began, speakin' verra deliberate an' slow, "that hae cam' to my recollection mak' me believe"—when up jumps the lawyer and cries oot: "Mak' ye believe! we'll tak' what ye recollect, and no' what ye believe.'

' "Stop, stop," says the judge to the lawyer. "Are ye aware the witness is answerin' a question frae the bench? Sit doon, sir. Witness, proceed."

' "Mak' me believe," repeated Mr. MacGrigor, "that John Aun'erson entered the Manse on the nicht o' the murder an' stole the knife." ' At which there was a sensation in the Coort.' There was a breathless silence in the little room, only broken by a groan from Mrs. Anderson, and a stifled gasp from Jessie. Dan sat with tight lips and knitted brows, his elbows on his knees and his chin firmly resting in the hollow of his hands.

' "Can ye tell the Coort what are the certain things which made ye form the opinion ye hae jist expressed?" asked the lawyer, but Mr. MacGrigor couldna be got to say onything definite, though he was ta'en back an' forward an' got an awfu' through-puttin'. Then the lawyer, primed by wee MacKinlay o' Kilrockton, wha was there for Jim Adams, said to Mr. MacGrigor that he believed he was on terms o' intimacy wi' a dochter o' Aun'erson's, an' the meenister said he had been.'

Tam was quick to notice that Jessie coloured painfully.

' "Ye'll mebbe be able to say, then," went on the lawyer, 'whether the knife ye fan' an' lost was in the possession o' John Aun'erson afore the murder?" An' Mr. MacGrigor, speakin' wi' extraord'nar' deliberation, said that no' for the

reasons put by the lawyer, but owin' to an accident, he ken't that it had, at ae time at least, belanged to John Aun'erson. A' the while the meenister's face had been as white as daith, but noo he put his haun' up to his broo in a kind o' pained way, an' glowered straicht afore him at naething, his lips movin' but no' makin' a sound. Afore onybody could get to him he fell forward in a swoon. Miss Gordon rose an' gied a wild cry, an' the excitement rose to its heicht. Mr. MacGrigor was cairried oot, an' Miss Gordon was ta'en awa' by her faither—Mr. Jack Steevison, wha was sittin' beside her, no' movin' in his seat.

'When things had kind o' settled doon again, Lord Dundreheid asked the jury if they didna think they had heard eneuch to let them gie a verdict', an' the foreman said "Ay," an' the thing was dune, or would hae been dune—a' but the verdict' an' sentence—hadna Mr. Steevison got up an' cried oat, "This is monstrous, my lord, the last witness hasna——" But he got nae faur'er, for folk cried, "Sit doon"; the macer ca'd out for silence in the Coort, an' Lord Dundreheid frooned an' said, "Put that man oot." "I dinna want to bide in sic a place," says Mr. Steevison, takin' his hat an' makin' for the door. Jim Adams says he was glad to see the last o' his back, for he's convinced Mr. Steevison meant mischief for him. That feenished it, for the jury cam' to an agreement in nae time, an' the auld doited lord was in as big a hurry to let aff Jim Adams in the end as he had been to ootlaw John Aun'erson in the beginnin'.

'I was speakin' to some men at the bar o' the "Black Bul"' as I cam' doon here, an' ken it'll dae your herts guid to hear—tho' I'm vex't to hae to say it—that they say the meenister was ill an' wanderin' in his wits. They say, forby, that your guidman, Mrs. Aun'erson, hadna a fair chance, an' that there's been a miscairriage o' justice; an' ye should hear, Jessie, the way they praise Mr. Jack Steevison for wantin' to speak up for your faither if they had gied him a chance. Ye'll hae to gie him an extra sweet smile the morn, if ye've ane left in thae days.'

Whereat Jessie blushed prettily, and felt happier than she had done for many a day, for the thought was sweet to her that, after all, she was not alone in believing in her father. And that Jack Stevenson should believe in him, and had even tried to speak up for him—as she was only too willing to think—was a ray of sunshine streaming through the rift in the clouds. To Dan, Mr. Jack Stevenson had always seemed a bit of a hero. That night, he was enshrined in the boy's heart as a real hero, perfect and complete. Mrs. Anderson felt in a dull way that she ought to be grateful to Tam, who, finding that he must be going, left the house with the thanks of all three sounding pleasantly in his ears. He had stayed longer than he had intended. There was a light in the Manse window as he passed the gate, but he found the "Black Bull" closed, and was not sorry. He made up his mind, as he went homewards to his bachelor house, that he was not yet done with Jim Adams,

and the conviction that it would yet come all right, which he had expressed to the Andersons on leaving them, settled itself within him.

CHAPTER XXIII

MR. STEVENSON was sitting in his private room at the works, going through the correspondence which had arrived that morning, and passing across to Jack, who sat at the other side of the table, all letters containing new orders or referring to work already in hand. He had laid aside one letter, which remained unopened until the rest had been dealt with, but these having been cleared away, he lifted this letter to open it.

Jack fancied it was some private document and rose to go.

‘I suppose I had better go now and attend to these,’ he said, indicating the papers which he held in his hand.

‘They can wait for a little. Keep your seat,’ said his father, opening the envelope. ‘This is from Gordon, I believe, and I wish you to hear what he says. Yes, I thought so,’ he continued, unfolding and scanning the letter, ‘it is another communication from the great Gordon. Now, just let me see.’

Jack waited until his father had read the letter through, watching his face the while.

‘I wonder what he takes me for,’ snapped out Mr. Stevenson, as he tossed the letter down in front of him. ‘He writes to me that he is taking his wife and daughter abroad for a month, accompanied by Mr. MacGrigor, which latter little tit-bit of information he has apparently inserted as an after-thought, or, possibly, at the instigation of sweet Alice. That news is probably meant more for your edification than mine.’

‘It is no news to me,’ remarked Jack nonchalantly, ‘seeing I heard it yesterday.’

‘You heard it yesterday?’

‘Bless my soul, it is all over the place. Everybody knows all about it. Alice gives way to her feelings at the trial, and Dr. Connell, who is called in when she gets home, pronounces her trouble to be nervous weakness—Connell must be a bit of a humorist—and prescribes change and travel.’

‘Well, what is the point of it all?’

‘Of course her father is anxious to be off to the Continent at once, but she declares that she is well enough, and had rather stay at home, until Connell mentions—in quite a casual way, of course—that he had been in to see the minister, on his way to Laverockbank—had found him in a state of acute

depression, had forbidden him to preach on Sunday, and had advised him to take a prolonged holiday—which Mr. MacGrigor had said was a luxury he could not afford.’

‘But who told you all this?’

‘I told you everybody knows it. Servants will listen, and having listened will talk, and you know what the Vale of Lennox is. I wonder you did not hear it yourself before now.’

‘Never mind wondering about me. Since you know so much, you perhaps know more?’

‘Yes, I believe I do. Alice changed her tune at once. Of course she would like to go abroad for two or three weeks, and it would be so nice if her father could persuade the minister to join them, the extra expense would really be so little to her father, and the doctor had said that Mr. MacGrigor positively ought to go away. And Mr. MacGrigor, being approached on the subject, in a delicate way of course, by Mr. Gordon, consented, doubtless being aware of the very unpleasant things people are saying about his appearance in the witness box, and hoping that they will be almost forgotten by the time he returns. The arrangement is beautiful, almost like a family one.’

‘Umph,’ grunted Mr. Stevenson by way of comment. ‘I shouldn’t be astonished,’ he continued after a reflective pause, ‘if Alice and MacGrigor are engaged before they come back.’

‘Very likely,’ said Jack airily.

‘I’ll bet MacGrigor is after money, like the rest of his mendicant tribe. I only hope,’ and he laughed maliciously, ‘he may get it. But it doesn’t matter a hang to me. Let’s come back to Gordon.’

Since his father’s worries had begun to accumulate, Jack had observed that he appeared to be losing his powers of concentration, and that, while his violent outbursts of anger still flashed out, he was growing less stormily energetic. The secret of it lay not only in the hopelessness of struggling to avert the impending disaster, but also had its seat in a trouble which revealed itself later in a startling way.

‘The long and the short of it is,’ proceeded Mr. Stevenson, ‘that this letter is Gordon’s ultimatum. He declines to have any further communication with me, either through his solicitor or otherwise, on the subject of the withdrawal of his money from the works. If the money has not been paid into his bankers by the time he returns he will at once take legal proceedings against me.’

‘Upon my soul, I can’t conceive what has made him grow so horridly cantankerous,’ observed Jack.

‘Why, the infernal old fool is being drained dry by his house-building, estate-creating craze. And then, between you and his women, such a beastly muddle was made of my marriage scheme that he feels fooled, and must get his spite put on somebody. But it is I, I who have been fooled, and you are all about to be fooled in turn. Gordon will never see a penny of his money back, his women-folk will cry their eyes out, MacGrigor will be taken in, and curse himself—man of God as he is—for his folly, and you—well, you will hardly be able to escape from the general smash.’

‘It seems rather a cheerful prospect for everybody,’ remarked Jack. ‘But where do you come in yourself?’

‘Where do I come in? I am Samson—and by God, I’ve been blind enough—who is himself crushed in the ruins he pulls down about the ears of the Philistine fools.’

‘Do you really expect me to take all this seriously?’

‘Well, hardly. It would be rather difficult to expect a man who has hitherto regarded life as a joke, except when he happened to imagine himself crossed in love, to take it seriously all at once.’

‘You are unfair, father,’ protested Jack. ‘You have never, until the other day, given me the chance of taking life seriously, so far as business is concerned.’

‘But you can make your chance, upon occasion, I understand. As for example, when you took things so seriously at the trial that you ran the risk of getting yourself committed for contempt of court. But what am I talking about? Have you nothing to do that you sit there gaping at me?’

Jack stared at his father, who was irritated still more by his silent but undisguised surprise.

‘Can’t you go round with these orders and see them put in hand? Or must I go myself? Do you hear me?’

Jack rose and holding the orders and letters in his hand, stood for a moment before taking his departure.

‘Am I to take it,’ he asked, ‘that what you said—I am not referring to your courteous personal references, but about the position of affairs—is correct?’

I have said all I am going to say, and more than I meant to say. You can take from it exactly what you please. In the meantime, will you be good enough to get

about your business, if you happen to have enough sense to realise that you have any?’

Jack departed at once, and went about his business, in the course of which he found himself, not precisely by accident, at Jessie’s side. They were alone, for he had given Lindsay, the foreman, a hint to put the girl upon some light ticketing work in a quiet corner of the ware-room, shut in by piles of printed calico. He had explained that Jessie would no doubt like to escape, for a time at least, from the gossip of the other girls concerning her father’s trial—a kindly consideration which did not deceive pawky Lindsay.

Under this arrangement, Jack had many opportunities, brief though they had sometimes to be, of seeing and speaking to Jessie. She grew to look with pleasurable expectancy for his coming. She came to recognise the true grit in him, to learn the scrupulous honesty of his ardour, and to realise the generous manhood of his devotion. Her perceptions in these directions had been quickened since the night that little Lizzie died. On that night the minister’s hold upon her had seemingly been strengthened, as his heart had warned him, and as he had feared. In reality it had been secretly undermined, and subsequent events had combined to loosen it. Love had been outraged, none the less because consenting in a moment of blind exaltation. And when its eyes had slowly unclosed, to find itself wounded and left alone, love had protested, at first inarticulately and almost unconsciously, against its abasement and desertion.

‘I hope you are none the worse of yesterday’s bad news,’ began Jack, as a matter of course, although he was surprised to find how well and comparatively cheerful she was looking.

‘The news was not altogether bad,’ she answered, with a quiet smile.

‘Not altogether bad?’ he repeated, puzzled.

‘No. Folk might have believed faither guilty. They’re no’ very sure aboot it, an’ when doo’ts begin there’s a chance o’ the truth bein’ ken’t, sooner or later.’

‘I shouldn’t wonder if you’re right,’ said Jack reflectively. ‘Of course,’ he said, with a change in his tone, ‘you still believe in your father’s innocence?’

‘Believe in it? Ay,’ she answered fervently, ‘mair than ever, if that’s possible. An’ oh, Mr. Stevenson, so do you, an’ I canna thank you, no, no, I canna thank you enough for standin’ up for him yesterday. I heard a’ aboot it last nicht an’ —’

‘It was nothing, Jessie, nothing,’ he interrupted, strongly moved by her emotion. ‘It was a small enough thing, in all conscience.’

‘It was nae sma’ thing. I only wish—I hae wished it ever since I heard aboot it yestre’en, that there was ony way in which I could show my gratitude,’ and to Jack’s amazement she seized his hand and kissed it.

She let his hand go, pulled herself up as if ashamed of a weakness, and drew back a little.

‘There’s anither thing,’ she resumed, speaking more quietly. ‘You sent me ten pounds.’

‘How do you know that?’ .

‘Never heed how I know it. You sent me ten pounds. I meant to send it back to you, but I

had to—had to spend it, an’ now I’m doubly in your debt, an’ can never, never repay you,’ she said, speaking quickly, almost brokenly, her momentary calm all gone.

Jack longed to gather her in his arms.

‘I had no thought of repayment,’ he said; ‘but there is one way in which you can more than reward me for any little service you may think I have done you.’

Jessie’s face went pale, and her hands moved as if to hush his lips. But he went on, with a pathetic eagerness to say it all out.

‘I love you, Jessie, love you, and I have wondered why you hardened your heart against me. I have sometimes thought that you love Mr.—that is, that there was some one who stood between us, but I think now, perhaps, that I may have been wrong. It was only that you did not care for me.’

‘Don’t, don’t say that,’ said Jessie. ‘The warld has changed, an’ I hae changed, since the nicht by the muir gate when I sent ye frae my side, an’ whiles I wish that I had changed afore the warld changed.’

‘What has the world to do with it, Jessie,’ he pleaded eagerly, trying to take her hand in his. But she put her hands behind her and let her head droop down, hiding her eyes, as she fronted him.

‘The warld has a’ to do wi’ it,’ she answered softly.

‘But it is monstrous, it is absurd,’ he broke forth passionately. ‘You say you wish to reward me for some fancied service; I show you the one simple, easy way to do it, and you put the world between us.’

Her silence pled for her, and made him ashamed of his outburst.

‘Forgive me, Jessie. I did not mean to hurt you, and perhaps I do not understand.’

She nodded her head, ever so slightly.

‘That’s just it. You do not understand,’ she said sadly, speaking now with full control of her English.

‘But I could learn to understand, Jessie,’ he pleaded. ‘Surely I could learn to understand if you would love me and teach me?’

As he looked at her, he saw she had grown agitated. It passed, and then she said, still keeping her eyes downwards—

‘If you learned to understand, you would love me no more.’

‘Then I do not want to understand. Leave me as I am, stupid, blind, and dull; only love me enough to give yourself to me.’

‘It’s too late, too late,’ she repeated piteously, pressing her hands upon her eyes, and rocking herself to and fro.

With an impulse of pitying love, Jack wound his arms around her and drew her towards him.

At his touch she grew quiet again. She let her head rest on his shoulder for a moment like a tired child—but only for a moment.

‘You mustn’t, you mustn’t, Mr. Stevenson,’ she cried, struggling to release herself. ‘You do not know what you are doing.’

‘I know very well what I am doing,’ he answered, still holding her clasped in his arms; ‘and I know now, Jessie, I know that you love me.’

‘Don’t, don’t,’ she gasped. ‘It is because I——’

‘Because you what?’

‘Because I love you that I ask you to let me go.’

He released her in an instant.

‘You love me’; he repeated it to himself as in a dream, his eyes fixed upon her in wondering admiration.

‘Did I say so?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then it is true. And because I love you, you must never think of me, never touch me, never speak to me of love again.’

There was a lofty seriousness in her speech, a fine dignity in her manner, which checked and held him for a moment. Then he laughed aloud.

‘This is a deuced funny way of courting, isn’t it, Jessie?’ he said, coming down from heroics to his own natural free and easy style.

‘I quite agree with you,’ said a voice, close by, startling them both into remembrance of where they were. ‘It is a deuced funny way of courting.’

At the mocking and sarcastic words, Jack turned to find himself standing face to face with his father.

‘I—I—didn’t know you were there,’ he stammered stupidly in his confusion.

‘I don’t suppose you did,’ replied his father, with the belittling smile which he knew so well.

‘And I really don’t care,’ added Jack, his confusion giving way to defiance.

‘Damn your infernal impudence,’ said his father, blazing into anger, and raising a clenched fist; ‘I—I——’ but the words died on his lips, trailing away into an incoherent mumble, and his hand fell to his side. He was silent for a moment, during which his mouth twitched slightly. Then, recovering himself with an effort, he scowled at his son.

‘Get out of this,’ he snarled; ‘get out.’

But Jack held his ground and defied him.

‘I am not a dog, to be ordered, even by you, in this fashion.’

‘Very well, please yourself. Then it is the girl who must go. And by heavens, if she goes, she never enters my gate again.’

‘I will go, Jessie,’ said Jack, turning to the girl, who stood speechless, with wide, frightened eyes—’ for your sake.’

‘Wait a moment,’ said his father, ‘till I explain to her. I told him,’ he went on, addressing himself to Jessie, ‘that he might amuse himself with you, carry on any game he liked with you; might do, in fact, just as he pleased with you—as I have done myself with the like of you when I was a young fellow, and pretty girls were about, although it sometimes led to a—well, to a mess—provided he did not make serious love to you, which is just what I find the young fool doing.’

Jack knit his brows and clenched his hands at this brutal speech, which made the hot blushes fly to Jessie’s face.

Mr. Stevenson, who loved his taunts to provoke reply, so that he might have openings for further gibing, was enraged that neither Jack nor Jessie broke their silence.

‘Get out of this, I tell you,’ he cried, turning again to Jack, ‘and let this young woman get on with her work, if you have not contrived so to turn her head that she fancies herself above doing a bit of honest work.’

Jack turned on his heel, flashing an angry look at his father, but still controlling his tongue, and, disappearing round the piles of calico, walked to the door and passed out.

The days following only deepened the estrangement between father and son, until they came together strangely and sadly enough.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE Reverend Alexander MacGrigor spent a few pleasant days in London, along with his friends the Gordons, before proceeding across the Channel to Paris. They had arrived in the metropolis at an excellent time. Christmas was at hand, the weather was frosty and clear, and the town was full of gaiety and alive with the stir of approaching festivity. It was pleasant to saunter along the pavements of Regent Street and Bond Street, with their ever-changing throng of elegant ladies and dapper gentlemen, and their long lines of shop-windows, laden with rich stuffs, blazing with colour, and glittering with gold and precious stones. It was a delight to stroll along Piccadilly, past the Green Park, stretching behind its railings across to Constitution Hill and Buckingham Palace, and to turn into Hyde Park under the arch hard by the Duke of Wellington's house, there to watch the riders in the Row, and the carriages of peers and commoners rolling by. And in the evenings, after dinner, when the cabs darted along the Strand, with their lamps flashing and fading like the lights of swift ships flitting through the sea of night, it was a joy to drive to the theatre and live for a little while in another world.

It was all new and wonderful to Mr. MacGrigor. It had a strange fascination for him, and on the third evening after their arrival in London, as he stood on the steps of their hotel, it seemed to him that he had been from home for an age. His old life had slipped from him; his work was but a shadowy dream. The Vale of Lennox was only a misty memory, through which dim figures moved silently, figures he had once known, but now knew no more.

He was waiting for Alice Gordon. Mr. Gordon had taken a box at the Lyceum Theatre for the play that evening, but his wife having mentioned at dinner that she was very tired, Alice had suggested that her mother should remain in the hotel and rest. Mrs. Gordon, however, protesting that she would rather accompany them than remain alone, it was only natural that her husband should offer to stay with her and let the young people go to the theatre together. It was settled thus, and Mrs. Gordon's spirits revived amazingly.

Mr. MacGrigor was not allowed to meditate long alone on the steps of the hotel, for Alice presently descended to him, looking very charming in the handsome opera cloak which covered, without quite concealing, her rich evening dress. The hall-porter called a cab, and as the minister drove towards Wellington Street with Alice seated by his side, the shadowy dreams, the misty memory, even the dim, silent figures, vanished utterly away. He was alone with her and was content, so content that the few words they exchanged had better have been left unsaid, he thought, so trivial, so utterly inadequate, did they seem. It was almost

with a sense of regret that he found the cab pulling up at the theatre door, so swift had been the flight of that happy time.

Mr. MacGrigor helped Alice to alight, and having dismissed the cab, piloted her across the pavement into one of the outer vestibules of the great house. When they entered their box the curtain was still down, and the orchestra was playing. Standing back in the shadow of the box, where they could see, but scarcely be seen, they looked round the house, packed from floor to ceiling with a vast audience, already waxing impatient for the curtain to go up. Miss Gordon swept a casual glance over it all, and then, seating herself where she could see the stage, and yet be sheltered from the eyes of the audience, she adjusted her opera-glasses and calmly surveyed the boxes opposite. Only two of these were yet occupied, and on one of them, containing a small party which included a couple of ladies very stylishly dressed and glittering with diamonds, she fixed her attention. The minister remained standing. The lights, the music, the vast sea of faces, intoxicated his imagination. For the moment, he lost his individuality, and, surrendering himself to his emotions was but an actor in a new, strange drama of dreamland. The conductor's baton rattled warningly upon his music-stand, the music suddenly ceased, the lights were lowered. A bell tinkled somewhere, a great hush fell upon the house, the curtain went up with a dull rustle, and the spell that lay on the minister was broken. He shifted his position slightly, and seating himself close to Miss Gordon, settled down to watch the development of the great tragedy which had taken London by storm, and was the talk of the town.

But the play had no glamour for him, strangely and unexpectedly enough. It seemed to him but a mockery of life; the actors were but puppets, the world in which they moved and babbled was merely an illusion which he could not for a moment trick himself into believing. He grew restless and impatient. He had flung his arm over the back of Miss Gordon's chair, and there his fingers kept softly tapping. Miss Gordon, watchfully conscious of his mood, and correctly divining its meaning, leant back, seemingly by accident. Her hair brushed against his fingers, which ceased their tapping and lay quiet and motionless, under the thrill of its delicious touch. Miss Gordon smiled softly to herself, with her face still averted from Mr. MacGrigor and turned towards the stage.

When the curtain fell upon the first act, and the billowing applause surged through the house, Miss Gordon turned to her companion.

'Why are you not applauding with the rest of us, Mr. MacGrigor?' she asked, daintily clapping her gloved hands.

'To tell you the truth, I was thinking of something else.'

'I thought as much. Do you know, I don't believe you heard a word the actors said.'

‘I believe you are right.’

‘It would serve you right if I were to take a headache, or faint, or do some such ridiculous thing, and make you take me back to the hotel at once.’

‘I should be just as happy as here——’

‘Now, there’s a rude thing to say, Mr. MacGrigor. You are exceedingly complimentary to the players—not to mention myself, which, of course, is a detail.’

‘Really, Alice’—he had got into the habit of calling her Alice since they left home—‘you

spoiled a very pretty speech by interrupting me.’

‘So sorry, I’m sure.’

‘You ought to be sorry, although you don’t look it.’

‘Ought I?’

‘Indeed you ought. You did an injustice to me, and at the same time missed a compliment I was about to pay you.’

‘Never mind about the injustice to yourself, Mr. MacGrigor, but do tell me what the compliment was,’ she said, laying her hand on his arm.

‘Well, I was going to say that I should be just as happy anywhere as here, provided I had the same company.’

‘And yet the company,’ she said, laughing mischievously, ‘have been doing their best on the stage, and you confess you have been utterly oblivious of them.’

‘I used the word in another sense, as you know,’ replied Mr. MacGrigor.

‘I apologise to the audience,’ she said, with a mock bow to the house. ‘It was stupid of me not to think of them.’

‘Wilfully wrong again,’ said the minister.

‘Wrong again! Let me see—you surely didn’t mean—but hush, the curtain is going up again,’

‘What a nuisance,’ said Mr. MacGrigor, bending closer and speaking in a whisper as the curtain rose. ‘Now that we two are alone, there are many things I should like to say to you.’

As it happened, it was only one thing, and not many, that Miss Alice Gordon wished to hear. She had fancied during the last two days that she had detected

signs that she was about to hear it, and, therefore, she felt she must discourage discursive generalities.

‘I suppose you want to discourse to me of the affairs of your parish, of the sins and sorrows of your beloved people,’ she replied in low tones.

‘No doubt you mean well, but, really, I don’t feel inclined to play the part of a sort of secondhand mother-confessor,’

‘Don’t you fancy you are rather—what shall I say?—rather elusive to-night?’

‘Not at all. It is only you who choose to be somewhat mysterious. But as you seem neither inclined to listen to the play yourself nor to let me listen to it, perhaps it will please your reverence if I consent to humour you. But you must be interesting, or I shall never forgive you.’

She had opened her fan, and now, leaning back, fanned herself slowly.

‘I don’t know if the subject on which I want to speak will fulfil the conditions,’ he said, ‘but——’

‘What conditions?’

‘Of being interesting.’

‘Oh! What is the subject?’

‘Myself.’

‘Let me see,’ she said, still fanning herself languidly, ‘yes. I think it will do. You are interesting—when you like.’

‘And you are complimentary—when you like.’

‘Never mind me, if you please. Keep to your interesting subject, and proceed.’

‘It isn’t quite of myself I wish to speak, but of you and myself—of both of us that is, if you understand.’

‘I can’t say that I do, until you explain.’

‘There really isn’t very much to explain. But, if you won’t think it rude of me, I think I could say it all a great deal better if you weren’t fanning yourself.’

‘Very well,’ she said, closing her fan with a dexterous sweep of her hand and letting it drop at her side, ‘only I wonder what that has to do with it.’

He found himself wondering so also, for now that the fan was shut and hanging at her girdle, he discovered it was more awkward than ever to feel that her attention was fixed on him—the play, of course, as agreed, being nothing.

‘Now, do try and unbosom yourself,’ she continued, becoming a little impatient, ‘or this scene or act—or whatever it is—will be over, and the orchestra will be breaking out again.’

‘I have been thinking for some time——’

‘You have, indeed.’

He ignored her interruption and went on, slowly choosing his words.

‘Over what I am about to say, although it may come as a surprise, but not altogether an unpleasant one, I hope, to you. We have known each other now for so long, that I hope you will forgive me for saying——’

‘My dear Mr. MacGrigor, I will forgive you for saying almost anything, so long as you do say it.’

‘You needn’t be so hard on me, Alice,’ he said, ‘for I have been, that is, I am, trying to tell you that I love you.’

She was quiet enough now. He thought he had displeased her and listened with breathless, almost painful eagerness for her reply. But he waited in vain.

‘Are you angry?’ at last he asked. ‘I hope not. Tell me, at least, that I have not offended you.’

‘No,’ she said, so softly that he had to lean still closer to her to catch her words, ‘you have not in the least offended me. I am only trying to think—to think what this means—for me—and you.’

‘For me—it means everything,’ he urged fearful that she was hesitating whether to reject or accept his love, ‘and for you, I have dreamed and hoped and longed that it might mean the same.’

‘I have sometimes wondered, Alec,’—and his heart fluttered hopefully as she named him so—‘if we were not drifting towards this.’

‘Yes?’

‘And I have asked myself whether it was wise in me to hope for the happiness that has now come to me.’

‘Then it is a happiness, and you have hoped for it?’ he said, his heart giving a great leap.

Her eyes looked their answer into his, then drooped softly, as she whispered ‘Yes.’ There was a pause, and she fell to trifling with her fan. But his hand stole round her fingers and drew her hand into his.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘I will speak to your father as soon as we get back to the hotel, and if he and your mother are agreeable, I don’t see why our engagement should be a very long one.’

She was a little surprised, thinking that he was in a much greater hurry to be married than he had been to propose.

‘Oh, father will leave it to me. He always does, because he knows that if I don’t get my own way I am sure to take it.’

The minister laughed.

‘I’m afraid you’re quite a little rogue at home.’

‘Indeed I am, and frightfully difficult to manage.’

‘I know—you can be led but not driven.’

‘Not always even that. It depends on who is leading me and where I am being led.’

But, perhaps because she observed that Mr. MacGrigor had grown rather thoughtful, possibly at the thought of the trouble’s he was lightly proposing to risk, she adroitly changed the subject.

‘Isn’t it strange,’ she asked, gliding into a dreamy and pensive tone, ‘that you and I should have had to come so far for this?’

‘It is all strange,’ he replied, ‘delightfully strange.’

‘It will be news for the good people in the Vale of Lennox, and rather a surprise to them, I fancy,’ he added.

‘Well, yes,’ she answered with deliberation. ‘I think they will be rather surprised to learn that you—their parish priest—should have proposed to me in a theatre.’

In a theatre! Somehow it had not struck him before, and now that it was thrust into his face he did not quite like it.

‘Really,’ he answered, ‘I had not thought of that, and I do not see why it should be generally known where I proposed to you.’

‘I believe you’re ashamed of it.’

‘It isn’t a question of shame at all, but of prudence.’

‘What a nice thing it must be to be a minister, and to have to take into consideration always what you do, and how, when, and where you do it!’

‘Yes,’ he admitted, ‘it is a little annoying at times for a minister, and,’ he added, after a slight pause, ‘for a minister’s wife.’

‘Indeed!’ she said, indifferently. ‘I should have thought minister’s wives would have had the sense to please themselves and leave “shop” considerations to their husbands. I should, I know.’

There was a challenge in this, which Mr. MacGrigor did not accept, thinking it would be

wiser to wait.

‘I don’t know why we are waiting here,’ said Alice. ‘We are not interested in the play, and you want to speak to my father to-night, I suppose.’

‘Of course I wish to speak to him to-night,’ he answered with alacrity, ‘if I may. But I fancied you were just a little disposed to make light of the whole affair.’

‘My dear Alec,’ she protested quickly, seeing that her habitual irresponsibility had carried her too far, ‘it is an old truth, that our very dearest misjudge us and misread us. It might have occurred to you, I think, that a woman could hardly be expected to fling herself in public upon her lover’s neck, however much she might—might, I say—like to do so, and the moment he makes his declaration to her should proceed to drag him with indecent haste before her father. The initiative lies, from first to last, with the man,’

She flattered herself that she had made quite a clever little speech, and she rounded it off with a smile so sweetly suggestive of the submission she had proffered, somewhat vaguely, it is true, that Mr. MacGrigor’s vanity was successfully touched, and the sense of his mastership—doubtful though he knew it to be—was pleasant to him.

‘I shall take the hint, then,’ he said, rising from his seat. Alice rose and stood while he put her cloak round her, and then, as he held the door open for her to pass out, she led the way from the box.

As the cab in which they were seated side by side rolled down the Strand, and Alice leant back, with her cloak thrown negligently open, and her white bosom showing softly in the dim light, it seemed to the minister that this wayward girl struck for him the first subtle note of invitation. High-strung as ever, the responsive note within him vibrated at once. His arm stole around her waist, and he drew her closer to him. She yielded, with a sigh upheaving her swelling breast, and letting her head softly incline towards him, turned her lips to meet his. This delicious giving thrilled him, and all the more because of its unexpectedness. He had feared she would prove cold. He had never guessed that her wayward

indifference was mere armour, and that beneath it glowed fire—quenchless and devouring. Yet to her it was more, infinitely more, than to him, for he had had his experiences. Their lips were together. The cab drew up with a jerk, a bright light flared in upon them, and Alice, with a little scream, drew her face away from the minister's. He released her, and she sank back into her corner, while Mr. MacGrigor drew down the window and peered into the night. They were in the middle of a block of cabs, stopped by a fallen horse or some such accident, opposite the Adelphi, and the lamp of a cab, which had been pulled up close to theirs, glowed in at the window and dazzled his eyes. With a muttered word of impatience he pulled up the window and leant back again.

‘It is only a block in the traffic,’ he said, ‘and we shall soon be moving on again. I’m afraid you got rather a fright, Alice?’

But she did not speak. Only, her hand stole into his, and was folded in it. There it lay, tenderly clasped, until the cab, moving on again, threaded its way through the night-traffic, and drew up at the hotel door. Not a word had she said since they kissed, but now as she walked across the brilliantly lighted hall by his side, her face radiant with a new joy, she said to him—

‘I am going straight to my room. You will tell me to-morrow—dearest.’

‘What your father says?’

‘Yes. I shall have mother up with me—you won’t mind me telling her myself, will you?’

‘Not in the least. In fact, I think it would be better.’

‘Much better—every way. Because you and father can talk it over quite alone. And now—until the morning,’ she said, holding out her hand.

‘It’s rather hard to part in public like this, after—well, after such a delightful drive.’

‘Hush!’ she whispered, lifting a warning finger roguishly, ‘you mustn’t tell tales out of—cabs. And you mustn’t, you really mustn’t, be too greedy.’

She had gone.

He made his way to the private drawing-room, where he knew he would find Mr. and Mrs. Gordon.

Mr. Gordon was placidly dosing in an armchair, while his wife sat reading by the fire. She turned her head towards the door, and her husband roused himself, with a querulous grunt, at Mr. MacGrigor’s knock.

‘Come in,’ cried Mrs. Gordon, and, as he entered alone, she laid her open novel upon her knees, and asked with some surprise where he had left Alice.

‘She has gone to her room,’ replied the minister, ‘and, although she did not ask me to deliver the message, I believe she would like to see you there,’

‘There is nothing the matter, I hope, Mr. MacGrigor?’ she said with immediate concern, rising, and letting her book fall unheeded to the rug.

‘Oh, not at all,’ replied Mr. MacGrigor, stooping down to pick up the book and lay it on the table. ‘I think—but perhaps it is only a foolish fancy of mine—that you will find her even more cheerful than usual,’

Mr. Gordon had been slowly gathering his drowsy wits together. He pulled out his watch and looked at it.

‘Why,’ he exclaimed, ‘you young people have got back remarkably early. Didn’t you enjoy yourselves?’

‘I don’t think we could have enjoyed ourselves better. And I propose to sit down with you and tell you all about it, over a cigar—if I may?’ he added, turning to Mrs. Gordon.

‘Of course you may,’ she replied. ‘I’m going up to see Alice, and won’t come down again tonight. So you gentlemen can do just as you please. Only don’t let Mr. Gordon keep you up too late, Mr. MacGrigor. He has had half a night’s sleep already, and has no consideration for other people.’

‘Don’t you believe her, Mr. MacGrigor,’ retorted her husband, laughing. ‘She tries to blacken my character on every possible occasion.’

‘Never mind him, Mr. MacGrigor, but remember my warning and take care of yourself. Good-night.’

‘Good-night.’

Mr. Gordon was more than cordial; he was even effusive in the way in which he expressed his satisfaction and gratification at the prospect of having the minister for a son-in-law.

‘In fact,’ he said, in his big good-natured way, ‘had my dearest wishes been consulted, this is exactly what would have been arranged.’

Despite Mrs. Gordon’s warning, it was early in the morning before the two gentlemen parted.

At breakfast, next morning, the minister saw at a glance that Alice had told her mother, and secured her approval. Mrs. Gordon was quite motherly, and Alice was charmingly shy and silent. Mr. Gordon was in high spirits and only restrained from mirthful rallying by a prudent consciousness of the presence of strangers.

Something like a family feeling prevailed, and Mr. MacGrigor would have been happy, but for one fact. He had slipped into his pocket, unopened, two letters which had arrived for him that morning.

One of them was addressed in a strange hand, and had come from over-seas, having been readdressed to him by Janet. The address of the other was in a familiar handwriting, and it bore the Browhill post-mark. It was from Jessie Anderson. He wondered what it could mean, and what message it bore for him. He longed—yet feared—for the moment when he could find himself alone, to tear it open and read what she—his loyal, dishonoured, deserted love—had written to him. For he dared not open it there and then.

CHAPTER XXV

JESSIE ANDERSON had not written to the minister without sore hesitancy and prolonged heart-searching. Her pride rebelled at the step which, it came ever more clearly to her mind, she ought to take, and it was only when she had convinced herself that it must be done that she plucked up heart to do it. On the night upon which she made her resolve final she betook herself early to her little room under the slates, and there, sitting alone, meditated long and seriously upon the form which her message should take. At length she had so far shaped her thoughts that she rose and went to the little shelf of books in the corner. Having selected the largest volume she possessed—and it was by no means big—she returned to her chair. Sitting down, she laid the book on her knees and spread upon it the note-paper which she now took from her pocket. The ink-bottle had already been placed on a book which she had laid on the edge of the bed, close to which she had drawn her solitary chair. Next she drew from her pocket a small hollow tin penholder, into which the pen could be sheathed when reversed, and made it ready for use. Then, having paused to gaze thoughtfully but unobservantly at a spot of damp on the low ceiling, she dipped her pen in the ink and began her letter. And this is what Jessie Anderson wrote to the minister:—

‘BROWHILL, *Tuesday night.*

‘MY DEAR ALEC,—I hope you will not be angry with me for writing to you, but my mind is in a great trouble, and there is no one that I can tell about it except you, I thought when I heard you were going away to travel with your friends, that it was as well for me, because it would be easier to write than to speak to you about it, even if I had the chance. But now, it is hard to write it, and I think it would be easier to tell you if you were here. But perhaps not. I thought you loved me, and I would sometimes think yet that you loved me, if my heart would let me. But it tells me that you have changed, and you yourself have left me—when I am going to need you most. For I am sure now of something that a little while since I only feared was possible. I have been wondering if you have never thought of it, if the father’s instinct never woke and whispered it to you. I am not finding fault with you, and I ask nothing from you for myself. I am only telling you now, in case you might accuse me later on of not having told you. You may want it to be near you, to have your care and your love. For myself I do not care, since you love me no more, and since things have happened to change me also. But I want to give you the chance, if you wish, and before it is any later, to do what is right—that is, if you think it is right. I will say no more. From your sincere friend,

‘JESSIE ANDERSON.’

When she had written and signed the letter she read it and re-read it, but altered nothing. She had thought over it so long that it had grown into shape in her mind, and only needed transference to paper. And now she remembered that she did not know where to send it. For it was out of the question, she decided, that it should be sent to the Manse to be forwarded. She was haunted, now more than ever, by an uneasy misgiving that Janet suspected her, and she had an unreasoning fear that the old woman would pry into the letter and read its secret before sending it on to Mr. MacGrigor. Only one other way seemed practicable, and that was to get the minister's address from Janet, and this she made up her mind to secure next day. Then she put away her books and her pen and ink, having folded the letter up and 'sealed it in a blank envelope, which she placed carefully in her pocket. Having done so, she undressed, put out the light, and crept into bed. But for long she could not sleep, tired as she was. Her thoughts ever kept wandering downwards to the letter which lay hidden away in the pocket of her dress hanging at the foot of the bed, and upon the folds of which, as if heaven would not let her forget, the soft moonlight shone strangely, as it slanted in through the skylight while she lay with wide but weary eyes.

At last she fell into sweet forgetfulness, until a loud knocking at her door woke her to another morning, and to the discovery that she had overslept herself. Dan was impatiently hammering at the door to let her know that unless she made haste she would be late.

Having dressed quickly and taken a hasty cup of tea which her brother had made, she went out with him and hurried down the Burn. The six o'clock 'bells' had not yet begun to ring when they turned into the Main Street. They slowed their pace when they found they were not likely to be late after all, and it was then Jessie asked her brother if he would call at the Manse at breakfast-time and get the minister's address.

'An' if she'll no gie ye't, Dan,' she concluded, 'then ye maun jist come awa' wi'oot it'

'There's nae fear o' that,' answered Dan cheerily, 'I ken hoo to mak' her gie't to me, whether she likes or no'.'

Dan kept his word, and called round at the back-door of the Manse at breakfast-time.

'An' what dae you want, Dan Aun'erson, comin' aboot dacent folk's hooes at this time in the mornin', when they're thrang at their breakfast?' demanded the old woman crossly, when she opened the door in answer to the boy's confident knock.

‘No verra muckle,’ answered Dan, with a laugh that lighted his brave blue eyes more brightly. ‘Only Mr. MacGrigor’s address.’

‘Wha wants it?’ asked Janet, sharply.

‘My sister.’

‘Oh, your sister!’ sneered the old woman, spreading out her hands and putting her head to one side. ‘Weel, I’m feared she’ll hae to want it.’

‘Verra weel,’ answered Dan, the smile gone out of his face; ‘ye can keep it if ye like. But I’ll get it frae some ither body.’

‘Ye canna.’

‘Can I no? An’ I’ll hae to write to the meenister mysel’ noo.’

‘You write to him! It’s a fine thing if the likes o’ him’s to be pestered wi’ letters frae the likes o’ you.’

‘I’m no gaun to pester him. I’m jist gaun to drap him a bit line aboot yoursel’.’

‘Aboot me?’

‘Ay, aboot you.’

‘An’ what are ye gaun to say aboot me?’

‘That ye’re sae thrang cookin’ the poached rabbit that ye bocht frae Jim Adams last nicht, that ye hav’na time to be ceevil to folk-when they ca’. That’s a’,’ said Dan, looking her straight in the face.

‘An’ hoo dae ye ken that Jim Adams brocht me a poached rabbit yestre’en?’ asked the old woman.

‘Never heed hoo I ken,’ replied Dan. ‘But he caught it in a trap, an’ he sell’t it to ye for a sixpence. But I canna wait, for I maun gang to get the meenister’s address,’ he added, turning as if to go.

‘Haud on, my man,’ said the old woman; ‘ye needna be in sic a hurry. If I was to gie ye Mr. MacGrigor’s address, ye micht forget to write to him and tell him aboot the rabbit, micht ye no’?’

‘It’s mair than likely,’ answered Dan. ‘I’ve an awfu’ bad memory whiles.’

‘Bide there a meenit, an’ I’ll bring it to ye, then,’ said Janet, disappearing into the house, while Dan waited, whistling merrily to himself.

Janet returned with the address, written on a slip of paper, and Dan, having read it and thrust it into his trousers-pocket, marched home to breakfast. Flinging down his bonnet, and lifting his bowl of porridge from the fireside, where it had

been set to keep warm for him, he sat down beside the others, with a twinkle in his eyes which Jessie saw and understood. Once he caught her eyes upon him, when he was putting a great spoonful of milk and porridge in his mouth, and he winked palpably to her.

Jessie and Dan left home together, and as soon as they got safely outside, the boy thrust his hand into his trousers-pocket, and drawing forth the slip which Janet had given him, handed it to Jessie. She glanced at it, folded it into a tiny square, and put it carefully away in her pocket.

‘I was feared she wouldna gie’t to ye,’ said Jessie.

‘It wasna her fau’t that I didna come awa’ wi’oot it.’

‘Ye’re an awfu’ laddie, Dan,’ said his sister admiringly. ‘Ye aye get the saft side o’ folk.’

‘I didna ken auld Jinat had a saft side.’

‘Ye didna get roun’ her then?’

‘Get roun’ her? Nae fears. I jist went straicht at her, and, garred her dae’t whether she liked or no’,’—and Dan chuckled gleefully at the recollection.

‘I hope ye wer’na unceevil to the auld body.’

‘Fegs, there wasna ony need to be unceevil. It’s no’ sae muckle what I said as what I’m no’ gaun to say that did the trick.’

‘That sounds like havers.’

‘Havers or no’ havers, ye hae the meenister’s address.’

‘Come noo, Dan,’ said his sister, coaxingly; ‘hoo did ye manage to worm ‘t frae her. I ‘m fair puzzled to ken hoo ye got at auld Jinat.’

The boy’s answer bewildered her more than ever; it seemed so utterly irrelevant and meaningless.

‘Ye wonder whaur I gang at nichts,’ he said, ‘since I stopped gaun to the nicht-schule?’

She nodded her head, observing him curiously.

‘Weel,’ he continued, ‘I’m no watchin’ Jim Adams for naething.’

‘What’s that ye say?’ asked Jessie, as if she either had not heard or did not understand.

‘I ‘m no watchin’ Jim Adams for naething,’ repeated Dan. ‘But ye mauna tell mither.’

‘Ye’re a curious callant,’ remarked Jessie, wonderingly. ‘What has Jim Adams to dae

wi’t?’

‘Naething that he kens o’ himsel’,’ said Dan, still mysterious and refusing to be drawn; ‘an’,’ he added, ‘naething that onybody need ken but me—an’ Jinat’

They had crossed to Lennoxbridge, and were walking up the cinder-path by the river-side. Once within the gate, they went their separate ways, to begin their allotted tasks, and Jessie had plenty of time before the dinner hour to think over what Dan had said. But puzzle her head as she might, she could not make more out of Dan’s enigmatical words than that the explanation of his recently acquired habit of staying out late at night was that he was watching Jim Adams. At dinner-time she hurried through her meal, went upstairs and addressed her letter to Mr. MacGrigor, posting it as she returned to work. And that night, as she lay asleep, it was being carried over the Border and went flying southwards, until it lighted in the minister’s hands on the morning after he had made his declaration to Miss Gordon.

It was not until half an hour after he had breakfasted that Mr. MacGrigor managed to be alone in his room, with the door closed between him and the world, and free to open his two letters, one of which, at least, he regarded with instinctive misgiving. Seating himself in a chair close to his dressing-table, which was set into the window recess, he drew the letters from his pocket, and, laying the other on the table, proceeded to open Jessie’s.

As he read, he paused to ask himself if he had read aright, or if an evil dream which had come to him one night was repeating itself by some trick of his brain. But he forced himself to read on, until the truth, keen and relentless, cut its way through all his hesitating self-deceivings and halting evadings, and took possession of him, merciless in its horror. The letter dropped from his hands and fluttered to the floor. He picked it up and thrust it into his breast-pocket, crumpling and crushing it as he did so. His sin had found him out. He recoiled from the one possible atonement demanded. The sacrifice involved appalled him. Surely, surely, she would understand and forgive.

‘I must reply to her at once,’ he muttered to himself, ‘and let her know about—about—Alice.’

He rose to go downstairs to the writing-room, and was in the act of turning towards the door when his eyes fell on the unopened letter which he had laid on his dressing-table. He lifted it and opened it absently, absorbed in other matters, to find it contained a letter within a letter. There was a sealed envelope enclosed, addressed simply to Miss Jessie Anderson, Browhill, and a brief note to himself

from a firm of lawyers in San Francisco. The note told him little, although at any other time it would have awakened in him many surmisings. It was as follows:—

‘SIR,—In accordance with the instructions of our late client, Mr. Robert Anderson, we forward to your care a letter from ourselves to his niece, Miss Jessie Anderson, concerning whom you wrote to him, and who resides in your parish. We shall be obliged by your putting her in possession of the same at your earliest convenience. We are, sir, yours obediently, SCOTT & O’BRIEN.’

With these letters in his hand he left his room, and went downstairs to the writing-room, where he selected a quiet comer and sat down to write. He had grown strangely collected and calm, and there was no hesitancy in his action as he put the paper before him and began to write. Resolve had come to him, swift and decisive. He would make his position clear, without any allusion which might compromise him hereafter. He wrote:—

‘DEAR JESSIE,—I enclose herewith a letter which has just come to you from Messrs. Scott & O’Brien, San Francisco, addressed to my care, and which I am asked to forward to you as soon as possible. Since it may be of importance, I shall post it myself within the next few minutes, as I am just going out with Miss Gordon, to whom, it may interest you to know, as a parishioner of mine, I have become engaged.—I am, yours faithfully, ALEXANDER MACGRIGOR.’

Heartless enough these words seemed. He shrank from re-reading them. But he shrank still more from what appeared to him the awful ordeal of doing what was right, only to hear the mocking censure of the world. He could not, he said to himself, endure the humiliation of breaking off his engagement with rich Miss Gordon, to link himself with shame and poverty. He would explain all to Jessie when he saw her, and assist her privately if the worst came to the worst. But this cold, calculating mood was wholly unnatural to him, and that very night as he lay in bed, sleepless and tossing, he suffered the first torments of the living hell which he had prepared for himself, all the more agonising because of the shining memory of the pure heights of those lofty ideals from which he had descended into this inferno.

CHAPTER XXVI

‘THERE’S a letter for ye, Jessie,’ said Mrs. Anderson, pointing to an envelope which was set against the wall at the back of the kitchen mantelpiece.

Jessie went forward, took the letter down, and read the address, blushing warmly.

‘I’ll tak’ my supper when I come doon,’ she said, moving quickly to the door.

‘What are ye gaun upstairs for? Surely ye can read your letter here,’ grumbled her mother.

But Jessie had gone, without appearing to listen, and in fact had no thought for anything but what might be Mr. MacGrigor’s reply to the message she had sent him.

The moment she was in her own room and had lighted the lamp, she tore the letter open with trembling fingers, and was surprised to find that it contained an inner packet, addressed to her in a strange hand. She put this aside for the moment and sought the minister’s note with feverish eagerness. She read it with a sense of dazed incredulity, so unlike was it to anything which she had imagined it possible to receive—and she had imagined many things—until she came to the closing words, wrapping the bitter pill which had so cruelly been sent to her to swallow. She read these words again to herself, half aloud, trying to take in their full meaning—

‘I am just going out with Miss Gordon, to whom, it may interest you to know, as a parishioner of mine, I have become engaged.’ It did interest her, very much, but she was astonished to find how little it surprised her.’ Her woman’s instinct had prepared her for this. She said to herself that it did not matter—and then she sat down and cried, long and bitterly. It was her mother’s voice, calling upon her from downstairs, which finally brought her to herself.

‘I’ll be doon in a meenit,’ she called out in answer, wiping her eyes and rising. Then she bethought herself of the other letter, which she had flung upon the bed. She took it up and opened it. She read, and as she read, grew quiet and still with surprise. She could not grasp its full import, but out of all its formalities and precise details she gathered the gist of it. Her uncle was dead, and had left to her his entire fortune, acquired at the Californian gold-diggings, and amounting to \$500,000. This money was now in the hands of his solicitors, who wrote to her that if she would be good enough to get her lawyers to communicate with them they would be glad to make the necessary arrangements for the transference to her

of her legacy. Five hundred thousand dollars was of course utterly beyond her comprehension. It might, for the moment, just as well have been twenty, or ten, or five thousand dollars. All she knew was, that by a sudden stroke of fortune she— they—because it was not of herself alone but of her mother and the others as well that she thought—would no longer be poor. She had not finished the letter at once, having paused to try and realise what this opening statement meant. She resumed her reading. ‘It may be as well to state,’ wrote the lawyers, ‘for your satisfaction, that it would be useless for any one to dispute your uncle’s will, if any party or parties felt disposed to do so. We were in his confidence, and are in a position to know that he always cherished very tender memories of the little niece he had left behind him in Scotland. Moreover, inquiries which he addressed, not very long before his death, to the parish minister of Browhill, elicited a reply concerning you which did you the highest honour, and which established you securely in your uncle’s favour. Further, our late client’s brother, your father, was in San Francisco, on his way to the diggings. Your uncle made very special inquiries about you, without seeming to do so, and what he then learned confirmed the high hopes which he had of you.’

Her father! her father! All else, the thought of her own trouble, the tidings of fortune, were swept away in the glad knowledge that her father still lived, an outlaw and a wanderer, it was true, but still alive, to love and be loved,

Again her mother’s voice came up the stair, case.

‘Are ye never comin’ doon, lassie, Your supper’ll be cauld.’

For answer, Jessie thrust the letters into her pocket, and rushed downstairs,

‘Oh, mither, mither!’ she cried, bursting into the little kitchen in a state of excitement that drove the youngsters into gaping wonderment, ‘I hae news for ye, an’ sic news. But ye maun send the weans oot.’

‘Send the weans oot! At this time o’ nicht! It’s maist time they were gaun to their beds. Ye’ve surely gane demented, lassie.’

‘I didna mean ootby. They can gang up to my room for a wee.’

The young ones were accordingly bundled out of the kitchen, and as they scrambled noisily up the stair, little Katey, as usual, felt it incumbent upon her to protest with shrill howlings.

‘Mither,’ asked Jessie, ‘whaur’s Dan? I’m deein’ to tell him the news. Surely he hasna

ane oot a’ready?’

‘A’ready, is it ye say? Ye surely dinna ken hoo lang ye’ve been upstairs. But gang on wi’ your news. Dan maun jist hear it when he gets hame.’

‘Sit doon, then, mither, an’ try an’ tak’ it quaietly. I’ve just gotten news o’ faither.

He’s——’

‘He’s no deid?’ cried Mrs. Anderson, starting up.

‘Deid! No. He’s leevin’, leevin’—think o’ that, mither, an’ in America.’

‘Whaur’s the letter?’

‘Here,’ said Jessie, drawing the letters from her pocket, to which she returned the minister’s, unobserved, and offered the other to her mother.

‘Read it yoursel’,’ said Mrs. Anderson, who had sat down again, and now leant forward with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. In this position she listened motionless until Jessie had read to the end. Then without raising her head, and looking like a woman plunged in a dream, she said—

‘Read that first bit ower again.’

‘What bit?’

‘The bit aboot the sillar.’

Jessie read it again.

‘Five hunner’ thoosan’ dollars! I wonder hoo mony thoosan’ poun’ that’ll mak’,’ remarked her mother thoughtfully.

‘I dinna ken. But think o’t, mither, faither’s leevin’, jist think o’t.’

‘I am thinkin’ o’t. But that’s an awfu’ heap o’ sillar. Jessie, my lassie,’ she said suddenly, letting her hands fall to her lap and sitting bolt upright, ‘ye’re a made woman. Ye’ll hae to gang in to Kilrockton, an’ see Mr. Wilson, the lawyer, the first thing the morn.’

‘What for?’

‘To gie him that letter an’ put the hale thing into his haun’s.’

‘There’s nae lawyer gaun to clap his een on this letter,’ answered Jessie decisively.

‘An’ what for no? Are ye daft?’

‘Because the letter would let them ken whaur faither is, an’ they’ll no rest till they hae hunted him doon.’

‘But ye’ll hae to show the letter or ye’ll no’ get the sillar,’ argued her mother.

‘Then I’ll jist hae to dae wi’oot the sillar noo as I hae dune wi’oot it afore. For I’ll show the letter to nae lawyer.’

Mrs. Anderson tried persuasion and then ridicule, but Jessie was not to be shaken in her determination to sacrifice everything, if need be, for her father’s sake. Her mother was growing cross, when there came a rush of footsteps past the window, the sound of hurrying feet in the passage, and, flinging the door open impetuously, Dan dashed into the kitchen.

‘What dae ye mean by comin’ bringein’ into the hoose like that?’ demanded his mother wrathfully.

‘I tell’t ye that I wasna watchin’ Jim Adams for naething, Jessie,’ burst out Dan excitedly, paying no heed to his mother’s question.

‘An’ what were ye watchin’ Jim Adams for?’ asked his mother, this time in a way which made Dan attend to her.

‘I dinna ken, mithers,’ replied Dan. ‘But the thocht cam’ into my heid ae nicht in my bed, an’ I hae kept geyan close to his heels maist nichts since then.’

‘But what was it ye were gaun to say, Dan,’ asked Jessie.

Dan darted a grateful look towards her and then, almost shouting in his joy, he cried—

‘Jim Adams is in the polis-office, an’ it’s a’ richt wi’ faither, for Adams has confessed.’

‘Thank God,’ exclaimed Jessie.

‘Confessed! Wha did he confess to?’ asked Mrs. Anderson.

‘To Tam Broon an’ me, an’ then to the polis.’

‘That’s a gey queer story,’ commented his mother. ‘Hoo did a’ this come about?’

‘Put aff yer bonnet, Dan,’ said Jessie, ‘an’ sit doon an’ tell us the hale story.’

Dan flung his cap on the table, and sitting down between his mother and sister, told his story.

‘I went up the Brae to the “Black Bul’,” when I gaed oot efter supper, to see if Jim Adams was there. For this while back he has aye ta’en a guid dram at the ‘Black Bul’ ” before he began his nicht’s poachin’. When I peeped in at the door he was there, richt eneuch, wi’ a gless before him. I seen him lift his gless, but when it was hauf roads to his mooth he looked ower’ his shouther an’ began

tremblin'. He put the gless doon an' wiped his broo, as if he was sweatin'. His face had gane as white as a cloot, an' he looked roun' again, his een maist startin' oot o' his heid. Murdoch spiered at him what was the maitter, an' Adams swore, an' tell't him to mind his ain business. Murdoch lauched, an' said he was feared that Adams had been frichted wi' a ghost. Wi' that, Adams let oat a roar an' bolted for the door, an' it took me a' my time to draw back my heid an' get oot his road before he cam' fleein' oot. He crossed the road an' gaed doon the Brae, mutterin' to himsel' an' hangin' his heid, wi' me followin' him an' keepin' as close to him as I could. He turned aff at the Manse gate and gaed doon the Kirk-stile. I sclimbed the gate into the road that leads to the minister's stable an' crept doon behin' the wa', an' on the ither side I heard Adams moanin'. Then he stopped, an' frae the noise he made I was feared he was com in' ower the wa' on the tap o' me. But he maun jist hae been leanin' against it, for in a wee I heard him sayin', "Can ye no leave me alane, Soople Sandy, an' sleep wi' the rest o' them there—there! See, they're a' quaiet—a' but you—but you! If I hadna killed you, ye would hae killed me, an' I wouldna hae glowered at ye nicht an' day, the way ye're daein' at me wi' thae fearsome een o' yours." I was shakin' in my shune, but Adams grew sae quaiet again, that I thocht he had slipped awa' withoot my hearin' him. But a' o' a sudden he broke oot wi' the awfu'est cursin' an' sweerin', makin' my hert loup into my mooth an' my hair near lift my bonnet aff. He swore he was gaun to dance abune Soople Sandy's grave till he had made it that there would be nae gettin' oot o't till the judgment day. I heard him stotterin' awa' doon into the kirkyerd an' syne I gaed back an' speiled ower the gate an' howked Tam Broon oot o' his hoose. I tell't him about Jim Adams an' what I had heard,

“Fegs,” says Tam, “we’ll hae the deevil by the heels the nicht, if we gang aboot it the right way”—an’ wi’ that he gaed into the “Black Bul” an’ fetched oot big Wull Ferguson. Tam tell’t Wull naething, except that he wanted him to come wi’ us, an’ Wull jist grunted and followed us doon the Brae. Near the Kirk-stile we met Rab Pollock, the polisman, an’ Tam stopped him an’ whispered something in his lug, an’ Rab wheeled aboot an’ cam’ wi’ us. We turned doon the Kirk-stile, an’ I’m tellin’ ye it wasna a cannie thing to be gaun into the kirkyerd at’ nicht, wi’ a’ thae white stanes, lookin’ like ghosts staun’in’ up or deid folk lyin’ doon. Wull began to whistle, but Tam turned roun’ an’ garred him shut up or gang awa’ hame. Tam was used to it an’ gaed on in front, no’ carin’ a button. Nane o’ us but Tam ken’t whaur Soople Sandy was berried. It’s doon in the corner next the glebe, whaur the dockans an’ nettles grow, an’ the Lennox comes lappin’ through the wa’ when it’s in spate. We gaed roun’ the path that rins under the big trees along the glebe wa’, steppin’ as canny as we could, but sune we were pulled up by Tam sayin’ “Wheesht!” We stood still an’ listened, an’ then we heard, comin’ oot o’ the darkness in front o’ us, a kind o’ smothered trampin’ an’

mutterin' noises. My knees were knockin' against ane anither, an' Wull an' Rab crept up closer to Tam an' me. Tam gaed on again, an' as we got nearer to them, the trampin' an' mutterin' becam' louder. I grupp'd Tam by the sleeve, an' he whispered to me, "It's him, Dan, an' we'll hae him. Keep up your hert an' think o' your faither." The next meenit we were richt on to something that was dancin' an' mutterin' awa' to itsel' an' never heeded us. "Turn on your licht, Rab," whispered Tam, an' the polisman had his bull's eye on the cratur in a twinklin'. It jist let oot ae yell, an' drapped on the grun', an' lay like a deid man. He had fa'n face doonwards, an' Rab kept the licht on him till Tam an' Wull had rowed him roun'. We waited a wee, talkin' to oorsels an' wonderin' what was to be dune, when Adams opened his een an' sat up .

‘ “Wha’s that? “ says he.

‘ “It’s me, Tam Broon,” says Tam.

‘ “Tam Broon? Tam Broon?” says he, sittin’ up an’ rubbing his een. “I thoct it was Soople Sandy.”

“Hoo could it be Soople Sandy?” says Tam.

“Ye’re sittin’ abune him, an’ ye ken ye killed him.”

“Of coorse I ken I killed him. But he’s no’ deid, or he couldna follow me aboot day an’ nicht the way he does. Wha’s that behin’ ye?” says he, startin’ up .

‘ “Jist twa-three frien’s o’ yours an’ mines. Hey, Rab, hae ye your snitchers aboot ye ?”

“Ay,” said Rab, giein’ me his lantern to haud, an’ takin’ a step forrit.

‘Wi’ that, Adams made a bolt to get awa’, but he hadna gane hauf a dizen yairds, wi’ Rab an’ Wull Ferguson at his heels, when he coup’d ower a gravestane. Rab tum’led ower him, an’ Adams was up afore him an’ was for makin’ aff again, when Wull clapped his big haun’ roun’ the back o’ his neck, and swore he would break it for him if he steered a foot. Syne Rab slipped the snitchers on his wrists, an’ they marched him awa’ to the polis-office, Tam Broon and me walkin’ behin’.

‘Tam an’ me followed them into the office, an’ as sune as we were in the licht an’ Adams got his een on me, he stood glowerin’ wild-like at me.

‘The sergeant was there, sittin’ at a desk wi’ a big book afore him, watchin’ Adams like a hawk .

‘ “What are ye daein’ here,” growled Adams at me. Whaur’s your faither?” I said naething.

‘ “I wish he had been hanged,” he went on.

‘ “It’s a guid job he wasna hanged,” put in Tam, “seein’ ye’ve confessed the nicht that it was you killed Soople Sandy.”

‘ “An’ I’ll say again, if it’s ony guid to ye, that I killed him. But he’s no’ deid; na, he’s no’ deid,” he screamed, “an’ they canna hang me. He’s no’ deid. See! He’s there, there, behin’ you, lauchin’ an’ girnin’ at me.”

‘The sergeant had been busy writin’ in the big book, but he looked up again and stared at

Adams.

‘ “Ye young deevil,” says Adams to me again; “I wish they had hanged that faither o’ yours, an’ then Soople Sandy would hae had company doon below, an’ wouldna hae come botherin’ me.”

‘The sergeant gied me a nod never to heed him, an’ then asked a lot o’ questions. He wrote it a’ doon in the big book, an’ efter that Jim Adams was ta’en awa’ an’ locked up for the nicht.

‘Then they a’ shook haun’s wi’ me an’ bade me rin awa’ hame an’ tell ye that faither could come hame an’ haud up his heid as sune as he liked noo, for it would a’ be made richt efter this nicht’s wark’

Mrs. Anderson and Jessie had sat silent while Dan was speaking, both of them with their eyes fixed upon the boy; but there was a striking difference between mother and daughter when Dan’s story came to an end. Mrs. Anderson kept her seat, thoughtful and undemonstrative, while Jessie rose, and crossing swiftly to Dan, put her arms round his neck, to the boy’s astonishment, and kissed him .

‘I’m prood o’ ye, Dan, richt prood o’ ye,’ she repeated, ‘for ye’ve brocht back faither’s guid name an’ oors,’

She drew back, and stood looking at him. It made him uncomfortable, and he was hungry. He rose and went over to the dresser to cut for himself a thick slice of bread. He was spreading some butter on it, when Jessie said to him—

‘When ye’ve spread your piece, Dan, I’ve a letter for ye to read.’

He came across the room, and taking a huge bite, resumed his seat. He laid the bread on the table near him, and took the letter which his sister held out to him.

Dan read slowly and carefully to the end of the letter announcing Jessie’s good fortune, and containing the reference to his father. To his sister’s great disappointment, he appeared to treat it with comparative coolness. ‘That’s fine,’ was all he remarked, as he handed her back the letter and picked up his bread from the table to attack it with hearty vigour. His capabilities of excitement had

been exhausted for one night, and he had, besides, but the dimmest conception of all that the letter meant.

‘Ye’ll gang in an’ see Mr. Wilson noo,’ broke in Mrs. Anderson, ‘seein’ that Jim Adams has cleared your faither.’

“There’s nae hurry, mither.’

‘Nae hurry, indeed! If ye dinna gang in to Kilrockton the morn’s morn in’, I’ll gang in

mysel’.

‘A’ richt, then, mither, I’ll gang,’ replied Jessie; and Dan was there and then instructed by his mother that he must see Jessie’s foreman as soon as he got to Fordingfield next morning and tell him that Jessie could not possibly come to work until the afternoon.

Jessie accordingly, dressed in her poor best, went into Kilrockton next morning and had an interview with Mr. Wilson, in whose hands she placed Messrs. Scott and O’Brien’s letter. The lawyer was kind but cautious. He trusted there would be no difficulties, and would communicate at once with her late uncle’s solicitors. Meanwhile—and had Jessie known it, no’ better proof could have been afforded of Mr. Wilson’s confidence in her future—he would be glad to advance her any money she might require pending a settlement. She thanked him, but said that she hoped she need not trouble him, and begged him to keep the matter secret in the meantime. Whereat he smiled and said that secrecy was part of his profession. But on one point Mr. Wilson was unable perfectly to assure her. It was by no means certain that in the eyes of the law the confession of Jim Adams would clear her father, since, in the words of the lawyer, they might argue that he was ‘art and part.’ He might possibly have to stand his trial if he returned home, although there could be little doubt as to the result. Still, Mr. Wilson thought, the simplest solution would be for him to remain abroad. There was not the most remote chance that the authorities, under the circumstances, would trouble him, while popular opinion would clear his memory of any stigma which had been attached to it.

‘It’s queer,’ said her mother, when Jessie got home and told her story, ‘that thae lawyer bodies can never see things like ither folk. But there’s nae need for your faither to come hame. I’m thinkin’ that when your money comes to ye, we can gang to him. I’m wearyin’, wearyin’ sair to see him.’

‘Weel, weel, mither, we’ll see about a’ that in guid, time,’ replied Jessie, leaving the room and going upstairs to her room.

‘What are ye daein’, lassie, changin’ your guid clathes in sic a hurry?’ asked her mother when Jessie returned a few minutes later.

‘I’m gaun back to work efter dinner. Ye tell’t Dan yoursel’, last nicht, to tell Lindsay that.’

‘Oh, ay. But I forgot. Ye’ll no need to be fylin’ your haun’s noo wi’ wark, for ye’ll hae to be learnin’ the pianny sune.’

‘I ‘m gaun to work for a wee while onyway, an’ ye maun say naething aboot the letter thae lawyers hae sent, till we mak’ sure that faither’s safe. Promise me, an’ I’ll get Dan to promise.’

Mrs. Anderson found it hard to promise. She was eager to begin crowing over her neighbours, and to hold up her head all the higher because she had been used, of necessity, to carry it low. But she gave the promise, as did Dan later on, and, more marvellous perhaps, she kept it. Jessie went to her work when the dinner-bell rang, as if no extraordinary change had come into her life, and this odd determination, as her mother thought it, was destined to be fraught with great issues.

CHAPTER XXVII

JIM ADAMS provided the Vale of Lennox with a fresh sensation, which developed in a startling manner, for hard upon the report of his confession flew the news of his death. The wretched man had 'tholed his assize,' and could not have been again tried by his peers for the murder of Soople Sandy, but, driven to desperation, he had elected to 'thole his assize' before a Higher Tribunal, and had hanged himself in the cell of the Lennoxbridge police-office, in which he had been confined for the night, when he was brought over from the Browhill kirkyard. In so doing he unconsciously did something to atone for the trouble which he had for years given to the authorities, since his death solved the very difficult problem of what was to be done with him under the circumstances.

'I have news indeed for you, Jessie,' said Jack Stevenson, coming to her side one day in the works, and pulling a newspaper from his pocket.

'Read that,' and he pointed to a paragraph among the marriage announcements. Jessie stopped her ticketing, and taking the paper from him, read the paragraph he had indicated, while Jack stood watching her closely.

'At the British Embassy, Rome, on the 13th inst., the Rev. Alexander MacGrigor, minister of the parish of Browhill, N.B., to Alice Gordon, only daughter of Thomas Gordon, Esqre., of Laverockbank, Vale of Lennox, N.B.' Jessie gave a little gasp of surprise, but no other sign passed her lips, only her face flushed for an instant, and then paled swiftly. She handed him back the paper without any comment, and resumed her work.

'Aren't you very surprised, Jessie?' asked Jack, as he thrust the newspaper back into his pocket.

'A little, not much.'

'Great Scott! What funny creatures you women are. Why, I nearly upset my coffee, when the governor smiled sneeringly and handed me the paper this morning at breakfast. I could see he had a malicious pleasure in pointing the thing out—for we are not on speaking terms yet, you know. But, I say, had you any idea this sort of thing was going to happen?'

'Well, I knew they were engaged, and——'

'You knew they were engaged, and you never told me!'

'I hadn't the chance. You haven't been in here since your father caught us and was so angry.'

‘Oh, you have only known it since then?’

‘Yes, and they must have got married in a hurry, I suppose.’

‘Very likely. I always thought Alice and her mother were desperately anxious to catch the minister.’

‘They ought to be happy, then, seeing that they’ve managed it. I suppose the rest of their trip will be their honeymoon.’

‘Honeymoon!’ exclaimed Jack, taking her hands in his before she was aware. ‘Honeymoon! I wish to Heaven we were starting upon ours.’

‘Don’t, Mr. Stevenson, please don’t. You are hurting me. And if you love me, go away; do go away.’

‘Good God! what is that?’ cried Jack, as a loud roar, shattering the windows, shaking the walls, and making the floor vibrate under them, burst through the air, followed by the screaming of women, the calling of men, and the sound of hurrying footsteps. He dashed to the door. A great column of smoke and steam was rising in the middle of the works, to be swept away by the strong north wind, which was blowing down the valley. He ran towards the boiler-house, and even as he ran, heedless of the workers around him, wild cries of ‘Fire! Fire!’ broke on his ears. He turned the corner of one of the sheds. Between him and the smoke and steam beyond, was an excited crowd, men and women, boys and girls. He pushed through them and reached the boiler-house, which showed through the grey smother a mass of confused wreckage and smouldering fire.

‘Is there anybody hurt?’ he asked quickly and anxiously of the men standing nearest to him.

‘No, as far as we ken.’

‘Is Geordie Glen safe?’

‘Oh, ay, he’s safe enough,’ answered one of the men. ‘Here he is to answer for himsel’,’ and the fireman was pushed forward, dirty, grimy, and unmistakably drunk and indifferent, face to face with Jack, whose glance of contempt he met with a defiant scowl.

‘I suppose you were absent from your post, or this wouldn’t have happened. And yet I don’t know. Anyway you’ve managed to save your skin, beastly drunk as you are.’

‘Never heed him, Mr. Stevenson,’ urged a voice at his elbow. He looked down and saw Dan.

‘The dryin’ shed’s on fire.’

‘You infernal fools!’ he cried, turning savagely on the men; ‘why did you let me stand here jawing with this drunken rascal? Let me pass.’

He made his way in hot haste towards the drying-shed, which lay behind the long low building which stood on the other side of the open space in front of the ruined boiler-house. As he rounded the corner and ran towards the drying-shed, he saw the smoke oozing through the roof, and drifting out of the shattered windows. Hither, too, the workers had hurried. Most of them seemed paralysed into impotence; some few bustled aimlessly about, demoralised for lack of leadership.

‘You thundering idiots!’ shouted Jack. ‘Can you do nothing but stand and gape like a pack of children? Where’s the fire-engine?’

‘The fire-engine’s comin’,’ answered one man, eager to defend himself. ‘The key was lost, an’ they’re breakin’ open the door to get the engine oot’

Just then a cheer went up, and the clustering groups gave way as the fire-engine came rumbling along, drawn and pushed by a number of men and boys. Jack assumed at once the direction of operations, and the fire-engine was got into position. It was an old-fashioned, rickety concern, pumped by hand. The hose was drawn out, and willing volunteers took their places on each side of the see-saw pump handle. The fire had not yet burst into flame, but was still smouldering in sullen threatening. Taking the nozzle in his hands and dragging the hose after him, Jack went forward to one of the windows and peered into the murky gloom within.

‘Come here, Lindsay,’ he called, turning round, ‘and hold the hose.’ The foreman came forward.

‘Ye ‘re no gaun to dae onything reckless, I hope sir,’ said the man, prompted by the grim determination which he read in Jack’s face.

‘I’m going into’ the building, if you think that reckless,’ he replied.

‘I dae indeed. Bide whaur ye are, an’ we can play upon the fire through the window here.’

‘Do as I tell you,’ answered Jack impatiently. ‘Bide you where you are, and pass the hose through to me when I get inside. You can see nothing from here.’

‘Ye’ll see still less frae the inside, I’m thinkin’.’

‘Never mind thinking, but do as I bid you, like a good fellow,’ replied Jack, springing from his side and making for the door, eagerly watched by the crowd of workers, into the front of which Jessie Anderson had edged her way, and where she now stood with palpitating heart, watching every movement of Jack with breathless interest.

He went forward and disappeared within the door, to make his way towards the window at which Lindsay stood with the hose. But, at the moment he vanished into the threatening smoke, in his mad attempt, a burst of flame surged up in the interior, flashing its horror upon the spectators and thrilling them into a wild cry of dismay. They swayed involuntarily backward and then forward, movements which were followed by quiescent expectancy. There was another upward rush of flame, and now was heard the angry roar of the fire as it gathered force to fling the lapping flames up and around. Lindsay was filled with fear, for he had neither seen nor heard anything of Jack Stevenson since he had passed within the door. He could think of no expedient but turning on the hose and trying to beat down the flames.

‘Pump awa’ there, pump awa’,’ he shouted to the men behind him, as he lifted the nozzle and directed it through the window. Willing arms strained, and strong bodies were bent and raised, as the creaking handle rose and fell, slowly filling the hose and sending a jet of water from the nozzle, at first in laboured spurts and then in a steady volume, which curved forward and struck the flames, to fall hissing among them and rise in clouds of steam.

Jessie had no eyes for anything but the door, towards which she gazed with painful intensity and through which there came not the figure she longed, with feverish desire, to see. She could wait there no longer and darted forward, heedless of the warning voices around her. She paused for an instant at the door, seeking for breath, as the smoke rolled into her face, filling her throat and nostrils. Then stooping down, she pushed forward on her desperate quest. Blinded and bewildered, she groped her way along, when a rush of flames startled her, and she staggered against the wall, baffled and half-suffocated. She pulled herself together and took another step forward, careless of her life, and feeling that there are some things even more bitter than death. Her foot struck some obstacle. She tripped and fell, and in so falling perhaps saved herself.

For a moment she lay face downwards. The sound of deep breathing, behind her and close at hand, stirred her into eager hope. Raising herself on her hands and knees she crept round, and there, beside her, stretched on the floor, lay Jack Stevenson, over whose prostrate body she had stumbled and fallen. There was not an instant to be lost. The fire at the other end of the building was gaining ground, and the antiquated fire-engine was powerless to cope with it. The roaring of the flames drowned the hissing of the water being poured into them, and their fiery tongues were darting towards the door as they licked their swift way along the cloth and seized upon the dry wood-work. Even in that lurid hell she had no thought of her own life, but the passionate desire to save Jack’s life was now a thousandfold fiercer within her at the sight of his helplessness. Lifting herself from the floor she stooped down and stretched her hands towards him. Laying

firm hold of him she drew him upwards, his dead weight taxing her strength to its utmost. With a desperate effort she drew him wholly from the floor, and staggered forward. Her arms were clasped tenaciously round his waist; his head drooped unconsciously over her shoulder. Slowly and unsteadily she made her way to the door, the burden she carried growing heavier with every uncertain step.

‘My God!’ she groaned at last, as she came to a standstill, and stood quivering and ready to fall. With a last supreme effort, that set every pulse beating tumultuously with the strain, and made the blood surge and hum through her head, she stumbled forward with a great cry. There was a sound of roaring voices, and the rush of trampling feet. A breath of fresh air struck upon her, and swept between her gasping lips. As in a dream she saw the door, and strong arms outstretched to seize her burden and succour her. Saved! he was saved—and with a smile flickering on her lips she fainted and fell forward, to be borne tenderly away, side by side with the man for whom she had imperilled her life.

Still the hopeless fight with the fire went on. The works’ bell had been set clanging to summon the fire-engines from the other works along the riverside, but before they arrived on the scene the flames, fanned by the wind, had obtained such a firm hold, that it was impossible to keep them from spreading, and when Jack Stevenson regained consciousness in the office to which he had been carried, it was to learn that the best part of Fordingfield was alight, and could not be saved.

‘Where is my father?’ were Jack’s first words when the message had been conveyed to him.

‘He’s gone home,’ answered the clerk to whom he had addressed himself.

‘Gone home!’ said Jack in surprise.

‘I mean—that is, he has been taken home,’ stammered the clerk.

‘Taken home!’

‘Yes. He became unwell—very ill, indeed, as soon as the explosion took place.’

‘Unwell—very ill—in what way?’

‘Well, we sent a messenger at once to the Apothecaries’ Hall, where he fortunately found Dr. Connell’s carriage standing outside, and the doctor himself in his consulting-room inside, and brought him back with him,’

‘Well, what did Connell say about my father?’

‘The doctor gave it as his opinion that Mr. Stevenson had had a stroke of paralysis.’

‘Paralysis!’ groaned Jack, full of remorse for his share in the quarrel which had lately divided his father and himself, and awaking to the consciousness that here was a fresh misfortune to intensify the disaster of the fire.

‘But Dr. Connell,’ said the clerk, with sympathetic encouragement, ‘was hopeful.’

‘Connell is always hopeful,’ said Jack. ‘But how did you get my father home?’

‘The doctor had his carriage brought round here, and Mr. Stevenson carried into it. He took Stewart with him to help to lift Mr. Stevenson out.’

‘Has Stewart returned?’

‘No,’

‘Then run up to the house, find out how my father is, and bring me back word at once. You will find me somewhere about the works.’

Jack’s tour of the works was a melancholy experience. The drying-shed was gutted, the machine-shop in smouldering ruins, the ware-room was a mass of fiery debris, the store was in flames, and was beyond all hope of being saved. But here, at last, it seemed that the combined fire-engines of the Vale had obtained control of the fire, for the store fortunately occupied such a position that it was possible for the firemen to prevent the flames from spreading further. Jack halted to watch the operations, but it was with a numb despair at his heart. Lindsay, begrimed and perspiring, and resting for a little from his gallant labours, came up and spoke to him.

At first, Jack was absent and moody, but Lindsay mentioned Jessie Anderson’s name, and Jack suddenly became interested. It was then he learned, for the first time, the heroic part the girl had played in the drying-shed, and the revelation stirred him almost beyond self-control.

‘She must have saved my life, Lindsay!’

‘She did a’ that, an’ at the peril o’ her ain. Ye hae muckle to thank the lassie for.’

‘Thank her? thank her? I want to—to—’ but Jack broke off abruptly in the middle of his excited stammerings.

‘I dinna understaun’,’ said Lindsay.

‘Of course you don’t understand. She hasn’t saved your life—but mine, mine, and she’s, she’s—what are you staring at?’

‘Naething, sir,’ answered the man, quickly and apologetically.

‘You’re sure she’s uninjured?’ continued Jack, in an altered tone, which showed he had again the reins upon himself.

‘There’s no’ a hair ‘o’ her heid as muckle as singed.’

‘She has gone home, you say?’

‘Ay. As sune as she cam’ roun’, her brither Dan saw her hame. The men gied her an awfu’ cheerin’.’

‘Did they?’ said Jack coldly. ‘I wonder it didn’t strike them that it was they who should have done what she did.’

‘She was into the dryin’-shed efter ye afore anybody jaloused what the lassie was for daein’. An’ ye mauna forget that it was a’ dune in a twinklin’, an’ the men were at the door as sune as they richtly ken’t what was on foot,’

‘Umph!’ growled Jack.

The clerk returned to tell Jack that Dr. Connell was remaining with Mr. Stevenson, more hopeful than ever, and had sent a message that Jack had better stay at the works if there was any need of him, because he could be of no possible use at home, where all was being done that could be done.

So he remained where he was, although he thought bitterly that it seemed he could be of as little use in one place as another, for although the fire was now thoroughly in hand it had done so much damage that it could not well do more.

It was late in the evening when he walked home, to find Dr. Connell still there, and his father come back to consciousness. Softly the son stole across the room to the bedside. He stood there for a moment regarding the drawn face, while a great wave of remorseful pity swept over him, and then bent his head above his father’s breast. Slowly the father raised his right hand, the one hand in which power remained to him, and laid it on his son’s head, and thus, in pathetic but eloquent silence, in the hush of the sick-room, the estrangement of days was swept away. The doctor, watchful and solicitous, drew Jack gently away, and together they passed into an outer room.

‘He will live?’ asked Jack in an anxious whisper.

‘He will live—yes—but——’ said the doctor significantly.

‘But?’

‘He will be a wreck. Fortunately, it is only one side that is affected. But he must on no account be excited—you understand?’

‘I think so.’

‘And now, if you’ll take my advice, you’ll go downstairs and have something to eat, while I go back to your father.’

‘I thought you were going away.’

‘No; I am going to remain here—probably all night.’

‘Then if I go and have a wash and get something to eat, you won’t mind if I go out for a little?’

‘Not in the least. Do exactly as you please.’

‘I’ll be back soon and look in before I go to bed.’

‘The sooner the better, then, unless you want to knock yourself up. Then I’ll have you on my hands next, and a nice patient you’d make.’

Jack had soon washed and refreshed himself, and having gone to the Snuggery to select his biggest ‘briar,’ filled and lit the ancient pipe, and went out. He felt he must see Jessie Anderson that night and pour out to her all the thankful adoration that filled his honest heart to overflowing. Going down the Avenue, he struck into Hill Street at the railway bridge, and hurried across to Browhill, fearful that Jessie might have gone to bed before he arrived at her mother’s door. He met in the Main Street one or two people he knew, but hastened by with a passing greeting, and turned up the Burn. Here he had to, pick his steps a little more carefully, but in a few minutes he stood before the poor little house whose humble roof sheltered the one woman on earth who held his loyal love. There was still a light in the window, but at the last moment he hesitated, being seized with a shy reluctance. For he had never knocked at Mrs. Anderson’s door before, and became all at once uncertain as to whether he would be a welcome visitor at that hour. But, as he lingered doubtfully under the stars, summoning up his courage to enter the passage and knock at the door, the skylight in the low roof was pushed outwards, and as it creaked upon its hinges, Jack took a step or two backwards and looked up. For once in a way, Fortune had favoured him. Jessie, all unconscious of his presence below, had thrust out her head, and was gazing forth into the still, sweet night.

‘Jessie!’ he said softly, and at the sound of his eager whisper the girl started and looked down.

‘Is that you, Mr. Stevenson?’

‘Yes. I came up to see you. May I come in?’

‘No, no,’ she said hastily. ‘Wait where you are, and I’ll come down.’

Quietly she withdrew, and shut the window. There was a minute or two of breathless waiting for Jack, before his straining ear caught the sound of her soft

footsteps as she descended the stair. His eyes looked rapturously upon her, as she emerged from the shadowy passage and advanced towards him. She had wrapped a shawl around her, which covered her head, with its curling wealth of dark hair. Jack's heart glowed as he took her hands in his, and looked down into the sweet upturned face, with its soft brown eyes, dainty nose, and wooing lips. He would have spoken but she hushed him.

'Not here,' she said in a whisper, drawing him gently away from the house. They went down to the edge of the Burn, picked their way across its bubbling shallows on the red sandstone stepping-stones, and ascended the opposite bank, where the sandy track, with its deep wheel-ruts, leads to the Quarry. They followed it and came to the Quarry Knowe, where the broom grows bonnily. Here they sat down and Jack poured into her ears, in a rush of broken whispers, all the gratitude which surged to his lips. 'It was nothing,' protested Jessie. 'I only did it because I could not help myself.'

'And I have come here to you because I could not help myself. Why? Because I love you—love you. And you also could not help yourself—because you love me. I understand it all, Jessie. I read your heart from my own.'

'Oh, don't, don't. I told you before that it is too late, too late.'

'It is not too late, it is never too late, while we live,' replied Jack, 'and you had no right to save my life, if you are only going to make it miserable.'

'Oh, you do not know what you are saying,' answered Jessie tremulously.

'Forgive me, dearest, dearest,'—and he drew her hands tenderly in his—'but I am mad with love of you. I can't go on like this. My life, the life you have given to me, is worth nothing to me without you. You are cruel, cruel.' She drew her hands away and covered her face with them. His heart told him that she was relenting. His arm stole round her, and she made no movement to release herself. He drew her gently towards him, and she let her head sink on to his shoulder. There was a long silence between them, and then it was Jessie who spoke.

'You called me cruel,' she said, 'cruel. And I only wish to save you from yourself—and me.'

'I do not understand, and I told you already that I do not wish to understand.'

'But there is something you must know, and then—then you will go away and leave me alone. It will be better so, dearest, for both our sakes.'

There was a pathetic wistfulness in her tones, and she still let her head recline upon his shoulder, hungry to enjoy the sweet comfort of the love she was steeling her heart to renunciate.

‘What is the use of all this mystery, Jessie?’ he asked, a little wearily. ‘Why cannot you be to me as other women are to the men they love?’

Something in his words seemed to sting her, for she drew away abruptly and sat erect.

‘Because,’ she said, slowly and sadly, ‘they bring joy wi’ them, and I could bring you naething but sorrow.’

‘Sorrow?’

‘Ay, sorrow, an’— an’ if you will hae it—disgrace.’

‘Sorrow and disgrace I can endure, and endure cheerfully; if I have only you and your love.’

‘No’ the kind o’ disgrace that I’m thinkin’ o’. It’s a disgrace I could only expect one man to thole wi’ me, an’ he has a wife noo o’ his ain.’

Jack started as if he had been struck. In his wildest imaginings he would never have insulted her by thinking of this—this! There was dead silence between them, broken only by the murmur of the burn tumbling down the Quarry braes, and the strong throbbing of two straining hearts. Jessie rose.

‘I’LLgang noo,’ she said.

Jack sprung to his feet, pressed to her side, and put his arms tenderly about her .

‘My poor lassie,’ he wliispered, ‘yah will need me more than ever.’

She looked up into his face, in the starlit dusk, with worship in her eyes .

‘You can still love me a little?’ And for answer he kissed her.

‘I’ll gang noo,’ she said.

Jack sprung to his feet, pressed to her side, and put his arms tenderly about her.

‘My poor lassie,’ he whispered, ‘you will need me more than ever.’

She looked up into his face, in the starlit dusk, with worship in her eyes.

‘You can still love me a little?’ And for answer he kissed her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE Vale of Lennox was in an eminently serious mood, for ill news had travelled fast, as usual. The ruin caused by the fire in Fordingfield Works proved to be more disastrous and complete than that which the blackened and roofless walls marked. The fire, indeed, had not only brought Mr. Stevenson's affairs to a crisis and hastened the impending crash, but it had made the collapse even more hopelessly desperate than it was bound to have been. It speedily transpired that the insurance on the Works had been allowed to lapse, and Jack, forced to set himself to examine the affairs of the firm, and harassed by the claims of alarmed and anxious creditors, found to his dismay that the dark hints of his father had been far from exaggerating the complete and absolute ruin in which he had involved himself. Nor were signs wanting, such as his failure to renew the insurance, within a recent date, that Mr. Stevenson, probably dismayed by his knowledge of the situation, had lost his head, and allowed matters to drift helplessly from bad to worse. There was not a doubt of it; Jack was driven to acknowledge it; his father, wrecked in body and mind, was bankrupt of purse and commercial reputation. It was an ugly truth to have to recognise, and all the more so because of the suffering and hardship which it brought in its train upon others. Upon the workers the blow fell with exceptional severity, for to them it meant the loss of bread, and held out to them no hope that energy and capital would triumph over the ravages of the fire and win employment for them once more within the old walls. Upon the creditors it descended with a shock proportioned to their claims and means, but upon no one did it fall with more stunning effect than upon Mr. Gordon. The news was sent to him by Mr. Graham, his lawyer, and reached him on the continent, from which it brought him home in hot haste, along with his wife, his daughter, and his son-in-law—the Rev. Alexander MacGrigor. There was not the least doubt, he speedily ascertained, that every penny he had invested in Mr. Stevenson's hands had utterly vanished, and that his resources would henceforth be severely crippled. It meant that he had to dispose of his estate and new mansion, which he gave instructions to Mr. Graham to put into the market at once. Mrs. Gordon accepted the situation with admirable patience and courage, but Alice—now Mrs. MacGrigor—was exceedingly ill-tempered and outspoken concerning what she called, 'the swindling dishonesty of that man Stevenson.' She was cross with everything and everybody—her husband included. In their absence the Manse had been re-furnished and re-decorated under Mr. Graham's supervision, at Mr. Gordon's expense, which was a gift to his daughter and son-in-law, along with a handsome cheque. But she found fault with this and quarrelled with that, and kept nagging, with bitter tongue, at old Janet and the

spruce young maid who had been engaged to assist the old housekeeper. Altogether, the minister's home-coming from his interrupted honeymoon was a dispiriting and unsatisfactory one. His fine marriage was not, after all, to be the success, from a worldly point of view, which he had fondly anticipated, and even already he had grave reasons for doubting if he had found true love in the woman he had wed for better or worse. Moreover, his return to the Vale, and more particularly to the Manse, brought with it a return to the past, which was linked so abhorrently to a possibility which he feared to face, but which distance and change had enabled him almost to forget

As for Jessie Anderson, she heard that Mr. MacGrigor had brought home his wife to the Manse—as who did not hear in that perfect whispering—gallery, the Vale of Lennox?—but it affected her little, because, for one thing, her attention was almost wholly devoted in one direction.

'We must get married quietly at the earliest possible moment,' Jack had said to her ere they parted on the night when she had unveiled her secret to him on the Quarry Knowe. 'Promise me,' he had urged, as she refused to utter her consent because of the true love she bore him, '—promise me.' 'I have sinned against myself,' she had pleaded, 'but do not, if you love me, force me to sin against you.' And he had only repeated in his deaf, unreasoning way, 'promise me, promise me.'

So at last she had yielded, having taken from him a pledge that if he changed his mind within seven days he would tell her and let her go her own way. In her heart she hoped, and also feared, that when he came to think calmly of what she had that night told him, he would repent him of his eager words.

The seven days had gone, during which she had not seen him once, which was not strange, seeing that the works were closed and he was immersed in the dismal affairs of his father, neither had she heard from him. But the eighth day had brought a letter from him, saying that he had in no way altered his mind, but held her to her promise, and as soon as his father's affairs were wound up, would marry her. He had hoped, he explained, to take her abroad, where they could begin life anew together. But the condition of his father's health and the difficulties in which the ruin of the business had involved him would prevent this. However, he had secured a situation in one of the Turkey-red dyeing works in the Vale, and as soon as he was free to go to it they could marry quietly, and go into lodgings, at the outset at least.

Jack's unselfish devotion and utter indifference to all considerations save to succour her and shield her with his love, touched Jessie beyond anything her life had yet experienced, and a big resolve shaped itself in her mind. He had loved her for herself alone, loved her in spite of her shame. She thanked Heaven that the

secret of her legacy had been kept, and resolved to devote it to the repairing of his position.

Thus it was that Jack received, to his surprise, a message conveyed by Dan, and which, instead of replying in any way to his letter, asked him to meet Jessie next day at Mr. Wilson's office in Kilrockton. But the surprise caused by the receipt of the message was as nothing to that which he experienced when he kept his appointment at Mr. Wilson's office. He found Jessie already arrived and closeted with the lawyer. When he was admitted to the private room, and had Jessie's prospects and proposals placed before him by Mr. Wilson, he doubted at first if he could believe the evidence of his own ears. 'Miss Anderson,' explained the lawyer drily, sitting back in his chair, and watching Jack keenly, 'some little time ago, came into a large fortune, a fact which, for reasons I cannot pretend to understand, she insisted should be kept quite private. She has now chosen, also for reasons of her own, which she has this time explained, that you should be made aware of her circumstances. Further, she tells me that you desire to marry her, and I should like to add on my own behalf, Mr. Stevenson, that I think you are a wise as well as a fortunate man. But on the day that you marry her, and this is the point she wishes me to make specially clear, the fortune she has inherited becomes yours—with the exception of a portion she will set aside for her family—on the understanding that at no time is any of it to be devoted, directly or indirectly, to the liquidation of the liabilities of your father. I have made myself clear, Mr. Stevenson?'

'Perfectly,' answered Jack thoughtfully, in a manner which suggested that instead of having grasped the situation he was completely unable to comprehend it.

'Well, then,'—the lawyer was proceeding, when Jack straightened himself up in his chair and interrupted him.

'You mean,' he asked, 'that Jessie—that is, Miss Anderson, has told you to say all this? There is no mistake?'

'I have told you precisely what Miss Anderson gave me to understand were her wishes, although of course the phraseology is my own. If I have misinterpreted your instructions, Miss Anderson, you will, correct me,'—and he turned to her.

'You have said exactly what I wished,' she replied.

'I—I can hardly realise yet what it all means, said Jack, looking from the one to the other.

'You will realise it in good time,' commented Mr. Wilson in his matter-of-fact, legal manner; 'and there are various preliminaries which will help you to do

so. For example, before the money can be secured, there are certain formalities to be gone through with the San Francisco solicitors of Miss Anderson's late uncle, who bequeathed to her the fortune in question, and which can be most simply done by her in San Francisco——'

'You mean that she should travel to California?'

'Most certainly I mean so, unless you can suggest any other way of getting to San Francisco.'

'It is a long way,'

'I believe so.'

'You do not propose that she should go alone?'

'I propose nothing. But it has been suggested'—Jessie blushed—'that it would make a delightful honeymoon trip,' Jack began to brighten up, but grew pensive next moment with an idea that struck him.

'But such a trip would cost a good deal of money, and I don't see how——'

'Very likely not. But that also has been thought of, I may tell you. I am so satisfied with the security that I will be glad to advance any money that is needed—not only for travelling, but other expenses. In fact, I offered to advance money recently to Miss Anderson, as she can tell you'—Jessie nodded—'but she refused, fortunately for you. For, otherwise, she would probably have left her work at once,' she would not, in that case, have been conveniently on the spot to save a certain gentleman's life upon a memorable occasion, and we might not be discussing the subject which interests us now.'

'I really don't know what to say, Mr. Wilson,' remarked Jack. 'I'm always an awful fool at expressing myself properly'—the lawyer smiled—'but all this comes on me so unexpectedly and it's such a big thing, too—and an extraordinary one—that you've put me in a regular hole for words. Of course, Jessie will understand how grateful I am for her confidence'—he looked towards her, and she smilingly nodded an eager response—'but I don't want to take the money. I would like, that is if she wouldn't mind, and if it can be arranged, that I should be nothing more, in regard to the money, than a kind of well, I suppose a kind of trustee.'

'It can be arranged easily enough, no doubt,' replied Mr. Wilson. 'But that is a matter for you and Miss Anderson to settle between yourselves.'

'You haven't told Mr. Stevenson about my father,' Jessie ventured to remind the lawyer .

‘Quite right, Miss Anderson, but I was just coming to him. Miss Anderson’s father,’ continued Mr. Wilson, turning to Jack, ‘we have learned from his late brother’s lawyers, is, or very recently was, in California. Part of her business in going to America would be to see her father, if possible, and arrange for his being joined there by his wife and family, excepting his eldest daughter, who will by that time, I understand,’ said the lawyer, with a twinkle in his eyes, ‘have a husband with a first claim upon her.’

‘You have got it worked out admirably between you,’ observed, Jack, who was rapidly recovering from the stun of his first surprise, and whose mind was now quick to perceive the advantages of these further proposals.

It was arranged before they left the lawyer’s office, that Jack and Mr. Wilson should transact between them any further business that was necessary before Jessie’s marriage, and her departure (with her husband) upon their American trip. Jack’s visits to Mr. Wilson were more frequent than he had anticipated they would require to be. It was Mr. Wilson who undertook to see Mr. Stevenson’s affairs attended to and wound up in his son’s absence; it was he who arranged the preliminaries for the marriage at a registrar’s office in town; it was he who put into Jack’s hands all the threads of the business which had to be carried through in the States. These were busy and crowded days for Jessie as well as Jack. She had to pay several visits to town, in connection with her outfit, her scanty wardrobe being ridiculously unequal to the occasion. Of course, these things could not be done in secret, and, hurried as the preparations were, the Vale soon knew all about it, and it paid to Jack and the girl of his choice the compliment of popularity, forbearing to criticise their proceedings with gossiping malice.

One thing alone really worried Jack, and that was the prospect of leaving his father in his helpless condition. But Mr. Stevenson rallied wonderfully under Dr. Connell’s care, and although it was considered unwise to excite him by telling him all, he was told enough to make him happy in the thought that his son’s future was assured; while the story of Jessie’s heroism had so filled him with admiration, that the only doubt he now expressed was whether Jack was quite worthy of her. A solution of the difficulty of caring for Mr. Stevenson was at length found by Jessie’s wit. It was arranged that Dan—who was now, of course, out of work, and who had developed during the last few months, under the stress of circumstances, remarkable reliability and steadiness—should go over to live in Firbank and attend upon Mr. Stevenson.

Swiftly the days went past, and brought the morning when Jessie had to part with her mother and the little ones, to whom she had given so much of her love and care. Mrs. Anderson and Jessie were deeply affected, while little Katey, with a better excuse than usual, cried lustily, with a chorus of the younger ones that was feeble in comparison. Mrs. Anderson would fain have gone across to the

station, but Jessie dissuaded her, not a very difficult matter, now that her daughter had grown an important woman, able to assure her that Mr. Wilson would send her a weekly remittance.

Dan accompanied his sister, and they found it an awkward business to run the gauntlet of the good wives of the Burn, who stood in cackling groups at their doors, and were all fain to wish Jessie god-speed, in their rough, kind-hearted way. But Dan hurried her along, 'Never heed them, Jessie,' he whispered. 'Ye'll be late for the train if ye dinna hurry.'

He had all a youth's horror of 'scenes,' and was afraid that if his sister lingered, she would break down. It was a relief to him when they reached the foot of the Burn, but he found, to his great trouble, that the worst trial still waited them, 'For Tam Broon was standing at the kirkyard gate, and had to shake hands with Jessie and bid her good-bye.

'I wish ye weel, Jessie,' he said. 'Here's a bit weddin' present that'll help to keep ye in mind o' auld Tam when ye're awa'—and he slipped into her hand a tiny packet of white paper screwed tightly at each end. 'Noo, Dan, my man,' he said, as Jessie confusedly sought to thank him, 'push on wi' your sister or she'll be late for the train.'

So they left Tam. Jessie thrust the little packet into her pocket, and it was only some hours afterwards that she discovered Tam had given to her an old-fashioned gold ring, set with a big yellow stone, which had probably belonged to his mother or perhaps even to his grandmother.

This was only the beginning of the trials in the Main Street. For Mrs. Ferguson came running across the road from her close-mouth, proudly and loudly voluble, and could hardly be shaken off, while, as if by accident, quite a number of the girls who had formerly worked in Fordingfield met them, and had to be hurriedly shaken hands with. Then, leaning against the railings at the Brig-end, were Buffy Bob, Pate MacLean, wee Jamie Auld, and big Wull Ferguson, a worthy quartette, smoking their morning pipes. They shook hands with Jessie in a manner almost patronising, and which indicated that they had long foreseen her good-fortune, and had, indeed, greatly helped to bring it about.

'As sure as daith, ye'll mak' her late for the train,' said Dan, 'if ye haud her here. She'll be back again.'

'Ay,' answered Pate 'she'll be back, but she'll no' ken us. She'll be gentry then.'

'Blethers!' retorted Dan. 'Come on Jessie.'

They got to the station just in time, and met Jack at the door of the ticket-office, where he had been anxiously waiting for them. At Kifrockton, they were joined by Mr. Wilson, who accompanied them to town, where— thanks to the lawyers preparations—Jack and Jessie were married quietly and without a hitch. And that same night the newly-wedded couple sailed for New York. In the States they spent a long honeymoon, during which they must have travelled far, and had many interesting experiences. For they arranged the business with the solicitors in San Francisco, found John Anderson somewhere or other—the particulars of his finding, curiously enough, never were known in the Vale of Lennox—and having found him, they must have settled him in some business or other in San Francisco, since, before Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson's return, Mrs. Anderson was sent for to join her husband, along with her family, excepting Dan, who remained with old Mr. Stevenson at Firbank. But the most interesting experience of the young married people, during the twelve months or so which they were absent from home, was generally reckoned by the Vale of Lennox to have been the birth of their son, and it was remarked upon as a proof of the amazing forwardness of everything in the States that this baby-boy was prodigiously smart, and uncommonly intelligent for his months. There were various people, including old Janet, who had their own opinions on the subject, and were inclined to be free-spoken about the matter, but they were promptly set down by popular opinion as ill-natured and scurrilous persons, and their smouldering slander was extinguished by copious torrents of cold unbelief.

CHAPTER XXIX

‘WE haven’t called at Firbank since the Stevensons came back from America,’ said Mrs. MacGrigor to her husband one day as they sat together at lunch in the Manse dining-room. ‘Don’t you think we might do so this afternoon?’

‘No,’ said the minister curtly, ‘I don’t think so. Why should you want to call on them?’

‘Well, for one thing, I want to see how your old factory flame looks and acts now that she has become a lady.’

There was a sneer in her tone, which her husband, irritable as he had become since his disappointing marriage, affected not to notice.

‘I take it, from what you say, that you have something else in your mind, Alice,’ he remarked coldly.

‘Well, yes,’ she replied, ‘I want to see this marvellously precocious baby of theirs that Janet tells me about.’

‘If you wait till Sunday you’ll see it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I am going to baptize it.’

Mrs. MacGrigor looked up quickly at her husband, and was about to say something further when she saw that he had grown strangely pale. Even as she looked at him, a spasm of pain flitted across his face. His lips were tightened, and with a sudden involuntary motion of his hand to his heart, he lay back in his chair and breathed strangely. His wife was alarmed. She rose and went over to him. But he waved her impatiently away.

‘It is gone,’ he said softly, as if speaking to himself; ‘but I must see Connell about this.’

‘Hadn’t I better send for him now, dear?’

Dear! The word jarred curiously upon him just then. It was the first time she had called him so for months.

‘Send for him? No,’ he answered, rising, ‘you will not send for him till I ask you. I am going into the garden to get a little fresh air.’

Without waiting for her to reply he left the room.

No sooner was he gone than Mrs. MacGrigor rang the bell and ordered the maid to clear away the table. She gave vent to her annoyance by finding fault with the girl for being slovenly and untidy.

‘I tell ye what it is,’ said the girl in the kitchen a little later to Janet, ‘the maister an’ the mistress hae been at it again. She was alane when I went in, an’ he had gane oot o’ the room, leavin’ his plate hardly tasted, an’ she got her spite oot on me.’

‘That’s naething new,’ commented Janet grimly.

‘Of coorse it’s no’ new, but I’m no’ gaun to thole it muckle langer.’

‘An’ that’s naething new either,’ remarked Janet.

‘Mebbe no. But I mean it this time,’ said the girl, nettled at the truth of Janet’s remark.

‘We’ll see.’

‘Ay, ye’ll see.’

The atmosphere of bickering discontent within the Manse was in strange contrast to the environment of Mr. Jack Stevenson’s home. He had settled down for the present, with his wife and the baby, at Firbank, to which old Mr. Stevenson, now largely recovered from his paralytic seizure, although he would never again be fit for business—had given them a cordial and fatherly welcome, in the happy belief that the house had somehow been saved for him out of the wreck of his business. As a matter of fact, it had been purchased with his daughter-in-law’s money. Dan, who had become as a son to the old man during his own son’s absence in America, had got placed in the laboratory of Dungarvel Works, and already gave promise of becoming an able chemist.

Jack was only waiting his opportunity to secure for himself a partnership in Dungarvel, for he declared that he would not live a life of idleness on his wife’s fortune, while she insisted that in the event of his resuming business he must make use of the advantages which the command of her money gave him.

Old Mr. Stevenson displayed an almost idolatrous love for the baby, and sometimes marvelled to himself that Jack did not appear to regard this firstborn with the effusive admiration of a doting parent. He had complained once, indeed, to his daughter-in-law, to whom he gave many confidences in his new and feebly garrulous way, that Jack might, display a little more affection for his baby-boy. Jessie had given him a curious look—the old man almost fancied for a moment that there was pain in it—before replying.

‘I’m sure Jack loves the boy as much as he possibly can,’ she had said. ‘He thinks more than he says.’

And she had thought to herself then, with a brooding intensity which had never come to her before, of the generous silence which her husband had not once broken. She kissed him with more than wonted tenderness that night when they were alone in their bed-room, and was startled when he spoke to her, for it almost seemed to her that he had read her thoughts.

‘I met Mr. MacGrigor this afternoon,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she answered, with fluttering heart

‘And I have arranged with him to baptize the baby next Sunday.’

‘With him!’ she said, with a surprise which she could not hide.

‘Yes. You are not angry?’

‘Angry? No.’

‘I am glad, because—but you are crying, Jessie,’—and he laid his hand caressingly upon her shoulder.

‘It is nothing,’ she replied softly. ‘Only you have been so kind.’

In her heart she kept wondering what had passed between the minister and her husband.

But this she was never to know, for Jack never referred to it again.

‘And what is to be the name of the boy?’ asked old Mr. Stevenson when Jessie told him that the baby was to be christened at the Parish Kirk next Sunday.

Strangely enough she had never thought of this, and the question confused her.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered ‘unless he is to be called after you, grandfather. But Jack will settle it himself, I suppose.’

The thought woke in the old man a kind of childish vanity, and he could not rest until he had asked Jack himself what name he was going to give the baby. Jack laughed, and bade his father have patience. There was quite time enough to fix upon a name, he said, and after all, what was there in a name.

When Sunday came, and Jack—who had been unusually silent all the morning—had departed for church, his father remembered that he had not heard a word about the baby’s name. He mentioned the matter, rather querulously, to Jessie before she followed her husband to church, accompanied by the nurse, who carried the baby. But Jessie knew no more than when he had spoken to her before.

There was a large congregation in Browhill Church that Sunday forenoon, which was destined to be memorable in the annals of the parish. Mr. MacGrigor, it was remembered afterwards, appeared to be nervous and unwell from the moment he entered the pulpit, and during his sermon he was observed to glance once or twice, almost as if appealing for sympathy, to the Manse pew, where his wife sat alone, erect and self-centred.

When the point in the service was reached where the rite of baptism was to be performed, there was a rustle throughout the congregation as Mr. Jack Stevenson rose from his pew and walked to the front of the pulpit. Almost simultaneously, Tam Broon walked down the opposite passage, closely followed by Mrs. Stevenson, carrying her baby, and showed her to a seat immediately behind where her husband was standing.

Mr. MacGrigor stood up in the pulpit and leant forward, looking pale and worried, and steadied himself by grasping with both hands the great Bible lying on the crimson cushion in front of him. The minister had the reputation in the Vale of 'laying the vows' upon the parents very strictly, and of doing so in singularly beautiful and chaste language. But to-day, he stumbled through his address with halting and hesitation, and finally, cutting it short, engaged briefly in prayer, and descended the pulpit-stairs to the baptismal-basin.

Mr. Jack Stevenson stepped forward, and handed the minister a small piece of folded paper, upon the inside of which the baby's name was written. Then he turned to take the child from its mother and hold it in his arms to be christened. The minister opened the paper and read the name inscribed there. It was enough. It told him, in a flash, that Jack Stevenson's silence had not been that of ignorance but of love for Jessie. The paper fell from the minister's hand and fluttered to his feet. He moistened his dry lips with the tip of his tremulous tongue, and faced the congregation with a straining heart and quivering nerves. His head swam, and a blinding mist obscured his eyes. Suddenly he became conscious that a breathless hush had fallen throughout the church, and knew that Jack Stevenson was standing before him with the baby in his arms. Struggling desperately to retain his self-control, he put forth his hand, dipped his fingers in the baptismal water, and began the brief formula which he was accustomed to conclude with the sacred sprinkling.

'I baptize thee—in the name—of—the Father—the—the—' and there he broke down pitifully. As on the day in the Manse with his wife, a spasm of anguish flitted across his face. With a subdued cry of pain, he clutched convulsively at his breast and gasped for breath. He staggered forward, and before Jack, encumbered as he was with the baby, could stretch out a hand to save him, he had fallen at Jessie's feet. A woman's piercing scream rang through the

church. Mrs. MacGrigor rose from her seat and rushed to her husband's help. But Tam Broon was before her.

'Keep her back, Mr. Stevenson,' he whispered to Jack, 'for God's sake.' Jack handed the baby to Jessie, who was sorely agitated, and bade her wait for him at the door.

'I must speak to him,' Mrs. MacGrigor urged piteously, as Jack gently withheld her from her husband, while strong kindly hands bore him from the house of God. 'Oh, let me speak to him, let me speak to him.'

She knew not that his ears had grown deaf for ever, that his voice had faded into the eternal silence, and that he had passed to where neither mortal love can comfort nor mortal censure vex.

In the excitement no one observed Jack pick up the little piece of paper which had fallen from the minister's hand. He slipped it into his pocket, and late that night, when he was alone, he took it out and glanced at the name upon it—'Alexander MacGrigor.' He put it carefully in the fire and watched it burn into nothingness.

'The boy shall take my father's name,' he said to himself, 'for the old man loves him.'

And he himself grew to love the little lad, whose likeness to his mother and whose winning ways made him evermore dearer to him. It was well. Because, save for the boy, the home would have been childless.