

FICTION

Flora Annie Steel

Red Rowans

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

RED ROWANS

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BY

MRS. F. A. STEEL

AUTHOR OF "MISS STUART'S LEGACY," ETC.

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EPILOGUE

RED ROWANS: A LOVE STORY.

PROLOGUE.

"Love took up the Harp of Life and smote the Chord of Self"

"Am I really like yon?"

A small brown hand pointed peremptorily to a finished drawing on a sketcher's easel hard by, and a pair of blue eyes frowned somewhat imperiously at a young man, who, with one knee on the ground, was busily searching in the long grass for a missing brush, while palette and colours lay beside him ready to be packed up. The frown, however, was lost on the back of his head, for he gave a decisive denial, without turning round to look at the questioner.

The girl's eyes shifted once more to the drawing, and an odd, wistful curiosity came to her face as she took a step nearer to the easel. What she saw there was really rather a clever study of herself as she had been standing a few moments before, erect, yet with a kind of caress towards the branch full of scarlet rowan berries, which one round firm arm bent down from the tree above, against her glowing face. There was a certain strength in the treatment; the artist had caught something of the glorious richness of colouring in the figure and its background, but the subject had been too much for him, and he admitted it frankly. In truth, it would have needed a great painter to have done Jeanie Duncan justice as she stood under the rowan tree that autumn evening, and Paul Macleod was at best but a dabbler in art. Still, it was a truthful likeness, though the nameless charm which belongs to one face and not to another of equal beauty of form--in other words, the mysterious power of attraction--had escaped pencil and brush. There was nothing spiritual in this charm; it was simply the power which physical beauty has sometimes to move the imagination--almost the spiritual nature of men; and, such as it was, it breathed from every curve of Jeanie Duncan's face and form. She was very young, not more than seventeen at the most, and, as yet, in that remote Highland glen, where every girl, regardless of her appearance, had a jo, the pre-eminence of her own good looks had never dawned upon her. So there was no mock humility in the words which followed on rather a long pause.

"I'll no be sae bonnie, I'm thinking."

Something in her tone struck through even her companion's absorption; for Paul Macleod was given to forgetting his world over trivialities. He looked up sharply, rose hastily, stepped across to where she stood, and laid his hand on her shoulder in easy familiarity.

"Why, Jeanie, what's the matter now?"

She moved away impatiently from his touch, and, as if from habit, her arm, showing white under the russet bedgown she wore, went up to the branch above her head. And there she stood once more with the ripe red berries against her ripe red lips.

"I'm sayin' I'll no be sae bonnie as yon."

"Your eyes are not quite so blue, certainly; your cheeks not quite so pink, your hair not quite so golden, nor your--
--"

"That's enough, sir; ye needn't fash yourself more. I'm no for sale by public roup. I was sayin' myself that I'll no be near sae bonnie as yon."

The rowan berries were being viciously stripped from their stems, and allowed to fall in a defiant patter on the ground; yet there were audible tears in the young voice.

"You little goose! I didn't know you were so vain, Jeanie," he began.

"I'm no vain," she interrupted, sharply. "It's no that, Mr. Paul. I dinna care--at least no much--but if a lassie's bonnie----" she paused suddenly and let the branch go. It swung back, sending a red shower of overripe berries pattering round the girl and the man.

"Well, Jeanie! If a lassie's bonnie?" repeated Paul Macleod, watching the rapid changes in her vivid face with amused admiration; "if a lassie's bonnie, what happens?"

She confronted him with a certain dignity new to his experience of her.

"Ye ken fine, Mr. Paul, the difference it makes to a lassie if she is real bonnie. Wasn't it yourself was liting the 'Beggair-Maid' at me the morn?"

"Gracious Heavens, Jeanie! Ambitious as well! On which of the crowned heads of Europe have you set your young affections? Tell me, that I may kill him!"

His arm slipped easily to her waist, and he bent to look in the face which fell as it were before his touch. Yet it was paler than it had been; for Jeanie Duncan neither giggled nor blushed.

"It's no matter where I set my heart," she said, curtly, "when I'm no bonnie."

"Who said so? Not I," he remarked, coolly.

"You said my eyes were no sae blue, my lips no sae red, my hair----"

"Thank heaven they're not! Why, Jeanie! You must surely know that you are a thousand times more beautiful than that--that chromo-lithograph over there, which is only fit for a second-class Christmas number or an undergraduate's room!"

She withdrew herself from his arm, looking at him doubtfully, ready to flare up in an instant.

"You're no pokin' fun at me?"

"Poking fun! Why"--his voice deepened suddenly, he stretched his hand towards her again--"you are simply the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

There was no mistaking the ring of reality in his tone, and yet there was nothing emotional about it. He seemed to be asserting the fact as much for his own benefit as for hers; and she also was lost in herself, in her own eagerness, as she looked again at the portrait.

"But it's real bonnie, Mr. Paul! Will it be as bonnie as the Beggair-Maid?"

"Still harping upon kings!" he said, coming back to her lightly. "Take my advice, Jeanie, and be content with commoners."

"But if I'm no content?"

"Uneasy lies the head! Don't you remember my reading that to you the other day?"

She flashed round on him in an instant, superb in her quick response, her quick resentment.

"I mind mony a thing ye've read, mony a thing ye've said, mony a thing ye've done. I've a deal to mind; too much, may be."

It came as a shock to Paul Macleod. For his heart had, as yet, an uncomfortable knack of acknowledging the truth. His head, however, came to the rescue as usual, by swift denial that those long days spent in painting Jeanie's portrait

under the rowan tree were hardly wise.

"One can't have too much of a good thing, and it has been pleasant, hasn't it?"

"Mither says it's bin a sair waste o' time," replied the girl, evasively.

"I haven't wasted mine," retorted the young man airily. "Just look at that masterpiece! And I've been as good as a quarter's schooling to you, little one; think of the information I've imparted to my model, the books I've lent, the--the things I've taught----"

"Aye. You've taught me a deal. I ken that fine."

He gave an impatient toss of his head as he turned away to pack up his belongings; the girl helping him silently as if accustomed to the task.

Not a soul was in sight, though a wreath of blue peat smoke behind a neighbouring clump of firs showed the near presence of a cottage. Save for this one sign there was no trace of humanity in the scene except those two in the foreground; both in their way types of youth, health, and beauty--of physical nature at its best. But the solitude was not silent. A breeze coming up with sunset rustled the rowan leaves, and surged among the silver firs, in echo, as it were, to the long hush of distant breakers on a rocky shore which came rhythmically to mingle with the nearer rush of the burns streaking the hillside; while far and near the air was filled with the wailing cry of lambs newly separated from the ewes; most melancholy and depressing of all sounds, especially when the sadness of coming night settles over earth and sky, sending the shadows to creep up the hillsides and drive the sunshine before their purple battalions. A veritable battle, this, of assault and defence; each point of vantage, each knoll held by the besieged until, surrounded by the enemy, the sunlight dies by inches, gallantly, hopelessly, and the struggle begins again higher up.

The girl and boy--for Paul Macleod was still in the early twenties--felt oppressed by their surroundings, and after the manner of youthful humanity they resented a feeling which had no foundation in themselves. Were they not happy, alive to the uttermost, ready to face the unknown, eager for the experience which the world seemed to find so dreary? Why should they be saddened by things which were not as *they* were; which had had their day, or did not care to have it?

"Come with me as far as the gate, Jeanie," he said, impatiently. "Ah! I know you don't generally, but you might to-day. Then you can lock it. If any of old Mackenzie's lambs were to get through to their mothers he would lay the blame on you."

"Why not to you, Mr. Paul?"

He laughed rather contemptuously. "Because the road leads to your croft, not mine; besides, no one ever lays blame to me. I never get into trouble, somehow. I have all the luck that way, it seems, while my brother--who is really no worse, I suppose--is always in hot water. I never saw such a fellow."

"They're saying," began Jeanie--half to cover the fact that she had taken the first step down the sheep track--"that the laird----" she stopped abruptly and looked furtively at her companion.

"You may as well tell me what they are saying, Jeanie," he remarked, coolly. "You always have to in the end, you know, and so there is no use in making a fuss."

She was not a girl to be at every one's command, but sooner or later most women find it pleasant to be under orders, for a time, at any rate; doubtless as the result of that past slavery of which we hear so much nowadays. The feeling will be eradicated in the next generation or so, but it must be allowed for in this.

"They're sayin' Gleneira will have to sell the place, and"--she looked at the face beside her critically, as if to judge how far she might go--"they're sayin' it's a pity you were no the laird, Mr. Paul, for you love every stick and stone about, and he is never coming near it at all, at all."

The young man walked on in silence.

"Did ye know that I've never seen the laird, Mr. Paul, though me an' mither has lived at the croft since I can mind anything; but, then, she is no going down the strath, and he is no carin' for the fishin', as you are; you're knowin' every stone in the river, I'm thinkin'."

He turned to her with a quick laugh as if to dismiss the subject. "And every face beside it; for I like pretty things, and some of them are pretty. I'll tell you what it is, Jeanie, Gleneira's the most beautiful place I ever saw; and you are the most beautiful girl in it. Beggar-Maids haven't a chance, so I shall expect to be invited to your nuptials with King Cophetua; a poor laird's Jock like myself can't compete with a crowned head." The bitterness of his tone had more to do with the prospect of having to let Gleneira go, than to the manifest difficulty of appropriating Jeanie Duncan without offending his head or her heart.

"There's better worth having than crowns, maybe," said the girl, doggedly.

"Right! crowned heads may be penniless; let us say an old monarch wi' siller."

"There's better worth having than siller, maybe."

Paul looked at her curiously. Apparently it was not for nothing that he had amused his sitter by reciting the almost endless repertoire of old ballads and songs in which he had taken delight since his earliest boyhood. For it was part of his rather complex nature that he should admire the romance and sentiment in which, with the easily adopted cynicism of a clever lad, he professed to disbelieve. It suited him as a refuge from himself; and yet the fact that Jeanie Duncan had accepted this admiration as a proof of eternal truth did not displease him.

"Better worth than siller!" he echoed, wilfully provoking the answer which he knew would come. "Why! there is nothing better worth than siller--in the end."

"Aye, there is," she put in confidently, "there's love. You've tell't me the sang, many a time;--It's love that gar's the world gang round."

Was it? They stood at the gate together, she holding it open for him to pass, and the question came upon him suddenly. The old question which comes to most men. Was it worth it? Should he, or should he not, go the commonplace way of the world, and take what he could get? Yes, if he could take it without bringing something into his life for ever, which in all human probability he would not care to keep--*for ever*. Even memory was a tie; and yet--his heart beat quicker, and the knowledge that passion was beginning to disturb the balance of his reason came home to him, bringing with it the same quick denial with which he had met his own doubt as to the wisdom of the past. It was his way of defending the emotional side of his nature.

"Take care, Jeanie!" he said, seizing on the first commonplace detail which met his eye, "that gate is newly tarred; you'll dirty your hands."

For the first time the girl challenged him deliberately.

"I'm no carin'," she said defiantly, "my hands is used to dirt. I'm not like you. It'll no hurt me."

She closed the gate behind him sturdily, fastening the padlock, and then without another word turned to go. In so doing she roused in an instant all his obstinacy, all the imperious contrariety which would not tolerate the decision of another, even though it tallied with his own.

"Are you going without saying good-bye, Jeanie? That's rude," he began, stretching his hand over the gate, and once more wilfully provoking a situation. "Nonsense! The least you can do is to shake hands, and say thank you for all the benefits----"

He paused, and the next instant had vaulted over the gate and was kissing away her tears and calling everything to witness that he had not meant to be unkind, that she was the dearest little girl in creation. Both of which assertions were absolutely true to him at the time; she had looked too bewilderingly sweet in her sudden burst of grief for prudence.

For the next half-hour, if there be another motive power besides Love behind the veiled mystery of Life bidding the world go round, these two young people did not trouble themselves about it. The descending mists crept down to meet the shadows, the shadows crept up to meet the mists, but sea and sky and land were full of light for the boy and girl absorbed in the vast selfishness of passion. So lost in the glamour with which the great snare for youth and freedom is gilded, that neither of them thought at all of the probable ending to such a fair beginning. Jeanie, because to her this new emotion was something divine; Paul, because her estimate of it aided a certain fastidiousness which, in the absence of better motives, had served hitherto to keep him fairly straight. So, in a measure, the idyllic beauty of the position as they sate, side by side on a lichen-covered stone looking into each other's eyes, and supremely satisfied

with each other's appearance, served to make Paul Macleod's professions more passionate than they would have been had she been less innocent.

It was not until with a wrench he had acknowledged that it really was time for her to be going home, and he was striding down the road alone, that a chill came over him with the question--

"Que diable allait il faire dans cette galere?"

It was one which, like a floating log after the rapids are past, always came to the surface of Paul Macleod's life when the turmoil of emotion was over. This time it brought an unpleasant surprise with it, for to tell truth he had imagined himself secure against assault. He had considered the situation calmly; had, so to speak, played with it, asserting his power of evading its natural consequences if he chose, of accepting them if he considered it worth while. And now, with his heart still beating, his face still flushed, and with Jeanie's kisses still tingling on his lips, it was no use denying that he had been taken by storm. And it annoyed him. Suddenly the thought that it was just the sort of scrape his brother would have fallen into came to enhance the odd contempt which Paul Macleod's head always had for his heart. The certainty, however, that he shared that brother's extremely emotional nature was so unwelcome that it served for a time to strengthen him in denial of his own weakness of will. After all, impulse was the essence of passion. Had he not, recognising this, voluntarily bade reason and prudence step aside. Would not any man have been a fool to think twice of the future with Jeanie Duncan's face ready to be kissed? It was worth something; in a way it was worth all the rest of the world put together. So the serio-comedy might have ended as such serio-comedies usually do but for the merest triviality; nothing more nor less than the perception that he had tarred his hands in vaulting over the gate! The offending stains sobered him, as no advice, no reasoning, no reproof, could have done. To begin with, there was no possibility of denying to himself that, be Love what it may, he, Paul Macleod, would never in a calm moment of volition have dirtied his hands in that fashion. He hated to be touched or soiled by common things, without, as it were, a "by your leave." Then there was a prophetic tinge in the consequences of his setting barriers at defiance which appealed to his imagination. After all, would it be worth while to carry about for the rest of your life an indelible mark of a past pleasure, which could scarcely fail to become a disagreeable reminiscence, no matter what was the *denouement* of the present situation? Marriage? Hardly that. Not only was he too poor to marry for love, but was it by any means certain that such love as this was worth the sacrifice of freedom. On the other hand, the only possible alternative was, to begin with, such shocking bad form. The Macleods of Gleneira had always kept straight in Gleneira itself. Besides, if he harmed the girl in any way, he knew perfectly well that the regret would be a tie to him all his life. That was the worst of having an imagination. Other men might do it; he could not, if only for his own sake. Then there was Jeanie, to think of poor little Jeanie, who didn't even grasp the fact that she was in danger--who would----

Ah! Was it worth while? The question came back insistently, as, with a plentiful supply of the salt butter recommended by the housekeeper at Gleneira, he tried to get rid of the tar. He was no milksop, though he liked delicate surroundings, and found a certain refinement necessary to his comfort, but, if he had no objections to soiling his hands in obedience to his own sovereign will and pleasure, he was always eager to have them clean again. And so it was with his life.

Poor little Jeanie Duncan! She in her innocent self-abandonment would have welcomed anything which would have marked her as his indelibly. And yet a real regard for her prompted his calculations. If he had held her cheaper he would not have dreaded the remorse which would be a tie to him all his life. It never occurred to him that this squeamishness had come too late, or that the fine-weather flirtation had in itself done the mischief; that the injury to an innocent girl lies in the mind only.

"Tell Donald that I shall want the light cart at five to-morrow morning. I have to catch the Oban steamer," he said to the astonished housekeeper as he sate down to his solitary dinner; for he had come to Gleneira with the intention of spending long-leave in pottering about the old place with gun and rod.

So while Jeanie Duncan slept the sleep of perfect content, her lover drove past the cottage in the grey mist of a rainy autumn morning feeling intensely virtuous; and all the more so because his heart really ached, even at the sight of the tarred gate. And no doubt nine-tenths of the men he knew would have applauded his resolution in running away, patted him on the back, told him he was a very fine fellow, and said that but for his self-control the affair might have ended miserably. Perhaps they would have been right; though, as a matter of fact, Paul Macleod was running away from the natural consequence of his own actions.

Jeanie Duncan read his note of farewell with a scared white face. It was gentle, regretful, kindly, and it killed her belief in Love for ever. And unfortunately Love had not come to her in its sensual guise. It had represented to her all the Truth, and Goodness, and Beauty in the world. So she lost a good deal; and naturally enough a great restlessness

and desire for something to fill the empty space took possession of her. Finally, when Spring drew on, and the first broods were trying their wings, she--to use the phrase adopted by those who tired of life in the remote glens--"thought of service in Glasgow." Vague euphemism for much seeing of that unseen world beyond the hills.

But while Paul Macleod in his travels carried with him the consciousness of virtue, she had for memory the knowledge that she had been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Two very different legacies from the same past.

CHAPTER I.

Within the long, low cottage the black smoke-polished rafters rose in inky darkness above the rough whitewashed walls, and the mud floor showed the traces of past leaks in many a hill and hollow. The two tiny windows were set breathlessly agape, and through the open door a flood of hot bright sunshine threw a bar of mote-speckled light across the room, gilding the heads of the scholars who sat swinging their legs on the benches and sending a sort of reflected glint from the white wall up into the sombre shadow of the roof. Such was the Episcopal Grant-in-Aid School of Gleneira one July day, some ten years after Paul Macleod had driven down in the mist to catch the Oban steamer.

Without, was a pale, heat-blanching sky set in tall spectral-looking hills which had lost contour and individuality in a haze, blending rock and heather, grass and fern, hollows and heights, into one uniform tint of transparent blue. Between the mountains there was a little level growth of green corn flecked by yellow marigolds, white ox-eyes, and scarlet poppies; then a stretch of dusty road, ending in cool shadows of sycamore and pine, beside the school-house garden.

A wonderful garden this. Of Liliputian size, yet holding in its tiny clasp a specimen of almost every plant that grows and blows. Three potato haulms, four cabbages, a dozen onions, half a yard of peas; a tuft of parsley, two bronze-leaved beet-roots, a head of celery. This, flanked by a raspberry cane, a gooseberry bush, and supported by an edge of strawberry plants, constituted the kitchen garden. Beyond, in the trim box-edged border leading to the school-house door, were pansies, roses, geraniums, lilies, and peonies; every conceivable flower, each family represented by one solitary scion. Last, not least, the quaint drops of the *Dielytra*; which the children with awestruck voices call "The Bishop." For when you strip away the pink, sheathing petals, is there not inside a man in full white lawn sleeves? And is not a man in lawn sleeves a disturbing element in a remote Highland glen, where half the people are rigid Presbyterians? Here in this little garden the bees hum lazily and the butterflies come and go; sometimes one, misled by the stream of sunshine pouring through the open door, floats in among the yawning scholars, rousing them to momentary alertness and a faint wonder as to the ultimate fate of the wanderer; whether he will philosophically give up the enterprise or, foolishly persistent, lose himself amid the smoke-blackened rafters.

The passing interest, however, dies down again into the sleepy stolid indifference which is the outward and visible sign of that inward desire for freedom felt by each child in the school. No keen longing, but simply a dull wish to be out on the hillside, down by the burn, under the trees; anywhere away from catechisms, collects, or shoes and stockings. The last being the worst infliction of all to these wild little Highland colts accustomed for six days of the week to bare feet, since the coarse knitted hose and hobnailed boots belonging to the seventh are a direful aggravation of the tortures of Sunday school; while even the glorious gentility bestowed by a pair of side springs is but poor compensation for the discomfort to the wearer.

Perhaps that was the reason why each pair of legs on the benches swayed helplessly to the rhythm of a singularly unmelodious hymn which the scholars were singing, led by the master in a muffled nasal chant. The tune itself was old and quaint, having in its recurring semitones a barbaric monotony which a lighter phrase here and there showed was not so much due to the composition in itself as to its present interpreter. The words were still more quaint, forming a sort of Litany of the Prophets, with innumerable verses and many vain repetitions.

Nevertheless, it was an evident favourite with the children; partly, it may be hoped, from its own intrinsic merits, mostly, it is to be feared, from the startling novelties in Scripture history which it was capable of promulgating when, as in the present case, the schoolmaster was engaged in his secondary profession of postmaster.

As the tune rose and fell, there came every now and again a pause, so sudden, so absolute that a passer-by on the dusty road might well have asked himself if some direful catastrophe had not occurred. Nothing of the sort. A glance within would have shown him everything at its usual; the scholars in rows, from the kilted urchin of four--guiltless of English--to whom school is the art of sitting still, to the girl of fourteen, blissfully conscious of a new silk handkerchief and the admiration it excites in the bashful herd-boy on the opposite bench. In the corner, at a table with a slanting desk, the master was busy sorting the letters which Donald Post, as he is called, has just brought in; the latter meanwhile mopping his hot face and disburdening his bag of minor matters in the shape of tea, sugar, and bread, and himself of the budget of news he has accumulated during his fourteen-mile walk; in an undertone, however, for the hymn goes on.

"*Whair is noo' the pro-phet Dan'!*?" droned the master, followed by a wavering choir of childish trebles and gruff

hobbledehoy voices, "*Whair is noo' the pro-phet Dan'!*"

The exigencies of the tune necessitated a repetition of the momentous question again and yet again, the tune dying away into a pause, during which the master's attention wandered to a novel superscription on a letter. The children held their breath, the hum of the bees outside became audible, all nature seemed in suspense awaiting the answer.

"I'm thinking it will be from Ameriky," hazarded the master thoughtfully to Donald Post, and, the solution seeming satisfactory, he returned with increased energy to the triumphant refrain

"Safe intil the Pro-mised Land."

The children caught it up *con amore* with a vague feeling of relief. A terrible thing indeed, to Presbyterians or Episcopalians alike, if the Prophet Daniel had been left hanging between heaven and another place! So great a relief, that the gay progress of the tune and the saint was barely marred by the master's renewed interest in a postcard; which distraction led him into making an unwarrantable statement that--

"He went up in a fiery char-yot."

True, the elder pupils tittered a little over the assertion, but the young ones piped away contentedly, vociferously. The Promised Land once attained, the means were necessarily quite a secondary consideration; and mayhap to their simple imaginings a fiery chariot was preferable to the den of lions.

"*Where is noo' the twal A-postles?*" led off the master again, after a whispered remark to Donald Post, which provoked so interesting a reply that the fate of the twelve remained trembling in the balance long enough for the old refrain to startle the scholars from growing inattention.

"Safe intil the Promised Land."

The sound echoed up into the rafters. Truly a blessed relief to reach the haven after delays and difficulties.

"*They went through*"--began the master. But whether in orthodox fashion it would have been "*great tri-bu-lation*," or whether, on the principle of compensation, the den of lions would have been allowed twelve saints, will never be known. The mote-speckled beam of sunshine through the door was darkened by a slight girlish figure, the children hustled to their feet with much clatter of the unaccustomed boots and shoes, and the schoolmaster, drowning his last nasal note under a guilty cough, busied himself over a registered letter. For Miss Marjory Carmichael objected on principle to the Litany of the Prophets.

The rather imperious frown, struggling with an equally obstinate smile which showed on the newcomer's face, vanished at the sight of Donald Post.

"Any for me?" she asked eagerly. It was a charming voice, full of interest and totally devoid of anxiety. An acute ear would have told at once that life had as yet brought nothing to the speaker which would make post-time a delight or a dread. She had for instance no right to expect a love-letter or a dun; and her eagerness was but the desire of youth for something new, her expectancy only the girlish belief in something which must surely come with the coming years. For the rest, a winsome young lady with a pair of honest hazel eyes and honest walking boots.

"Deed no, Miss Marjory," replied the schoolmaster, selecting a thin envelope and holding it up shamelessly to the light--a bold stroke to divert attention from the greater offence of the hymn, "Forbye ain wi' the Glasky post-mark that will just be ain o' they weary circulars, for as ye may see for yoursel', Miss Marjory, the inside o't's leethographed."

"Thank you, Mr. McColl," said the girl, severely, as she took the letter, "but if you have no objection I should prefer finding out its contents in a more straightforward fashion."

"Surely! Surely!" Mr. McColl, having got a little more than he expected, gave another exculpatory cough, and looked round to Donald Post for moral support. Perhaps from a sense that he often needed a like kindness, this was an appeal which the latter never refused, and if he could not draw upon real reminiscence for a remark or anecdote bearing on the point, he never had any hesitation in giving an I. O. U. on fancy and so confounding his creditors. On the present occasion, however, he was taken at a disadvantage, being engaged in trying to conceal from Marjory's uncompromising eyes a bottle of whiskey which formed a contraband item in his bag; consequently he had only got as far as a preliminary murmur that "there wass a good mony wass liking to be reading their ain letters but that it wass James Macniven"--when the schoolmaster plucked up courage for further defence.

"Aye! Aye! 'tis but natur'l to sinfu' man to be liking his ain. Not that they circulars interestin' readin', even if a body is just set on learnin' like Miss Marjory. And I'm thinkin' it will only be from a wine mairchant likely. It's extraordinair' the number of circulars they'll be sending out; but the whiskey is a' the same. Bad, filthy stuff, what will give parral--y--ses to them that drinks it."

This second bid for favour, accompanied as it was by an unfortunate glance for support at Donald--who was struggling unsuccessfully with the neck of the black bottle--proved too much for Marjory's dignity, and the consequent smile encouraged Mr. McColl to go on, oblivious apparently of his last remark.

"And it's whiskey we shall all be wanting, and plenty of it, to drink the young laird's health. But I was forgetting you could scarcely have heard the news, Miss Marjory, since it is only coming in the post just now. It is the laird, Miss Marjory, that is to be home to-morrow by the boat!"

The girl forgot an incipient frown in sheer surprise. "Here! Captain Macleod?"

"Aye! it's the machine is to meet him at the ferry, the light cart for his traps, and the house to be ready." In his desire for importance Mr. McColl in the last words had given himself away completely, for Marjory lived at Gleneira Lodge with her cousin, the factor.

"The house to be got ready! Impossible! Mrs. Cameron had heard nothing when I came out. Where did the news come from?" Marjory's voice, especially to those who knew and loved her, as these good folks did, never admitted of refusal, so the postmaster coughed again between the thumps of the office stamp, which he had begun to use in a hurry.

"It will be Mistress Macniven that was telling Donald Post, and Donald Post he will be telling it to me." The words came in a sort of sing-song, echoed by Donald himself in a croon of conviction.

"Hou-ay! it was Mistress Macniven was tellin' it to me, and it iss me that iss tellin' it to Mr. McColl, and it is fine news--tamm me, but it is fine news whatever."

A twinkle came to Marjory's eyes, for in her character of Grand Inquisitress to the Glen, such startling language was too evidently a drag across the trail.

"But where did Mrs. Macniven hear it?"

"Aye! aye!" assented Donald, rising to go abruptly, "that is what it will be, but she was tellin' it to me, whatever."

"I don't believe a word of it," continued the girl; "Captain Macleod would have written to my cousin, I know. It is just idle gossip."

This was too much for the postmaster, who posed, as well as he might, for being an authority on such questions. In the present instance he preferred the truth to incredulity.

"Deed, Miss Marjory," he said, with unblushing effrontery, "it'll just be one o' they postcards."

"Hou-ay!" echoed Donald, softly. "She'll be yon o' they postcards, whatever."

"A postcard! What postcard?"

Mr. McColl handed her one with the air of a man who has done his duty. "Will you be taking it with you, or shall I be giving it to Donald, here?"

Marjory looked at him with speechless indignation; at least, she trusted that was her expression, though the keen sense of humour, which is the natural heritage of the Celt, struggled with her dignity at first.

"I am really ashamed of you, Mr. McColl," she said at last, with becoming severity. "Of you and Mrs. Macniven; you ought to know better than pry into other folks' secrets."

But now that the cat was out of the bag, the postmaster showed fight. "Deed, and I'm no for seeing it was a secret at all! It is a penny people will be paying if they're needin' secrets. And the laird is not so poor, but he would put a penny to it if he was caring; though yon crabbed writin' they teach the gentlefolk nowadays, is as most as gude as an envelope. Lorsh me! Miss Marjory, but my laddies would be gettin' tawse for a postcard like yon. It was just awful ill to

read."

"To read! Mr. McColl, I really am surprised at you! It is most dishonourable to read other people's letters," protested the girl, with great heat.

"Surely! Surely! but yon's a postcard."

From this position he refused to budge an inch, being backed up in it by Donald, who, being unable to read, was busy in stowing away various letters in different hiding-places in his person, with a view to their future safe delivery at the proper destination. "It was a ferry useful thing," he said, "was postcards, and if Miss Marjory would mind it wass, when old Mistress Macgregor died her sons wass sending to Oban for the whiskey to come by the ferry. But it wass the day before the buryin' that a postcard wass coming to say the whiskey was to be at the pier. But young Peter's cart wass going to the ferry to fetch the whiskey and he was meeting Peter and telling him of the postcard. So if it had not been for the postcaird it wass no whiskey they would be having to Mistress Macgregor's funeral, whatever." A judicious mingling of fact and fiction which outlasted Marjory's wrath. She put the cause of offence in her pocket, remarking pointedly that as Donald had such a budget of important news to retail, that would most likely be the quickest mode of delivery, and then turned to her task of giving the children their usual Sunday lesson, which she began with such a detailed homily on the duty towards your neighbour, that Mr. McColl took the excuse of Donald's departure to accompany him into the garden, and remain there until she passed on to another subject.

For Marjory Carmichael ruled the Glen absolutely; perhaps because she was the only young lady in it. Girls there were and plenty, but none in her own class of life, and the result on her character had been to make her at once confident and unconscious of her own powers. She was not, for instance, at all aware what a very learned young person she was, and the fact that she had been taught the differential calculus and the theory of Greek accents affected her no more than it affects the average young man of one-and-twenty. The consequence being a restfulness which, as a rule, is sadly wanting in the clever girls of the period, who never can forget their own superiority to the mass of their female relations. Having been brought up entirely among men, her strongest characteristic was not unnaturally an emotional reserve, and up to the present her life had been pre-eminently favourable to the preservation of that bloom which is as great a charm to a girl as it is to a flower, and which morbid self-introspection utterly destroys. To tell the truth, however, she was apt to be over contemptuous of gush, while her hatred of scenes was quite masculine. In fact, at one-and-twenty, Marjory knew more about her head than her heart, chiefly because, as yet, the call on her affections had been very small. Her father, a shiftless delicate dreamer, brought up by a brother years his senior, had married against that brother's wish, the offence being aggravated by the fact that the bride with whom he ran away was his brother's ward. One of those calm but absolutely hopeless quarrels ensued which come sometimes to divide one portion of a family from the other, without apparently much regret on either side. The young couple had the butterfly instinct, and lived for the present. They also had the faculty for making friends in a light airy fashion, and after various vicissitudes, borne with the gayest good temper, some one managed to find him a post as consul in some odd little seaport in the south, where sunshine kept them alive and contented until Marjory chose to put in an appearance and cost her mother's life. The blow seemed to make the husband still more dreamy and unpractical than ever, and, when cholera carried him off suddenly four years afterwards, he made no provision whatever for the child's future, save a scrawl, written with difficulty at the last moment, begging his brother to look after Marjory for the sake of old times.

Perhaps it was the best thing he could have done, since nothing short of despair would have affected Dr. Carmichael, who had by this time become so absorbed in the effort to understand life that he had almost forgotten how to feel it. People wondered why a man, who had gained a European reputation for his researches, should have cared to linger on in a remote country district like Gleneira, and some went so far as to hint that something more than mere displeasure at his brother's disobedience lay at the bottom of his dislike to the marriage and his subsequent misanthropy.

Be that as it may, his first look at little Marjory's curly head was absolutely unemotional, and he remarked to his housekeeper that it was a good thing she seemed to take more after her mother than her father, who had always been a cause of anxiety. For the rest, it was a pity she was not a boy. Orphans should always be boys; it simplified matters so much for the relations. However, Mrs. Campbell, the housekeeper, must make the best of it, and bring her up as a girl. He could not.

But Marjory took a different view of the situation, and before six months had passed it dawned upon the Doctor that, as often as not, she was trotting round with her doll in his shadow as he paced the garden, or sitting in a corner of his study intent on some game of her own.

She was a singularly silent unobjectionable child at such times; at others, if he might judge from the sounds that

reached him, quite the reverse. He laid down his pen to watch her as she sate in the sunshine by the window one day, and heard her instantly tell her doll, that if she was naughty and disturbed Dr. Carmichael she must be sent into the garden. Another day he came upon her in his chair poring over a Greek treatise in an attitude which even he recognised as a faithful copy of his own. Finally, he discovered that she had taught her doll to draw geometrical figures such as she often saw on the papers littered about the room. This palpable preference for him and his occupations being distinctly flattering, he began to take more notice of her, and try experiments with her memory. So, by degrees, becoming interested in her quick intelligence, he deliberately began to educate her, as he would have educated a boy, with a view to her making her own living in the future. As indeed she would have to do, in the event of his death; since years before her advent he had sunk all his private means in an annuity, and the expenses of his scientific work did not allow of his saving much. The prospect neither pleased nor displeased the girl. It came simply, naturally, to her, as it does to a boy. On the other hand, she certainly worked harder than any boy would have done, partly because she took it for granted that the tasks set her by Dr. Carmichael were very ordinary ones, and partly because of that feminine tolerance of mere drudgery which makes it so difficult to compare the intellectual work of a man and a woman. For while you can safely assume that an undergraduate has not worked more than so many hours or minutes a day, it is quite possible that a girl student may have sate up half the night over a trivial exercise. The primal curse on labour, it must be remembered, was not extended to the woman, who had a peculiar ban of her own.

So, by the time she was seventeen, Marjory Carmichael was learned beyond her years in Greek and Latin, and displayed a genius for mathematics which fairly surprised her uncle. Then he died suddenly, leaving her to the guardianship of a distant relation and ardent disciple in Edinburgh, who was instructed to spend what small sum might remain, after paying just debts, on completing the girl's education, and starting her, not before the age of twenty-one, in a career; preferably teaching, which he considered the most suitable opening for her. She was strong, he said, in the letter in which he informed Dr. Kennedy of his wishes, and singularly sensible for a girl, despite a distressing want of proportion in her estimate of things. Being neither sentimental nor sensitive, she was not likely to give trouble. So far good, but at the very end of the letter came a remark showing that the old man was not quite the fossil he pretended to be. It ran thus: "All this concerns her head only; of her heart I know nothing. Let us hope she has none; for it is a terrible drawback to a woman who has brains. Anyhow, it has had no education from me."

The description somehow did not prepare Dr. Tom Kennedy for either the face or manner which greeted him on his arrival at the house of mourning, but then he himself had the softest heart in the world, and the mere sight of a lonely slip of a thing in a black dress gave him a pang. But that was only for a moment; five minutes afterwards he wondered how that suggestion of kissing and comforting her in semi-fatherly fashion could have arisen. Yet the same evening after she had bidden him good-night with a little stilted hope that he would be comfortable, the temptation returned with redoubled force, when, on going into the study for another volume of the book he had taken up to his bedroom to read, he found her fast asleep in the dead man's chair, her arms flung out over the table, her cheek resting on one of the ponderous volumes which had been the dead man's real companions. Her fresh young face looked happy enough in its sleep, though the marks of tears were still visible, and yet Dr. Kennedy felt another pang. Had the child no better confidante than that musty, fusty old book? Yet he did not dare to rouse her, even though the room struck cold and dreary, for he felt that the knowledge that he had so far been witness of her weakness would be an offence, a barrier between them, and that was the last thing he desired. So he crept out of the room again discreetly, and smoked another cigar over the not uninteresting novelty of his guardianship. For Tom Kennedy was sentimental, and gloried in the fact.

"You are very kind," said Marjory to him, a day or two afterwards, with a half-puzzled and critical appreciation of his tact and consideration. "But I don't see why you should take such trouble about me. I shall get on all right, I expect. I think it is a mistake that uncle has forbidden my beginning work till I am twenty-one, but, as it can't be helped, I must go on as I've been doing, I suppose. I would rather not go to school if that can be arranged. You see I don't know any girls, and I am not sure if I should get on with them. If I could stop here, Mr. Wilson at the Manse would look over my work, and I could come up to Edinburgh for my examinations, you know."

Evidently his guardianship was not going to be a burden to him. This clear-eyed young damsel, despite a very dainty feminine appearance, was evidently quite capable of looking ahead.

"I will do my best to arrange everything as you wish," he replied, feeling somehow a little hurt in his feelings. "My great object, of course, will be that you shall be as happy as possible."

"Happy?" she echoed, quaintly. "Uncle never said anything about that. I'm not sure if I want that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" he put in, rather aghast.

"Oh! nonsense, and all that; and yet----" She looked at him with almost tragic earnestness. "I am not sure if I don't

like it after all. It is funny, but it is nice."

"What is nice?"

"You're being so kind. Only I think it would make me lazy, and that wouldn't do at all. Uncle used to say I must never forget that I had to earn my own living."

"And I--well! I'm afraid I should like to make you forget it," he answered; "but we needn't quarrel about it, I suppose. At any rate, not for the next four years."

"But I don't mean to quarrel with you at all," she said, very sedately. "I mean to be friends; it is so much more convenient." Perhaps it was on the whole; even though as the years went on Dr. Thomas Kennedy, aged forty, began to wish that her twenty-first birthday would find her willing to continue the tie on another footing. And yet he recognised, not without a certain admiration, that she was not likely to be happy, even if married to one whom she trusted and liked as she trusted and liked him, unless she had first faced the world by herself. Of course, if she were to fall in love it would be different; then, like other women, she might take a certain pride in giving up her future. But she was scarcely likely to fall in love with him, unless he made love to her, and that was exactly what he could not do. In a sort of whimsical way he told himself it would not be fair, since in his heart of hearts he did not believe in the master passion! not, at least, in the romantic form in which alone it would appeal to a girl like Marjory. To affect her it must be something very intense indeed; something, in short, which his infinite tenderness for the girl prevented him from giving. Perhaps if there had been any symptoms of another lover appearing on the scene all this philosophic consideration might have disappeared under the pressure of rudimentary jealousy; but there were none. Indeed, barring the Episcopalian clergyman, who was quite out of the question, there was no young man of Marjory's own rank, or near it, at Gleneira, where he had arranged for her to stay on with a distant cousin of his own. And neither Will Cameron, the factor, nor old Mr. Wilson, at the Manse, nor any of the occasional visitors were more likely to stir the romantic side of the girl's nature than he was himself. Less likely, indeed, since he had the manifest charm of being a person of more importance. In appearance he was a small, dark man with a vivacious face and something of a foreign manner, the latter being due to his having wandered about on the Continent for years seeking surgical experience at the cannon's mouth. So, on his last visit to Gleneira, where he spent all his rare holidays, he had told himself point-blank that he of all men in the world was bound in honour not to take advantage of his ward's innocence and undisguised affection. She was exceptionally fitted for the future she had mapped out for herself, so in a way he was bound to let her try it.

Consequently, as she sat that July afternoon teaching the children their duty to their neighbour, there was no *arrière pensee* of any kind in her affectionate reliance on Cousin Tom's unfailing interest. That would last until she grew tired of teaching, and he grew old. Then, always supposing that it was agreeable to both parties, they might settle down somewhere and be the best of friends till death did them part.

Weary of teaching! That did not seem likely, to judge by the way she taught; and yet through all her work she was conscious of that postcard in her pocket; conscious of the fact that there was no denying Donald's proposition, and that it brought great news whatever. But as she followed the trooping children out of doors to the horse-chestnut shade, she took no notice whatever of Mr. McColl's evident desire to re-open the question, and, with a curt remark that the children knew their duty to their neighbour admirably, she set off with a light, rapid step down the white road.

Mr. McColl looked after her admiringly, unresentfully. Miss Marjory was Miss Marjory, and without her help his grant in aid would be but a poor thing, what with the Bishop's lawn sleeves and the new standards; both of which are stumbling-blocks in a remote Highland parish even when there is no other school within ten miles. Well, well, it was grand news for the Glen that the laird was to be home, and there were others besides Miss Marjory who would be glad to hear it.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. McColl was right, as Marjory herself had ere long to acknowledge; for she had not gone far ere quick steps echoed behind her, and, looking round, she saw the Reverend James Gillespie trying to overtake her. She paused in resigned vexation, experience having taught her the wisdom of waiting for him; the fact being that the fusion point of mind and body was with him extremely low, and heat had a disastrous effect on both; so she waited--that honest walking boot of hers beating a very girlish tattoo of impatience the while against a rock.

"This is great news, Miss Marjory," he began, breathlessly. "Great news--I may say, good news--is--is it not?"

The latter rather alarmed inquiry being the result of a glance at her face; for she was in a contradictory mood, and the Reverend James never had any fixed opinions in minor matters. He took them from his friends and was, in consequence, often in the position of a child who, having filled both hands with biscuits, is suddenly offered a sweetie. Even then he was quite ready to swallow the new contribution if it was firmly put into his mouth. There was no little excuse for him, however, since his present environment in a measure forced him to a poor opinion of himself in the past. The fact being that until the age of fifteen he had been nothing more than the son of a poor crofter on the estate of Gleneira. A clever lad, no doubt, who might perchance rise to something above his father's fate. And then the Bishop, on the lookout for recruits to the Gaelic-speaking clergy necessary to carry on the work in the remoter glens, where the Episcopal faith still lingers, had chosen him out like Samuel for the service of the Lord. It had been a veritable translation, for the Bishop, being High Church, had exalted views of the priesthood. The result being that James Gillespie, fulfilled with a virtuous desire to justify the Bishop's choice, soon lost the small amount of individuality he had originally possessed. Educated by the Bishop, ordained by the Bishop, made the Bishop's chaplain in order that the Bishop might coach him through the rocks of social etiquette, he became, not unnaturally, a sort of automaton, safe so far as his knowledge of the Bishop's views went, but no further. On these points he was logic proof; on others the veriest weathercock at the mercy of every breeze that blew. For the rest, a good-looking, florid, fair young man, dressed rigorously in clerical costume. This again being in deference to the Bishop who, honest man, having his fair share of the serpent's wisdom, saw the necessity of hedging this prophet in his own country about with every dignity which might serve to emphasise the difference between his past and present. The more so because the sparse congregations amid the fastnesses of the hills were in the charge of different pastors. Once a month or so the Reverend Mr. Wilson, from the Manse miles away down the Strath, would drive up in a machine, put up with the Camerons at the Lodge, and deliver a very cut-and-dried little sermon in the school-house. On these occasions the Reverend Mr. Gillespie used to trudge over the hills with his surplice in a brown paper parcel, so leaving the Geneva gown and bands a fair field while he delivered an equally cut-and-dried little homily to the still more outlying faithful in a barn. About this arrangement, necessitated by ancient custom, even the Bishop constrained his tongue, seeing that Mr. Wilson belonged to the Church of Scotland, as by law established, and, what is more, to the very highest and driest portion of it. He was a courtly old gentleman, with a white tie, yards long, wound round his neck numberless times, and finished off by an odd little bow made out of the extreme ends; a learned old man with a turn of the leg, suggesting a youth when calves were visible, and a vast store of classical quotations remaining over from the days when he lectured on the humanities at St. Andrews. Neither did the Bishop consider the Reverend Father Macdonald, who came once in three months or so, and generally on a week day, an intruder. On the contrary, the Reverend James had instructions to ask him to dinner, and, if it was a Friday, to have cockle soup and stewed lentils for him; that is to say, if the invitation was accepted, which it was not as a rule, the Father preferring to eat potatoes and butter at the Camerons, and endure the old lady's good-natured scorn, for the sake of hearing Marjory sing Scotch songs and play Scarlatti. For Dr. Carmichael's one relaxation had been, music, in which, as in other things, the girl had proved herself to be an apt pupil. As often as not, too, on these occasions, old Mrs. Cameron would send a man with the dogcart down the Strath to fetch up Mr. Wilson, and then the two old enemies could fence at each other courteously over the single glass of port, for which the Jesuit had a dispensation. And, if the buttons seemed inclined to come off the foils, Marjory, in the next room, would strike up, "Come, bring to me a stoup o' wine, and bring it in a silver tassie." Then their old heads would wag, and they would give over the endless battle for the sake of hearing a "bonnie lassie" sing their favourite song. But it was very different when the Free Church missionary came round, for he was an earnest, red-haired person, who any day of the week would gladly have testified against Black Prelacy to the bitter end of the stake. He was a stumbling-block, even to Marjory, who professed calm tolerance; but then those courtly old admirers of hers, to say nothing of Cousin Tom's rather foreign manners, had spoilt her. So that amid all her theories--the theories of clever youth instinct with the love of justice and liberty--she could not help being repelled by the roughness of life when, as it were, she touched and handled it. The people themselves, however, thought it a sign of strength to bang the pulpit and bellow, as, indeed, it was, undoubtedly. So the consensus of opinion in all sects was that the Free Church had the finest preacher. Not that it

mattered much in a place where church-going on a Sunday was a recognised dissipation, which had to last for a week. Thus, no matter who was in the pulpit, the little school-house on a fine day overflowed; and even the Reverend Father Macdonald had not a few applicants for a blessing against witchcraft if the cows did not milk properly. This, however, was done on the sly, by accident as it were, when the petitioners chanced to meet priestly authority in the post-office.

In order, therefore, to hold his own amid the hosts of Midian, the Reverend James spent quite a large slice of his modest income on all-round collars and silk cassocks; and even when the old Adam arose at the sight of a red-brown river, and he *had* to creep away with a hazel rod and a bag of worms to some seething pool where the sea-trout lay, he still kept to his professional garments and sate on a rock with his long coat-tails pinned behind his back, looking like a gigantic crow about to fly.

Despite this and other ridiculous habits, Marjory, with her clear, honest eyes saw the real desire to do his duty to Church and State underlying the young man's indecision; but, fortunately for him, she had no notion that of late this had taken the form of wishing to marry her. The fact being that in a recent visit the Bishop had not only remarked that the parish clergy should be the husbands of one wife, but had rather pointedly referred to the immense improvement in the school standard, since Miss Carmichael had begun to practise teaching there. The direct consequence of which had been to make the Reverend James believe himself in love, and at the same time to make him regard all Marjory's opinions as episcopally blessed. An effort needing mental gymnastics of the highest class, especially when, as now, she was bent on mischief.

"Good news," she echoed. "Well, I hardly know; that must surely depend entirely on what sort of person Captain Macleod turns out to be." This she knew must, to begin with, savour of blasphemy to one born and bred on the estate.

"Naturally, I may say, of course, but----" he looked at her pathetically, like a dog when asked to perform a difficult trick; "you--you--you surely have not heard anything against him, have you?"

Marjory's eyes twinkled, but only for a moment; after all it was poor fun depolarising his mental compass.

"Anything against him? No; except that he is too good-looking, I am told."

"Handsome is that handsome does," remarked the Reverend James, cheerfully; it was a favourite proverb at the palace, and he felt sure of his ground. Unfortunately, since it roused Marjory to contradiction.

"Nonsense! As if all the goodness in the world could change a snub nose into a Grecian."

"But surely, my dear Miss Marjory," protested the young man feebly, "the proverb does not assert--em--that sort of thing. I have always understood it--em--I mean the latter half--perhaps I should say the simile--alludes to moral worth."

"Now, Mr. Gillespie! does that mean you consider beauty and goodness to be the same, or simply that you deny the value of physical beauty altogether?" asked Marjory in aggrieved tones.

"I--I don't think I mean either," he replied, so naively that she was obliged to laugh; "but indeed," he went on, "it seems to me, as I remember the Bishop said in his sermon on All Souls, that beauty and goodness are in a measure synonymous, that----"

"Do you mean," she interrupted hastily, but with a sort of quick hesitation which came often to her speech when she was really interested, "that not only are good things necessarily beautiful in a way, but that beautiful things must be good? Look at Tito! All his vileness did not mar the perfection of his beauty. It was a tower of strength to him till the day of his death. It must be so--you can't help it. The thing is good in itself."

Never having read "Romola," the Reverend James fell back discreetly on a more unimpeachable proverb, by remarking, with the air of a man making a valuable contribution to the argument:--

"Beauty is but skin deep."

"Who wants it to be more?" she asked, hotly. "That is all you see. No one asks whether the muscles follow the proper curves beneath the skin, or the bones are strong. And, after all, it seems to me that goodness and beauty appeal to the same chord--the love of everything that is clear, defined, orderly. Ugliness is so incoherent, so indistinct, Mr. Gillespie! Did it ever strike you how unnecessarily ugly we all are? Now, don't deny the fact. Remember the Bishop's hymn says, 'only man is vile.'"

"But that really does apply to his moral."

"I don't agree with you. Some of us, perhaps, are wicked, but most of us are hideous."

"Do you really think so?" And the self-conscious look on his smug, comely face was too much for her gravity. She laughed merrily.

"There are exceptions to every rule, Mr. Gillespie; I only meant to say that since the strongest and best, and therefore, according to you, the most beautiful, had survived in the struggle for existence----"

"By the bye," he put in, for him quite eagerly, "the Bishop has just sent me an excellent reply to the Darwinian----"

Marjory went on remorselessly, "That we were singularly plain-looking, as a rule. For my part I would gladly have eliminated the Carmichael nose if I had had any choice in the matter."

The remark left a grand opening for a compliment if he could at the moment have thought of anything save the crude assertion that he considered it the most beautiful nose in the world. So he remained silent, casting about in his mind for a less absolute form, with such concentrated admiration in his face, that even Marjory could not avoid noticing it, and with a sudden curl of her lip, changed the subject by asking him, in her best categorical manner, when he had last been to see old Peggy, who was bad with her rheumatism. Now old Peggy's cottage was not an inviting-looking abode--a boulder-built hut with a peat roof and a rudimentary chimney--and it lay close by in a hollow between the road and a bog full of waving cotton grass. So the Reverend James regretfully gave up his opportunity as lost for the time; but a gleam of manly resolution came to him as he looked first at the hut, then down the road, the pleasant sunshiny road stretching away to where a thin blue smoke from the chimneys of Gleneira Lodge rose above the silver firs and copper beeches to the right of the big house. All that distance to traverse with Marjory, as against Peggy Duncan the pauper, who was bad enough at the best, but, with the rheumatism, simply appalling.

"I'm afraid I haven't time to-day," he began, with admirable regret, which, however, changed to consternation as his companion paused and held out her hand.

"Then good-bye! I promised to look in on my way home. And on the whole it is better as it is, for it is positively unsafe to visit old Peggy in couples when she is ill. So long as she has but one visitor, you know, the fear of losing a gossip bridles her tongue; but when there are two, one is always a scapegoat." Now, Marjory looked at her companion gravely, and spoke deliberately, "You wouldn't, I'm sure, care to hear me abused; so it is wiser for me to go alone. Good-bye."

She was off as she spoke down the brae, leaving him disappointed, yet still vaguely content, the very thought of in the future having a wife who would go and visit old Peggy filling him with peace, for that old woman was a sore trial to his dignity, since she invariably made a point of remembering his youth as a barefoot cotten's boy. But then at heart she was a Presbyterian who did not believe in the sanctity of orders. So he went on his way down the loch fairly satisfied with himself, while Marjory took his place beside the sick bed of the rheumatic old woman.

The girl gave one regretful glance at the sunshine before she dived into the darkness of the cottage. It was mean and squalid in the extreme, yet to those accustomed to the dirt and warmth, the discomfort and the cosiness of a Highland hut, its air of tidiness was unusual. The mud floor was even and clean swept, the single pane of glass doing duty as a window was neither broken nor patched with rags, while the crazy, smoke-blackened dresser was ranged with common earthenware. A gathering peat, just edged with fire, lay on the huge stone hearth, above which a tiny black pot hung in the thin column of pale blue smoke which, as it rose to the dim rafters, was illumined by the only ray of sunlight in the house--that which streamed through the round hole in the roof which did duty as a chimney. Beside the hearth a fair-haired boy of about six lay fast asleep, while from a settle in the darkness a pair of gleaming green eyes revealed the presence of a cat.

Nothing more to be seen by Marjory's sun-blinded sight. Not a sound to be heard, until suddenly a grey hen roosting in the rafters began to cluck uproariously with much sidelong prancings of a pair of yellow legs, and downward dips of a quaint, irascible, tufted head. Instantly from a recess bed arose a patient moan and a pious aspiration that the Lord's will might be done at all costs.

"Good afternoon, Peggy! I hope your sleep has done you good," said Marjory blithely, as she sate down on the edge of the bed, and looked steadily at the occupant's face. Old Peggy Duncan, with the assertion that she had not slept for days trembling on her tongue, wavered before the girl's decision, and murmured something about closing an eye.

"That is better than nothing, isn't it?" continued the uncompromising visitor. "And as for wee Paulie! he's been having a fine snooze. Haven't you, Paulie?"

The child by the fire, rubbing his eyes drowsily, smiled back at her rather sheepishly.

"Deed it's so," broke in the querulous voice, satisfied at finding a legitimate object for complaint. "He's just the laziest, weariest wean, and no caring a tinker's damn for his nanny. Just lyin' sleepin', and me in an agony. Could ye not watch?--Ay!--Ay! But what can one expect o' a child o' the devil---"

"Peggy! You're a wicked old woman to speak like that. Paul does more than most boys twice his age. I'll be bound he has been stuffing indoors with you all day long without a grumble. Run away now, dear laddie, and get the fresh air."

The order, spoken in Gaelic, produced a sudden flash of life all over the little fellow, and he was out of the door in a second. Marjory looked after him with a pleasant smile.

"He is a pretty boy, isn't he, Peggy?--quite the prettiest in the glen."

"Aye! he has the curse o' beauty. Sae had his mither. Ay! an' her father before her. Thank the Lord, Miss Marjory, you're no bonnie."

"I shall do nothing of the sort, Peggy. And how is the pain? Better for that liniment I rubbed in yesterday?"

"Better!" There was a world of satisfied scorn in the old voice. "Better frae ae teaspoonful o' stuff. Lord be gude to us, Miss Marjory! Naethin' short o' a meeracle'll better me, an' ye talk o' a carnal rubbin' doing it."

"It would be a miracle if it did, wouldn't it, Peggy?" retorted the girl, calmly; "but if it did no good at all there is no use in repeating it, so I'll be off and leave you to your sleep again."

"Hoot awa! an' you tired wi' your walk. Just sit ye down and rest a bit and dinna mind me. I'm used to being no minded, ye ken. Wha minds a bit pauper body but the parish? Two an' saxpence a week, an' a boll o' meal term-day that's no meal at a', but just grits; grits and dirt. I'm no wondering that they puts soddy (soda) until't at the poor's-house to gar't swall. Ay! Aye! and me lyin' a week without spiritual food, an' I cravin' for it from anyone."

"Now, Peggy, you know quite well you told Mr. Gillespie you wanted none of his priestcraft, the last time he was here. You are just a bad, ungrateful old woman, and I've a great mind to go away without making you a cup of tea or telling you the news."

The old face set close in its white cap frills brightened visibly at the last words. "Weel! Weel! I must na be hard on the pair lad. There be divers gifts, an' may be he's gotten one somewhere. And but for the pain makin' me clean wud, I'd have had the tea for you. Just cry on Paulie--the kettle's on the fire, and he'll no be long, pair lammie."

But Marjory preferred to leave the boy to his play, and set about the task herself quickly, dexterously, while old Peggy watched her with sagacious eyes; for she herself had been a notable worker, and had still a regretful admiration for the capability in others. Rather a despicable object, perhaps, this fretful rheumatic old woman, grumbling and growling at everything; and yet, could the secrets of all hearts be revealed, she might have seemed more of a heroine and martyr than many a canonised saint. A youth of ceaseless plodding toil had been given in stolid honesty to her master's interests; then late in life, when the hopes of womanhood were almost over, had come a brief St. Martin's summer, where a wandering Englishman engaged on some mining venture close by had married the sober lass as a means of being comfortable for the time, and after a year had deserted her shamefully, leaving her to work harder than ever for the sake of the little daughter who remained to show that Peggy's short spell of love had not been a dream. Some, indeed, there were who maintained that it had never had any solid foundation, and that the marriage had been but a pretence. This coming to the mother's ears had roused in her a fierce anger, which in its turn gave rise to a passionate desire to prove this child of hers to be above their petty spite, superior to their plodding lives. And in a measure she succeeded. Jeanie Duncan grew up in what, to a girl of her class, was luxury, while her mother sold brown sugar, herrings, tarred rope, and tobacco--in fact, kept a general store. Until the girl, like many another, fretted at home, sought service, and disappeared beyond the circle of blue hills; to be followed after a time by her mother.

But though pretty Jeanie Duncan never returned, old Peggy did, bringing with her a baby. Not an unusual sequel to the story; and so, though the neighbours shook their heads, there was no need to question the woman. What else could have been expected from flighty Jeanie Duncan, whose head had been turned by Mr. Paul's painting her picture.

And Peggy said nothing, even while she concealed nothing. Silent from her youth, she was more silent than ever as she reverted again to the hard toil of those early days, until one January the cold settled into her ill-clad old bones when she was gathering sticks in the woods and left her a cripple. And then the loss of her independence broke her spirit and turned her into a fretful scold. A dreary, toil-worn, barren youth, desertion, degradation, outrage of love and pride—all this gamut of grief had she sounded without an answering groan. The straw which broke her patience was not the hardness but the charity of her fellow-creatures. A most irrational old lady, no doubt, yet not altogether blameworthy in her self-satisfied appreciation of the tea "that was no from the parish, praise be to the Lord," and very human, certainly, in her eager desire to hear the news of that parish. Yet her face when Marjory told her of the laird's return seemed to settle into a strange indifference. "The laird! It will be Mr. Paul you're meaning."

"Yes, Mr. Paul; he is the laird now, you know, and he hasn't been here for nine years. He has been away in India with his regiment."

"Lord sakes! as if I did na' know that; he has been the laird these sax years gone. I mind it weel. And I mind him, too; ower weel, maybe. A winsome laddie, fond of painting; but 'Thou shalt not make to thyself the likeness,' ye ken. So he is coming home at last--bonnie nae doot; and she, my Jeanie, is dust and ashes."

It was seldom that Peggy alluded to her dead daughter, and there was a wistful look in the crabbed old face. Marjory, quickly responsive, stroked the crabbed old hand which lay on the coverlet gently; but old Peggy would none of her sympathy and drew it away, while her voice took almost a triumphant tone.

"Ay! Dust and ashes! That's what we a' come to. Young and auld, Miss Marjory, my dear, rich and poor. Ay! and parish officers, forbye; it's no to be escapit, thank the Lord! And if you're going ye might just open yon drawer in the aumry an' tak' oot my deid claes. There's a bonnie blaze in the fire that maun-na be wasted, and in life we are in death, ye ken, so it's as weel to hae them aired. There's a deal o' sickness comin' frae damp linen, and I'm sae subject' to the rheumatism."

"That would be one of the ills you would leave behind you, Peggy," suggested Marjory, with a tender smile at the oddity of the old woman's thought.

"I'm sure I hope sae, for it wad be maist terrible in the wings," replied Peggy, gravely. Her eyes, following the girl as she complied with the grim request, lit up with satisfaction, her mouth trembled in the effort for calm indifference.

"Ay! sure enough it's the best of cloth, yon, and there is twa rows back stitchin' as fine as fine, and a frill down the front. Some has a lace edgin', but I'm no sure o' furbelows. It wad no be decent for me to come before my Maker prinked oot like a young lass; though Mary McAndrews, who was a gude four year aulder nor me, had real Valenciennes. But, there! she was ae' flighty, puir thing; her mind set on bows and gum flowers, no on things above. Fine cloth an' a cambric frill's gude eneuch for my funeral; an' the coffin no from the parish, thank the Lord!"

As old Peggy lay there in the bay bed gossiping over her shroud she was a grim sight; yet a pathetic one, since there is nothing in the wide world which appeals to the humanity within us so much as the tired, toil-wasted hands of old age folded on a coverlet waiting for death. Marjory, with her strong young ones straightening the dead clothes, felt a strange thrill at her heart, even as she thought of the long years of welcome struggle before she, too, would be glad of rest.

"So Mr. Paul is to come hame again?" quavered the old voice, softened inexplicably by that chill thought of death. "Aye, aye! he will be bonnie still, for he was aye of the kind to mak' a bonnie corp. And no that bad for a man--not by ordinair. Weel! when ye see him tell him that ould Peggy's gone on the parish, but that it'll no be a parish funeral. For there's twa bottles gude whiskey in the draw wi' the deid claes, my dear, and that's eneuch to carry me to my grave as I sou'd be carried."

CHAPTER III.

Will Cameron the grieve, or, in plain English, the land steward of the Gleneira property, was leaning lazily over the shrubby gate, watching two men mowing a narrow strip of grass on either side of the grand approach leading up to the Big House; a proceeding which gave the whole place a most ridiculous half-shaven air. It had its merits, however, in Mr. Cameron's eyes, seeing that it was supposed to make the roadway look kempt while it preserved the rest of the lawn for hay; an economy sorely needed at the Big House, after the late laird's riotous living. Even now, when matters had mended somewhat, honest Will did not care to think of those times when all he saw of the laird of Gleneira was a signature on I O U's; for, when all was said and done, his own honesty seemed bound up in that of the old place. A gardener was nailing up the creepers covering the porch; the windows of the house were set wide open, and through them a noise of hammering and brushing floated out into the crisp morning air as Marjory came up the road from the lodge; her footsteps crunching in the loose sea-gravel, which not even the coming and going of years had worn into compactness, and leant over the gate likewise. Will shifted a little, almost unconsciously, to make room for her, with loose-limbed easy good-nature, and in so doing revealed the whole attitude of his individuality towards Marjory Carmichael. Briefly she was the dearest girl in the world, but rather apt to make a fellow move on, when he would much rather have stopped where he was. Yet they were the best of friends, almost playmates, although he was double her age and distinctly bald. For the rest a very straightforward simple person, with nothing complex about him. One of those men whom Nature has made firstly a sportsman, secondly a farmer; in other words, a descendant of both Cain and Abel. Marjory herself was very fond of him, and no wonder, since during the years she had spent with his mother he had set himself to make things pleasant for her as a man about a house can do when he has absolutely no ulterior object in view. The mere suggestion of such an object would have filled him with terror, for Marjory's energy was appalling.

"What a pretty place it is after all," she said suddenly, and in so saying spoke the truth. Framed in by an amphitheatre of purple heather-clad hills and dark green fir-clad spurs, Gleneira House with its swelling lawns stretching away to the rocky beach of the loch, its tall silver pines and clumps of rhododendrons looked bright and cheerful despite the nameless want which hangs always round an empty house; the dead look, as if, the soul having passed from it, naught remained save for it to hasten back to the dust whence it came. There was something, however, which struck one as homelike in its low irregular outline, its bow windows set in rose, jasmine, and magnolia; above all in its clustered stacks of chimneys rising without respect to symmetry and suggesting comfortable firesides within. Cosy firesides in corners, not set back to back in pairs after the modern fashion. A conglomerate building altogether, not unlike a two-storied summer-house full of French windows. An airy feminine sort of house, unlike the usual aggressively stony Scotch mansions, yet fitting in strangely with its fairylike background of hills, and woods, and lochs.

"Very pretty, but awfully out of repair," replied Will, disconsolately. "The roof won't last much longer."

"Why doesn't he--Captain Macleod I mean--put on a new one?"

"My dear Marjory! He can't afford it. A man has to spend a lot in an expensive regiment like his, and----"

"Nine years since he was in the Glen," interrupted the girl, bent on her own thoughts. "I don't remember him a bit. What is he like, Will?"

"Awfully handsome; about the handsomest boy I ever saw, and I don't suppose he has changed much."

"I know that--anything more?"

"Spends a heap of money."

"I know--anything more?"

"Yes; you will like him."

"Why?"

"Women always do."

Marjory turned down the corners of her mouth; a trick which with her meant disapproval, disgust, dislike, disappointment,—such a variety of small d's that Will was wont to say it was quite as reprehensible as the collective big one of his sex.

"He really is an awfully nice fellow," continued Will; "but the place is going to rack and ruin. The farm houses are so poor that the south country men won't take them, and a slack style of tenant only means going from bad to worse. He ought to marry money. It is the only way out of the difficulty, since he won't skin the woods or let the place."

"Why doesn't he come and live here as his fathers did," put in the girl, quickly; "why shouldn't he be satisfied to do his duty to the people as his fathers did?"

"Because his income isn't what theirs was to begin with. The place is heavily mortgaged; everyone knows it, so there is no reason why I shouldn't say so. Then Alick Macleod ran through a heap of money somehow, and left a lot of debts which had to be paid off. I don't say that the Captain mightn't have been more economical, but it isn't all his fault. And then he won't touch the estate. That is right enough in a way, and yet Smith, the hook-and-eye man, offered twice its value for that bit of moor that marches with his forest."

"And Captain Macleod refused?"

"Declined with thanks; and wrote me privately not to bother him again with any proposals of that sort from a bloated mechanic."

Marjory's mouth turned down again. "Indeed! that was very noble of him."

"So it was in a way," replied her companion, sticking to his own ill-concealed satisfaction, "for the man is offensive to the last degree. He has invented a tartan, and has a piper to play him to bed."

"If he likes it, why not? Every man must have invented his own tartan, once upon a time, you know; the Macleods into the bargain."

Will Cameron smiled languidly. "You are a beggar to argue, Marjory. But as I said before, the laird must marry money."

"Sell himself instead of his property?"

"Why not? he is worth buying, and she needn't be ugly."

"Ugly! as if that were the only question! I believe it is all you men think of. Why, Will, you haven't told me anything about Captain Macleod except that he is good-looking; and I knew that before. I wanted to hear what he was like—he himself, I mean."

He looked at her with comical amusement. "You have come to the wrong man, my dear. I never could tell my own character, much less anybody else's. But here is old John, beaming with satisfaction at the thought of coming slaughter among the birds. Ask him!"

"Is it what the laird is like?" echoed the bent but active old man, pausing with a troop of wiry-haired terriers at his heels. "Then he is real bonnie, Miss Marjory; that's what he is."

"So I told her; but she wants to know more." John Macpherson scratched his ear dubiously, then brightened up. "Then it's a terrible good shot he will be. Aye! ever since he was a laddie no higher than my heart. Just a terrible good shot, that's what he is."

"After all," remarked Will, as the old man passed on, "that gives you as good a clue to the laird as anything else would do. Old John meant that as the highest praise. The coachman in all probability would say he was a first-rate rider. I have heard mother call him a good young man, but that was when I had lost five pounds at the Skye gathering, and he had won. The fact being that he had a knack of warping people's judgment; it was he, by the way, who advised me to bet on a man who couldn't putt a bit. He used always to twist me round his little finger when we were boys together—and by Jove! he had a temper. Sulky, too, and obstinate as a mule."

"Thank you," interrupted Marjory, drily; "that's quite enough. Well, I hope nobody nice will buy him."

Will Cameron flushed up quite hotly. "Now, I call that really nasty, Marjory, when it can't matter to you. And you

know as well as I do that we want money awfully; you, who are always railing at the black huts, and the lack of chimneys, and----"

But Marjory, after a habit of hers when she was not quite sure of her ground, had shifted it, and passed on to the house, whence the sounds of sweeping and hammering continued. Will shook his head at her retreating figure, smiled, and called out cheerfully:--

"Tell mother not to hurry, he can't come till the evening boat."

Vain message, since you might just as well have made such an appeal to old Time himself as to Mrs. Cameron, who, despite her seventy years and portly figure, was bustling about, the very personification of order, even in her haste. You felt instinctively that every symptom of hurry was the result of a conscientious conception of the importance of her part in the day's proceedings, and that to be calm would have been considered culpable. Yet, as she trotted about, her voluminous black skirts tucked through their placket-hole, not a hair of her flat iron-grey curls was astray, not a fold of her white muslin kerchief, or frill of her starched lace cap was awry, though her aides-de-camp, a couple of sonsy Highland maids, were generally dishevelled, cross, and hot.

"Eh! Marjory, my dear," she cried, catching sight of the latter, as she entered the large low hall, set round with antlers; "ye're just in the nick to help count the napery while I see to the laird's chamber. He will be for having his old wee roomie, I misdoubt me; he was always for having his own way, too. But he will just no have it, that's all. Folks must accept their position, aye! and maintain their privileges in these days, when every bit servant lassie claims a looking-glass to prink at." The last words were delivered full in the face of a pert South country maid, who, with an armful of towels, passed by in rather an elaborate pink dress. It was merely a snap shot, however, for the old lady hurried on her appointed way, leaving Marjory and the offender, who was quite accustomed to being a target, in charge of the dark lavender-scented linen closet. Pleasant work at all times this, of handling the cool, smooth piles; the only household possessions which never seem to suffer from being laid away, which come out of their scented tomb with their smoothness emphasised by long pressure, their folds sharply accurate, their very gloss seeming to have grown in the dark. No fear of moth here; no hint of decay. Marjory, singling out a fine tablecloth and napkins for the laird's first meal at home, and choosing the whitest of sheets and pillow-cases for his bed, found herself unable to believe that long years had passed since some woman's hand had carefully put them away. It seemed impossible that it should be so, and that they should be ready to begin their work as if not a day had passed. Unchanged in a world of change! But the guest himself would be more changed than his surroundings; for he could only have been a boy--not much older than she herself--when he was last at Gleneira. The thought lingered, and after her task was over she wandered from room to room trying to put herself in his place, and guess how it would strike him. For it was pleasant sometimes, when one had an hour to spare, to spend it in that fanciful world of feeling, with which her practical life had so little to do.

His mother's sitting-room! That could not fail to be sad, even though the fair-haired original of the faded portrait in pastels over the mantelpiece had passed from life when he was still a child. Yet, if *she* by any chance could see even the smallest thing that had once belonged to that mother whose memory was a mere abstraction, who had never really existed for her at all, she would feel sad, and so he must also who had known his. Well, Captain Macleod's mother must have been dreadfully fond of fancy work, to judge by the room! And yet, not so long ago, she herself had been full of childish admiration for that terrible screen in the corner, which now only excited a wild wonder how any responsible human being could have wasted hours--nay! days, months--in producing such a fearful result. It represented a Highlander in full national costume, done in cross-stitch; the flesh was worked in small pink beads, giving a horrible pimply appearance to the face and a stony glare to the eyes; in the distance rose purple silk hills, and the foreground consisted of an over-grown velvet pile mongrel with a tail in feather stitch. In those childish days of admiration, however, it had had a fearful charm of its own, born of its inaccessibility. For, once within a certain radius, the whole picture disappeared into a senseless medley of silk, worsted, and beads. Only distance lent design, making four white beads and a black one a recognisable equivalent for the human eye. As she stood looking at it now, an amused smile curved her lips, with the remembrance that in still more childish days she had mixed up this magnificent Highlander with her conceptions of the absent laird. Probably it was quite as like him now as the crayon drawing, labelled "Paul," of a pallid boy holding a toy ship, which hung on the wall beside the pastel. On the other side was another pallid boy holding another ship, and labelled "Alick." As far as she could judge Alick might have grown up to be Paul, and Paul to be Alick. Only Paul held his ship in his right hand, and Alick in his left; but that was, of course, only because their portraits had to look at each other across the picture of their mother; because, as it were, of the exigencies of Art. She smiled to herself as she drifted on lazily to what Mrs. Cameron had considered the keystone of the laird's position. It was a dim, dignified room, with a dreadful bed. So large, so square, so evenly surrounded with Macleod tartan hangings that a sleeper immured therein might well on waking lose his airs, and which way he was lying. A bed which might have a dozen ghostly occupants, and the flesh and blood one be none the wiser of those dead and gone lairds of Gleneira. Marjory, oppressed by the very look of it, threw the windows, wide as they would set, to the air and sunshine.

Even so, it was a dreary, depressing room, especially to one coming alone, unwelcomed by kindred, to his old home. With a sudden impulse of pity she drew from her belt a bunch of white heather and stag-horn moss which she had gathered that morning, and arranged it neatly in a little empty vase which stood on the wide dressing-table. A poor effort, yet it gave a certain air of expectancy to the room; more appropriate also to the occasion than more elaborate garden flowers would have been, since white heather stood for luck, and the stag-horn moss was the badge of the Macleod clan. A charming little welcome, truly, if the laird had eyes to see! Her face, reflected in the looking-glass as she stood smiling over her task, would, however, have been a more charming welcome still could the laird have seen it. And then the sound of wheels on the loose gravel outside sent her to the window in sudden alarm; but it was only the Manse machine, drawn by the old grey horse, with Father Macdonald on the front seat beside Mr. Wilson, who, as he caught sight of her, stood up with profound bows, disclosing a curly brown Brutus wig. And there was Will lounging at the horse's head, and his mother on the steps with dignified gesticulations. Beyond towards the Strath was the wide panorama of hill and moor and sea, flooded in light. The sudden feeling that it is good to be here, which comes even to untransfigured humanity at times, filled the girl's heart with content as she nodded back to her two devoted old friends who were now both standing up in the dogcart, waving their hats. How good everyone was to her! How happy they all were together in the Glen! And she had never before seemed to realise it so completely.

"Heard I ever the like?" rose in Mrs. Cameron's most imperious tones. "To pass by the house wi' an empty stomach, and it not even a fast! A fast, say I? A feast for Gleneira, and twa glasses o' port wine for Father Macdonald whether he will or no. Marjory, my lass, away with them like good boys to the parlour and cry on Kirsty for the glasses. Will, ye gawk, are there no grooms in Gleneira House that you must be standing there doing their wark. Now, Mr. Wilson, just come you down to *terry-firmy*, as you would say yourself. You're no golden calf, man, to be put up on a pedestal."

"My dear Madam!" cried he, gaily, clambering down with no small regard to the Graces. "If it is a question of worship, 'tis I who should be at your feet. *Facilius crescit quam.*"

"*A cader va chi troppo in alto sale,*" interrupted Father Macdonald, clambering down on his side. He was a small man with round childish face, possessed of that marvellously delicate yet healthy complexion which one sees in Sisters of Charity; in those, briefly, who take no care for beauty and lead a life of austerity and self-denial. A complexion which a society woman would have given her eyes to possess.

"Hoot away wi' your gifts o' tongues," retorted the old lady, in mock indignation at the perennial jest of strange quotations. "Marjory, just take them ben and stop their mouths wi' cake and wine. And make them drink luck to the auld house that is to be graced wi' its master."

"Ah, my dear Madam," said the incorrigible offender, ambling up the steps, and giving a sly glance at Marjory, "you agree with our friend Cicero, *'Nec, domo dominus sed domino domus honestanda est.'*"

Mrs. Cameron treated the remark with silent contempt, and Marjory, leading the way into the morning room where Paul Macleod's portrait hung on the wall, looked back with a kind smile at the two old men who, never having owned chick or child of their own, treated her as a daughter. A sort of dream-daughter, dear yet far removed from the hard realities of every-day familiarity.

"I'm so glad you were passing to-day, father," she said eagerly; "I found a little Neapolitan song among some old music here, and I want you to see if I sing it right."

Mr. Wilson, seated in the armchair, his legs disposed elegantly, straightened his necktie, and made a remark to the effect that the Neapolitans were the most debased Christian population in Europe. And that despite the fact that they lived, as it were, under the very nose of the Pope. An attack which was the result of an ever-green jealousy in regard to the little Jesuit's superior knowledge.

"Neapolitan! Ah! my dear young lady, the patois is almost beyond me. If it had been Roman!" The smooth childlike face grew almost wistful thinking of the days so long ago spent in the still seclusion of the Scotch college, or out in the noisy colour of the Roman streets; a quaint memory for the old man who for fifty years had never seen a town, whose very occupation was passing away from his life, as, one by one, the old adherents to the old faith still lingering among the mountain fastnesses, died and were buried by him.

"Ah! you will manage," said Marjory, cheerfully. "It isn't as if you didn't know the subject, for it is sure to be all about love. Songs always are."

So, while the cake and wine were coming in, she sate down to the piano and sang, guided by the two old men, of

love; for Mr. Wilson, great on philology, had his views on the mutations of vowels and consonants, and stood beside the little priest beating time to the phrases with his gold eyeglasses.

Mrs. Cameron found them so, and rallied them on their taste when there was good port-wine on the table.

"My dear Madam," retorted Mr. Wilson, positively shining with delight at his own opportunity of showing that his acquaintance was not confined to dead languages. "We have only put the 'Weib und Gesang' before the 'Wein'; and I am sure anyone who had the privilege of hearing Miss Marjory sing would do the same."

She made him a little mock curtsey, but Mrs. Cameron would none of it, and cut a huge slice of cake. "No! no! minister; from the very beginning o' things men-folks cared more for their stomachs than their hearts. If Eve, poor body, had only given Adam a better dinner he wouldna have been wantin' to eat apples betwixt whiles, and a deal o' trouble might have been saved. But a woman's different. She takes it ill if a man doesn't fall in love with her; she's aye wantin'---"

"I'm sure I don't want anything," put in Marjory, with her head in the air.

"Don't be talkin' havers, child. I tell ye a woman's aye wantin' it. Auld as I am---"

"My dear Madam," expostulated Mr. Wilson.

"Haud your whist, minister," interrupted Mrs. Cameron, tartly; "what will you be knowing o' a woman's heart? I tell you she may be auld and grey, she may hae left half the pleasures o' this world behind her, she may hae been a wife for two score years, and spent her heart's bluid in rearing weans, but what's left o' the heart will be turnin' wi' regret to the time when the auld body who sits on the tither side o' the fire--girding at his food, maybe--was courtin' her. Or, maybe, when some ither auld body that's no at the tither side of the fire was courtin'. There's no sayin'."

There was a silence: and then the old priest said under his breath: "*Amor a nullo amato amor perdona.*"

Mr. Wilson nodded his brown Brutus wig in assent. He did not mind that sort of Italian. Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of the humanities could understand so much. So they were merry over the cake and wine; merry even over the parting with it in obedience to the minister's Horatian order: "*Lusisti satis, editsi satis, alque bibisti, Tempus abire ibe est*"--which Mrs. Cameron insisted on having explained to her word by word. It was a complete exposition, she asserted, of the whole duty of man as viewed by men. To eat, to drink, to amuse themselves, and then to run away.

That same evening, in the mirk end of the gloaming, Marjory, walking in the garden between the great borders of clove pinks which were sending out their fragrance to meet the coming night, heard the *feu de joie*, arranged by old John Macpherson to greet the laird's arrival, go off like the beginning of a battle. Half an hour afterwards Will Cameron returned, calling loudly for his supper, and full of enthusiasm.

"Upon my word, Marjory, I think he is handsomer and more charming than ever."

"Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain," said the young lady, taking a leaf out of Mr. Gillespie's book.

CHAPTER IV.

People who only know the West Highlands in the rainy months of August and September, when a chill damp, almost suggestive of winter, comes to the air, will scarcely credit the intense heat which June and July often bring to the narrow glens, shut in on all sides by sun-baked mountains. Then the springs fail, and the cattle break through the fences, seeking the nearest point of the river; or stand knee-deep in the estuary water, flicking away the plague of flies with their tails, and lowing seaward to the returning tides. Then the burns, fine as a silver thread down the mountain sides, run with a clear bell-like tinkle through the boulders over which they will dash with a roar and a rush in the coming Lammas floods. Then the cotton grass hangs motionless on its hair-like stem, and the bog myrtle gives out a hot, dry, aromatic scent, to mingle with that of the drying grass. On such days as these, everything having life instinctively seeks the shade. So Marjory Carmichael, on the morning after the laird's return, left the dusty high-road, crossed the fast hardening bogs by the tussocks of gay mosses tufted with bell-heather, and so continued her walk along the alder-fringed bank of the river. Even at that early hour not a leaf was stirring; the very bees hung lazily on the pale lilac scabious flowers, and the faint hush of the river had a metallic sound. Marjory, clambering down a fern-clad bank, sat down beneath a clump of hazels, set with green nuts. Below her the river, between the alder stems, showed olive and gold in sunlight or shade, with every now and again a foam fleck sailing by; for, some fifty yards above her resting-place, the Eira, fresh from a boisterous half-mile scramble among the rocks, rushed through a narrow chasm at racing speed, and fell recklessly, dashing itself into a white heat of hurry in a seething whirling pool set in sheer walls of rock, and thence finding outlet for its passion in a wider basin, and so, with ever clearing face, sliding into peace in the dark oily pool beneath the bank where Marjory sate. Her favourite nook, however, in all the river side, lay higher up, close to the leap, where she could watch the gleaming sea-trout and an occasional salmon patiently trying at the fall, see the flash of the rapids beyond the fringing ferns, or mark the drifting shadows on the opposite hillside. But the single rowan tree, clinging with distorted roots to the heather-tufted cliff, flung its branches over the fall, and gave no shade elsewhere; hence on this hottest of hot July mornings Marjory chose the hazel hollow instead, and leaning back among the flowering grasses, which sent a pinkish bloom of tiny fallen blossom on her curly hair, drew a long, closely written letter from her pocket, turned to its last sheet, and began to read it. Not for the first time, but then Cousin Tom's letters were worth a dozen of most people's, especially when they had something to say, as this one had:--

"What a hurry you seem to be in to begin work; and I am always in such a hurry to begin play. But then you have arrived, or are about to arrive, at the years of discretion, and I am a mere child of forty-one. Twenty years between us, dear! It is a lifetime; and what right have I, or any other old fozzle, to dictate to you, Mademoiselle Grands-serieux, who, clever as she is, hardly knows, I think, when her most affectionate and unworthy guardian is attempting a jest. It is an evil habit in the old. Expect to hear from the School Committee in Hounslow before many days are over. I think all is settled fairly, but I hear there is no chance of your being needed before the beginning of November. And this is still July. Three whole months, therefore, ere Mademoiselle need take up the burden of teaching vulgar little boys the elements of Euclid. And yet the momentous coming of age, when Wisdom, let us hope, is to be justified of one of her children, is this week. Marjory, my dear! Fate has given you a real holiday at last! Of course, I am an incorrigible idler compared to you, but, believe me, my heart has ached at times over your sense of duty! Life is not all work, even if it is not all beer and skittles. So take the goods the gods provide (as dear old Wilson would say in the proper tongue--my Latin is merely a catalogue of dry bones)--put away all the books--let two and two be five or five hundred for the time, while you cross the Asses' Bridge with the rest of humanity. Wake up, my dear little girl! or rather begin to dream! Of what? you ask. Of anything, my dear, except Woman's Suffrage. By the way, I have six new reasons against the latter, which I will detail to Mademoiselle Grands-serieux when a detestable bacillus, who will neither be born nor die, permits of my joining her in the earthly paradise. Meanwhile have a good time--a real good time."

Marjory leant back again on a great basket of spreading lastrea which gave out scent like honey as she crushed it. Cousin Tom was delightful, and perhaps he was right. The sudden content with Life as it was which had come to her the day before when she realised its peace, its beauty, its kindliness, returned now. Through the arching hazel boughs the sunlight filtered down in a tempered brilliance restful to the eyes; a grasshopper shrilled in the bents; a yellow butterfly, settling on a leaf beside her, folded its wings and, apparently, went to sleep. An earthly paradise, indeed! Surely if one could dream anywhere it would be here.

Suddenly a faint *shwish-shwish* broke the silence. *Shwish-shwish*, at regularly recurring intervals. Marjory, recognising the sound, wondered listlessly who could be fishing the lower pool at this early hour. One of the keepers, perhaps, hopeful of a trout for his master's breakfast; rather a forlorn chance even in the pot above, with that cloudless sky. A jarring whizz, accompanied by a convulsion in the alder branches, broke in on her drowsiness, making her sit up with intelligent appreciation of the cause. The somebody, whoever he might be, was "in" to the tree. Another

convulsion, gentler, but more prolonged; another short and sharp, as if somebody were losing his temper. Then a persuasive wiggle to all points of the compass in turn, and finally the whirl of a check reel.

Somebody being evidently about to try conclusions with Nature, Marjory leant forward in deep interest, knowing by bitter experience that it was two to one against humanity. At last, as she expected, there came a series of short, sharp jerks; then something she had not expected. On the morning air one comprehensive monosyllable--"Damn." That was all. No affix, no suffix; without nominative or accusative; soft, but trenchant.

"A gentleman," said Marjory to herself, without a moment's hesitation, as she rose to peer through the thick tangle of alders. If so, the laird, of course. Yes! It must be he, on the opposite bank, standing irresolute; weighing the pros and cons of breaking in, no doubt. Marjory's experienced eyes following the taut line, rested finally on the cast looped round a branch just above her, and apparently within reach. The mere possibility was sufficient to make her forget all save the instinct to help.

"Don't break, please, I can get it."

Her eager voice, unmistakably girlish and refined, echoed across to Paul Macleod, who, after a moment's astonished search, traced it to a face half-seen among the parting leaves. He took off his hat mechanically, for though it might have been a pixie's there was no mistaking its gender, and the sex found a large measure of outward respect in Paul Macleod. For the rest, help offered was with him invariably help accepted; a fact which accounted for a large portion of his popularity, since people like those around whom the memory of their own benevolence can throw a halo. So he stood watching Marjory settle methodically to her task, wondering the while who the girl could possibly be. For that she had white hands and trim ankles was abundantly evident, and neither of these charms was to be expected in the rustic beauties of the Glen.

"I am afraid I am giving you a lot of trouble," he said sympathetically, as for the third time the branch flew back from Marjory's hold with a sudden spring.

"Not at all," she gasped jerkily; one cannot speak otherwise on tiptoe with both hands above one's head.

"Perhaps I had better help."

"Perhaps you had," she answered resentfully, desisting for a moment after a fourth rebuff. "There is no positive necessity for you to remain idle. You might for instance reel in as I pull."

His faint smile was tempered by respect. The young lady on the opposite bank knew what she was about, and, perhaps, might even be good looking, if she were not quite so red in the face. So he obeyed meekly, and was rewarded by a gasp of triumph.

"There! I've got it. I knew you could help if you tried."

"I'm immensely obliged," he began; then the girl's foot slipped, the branch sprang from her hand, she made an ineffectual jump after it, and the next instant the all but disentangled cast, flung into the air by the rebound, was hard and fast in a higher twig.

Marjory could have stamped with despite; thought it wiser to laugh, but found the opposite bank full of silent, grieved sympathy.

"I'll get it yet," she called across the water, with renewed determination.

"I think, if you'll allow me, I will break in," came the deferential voice after a time. "It really must be very tiring to jump like that."

"Not at all; thank you," she retorted, without a pause. "I never--give in."

"So it appears. Will you allow me to come over and help?"

Come over and help, indeed! Marjory's growing anger slackened to contempt. As if he could come over without a detour of half a mile down or quarter of a mile up the river; and he must know it, unless he had no memory. "You can't," she jerked between her efforts. "You had--better slack line--and sit down--I'll get it somehow."

Véry much "somehow." Her hat fell off first. Then, after a desperate spring, in which she succeeded in clutching a

lower branch, a hairpin struck work. Hot, dishevelled, exasperated, yet still determined, she persevered without deigning another reference to the silence over the way, until an arm clothed in grey tweed reached over hers and bent the branch down within her reach. She looked round, and, even in her surprise, the great personal charm and beauty of the face looking into hers struck her almost painfully; for it seemed to soothe her quick vexation, and so to claim something from her.

"I jumped," he said, answering the look on hers. "It is quite easy by the fall."

Something new to her, something which sent a lump to her throat, made her turn away and say stiffly: "I am sorry I gave you the trouble of coming. It would have been better if you had broken in. Good morning."

He stood grave as a judge, courteous, deferential, yet evidently amused, still bending down the bough.

"Will you not finish the task you began? You said you never gave in; besides, I can hardly do it for myself." The fact was palpable; it required two hands to disentangle a singularly awkward knot. To deny this would be to confess her own annoyance, so she turned back again. Rather an awkward task with a face so close to your own, watching your ineptitude. And yet she forgot her impatience in a sudden thought. If he had fallen! If that face had had the life crushed out of it!

"You ought not to have jumped," she said, impulsively. "It was very dangerous."

"Pardon me; I have done it hundreds of times when I was a boy."

"Boys may do foolish things."

He smiled. "And men should not; but are dangerous things necessarily foolish?"

"Needlessly dangerous things are so, surely?"

"In that case, what becomes of courage?"

She paused, frankly surprised both at herself and him. How came it that he understood so quickly, that she followed him so clearly? Yet it was pleasant.

"Courage has nothing to do with the question."

His smile broadened. "Thanks. I began by saying so. The fact being that the jump is not dangerous."

"No one else jumps it," she persisted.

"Pardon me for mentioning that I am an unusually good jumper. Besides--"

"The game is never yet worth a rap
For a rational man to play,
Into which some misfortune, some mishap
Cannot possibly find its way."

Again something new to her, something which this time sent a thrill of answering recklessness through her veins, something of the mere joy and pride of life made her ask in quick interest--"Who wrote that?"

"A man who gave in at last; he shot himself."

Marjory's face paled. Yes; men did that sort of thing, she knew. She had read of it, and accepted the truth of it calmly. Now for the first time she felt that she understood it, that she too stood on the brink of the Great Unknown Sea, which might bring her to the haven where she would be, or to shipwreck. Then in quick relief came a new cause for resentment in the perception, as she began to wind up the now disentangled cast, that a large portion of line remained attached to it. In other words, her companion had deliberately cut it, and brought his rod with him; had risked his life not for the sake of his flies, but simply to amuse himself at her expense.

"I think that is all I can do for you," she said, in a white heat of annoyance. "Good morning, Captain Macleod."

The name slipped from her unawares, and she recognised her own mistake immediately. Her knowledge of his identity being a sort of introduction, from which she could scarcely escape. For his position as laird of Gleneira, owner of the very ground on which she was trespassing, could not be ignored. She could not dismiss him like a tramp. He took the advantage she had given him, coolly.

"Thanks, so many," he said, holding back a branch to allow of her passing before him, "but I am going also. It is too bright for sport. In truth, I never expected any, and only came out to renew my acquaintance with the river, and discover, what I expected, that I have almost forgotten how to throw a fly."

"Indeed, you have not forgotten how to break in, at any rate," she replied viciously; then ashamed of her unnecessary heat, since surely it was none of her business if he broke every cast he possessed, she added, in superior tones, "there is no reason, however, why you should not get a fish in the Long Pool. The sun won't touch it for half an hour."

"The Long Pool," he echoed, "which is that? I'm afraid I have almost forgotten it, too."

It was a palpable excuse for continuing the conversation, and as such Marjory resented it; at the same time, no one ever appealed to her for information without meeting with prompt attention, the teaching element being strong in her. So was impatience at crass stupidity; or, as Captain Macleod preferred to call it, a deficient bump of locality.

"I'll see you as far as the Alder Island," she said at last, with some irritation, "then you can't possibly make a mistake." That, at any rate, would be better than trailing the whole two miles back to Gleneira beside him. Not that he was forward or objectionable; on the contrary, he treated her with a deference which would have been pleasant had it not covered a quiet coercion which was perfectly intolerable. So the glint of the Long Pool behind the Alder Island came as a relief, and she pointed to it in a sort of triumph.

"I'm afraid it is no use," he said despondently. "Too fine; besides, I haven't had my breakfast, and it is growing late. I'll get Cameron to come down afterwards and show me the casts. A river changes in ten years."

"You can't possibly judge from here; and I can show you the cast perfectly," she retorted. It had come to a stand-up fight with the gloves on between his will and hers, and accustomed as she was to instant submission from everybody of the opposite sex, she would not confess her own defeat by getting rid of him with a crude dismissal. To begin with he scarcely merited the insult, and, in addition, it might be awkward afterwards. So she pointed out the probable lie of the fish, and, her sporting instincts overcoming her contempt, exclaimed against the gaudy cast he selected--a cast no decent fish would have looked at except in flood time.

"No! no!" she cried, in real eagerness. "Something less like a firework, if you have one--a brown body and turkey wing. Ah! here's the very thing. I don't believe in the steel loops, though, do you--? Will doesn't. And you have bridge rings I see; I never saw them before. They look good. Now then! Just below the break, down the slidy bit, and across to the ripple--Oh-h!"

The exclamation was caused by a fall as of a coiled hawser on the water, and a separate "blob" of each fly on the surface.

"You had better try again," she said gravely, "and don't thrash so; use your wrist."

"If there was more wind," he suggested.

"Nonsense! you ought to be able to throw that distance anyhow. It's all knack; it will come back after a cast or two. I'm sure it will."

Apparently she was wrong. The line ceased, it is true, to fall in a heap like an umbrella, yet failed by many feet to reach the break above the slidy bit.

"Give me the rod a moment," she cried, "and I'll show you the turn of the wrist. You'll recognise it then."

There was an instant's pause as she stood, one foot planted against a stone, her lithe figure thrown backwards, her chin following the little toss of her head, tilted sideways; so that her eager young face was in full view of her companion; and then the long line flew out in the spey cast and seemed to nestle down just where the water broke.

"Bravo!" cried Captain Macleod, as much to the picture as to the skill. And then before he could say another word came an eddy, a noise like the cloop of a cork, a glint of a silvery side, and the whirl of the reel. Things to drive all else

from a fisherman's brain.

"In to him!" shouted the Captain, excitedly; "and a beauty, too. No! no; keep it. I'd rather you kept it! I'd like to see you land him--if you can."

The implied doubt, joined to the vicious shooting of something like a huge silver whiting with its tail in its mouth into the air, warning the girl of the danger of a slack line, had the desired effect. She set her teeth and gave herself up to repairing the error of indecision. The fish, having got his head, was now further down the pool than he should have been, and close to an ugly snag, towards which he bored with the strange cunning which seems born in fish. Marjory gave him the butt bravely, but he fought like a demon, and for one instant the reel gave out an ominous clicking.

"Perhaps I had better," came an eager voice beside her. "It is heavier than I thought."

"Please not! Please let me keep it now! I'd rather lose him--there!" A rapid wind-up emphasised her excitement. "I can manage him, you see--if you will go down--there by the white stones--I'll get him into the shallow--the tackle is so light I can scarcely bring him up--and--and--don't be in a hurry--I'll bring him in right over the click."

The old imperiousness was back in full swing, and once again she had a willing slave, eager as she was for the sight of something long and brown curving, snakelike, into the shallow as if of its own free will, or coming in despairingly "this side up." It was a sharp, swift struggle, all the sharper and swifter because of that ominous snag over the way; and then an eight-pound grilse with the sea-lice still on him lay on the bank.

"Oh! What a beautiful creature! One of the prettiest I have ever seen," cried Marjory, ecstatically, on her knees beside the prize.

"Very much so, indeed." Captain Macleod's voice was absent, and his eyes were not on the fish. "You killed him splendidly."

The light went out of the girl's face; she rose to her feet slowly.

"I wish I had given you the rod," she said, still looking down on the palpitating, quivering bar of silver.

"That is most forgiving of you!"

She turned upon him almost indignantly. "Oh! I wasn't thinking of all that--that stuff! I was thinking--it seems so cruel."

"Many things seem so afterwards. One might spend a lifetime in regretting, if it was worth it; but it isn't."

"Isn't it? I wish anyhow that I hadn't killed that fish."

"Why not go further back, and wish you hadn't interfered to save my cast? for, as it happens, the one you chose out was the very one Fate had ordained should remain in an alder bush----"

"Perhaps I do," she replied stiffly, realising how he had played upon her for the first time. The knowledge, rather to her own surprise, brought tears to her eyes.

"I don't wonder that you regret having helped me," he said with a sudden change of manner. "If you will tell me where to leave the fish I will no longer trouble you. I am sorry for having given you so much already."

There was no mistaking the hidden depth of his apology. As he stood there in the sunlight, looking at her gravely, Marjory felt to the full the charm of his gracious presence. Who could really be angry with him for such a trifle? For it was a trifle after all.

"My name is Marjory Carmichael," she said briefly, "and I live at the Lodge with the Camerons. But I don't want the fish. I don't indeed."

"Then you shall not have it. I owe you some obedience, do I not?--and thanks beyond measure."

He stood there with his cap off smiling at her, and she, feeling apologetic in her turn, hesitated. After all, if he was going her way it would be foolishness itself to tramp that mile and a half with an interval of fifty yards or so between them.

"And now I must emulate your skill," he said cheerfully, "though I can't expect your luck." And as she moved away she saw his flies settle softly as thistledown in the right place. Well! that was better than keeping up the pretence.

As for him, though he continued to fish conscientiously, his thoughts were with the figure of the retreating girl. She had amused him and interested him greatly. A relation, he supposed, of Dr. Carmichael's; in fact, he had a dim recollection of a curly-haired child scampering about on a Sheltie ten years before; though he had never known the doctor, who had lived as a recluse. But how came she here still, and with the Camerons? A cut above them surely! By Jove! how she had hung on to that grilse, and how nearly she had cried over it afterwards. Maudlin sentimentality, of course, and yet he had felt the same a hundred times over a wounded deer. The look in her eyes had been like that, somehow; uncommonly pretty eyes they were, too, into the bargain!

CHAPTER V.

Paul Macleod sate in the business-room, where so many lairds of Gleneira had received rents and signed cheques, playing his part with great propriety, much to Will Cameron's delight and astonishment. Captain Macleod was, undoubtedly, the laird, and as such bound to a semi-parental interest in every living thing, to say nothing of every stick and stone about the old place. On the other hand, he had been away in a perfectly different environment for nearly ten years, and it seemed nothing short of marvellous to the factor that he should remember every farmer and cottier, nay, more, their wives, and sons, and daughters, by name. And so, perhaps it was; though, to tell truth, the mental qualities it represented were small, being no more nor less than a quick responsiveness to the renewal of past sensation; that very responsiveness which ten years before had made Paul shrink from giving an unpleasant memory a place in his life. Moralists are apt to sneer at the popularity which the possessor of this faculty enjoys; and, of course, it is easy to cheapen the sympathy of the man, who when he sees you, is instantly reminded of all the past connected with you in detail, and proceeds to inquire eagerly about your ox and ass, your manservant and your maidservant, and everything that is within your gate. Yet, when all is said and done, and though he certainly gives the false impression that these things have never been out of his mind, the gift is not only an enviable one, but in itself argues a quicker sensibility than that possessed by his more stolid, if more honest, neighbours.

So there was no effort to Paul Macleod in taking up the thread of his past life at Gleneira; at the same time, he felt no more regret at hearing, as he did through Will's answers to his inquiries, of Jeanie Duncan's death, somewhere in the vague South country, than he did for many another item of news. Partly because that old life had really passed out of existence for him altogether, and partly because Will, being a good-natured kindly soul, said nothing about the child which poor old Peggy had brought with her. There are many men of this sort--more men for the matter of that than there are women--who hate to face the sad aspect of life, and slur over a painful story whenever they can.

Thus Captain Macleod was able to quit the past and plunge into the future without even the slight regret which the news must have brought him; for in his way he had really loved Jeanie, and the thought that his admirable self-sacrifice had not availed to keep her memory pleasant, would have been a distinct annoyance. As it was, he began at once on plans and arrangements, which convinced Will Cameron that the laird must be going, unconsciously, to follow his advice, and marry a rich wife. Nothing else could explain the fact that Gleneira House had to be generally smartened up for the present, pending more solid repairs during winter, that carriages and horses had to be bought at once, and preparations of all sorts made for the houseful of guests which would come with the shooting season. In the matter of slates, glass, stables, and garden, Will Cameron felt himself equal to the occasion, but when chintzes and furniture came under discussion he meekly suggested a reference to Maples', or Morris, or his mother.

"I should prefer Mrs. Cameron," replied the laird, with a laugh. "If I wanted the other sort of thing my sister Blanche would do it for me fast enough. Take a brougham by the day--to save her own horse, you know--and re-create poor old Gleneira. First day, paper, painting, draping; second day, furnishing; third day, creeping things innumerable--you know them. Chenille things climbing up the lamp, a Japanese toad on the writing-table, and a spider on the edge of a teacup." He rose and went to the window. "But that sort of thing is desecration of this," he went on, looking out on the opalescent shimmer of sea and sky and hills; "though it does well enough in South Kensington. I never could fit myself out, even in clothes, with a view to both hemispheres, and though some folk profess to prepare for heaven and enjoy earth at the same time, I'm not made that way."

He pulled himself up with an airy smile, and turned round again.

"So let us be off to Mrs. Cameron, and perhaps that young lady who is staying with you--I met her by the river this morning----"

"Marjory," put in Will, eagerly; "why, yes, of course, she is the very person we want--has awfully good taste."

"Indeed," said the other, smiling again. He was thinking that in that case he could not claim distinction since she had not favoured him with much of her approval. Not that it mattered, since he had quite made up his mind that during the next few weeks, before his married sister came to do hostess, Marjory would be a decided acquisition to the limited society at his command; for Paul was distinctly gregarious in his tastes. It did not take much to amuse him; but he needed some gentle interest to start the wheels of his pleasure, and that interest was, preferably, a woman. So, being able thus to combine duty and amusement by a visit to the Lodge, he calmly suggested an adjournment on the spot, to which Will agreed, blissfully oblivious of the fact that not half-an-hour before he had left his mother in the agonies of

redding up the best parlour, with a view to the laird's expected visit in the afternoon.

No doubt when the women of the future have won large interests for themselves, such a spectacle as Mrs. Cameron presented when she saw two tweed-clad figures lounging up the path together will be impossible. Even nowadays the attempt to describe her feelings must fall far short of the reality, since few of this generation can grasp the mental position of the last, and Mrs. Cameron belonged to the generation before that. Of far better birth than many a farmer's wife who would be ashamed at being discovered engaged in household work, Mrs. Cameron would as a rule have gloried in what was to her the sole aim and object of woman's creation; but this was no ordinary occasion; how could that be one which necessitated clean muslin curtains at a time when clean muslin curtains should not be, a cake made after her mother's original recipe baking in the oven, and a bottle of her dead husband's very best Madeira waiting to be decanted on the sideboard?

She stood transfixed on the steps, in the very act of running a tape through the stiffened hem of the curtain, an operation which in itself had reduced her patience to the lowest ebb; and then, after an instant's pause, her resentment found an outlet in one expressive epithet.

"The Gowk!" For it was Will's fault, of course; had not the lad been a perfect dispensation ever since he was born? (this being her favourite word for describing all the inevitable trials of her life). Besides, after the manner of most housewifely women, she always visited any failure in domestic arrangements on the head of the nearest male belonging to the family. No one but a man, no one but a man, sent to make *her* life a burden, could have been guilty of such a disgraceful blunder, when a word, a hint, could have kept the laird from coming until the afternoon. The conviction brought a sort of martyred resignation with it, as she continued in a lower key, "and the parlour as bare as the loof o' my hand, save for the tea leaves on the drugget."

A more forlorn picture of discomfort could not have been suggested, and Marjory, standing by with needle and thread, promptly suggested that the laird should be shown into her study, since she was on the point of going out; an assertion which mollified the old lady by its suggestion that the visit must be to her alone. And wherefore not, since she had seen three generations of Macleods come and go? So, with vague remarks about sparing the rod and spoiling the child, which it is to be supposed bore reference to poor Will's education, she hurried off to meet her guest in the old-fashioned style, and take it out of the offender--who in the meantime had, for hospitality's sake, to go scot free--by a display of almost subservient humility to their employer.

"Come ben! Come ben, Gleneira, to your ain house. And tho' it is no so tidy as I might have wished" (here a savage glance at her son emphasised the stab) "it is not for me to say you nay, for even if we have been here father and son, a' these years, it is no for us to be forgettin' oor position and dependence."

"Don't keep the laird standing on the steps all day," put in Will, hurriedly; "he wants to have a crack with you, mother; let us go into the parlour."

"The parlour, William, as you should ken fine, is being redd up, so I must fain ask the laird's pardon for takin' him to our boarder's wee sitting-room."

As a rule Mrs. Cameron would sooner have died than call Marjory a boarder, and so level herself to the bit farmer-bodies who let lodgings in the summer time; but at present any weapon against her son's dignity was welcome, and she rejoiced to see him growing more and more impatient. Letting lodgings, indeed! Aye, that was what the poor shiftless creature would come to if he hadn't her to make both ends meet!

"My dear Mrs. Cameron," replied Paul, still holding her old hand and looking sentimentally into her old face, "the pleasure of seeing you is all I care for now. To begin with, it makes me feel years younger. And how young I was when you caught me stealing your jam! I have never forgotten the lecture you gave me, never! And then, do you remember---?" He was fairly afloat on the sea of reminiscence now, much to the old lady's gratification. But since this was distinctly an irregular method of getting through a state visit, she led the way defiantly to Marjory's little snuggerly upstairs, with another sniff at poor Will, which sent him off muttering something about letting its owner know; a remark which increased his mother's wrath, and made her more than ever set on a strict observance of the ceremony due to the occasion. So she sat exactly opposite Paul on a high chair, and began *seriatim* on all domestic events in the Gleneira family during the past nine years, until his head whirled, and the life which had seemed to him so varied and gay, reduced itself to a mere excerpt from the first column of the Times. Yet his deferential courtesy never failed, and, as usual, brought him its own reward; for after a time, the old lady, finding it impossible to resist his charm, thawed completely, and finally getting quite jolly, frankly confessed her annoyance, and hurried off to see if the cake were not sufficiently baked to admit of Gleneira's breaking bread in the house, just for luck's sake.

Paul, left alone, began to frown. This was Miss Carmichael's room; but, apparently, she meant to steer clear of it while he was there. Girls did that sort of thing; it made them feel independent. Meanwhile, what sort of a girl was she, judged by her room; that sort of knowledge often came in very useful when the dear creatures were shy. Fond of flowers, certainly, and in a rational way; these were not arranged in bouquets, but set one or two in a vase wherever a vase could stand, so that you could see them. Books? A closed bookcase full of the dreariest backs; they must have belonged to her uncle, or perhaps to old Cameron, who had been a bit of a student; but scarcely to a girl who could throw a salmon line like Miss Carmichael. Yes! She had certainly looked as well as she was ever likely to look, when swaying her lithe body to the sway of the rod. Pictures? A good photograph that, over the mantelpiece, of Andrea del Sarto's Maddelena; from the original, of course, and full size. That was the best of photographs, you could have them exact, and sometimes half an inch made such a difference. How well he remembered his first sight of the picture in that dark corner of the Borghese gallery, and the effect its dreamy eyes had had on him; the wonder, too, whether the casket really held a very precious ointment, or a still more precious *acquafana*. Either was possible with that dim, mysterious smile; and the woman herself--for it was Del Sarto's wife, of course--had been a lying devil who made her husband's life a perfect hell. Now, had Miss Carmichael chosen that photograph for herself; and, if so, why? Since it did not fit the salmon fishing any better than the books. Ah! there in the bow window, cut off from the rest of the room by muslin drapery, was a low wicker chair, placed close to a revolving bookstand.

"Now for the last new novel," he said to himself cynically. "What is the odds on anything in these latter times. I have seen nice girls since I came home reading things in public which I would not leave about in the smoking-room for fear the housemaid might be shocked. Eheu!"

It was a sort of prolonged low whistle of surprise and disappointment, mingled with a distinct personal aversion to the treatise on Conic Sections, which he took up inadvertently. The fact being that Paul Macleod had at one period of his life thought of Woolwich, and that particular book had, as it were, stood in the way of his ambition. Perhaps it was that which made him fling it down contemptuously, with a sort of vague indictment against the owner. She had not looked like it certainly, yet for all he knew she might be one of those clear-headed, hard-hearted nondescripts--the opposite extreme from that angel-faced, sensual-minded demon over the mantelpiece--who despised the emotions they were born to create, and would scorn to have a foolish, illogical, unreasoning, lovable sentimentality. There he paused abruptly, and whistled again; for on the stand among the books was a little vase holding some white heather and stag-horn moss. A curious coincidence truly, even if it were nothing more. He stood looking at it for a minute or two, and then quite coolly exchanged it for a similar bouquet which he was wearing in his buttonhole; a bouquet which he had found in a vase on his dressing-table.

Just then the door opened, at first gently, then hurriedly, while Marjory's voice exclaimed in joyous relief, "Gone at last! What a relief!"

Paul emerged from his concealment with outstretched hand. "Good-morning, Miss Carmichael," he said in that charming voice of his, "delighted to find you at home." She looked at him with level, puzzled eyes.

"I think you must have heard what I said just now, didn't you?" Her directness went straight through the veneer of conventional politeness, and startled him into corresponding frankness.

"Yes; every word," he said, turning to take up his cap.

"Oh, please don't," she broke in eagerly. "It will make me feel so ashamed. And it was only because I wanted to finish some papers and send them off. You see to-morrow is my birthday, and I promised Tom to take a holiday. But I forgot," she added with a quick apologetic smile, "you don't know who Tom is, and it can't interest you----"

"I beg your pardon," he interrupted, returning somewhat to his more elaborate manner; "it interests me exceedingly to know who Tom is."

Again her perfect unconsciousness drove him back to simplicity.

"Tom is my guardian--Dr. Thomas Kennedy. I don't suppose *you* have heard of him, but most people have; I mean of that sort. He is in Paris now busy over a bacillus."

"Indeed!" said Paul, beginning to weary; "and so to-morrow is your birthday, and you are to have a holiday; a whole holiday. That sounds very virtuous, Miss Carmichael, to a man who has perpetual holidays."

"But I am going to have six weeks! A real vacation. The first I've ever had; because you see I've never been to school or college, and work has always been more or less of an amusement to me. One must have something to do, you

know."

"Pardon me, but I seldom find the necessity. Life in itself occupies all my spare time; I mean all the time I can spare from things that are necessary to keep in life."

She looked at him again with frankly puzzled, half-amused eyes. "How funny that sounds. I don't understand it a bit, but I daresay I shall when I have really been idle for two or three weeks. Tom says it will do me good before I start regular work. I am going to teach in a Board school in November."

"That seems a pity."

"Why? I have to earn my own living, remember!"

"Pardon me for saying that that seems to me a greater pity still."

The puzzled, amused look grew more pronounced. "And that sounds still funnier. Can't you see that some of us must work; there are so many of us nowadays. Besides, I like work; uncle used to say that was lucky, because I had to. You see I am absolutely alone in the world."

"And that is the greatest pity of all." His voice, soft, kind, courteous, carried them beyond the lightness of ordinary conversation in a moment, and Marjory, recognising the fact, felt none of her usually quick resentment at the intrusion of a stranger into her inner life; for she was not of those who parade their possession of a soul, perhaps because she took it as a matter of course.

"I suppose it is, in a way," she assented; "but I have been accustomed to the position all my life, and somehow I never regret it."

"That seems to me rather unnatural in a girl."

"It is very lucky," she retorted. "What would become of me if I were afraid?"

"You would probably lead a far happier life."

"Why?"

They were standing opposite each other, looking into each other's faces, and the beauty of his, the unconsciousness of hers, held them both captive.

"Because in all probability you would marry."

There was a silence for a moment, but Paul Macleod, no mean judge of character, partly because of the complexity of his own, had rightly gauged the measure of what he had to deal with. What many girls might have deemed an impertinence Marjory passed by as a mere truism.

"I have often thought of that myself," she replied quietly; "but I think you are mistaken."

It was his turn now to put that terse, unconditional "Why?"

"I am not likely to marry; as uncle used to say, I have not purchasing power equal to my requirements."

"Meaning, of course, that your ideal is too high. I should have fancied so. You are very young, Miss Carmichael. And I am old; besides, ten years knocking about in Indian cantonments disposes effectually of the theory of twin souls. It is very beautiful, no doubt; but I fancy mine must have died in the measles, or some other infantile ailment. It did not survive to riper years, at any rate. But here comes Mrs. Cameron, so I shall escape scathing this time. I generally do."

Marjory felt she could well believe it, palpably unjust though such immunity might be, as she watched the laird give back the fervid greeting of the Reverend James Gillespie, who followed close on the tray of cake and wine.

"My dear sir; welcome to the Glen," cried the young clergyman. "I have been up at the Big House, and, hearing you were at the Lodge, ventured to follow you. As parish clergyman----"

"Deed no! Gillespie," put in Mrs. Cameron, sharply.

"I did not say minister, my dear Madam," retorted the Reverend James with uncommon spirit; "I said clergyman; and considering that the lairds of Gleneira have ever clung loyally to the Church." Here something in the old lady's face made him, as it were, climb down again. "Well, let us say parish priest."

"Deed no, again," interrupted the good lady, with a grim smile. "What would Father Macdonald be saying?"

The Reverend Mr. Gillespie climbed down still further for the sake of peace, though the vexed question of effectual orders was a favourite hunting-ground of the Bishop's. "As a native of Gleneira, deeply interested in the spiritual and moral welfare of its inhabitants, allow me to express my sincere pleasure in your return. Believe me, Gleneira, the people welcome you to their midst."

"It is really awfully kind of you all, when I have been such a shocking ne'er-do-weel absentee. I assure you, Miss Carmichael, that the number of times I've had to drink my own health in raw whiskey this morning is incredible; enough to ruin it for the next year."

The Reverend James put on his most professional air. "Too true. As the Bishop says, whiskey is indeed the bane--"

"Hoot, no!" interrupted Mrs. Cameron from the cake and wine; "good whiskey ne'er harmed a good man. It is just the idle, feckless bodies getting drunken that gives it a bad name."

"But that is just the point, my dear lady," expostulated the young man, feeling sure of his ground. "It is for the sake of the weaker brother."

"Havers!" began Mrs. Cameron; but the Reverend James was firm, and quoted the text.

"Aye, aye!" continued the old lady, "I ken where it comes from fine, more's the pity, for I don't hold wi' it. It's just a premium on being a poor body, and is the clear ruination o' this world whatever it may be of the next. Gie me a useless, through--other man or woman, and hey! it's a weaker brother an' maun' be cockered up."

She showed so much animation that her opponent retired from the contest discreetly by turning to the laird and beginning on a stock subject.

"I am sorry to say, Gleneira, that despite my own efforts, and the Bishop's earnest desire for the erection of a church, matters remain much as they were, when you were here last. That is to say, service has still to be conducted in the school-house, which, er--in addition to other illegitimate uses"--he glanced casually at his old enemy at this point--"also serves as a post-office; a plan which has great and undeniable inconvenience."

"And convenience, too," put in Mrs. Cameron, remorselessly. "You see, laird, the post is no delivered on the Sabbath-day, this bein' a Christian land, and so when folk go to kirk they can kill twa birds wi' one stane."

This was too much. "In my opinion," retorted the Reverend James, pompously, "it would be far less objectionable if Donald *did* deliver the letters than that the last words of the blessing should be the signal for handing them round the congregation. But as is so often the case in Scotland, the veneration for the day--which, by the way, is not the Sabbath----"

"No, no!" interrupted the old lady, "I'm no going that gate. I've told ye oft, Mr. Gillespie, it is naught to me if it's the Sabbath or Sunday, or Lord's-day or the first day o' the week we are keeping. But I ken fine that in my learnin' days I was taught to keep it holy, so if there is ony mistake it was none o' my makin'. It's the fault of the minister."

Mr. Gillespie coughed. "The hours of service are eleven o'clock for matins, and four o'clock for evensong. Miss Marjory kindly helps us with the harmonium. Indeed, one of my reasons for coming on here was to ask her to settle the hymns for Sunday first, unless, indeed, you yourself would select one suitable--er--to the occasion."

Paul took the proffered hymn-book with visible embarrassment, and looked appealingly towards Marjory, but it was impossible to laugh, for the Reverend James's proposition was saved from absurdity by its absolute simplicity.

"Really! my dear sir," he began, when Mrs. Cameron came to his rescue.

"Gie the laird a harvest hymn, Mr. Gillespie. I'll warrant he has sown his wild oats, though maybe after all, you would no care to be reapin' them, Gleneira."

He laughed very boyishly. "My dear old friend, if they were fifty shillings a quarter, I should be the richest man in Lomeshire, instead of the poorest."

"Poor," she echoed grimly; "you couldna' be poor if you tried. It is no in some men. And now, Gleneira, there's some o' the farm folk waiting to drink your health outside, so come awa'. And you, too, Marjory, my dear, for you're a Gleneira lass when all's said and done. And the parson can tak' a glass for his oft infirmities if he'll no do it for anything less important."

They followed her out into the sunshine, where, in a solemn semi-circle, they found half-a-dozen or more of men and halflings, headed, of course, by old John Macpherson as spokesman. He held a wine glass in one hand, a black bottle in the other, and the liltiness of his attitude, joined to a watery benevolence in his eye, told a tale of previous exertions towards the laird's good health. It was evident that, for the time being, he was an optimist, viewing the world as the best of all possible worlds. A glass more, and he would be ready to defend the proposition with his fists; another, and he would have wept over its denial, for Aladdin's genii of the bottle was not more powerful in metamorphosis than Scotch whiskey was on John Macpherson.

"An' here's to you, Gleneira," he said, when Paul returned the glass. "An' it's wissing you as rich as the Duke o' Wellington--Pech! Mistress Cameron, but yon's gude whiskey--water never touched it."

Even the refilled glass, as it passed from hand to hand, seemed to have a vicarious effect on old John, who waxed more and more lilty, and finally, when the others moved off, lingered for an audible whisper, accompanied by an admiring glance at the laird.

"Gorsh! Miss Marjory, wass I no tellin' you he was bonnie, and iss he not bonnie, whatever?"

"A leading question, John," said Paul, readily; "witness can't be expected to answer it."

But the argumentative mood was beginning. "An' what for no. Miss Marjory will be a Highland lass, an' a Highland lass will no be so shamefast, but they will be knowing a bonnie lad when they see one."

"I quite agree with you, John," said the girl, quickly, with a suspicion of both a frown and a smile on her face.

Paul Macleod, as he walked home, found himself fully occupied in trying, as it were, to piece the girl's character together to his satisfaction. She was a novel experience, a pleasant one into the bargain.

So when she came to breakfast next morning, a bouquet of hot-house flowers lay on her plate with Captain Macleod's best wishes for her birthday.

"I think it is very kind of him," she said judicially, in reply to Mrs. Cameron's rapture over the laird's condescension; "but Peter Morrison will be furious at having his show spoilt. And he has amputated the poor things at the knee. Men ought never to pick flowers, they don't understand them, except gardeners, and they never want to pick them at all."

When she went up that afternoon to the Big House in order to aid Mrs. Cameron's taste in the matter of new curtains, there was a little bunch of white heather and stag-horn moss tucked into her belt. In finding room amongst the vases for the newcomers this had seemed too pretty to throw away, that was all. But Paul Macleod's keen eyes fell on it at once with a certain satisfaction; nevertheless, he made no allusion to the subject, a reticence which he would not have observed towards most women of his acquaintance. It was sufficient for him to be aware of its complicated history. That sort of thing gave an infinite zest to life.

CHAPTER VI.

Even in the dusty glare of a dusty July sun, one of the largest houses in Queen's Gardens looked cool and pleasant with its delicate shades of grey on wall and portico, its striped jalousies and tiled window gardens gay with scarlet geraniums, yellow calceolarias, and blue lobelias; flowers, all of them, which seem somehow to have lost their flowerfulness by being so constantly associated in one's mind with area railings, barrel organs, and the eternal rat-tat of the postman's knock--to be brief, with London. For all the passer-by knew or cared, those lines of brilliant red, yellow, and blue blossoms might have been cunningly composed of paper, and would have served their purpose to the full as well had they been so, since no one, even inside the house, ever looked on them in the light of living, breathing plants going through a process of asphyxiation. It is difficult no doubt to resist the temptation to have pot-plants in London, but how often when brought face to face with the hideous ravages which a day or two of its poisonous atmosphere makes on our favourites has not the true flower-lover felt nothing short of murder. The inhabitants of the house in Queen's Gardens, however, had not even this chance for remorse, since the boxes were kept bright by contract, and if any poor plant was ill-advised enough to droop and complain, it was promptly rooted up and replaced by the man who came in the early mornings to "walk the hospitals" before the family appeared on the scene.

Within the house, the same spick and span, utterly impersonal attention to beauty prevailed. From basement to attic it was simply perfect in its appointments. As it might well be, since an artist in copper utensils had been let loose in the kitchen, the greatest authority in the world on wall papers had been allowed his will in friezes and dados; and so on from cellar to roof. There is, of course, a good deal to be said in favour of this modern specialism. It is distinctly comforting to know, that if you have not reached perfection, you have at any rate paid for it; but to some barbarians the loss of individuality in such houses is very grievous. To begin with, you lose a most delightful study of character. And after all, if Mrs. Jones has a sneaking admiration for a pea-green carpet with pink cabbage roses sprinkled over it, why, in heaven's name, should she conceal the fact? No green that ever was dyed is greener than grass, no flower that ever was woven is half as brilliant as the blossom-mosaic which Nature spreads for you to tread upon when the snow melts from the upland Alps. Yet the house was charming enough in detail if a little confusing *en masse* to those sensitive to their surroundings; since the drawing-room was Queen Anne, the dining-room Tudor, and various other corridors and apartments Japanese, Renaissance, Early English, or Pompeian.

This again did not affect the inmates, who, indeed, would have scorned to feel as if time and space had been annihilated in the course of half-a-dozen steps; such fanciful imaginations being almost wicked, when time and space were distinctly necessary to the due performance of your duty in that state of life to which it had pleased Providence to call you.

On this particular morning in July, Mr. and Mrs. Woodward and their daughter Alice were seated at the breakfast table in the usual comfortable indifferent silence of people who keep a diary of outside engagements in a conspicuous place on the writing-table, and whose inner lives move in decorous procession from morn till eve. A canary was singing joyfully, but at the same time keeping a watchful eye on the grey Persian cat which walked up and down rubbing itself, as it passed and repassed, against Mrs. Woodward's gown, with an anxious look on the bread and milk she was crumbling for it. Mr. Woodward, at the other side of a central palm tree, studied the share list. Miss Alice Woodward, who had evidently come down later than the others, was still engaged listlessly on toast and butter; finally making a remark in an undertone to her mother that as Jack had settled to ride with her in the Park at eleven, she supposed it was about time to get ready; a remark which resulted in her pushing away her plate languidly.

"You have eaten no breakfast, my dear, and you are looking pale," said her mother, comfortably; "I will get you some more Blaud's from the Stores."

"Oh! I'm all right," replied the girl. "It's hot, and--and things are tiresome. They generally are at the end of the season, aren't they?"

She drifted easily, rather aimlessly, out of the room. Like everything else in the house she was costly and refined; pretty in herself but without any individuality. For the rest, blonde and graceful, with a faintly discontented droop of the mouth, and large, full, china-blue eyes.

Mr. Woodward watched her retreat furtively till the door closed behind her, then laid down his paper and addressed his wife with the air of a man who attends strictly to business. That was, in fact, his attitude towards his daughter at all times. He did not, he said, understand girls, but he did his duty by them.

"I heard from Macleod this morning, my dear."

Mrs. Woodward went on crumbling bread gently, and there was a pause. "Well, what does he say?"

"That the house will be ready for visitors by the 8th of next month, and that it will give him great pleasure to welcome us as soon after that date as we can manage."

"Nothing more?"

"Only the old story; that he is most anxious for our consent in order that he may speak definitely. There, read it yourself, a sensible, gentlemanly letter. I really don't think she could do better."

His tone was precisely what it would have been had he been recommending the purchase of debenture stock in a safe concern.

"Then I suppose we may consider it settled; I mean, if Alice likes the place."

"Just so; but I'm told it is charming; there is a man--in hooks-and-eyes, by the way--who has the moor next it. I met him at the Kitcheners' dinner. He said it only wanted money, and she will bring that. Besides, the man himself is all that can be desired, even by a girl."

Mrs. Woodward nodded her head. "Yes, that is such a comfort, and Lady George is so nice. Alice is quite fond of her, which is a great point with a sister-in-law. In fact, everything seems most satisfactory." She paused a moment, and a faint shade of doubt showed on her face. "Only, of course, there is Jack."

"Jack! heaven and earth, Sophia! what has Jack to do with it?"

"Nothing, of course, only you know, or at any rate you might have seen that he--well, that he may object."

Mr. Woodward's face passed from sheer amazement to that peculiar expression of virtuous indignation which so many English fathers reserve for those who, without a nomination, have the temerity to admire their daughters.

"Jack! that boy Jack?"

"He is older than Alice, my dear," put in his wife, with meek obstinacy. She, on the contrary, was smiling, for, no matter how ineligible the victim, a scalp is always a scalp to a mother; and Jack was not ineligible. On the contrary, he was the head of the soap-boiling business, now that her husband had received a consideration for his interest, and retired into the more genteel trade of blowing soap bubbles on 'Change.

"Pooh!" retorted Mr. Woodward, angrily, "if he is troublesome send him to me, I'll settle him. The lad must marry position, like Alice." He paused, and his manner changed. "You don't, of course, mamma, insinuate that--that Alice--that your daughter has been foolish enough----"

Mrs. Woodward rose with dignity, and gave the cat its bread and milk. "*My* daughter is a dear, good, sensible girl, Mr. Woodward; but that doesn't alter the fact that your *nephew* may be foolish. I consider it extremely likely that he may be; it runs in the family."

Mr. Woodward took up the share list again, using it--after the manner of his kind when in domestic difficulties--as a shield, and his wife put a fresh lump of sugar in the canary's cage, saw to its seed and water, and left the room placidly. The bird was her bird, the cat her cat, and therefore she did her duty by them. In the same conscientious spirit she interviewed the housekeeper and ordered a very good dinner for her husband because he was her husband. Some people have the knack of getting a vast deal of purely selfish satisfaction out of their own virtues. Finally, she went into the morning-room, and began to think over the best way of doing her duty by her daughter also; for there was this difficulty in the way, here, that she and Alice were too much alike for sympathy. They found each other out continually, and, what is more, placidly disapproved of the various little weaknesses they shared in common. It is this inevitable likeness which is really at the bottom of that state of affairs, which is expressed in the feminine phrase, "they don't get on at home, somehow." But Alice was not a revolting daughter. Apart from other considerations, she would have thought it vulgar not to behave nicely to her parents, while Mrs. Woodward herself would have felt her complacent self-respect endangered if she had not had a high estimate of her own child; and Alice was, in this aspect, a far easier subject than her brother Sam, who, to tell truth, gave even his mother a few qualms in regard to his personal appearance.

But Alice was perfect in that respect, simply perfect. Not too pronouncedly pretty; not the sort of girl whose photograph would be put up surreptitiously in the shop windows, but really quite unexceptionable as she came in to her mother's room and stood at the window in her trim habit waiting for the horses to come round. Then she turned to her mother composedly.

"Father had a letter from Captain Macleod this morning, hadn't he? When does he expect us?"

Mrs. Woodward gave a sigh of relief. It was an advantage sometimes to be seen through, especially when you were anxious to give a word of warning before that long ride with Jack in the Park, and you did not quite know how to set about it.

"On the 8th; that will suit your father nicely; he will have done his meetings by then. And you will like the change, won't you, darling?"

"Immensely, of course. Then we had better go round to Redfern's to-day and order tailor-made things; something that looks rough, you know, but isn't. I hate rough things, they make me feel creepy. Ah! there is Jack coming round the gardens. Good-bye, dearest."

She stooped to kiss her mother dutifully ere leaving, and Mrs. Woodward seized the opportunity.

"Good-bye, darling, and before you go, Alice, about Jack."

"What about Jack, mamma?"

"You might tell him--perhaps."

"What shall I tell him?" asked the girl, a trifle petulantly. "That we are going down to stay at Gleneira with the Macleods. That is really all there is to tell--as yet."

"I know that, my dear; still--still it would be better if Jack did not follow you about so much."

"Of course, it would be better, and I have told him so often; I will tell him again, if you like, so don't be anxious, you good, pretty little mamma. I am very fond of Jack--he is a dear fellow--but I don't intend to marry him. I see quite well how foolish it would be for us both."

Mrs. Woodward, as she watched the riders pass down the road, told herself that Alice was one in a thousand, and deserved to be happy, as no doubt she would be if she married Paul Macleod, who was so very nice-looking. This point of good looks was one upon which Mrs. Woodward laid great insistence, and it enabled her to spend the next hour or two in finishing a sentimental novel in which the lovers, after sternly rejecting the counsels of parents and guardians, were rewarded in the third volume with PS50,000 a year and a baronetcy. For, like most mothers, poor Mrs. Woodward was sadly at sea on the matrimonial question. Its romantic side appealed to her fancy, its business side to her experience, since no woman can have done her duty in the married state for a quarter of a century without seeing that where personal pleasure has been the motive power in one point, sheer personal self-abnegation has been the motive in ten.

Meanwhile the cousins, after cantering round the Row, had reined in their horses for a walk. Alice rode well, and the exercise had brought an unwonted animation to her appearance. Jack, on the other hand, was a tall, burly young fellow, a trifle over-dressed, but otherwise unobjectionable, looked his best, with a heartwhole admiration for his companion on his honest face. What a pretty couple they would make, thought an old spinster, taking her constitutional in Kensington Gardens, and began straightway to dream of a certain hunt ball where someone had danced with her five times before supper. How many times afterwards she had never had to confess, even to her twin sister; thanks to the extras, which, of course, need not count. And yet nothing had come of it! And just as she got so far in her reminiscences Alice was saying to Jack pleasantly, "I shall miss these rides of ours, Jack, shan't you?"

"Why should you miss them?" he asked anxiously, for there was a superior wisdom in her tone which he knew and dreaded. "I'm going down to Heddingford when you go. We can ride there."

"But we are going to Scotland first; didn't mamma tell you? We are to stay with Captain Macleod."

Poor Jack's heart gave a great throb of pain.

"Macleod?" he echoed, "that is the tall, handsome fellow, isn't it, who used to hang round you before I came up

from the works?"

This allusion to Paul's good looks was unfortunate, since Jack's were not improved by the sudden flush which crimsoned even his ears.

"I don't know what you mean by hanging round," retorted the girl, quickly. "It is a very vulgar expression."

This again was unwise, for Jack, knowing his strong point was not refinement, felt instantly superior to such trivialities, and took the upper hand.

"Call it what you like, Ally. You know perfectly well what I mean, and what he meant, too."

There was no denying it, and, after all, why should it be denied? Had she not a right to have other lovers besides Jack?

"Let us come for another canter," she said, in the tone of voice which an elder sister might have used to a troublesome little brother, who required to be coaxed out of ill humour. "There is no use being cross about it, you know."

She went a little too far, and roused him into laying his hand on her rein, abruptly. And the action startled her, for she hated any display of emotion, being, in truth, totally unaccustomed to it.

"Not yet, Ally! I want to have this out first. It is time I did. And yet I don't know how to begin; perhaps because it never had a beginning. I've always cared for you--you know that. Ever since----" the young man's eyes grew moist suddenly over some childish recollection, and then an almost savage look came to his face. "And you--you cared. I'm sure you cared----"

Some people have the knack of saying the wrong thing, and in this case poor Jack Woodward gave his mistress a handle both to her pride and her prudence.

"Care," she echoed, in a patronising tone. "Of course, Jack, I cared. I cared for you very much, and I care for you now. So much so that I am not going to let you be foolish any more. We didn't understand what things really meant in those old days----"

"You don't understand now," he broke in hotly.

"Don't I," she continued; "perhaps I don't, for I don't really see what there is to make such a fuss about. And it is very selfish----"

"Do you mean to say that it is selfish of me to love you?" he cried. "Selfish to----"

She interrupted him again with the same facile wisdom.

"Very selfish, if we stand in each other's way. And, after all, Jack, what we both need to make life really successful is something we have neither of us got. We are only soap-boilers, you know, and society----"

"Society!" he echoed sternly. "What has society to do with it? I didn't think you were so worldly."

"I am not worldly," she retorted, in quite an aggrieved tone; "unless, indeed, it is worldly to be sensible, to think of you as well as of myself--to be unselfish and straightforward."

"Straightforward! What, do you call it straightforward to let me hang round you as I have done?"

"Really, Jack, you are *impayable* with your hangings round! Can you not find a less objectionable phrase?"

She was fencing with him, and he saw it, saw it and resented it with the almost coarse resentment of a nature stronger and yet less obstinate than hers.

"Yes, if you like. I'll say you have played fast and loose with me--as you have. You have known for years that I cared for you, and that I intended to marry you. And when a girl allows that sort of thing to go on without a word, and doesn't mean it, I say she is a flirt--a heartless flirt, and I have nothing more to do with her."

He turned his horse as he spoke, and without another word rode off, leaving her to go home with the groom.

Inexcusable violence, no doubt. Alice told herself so again and again in the vain effort to get rid of a certain surprised remorse, for the girl was emphatically a moral coward, and any display of high-handed resentment, so far from rousing her opposition, invariably made her doubtful of her own wisdom. She hated scenes most cordially, hated, above all things, to have opprobrious epithets hurled at her; for she clung with almost piteous tenacity to her own virtue. It was too hard, too unkind of Jack to blame her, and yet despite this, his condemnation seemed to dim that lodestar of her firmament--common sense. After all, if he liked her, why should they not marry? Why should such devotion be sacrificed to the Moloch of position? In truth, as she thought over the incident, an odd mixture of anger and regret came to upset her usual placidity, so that, much to her own surprise, she broke down helplessly into tears over her mother's conventional inquiry as to how she had enjoyed her ride. Nor could she find any reason for this unwonted emotion, beyond the fact that Jack had been brutal and called her a flirt, and had ridden away, declaring that he would have nothing more to say to her. That such would be the case Mrs. Woodward, as she administered sal volatile and talked about the trying heat, felt was most devoutly to be wished; but a long course of three volume novels warned her of the danger of trusting to the permanence of lovers' quarrels. So after her daughter had been provided with darkness and eau-de-cologne, and a variety of other feminine remedies against the evil effects of emotion, she went off to her own sitting-room to consider the position by the light of her five-and-forty years of human experience. To begin with, the girl's feelings were clearly more deeply implicated than she, or for the matter of that Alice herself, had imagined. The question, therefore, came uppermost whether this fact ought to be admitted or deprecated; whether in short this evident dislike to giving her cousin pain was the result of a romantic attachment or simply the natural kindliness of a girl for a young fellow she had known from infancy. Now the cogitations of mothers over their daughters' matrimonial prospects are always fair game for both moralist and novelist. For some mysterious reason the least display of prudence is considered worldly; yet, on the face of it, a woman who has had, say, five-and-twenty years of married life cannot possibly fail to see how much of her own life has been made or marred by influences which she never considered in accepting Dick, Tom, or Harry. In nine cases out of ten it is the remembrance of her own ignorance which makes her espouse the cause of the lover who can bring the greatest number of chances for content. And it is idle to deny, for instance, that a girl marrying into a family which will welcome her is far less likely to quarrel with her husband than one who is looked on askance by her mother-in-law. There is, in sober truth, an immense deal to be said in favour of the French theory which holds that given a favourable nidus, and kindly atmosphere, the germ of happiness is more likely to grow into a goodly tree, and bear fruit a thousandfold, than when it is planted in a hurry by two inexperienced gardeners in the first pot which they fancy in the great Mart. Owing, however, to our somewhat startling views as to the sanctity of the romantic passion over the claims of duty towards oneself and others, these minor considerations are considered mercenary to the last degree, and the mother who is courageous enough to confess them openly is held up to obloquy. Why, it is difficult to say, since none of us really believe in the popular theory. It will not hold water for an instant when put to the practical test of experience; even if we leave out of consideration the fact that fully one-half of the people one meets have never felt, and have never felt the desire to feel, an absorbing passion.

Mrs. Woodward, for instance, had not; moreover she had brought Alice up from the cradle to share her views of life, and had never once found her way barred by any bias towards a more passionate outlook. In fact, she was, in her mother's estimate, the very last girl in the world to find sentiment soothing. On the contrary, it distressed her, made her cry, necessitated her lying down with smelling-salts and a hot-bottle. Then above all things she loved a certain refined distinction and exclusiveness. Even as a child she had held her head high in the soap-boiling connection, and though she would no doubt be very fairly happy with Jack, the Macleod family was distinctly more suitable. The question, therefore, soon resolved itself, not into whether the outworks of the girl's placidity should be defended, but how this could best be effected. How in short Jack could be prevented from posing as a martyr; for Mrs. Woodward was sharp enough to see that, at present at any rate, the danger lay entirely in her daughter's remorse.

"It was very unkind of Jack I must say," she commented skilfully on the story which Alice unfolded to her after a time; "but you mustn't be hard on him, my dear. Men never have so much self-control as we have, and no doubt the knowledge that you were right vexed him. They get over these little rebuffs very quickly."

"It--it seemed to hurt him though--and I hate--all that sort of thing," murmured the girl doubtfully, looking as if she were going to cry again.

"And it hurts you apparently, though you know quite well that you only did your duty."

"I suppose so," remarked Alice, still more doubtfully; "only I wish he hadn't been so unreasonable."

"So do I; but in these cases the girl always has to have sense for both. Besides Jack has a vile temper. But it is soon over. You will see that he will come to dinner as usual--it is the opera night, and he wouldn't miss that for anything--not even for you, my dear."

Alice smiled a watery smile, and said she did not think it meant so little to him as all that; but Mrs. Woodward maintained her position, having, in fact, some grounds for her belief, owing to the despatch of a certain little note which she had sent off before coming in to console Alice, and which ran thus:--

"DEAR JACK,--Alice tells me you were very much put about to-day regarding our visit to Scotland; why, I can scarcely understand. Dear boy, if only for your own sake--since you can scarcely wish to quarrel with her, or us--do try and keep that temper of yours a little more under control. The poor girl came home crying, and I really cannot allow you to go out with her again if you are so inconsiderate. You ought to know quite well how sensitive she is, so for goodness' sake don't let this stupid misunderstanding disturb us all.--Your affectionate Aunt,

"SOPHIA WOODWARD."

P.S.--"We dine earlier to-day, as Alice wants to be in time for the overture, 'Tannhauser.'"

A note which meant all or nothing according to the wishes of the reader. In this case it meant all, for Jack, returning to his rooms after a disastrous attempt to begin his future role in life by playing whist with the old fogies at his club, was feeling that life, even as a misogynist, was unendurable, when the sight of his aunt's handwriting made his heart beat. The note was not in the least what he had expected to receive, and made him somehow feel as if he had grossly exaggerated the necessity for grief.

"Aunt Soph is on my side, anyhow," said the young man, with a certain elation, "and I was a brute, I'm afraid."

The result being, that before Alice, who had been spending the afternoon with Paul Macleod's sister, Lady George Temple, had returned from her drive, Jack, with a big gardenia in his coat, was ushered into the drawing-room, where his aunt, in satin and diamonds, was skimming through the last few pages of another novel which had to be returned to the library that evening.

"Good boy!" she said, smiling. "Now, I hope you won't spoil Alice's pleasure to-night by even alluding to your rudeness."

Jack looked a little aghast. "But, Aunt Sophia, I must beg her pardon."

"Then you had better do it at once," replied Mrs. Woodward, "and get it over. For there she is at the door. You can run downstairs and meet her, for she will have to go up to dress at once. She is late as it is."

Begging your mistress's pardon on the way upstairs, before the eyes of a butler and a footman, was not quite what Jack had pictured to himself; but it was better than nothing, and Alice's unfeigned look of relief at seeing him could not be mistaken.

Mrs. Woodward slept soundly that night, feeling that she had done a good day's work, and steered the bark of her daughter's happiness out of a great danger. And happiness to her philosophy meant much, since virtue was so very much easier of attainment when life went smoothly. This was partly the reason why she did not detail the past danger to her husband after the manner of some wives, who love to chase sleep from their good man's eyes by breaking in upon the delicious drowsiness of the first ten minutes in bed by perfectly needless revelations of past woe.

The tie, in fact, between these two whose night-capped heads reposed side by side, was a curious one if absolutely commonplace. It consisted of a vast amount of mutual respect for each other's position as husband or wife, a solid foundation of placid affection, and no confidence. For instance, Mrs. Woodward knew considerably more about her son Sam Woodward's debts than his father did, to say nothing of minor points in the matter of household management; but then at least two-thirds of Mr. Woodward's life was absolutely unknown to the wife of his bosom. He breakfasted and dined at home on week days, and on Sundays he added lunch to the other meals; what is more, he never deserted her for the club on the occasion of "At Homes." But of his life between 10 A.M. and 7 P.M. she knew nothing, except that he lunched at a bar in the City. So far as this went, he was to her exactly what he was to the outside world; that is to say, Mr. Woodward, the lucky financier, whose name meant money. Even the success or failure of the companies which she saw advertised with his name as director did not interest her, for she knew by experience that

money and to spare was always forthcoming. And to tell the truth, Mr. Woodward was a singularly lucky man. When the smash came to the company "For Preserving the North American Indian from Total Extinction by Supplying him with a Sparkling Beverage, Exhilarating but non-Alcoholic, to take the Place of the Deleterious Fire Water," he had happened to sell his last remaining share the day before; and even when the scheme for supplying hard-boiled eggs to the settlers in Africa failed, it did not affect the home supply at all. And yet Mr. Woodward's character as a business man stood above suspicion, and the worst that had ever been said of him was that he could sail a point or two nearer to the wind with safety than most men.

So that night he also slept the sleep of the just, undisturbed by the thoughts of Jack's temerity. Even if he had known of it, it is to be feared that he would have set the question aside with the mental verdict that it was clearly the business of the girl's mother to see to such things. Poor mothers! who as they look at the bald head on the pillow beside their own cannot but feel, even while they would not now part with it for all the world, that life would have been less disappointing if circumstances had been more kind.

As for Alice herself, she slept peacefully also, the doubt which poor Jack's pain had raised in her gentle mind having been allayed by his prompt submission. And Jack snored--positively snored; for he was rather fatigued with his own excitement, being of the sort which takes most things not so much keenly as heavily. To tell the truth, also, his determination to marry his cousin was so fixed that the greater part of his pain had been sheer inability to grasp the idea of denial; so that he reverted gladly to the old position without asking questions as a less tenacious man might have done.

CHAPTER VII.

Lord George Temple sate moodily in the armchair of his study in his little house in Mayfair chewing the end of a cigar and looking disconsolately at a tray of whiskey and water and a plate of oval thin Captain's biscuits on the table. He was a red-haired smooth-faced man with rather a long upper lip, and a good-natured, somewhat whimsical expression.

"It is a confounded shame!" he said to his wife, who, with an opera cloak slipping from her pretty bare shoulders, was resting for a moment before going upstairs to bed. "Graham gives his cook twenty-five pounds a year--I heard her telling you so one day when she was wanting a new one--and yet there wasn't a thing fit to eat on the table----"

"Well, I don't know," put in Lady George, absently; "I think those stuffed larks came from Mirobolants. I saw that style of decoration in his place the other day, and I'm quite sure the iced soufflé was Bombardi's; I know the shape."

"Exactly what I said!" continued the husband, "not a thing fit for a gouty man to eat at the table, and yet a woman on twenty-five pounds ought to be up to roast chicken and a rice pudding."

Blanche Temple looked at her spouse with the compassionate air of tolerance which she invariably extended to his views.

"But you can't give your friends roast chicken and rice pudding; you can't, indeed, nowadays. People wouldn't come."

"My dear girl," interrupted Lord George, obstinately, "there were four men at the table who, like myself, partook of soup, fish, and cheese straws. And one poor beggar didn't even have the soup." The thought was apparently comforting, for he began more contentedly on a biscuit. But his wife was now interested in the subject. Most things interested her, either to affirmation or denial, for Paul Macleod's sister was a very clever woman, if at the same time curiously conventional.

"Well! I don't know who eats the things, then," she said, aggrievedly. "Why, the last time we had a dinner-party--I mean when the Woodwards were here--I'm sure Paul ought to be infinitely obliged to me for the trouble I take--the cook who came in used pounds on pounds of stock meat, and quarts on quarts of cream; to say nothing of a whole bottle of whiskey. 'You had better give it her, my lady,' said Jane, 'for fear as the dinner might 'ave no appearance.'"

Among other unknown and despised talents which did not suit Lady George's theory of her own role in life was a distinct turn for mimicry. Her admirable impersonation of Jane, therefore, made her husband burst out laughing; since by a whimsical perversion of affairs he loved his wife dearly for the very qualities which she feigned not to possess. For Blanche was essentially a theatrical woman, loving to pose in all the relations of life, her present one being that of a dutiful sister. On Paul's return from India she had not only hastened to impress on him the absolute necessity for his marrying an heiress if he wished to keep Gleneira in the family, but had also introduced him to Alice Woodward, as a girl who would suit the part admirably. For Lady George knew her brother's foibles thoroughly, and understood that if he married for money, the bride must be a person who would neither offend his refinement, nor require much display of affection; since Paul would certainly never give himself away by pretending a depth of sentiment he did not feel, and yet would not marry without something of the sort. That she felt was the worst of him. *Au fond* he was absolutely truthful to himself.

"Of course you could sell if you liked," she had said to him skilfully, well knowing that the very thought was utterly repugnant; "trade is always ready to buy a Highland property. The only alternative is to marry a girl with money. I know one, pretty, lady-like, refined; a girl of whom you would be very fond if she were your wife. Her father is a speculator. Not quite so safe, of course, as a solid business--buttons or tallow--though, by the way, he has something to do with soap. Still, these Woodwards are quite presentable, and *Monsieur le pere* has his wits about him. And then you know there are always settlements, and deeds of gift, and those sort of things which creditors make such a fuss about."

Her brother winced visibly. "I should prefer not to have a row with anybody else's creditors," he said shortly. "*I* shall have enough apparently to do in keeping my own quiet. England is a terribly expensive place to live in."

"London, you mean," retorted his sister, gaily. "You can always go down to Gleneira and vegetate."

That had been at the beginning of the season, and now Paul had gone down, not to vegetate, but to prepare the old place for the visit of inspection; not without a certain resentful irritation at the necessity for it. Though at the same time it put the affair on an easier footing for the present.

Afterwards, however, Paul had every intention of imparting sentiment into the transaction, if it could be done; and he knew himself to have a vast capacity for falling in love, after the approved romantic fashion, with any pretty girl who was willing to let him make love to her. So his sister, bewailing the pounds of stock meat and quarts of cream expended on his behalf, yet felt that she had been successful; but, then, she would hardly have recognised herself if she had not been so, since in her own little world, which she carefully avoided extending unwisely either upwards or downwards, Lady George Temple was always cited as a success in all the roles which she felt called upon to play.

"I heard from Paul to-day, by the way," she said, as she gathered up her gloves and fan. "He wants me to go and call on that Mrs. Vane. You remember who I mean, of course?"

"No, I don't," replied Lord George, relapsing into moodiness over the biscuits.

"You never do remember what I mean, dear! But she is the Colonel's wife, who nursed Paul when he nearly died in India. Of course they do it very often, I know, and it is more confusing than sending for a woman whom you can pay and get rid of afterwards. Still, she really did save his life--under Providence, of course--at least, Paul always said so. Well, her husband, who, I believe, drank, or did something, died two years ago, leaving her dreadfully off, so she went to live with somebody--an uncle or an aunt, who, I fancy, must have left her some money, for she has just taken a house somewhere in Chelsea. And Paul, who hasn't seen her since those old days, has asked her to Gleneira, and wants me to make her acquaintance first. Rather a bore, for I wish to have a particularly pleasant party, and she will most likely be an old frump."

"Scarcely, my dear, if she nursed your brother, and he survived," remarked Lord George, gravely.

His wife frowned. "How can you be so absurd, dear; she must be quite old, for Paul wrote she was a perfect mother to him, and that is quite six years ago."

Lord George's eyes twinkled again. "My dear Blanche, you and Paul have exaggerated notions on the subject of a mother's----" He paused, at a rattle on the door-handle, and looked apprehensively at his wife. The next instant two charming little figures in frilled white nightgowns burst into the room, and flinging themselves into their mother's arms began to cover her with kisses. The daintiest little creatures, a boy and a girl, with angelic faces and shrill, excited, happy, little voices.

"Oh, you bad children!" cried Blanche, without a trace of vexation. "So you wanted to see mother, did you? And now you have seen her, off to bed with you before Nannie comes after you, there's dear ones! Quick! or she will be coming."

"Quick, Adam! Quick, Evie!" echoed the happy voices excitedly, in a rush to the open door, which ended in a sudden pull up, and a still more excited cry. "Oh, mammy! Oh, daddy! here's Blazes comin' down the stairs."

Lord George's face lost its apprehensiveness in resignation. Yet, as he settled himself back in his chair, his long upper lip betrayed a disposition to smile, for Blasius, his youngest son, was apt to amuse him. A very different child this, short, squat, and red-haired, who, after sundry thumpings and bumpings outside, suggestive of falls, appeared, rubbing his eyes sleepily, at the door; then the broad, good-natured face expanded into a grin. "*Bickys!*" he said, laconically, as he toddled across to the tray.

"Oh! what a welly greedy little boy, ain't he, Evie?" said Adam. "We come to see our darlin' mummie, didn't we, duckums?" He was at her side for a swift caress, and back again to stand expectantly beside his sister, whose little dancing feet were keeping time to her nodding golden head. As pretty a picture of light-hearted innocent enjoyment as heart could desire, even at eleven o'clock at night!

"Give him a biscuit, do, and let him go," said Lady George, hurriedly. "It won't hurt him, they are quite plain. Dada will give you a biscuit, Blasius, and then you can go back to bed, like a dear, can't you?"

Blasius' large, round, blue eyes assumed a look of vacuity as the sentence proceeded; but as he stood sturdily on his little bare feet beside his father both little chubby hands went out at once, and a singularly full voice for so young a child gave out conglomerately:--

"Blathe's--'ll--take two, ta."

Lord George shot a glance at his wife and complied; while from the door came a little whisper, intended to be one of horror. "Oh, Addie! ain't he a welly greedy little boy?"

"And now Blasius will go to bed like a good boy, with his good little brother and sister," remarked Lady George, with forced optimism. "Adam and----" Her voice failed before a soft thud as Blasius sat down solidly, and stuck his little bare feet beyond his little white nightgown.

"Mummie can go, Blazeth'll stay with dada--ta."

Those two at the door stood bolt upright, with sidelong looks of pious horror at each other--

"Oh, Evie! \ > Ain't he a weally naughty little boy?" "Oh, Addle! /

"Blasius *must* go to bed," began his mother, quite firmly, "or--or--mummie will be very much grieved. Her little boy wouldn't like to grieve his mummie, would he?"

Lord George, who had looked hopeful at the decision of tone, sank back in his chair and twiddled his thumbs.

"You had better ring for nurse at once, Blanche. It always comes to that in the end, and the child will get cold."

His wife frowned. Her theories had been so successful with Adam and Eve that the necessity for reverting to the *vi et armis* with this baby was grievous. She sat down beside him on the floor, and began in mellifluous tones.

"Listen, Blasius. Mummie wants her little Blasius to do something to please her; she wants him to do something very much----" She got no further, being gagged by a little soft hand and a very hard biscuit together.

"Blazeth's not a deedy 'ickle boy. Blazeth'll give poor 'ickle mummie hith bicky, and be a dood 'ickle boy. Then daddy'll gif him anofer."

Little chortles of intense enjoyment came from those angelic faces at the door.

"Go to bed, children; off with you at once," said their father, quickly, whereupon an obedient patter of bare feet fled up the stairs with an accompanying cackle of high, eager voices, busy over the pros and cons of Blasius versus authority.

"Do you think she'll assuade him, Evie? I don't." "I think he ought to be smacked, I do." "I'd let him cry, it don't hurt a child to cry. Nanna's mother says it's good for the lungs." "And Blazes likes to cry, he does." "I say, Addie! how long will it be afore Duckum's mummie has to ring the bell?"

The last wonder being faintly audible from the landing above, settled the business downstairs. Lord George rose and took the law into his own hands.

"Oh, George!" cried his wife, reproachfully, "how can you expect to train up children in the way they should go if you are so impatient? If once I could have got Blasius to understand what was really required of him----"

Here the advent of a big, stalwart figure in a wrapper, bearing a white shawl, brought such sudden comprehension to the stalwart little one, that the room for one brief moment resounded with yells. The next found the door closed upon them, and Lady George looked disconsolately at her husband, as she listened to the retreating struggles of her youngest born.

"I cannot think what makes him so different from the others," she said, gloomily.

"My dear," replied her husband, consolingly, "Cain came after Adam and Eve; perhaps the next will be Abel. Besides, Blasius was a risky name. I told you so at the time."

"Saint Blasius was a very worthy man," retorted his spouse, hotly, "and, considering that you and the boy were both born on his day, I must say I think it quite natural that I should call my child George Blasius--or, let me see, was it Blasius George?"

"It is a matter of no importance, my dear," replied her husband, drily. He did not remind his wife, nor did she choose to remember that at the time she had been playing the ultra ritualistic role. To tell the truth, she did not care to

be brought face to face with her past impersonations, unless the fancy seized her to revert to them; when, at a moment's notice, she could resume the character as if she had never ceased to play it.

So, the next day, with a view to making a suitable impression on Paul's widow, as she chose to call Mrs. Vane, she put on her most dowdy garments, and actually went in an omnibus down the King's-road. Thus far her environment suited her foregone conclusions, but, as she stood in the wide stretch down by the river, the brilliant sunshine streaming upon a very bright knocker and a very white door, a certain feeling of distrust crept over her. Nor was the darkened room into which she was ushered reassuring. The parquet floors were almost bare, the windows beneath the striped Venetian awnings were set wide open to a balcony wreathed with blossoming creepers, and hung with cages of singing birds. A scent of flowers was in the air, a coolness, an emptiness, and yet the first impression was one of ease and comfort. Not the room, this, of an old frump. And this was not an old frump rising from a cushioned lounge and coming forward like a white shadow in the half light.

"How good of you to come!"

Lady George, dazzled as she was by the change from the sunlight outside to the darkness within, yet saw enough to make her gasp. Lo! this little bit of a woman with siren written all over her from the tip of her dainty Parisian shoe to the crown of her fair, curly head, was Paul's widow. His mother, forsooth! A pretty mother, indeed!

Having got so far as this, Blanche, being, amongst other things, somewhat of an artist, felt bound to admit that Violet Vane was very pretty indeed; so pretty that it was a pleasure to watch the piquant face, full of a quaint sort of humour and freshness, grow clear of the shadows. In this half light she looked younger, no doubt, than she really was; still, even in the garish day, Lady George felt instinctively that her charm would remain. In fact, she was not at all, no! not in the least, a suitable companion for Paul, when so much depended on his being reasonable.

"I haven't seen your brother for years," came the sweet but rather thin voice. "It is so good of him to remember me. So more than good of him to ask me down to Gleneira that I mean to go, if only to ensure the kindness being credited to him. I wonder if he is much changed?"

There was a certain challenge in the speech which Lady George was quick enough to recognise, and, as she recognised it, wondered if her own astonishment had been too palpable, as that in itself would be a mistake, so she replied deftly:

"He is not changed in one thing--his gratitude to you. And I am grateful also, for Paul is very dear to me. The dearest fellow in the world, is he not?"

It was a statement to which, in the language of poker, Mrs. Vane could hardly go one better, and therefore it left her, as it were, to an under-study of devotion.

"He used to be very nice when I knew him; but, then, sick people are always nice; they are so much at one's mercy," said the little lady, airily. They were, in their way, admirable types of their kind, these two women; both artificial, yet with an artificiality which sprang from the head in the one case, from the heart in the other; for Mrs. Vane saw through herself, and Lady George did not.

"So that is Paul's sister," said the former to herself as, on the way back to her lounge, after escorting her visitor in friendliest fashion to the stairs, she paused to take up a photograph case lying on the table. It contained Paul's portrait as he had been before the time when she had watched his fair head tossing restlessly on the pillow in that hot Indian room which nothing would cool. The memory of those dreary days and nights came back to her in a rush, making her, paradoxically, look years older, worn, haggard, and anxious. She seemed to be back in them; to hear the gathering cry of the jackals prowling past the open door, to see the flicker of the oil night-light gleam on the splintered ice, turning it for a brief second to diamonds, as she prepared it for the burning forehead above those bright, yet glazed eyes; and, more than all, she seemed to feel the old passionate protest against the possibility of his passing for ever out of her life joined to the fierce determination to save him to the uttermost. From what? from herself, perhaps. For Mrs. Vane had performed the most unselfish act of her life when she had laughed and scoffed at the devotion and gratitude of her patient. She had had many, she said, and they had always felt like that during some period of their convalescence. There was nothing for these sequelae of jungle fever like three months' leave to the bears in Kashmir; and, if he liked, he might bring her home one of those little silk carpets for her sitting-room as a fee; she would prefer a carpet to anything else. And so Paul had come back with his unromantic offering, cured, as she had prophesied, of his feverishness, but not of his friendliness. That had lasted, despite a separation of years. And something else had lasted also, to judge by the look on Mrs. Vane's face as she stood with Paul's photograph in her hand.

Lady George Temple took a cab home, and tried to regain a sense of lost importance by having the children down to tea. Paul had kept this thing secret from her; he had allowed her for years to speak kindly, effusively of the woman who had saved his life as if she were an old frump, when she was really--Blanche, being a person of sense, felt forced to acknowledge the truth--one of the most charming little creatures imaginable, with just that half-sympathetic, half-bantering manner which was so taking. And Paul, having done this, her own role of devoted sisterhood suffered thereby; so she fell back upon her motherhood.

Thus, when her husband returned, he found the room littered with Kindergarten toys, while Adam was threading beads by the multiplication table, and Eve was busily engaged in marking the course of the River Congo in red back-stitching on a remarkably black continent of Africa, which was afterwards to do duty as a kettleholder. Blasius, meanwhile, having been so far beguiled into the Zeit-Geist as to consent to build a puff-puff out of some real terra-cotta bricks and columns which were intended for an architectural object lesson.

"Oh, George!" began his wife, pausing with a lump of sugar in the tongs over his cup, "Paul's widow is dreadful; I don't know what I shall do with her."

"Hand her over to me--I can generally manage to get on with people," he said, watching the tongs greedily; for the question of sugar in his tea was the cause of much dispute between him and his wife. A slow smile came to her face as she replaced the lump.

"No! my dear; it wouldn't be good for you," she said, coming back to the present, and then she frowned. "I cannot think what induced Paul to ask her just when so much depends on the Woodwards feeling themselves to be *the* guests *par excellence*," she continued, after a brief but picturesque description of the offender. "And this woman is sure to sing, and play, and dance, and act. I saw it in her face."

"Jolly sort of person to have in a country house, I should say," remarked her husband, secretly impressed.

"I knew *you* would say that, George," put in his wife, resignedly. "Yes! she is just the sort of woman men love to dangle round."

"Then ask someone to dangle. That will leave the coast clear for Paul and Miss Woodward."

Lady George raised her eyebrows scornfully. "As if that would do any good! That sort of woman always insists on having the best men, and Paul looks that in most society; besides I don't feel called upon to pave the way to an heiress for anyone else but my brother. That is what it would come to. No! I cannot conceive why Paul should make things so--so much more difficult for himself."

"Natural depravity, my dear," suggested her husband, helping himself on the sly to sugar. "There is such a thing--Hullo! what's that?"

That was the sudden discovery on Blazes' part that an Ionic column, when used as an engine funnel, would, if hit violently with a good, squat Norman one, break off in the middle; a discovery which was followed by an outburst of that craze for destruction which healthy children display on the least provocation.

"He--he is not a 'Kindergarten' child," remarked his mother, plaintively, when after a time the upstairs bell had once more been rung and the offender carried off shrieking amid awed whispers of intense enjoyment, about "welly welly naughty little boys" from Adam and Eve.

"No, my dear, he isn't," assented Lord George, cheerfully. "Some of us are made that way; his uncle, for instance; but he isn't a fool, and he knows which side his bread is buttered; a fact which has a marvellous effect in keeping a man straight."

"My dear George! what a terrible thing to say. It is a reversion to that fear of punishment----"

"My dear! I should like a second cup of tea, and this time I think you might let me have a small lump of sugar--quite a small one."

That evening Blanche wrote a long letter to her brother, which gave her some trouble to compose. In it she lavished endless praises on dear Mrs. Vane, who, to judge from her *looks*, must have had great *trouble*, and fully deserved dear, kind Paul's grateful remembrance of past services; which, by the way, she seemed to have extended to many other fortunate invalids. Altogether a most delightful woman, of *varied experiences* if a trifle *manieree*; "though this," she added, "my dear Paul, is, I fear, a common fault with women who have been made much of *by many men*."

As it so happened he read this remark at a small picnic party where Marjory, the only lady present, was dispensing tea to Will Cameron, himself, the Reverend James Gillespie, Father Macdonald, Mr. Wilson, and Donald Post, who had been waylaid on the road just above the little creek on the loch, where they had lit their fire, to say nothing of the minister's man holding the Manse dogcart until its occupants should choose to tear themselves away from temptation and proceed on their journey.

"*Quid datur a Divis felice optatius hora?*" quoted the minister gallantly, as he set aside the girl's offer of another cup and rose to go, while little Father Macdonald, following his example, quoted a verse from Tasso to show that the memory of a pleasant hour might give even greater pleasure than the hour itself. Paul Macleod, watching them, and fully alive to the adoring look on the Reverend James's face, continuing, as it were the kindly affection of Will's, gave a short laugh as he tore up his letter and threw it into the embers of the dying fire.

Marjory looked at him inquiringly.

"Only something that seems singularly out of place with my present surroundings," he said in quick response; "but the world has a knack of seeming very far away when one is in Gleneira."

CHAPTER VIII.

It was true. The more so because the heat-haze lingered, turning the hills which lay between the Glen and the world beyond it, into a pale blue, formless wall, which seemed somehow more of an arbitrary division than it would have done had the contours of each successive rise been clearly visible. The fierce sun beat down on the limestone rocks, giving a russet tinge even to their mosses, and Paul Macleod's useless rod lay in its case, since the river was reduced to a mere tinkle of clear water in a moraine of boulders. So he took to haymaking instead, partly because it suited his mood to play the role of country proprietor--for to a certain extent he shared his sister's dramatic temperament--and partly because Marjory always brought Will Cameron's tea into the fields. It was quite idyllic to watch her from afar, making it ready on the outskirts of a nut coppice or belt of firs, and then to see her stand out into the rolling, undulating waves of new cut grass which were creeping up the hillsides before the scythes, and call to them in her clear, young voice, for, of course, the laird could not be left out in the heat when his factor was enjoying the cool. So he used to lounge about as Will did in the scented hay, and talk nonsense, with infinite grace and skill, until, with the extinction of his pipe, the latter's tardy sense of duty would take fire, and he would insist on a return to work.

On the whole, it was scarcely what Paul would have expected to amuse him, and yet, after ten years of a land where hay-fields are not, and it is unsafe to sit about for fear of snakes, it was strangely pleasant. And so delightfully innocent! This came home to him one night when, on going to his room, he saw his purse on the dressing-table, and remembered that for a whole week he had not opened it. The world had gone on as if there were no such thing in it as money. He mentioned the fact next day among the hay-cocks, declaring that if someone would only be responsible for his bills, he himself would never care to see a shilling again.

"Not I," said Will, rather dolefully; "for I'm afraid, Gleneira, these masons and carpenters will cost a lot more than we fancied. It is always the way when one touches a place. I remember when Inveresta began he told me I wasn't to exceed a thousand, and before he was half way through his list of absolute necessities, the figures had passed fifteen hundred. And yet I don't think it can be helped."

He blew disconsolately at his pipe as if it were in fault, for he prided himself on managing the estates in his charge with strict economy, but Paul smiled indifferently.

"My owner will be able to pay, I expect, when I get one. For when the worst comes to the worst, Miss Carmichael, I can always put myself up to auction. Do you think I should fetch a fair price? Item, one Highland estate, seriously damaged by the Crofter Commission, and an ancestral tree, ditto, by Darwinism. N.B.--Property encumbered by several mortgages and one extravagant proprietor." He lay back against a hay-cock with his hands behind his head, looking the personification of lazy content as he watched her face shift and change. "You don't seem to approve of my plan," he went on, in the same light tones, "but the idea has infinite charm for me; it would save so much trouble, and do so little harm. People sell themselves to the devil, we are told, and that may be reprehensible--at any rate, it would be uncomfortable. But what inconvenience or immorality can there be in making yourself over, soul and body, to some virtuous Christian man or woman who, in all probability, is far more capable of running the coach respectably than you are?"

"The same immorality as there is in any other form of suicide, I suppose," she replied coldly; but he was not to be put off.

"And what immorality is there in suicide, Miss Carmichael? I hold that my life is my own, unless I make over the responsibility of it to someone else, which you say is wrong. Therefore, I have a perfect right to do what I please with it."

"Once you have overcome the initial difficulty of discovering what you do please," she retorted sharply. And he smiled.

"You use a detective camera apparently, but I admit it. I am only certain of one thing, it pleases me to please myself. It pleases me now to forget that there is such a thing as money, and to go to bed at ten o'clock."

"Which shows that you are virtuously inclined, and that, therefore----"

"I refuse to be whitewashed by your charity," he interrupted. "I am of the earth, earthy; though sometimes I can lie on my back in the hay and see heaven opening----" His voice, with a sudden cadence in it, ceased as he sprang lightly

to his feet.

"Come along, Cameron--you are intolerably long over that pipe--my energy, Miss Carmichael, does not arise from Goodness, but from Greed. If the hay is not in tonight, it may rain; if it rains, the hay will be spoilt. If it is spoilt I shall have to buy more, and if I buy more I shall not have that shilling to spend on myself. It comes to that in the end, even in Arcadia."

There were similar endings to many conversations in which Marjory tilted bravely at various objects, which, in her heart of hearts, she feared might be windmills. For she was never quite sure if he was in earnest or not, and even when he had palpably played the fool with her pet theories, or scouted a serious thought, a word, even a look, would come to redeem the past, and give a curious zest to the future. Yet in a way it distressed her also by confusing her clear-cut, unswerving outlook on life. A man even professing such atrocious sentiments ought to be unendurable, and this man was not. Far from it. And what was almost more disconcerting, he evidently understood her better than honest Will did; while, as for the Reverend James! the very thought made her laugh. Yet, on the whole, she welcomed a reasonable cause which, despite the holiday she had imposed on herself in obedience to Cousin Tom's wishes, came to make an absence from the hay-fields less marked, and a reversion to the young clergyman's company quite natural. This being nothing more or less than a visit from the Bishop, which, coming as it did in this holiday time, gave to the person who was ostensibly responsible for the pupils' duties towards their neighbours fearful anticipations of failure. For James Gillespie was one of those persons who cannot teach; well meaning, fairly well-educated, people who know the information they wish to impart and cannot impart it, people who, in a repetition, invariably prompt the wrong word, and send the hesitating memory hopelessly astray. And this was a question of repetition, since the Bishop never interfered with the secular teaching, which he left, with a Levite shake of the head, to the Government inspector. So Marjory, relieved she scarcely knew why, spent these afternoons in hammering the necessary precision into the children's heads while the Reverend James sat watching her rapturously and feeling that the whole parish, including himself, would have no excuse for not knowing its duty towards its neighbour if she were the clergyman's wife.

And on the third day someone else seemed bitten with a desire to learn, for Captain Macleod strolled in lazily and sat down on the furthest bench, saying he had come to fetch the letters, and with her permission would await their arrival in the cool. Why his presence should have immediately aroused her to a resentful consciousness of the adoring expression on the face beside her, she did not understand, but the certainty and the uncertainty of it combined made her turn to her companion with an audible asperity of tone:

"I really think, Mr. Gillespie, that you might try and get the little ones perfect in their hymn. You must remember that the last time the Bishop inspected he told the children that the youngest Christian should know one hymn, and the infants are not even perfect in the 'Happy Land.'"

To hear being to obey, Mr. Gillespie retired towards the post-office portion of the room where, with a semicircle of tiny bare-legged lassies and laddies before him, he sat beside Paul Macleod and began his task. It was rather a Herculean one, owing to the fact that his pupils having no English, as the phrase runs, the simple stanzas were to them mere gibberish.

"It is three months they will be learnin' it, whatever," said Mr. McColl, cheerfully, when the last of the semicircle had failed hopelessly.

"It is impossible, quite impossible," retorted Mr. Gillespie, in a white heat of anxiety. "Some of them must have picked up something in that case----"

"Deed, no, sir. Naethin's impossible with bairnies. And wee Paulie there has it fine, for he is at me to learn it on him many a time, because Miss Marjory was saying he would be a fool if he didn't. Speak up, Paulie," he added, in the Gaelic, "you have it fine."

Wee Paulie hung his close-cropped fair head with its odd little fringe left over the forehead, so that nothing was to be seen but a rising flush, and murmured some half-inaudible words, whereat the biggest boy in Marjory's class said triumphantly:

"He is saying that he will no be saying it to him, but to her."

"Hush! Donald," came the quick, clear, dictatorial young voice; "that is not the way to speak. Stand down two places. Paul, come here."

The big Paul, seated on the back bench, looked up and smiled, feeling it would be rather pleasant than otherwise to

obey; and little Paul pattered shamefacedly across to the girl's side, yet with a confident air which raised the sleek head a little, and showed a pair of very long lashes on the flushed cheeks. As he edged close Marjory passed her arm round him, and with the other hand raised his chin square and straight.

"Now, Paul, if you please," she said, in the Gaelic; "clasp your hands, and say it right out--to the whole school, remember. You know it quite well, and you should never, never pretend that you don't know when you do. It is mean."

Big Paul, thinking that even reproof sounded pleasant in that voice, and, at any rate, must be bearable in that position, smiled again, and continued smiling unavoidably, as little Paul reeled off the whole hymn from beginning to end in confused, unintelligible fluency, broken only by hurried gasps for breath.

"A pretty little fellow," said Captain Macleod, in an undertone to his neighbour. "Who is he?"

"Old Peggy Duncan's grandson--Jeanie Duncan's child--you must remember her."

The words seemed to jar the very foundations of happy, idle, careless content, and Paul, even in his surprise, felt aggrieved.

"Of course I remember her; but they told me she was dead. Who did she marry?"

The Reverend James Gillespie put on his most professional manner. "I'm afraid it is a very sad story, but no one really knows the facts of the case. She left home, as you may have heard----"

"Yes! I have heard," put in Paul, suddenly, resentfully. "And I--I can understand the rest. It's a common enough story, in all conscience."

"Too true, too true," began his companion, but the laird had risen, and, with a remark that he would wait outside for the tardy letters, left the schoolhouse. Apparently he tired even of that, for when Marjory, after lingering longer than was necessary over the arrangements for the morrow's inspection with Mr. Gillespie, came out with a half-annoyed expectation of finding the tall figure still lounging under the horse-chestnut tree, it had gone, rather to her surprise.

Still, it would ensure her the solitary walk home which she loved; since really it was too much to expect her to devote a whole afternoon to the Reverend James who, curtly dismissed to a neglected parishioner up the Glen, watched her pass down the loch with wistful yet still admiring eyes until she disappeared behind a knoll of ash trees, hiding the bridge which carried the road to the other side of the river, and so down the seashore to Gleneira House and Lodge. A road which, beautiful at all times, was never so beautiful as in the sunset. There was one point, however, where its beauty seemed to culminate, where, after climbing a rocky knoll cushioned with bosses of bell-heather and the close oak scrub which springs from the roots of past cuttings, it dipped down to the very edge of the water. Here, on spring tides, the waves crept up to smooth away the wheel marks, and leave a scalloped fringe of seaweed on the turf beyond. And hence you could see straight through the cleft of the Narrowest, where the hills embosoming the upper portion of the loch sloped down into the gentler contours of the lower, right away to the Linnhe Loch, and so beyond the purple bluff of Mull to the wide Atlantic. On that evening the sun was setting into it in a golden glory, guiltless of a cloud. And Marjory, cresting the knoll, thought instantly that here, indeed, was a chance of the Green Ray. For ever since she had read Jules Verne's book the idea of this, the last legacy of a dying day, had remained with her fancifully. Many and many a time, half in jest, half in earnest, she had watched for it, wondering if she would feel different after she had seen it. If, in fairy-tale fashion, the world would seem the better for it. Even if the legend was no legend, and the phenomenon simply a natural one, due to refraction, there must be something exhilarating in seeing that which other people had not seen; in seeing the world transfigured, even for a second, for you, and you only. Unless, indeed, others were watching with you. And, then, what a strange tie that would be! To have seen something together that the rest of the world had not seen; something at which it would laugh, but which you knew to be true. The quaintness of the idea attracted her as she walked over the crisp shingle to sit on a rock close to the incoming tide. Out yonder on the far sea horizon it was a blaze of light, but closer in the loch showed like a golden network of ripples with ever-widening meshes enclosing the purple water till it ended, at her very feet, in a faint foam-edge. There was no sound save the blabbling of the tiny wavelets on the rocks as they whispered to each other of the havoc they had done far out at sea, or met every now and again with a little tinkle of laughter to drown a stone.

To Marjory, looking and listening so intently that consciousness seemed to leave eyes and ears, came a sudden dread, not for herself, but for others different from what she was.

"Drowned--dead, drowned--drowned and cold--dead, dead, drowned!" Those whispering voices seemed to repeat it over and over again, as for the first time in her life she realised that others might not steer straight for the sun across

the ocean of life, as she did, unswervingly. Of course, in a scholastic, unreal way she knew well that there were swift currents to betray, big loadstone rocks to make the compass waver; but till she had met Paul Macleod the possibility of anyone deliberately and wilfully weighting his log and depolarising his compass had not occurred to her. It is so, often, with those who, as she was, are almost overburdened with that mysterious outcome of past sacrifices, a sense of duty. But Paul, she recognised clearly, might steer straight for the rocks, though his knowledge of seamanship was equal to her own. On that point she would take no denial. It was her one solace against her own interest in him. But for it what scorn would be too great for the weakness of her tolerance for a handsome face, a soft voice, and the most engaging of manners. No! The charm--for there was undoubtedly a charm--lay elsewhere; in his considerateness, his quick sympathy. This did not come, as he averred, from a mere selfish desire to be liked, a mere selfish consideration for his own comfort. It might suit him to say so, to declare his disbelief in anything higher, to scoff, for instance, at the Green Ray. The girl's thoughts rebounded swiftly to their starting-point, and brought back sight to her dream-blinded eyes.

Too late! Too late! The last outermost edge of the sun had dipped beneath the sea; the fateful moment was past, and with the little chill shudder of a breeze which had crept like a sigh over the water at the Death of Day, the little wavelets at her feet were whispering--

"Drowned--dead--drowned! Who cares? Drowned! drowned! drowned!"

She rose suddenly and stretched her hands out to the fast fading glow, as if in entreaty. But only for a second; the next the voice of someone coming up the opposite side of the knoll carolling a Gaelic song made her turn quickly to see Paul Macleod outlined against the blue of the hills as he paused on the summit to take breath and look up into the child's face above him with a smile; for little Paul was perched on his shoulder.

The western glow, already leaving the earth, fell full on those two faces, and on the firm delicate hands, holding the child secure. It was like a St. Christopher, thought Marjory, with a pulse, almost of pain, at her heart. For it left her bereft of something; of something that had gone out irrevocably to be Paul's henceforth, even though the first glimpse of her standing below made him loosen his clasp almost roughly.

"Is that you, Miss Carmichael?" he called, walking on to meet her; "I'm doing good Samaritan against the grain; but I found the little imp on the road. He had fallen from a rowan tree and sprained his ankle."

She found it easier for some reason to speak to the child in reproof. "I've told you so often not to climb so recklessly," she said in Gaelic.

"He was getting berries for you; there was a bunch half ripe at the very top; at least so he says," replied Captain Macleod in the same language, then at her look of surprise added a trifle bitterly--"you see I remember--we lairds don't often speak it--more's the pity--but I have an uncomfortable memory for the days of my youth."

"It was very good of you," she began, when he cut her short.

"It was least trouble to carry him. He was whimpering like a little cur at the river pool, so I elected to bring him along instead of going back half a mile to ask someone else to do it for me. His grandmother's cottage is just below the point there, isn't it? He can walk as far as that." As he spoke he swung the child to the ground lightly. "And you needn't look so fierce, Miss Carmichael; it won't hurt him."

She took no notice of his remark, except to ask the child if he could manage.

"If you speak in that tone of voice he will say 'no,' of course; but I assure you it is all right. I've tied it up tight, and it wasn't very bad to begin with."

It had indeed been very neatly bandaged with a handkerchief torn into strips, and the sight softened her rising indignation. "Possibly, but it will be none the worse for being put in hot water. Come, Paulie, lean on me, and if it's bad I'll carry you----"

Before she could finish, the child was back on his namesake's shoulder.

"If you will show me the way down, I'll save you the trouble."

The accent he laid deliberately on the pronoun took half the virtue from his action, and yet the certainty that he had purposely put it there showed her that he was alive to something else, and made her lead the way silently to the cottage; and, even when there, the remembrance of the St. Christopher picture joined to the unconscious Highland hospitality, which forbids an unsought parting on the threshold, made her ask if he would not come in and let old

Peggy thank him for his kindness.

"I doubt if she would," he replied curtly; "anyhow I won't risk it."

Perhaps he exercised a wise discretion. Marjory herself was inclined to think so, in view of the old woman's general attitude towards the world.

"Pickin' rowan berries, was he," she echoed wrathfully, turning as she so often did when angry to the broader Scotch of her youth; "they're the deil's ain beads for young folk--aye! I mind it was so in the beginning!" Her restless claw-like fingers busied themselves over the coverlid, and her restless eyes followed Marjory, who was attending to the sprained foot, which to say sooth was not a very serious matter. "And Mr. Paul hefted the wean, and wouldna' come in bye to say a word to the auld wife. That was real kind, or maybe it wasn't; but there! he never brocht luck to my hoose, an' he wouldn't raise a finger to do't. It's the way o' the warld, the way o' the warld."

"That is not fair, Peggy," retorted the girl, roused as she always was by injustice. "The laird was speaking of you only the other day. He is much annoyed at your having been allowed to go on the roll, and said----"

The old pauper's hands stopped their uncanny fingerings, and every line of the old face hardened.

"If I choose to be on the pairish, I'll be on the pairish. It's better than Mr. Paul's charity, an' ye may just tell him sae frae old Peggy Duncan. I may be wrang, I may be richt, an' Him above only kens hoo it is, but I was no born on his land, and I'm no his poor."

"All the kinder of him to offer help," persisted Marjory. "And you have no right, just because you are in an evil temper, to speak as if he had done you some wrong."

"Wha says he did?--not I! D'ye think I soud be lyin' here wi' him oot ben if he had. Na! Na! Half deid as they are, my auld fingers wad be at his bonnie fause face." The very vigour of her own voice seemed to choke her, and she fell into a fit of coughing, then lay back exhausted into a more Christian frame of mind. "God guid us, Miss Marjory," she gasped, "but I'm jest an awfu' limmer whiles. If I was to be nippit awa' this nicht I ken fine whaur I'd wauken."

"And quite right, too," replied her visitor, severely, recognising the half-apologetic tenor of the last remark, and, seizing the opportunity for a bit of her mind before old Peggy, with some sidelong sally, should escape deftly from the difficulty, after her wont.

"Aye, aye! The tongue is an unruly member, and yet I bridle it whiles for fear o' findin' myself in the same mansion wi' the pairish officer. Eh! yon's an awfu' man, Miss Marjory, for sweerin', and I just couldna' thole him. So, if ye like, ye may give old Peggy Duncan's thanks to the laird, when you see him, for bringing the laddie hame. Maybe it was kind o' him."

"It was kind of him, very kind," said the girl, stoutly, feeling dimly pleased to hear herself say so, and know that there could be no mistake about that. And yet she felt vexed when she found him waiting for her on the road when she came out into the darkening dusk.

"I thought it was the proper thing to do," he replied, to her little stiff expression of regret that he should have troubled himself so far.

"What was the proper thing?" she asked captiously. "I am quite accustomed to walking home in the dark."

"Proper to act up to your opinion of me, and be self-sacrificing, perhaps." He paused, then said, suddenly, "Don't let us quarrel, Miss Carmichael; it is such a lovely evening."

True a thousand-fold! True beyond measure! The light had left everything, save the sky and the sea as they walked on side by side silently.

"How's the patient?" he said, at last, reverting somewhat to the old, airy, half-bantering tone.

"Well; thanks to you. If he had walked home he might have been laid up for days."

"I did as little as I could, I assure you."

"On the contrary, you did more than was necessary. Paul told me how you comforted him, and sang songs all the

way to cheer him up."

She would not allow him this denial of his own virtues, or accept his estimate of himself.

"That was to cheer myself up, and forget my dislike to carrying a dirty little boy, I expect. The study of one's own motives, Miss Carmichael----"

He got no further, for she turned to him with a quick gesture of pained denial. "Don't--please don't. Why should you slander yourself?"

Something in her tone roused a response in him for a moment, but the next he had smothered it in a sort of reckless desire to shock this girl with the intelligent, trustful eyes--to force her from her belief in him.

"Slander," he echoed; "there is no slander, I assure you. What do you know about my life? Would it help you to understand my complicated state of mind about that boy, for instance, if I told you that I was once madly in love with his mother, and that I still think her the most beautiful woman I ever saw?"

He had not intended this confidence; yet now he had given it, he did not regret the impulse, nor did he wonder at it, since the thought of that past idyll had been interfering so much with the present one during the afternoon, that he felt inclined to get rid of both once and for all.

"I have always heard she was very beautiful," replied Marjory, slowly; "but, of course, I did not know----"

He burst into a hard laugh. "That I fell in love with her! Really, Miss Carmichael, you are most disconcertingly cool!"

"I was going to say," she put in, unmoved, "that I did not know she was the sort of person----"

"I would fall in love with? Indeed! Perhaps, as you appear to have formed some sort of estimate as to the qualities likely to attract me, you might give me a hint or two. It might help me in the selection of a wife." He hardly knew what he was saying, for his temper had got the better of him; indeed, he did not care for the moment what he said, save that it should be something that would put an end to this confidence of hers. But he had reckoned without her absolute unconsciousness; what is more, without her fearlessness and high spirit.

"I said nothing about a wife," she replied quietly. "Why should I? You were talking of love, and I knew that you had made up your mind to marry for money."

"So I have; what then?"

"Nothing, except this--that since you can set love aside so easily, I fail to see what effect the memory of a past one could have on your present life--that is all."

He looked at her in the growing darkness, wishing that he could see her face more clearly; wishing still more keenly that he could see straight into her mind and satisfy himself that this calm indifference was simply cold-bloodedness. But what if it was something more? If here, at last, he had found that of which most men dream at times; the refuge from themselves. And when he spoke again his voice had changed its tone, though the bitterness remained in the words.

"You make no allowance, then, for the power of a sentiment, especially when it is morbid and unhealthy. And yet such things mean more to most of us than right or wrong; because they are more human."

There was a pause; then she turned to him with a smile, which he felt, more than saw.

"I am afraid I don't understand what you mean."

"Perhaps it is as well you do not," he replied; and changed the subject.

But from that day their mutual attitude towards each other altered, perhaps unconsciously. To tell the truth, the remembrance of the St. Christopher rose up between her and Paul in his less admirable impersonations. All the more so, perhaps, because of his strange, impulsive confidence regarding his love for the boy's mother. He must have been quite a boy himself at the time, she thought; no older than she was now, and boys were so much younger than girls for their age. She felt vaguely sorry for that young Paul and his fruitless love; for Marjory, like most girls who have been much in contact with the poor, accepted the facts of life calmly, looking at them straight in the face, and calling them by their

names fairly, ere she passed them by. And so no doubt of that past to which Paul had alluded so frankly ever crossed her mind. She felt, almost unconsciously, that he would not have spoken about it to her had there been any cause for such suspicion. So the only effect of his attempt to shock her was to bring into stronger relief her confidence in his gentlemanly instincts. And Paul, seeing this, metaphorically took off his shoes before the holy ground which she prepared for him, even while he fretted against the necessity imposed upon him by that better part of his nature, which, in environments like these, would have its say. And then, even as he discussed the matter with himself cynically, telling himself at one and the same time that she was not human enough to see, and that it would be cowardly to open her eyes, there would come with a rush a fierce resentment at all reason. This was holiday time, and it would soon be over for him. A week or two more and Gleneira would be full of London ways and London talk; it would be time enough then to remember the world, the flesh, and the devil.

CHAPTER IX.

There was some excuse for his refusal to face a struggle, for in the sunshiny days which followed, Nature herself held high holiday, and the most prosaic might well have found it impossible to avoid falling in with her gracious mood. The heather-flush was beginning to creep over the curves of moor, the rowan berries ripened under the sun's kiss, the juicy *guienne* cherries purpled the children's mouths, and the oat fields hid their poverty in a cloak of golden marigold. Down in the shady nooks the stately foxgloves still lingered, while on the sunniest spots the bracken was gathering the sun-gold into its delicate tracery against the coming gloom of winter. Such times come rarely; times when it is possible to forget the world of toil and trouble, of sin, sorrow, and shame, which lies beyond the circle of the everlasting hills; times when one is content to let life slip past, without counting its pulse-beat; times when one seems to enter in spirit with that divine rest, because the whole world seems good in our eyes.

Paul, dulled as he was by world-tarnish, felt the charm; Marjory, fresh from her sober youth, yielded to it gladly. Will Cameron, with the hay safe housed and harvest secure in the future, said the weather was too good for farming, and gave himself a holiday, and even Mr. Gillespie, free from inspection anxieties, and rejoicing in the Bishop's praise, fell back for a while on college sermons, and studied future ones in stones and running brooks. Only Mrs. Cameron, despising the heat, bustled from kitchen to store-room, from store-room to dairy, indignant over the irregular meals, and the still more irregular milk. It was enough, she said, to turn that of human kindness sour to have charge of five Ayrshires and two Jerseys in such weather, with an English cook coming, or a Frenchman maybe--the laird was equal to that iniquity--who would use crocks on crocks of powdered butter. She knew them! graceless, godless creatures, and Will, instead of wandering like a tinkler about the place, should be at the markets buying pigs, to eat up the sinful waste of good victuals which would begin ere long at the Big House. It was very well of William to smile, and for the laird to say he didn't mind; but what would Lady George say to the cook? And how did William expect to supply the Big House as it should be supplied, when every crofter body was asking one and eightpence a pound for butter she wouldn't look at? And it all trusted, every pound of it, to the English folk over at the Forest, who were coming down like a flight of locusts, devouring the land with pipers and bad whiskey, and a set of idle, pasty-faced, meat-eating English maids, ruining the country side with bad examples! There would have to be a judgment, nothing less, when Sheenach--barefooted Sheenach from the blackest hut on the property--Marjory would mind it, seeing that she held it to be a disgrace to a Christian landholder--set her up for new-fangled notions indeed!--had actually spoken to her, Mrs. Cameron, about beer-money! The kitchen girl over at the Forest, forsooth, got it, and three shillings a week for washings. Heard one ever the like! a barefoot lass that had not spent three shillings on washings since she was born, and would have to look to it for white robes in the future. And Mistress Mackenzie at the ferry house saying calmly that her prices would be doubled from the 10th August.

"It is too true, mother," Will would say consolingly. "I'd like to see the Commission have its way, and destroy the Forests altogether, if only to teach the people what it would mean. But there! parcel post is only twopence a pound, and we can get butter from Devonshire. They pay high rents there, you know, so they can afford to sell produce cheaper." But even this paradox would not soothe the old lady's ire, and the three idlers would escape from the butter-problem into the wilderness of beauty beyond the fat pastures which fed the dairy; in so doing, no doubt, following the example of the offending English folk, who do not care to trouble their holiday with thoughts of the dishonesty and greed they foster and encourage.

Many a tramp had these three over hill and dale. Sometimes climbing the boulder-strewn heights whence sea and land showed like a map; more often lingering by the river lazily, as it made its way through the grassy uplands in a series of foamy leaps and oily pauses. For here the sea-trout were to be beguiled by patience; if not by that, then by the red-tailed fly which Will used with the consummate skill of the real pot-fisher. Paul, on the other hand, beset by lingering prejudice, would lounge on the bank intermittently, offering the rod to Marjory in order to bring him luck; while she, engaged in collecting a perfect herbarium, would deprecate her own past skill in the Long Pool.

"And the admirable underhand cast was a chance also?" he retorted drily. "Really, Miss Carmichael, my modesty is catching."

Marjory laughed. "Oh, no! I learnt that from Will. I never could make out whither he went on Sundays, till one day I came upon him in that little strip of pasture in the middle of the larch plantation, flicking at dandelions with his ten-foot rod. Then he confessed that it was his usual occupation of a Sabbath afternoon, because it was so deadly dull with nothing to do at home. So after that I flicked, too. We used to do it against each other for hours, didn't we, Will?"

"Ten for a dandie, twenty for a daisy, fifty for a bumble-bee," murmured Will from under his tilted hat, as he lay on the grass.

"An instance of the deceit which the irrational worship of the Sabbath is apt to produce," remarked the Reverend James Gillespie, whose conscience invariably assailed him when he had not made a professional remark for some time.

"It is so refreshing to hear you accuse Miss Carmichael," said Paul, gravely. "Deceit is a mortal sin, isn't it, Mr. Gillespie?"

The Reverend James hesitated. He looked sorely out of place amid the wilderness in his black garments, with Paul in his loose Indian suits, and Will guiltless of coat and waistcoat.

"Deceit, cheating--whoever doth wickedly, etc.--generally comes under common theft--non-bailable," murmured the tilted hat softly; for Will, in his youth, had studied law.

"I congratulate you, Miss Carmichael," said Paul, still gravely, "on having attained the position of a real criminal. I have a sneaking admiration for them."

"Why?"

"Because they have done--what I have been afraid to do!"

So the day would slip by in idle talk and idler work, until the lengthening shadows warned them they were far from home, and Will would grow restless over the prospect of dinner *versus* the tea, with which he had more than once been put off on occasions of gross irregularity. While Paul would boast of his freedom from all control, or offer to stand in the breach by begging a meal at the Lodge; since even Mrs. Cameron's tongue softened when it spoke to the laird, and a vein of humour ran through her blame.

"It's clean reediklous, Gleneira," she would say. "Here it is gone ten, and supper was bidden at eight. An' if you expec' me, a Christian woman, to tell Kursty that *my* son is even as them who mocked Elijah, or that it was I that made a mistake, you're just wrong. An' a' for a wheen trouties, that's no good for kipper or for anything but to cocker yourselves up wi' at breakfast, instead of being contented with good porridge, as your fathers were. But there! we ken find that Esau sold his birthright for a mess o' pottage."

"And I don't wonder at it," Paul would reply gravely; "if he was half so hungry as I am. How much was it, Cameron, that the hook-and-eye man offered me for Gleneira? A man must eat, you know."

Whereupon the old lady would remark that, as she at least knew her duty, his father's son should never lack bread in her house, and so bustle away good-humouredly to hurry on supper. The unpunctuality was not, however, always their fault; and on one occasion followed on an incident which had a curious effect in still further softening Marjory's judgment on handsome, idle, kindly Paul, and introducing that vein of pity, which, in women of her type, seems an almost necessary ingredient of affection. It may be only a triviality, the half-humorous despair of a buttonless shirt, the possibility of dirty tablecloths, or it may go further into uncared-for sickness and loneliness, but the thought of personal discomfort to a man whom she likes is always grievous to women who have not been educated out of their housewifely instincts.

It came about in this wise. There was a certain Loch of the Fairies which, despite its great beauty, Marjory had seldom seen, for this reason. It lay hidden in the highest corries of the deer forest, accessible only by the burn watering the sheltered glen which, from time immemorial, had been the sanctuary; and not even for Marjory would old John Macpherson disturb his deer, or allow them to be disturbed. But Paul thought differently when he found that the girl's face brightened at the idea of an excursion thither; for, to him, the nearest pleasure was invariably the best.

"As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb," he said, with a laugh. "We will start early and make a day of it. And I'll ask Gillespie to come. He is always telling cock-and-bull stories about the big fish there, so we will set him to catch one. I never did."

And Will Cameron agreed also, saying he would take the opportunity to meet the forest keeper on the march, and settle the position of a new fence to keep the hinds from straying. Only old John shook his head, with mutterings regarding future sport and old traditions.

"As if *that* were not worth all the sport in the world," said Paul, almost exultantly, as, climbing the last bracken-set knoll, and leaving the last Scotch fir hanging over a wild leap of the burn, they filed past a sheer bluff, and saw in front

of them a long, narrow, almost level glen, through which the stream slid in alternate reaches and foaming falls. On either side almost inaccessible cliffs; in front of them, cutting the blue sky clearly, a serrated wall of rock closing up the valley. Great sharp-edged fragments from the heights above lay strewn among the sweeping stretches of heather, whence a brood of grouse rose, blundering to the anxious cackle of the hen.

"There they are," said Will, from force of habit in a whisper, "up on the higher pasture. I thought they would be; so we shan't disturb them a bit if we keep to the burn."

Marjory, shading her eyes from the sun, stood looking on one of the prettiest sights in the world; a herd of red deer dotted over a hill slope, or seen outlined against the horizon line. Paul, from sheer habit also, had slipped to the ground, and had his glass on them. "Splendid royal to the left, Cameron--wonder if we shall get him this year--and, by George, there's the old crooked horn! I remember, Miss Carmichael, trying to put a bullet into him--well, we won't say how many years ago."

"What a slaughterhouse a man's memory must be," remarked Marjory, with her head in the air.

"Not in this case, at any rate," retorted Paul. "Sometimes I am merciful--or miss; which answers the purpose quite as well." As he spoke the memory of Jeanie Duncan rose quite causelessly to his mind, and he started to his feet impatiently; for somehow little Paul's existence had taken the bloom off his self-complacency in regard to that episode.

"Now for the Pixie's loch," he cried gaily. "The ladies have it all their own way there in destruction, if tales be true. I wonder which of us three unfortunate males she will choose as her victim to-day?"

Marjory, looking down as they crested the last boulder-strewn rise on the almost black and oily sheet of water in the crater-like cup of the corrie, felt that she did not wonder at the legends which had gathered round the spot. The very perfection of its loneliness, its beauty, marked it as a thing apart from the more familiar charm of the world around it. There seemed scarce foothold for a goat on those pillared cliffs which sank sheer into the dark water, and the streak or two of snow lingering still in a northern recess marked, she felt sure, some deep crevasse hidden from sight by the innocent-looking mantle of white. Nor could one judge of the depth of the lake by the jagged points of rocks which rose here and there from the surface of the water, for, as she stood, she leant against a fragment of some earlier world, which looked as if it must have fallen from the sky, since the vacant place left by such a huge avalanche must have remained visible for ever in the rocks above. So those out yonder might go down and down, forming vast caves where the Pixie might hold her court of drowned, dead men. She turned to look at Paul suddenly, apprehensively; perhaps because, even in her innocence, she recognised instinctively that there, with all its gifts, with all its charm, lay the nature to which the syren's song is irresistible. But he, stopping on the brink to dip his hand into the water, was looking back at her with a laugh.

"By Jove!" he said, "isn't it cold? Enough to give anyone the shivers."

As he spoke, far out on the glassy glint of water came a speck of stronger light, widening to a circle, widening, widening ever, in softening ripples.

"There! I told you so!" cried the Reverend James, excitedly; "a five-pounder at least!" After which, naturally, there was no time for sentiment, no time for anything but an unconfessed race as to which of the three should have his fly on the water first. Marjory, left to her own devices, wandered as far as she could round the level edge, which to the south lay between the lake and the cliff, until she came to the moss-clad moraine, through which the water found its way to new life in the first long leap of the burn below; for the loch itself was fed by unseen springs. She could hear the stream beneath her feet tinkling musically, and gurgling softly, as if laughing at something it had left behind, or something it was going to meet; and the sound oppressed her vaguely. Here, in an angle of sand, stood a half-ruined boat-house, and within it a boat painted gaily, yet with an air of disuse about it which made Marjory go inside and look at it more closely. It seemed sound enough, and yet, as she wandered on, she hoped that the fishers might not be tempted to use it out on those unknown depths. Then, coming on a great bank of dewberries, she sank down into the yielding heather and gave herself up to enjoyment, finally stretching herself at long length on the springy softness, and watching the lake through her half-closed eyelids. Suddenly, with a smile, she began to sing, and then as suddenly ceased. Cliffs could give back an echo, certainly, but not so clear an one as the tenor tone which followed close on that first phrase of the "Lorelei." An instant after Paul's figure showed round a rock below, busily engaged with a swishing trout rod.

An echo, indeed! and Marjory sat up among the dewberries, feeling indignant.

"Captain Macleod," she called aggressively, "have you caught anything?"

He turned, as if he had been unaware of her presence, and raised his cap. "It is not a question of my catching anything, Miss Carmichael, but of my being caught. There is a syren about somewhere; I heard her just now; did you?"

"I generally hear myself when I am singing," she replied coldly. "Where is Will?"

"Will," replied Paul, cheerfully, "is swearing round the corner. He has just had a splendid rise, and his hook drew. No further description necessary."

She laughed, and Captain Macleod went on in the easy familiar tone which had taken the sting out of so many other remarks which, to Marjory's unsophisticated ears, had savoured of impertinence.

"If we neither of us get another this round, we are going to start over the hills for the fence. I want to see it myself. You will find a splendid place for tea about a quarter of a mile down below the fall. Heaps of sticks--bits of the primeval forest washed out of the moss--so you will manage nicely; besides Gillespie will be here."

It was just such a careless, brotherly speech as Will might have made, and Marjory appreciated it. Besides the thought of an hour or two, absolutely to herself, in those solitudes had an indescribable charm; indescribable because, to those who know it not of themselves, words are useless, and those who do need them not. For her, with a stainless past and a hopeful future, it was bliss unalloyed to wander down the burn-side, resting here and there, watching the ring-ouzel skim from shelter, or an oak-egg-moth settle lazily on a moss-cushion. And yet, as she sate perched on a rock far down the valley above a deeper pool than usual, she amused herself by singing the "Lorelei" from beginning to end, secure from unwelcome echoes. So back on her traces to the baskets which had been hidden in the fern, and the preparations for tea. The relics of the primeval forest burnt bravely aided by some juniper branches, the kettle was filled, boiled, and set securely on a stony hob; and then, free from cares, Marjory chose out a springy nest among the short heather and curled herself round lazily to watch the sky line where before long two figures should come striding into sight, dark against the growing gold of the westering sun. Blissful indeed; extremely comfortable also.

When she woke Paul Macleod was calling her by name, and she started up in a hurry. "I came on as fast as I could lest you should be wearying," he said, and his face showed he spoke the truth. "It was further than we thought for. Where's Gillespie? He can't be fishing still, surely. I didn't see him on the shore as I came past."

Marjory, confused as she was by sudden awakening, remembered one thing, and one thing only--the boat--the old rotten-looking boat.

"You didn't see him--and he hasn't been here! Oh! Captain Macleod, I do hope nothing has happened--the boat----"

"Nonsense!" replied Paul, decisively, "nothing can have happened. Still, it's late--you have been asleep some time, I expect. Perhaps he has missed you, and gone home."

"He could not miss the fire," she said quickly, "and he cannot swim. If he has taken the boat, and if----"

"There is no use imagining evil," put in Paul, drily; "as you are anxious I will go----"

"I will come with you," she said eagerly; "if I put some more wood on the fire----"

"It will be ready for us when we return," remarked Paul, cheerfully, "and Gillespie will want his tea. I expect he is in to the big trout or----" he paused before her anxious face and told her again that nothing could have happened. She surely did not believe in pixies? Still, he grew graver when a look at the boat-house proved it to be empty, and his first shout brought no answer, except a confused, resounding echo.

"If he had gone beyond that bluff into the inaccessible part, which he is likely to have done with the boat--he might not hear. Come on--and don't imagine the worst. If, when we can see all the water----"

He paused, and said no more, as, with her following fast at his heels, he hurried up the brae which hid the further reach of the lake. So, being a step or two ahead, and several inches taller than she was, a view halloo, followed by a laugh, was her first intimation that the search had come to an end. The next instant she had joined the laugh, for a more ridiculous sight than the Reverend James Gillespie presented as he stood up, in full clerical costume, on an uneven rock

some two feet square, in the very middle of the loch, could scarcely be imagined. The cause, however, was clear in the half-sunk, water-logged boat, jammed on a jagged rock, which was just visible above the water close by.

"Have you been there long?" called Paul, recovering himself.

"All the afternoon," came back in hoarse and distinctly cross tones. "I shouted till I could shout no more. I thought you had all gone home!"

"Gone to sleep," remarked Paul, aside, as he sat down and began deliberately to unlace his boots. "Now, Miss Carmichael, if you will look after the tea, I'll rescue the shipwrecked mariner, and bring him to be comforted."

Marjory, eyeing the stretch of black water nervously, suggested he had better wait for Will to turn up; but Paul laughed. "I'm relieved to find you have some anxiety left for me--yet it is really absurd. I could swim ten times the distance ten times over; besides, I'll bring him back with the oars if that will satisfy you?"

She felt that it ought, yet as she turned to leave him, the keen pang at her heart surprised her, and not even his gay call of reassurance, "Two teas, please, hot, in ten minutes," given, she knew, from such kindly motives, availed to drive away a sudden thought of that gracious face--drowned--dead--drowned. Such irrational fears, when they come at all, come overwhelmingly; since the mind, imaginative enough even to admit them, is their natural prey. Yet this very imagination of her own was in itself startling to the girl, who caught herself wishing she had not sung the "Lorelei," with a sort of surprised pain at her own fancifulness. It was absurd, ridiculous, and yet the sight of Will's loose-limbed figure coming to meet her, brought distinct relief as she bade him go on and help Captain Macleod. Even so, as she blew at the fire and made the tea, the thought would come that a man who could not swim would be of no possible use if--if--if--- So, in the midst of her imaginings, came at last the sight of three figures striding down the brae, talking and laughing; at least, two of them were so engaged, the Reverend James having scarcely recovered his temper, and being, in addition, almost quite inaudible from his previous efforts to make himself heard.

"The pixie wouldn't have him, said he wouldn't suit the place," said Paul, gravely, when, with the aid of several cups of tea, the victim had finished his tale of the big trout, which had deliberately dragged him on to a jag, knocked a hole in the bottom of the rotten old boat, and left him helpless, taking advantage--and this seemed the greatest offence--of the confusion consequent on the manoeuvre, to swim away with ten yards of good trout line and an excellent cast. At least, this was Will's view of the situation, the Reverend James attempting hoarsely to give greater prominence to the saving of his own life, while Paul gave a graphic description of their procession down the loch to the landing-place, with the clerical costume packed out of harm's way in the fishing-basket which was swung to the butt end of the rod, and Marjory indignantly disclaimed the slumber of the Seven Sleepers, declaring that the shouting must have gone on when she had been down the burn. So, chattering and laughing, the tea things were packed up, and they started homewards.

"Let us have a race down the level," said Paul, suddenly; "that water was cold as ice."

Five minutes after, when Marjory caught him up, as he lingered a little behind the two others, who were just disappearing behind the bluff at the entrance to the sanctuary, she was startled at his face.

"Ague," he said, in answer to her look. "That is the worst of India. I told you the water was cold enough to give anyone the shivers." He tried to laugh it off, but he was blue and pinched, his teeth were chattering, and with every step the effort to stand steady became more apparent. The sight of his helplessness made the girl forget everything but her womanly instinct to give comfort.

"You had far better sit down for a while," she said, eagerly. "I can easily light a fire, and we have the kettle. Some hot whiskey and water----" But Paul was actually beyond refusal; he sat down weakly, utterly knocked over for the time, and unable to do anything but mutter, between the chatterings of his teeth, that it would not last long--that it would be all right when the hot fit began--that she had better go on and leave him. To all of which Marjory replied, in businesslike fashion, by bringing him a great bundle of bracken as a pillow, spreading her waterproof over him, and piling it over with more fern, till he smiled faintly, and chattered something about there being no necessity for covering him up with leaves--he was not dead yet. Then the fire had to be lit, the kettle boiled, a jorum of hot toddy brewed, a stone warmed and set to hands and feet.

"Now, if you lie still for half an hour," she said magisterially, "I expect you will be much better when I come back." And he was hot--as fire, of course, and shaky still, but minus the cramps, and very apologetic for the delay.

"You couldn't possibly help it," she interrupted quickly. "You looked--you looked----" and then something seemed

to rise up in her throat and keep her silent. But it was just this look of utter helplessness which remained in her mind, bringing with it always a tender compassion; and as the remembrance of him with little Paul on his shoulder served to soften her towards his atrocious sentiments, so that of his sudden physical collapse served to lessen the sort of resentment she had hitherto felt to the charm of his great good looks. She could not have explained how either of these facts came about; she was not even aware that it was so, and yet it did make a difference in her attitude towards him. A pity for his weakness, for his faults and failings, came to take the place of condemnation.

So the days passed, until one evening as they trudged home from an unsuccessful raid on the river, Mr. Gillespie remarked that the herring were in at Craignish, and the mackerel often came at the back of the herring, so, maybe, it would be worth while to have a try at them.

"Better than the river, anyhow," grumbled Will, who, even with the red-tailed fly, felt the horrid weight of an empty creel on his shoulders.

Paul looked at Marjory. It had come to that in most things by this time, and as often as not, as now, no words were necessary. "Then I will tell John Macpherson to have the boat ready to-morrow, for it is my last day--of leisure, I mean. My sister comes on Saturday, my guests follow on Monday, and after that--the deluge, I suppose."

"I should not wonder," remarked Will, gravely; "the midges were awful to-day."

Both Paul and Marjory laughed; they could not help it, despite their vague regret that holiday time was over.

CHAPTER X.

Paul's last day was one of those never-to-be-forgotten days, when the mist lies in light wreaths below the mountain tops, which rise clear and sharp against an intense blue sky; when masses of white cloud hang in mid-air, bringing with each new moment some fresh beauty, born of shadow, to sea and shore; when a cool breeze blows unevenly, every now and again darkening the water to a purple, and cresting the waves with foam-streaks edged with turquoise.

"None too soon," said Paul, briefly, as the "Tubhaneer" (so called from her washing-tub-like build) cast off her moorings, and stood out for the middle of the loch. "I told you it would be the deluge after to-day, Miss Carmichael. We shall have rain to-morrow."

Will nodded his head.

"Oh, don't talk of to-morrow!" said Marjory, quickly; "to-day is enough, surely."

Paul, from amid-ships, applauded softly, and she attempted a frown, which ended feebly in a smile. And wherefore not? Sufficient, indeed, unto that day was the pleasure thereof. The red-brown sail drew bravely, the long line lay curled up forward, the oyster dredger rested athwart, the rifles were with Paul amid-ships, the lithe rods swept out astern behind Marjory as she leant lightly over the tiller, her eyes upon the quivering sail; for it needed every inch she could gain to avoid a tack, even though the current of the outgoing tide was aiding them to slip through the Narrowest to the open sea beyond.

"Where will the white rock be?" she asked of Donald Post, who, being learned in banks and baits, would often set his wife to carry the bag while he was off and away after the sea fishing. He was now opening mussels with a crunching sound, regular as a machine.

"Deed an' she will be right ahead of us whatever," he replied, without a pause.

"There will be plenty of water, I suppose?"

"Deed she will no be havin' much on her, anyhow."

"Then how shall I steer?"

"Just as she is, Miss Marjory, just as she is; she will be doing fine, I'm thinking."

"A miss is as good as a mile," murmured Paul, engaged in stretching his long length comfortably over some ballast kegs. "Can you swim?"

Marjory nodded. "Then save me, please; I really am not inclined to exert myself."

"So it appears," remarked Will Cameron, in an injured tone. He and the Reverend James were forward, busy over the tangled lengths of the long line, and the necessity for restraining his tongue before the cloth was telling even on the former's easy temper; for a long line in a tangle is quite indescribable in Parliamentary language.

"Keep her in a bit, Marjory. We must anchor over the fishing-house bank for a while, and get bait for this--this *thing*."

"Then I shall have to tack."

"Tack, indeed! If you don't like it, I'll steer and you can tackle this--this *thing*. Look out, Donald!--two trees and the white stone."

Round went the tiller. "Now, John!" said the girl; the sail came down with a clatter, the way slackened, the anchor, poised in Donald's watchful hands, splashed overboard, and the "Tubhaneer" drew up to it with her mast, and the two trees, and the white stone in a line.

"Well done, Miss Marjory; that was well done, whatever," rose Donald's voice softly, between renewed crunching;

and two minor splashes following close on each other told that the Parson and Will had their hand-lines down. Then came a silence, broken only by the fitful gurgle of the water against the "Tubhaneer" as she swung round to the tide, and that monotonous crunch, crunch of the mussel-knife.

"John Roy, he wass takin' five whitin's from the bank last week," rose Donald's voice once more, quite causelessly. "It wass a bit of himself he was catching them with. It iss nothin' the whitin's iss liking so much as a bit of himself."

Then silence again, his hearers being too much accustomed to the intricacies of Donald's style to be startled by this novel fact in natural history. So, amid the stillness, a sudden jerk of the Reverend James's right hand, a pause of intense expectation--to judge by the rapt look on his comely face--then disappointment from bow to stern, and a general slackness.

"It will just be ain o' they pickers," mused Donald, recovering from his momentary idleness; "or maybe a sooker. It iss the pickers and sookers in this place that just beats all. Oo-aye! If it wass not a picker, it will be a sooker."

"What is the difference between a picker and a sucker, Donald?" asked Marjory, severely practical.

"Deed, then, Miss Marjory, and it iss not any difference there will be between them at all. It is a sooker that will not be caring a tamm for the hook, and it is the picker that will not be caring a tamm either."

"Ahem!" interrupted Mr. Gillespie, with reproachful glance at Donald's unconscious back; "I believe, Miss Marjory, that pickers or suckers is really only the local name for young codlings, lythe, or cuddies. In fact, for all young fish."

"She is not them at all," retorted Donald, scornfully. "It iss sookers and pickers, and not young fish they will be, and it iss not a local name, whatever." The last came with such a glance of sovereign contempt for the offender, that Paul, from his ballast kegs, smiled up at Marjory, who smiled back at him.

"Got him at last! and a good one too!" sang out Will, ending the discussion by a new topic of all-absorbing interest, which held the boat's crew in suspense till the rasping rub of the line over the side and the drip of water falling back on water ceased in a disgusted exclamation from the captor of a small flounder, hooked foul.

"Little deevil," murmured John Macpherson, in such a self-communing tone, that the Reverend James felt the observation must pass.

"It iss pulling like that they are," commented Donald, affably. "John Roy he was fishin' at the ferry-house, and thinkin' it wass a *skatach* he got, and cryin' on me for the gaff he wass, but it was two flukies he was hookin' by their tails."

Marjory looked as if she were inclined to dispute the fact, then joined in the dreamful silence, which, with spasmodic awakenings as fish after fish came over the side, lasted until there was enough bait, and Will gave the word to move on. Then the anchor came up laden with a root of oarweed, in which strange shells and starfish lay entangled; so it was handed aft for Marjory to see.

"It is squeakin' like a mice yon beast will be," said Donald, pointing to a sea-urchin. "Aye! an' bitin' most tarrible he is."

"That is quite impossible," interrupted the girl, cutting short various other facts which trembled on Donald's lips. "They couldn't bite if they tried."

"Then it is squeakin' like a mice they are, whatever," he retorted doggedly; "for John Roy wass tellin' it to me." John Roy being Donald's Mrs. Harris, the subject admitted of no further discussion, and the ensuing pause was broken by a sudden question from Paul.

"Do you ever find niggerheads about here now? I remember when I was a boy in petticoats----"

He took the tiny cowrie of dazzling whiteness she handed him by way of answer, and said no more. How many years, he wondered, was it since he had last thought of niggerheads? Truly the world was a strange place, and a man's brain stranger still.

And now the long line, duly baited for skate and haddock, was being paid out and left drifting, moored to floats which seemed to dance away on the waves, as the "Tubhaneer" with sail full spread made for the last, low, sunlit point,

and so, entering the Linnhe Loch, headed straight for the blue Kingairloch Hills. To the left lay Lismore, a glimmering strip of green and gold amid the shining sea; behind was Port Appin, with its heather-crested bluff, and spidery-black pier; before them the serrated line of Ardnamurchan, and beyond, faint in the distance, the headland of Mull jutting into a glint of the Atlantic. To the right rose Shuna with its swelling grassy slopes and cross-signed pebble shores, like a fairy island in the summer sea. So further afield Appin House, set in fir knolls, Ardgour lighthouse glimmering to the left, and beyond, all the hills rising clear and cloudless to the peak of Ben Nevis.

On Ami's bay a cluster of boats in shore told that the herring were in.

"They never come to Loch Eira now," remarked Will, idly. "It is funny, but they don't."

"It will not be funny at all, sir," expostulated Donald. "It wass comin' they were every year, sure's I sit here, but it wass old John Mackenzie he wass going after them on the Sabbath, and it wass not coming any more after that they were."

"And that is a fact, of course?" asked Will, gravely.

"It will not be a fact at all, sir," echoed Donald, "but it was old John himself wass tellin' it to me."

"I believe it to be quite true, Mr. Cameron," put in the Reverend James; "indeed I remember the Bishop commenting upon the circumstance in a sermon. He brought it in most beautifully, and so conclusively."

"It wass a burnin' shame of the old *bodach*, whatever," grumbled John Macpherson. "Ay! Ay! a dirty trick, whatever."

Marjory, watching the sea-pyots wheel and veer against the blue of the distant hills, smiled to herself. The mere thought of the Bishop in his lawn sleeves seemed unreal out there in the sunshine. Everything was unreal save the boat skimming with a little hiss through the water.

"There's a steamer rounding the point below Lismore," said Will. "What will she be, I wonder?"

"She will be the salt ship from Glasgow for the harrin'," replied Donald, after prolonged deliberation. "That iss what she will be, an' ferry welcome. I mind when the harrin' were in Glen Etive, and the salt ship she wass not comin' at all, the people wass diggin' holes in the peat, and fillin' them with the harrin'. It wass not keepin' ferry well, but it was eating them were. A terrible year for sickness it wass, though the harrin' was that plenty, they wass takin' them in buckets."

"Deed an' it was a dirty trick of that old *bodachs* to be driving them away," grumbled Macpherson, "a dirty trick--Gorsh me!--yon's a seal--quick, Mr. Paul!"

There was a sudden, still stir in the crew, and all eyes turned to where a smooth brown head slipped oilily through the water. Marjory held her breath half-shrinkingly, yet said no word. Not even when Paul whispered "Ready, Cameron?" and, heralded by a little flash and puff, the simultaneous report of the rifles frightened the sea-pyots into screaming flight. The head disappeared as the bullets went ricocheting over the water in soft *ping-pings*.

"Too high," said one voice, mournfully.

"Yes! but the direction was good."

These remarks, which in constant substance but varying form follow most unsuccessful shots, appeared satisfactory to the speakers; for Paul retired to the thwarts again, and Will resumed his pipe, while Macpherson looked pensively through one of the rifles to see if it had leaded, and the general excitement died down.

"It is curious," remarked Marjory, disdainfully relieved, and speaking, as it were, to the circumambient air, "how even a remote prospect of killing something will rouse a man's love of destruction."

Paul, leaning one arm on the thwart, looked up at her solemnly.

"True--too true. We are destructive, or rather, accurately speaking, we should like to be destructive--only we aren't. That was a bad miss of mine. But if we like to destroy, you women love to annex. Witness that pile of seaweed and shells beside you. You don't really want it, and ten to one when it comes to the bother of carrying it home, you will leave it behind you."

"Pardon me," remarked the girl, "you shall carry it for me."

"A foregone conclusion, if you wish it, of course; but in that case you will simply add my services to your possessions. And in like manner you will dispense with them when I cease to be amusing. Woman all over!"

"Thanks, Gleneira!" laughed Will. "It does me good to hear Marjory kept in order. She bullies me awfully about shooting seals, and I fully expected her to sneeze or cough. She generally does."

"I knew you wouldn't hit," retorted Marjory, scornfully, "and it pleased you."

"Pleased 'er and didn't hurt me,' as the navvy said when his wife beat him," put in Paul. "By Jove! Miss Carmichael, if I had known what you thought, I would have put a bullet----"

"Hist!" cried Marjory, holding up her hand. There, within a stone's throw, was the smooth brown head, with large, liquid, confiding eyes turned towards the boat. Not a ripple, not a sound, showed that it was in motion, and yet it slipped past rapidly.

"Gorsh me! but the beast's tame," whispered John, unable to contain himself in the inaction; but the whisper might as well have been a clap of thunder, for the round head sank noiselessly into the water, leaving scarcely a ripple behind it.

"Why didn't you shoot, Captain Macleod?" asked Marjory, with an odd little tremor in her voice, at which she herself was dimly surprised; "you might have hit that time, for it couldn't have been more than fifteen yards off."

"I never thought of it," he replied quietly; "the beast looked so jolly."

"It looked quite as jolly when it was far away, no doubt."

"But I couldn't see it. And if we discuss that point I shall find it as much out of my range as the seal was. So give me a good mark for refraining when I did see its jolliness."

"Besides, it would have been no good trying. It would have been down like a shot if we had stirred a finger," said Will, philosophically.

Paul Macleod sighed. "There goes my last claim to saintship. You are a perfect devil's advocate, Cameron."

"But, really, Miss Marjory," put in the Reverend James, who had, as usual, been left far behind in the quick interchange of thought, "I do not see why you should object to shooting a seal. Man is permitted by a merciful Creator to destroy animal life----"

"In order to preserve his own, and even then it seems a pity," interrupted the girl, eagerly. "Oh, I daresay, Captain Macleod, the feeling isn't strong enough to make me turn vegetarian, but it *is* wanton cruelty to kill a poor seal which is of no use to anyone!"

"There you go!" grumbled Will. "Why! I wanted its paws awfully for tobacco pouches--mine is quite worn out."

"Your remark, Cameron, is childish and unreasonable," replied Paul, from his lounge. "You cannot expect Miss Carmichael's tolerance of humanity to extend to tobacco pouches. Let us be thankful it concedes mutton chops."

"A seal is a ferry clever beast, whatever," put in Donald. "It wass John Roy wass walking on the rocks at Craignish, and he wass seeing a big seal, and heavin' stoness at it, and--gorsh me!--but it wass takin' the stoness and fro'ing them back at John. And, tamm me! but the creature wass a better shot than John--oo--aye! a far better shot whatever."

"And that is a fact, Donald?" asked Will, solemnly.

"Not a fack at all, sir; but John Roy he wass tellin' it to me."

"Not so clever as the Kashmir bear, Donald?" put in Paul. "When it has to cross a stream in flood it carries a big boulder on its head to keep itself steady."

"An' is that a fack, sir," asked Donald, readily.

"The people were telling it to me, anyhow!"

"Then they were big liars whatever," said Donald, with such an inimitable air of shocked conviction that a general shout of laughter rose on the sunny air.

Oh, bright, glad day! Oh, careless, foolish talk! Oh, deep abiding sense of peace and good-will in all that sea-girt mountain world which rose around them, havening their little boat! Could it be that there was trouble, or toil, or tears, yonder where the mist floated so tenderly, or there, where cottage and castle, meadow and moor, wheat and tares were blended into one purple glory? There were not many such days in life, so let us cherish the mere memory of them!

The mackerel, it is true, were not to be beguiled, but what matter? The boat skimmed over the blue water; two red-brown sails stood out to the West or East.

"No use trying any more," said Will at last, with a shake of the head over Paul's placid repose; for lunch had come to fill up the measure of content, and the laird was back among the ballast with a large basket of strawberries. "I think, Donald, we might try the big lythe off Shuna."

"The tide will no be answerable awhile, sir, but there will be no excuse for the *bedach ruachs* at the rocks; no excuse at all."

"Let us hope the fish will have a sense of duty," murmured Paul from the strawberries; "cold-blooded creatures generally have."

They anchored out of the tide race in a backwater of the current, and Marjory, looking over the side, could see far down into the green depth where pale, pulsating Medusas came floating by, and every now and again a flash of light told of a passing fish.

"Too much tide," began Paul, eyeing the set of the lines from his retreat, when four mighty and coincident strikes silenced his wisdom for a while. But only for a while, since amid the rasp and rub of wet lines against the side came Will's voice despondently.

"I'm in to some of you others."

"So am I--and I----" echoed Marjory and the Reverend James. Only Donald Post whispered softly, "It is the deevil is on mine whatever," and Paul, without stirring hand and foot, suggested the mainland of Scotland. But it was neither. The lines passed to the stern produced conjointly a codling, which after swallowing two baits had tried at a third, and so hooked itself foul in the fourth.

"There's an object lesson for you, Miss Carmichael," said Paul, teasingly. "How about your theory of the cruel hook and the poor fish?"

"It is not feeling a tamm, fish is," commented Donald, calmly disgorging the baits. "It was fishin' for *bodachs* old John Boy was, and he was catchin' her foul by the eye, and the eye she come out. But John Roy was leavin' it on the hook and the *bodach* was comin' again an' takin' his own eye."

"And there is a fact for you," continued Paul.

"No! No! sir," protested Donald, with a twinkle in his eye; "it will no be a fack whatever, but John Roy he was tellin' it to me." Whereat there was laughter again.

So, as the day drew down, they landed on Shuna to boil the kettle for tea with driftwood gathered from the shore, and wonder idly as the flames leapt up to shrivel the lowermost leaves of the rowan tree by the spring, whence the wreckage which burnt so bravely had come; for storm and stress seemed far from their world.

Then, while the boatmen took their turn at the scones and cake, the jam and toast, they climbed the grassy slopes, and, sitting down by the old tower, watched the sunset idly; for all things, even pleasure, seem idle on such days as these. The clouds had pricked westwards, as if to aid the Atlantic in a coming storm, but below their heavy purple masses lay a strip of greeny gold sky, into which the sun was just sinking from a higher belt of crimson-tinted bars.

"No Green Ray for us to-night," said Marjory, with a smile.

Paul raised his eyebrows. "No Green Ray on this or any other night, in my candid opinion."

The Reverend James looked puzzled. "I have often heard you mention this Green Ray, Miss Marjory, but I am not quite sure to what you allude."

"To a fiction of Jules Verne's, that is all," put in Paul, quickly.

"Nothing of the sort; people have seen it," corrected the girl, eagerly.

"Say they have seen it," murmured Paul, obstinately, and Marjory frowned.

"I will explain it to you, Mr. Gillespie," she went on, with assertion in her voice. "It is a green ray of light which shoots through the sea, just as the topmost curve of the sun touches the water. I watch for it often. I intend to watch for it till I see it, as others have done."

"And what good will it do to you when you have seen it?" asked Paul. They were speaking to each other, despite the pretence of general conversation; but it was so often.

"I haven't the least idea," she answered airily; "for all that, I look forward to seeing it as a great event in my life."

"Great events are dangerous; like some very valuable medicines, uncertain in their effects. Birth, for instance--you may be born a fool or a wise man. Marriage--a chance of the die--so I'm told. Death." He pointed dramatically upwards and downwards with a whimsical look on his anxious, gracious face.

"I deny it, I deny it altogether," cried the girl, forgetting herself and him in her eagerness. "You are either in existence before birth, or you are not. In the one case you must remain yourself, in the other you, being nonexistent, cannot suffer chance or change. It is the same with death. If there is no *you* to survive, death itself ceases to be since you are non-existent. If there is, you must remain yourself."

"Surely, my dear Miss Marjory," said the Reverend James, breaking in on the girl's half-questioning appeal, "we are to be changed in the twinkling of an eye?"

"And marriage, Miss Carmichael?" put in Paul, quietly, passing by the last remark as if it, too, had been non-existent. "You left out marriage in your philosophy."

Her face fell, yet softened.

"I do not know; it is like the Green Ray, something to dream about."

"To dream about! Ah! that sort of marriage is, I own, beyond the vision of ordinary humanity."

"But indeed there is nothing scientifically impossible in the Green Ray. You have only to get the angle of refraction equal to the----"

"Spare me, please. If I have to swallow romance I prefer it undisguised. Even as a boy I refused powders in jam."

"Wish I had," grumbled Will, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "I have never been able to eat black-currant jelly in consequence. And it is awfully nice in itself. Come, Marjory, we ought to be going."

"It is very hard to get rid of acquired tastes," muttered Paul, in an undertone, as he rose, and quite familiarly held out his hand to help Marjory to her feet also. "For instance, it will be difficult to forget the flavour of the past fortnight."

"Why should you forget it?" They were standing apart from the others, who were looking eastward to see if the boatmen were ready.

"Because the pleasure of it has been demoralising."

"I don't believe in the demoralising effect of pleasure."

"Perhaps not. You are one of the virtuously constituted whose pleasure consists in behaving nicely. Mine doesn't."

Her hand went out in an impulsive gesture of denial.

"Why should you say that? You are not----"

"How can you know what I am?" he began bitterly, yet indifferently; his eyes, not upon her, but fixed far on the distant horizon, as if arraigning some unseen power which had made him what he was. Then he paused abruptly, and infinite surprise drove everything else from his face.

"Look!" he cried.

"Look?--what?--where?"

"Look!" His hand was on hers now, and its trembling touch seemed to give her sight.

It was a new heaven and a new earth! For, on the outermost edge of the world, the last beam of light from the sunken sun shot through the waves, flooding sky, and sea, and shore, with a green light, soft and pellucid as the heart of an emerald. But only for an instant. The next he had loosed her hand and the light was gone.

"What are you staring at so, Miss Carmichael?" His mocking tone jarred her through and through. She looked at him in sheer bewilderment.

"The--the Green Ray!"

"The Green Ray!" he echoed, in the same tones. "I say, Cameron! Here is your cousin declaring she has seen the Green Ray. Did you see anything?"

"Only the seal you were watching out on the rocks yonder," called Will. "Splendid shot, wasn't it?"

"The Green Ray!" echoed the Reverend James, bustling up. "Dear me, how interesting, and I missed it, somehow. What was it like, Miss Marjory?"

The girl stood with her clear, cold eyes fixed on Paul's face. "I scarcely know. You had better ask Captain Macleod. If I saw anything, he saw it also; and saw it first!"

"But you have such a much more vivid imagination than I," he replied easily, "that what would be to me merely an unusually beautiful effect, might be to you a miracle. It is simply a question of temperament, and mine is severely practical. In fact, Cameron, if we are to get home to-night, it's time we were going."

"By George!" said Will, when, with a general scramble, they had stowed everything on board, "it's later than I thought, the tide has turned, and the wind is almost down. We must take the sweeps, I am afraid."

"All right," said Paul. "Hand us over an oar."

He was a different man; the lazy content was gone, and he gave a stroke from a straight back which made Donald gasp between his efforts--"Gorsh me! but he is a fine rower, is the laird!"

But there was silence--the silence of hard work--for the most part, as they toiled home with wind and tide against them. Yet the scene was beautiful as ever in the growing moonlight.

"We are not more than a mile from the house here, Marjory," said Will, as they rounded a point below the Narrowest; "but it will take us a good hour to get her to the boat-house, and I can't leave her here; it's spring tides, and the painter's not long enough. But I'll land you on that rock, and the laird will see you home. Mother will be getting anxious."

"I would rather stay," she was beginning, when Paul cut her short.

"Back water, bow; pull, Donald. Luff her a bit. Miss Carmichael, please. That will do." They were alongside the little jetty of rock, and he was out. "Your hand, please, the seaweed is awfully slippery. Donald, pass up those shells, will you, they are in my handkerchief. All right, Cameron. Give way."

It had all passed so quickly, and this masterful activity of Paul's was so surprising, that Marjory, rather to her own surprise, found herself following close on his heels as he forced a way for her through the dense thickets of bracken, or held back a briar from the path in silence. Yet the silence did not seem oppressive; it suited her own confusion, her own vague pleasure and pain. She had seen the Green Ray, but she had seen it through Paul Macleod's eyes. Yes; whether he would or not, they had seen it hand in hand. He might deny it, but the fact remained. He was one of those who could

see it!

And Paul, as he walked on, felt that the silence intensified his clear pleasure and clearer pain. For there was no vagueness in *his* emotions. It was not the first time that the touch of a woman's hand had thrilled him through and through, as Marjory's had done as they looked out over the sunset sea; but it was the first time that such a thrill had not moved him to look upon the woman's face! And they had stood still, hand in hand, like a couple of children, staring at the Green Ray! What a fool he had been! What did it mean save something at which he had always scoffed, at which he meant always to scoff! And then the Green Ray? Was his brain softening that he should see visions and dream dreams? He, Paul Macleod, who loved and forgot all, save his own physical comfort. As everyone did in the end. And yet it was a familiar pleasure to be in love again honestly, a pleasure to feel his heart beating, to know that the girl he fancied was there beside him in the moonlight, that he could tell her of his heart-beats if he chose. But he did not choose. Love of that sort came and went! Did he not know it? Did he not know his own nature, and was not that enough? And yet, when they reached the high road a sudden desire to make her also understand it, made him say, abruptly:

"When do you begin work? In London, isn't it?"

"Yes; in November."

"And you are really going to waste life in a dull, dirty school, teaching vulgar little boys and girls."

"I shall teach them not to be vulgar."

He shrugged his shoulders. "You cannot fight against Nature, Miss Carmichael; as we are born, we remain. You will only kill yourself in your efforts at regeneration."

"I think not. I am very strong to begin with, and then I hate rusting in idleness."

"Rust may be better than tarnish. When I think of you here in this paradise--a fool's paradise, perhaps--and of what you must encounter there, it seems preposterous for you to mix yourself up. But you do not understand; you never will." He had forgotten his new outlook in the old resentment at her unconsciousness.

"Understand what? I can understand most things if I try."

"Can you? I doubt it. You cannot understand me, for instance, but that is beside the question. The only comfort is that real life will disgust you. Then you will return to the home you should never have left."

"I have no home--you know that."

"You can make one by marrying, as other girls do."

"I am not like other girls, thank you----"

"Do you think I can't see that?" he broke out quite passionately. "Should I be talking to you as I am if you were--why, I can't even speak to you of what some of them are. It is because you are not as other girls----"

"Then you wish me to behave as they do. You are scarcely logical." Her tone was as ice, and, chilling his passion, sent him back to his cynicism.

"Logic and love do not generally run in double harness, Miss Carmichael; but if you prefer the former, I am quite prepared to stick to it. Someone wants a wife, someone wants a home. It is a mere case of barter. What can be more natural, sensible----"

"And degrading."

"Pardon me, not always. I will take my own case if you will allow me. We have touched on it often before. Let us speak frankly now. I need money, not for myself alone; for the property. You have hinted a thousand times that I am a bad landlord; so I am. How can I help it without money?"

"You could be a better landlord than you are."

"If I chose to live on porridge and milk; but I don't choose, and I don't choose to sell. I prefer to stick to champagne and devilled bones, and give up another personal pleasure instead. And you say it is degrading."

"I said nothing of the sort. I spoke of myself. It would degrade me. I do not presume to speak of you."

"But you think it all the same."

"And if I do, what is that to you?" she cried suddenly, in hot anger. "I do condemn you, if you will have the truth. I think you will deliberately turn your back on the best part of life if you marry for mere comfort--and, what is more, that you will regret it."

"Possibly. I regret most things after a time. Let us wait and see whether you or I find the greatest happiness in life. Only we are not likely to agree even there, for we shall not see the world in the same light."

"Unless High Heaven vouchsafes us another Green Ray," she said coldly.

The allusion aroused all his own vexation with himself, all his impatience at her influence over him. They were passing the short cut leading to the Lodge, and he paused.

"I don't think I need intrude on Mrs. Cameron tonight," he said. "Good-bye, Miss Carmichael." Then suddenly he turned with a smile of infinite grace. "Let us shake hands over it to show there is no ill-feeling. It is my last holiday, remember; and, according to you, I am going into penal servitude for life. But I'll chance my ticket-of-leave. I am generally fairly virtuous when I have enough to eat and drink. And we have had a good time, haven't we?"

"Very," said Marjory. And though he tried hard to get up another thrill as their hands met, he failed utterly. He might have been saying good-bye to his grandmother for all the emotion it roused in him; and as he strode home he scarcely knew if the fact were disconcerting or satisfactory. The latter, in so far that it proved his feeling for Marjory must be of a placid, sentimental form, to which he was unaccustomed. What else could it be in such surroundings, and with a girl who hadn't a notion what love meant?

And Marjory, as she crossed the few yards between her and Mrs. Cameron's comments, felt vexed that she was not more angry with the culprit. But once again the thought of the St. Christopher, and of Paul's blue, chattering lips, when he had the chills at the Pixie's Lake, came to soften her and make her forget all but admiration and pity.

CHAPTER XI.

Rain! Rain! Rain! One drop chasing the other down the window-pane like boys upon a slide. Beyond them a swaying network of branches rising out of the grey mist-curtain veiling the landscape, and every now and again a wild whirl of wind from the southwest, bringing with it a fiercer patter on the pane. Those who know the West coast of Scotland in the mood with which in nine cases out of ten it welcomes the Sassenach, will need no further description of the general depression and discomfort in Gleneira House a week after Paul had said good-bye to Marjory at the short cut. For he had been right, the deluge had come; and even Mrs. Cameron, going her rounds through byre and barn in pattens, with petticoats high kilted to her knees, shook her head, declaring that if it were not for the promise she would misdoubt that the long-prophesied judgment had overtaken this evil generation. And she had lived in the Glen for fifty years.

Poor Lady George, who had arrived at Gleneira wet, chilled, uncomfortable, yet still prepared to play her role of hostess to perfection, fell a victim to a cold, which, as she complained, put it out of her power to give a good rendering to the part. Since it was manifestly impossible to receive her visitors, arriving in their turn wet, chilled, uncomfortable, with anything like the optimism required, for protestations that Highland rain did no harm, and hot whiskey-and-water did good, were valueless, when you sneezed three times during your remark. If she could only have gone to bed for one day, there would have been some chance for her; but that was impossible, since nowadays one couldn't have a good old-fashioned cold in one's head without the risk of breaking up one's party from fear of influenza! So she went about in a very smart, short, tweed costume, with gaiters, and affected a sort of forced indifference even when the cook, imported at fabulous wages, gave up her place on the third day, saying she could not live in a shower bath, and was not accustomed to a Zoological Gardens in the larder; when the upper housemaid gave warning because hot water was not laid on to the top of the house, and the kitchenmaid refused to make the porridge for the half-dozen Highland lassies, who did all the work, on the ground that no self-respecting girl would encourage others in such barbarous habits. But all this, thank heaven! was on the other side of the swing door; still, though the guests could scarcely give warning, matters were not much brighter in, what servants call, collectively, the dining-room. Breakfast was a godsend, for a judicious admixture of scones and jams, and a little dexterous manipulation of the time at which people were expected to come down, made it last till eleven at the earliest. And then the hall was a providence. Large, and low, and comfortable, with a blazing fire, and two doors, where the ladies could linger and talk bravely of going out. Looking like it, also, in tweeds even shorter and nattier than Lady George's, yet for all that succumbing after a time to the impossibility of holding up an umbrella in such a gale of wind, joined to gentle doubts as to whether a waterproof was waterproof. Then there was lunch. But it was after lunch, when people had manifestly over-eaten themselves, that the real strain of the day began. So that the Reverend James Gillespie, coming to call, despite the pouring rain, as in duty bound, was delighted with the warmth of his reception, and Lady George, making the most of the pleasing novelty, reverted unconsciously to a part suitable to the occasion.

"Dear me!" she said plaintively; "this is very distressing! Imagine, my dear Mrs. Woodward! Mr. Gillespie assures me that there is no church in the Glen, only a schoolhouse. Paul, dear, how came you never to mention this, you bad boy?"

Paul, who, after sending the most enthusiastic men forth on what he knew must be a fruitless quest after grouse, was devoting himself to the ladies, and in consequence felt unutterably bored, as he always did when on duty, turned on his sister captiously:

"I thought you would have remembered the fact. I did, and you are older than I am. Why, you used always to cry--just like Blazes does--if my mother wouldn't let you open the picture papers during service."

Lady George bridled up. It was so thoughtless of Paul, bringing all the disagreeables in life into one sentence; and reminiscences of that sort were so unnecessary, for everyone knew that even the best childhood could not stand the light of adult memory.

"But surely there was a talk, even then, of a more suitable building. I suppose it fell through. High time, is it not, dear Mrs. Woodward, for our absentee landlord to repair his neglect?"

"The farm-steadings have first claim to repair, I'm afraid, Blanche," returned Paul, refusing his part. "The church will have to stand over as a luxury."

Lady George, even in her indignation, hastened to cover the imprudence, for the Woodwards were distinctly high.

"Not a bit of it, Paul! We will all set to work at once, Mr. Gillespie, and see what can be done--won't we, dear Mrs. Woodward?"

"I would suggest writing to the Bishop as the first step," said the Reverend James, modestly.

"And then a fancy fair," continued Lady George.

"Delightful! a fancy fair, by all means," echoed an elderly schoolfellow of Blanche's, who had been invited on the express understanding that she was to do the flowers and second all suggestions.

"I trust you will have nothing of the kind, Blanche," put in Paul, with unusual irritation. "I hate charitable pocket-picking. I beg your pardon for the crude expression, Miss Woodward, but I have some excuse. On one occasion in India I was set on by every lady in the station, with the result that I found twenty-five penwipers of sorts in my pocket when I got home."

"Twenty-five, that was a large number," said Alice, stifling a yawn. "What did you do with them?"

"Put them away in lavender as keepsakes, of course."

"My dear Paul," put in his sister, hurriedly, recognising his unsafe mood. "We do things differently in England. We do not set on young men; we do not have----"

"A superfluity of penwipers," interrupted her brother, becoming utterly exasperated; but as he looked out of the window he saw something which made him sit down again beside Alice Woodward, and devote himself to her amusement. Yet it was a sight which with most men would have had exactly the opposite effect, for it was a glimpse of a well-known figure battling with the wind and the rain along the ferry road. But Paul Macleod had made up his mind; besides, rather to his own surprise, the past few days had brought him very little of the restless desire to be with Marjory, which he had expected from his previous experiences in love. It was evidently a sentimental attack, unreal, fanciful, Arcadian, like the episode in which it had arisen. And yet a remark of his sister's at afternoon tea set him suddenly in arms.

"Mr. Gillespie told me there was a girl staying at the Camerons', Paul, who was a sort of governess, or going to be one. And I thought--if she hadn't a dreadful accent, or anything of that sort, you know, of having her in the mornings for the children."

"Miss Carmichael, Blanche," he broke in, at a white heat, "is a very charming girl, and I was going to ask you to call upon her, as soon as the weather allowed of it. I have seen a good deal of her during the last few weeks, and should like you to know her."

Really, in his present mood, Paul was almost as bad as a dynamite bomb, or a high-pressure boiler in the back kitchen! Still, mindful of her sisterly devotion, Lady George covered his indiscretion gracefully.

"Oh, she is that sort of person, is she? I must have misunderstood Mr. Gillespie, and I will call at once, for it is so pleasant, isn't it, Alice dear, for girls to have companions."

And yet, as she spoke, she told herself that this was an explanation of her brother's patience in solitude, and that it would be far safer, considering what Paul was, to keep an eye on this possible flirtation. Meanwhile, the offender felt a kind of shock at the possibilities her easy acquiescence opened up. He had been telling himself, with a certain satisfaction, that the idyll was over, leaving both him and her little the worse for it; and now, apparently, he was to have an opportunity of comparing the girl he fancied, and the girl he meant to marry, side by side. It was scarcely a pleasing prospect, and the knowledge of this made him once more return to his set purpose of fostering some kind of sentiment towards Alice Woodward. But the fates were against him. Lord George, coming in wet, but lively, from a constitutional, began enthusiastically, between his drainings of the teapot, in search of something to drink, on the charms of a girl he had met on the road. "A real Highland girl," continued the amiable idiot, regardless of his wife's storm signals, "with a lot of jolly curly hair: not exactly pretty, you know, but fresh as a daisy, bright as a bee. I couldn't help thinking, you know, how much better you would all feel, Blanche, if you went out for a blow instead of sticking at home."

"We should not come into the drawing-room with dirty boots if we did, should we, Alice dear? Just look at him, Mrs. Woodward! He isn't fit for ladies' society, is he?"

Lord George gave a hasty glance at his boots, swallowed his tepid washings of the teapot with a muttered apology, and retired, leaving his wife to breathe freely.

"That must be Miss Carmichael, I suppose," she remarked easily. "I am beginning to be quite anxious to see this paragon, Paul."

"Nothing easier," replied her brother, shortly; "if you will be ready at three to-morrow afternoon, I'll take you over and introduce you."

Positively she felt relieved when, with some excuse about seeing whether the sportsmen had returned, he left the drawing-room. It was like being on the brink of a volcano when he was there, and yet, poor, dear old fellow, he behaved very sweetly.

She said as much to him, being clever enough to take his real affection for her into consideration, during a brief quarter of an hour's respite from duty which she managed in his business-room before dinner.

"I wish *I* had a snugger like this, Paul," she said, plaintively shaking her head over his long length spread out on one side of the fire, and Lord George's on the other, "but women always bear the brunt of everything. If the barometer would go up I could manage; but it *will* go down, and though I've taken away the one from the hall, Major Tombs has an aneroid in his room, and *will* speak about it. And Ricketts--I have had her for five years, George, you remember--gave me warning to-day. It seems Jessie took advantage of the fire in Ricketts's room to dry one of Paul's wet suits, and Ricketts thought it was a burglar. She went into hysterics first, and now says she never was so insulted in her life."

Paul laughed. "Would it do any good if I apologised?"

"Wish it had been mine," grumbled Lord George. "This is my last coat but one, and the sleeves of it are damp. I can't think why the dickens the women can't turn 'em inside out."

"Oh! of course, it's the women again, George, but the footman wants to know if he is expected to grease boots, and I don't know what to say. Someone used to grease them, I remember----"

"Oh! if it comes to that," said Paul, hotly, "I'll grease 'em myself. Why should you bother, Blanche?"

"Now that is *so* like a man! Someone must bother; and really servants are so troublesome about boots, though I must own one would think you men were centipedes; there are fifty pairs in the laundry at present. And Mrs. Woodward says her husband has smoked too many cigars and drunk too much whiskey and soda. As if it were my fault." Poor Lady George spoke quite tearfully.

"Well, I offered to take him out, but he said his waterproof wasn't waterproof. What the dickens does a man mean by coming to the West Highlands without a waterproof? One doesn't expect anything else in a woman, of course, but a man!"

Lady George dried her eyes disconsolately. "Oh! it is no use, George, importing the antagonism of sex into the matter. It is bad enough without that. If we only had a billiard-room I could manage. Do you know I think it quite criminal to build a house in the country without one."

"There are the Kindergarten toys, my dear," suggested her husband; "the children seem to have tired of them."

"Oh, don't try to be funny, please!" retorted his wife; "that would be the last straw. And nurse says it is because they cannot get out that they are so cross. Just when I was counting on them, too, as a distraction."

"Well, Blazes was that effectually this morning," replied her husband, with an air of conviction; "he howled straight on end for two hours, and when I went into the nursery to see what was up, I found the poor little beggar sobbing over some grievance or another."

Lady George flushed up. "It was only because he couldn't come down with the others--I really can't have him; he is so unreasonable, and Mrs. Woodward doesn't believe in my system."

"Never mind, my dear Blanche," said her brother, consolingly. "It seems to answer nicely with good children, and children ought to be good, you know. And the barometer is going up, it really is."

"For wind, I suppose," replied his sister, tragically. Apparently it was for wind; at any rate, Will Cameron coming up to see the laird on business next day observed casually that this must be about the end of it; an optimistic remark which has a certain definite significance in a land of gales. Even the sportsmen were driven to the cold comfort of examining the action of each other's weapons with veiled contempt, discussing the respective merits of each other's

accoutrements, from cartridge cases to leggings, and trying to forget that the wild weather was making the birds still wilder than they had been already. It appeared to have the same effect upon humanity. Sam Woodward, who had been a thorn in poor Lady George's side from the beginning, fell out with the only man who could tolerate him, and thereafter told his sister it was a beastly hole, and that he meant to make the *mater* give him some oof, when he would cut and run to some place where they weren't so beastly stuck up. Mr. Woodward, senior, after roaming about disconsolately waiting for the post, was only appeased by Lady George's suggestion that he would be doing yeoman's service to the cause of civilisation if he composed a letter to the Postmaster-General, calling attention to the disgraceful irregularity in her Majesty's mails to Gleneira; whereupon he retired into the library and wasted several sheets of foolscap.

It was on the children, however, that the weather had the most disastrous effect; so much so that Lord George, returning in the afternoon from a blow with Paul--whose patience had given way over a point-blank refusal on the under footman's part to stop another hour if he was not allowed a fire in his room before dinner--found his wife in the nursery standing helplessly before Blazes, who, in his flannel nightgown, was seated stolidly on the floor. Adam and Eve, meanwhile, were eyeing the scene from their beds, where, however, they had a liberal supply of toys.

"Oh, George!" she cried appealingly, "he has such a hard, hard heart; and I am sure he must get it from your side of the family, so *do* you think you could do anything with him?"

"Put him to bed like the others," suggested his father, weakly, showing signs, at the same time, of beating a retreat, but pausing at the sight of his wife's face, which, to tell the truth, was not far from tears.

"So I have, but he gets out again, and nurse can't hold him in all the time. Besides, it was Mrs. Woodward's fault for being so disagreeable about my system; but the children were naughty, poor dears; only, of course, Adam and Eve went to bed when they were told--you see, they are *reasonable*, and knew that if they *did* they would be allowed to come down again to dessert--and then they didn't really mind going to bed to please me, the little dears. But Blasius actually slapped Mrs. Woodward's face, and then she said he ought to be whipped. So we had quite a discussion about it, and, in the heat of the moment, I told Blasius he must stop in bed till he said he was sorry. And now I can't make him stop in bed or say a word. He just sits and smiles."

Here their mother's tone became so unlike smiles that Adam and Eve, from their little beds, begged their ducksom mummie not to cry, even though Blazes was the baddest little boy *they* had ever seen.

"If he won't say it, you can't make him," remarked Lord George aside, with conviction. "If I were you I'd chance it."

"But I can't. You see, I told Mrs. Woodward I could manage my own children, and so I've made quite a point of it with Blasius. I can't give in."

Lord George, who was in the Foreign Office, and great on diplomatic relations, whistled softly. "Always a mistake to claim when you can't coerce--or retaliate." Then he added, as if a thought had struck him, "Look here! has he had his tea? No! then hand him over to me; I'll put him in the little room by the business room. Nobody will hear him there even if he does howl, and as he gets hungry he will cave in, I expect. At any rate, he can't get out of bed there, and I don't think he can like it."

But for some unexplained reason, possibly original sin, Blasius elected to be quite cheerful over the transfer. He informed the nurse, as she put on his dressing-gown, that he was going to "moke with daddy," and when he reached the little bare room, which was almost a closet, he tucked the same dressing-gown round his little legs very carefully as he plumped down on the floor.

"Blazeth's goin' to stay here a long, long time," he said, confidently. "Dood-night, daddy dear."

In fact, he was so quiet that more than once his father, smoking in the next room, got up to open the door softly and peer in to see if by chance any evil could have befallen the small rebel; only to retire finally, quite discomforted by the superior remark that "when Blazeth's horry Blazeth's 'll let daddy know." To retire and meditate upon the mysterious problem of fatherhood, and that duty to the soul which, somehow or another, you have beckoned out of the unknown. In nine times out of ten, thoughtlessly, to suit your own pleasure; in ninety-nine times out of a hundred to bring it up to suit your own convenience, to minister to your amusement, to justify your theories.

Lady George, coming in with the falling twilight, when the duties of afternoon tea were over in the drawing-room, found her husband, minus a cigar, brooding over the fire.

"I've done it, Blanche," he said defiantly.

"Done what?"

"Beaten him. I knew I should some day."

His wife gave quite a sharp little cry. "Oh, George! and I trusted you. I trusted you so entirely, because you knew it was wrong. And now it can never be undone--never! You have ruined everything--all the confidence, and the love--Oh! George, how could you?"

The man's face was a study, but it was one which few women could understand, for there is something in a righteous disregard of weakness which seems brutal to most of them; for to them justice, like everything else, is an emotion.

"The little beggar bit me," he began, rather sheepishly, and then suddenly he laughed. "He was awfully quiet, you know, and I thought he was really getting hungry; so I went in, and by Jove! Blanche, he had eaten nearly a whole dog biscuit! Paul keeps them there, you know, for the puppy. Well, I felt he had me on the hip as it were, and if it hadn't been for your face, I'd have given in--like a fool. So I sate down and talked to him--like--like a father. And then he suddenly slipped off my knee like an eel, and bit me on the calf. Got tired, I suppose, and upon my soul, I don't wonder--we had been at it for hours, remember. And then--I don't think I lost my temper, Blanche--I don't, indeed; but it seemed to come home to me that it was he or I--a sort of good fight, you know. So I told him that I wasn't going to be bothered by him any more. He had had his fun, and must pay for it, as he would have to do till the day of his death. And then I gave him a regular spanking--yes! I did--and he deserved it."

There was the oddest mixture of remorse, defiance, pain, and pride in her husband's honest face, but Lady George could see nothing, think of nothing, save the overthrow of her system, her belief.

"I wonder you aren't ashamed of yourself!" she cried, quite passionately. "It isn't as if he could reason about it as you can--it isn't as if he understood--it is brute force to him, nothing more----"

"That's just it, you see," protested the culprit, feebly, "if he *could* reason."

"And now the memory must be between you two always, and it isn't as it used to be in the old barbarous days. Parents nowadays care for something more than the old tyranny. We have a respect for our children as for human beings like ourselves. And now you will never be--or at least you *ought* never to be able to look him in the face again! Just think what it means, George!" Blanche, as she stood there with disclaiming hands and eloquent voice, felt herself no mean exponent of the new order of things, and rose to the occasion. "If he had been a man, you dared not have beaten him, so it was mean, brutal, unworthy. How can you expect the child to forget it? Would you, if you were in his place? No! He will never forget it, and the memory must come between you----"

"Blazeth's horry."

A round, full, almost manly voice, and a round, broad face, seamed with tears, yet strangely cheerful withal, as if the bolt having fallen, the sky was clear once more.

Blanche dropped to her knees, and, secure in her own conscience, held out her arms to the little advancing figure, but the child steered past them. It was fact, and fact alone, which impressed the sturdy brain, which day by day was gathering up its store of experience against the hand-to-hand fight with life, which, please God, would come by and bye--the life which was no Kindergarten game, the life of strange, unknown dangers, against which the only weapon is the sheer steel of self-control. And this was a little foretaste of the fight in which daddy had won; daddy, who could do nothing but clasp the little figure close to his heart as it climbed to his knee, and then walk away with it to the window to hide his own tears.

His wife, standing where Blasius had passed her by, could see those two round, red heads, so strangely like each other, though the one had a shock of rough hair and the other was beginning to grow bald. And she could hear that round full voice with a ring of concern in it.

"Blazeth's horry he hurt daddy such a lot. And daddy hurt Blazeths awful; but he's a dood boy now. And oh, daddy! I don't fink them bickeys is half as nice as daddy's--and Blazeths would like one, becauth he's a dood boy."

The storm was over. The sky was clear, and Lord George, as he carried his youngest born pick-a-back upstairs to the nursery, felt that there was a stronger tie between them than there had ever been before; a strange new tie between him and the little soul he had beckoned out of the unknown--the little soul to whom in future "Daddy says not" would

represent that whole concentrated force of law and order from which it was at present sheltered, but which by and bye would be its only teacher. And yet, when brought face to face with his wife's arguments, he, being of the dumb kind, could only say:

"You see, my dear, Blazes is *not* a Kindergarten child, now is he?"

CHAPTER XII.

And still it rained!

"Paul, this is awful," mourned poor Lady George, on the eighth morning. "The post hasn't come at all for two days, and it is positively heartrending to see poor Mr. Woodward trying to read Monday's share-list for the third time. Then the beef hasn't come either, and their maid won't eat any other meat. Hot roast twice a day, and cold for lunch. All the servants have given warning, and I don't believe the Woodwards will stand it."

"Let them give warning, too," broke in her brother, hotly; then seeing his sister's face, went on after his wont, consolingly. "Don't bother, please, I'm not worth it. Besides, if Miss Woodward is going to do me the honour of marrying Gleneira, it is as well that she should learn to stand a little damp."

"A little damp! Besides, she will have time to learn afterwards--women always do after they are married--till then, they really have a right to be amused. Can't you suggest something to cheer us up? I'm at my wits' end. Even the book-box has gone astray, and it is so hard to make conversation when you don't see the society papers."

"Shall I black my face or stand on my head and sing a comic song? I've done both in my salad days."

"Oh, don't be unkind, Paul, when I have taken so much trouble!"

"You have, indeed," he echoed, walking to the window moodily, feeling at once irritated and annoyed. Personally he would have found no difficulty in amusing himself with Marjory, whom he had not seen for a week, so close at hand. And suddenly the thought of someone else who had had the knack of making time pass pleasantly occurred to him. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Blanche, I'll wire to Mrs. Vane to come at once. I expected to hear two days ago if she was to be with us this week or next; but she would come anywhere to do a kindness, and she would keep us alive--rain or no rain."

"It would be too late," returned his sister, dejectedly. "To do any good she should be here to-day. I will not be responsible for another hour--another minute of this detestable climate." She spoke quite tragically, but her brother was staring out of the window with all his eyes.

"By all that's impossible! Yes, it is. Hooray, Blanche! There she is."

"Who! What!"

"Violet! Violet Vane in Macniven's machine. How on earth----" He was out of the door full of excitement, followed by his sister, who was heard giving tragic orders for hot baths and blankets.

"She must be half drowned," said Mrs. Woodward, hastening from her room at the sound of wheels to join the little circle crowding round the window to watch the arrival. "She will go to bed at once, of course."

"And have something warm," said one voice.

"More likely inflammation of the lungs. I remember----" suggested another.

"Bronchitis, at least--poor thing--poor thing----" put in a third.

To which Cassandra chorus came the sound of a musical laugh and a perfect ripple of chatter, as Paul, with a new cheerfulness in his face, ushered in the daintiest little figure, which, as he held the door open, looked back at him to finish the recital of her adventures with words, "It was such fun."

"My dear Mrs. Vane," cried Lady George, "you must be dead!"

"Only with laughing, I assure you. I am not a bit wet, thanks. I got them to lend me a tarpaulin jacket and a sou'-wester. But Captain Macleod tells me I was not expected--I am so sorry, but really I did write."

"The post is shamefully irregular," put in Mr. Woodward, majestically; "it did not come yesterday, and I have no doubt it will not come to-day."

"But it has! I brought it. Peter Macniven--that was my driver--proposed I should give it a lift, and Donald Post said it would save time if I took out the Geneira letters myself. So I did. They are in my bag downstairs, Paul--quite a large bundle for Mr. Woodward; and all the picture papers, and a packet of chocolates from Fuller's. And, oh! by the way, Lady George, there was a basket of beef and a box of books lying for you at the Oban pier, so I took the liberty of bringing them along."

"My dear--my dear Mrs. Vane!"

Lady George positively could say no more. Here was a guest, indeed. It was as if a glint of sunshine had come into the house; so that after a time the young man with a big head, whom Lady George had invited because he could recite poetry to the young ladies, and who had for the last few days been elaborating a sonnet on suicide, went hurriedly out of the room to commit to paper the opening lines of a lyric, "To a sea breeze sweeping away a storm." It was the same with everyone in the house, and even the maids bustled to get her room in order, and the butler, after laying an extra place at the dinner-table, remarked in the housekeeper's room that now, perhaps, the dining-room would have conversation that was worth listening to.

Only Paul, remembering her ways of old, and that, spirits or no spirits, the long journey must have fatigued one who was past the first untiringness of youth, urged her to rest; but with a little familiar nod of comprehension she set the very idea aside with scorn. Thereby, to say sooth, starting fair with him by arousing once more that tender admiration for pluck which, despite asseverations to the contrary, most men have for courage and fire in a woman. Paul Macleod, at any rate, felt it keenly when she came, plumaged like some delicate butterfly, into the drawing-room before dinner, causing Mr. Woodward to put down the share-list without a sigh, and Sam, who had been laying down the law loudly, to become bashfully silent. And then when, in consequence of her being the Honourable Mrs. Vane by virtue of a most dishonourable husband, Paul took her down to dinner, how different that dinner was! He recognised it gratefully; recognised the readiness of her smile, the art which her bright eyes had of making people believe in themselves and feel that they, too, had something to say worth the saying. The art, in short, of the hostess, which Lady George, with all her cleverness, had not; for the simple reason that she thought too much about the effect she was producing. And Violet Vane's worst enemies might call her artificial, but they could never have called her self-conscious or selfish. While, as for the artificiality, a woman must needs be that who is deadly weary, and who has given herself bright eyes and a ready tongue by means of chloric ether. Violet had to slip away for another dose ere she could face what to her was the dreariest, deadliest hour of the day--the time when the ladies wait patiently for the men to come up from the wine and the cigars; for she was frankly, unblushingly, a man's woman, and would confess as much to anyone with a smile. And wherefore not? She had lived among them all her life. She had no babies to discuss, had no experience of English housekeeping, and felt no sympathy with woman's rights or wrongs; for the simple reason that she herself had never felt the least disqualification of sex. She was *bonne camarade* in every fibre of her mind and body; yet withal a thorough little lady.

"Paul, my friend," she said, as he made his way straight to her sofa, where, with wide, bright eyes, she had been taking sights for future steering, "you can have five minutes by the clock, and then monsieur will be on duty again. Will he not? Yes! no doubt five minutes is short; it will not suffice to tell me all you have to tell, will it? But I would rather leave it for to-morrow. For I am tired, Paul, so tired, and I don't want to be cross."

Something in her voice touched him. "Of course, you are tired. I know that. But when was our dear lady ever cross?"

The old familiar title, given in the remote Indian station to the dainty little woman who had made life so pleasant to so many, came to his lips naturally, and the scent of the jasmine she wore carried him back to the days when it had seemed an integral part of consciousness; since life was divided into delirium-haunted forgetfulness and confused awakenings to the familiar perfume. And those are things a man never forgets. She laughed, though the words sent a throb to her heart.

"Cross?" she echoed; "I am always cross when people are dull. And you are dull to-night, Paul. Why?"

Those bright eyes were full of meaning, and he hesitated over the remark that he had been waiting for the sunshine of her presence. She laughed again, this time with an odd little ring in it. "My dear Paul, you should not need sunshine nowadays." There was no mistaking her intent, and he winced visibly.

"I always said you had antennae, Violet," he replied, with a flush; "but how on earth have you found that out already?"

She paused for a moment, and a mad desire to quote a proverb about thieves came over her. So it was true, then!

True, and she--she was too late! She set her teeth firmly over her own pain. "Does it generally need such great acumen to discover when Paul Macleod is in love, *mon ami*?"

The sarcasm struck home, and he rose, feeling the position untenable. "Come and sing," he said; "it is years since I heard you."

She shook her head. "It will not do, Paul; not even though it is five years six months seventeen days and a few hours or so since we sang 'La ci darem' together. The five minutes is not up yet, so sit down, please, and tell me who these people are whom you want to amuse. Or, stay! I will catalogue them, and then you can correct my mistakes. Your sister? How handsome she is, yet not in the least like you. Lord George? A perfect angel, with a twinkle in his eye. He is to be my best friend. Your Miss Woodward? Alice is a pretty name, Paul; and her hair shall be of what colour it shall please God. Am I right, Benedict? Papa Woodward? Have a care, Paul! he studies the share-list too much; so have it in Government securities. Mamma Woodward? What her daughter will be at that age; it is such an advantage to a man, Paul, to see exactly what his future will be. Master Woodward? No! I will leave you to describe him."

Paul winced again. "You are very clever, Violet--suppose you pass on to the others----"

"I told you I was evil-tempered. Then there is the young man who wrote a sonnet to somebody's eyebrow--probably mine--between the soup and fish. Two young ladies colourless--your sister is clever, too, Paul--and a couple of men to match. Finally the Moth."

"Who?"

"Miss Jones, or is she Miss Smith? I met her in Devonshire with another school friend. She was Watteau then--cream and roses. I met her, too, on a yacht--anchors and lanyards. And here, like Lady George, she is *moyen-age*."

"But why the Moth?"

"Because she takes her colour from what she preys upon; and she frets my garment! That is all, except the lady who bicycles and thinks Genevra too hilly, and the man who takes photographs."

"My dear Violet!" laughed Paul; "you are a witch."

"Pardon me! I am an ass--all ears. And Bertie, Palmer, and Gordon come next week. I'm glad of that; one can't make bricks without mud. Straw requires the baser clay."

"Straw! that is hardly complimentary to your sex!"

"Pardon me again! the highest duty of a woman is to please man, and he is proverbially tickled by a straw. So now for the neighbours."

"None."

Violet Vane's eyebrows went up in derision. "There is no Sahara in Lorneshire, and you have been here for three weeks--or is it a month?"

"To be accurate, a month and four days."

"Dear me! what a long time it takes to put up curtains."

"Very. I am sure those five minutes are over, Violet. Won't you come and sing for us?"

"How--how dreadfully dull you must have been, Paul!"

"Dreadfully. Blanche! will you try and persuade Mrs. Vane to sing to us--she is obdurate with me."

Lady George, delighted at her brother's virtue in seeking to break up a *tete-a-tete*, was urgent in her appeals, and Mrs. Vane passed to the piano, airily.

"There is music here," cried Lord George, officiously producing a book from the canterbury. Mrs. Vane took it with a gracious smile.

"Bach! Corelli! This is yours, I suppose, Miss Woodward?"

"No! I don't play," replied Alice, and Mrs. Vane turned instantly to the flyleaf.

"There are no songs in that book," remarked Paul, black as thunder, laying his hands on the volume. "Not that it matters--for Mrs. Vane used not to need music----"

"Nor does she now," retorted the little lady, laughing, as she sate down, saying as she did so, in an undertone, "Does Marjory Carmichael play Bach well, Paul? I hope so; he is dreadful when murdered."

The reply, if reply there came, was lost in her sudden burst into one of those French *chansons* in which laughter and tears are so closely interwoven that the mixture is apt to confuse the insular understanding. Her singing was, like herself, bright, gracious, fluent, with the rare perfection of training which conceals art.

"She reminds me of Piccolomini," said Mr. Woodward, in pompous delight, feeling himself the better for the remark, after the fashion of men who are no longer afraid of being considered old. "A most charming little person altogether. Who is she?"

"The widow of an Honourable--a Colonel--one of the Wentworths, I suppose," replied Lady George, yielding to the reflected glory of a successful guest. "She was very kind to Paul when he was ill in India, and we are all very fond of her. A most desirable friend for him to have."

"Most desirable!" echoed Mr. Woodward; and Blanche felt that she had been wise, since no one could tell how Paul would behave with a woman of that sort. She might have felt still more doubtful if she had seen the desirable friend after she reached the seclusion of her own room, sitting dry-eyed and haggard before the looking-glass, as if to read the ravages of time in each faintly-growing wrinkle.

"I have been a fool!" she said, half aloud, as she rose; "but it may not be too late. I thought at first he was in love with that girl; but it is not she. Oh, why! Why didn't I tell him I was rich now, instead of waiting like a romantic idiot to see if he could still care for me? Care for me! As if any man wouldn't care for a woman such as I, if she chose to let him care. Well! I must sleep now; I can't afford to look older than I am." So she opened her dressing-case, took out a bottle of chloral, measured herself out a full dose, and half an hour afterwards was sleeping peacefully, like a child.

When she woke the sun was streaming in at the open window--for she was one of those to whom the close atmosphere of English houses is unendurable--and she curled herself round comfortably in her bed to consider the new aspect of affairs before rising to face them. In a way she was to be pitied, for in sending Paul Macleod to Kashmir, in order to buy a silk carpet, she had really touched the highest point of self-abnegation of which she was capable. She had done it to save him; for what? For this colourless girl who would never understand his odd mixture of sentimentality and worldliness? No! not for that. Even as a friend she could not stand by and see him ruin his prospects of happiness in that fashion. Had she not hesitated herself in those old days, when, by simply leaving a man who disgraced her every hour and moment of his life, she could, after a brief period, no doubt of horrible humiliation, have married Paul herself? She had hesitated because of his future, for nothing else; and was she to stand by and see him ruin it for no just cause, since she was wealthy enough now for all his wants? There was a sufficiency of high moral tone in this view of the question to serve her purpose, which she strengthened by telling herself that if she had found Paul properly devoted to his heiress, she would once more have sacrificed herself. All is fair, says the proverb, in love and war; but Mrs. Vane felt much was fair because it was not love, and came down to breakfast determined to see what could be done. For Paul's sake first, of course, and then?--for the present Mrs. Vane decided to leave that alone.

Despite the sunshine, the menkind came down slackly, grumbling at a real shooting day being just "nippet awa by the Sawbath." Obedient, nevertheless, to the order for church parade at the schoolhouse, which, being of modest dimensions, overflowed after a time into the road, where the latest comers contented themselves with sitting on the turf-capped dyke beneath the chestnut tree, where they could just hear the swell of the responses, and join in the hymns if they chose. Mrs. Vane, standing during the *Venite* beside Paul, could see these outdoor worshippers, and rather envied them, being at heart a thorough little Bohemian. Yet the interior interested her quick brain also, and she watched Lady George with furtive amusement, as the course of service brought to that lady a dim suspicion that she had lost her place. For, despite Mr. Gillespie's suggestion of a second and English "diet" for the visitors, Blanche had preferred to bring them to the Gaelic; moved thereto by a vague feeling that it gave, as it were, a *cachet* to the laird of Gleneira, with whose importance she was anxious to impress the Woodwards. The effect, however, was somewhat disastrous, since Alice looked shocked and surprised, Sam laughed, and Mrs. Woodward, after a frantic effort to follow the Psalms, gave up the struggle. Mr. Woodward had--Blanche felt fortunately--remained at home, for he was of the stern, uncompromising section of British laymen who only attend service on high days, and have, in consequence, strong opinions as to the necessity of the Athanasian Creed to the stability of the English Church. Paul, tall and

listless, looked so persistently towards one dark corner, that at last Mrs. Vane's watchful eyes, following his, discovered an attraction in the girl playing the harmonium. And then it struck her that the voluntary had been a bit of Corelli! Yet that was not the sort of face to make Paul stare, as he undoubtedly was staring. She looked up at him quickly, and with a real shock recognised something in his expression which she had not expected, something which roused her to a sudden flame. It was almost a relief when Donald Post, stealing in on tiptoe noisily, caused a general stir, followed by an all-pervading smell of sealing-wax from the other dark corner, which showed that Mr. McColl was sealing up the bag; Lady George's face the while being an unsuccessful attempt to combine horror and unconsciousness, while her husband's, much to her annoyance, openly reflected the children's unabashed interest. It was a greater relief still, when the sermon came to an end, the letters were handed round, and, with joyful barks, the colliers rushed out, followed by the quality. All but Mrs. Vane, who stood listening to a fugue of Bach's with a little fine smile on her face. Inaction was over, and she must survey this new difficulty without delay.

"Don't wait," she said to Paul, lightly; "I love Bach, and Miss Carmichael plays charmingly."

He said a bad word under his breath as he passed out, and yet for the life of him he could not be angry with her. She saw through him, of course; right through to the very worst part of him, and yet she was his friend. When he joined the gathering outside Lady George was already shaking hands benignly with all and sundry, whispering between whiles to Mrs. Woodward that it was a Highland custom, and so much more conducive to proper relations between landlord and tenant than the English standoffishness. In fact, she was in her element, in a new part of great capabilities. Paul, on the other hand, merely nodded and smiled; but his great personal beauty, his reputation as a soldier and a sportsman, went further towards popularity among both the men and the women than all his sister's condescension. And still the Bach fugue went on, being, in truth, susceptible of many repeats and *da capos*, while Marjory, over the music desk, gave annoyed glances at the dainty little figure at the door. During the past week of Paul's absence, the charm of his personality had faded, leaving behind it the memory that he was hardly of her world; that even if he had been, he was hardly the sort of man with whom she could have sympathy. And yet, with the sight of him, had come back the old excuses, the old conviction that he slandered himself. It did not make her feel any the more kindly towards the world which held him back from his better self; towards women, for instance, like this one at the door.

"Are you not coming, Violet? The others have gone on."

Paul's voice had a note of warning in it, but she never heeded his thunderings like others did, and in that lay the secret of her power over him.

"I am waiting for you to introduce me to Miss Carmichael," she said calmly; "then we can walk home together. I want to ask her where she learned to play Bach."

A transparent prevarication, but one it was impossible to set aside; nor, to tell truth, did Paul wish to set it aside. The temptation presented to him by this little Eve in a Paris costume, was far too welcome for that; so welcome that the very excess of his own fierce desire to yield to it made him silent, while Mrs. Vane set herself deliberately to pierce through the girl's shield of stiff politeness. Not a difficult task with one so quick to respond to the least touch of sympathy; besides, Mrs. Vane in her girlhood had lived in the great world of music, among people who were to Marjory as prophets and kings. So she was soon deep in eager inquiry, and positively felt impatient as, when they were passing old Peggy's cottage, little Paul started up from the brackens with a quick message that his grannie would like to see Miss Marjory, if she could spare time.

"What a pretty little fellow," remarked Mrs. Vane. "Is Paul a common name about here? or is it a compliment to the laird?" She asked the question carelessly, and was genuinely surprised at the look it brought to the elder Paul's face.

"It is certainly not out of compliment to me, so I presume it is a common name--since you gave no other alternative." This was a manifest loss of temper on his part, not to be justified so far as she could see; therefore, in her opinion, a thing to be decently covered at the time, however much it might mean when considered. So she remarked that, common or not, it was a name she liked. And then she said good-bye charmingly, warning Miss Carmichael that she must expect to be disturbed for more Bach; and so drifted on daintily.

"She is quite delightful, your Miss Carmichael," she began, negligently, after a pause.

Paul, who, after a handshake with Marjory, had rejoined her, looking better pleased with himself, decided on adopting her mood.

"Very; though I fail to see why you should use the possessive pronoun. She would not thank you, believe me."

"Because you discovered her, that is all. She is charming. Like Brynhild, brave and bold."

"Cruel and cold."

"Nonsense. Men like you, my friend, of the earth earthy, are alarmed by the glistening circle of fire. Few have the courage to leap it and wake the heart within. Gudrun, duly decked in diamonds and given away by her father in St. George's, Hanover-square, is more in your line. Better so, for Sigurd is a double-faced scoundrel, and Brynhild's heart is too good to break." Her voice grew serious, a little bitter smile came to her face; for Violet had a heart of her own.

"I quite agree with you."

The jest was gone both from his mind and hers, and she changed the subject adroitly, certain of one thing, that here was a weapon ready to her hand. Love *versus* Greed-of-Gold! Really, that method of putting it sounded quite pretty. And then suddenly a fierce pang of jealousy shot through her as she thought of the look she had caught unawares on Paul's face. Alice Woodward would never rouse such a look as that--never! Would it not be better to leave things as they were? But, then, why should they not be turned to something better? If, somehow, they could be manipulated so as to disgust him both with mere money and mere affection, it would be better for all concerned. For him, above all, since he could neither live without love or money; and she could give him both.

As they talked commonplaces during the remainder of the walk, Paul felt more contented than he had done for a week, even while he was asking himself captiously why this should be so. To see the girl you like, and say not a single word to her ear alone, to shake hands with her and feel no desire to prolong the touch, to look in her face and see nothing that was not clear and cold in her eyes, was not, could not, be comforting. Clearly his feeling for her was not to be classed as a passion. And yet how glad he had been to see her. How contented he had been to walk beside her, and what a sense of *bien-etre* her presence gave him. And it was distinctly satisfactory to find it so little disturbing. Then, recognising the fact that he was becoming absent in the effort to remember the exact look on her face as she shook hands with him, he set the thought of her from him angrily. He would not be the sport of a mere sentimental fancy, unworthy of a man who had the courage to face his own manhood.

CHAPTER XIII.

The next morning Paul, smoking his usual cigar of proprietorship about the stables and dog kennels, saw Mrs. Vane coming with a pretty little air of hesitation along one of the shrubby paths.

"*Ben trovato!* Who would have thought of finding you here?" she cried gaily, just as if she had not been watching to catch him from her window for the last ten minutes. "I have missed my way to the Lodge; show it to me, please."

He looked into her clever, charming face, understanding perfectly what she was at, and yet the *finesse* did not irritate him as it would have done in another woman. Besides, in this instance, she was just a little too clever, as he meant to prove to her.

"By all means," he replied coolly; "I was just going there myself to apologise to Mrs. Cameron for my sister's negligence, but really the weather has been so bad."

Mrs. Vane shot an amused glance at her tall companion. So Paul meant to ride the high horse, that poorest of all defences against a quick wit; like that of lance against bayonet, dignified and circumambient, but quite ineffectual.

"But I am not going to see Mrs. Cameron," she retorted frankly; "I am going to see if Miss Carmichael will be kind and play Bach to me; it is a long time since I heard him played so well. You used to be fond of him, too, in the old days, Paul. Don't you remember how you used to lie on the sofa after that fever and declare that a wife's first duty was to be able to play to her husband? But girls--at least, most girls--don't care to play nowadays unless they are professionals. And if they are professionals they don't care to be wives--not even to a Highland laird."

"In regard to the present musician," replied Paul, beginning to dismount, "I am sure no such scheme of self-sacrifice ever entered her head. Miss Carmichael is charming, I admit; but she has a mission in life, and it is not to regulate me. That, I think, is a fair and full statement of the truth, except that before I came here she used to practise occasionally on the piano at the Big House, and, I presume, left her music there by mistake."

Mrs. Vane stopped in an attitude of tragic despair. "There! I have gone and forgotten it after all, and that was my excuse for going so soon. You see, your sister said it had better be taken back at once, as none of the girls in the house played, and so it wouldn't be wanted."

Paul bit his lip at the double thrust. "Perhaps it is as well you *have* forgotten it," he said angrily; "Miss Carmichael will, no doubt, be able to use it herself some day soon."

"That will be delightful," replied Mrs. Vane, with a sudden cessation of attack.

Five minutes after, rather to his own surprise, Paul Macleod found himself talking to Marjory as he might have talked to any other girl of his acquaintance, and wondering how he could have been such a fool as to imagine himself to be in love with her. After all, he told himself, his first theory had been right, and the ridiculously unconventional familiarity of the past idyll was mainly responsible for the mawkish sentimentality which had attacked him of late, but which, thank heaven! was now over. How could it be otherwise with a girl like Marjory--a perfect iceberg of primness and propriety?

His sense of security, joined to a certain unconfessed resentment at her apparent indifference as to whether he came or not, drove him into more effusive apologies on his sister's behalf than he would otherwise have made, and brought down on him a remark from Mrs. Cameron that "Indeed and in truth Marjory would no be going to make strangers of the laird and his sister, and he so kind, in and out o' the house for weeks, just like a bairn of her own." Whereat Mrs. Vane, stifling a desire to laugh at Paul's evident confusion, came to the rescue with a well-timed diversion about some of the household troubles which had been occupying Lady George.

"Deed!" said Mrs. Cameron, after listening sympathetically, "I can well believe it! But the warld will come to an end soon, that's one comfort. You see, it'll just no be possible' for Providence to put up wi' it much longer, for it's a' I can do to have patience wi' my small corner of the vineyard, an' that, praise be, is no sae bad as it might be, seeing that I can hand my ain wi' most folk."

"But Providence can do that also, surely, Mrs. Cameron?" laughed Paul.

"Maybe, an' maybe not. I grant ye it comes quits at the hinder end, what wi' worms that die not, an' fires that be not quenched. But it's a weary long time to blow at the flames o' wrath, and wadna suit me that's aye for havin' it out and done wi'. Lord sakes! life wad no be worth havin' if I had to write down a' the servant lassies cantrip's in a big bookie against term day, an' keep my tongue on them meanwhiles. And it is little the hussies would care if I did, for they wad ken find I'd just forgive them when the day of reckoning came, an' forgiveness just beats all for spoiling folk."

"It's lucky for some of us," put in Mrs. Vane, with a laugh, "that Providence isn't of your way of thinking."

"Deed, I am not as sure of that neither. Folk would think twice o' breaking the law if it waant for the grips they have on mercy. It is just, you see, in the nature o' man to stand by his luck if the odds are even; but if he knows he'll get paicks he will just keep the body in subjection. It is the same in all things. Just look at the difference in the manners o' folks nowadays! Not half so good as in the old times when they had to stand sponsor for each word with a pistol shot. Why, I mind, Gleneira, your grandfather calling out Glenrannooch for passing him on the kirk steps without a reverence!"

"I didn't know you were so bloodthirsty," remarked Paul; "and though I quite agree with you, theoretically, I must be careful, since you evidently don't believe in apologies."

"Apologies," echoed Mrs. Cameron, scornfully. "No! no! Gleneira. They're fine healin' balm to the sinner, but I'll have none coming between me and my rights. There was James Gillespie telling little Sandy McColl to go an' apologise to wee Peter Rankin for pulling his hair, instead o' just giving the laddie a good skelping, and daring him to do it again. So the bairns just bided their time and had it out in a natural way, and you never saw such sights they were. I'm no saying folk should not be repentant o' their sins, but they should just take the consequences along wi' the forgiveness."

"Or follow my example and take neither," suggested the laird.

Mrs. Cameron looked at him sharply, then shook her head. "Havers! that is what no mortal man can do, least of all, you, Gleneira, with your soft heart."

"Soft heart!" echoed Paul, derisively. "It is only that towards you, Mrs. Cameron; to the world in general it is hard as adamant. Don't you agree with me, Miss Carmichael?"

"Hard enough to ensure your peace of mind, I hope," she replied quietly.

Violet Vane's bright eyes were on them both, and she gave an odd little laugh. "I wonder if it is! I should like to vivisect you and find out, Captain Macleod; only the process of seeing the 'wheels go wound,' as Toddie says in 'Helen's Babies,' might end in stopping them altogether. Perhaps it would be as well--for other people's hearts."

"The heart is no easily damaged, anyway," put in Mrs. Cameron, with the air of one who knows. "Folks like to think it is, but it is maistly the stomach that goes wrang. I've seen a heap o' broken hearts in my time cured wi' camomile tea; it's just grand for the digestion."

"I shall order Peter Macpherson to lay down a large bed at once," began Paul, gravely.

"For the sake of your victims, I suppose," interrupted Mrs. Vane. "Commend me to Captain Macleod, Mrs. Cameron, for shameless conceit."

"Pardon me," put in Paul, "for my own." He gave a glance at Marjory, who was standing apart with a little fine smile of contempt on her face, but she took no notice of him. To tell truth she scarcely knew why she felt scornful, and, when they had gone, she sate down in defiance of her promise to her books again, telling herself that Paul by himself, willing to fall in with her life, was quite a different being from Paul expecting her to be friends with his friends--people whose dresses fitted them like a glove, and who looked charming. Yes, that was the right word!--charming from the sole of their feet to the crown of their heads. As if she had anything in common with such people!--or, for the matter of that, with Paul, himself--she, whose fate it was to work, and who liked that fate? Yet almost before Captain Macleod and his companion had reached home after the *detour* he begged for round the garden, Marjory had thrown down her book in a temper at her own stupidity, run upstairs for her hat, and was off for a wild, solitary scramble over the hills.

Paul and his companion, meanwhile, strolling idly through the vineries and hothouses, she with dainty dress, draped gingerly from fear of stain, and vivid, whimsical face, diving like a honey-sucker at the perfumed flowers, were enjoying themselves thoroughly in their own way; so that the former, coming out at last from an atmosphere of

stephanotis and tropical heat to face the bright, sharp air of a Highland glen, gave a little shiver, and told himself inconsequently that Violet was the most charming companion in the world. And so she was, being blessed with the infallible range-finder called tact; for half the misunderstandings of life come from people either blazing away at a bird that is out of shot, or blowing one to pieces,—that is to say, from a failure to appreciate distance and the fact that, though our best friend may be, so to speak, well within range over night, that is no reason why we should reach him with the same sight the next morning. In most of us feeling, tastes, dislikes, fluctuate with every hour; nay, more, the individual, as a whole, hovers like the needle of a barometer on either side of change, so that the more sensitive of us are conscious of the difference in ourselves at different times in the day, and it becomes possible for us to be certain that we might do that at ten o'clock at night which we could not do at ten o'clock in the day. Yet, despite this undoubted fact, most of us resent the change of position in regard to our outlook in life which it entails, the change of key which strict harmony requires. Mrs. Vane, however, was not one of the many, and, as a rule, when she played a dissonant note she did it out of malice aforethought; as she did now when, looking back at the garden with its low espaliers and broad walks bordered by old-fashioned flowers, she paused to say sweetly, "It is a charming place, Paul; you ought to be very happy here with her."

He frowned as he held the door open for his companion to pass through; but he was beginning to remember that she used the bayonet deftly, and came to close quarters at once.

"The personal pronoun, third person singular, feminine gender, accusative case, is rather too vague to interest me, I'm afraid. Can't you suggest something more concrete?"

She laughed as she pointed gaily to an upper path which, after a time, would merge into theirs. "See! yonder are the young ladies, going home, as we should be also, since you will be wanted. Don't let me keep you, please. They will walk faster than I do, and I am used to being left behind to fend for myself."

"Not by me," he replied, with a certain self-complacency, "and you never will be, I trust. I should be a brute indeed were I to forget all your kindness."

"*Dieu merci*," she flashed out, in sudden, uncontrollable resentment, "how I hate gratitude! It takes half the flavour out of life. I often think I should have been happier if I had not been so kind to people."

"I have no doubt you made *them* much happier, if that is any consolation to you."

"Not in the slightest." Then as suddenly her irritation passed, and she looked up at him with a whimsical smile. "Paul," she said, "I believe Miss Carmichael used to set you copies—or is it Miss Woodward? anyhow, you are detestably didactic to-day; so it is just as well the others are joining us, or you would be telling me that 'Evil communications corrupt good manners.'"

"The process is pleasant, anyhow," he replied, in one of those moments of recognition which come to us, even with familiar friends, as some quality or charm strikes us afresh; "and you couldn't corrupt my good temper, for you always put me into one, somehow. I believe you use arts and spells."

She shrugged her shoulders gaily. "Burn me as a witch, by all means! You can afford it since the next fairly good-looking woman you meet will have exactly the same consolatory power. As you said, the personal pronoun, feminine gender, third person singular, has a wide application for Paul Macleod. Ah! Miss Woodward, what lovely ferns! We have just been going round the houses, and there is a hibiscus out which you ought to see. It put me in mind of India; you sent the seed home from our garden, I think, didn't you, Captain Macleod? We might go back and look at it now, and return by the beach, mightn't we? It is no longer, and far prettier."

The result of which easy, deft manipulation of a chance meeting being that, ere the memory of his pleasant stroll with her had passed from Paul's somewhat vagrant mind, he was performing the same pilgrimage again under different guidance. Now, Alice Woodward was always counted a most agreeable girl in her world, and Paul, as in duty bound, laid himself out to please; yet all the time they were chatting amicably about Shakespeare and the musical glasses he was conscious of an effort, and of a desire to know what the other girls who were lagging behind with Violet could be laughing at so gaily.

"That is the hibiscus," he said, stopping abruptly before the flower which, with its creamy petals and crimson heart, had ten minutes before carried him back to another hemisphere, another life—a pleasant, younger life, with more possibilities of passion in it than the present one.

"It is very pretty," replied Alice, blandly, rather absently. "The colours are lovely. I really think colours improve

every year. Do you remember at Constantinople, Captain Macleod, everyone agreed that there was a decided advance on Venice? In that ballet before the procession, you know, they really were exquisite."

Paul assented cheerfully, even though he felt such memories were as water after wine to Mrs. Vane's appeal to the past. "It used to grow by the well. Ah, Paul! how young you were on those days, and how you used to enjoy life."

That was true; and yet a well-cooked dinner and roomy stalls at a first-class *spectacle* brought solid comfort more suitable to the coming years; besides, Violet had always had the knack of taking the colour out of other women, and while adapting herself more readily to her surroundings than most, never lost a peculiar piquant charm of her own which did not clash with her environment. Yet, as they strolled home by the beach, it occurred to him that they were all, himself included, out of touch with the glorious world of sea and sky and mountain in which they stood. And Mrs. Vane agreed, or, at any rate, was quick enough to read his thought, for as the girls trooped up the stairs finishing a discussion on the relative merits of two balls, she lingered in the hall to say quizzically:

"Is her name Virginia, Paul? and do you fancy a desert island? That comes of having so much of the natural Adam left in you."

"Oh, dear me! what has Blasius been doing now?" asked Lady George, plaintively, overhearing the last words as she came out of the morning room. At the same moment, as if in answer, the sturdy stump intermingled with bumps which usually marked Blazes' rapid descent from the nursery regions, was heard as a sort of running accompaniment to a steady stream of violent objurgations delivered with immense zest, in his round, full voice: "*Haud up! Ger' out, ye brute! Stiddy, yer deevil! Stiddy yer!*"

"Nurse!" cried poor Blanche, aghast, to the stately figure, descending behind the stumbling, bumping, yet swift offender, "what does this mean? Where has Master Blasius picked up----"

"Oh! if it comes to picking up, milady, that's easy sayin'. Master Blazes told me last night 'is bath was 'devilish 'ot,' and when I spoke to him serious told me it was the Captin'."

"Really, Paul, I think you might be more careful," began his sister, aggrievedly, when he interrupted her.

"I'm not responsible for *that*, anyhow! What on earth is he up to now?" For Blasius, having reached the bottom of the stairs, had, so to speak, fallen tooth and nail on the sheepskin rug, which he was bestriding with vehement kicks and upbraids, as he clutched on to the wool wildly--

"Ger' up, ye deevil! Haud still, ye dommed brute!"

"It is through Mary's young man as she's took up with bein' a shepherd, milady," said nurse, swooping down on the child. "An' through her never 'aving seen sheep shore, that's what it is."

Paul burst into a guffaw of laughter. "Old Angus! I swear to you, Violet, it's the living image of old Angus. What a mimic the child is!"

"Do be quiet, Paul!" said his sister, hastily. "How can I---- Nurse, tell Mary that I am much displeased, and that if I hear of her watching the shepherd again----"

"I 'ave told her, milady," retorted the nurse, with as much dignity as kicks and strugglings left to her, "and there an't no fear. Master Blazes'll forget it sharp enough when he don't 'ear it. It is the things 'as he do 'ear, constant"--a backward glance at Paul from the turn of the stair emphasised the reproach.

"It is really very distressing," mourned Lady George, turning in grave regret to Mrs. Vane, and then, seeing unqualified amusement in that lady's face, yielding a little to her own sense of humour. "But he really did it splendidly, though where the child gets the talent from, I don't know. But fancy, Paul, if Mrs. Woodward had been here! I should have died of shame, for she spent half an hour yesterday in lecturing me. 'Dear Lady George,' she said, 'you mean well, and of course the younger generation are always right.' Now, what are you all laughing at?"

"At you and your son, my dear," replied Paul. "That was Mrs. Woodward to the life! So cheer up, Blanche. He will make his fortune on the stage--or as a sheep farmer." And so full of smiles over the recollection of the small sturdy figure struggling with the woolly mat, he went off, feeling that in one way or another the morning had passed pleasantly enough. Rationally also, without any attempt at Arcadia. That danger was over, and incidentally he owed Mrs. Vane another debt of gratitude for having driven him into calling at the Lodge, and so discovering that Marjory, seen in ordinary society, was not nearly so distracting a person as she had been when earth, and air, and water had

seemed to conspire in suggesting a new world of dreams, where love was something very different to what it was in real life.

But Paul Macleod was not the only one of the party who felt satisfied with the morning's work. Mrs. Vane, as she idled away an hour or two in her room—one of her country-house maxims being that the less people saw of you between meals the better—told herself that there was time yet to stave off the immediate danger with Alice Woodward. That was the one thing to be attained somehow—how, she did not care. Paul had been flirting with Marjory, of course. Deny what he would, the look she had surprised on his face on the Sunday did not come there for nothing; besides, the girl herself had been too cold, too distant, for absolute indifference. That farce of everything being over for ever was easily played in absence, but was apt to break down at a renewal of intimacy. It would be well to try if it would, at any rate; and under any circumstances Paul was not likely to settle matters with Alice until the party was on the eve of breaking up; since it was always more convenient in these matters to have a way of escape if you were refused.

Mrs. Woodward was of the same opinion, and said so to her husband when, on laying his night-capped head on the conjugal pillow that evening, he began to sound her as to the prospects of escape from the dilatory posts, which, to tell truth, afforded him daily occupation. For on the stroke of eleven he could fuss round, watch in hand, counting the minutes of delay, and, after Donald had come and gone, there was always that letter to the *Times*, exposing the iniquity of whiskey bottles and pounds of tea in Her Majesty's mail bag, to be composed against Lord George's return from the hill to the smoking-room, when it had to be read aloud, amended, discussed, and finally set aside till the next day. Then Donald would be later than ever, and Mr. Woodward, tempted by the thought of detailing still more horrible delinquencies, would withhold his letter for further amendment.

"I suppose it is all right, mamma," he began cautiously. "At least, I noticed that the young people seemed to be—er—getting on to-day."

"Quite right," yawned the partner of his joys and sorrows. "How lucky it was that Jack had to go to Riga about that tallow business."

Even in the dark, with his head in night-cap, Mr. Woodward's paternal dignity bristled.

"Lucky! You speak, my dear, as if he had had claims, and I deny----"

"You can deny what you please, Mr. Woodward. I think it was lucky, for now he need know nothing of the engagement till he returns."

"Perhaps. My dear, by the way, have you any idea when the engagement is likely to—ahem—er—come off?"

Mrs. Woodward yawned once, twice. This was a detail scarcely sufficient to warrant her being kept awake. "I can't say—not till we are going to leave, I should think. That sort of thing breaks up a party dreadfully. Why?"

Mr. Woodward sighed. "Only the posts really are so irregular. As I said in my letter of to-day----"

But this was too much for anyone's patience. "You can tell me to-morrow, my dear," said the wife of his bosom, firmly. "I shouldn't wonder if it were later than ever, for Lady George told me it was fair day, or fast day, or something of that sort in Oban."

Mr. Woodward gave a groan, and turned over to compose a still more scathing report of the Gleneira mail.

About the same time Blanche Temple, who, on her husband's late arrival from the smoking-room, was found by him in dressing-gown and slippers over the fire, reading a novel, and enjoying the only free time, she said, a Highland hostess could hope for, was telling her lord and master much the same tale. The young people were getting on, Paul was really behaving charmingly, and little Mrs. Vane, contrary to her expectations, seemed quite inclined to throw them together, so that the future seemed clear. And Alice Woodward, had she been awake, would doubtless have added her voice to the general satisfaction, for it was distinctly pleasant to see the other girls' evident admiration of Paul's good looks, and to hear their raptures over the beauty of Gleneira. For a few months in autumn it would certainly be pleasant to play the part Lady George was playing now, and for the rest of the year there would be Constantinople, and civilisation generally.

But the very next day at dinner something occurred to disturb one person's peace, for Paul, as Mrs. Vane used to say, was a bad landlord even to himself. His mind was not well fenced, and the gates, which should have barred vagrant thoughts from intrusion, were as often as not wide open or sadly out of repair. And this interruption was trivial,

being only a remark in his sister's clear, high-pitched voice:

"Mr. Gillespie was here again about that bazaar, and I believe, Paul, he is in love with that Miss Carmichael of yours. At least, he talked of her in a way--it would be most suitable, of course, and I really think we ought to encourage it. It would give us old fogies something to amuse us, wouldn't it, Mrs. Woodward?"

"I disapprove of matchmaking on principle, Lady George," replied that lady, severely; "but this, as you say, appears very suitable indeed. She is a governess, or something of that sort of thing, I believe, and they generally make admirable wives for poor clergymen. Understand Sunday-schools, and don't expect to be taken about everywhere."

"What an admirable wife for any poor man," put in a subaltern from Paul's regiment, who had been asked down to make the sexes even; a nice, fair-haired lad, given as yet to blushing over his own successes in society. "If you will introduce me, Lady George, I might cut out the curate."

"He isn't the curate," said his hostess, smiling. "By the way, Paul, what are they in Scotland?"

"Dissenting ministers!" retorted her brother, sullenly, angry with her, and with himself; the one for inflicting, the other for feeling, this sudden pain. Blanche's face was a study in outraged dignity.

"My dear Paul!" she began, and then paused, speechless.

"He is very good-looking, I think," said the echo diligently, "and I hear----"

"What is that?" put in Lord George from afar. "Miss Carmichael and the parson! Pooh! she is far too good for that blatant young----"

"George!" exclaimed his better half, this time with authority, "pray remember that he is our clergyman--our parish clergyman."

"We are not likely to forget his pretensions to that position, Blanche, considering how often he comes here," put in Paul, at a white heat over what he told himself was an unwarrantable liberty with a young lady's name, and feeling as if he could rend the whole company; especially the unsuspecting subaltern.

"What a refreshing thing it is," came Mrs. Vane's half-jesting voice, "to find the sexes have so high an opinion of each other! Go where you will, Lady George, the news of an engagement makes nine-tenths of the men swear she is too good for him, and all the women say he is too good for her. Touching tributes; but what gender is truth?"

"Masculine, of course!" put in her next-door neighbour, who prided himself on being smart. "That dissentient tenth proves discrimination the unanimity prejudice."

"Pardon me, it may only mean that men mix their prejudices as they do their wines, while we women are consistent and prefer simplicity."

"I can hardly be expected at the present moment to say that I do," retorted her companion.

"I shall remember that against you," laughed the little lady. "Meanwhile I agree with the men. The young lady is too good for any of you; she is charming."

"Give me first introduction, please," pleaded the subaltern. "I always like people who are too good for me."

"That explains the universality of your affections, I suppose, Mr. Palmer," remarked Mrs. Vane, demurely.

"But really, Paul," said his sister, returning to the subject with injured persistency when the laugh had subsided. "I cannot see why Mr. Gillespie should not pay his pastoral visits if he chooses; besides we had to discuss the church."

"Then I trust the service won't be a repetition of the last one," replied her brother, still woefully out of temper; "I, for one, will refuse to go if it is. You agree with me, don't you, Miss Woodward?"

She smiled at him placidly. "Well! it was rather funny, wasn't it?"

"Funny!" echoed Sam Woodward. "I'll tell you what, it was the rummiest go!" and he was proceeding to detail the whole to the new arrival whom he had taken down to dinner, when Lady George, with a withering glance in his direction, proceeded in a higher key.

"The new church, I mean, Paul. We have arranged it all delightfully while you horrid men have been killing birds. Alice is making a subscription book with a Gothic window on the outside--illuminated, you know--and a little appeal on the first page. It is to have an initial letter, is it not, dear? Then by and bye, next year, perhaps, when London isn't quite empty, Mrs. Woodward has promised her house for a Highland fair--tartan things, and snoods--and--and----"

"Queighs," suggested her husband, demurely, but she scorned the interruption. "And spinning chairs."

"Spinning chairs?" echoed Mr. Woodward, who, hearing for the first time that his house was to be made use of, felt bound to show some interest in the matter.

"Yes! those things with very little seat, no back, and a lot of carving. All the stall-keepers are to be dressed out of Scott's novels and Mr. St. Clare is going to write--what was it, Mr. St. Clare?"

"A rondelet," muttered the poet, gloomily, looking up from the chocolate creams with which he was trying to make life worth living.

"Of course! a rondelet--that is the thing with very few words and a great many rhymes, isn't it? And of course you, Paul, will wear the kilt--local colour is everything."

"My dear girl," cried Paul, too aghast for ill-humour. "I haven't worn the kilt for years--pray consider----"

"The local colour of your knees," put in Lord George, brutally. "Never mind, old man, a bottle of patent bronzine, like Blanche uses for her slippers----"

"George!" cried his wife, rising with an awful dignity. "Shall we go into the drawing-room, Mrs. Woodward?"

"It was only his knees, my dear," protested the discomforted nobleman in a whisper as she swept past him. "Hang it all! if a man mayn't mention his brother-in-law's knees or his wife's slippers."

But she was out of hearing, so he sate down in his chair again and poured himself out a bumper of port viciously.

CHAPTER XIV.

While the Big House was going on its way from cellar to attic, as if it had been within the sound of Bow Bells instead of in a remote Highland glen, Marjory for the first time in her life felt time heavy on her hands; a thing not to be tolerated for an instant by a young person of her views and prospects. She told herself that if this was the result of her holiday, the sooner she set to work and forgot that pleasant, idle time the better. For it had been pleasant, and Paul Macleod had been kind. But what of that? His ways were not her ways--his thoughts were not her thoughts; and then suddenly would come the memory of that short instant on Isle Shuna when they had stood hand in hand watching the Green Ray. Or was that only another result of idleness?--that she should be growing fanciful. Paul himself had denied seeing it, and after all, despite his kindness, he was the last person to have sympathy with her ideals; yet such sympathy was the only thing which could make her care for him or his society. She told herself all this, over and over again, until she believed it; for Marjory had not yet learnt to differentiate her head from her heart. Many women never learn the art, and though some, no doubt, find the difficulty lies in discovering their heads, a far greater number stop short at a calm affection in the catalogue of their emotions.

Still, for some reason or another, as yet inexplicable to the girl herself, the melodious carol of a blackbird singing his heart out in a cherry tree sent a pain to her own. It seemed to fill the world with unrest, even though the house lay still as the grave; for Mrs. Cameron and the lassies were away at the milking. She covered her ears to shut out the sound and bent closer to her book, until suddenly she found herself blindfolded by a pair of strong, slender, supple hands--hands that could not be mistaken for an instant.

"Tom!" she cried. "Oh, Tom! is it you?"

"Tom it is," said a voice with a pleasant intonation scarcely foreign, and yet assuredly not wholly English. "*E' bene!* Mademoiselle Grands-serieux! So this is the way you hold high holiday?"

He pointed to the open book, then, as she clung delighted to his arm, put on an air of simulated disgust, perhaps to conceal the keen joy which her welcome afforded him.

"Conic sections again, and I wandering round 'permiskus' calling for some of my relations to kill the fatted calf!"

"The prodigal didn't come 'permiskus.' He wired ahead and they saw him from afar."

"Then he didn't get an unexpected holiday, come express from Paris to Oban, and then walk thirty miles over the hills because he had missed the mail cart and was a fool----"

"But why a fool?"

"Why? Because the bosom of my family was absorbed in conic sections! And if that reason won't do, you really must wait until I have had some veal--for to tell truth I'm ravenous--mostly for drinks!"

He watched her as she flew off, singing as she went like any blackbird out of sheer lightness of heart, and asked himself if this were not enough? If he were bound to wait for something more? For Dr. Tom Kennedy was not a man to require much time for such thoughts, especially when he had been thinking of Marjory and his welcome all that trudge of thirty miles over bog and heather. But the answer came slowly, for he was quite as much in the dark on the vexed question of Love and Marriage as most people, and the little Blind Boy with the bow and arrows was as yet a part of his Pantheon. And yet there was temptation enough to set mere romance aside, when, after anticipating his every want, and fussing over him after the manner of a hen with a solitary chicken, Marjory drew a low stool beside his chair, and, with her elbows resting on her knees and her radiant face supported on her hands, looked over him, as it were, in sheer content.

"You don't know how nice it is to have you back," she said, suddenly stretching out one hand to him--a favourite gesture of hers when eager. He took it in both of his, bent over it, and kissed it.

"'Tis worth the parting, child, to come back--to this."

She laughed merrily. "You have such pretty manners, Tom! I expect you learnt them from grandpapa the Marquis and the *haute noblesse*. And then in Paris, I suppose----"

His heart contracted, but he interrupted her gaily. "I decline to be scheduled in that fashion. My manners are my own, thank Heaven! in spite of Galton on heredity. Oh! Marjory, my dear! what a relief it is to get away from it all--from the eternal hunt for something that escapes you--from the first chapter of Genesis to the Book of Revelation; and now that I come to think of it, there is something new about you--what is it?"

She shook her head hastily. "Nothing. You said that last time, I believe--people always look different. You have got greyer."

He rubbed his close-cropped head disconsolately. "Have I?--well, I can't help it. I'm getting old."

"Nonsense! And I won't have you say you are glad to get away from work--from the best work in the world! How can you tire of the only thing worth anything, and of the search for truth?"

"Because I'm forty-three--more than double your age. By the way, there was a man I know who married a girl of sixteen when he was thirty-two. And when he saw it down on the register it struck him all of a heap that when she was forty he would be eighty. Matrimony, apparently, isn't good for arithmetic--nor for the matter of that, arithmetic for matrimony!"

"What silly stories you have, Tom," laughed the girl, "and in other ways you really are so sensible."

He rose suddenly and went to the window--a small, slight man, with a keen brown face--and then, as if in excuse for the move, he picked a spray or two of white jasmine and stuck them in his buttonhole. Then he turned to her with a smile. "I should have been a deal more sensible if people hadn't taught me things when I was young. Original sin isn't in it with education. Come, Marjory! let us go and find my cousin--or there will be a row in the house."

"I like that!" retorted the girl, taking possession of his arm; "as if anyone in the place dare say a word against you. Why, she told Dr. Macrea the other day that she didn't intend to die till she could have you to attend her!" Whereat they both laughed.

But, in truth, there was much laughter and general good-will at the Lodge that evening, when Dr. Kennedy insisted on Mrs. Cameron bringing her knitting to the garden bench, while he and Marjory and Will strolled about among the flowers, or stood talking here and there as the fancy took them.

"Why do you always wear jasmine, Tom?" asked the girl, idly bending to catch a closer whiff of the buttonhole. "I suppose *she* used to give it to you."

"What she?"

"The one *she* of a man's life, of course."

"Fabulous creature! If they come at all, they come in crowds. Yes! now I think of it, I fancy you are right. I was twelve, and she a distracting young flirt of six. Her name was Pauline. I remember it, because she was the last!----"

"Oh, Tom! how can you!"

"Fact; for twenty years after that the responsibilities of searching for truth prevented my thinking of fictions."

"And after that?"

"My dear Marjory, no history is ever written up to date. Even in your beloved school-primers the last years of Her Gracious Majesty's reign are glazed over by generalities. You see it is never safe to hazard an opinion till events have proved it to be right. And then decent reserve over the immediate past saves a lot of worry. I should hate to confess that I had told a lie yesterday, though I might own up placidly to one seven years ago. Yes! seven years should be close time for confession. A man renews his vile body in that period, and can take credit for having changed his morals also."

"But it is more than seven years since you were thirty-two."

"You have a head for arithmetic, my dear, not for--the other thing; and it is possible that I am still only in the second volume of my fiction."

"You mean in love. What a delightfully funny idea!"

"Mrs. Cameron!" cried the doctor, "do you see anything comic in the spectacle of Methuselah wishing to get married; for I don't. I think it is melancholy in the extreme."

In truth he did think so, for though, when he was away, his own sentimentality seemed sufficient for them both, the first look at Marjory's face always told him that, if the received theories were true, there was something yet to come before he had any right--in a way any desire--to ask Marjory to be his wife. If they were true! There lay the problem which he found so much difficulty in solving. Like most men of his profession, he was almost over familiar with the material side of the question, and, being naturally of delicate fibre, an instinctive revolt made him exaggerate the part which romance was to play in the purification of passion. To marry when you loved each other was one thing; for one to love, and both to remain friends, was another! And between these two ideals he hesitated; for Dr. Kennedy's power lay not so much in strength as in a certain fineness of perception and delicacy of touch. And yet at times a doubt lingered--the doubt which had made him fall foul of the things he had been taught in his youth. But even through this there ran a vein of protest against the lack of colour which a more prosaic, more material, and yet less animal view of the relations which ought to exist between a man and woman would involve. For he was sentimental to a degree, and told himself that the very fact of his age made it more than ever necessary that his wife should be inspired to do her duty by something more than mere affection. That is to say, once more, if current theories were true! He came back to this point again and again, unable to settle it to his own satisfaction, and finding his chief comfort in the fact that Marjory had, hitherto, never shown the least sign of loving anyone. If that were to continue in the future, he could imagine the doubts and difficulties disappearing altogether; but for this time was required, time for her to understand her own nature. His knowledge, his experience of life, the position in which he stood towards her, all combined to make him hyper-sensitive lest in any way he should wrong her innocence and ignorance. Besides, he himself would have been bitterly dissatisfied with the position. That was the solid truth, which went further than anything else in making him stand aloof; though, no doubt, he would have denied the fact strenuously, since to men of his stamp a sentimental grief is better than no sentiment at all. Yet the grief sate on him lightly because of its very sentimentality, and because--though this again he would strenuously have denied--in his heart of hearts he felt that it was largely of his own making, and that one part of his nature was satisfied and to spare. In these days, when the happiness of the individual is both aim and end, it is curious to see how persistently one form of happiness is ignored; the happiness which indubitably comes from doing what you would *not* wish to do, unless you conceived it to be your duty. And yet the very people who deny the possibility of this content are the first to point out that, when all is said and done, a man can only do what he wishes to do.

So that when, on the next morning, Dr. Kennedy, who had listened to the tale of what had been going on and what was going on in the Big House with a certain foreboding, came to Marjory and urged her to accompany him on a visit there in the afternoon, he did so with the distinct intention of feeling the self-complacency of duty performed. And Marjory, in her turn, thus brought face to face with the very reasonable proposition, found it hard to make an excuse that did not rouse her own indignation by being over serious. After all, why should she not comply with Captain Macleod's urgent invitations? There was nothing to be afraid of. Nevertheless, when she appeared, clothed in white raiment with her best gloves on, she had so solemn and sedate an air that the doctor felt aghast at his own act.

"Don't look so like Iphigenia, my dear," he said; "or let us give it up."

"Certainly not. If it's the right thing to do, it has got to be done; but I do feel like a sacrificial lamb. You don't, of course; but then you are accustomed to society, a great deal of society, and I'm not. Do you know, Tom, I have scarcely ever seen more than three or four people of my own rank together in my life, and I positively don't know any girls."

"Time you did," he replied stoutly.

"But I doubt if I have any manners," she protested.

He had, at any rate; and new as the experience of the large party gathered in the big drawing-room was to her, she found immediate confidence in the perception that her companion would stand the test of any society; indeed, as she sate talking to Alice Woodward, she could not help noticing with a certain amused pride Lady George's frigid politeness give way to interested endeavours to find out who this most unusually well-bred specimen of a country doctor could be; for Paul was not there to aid his sister's ignorance.

But by and bye Mrs. Vane came in and made her way straight to Marjory with pretty little words of welcome, yet with the Anglo-Indian lady's reminiscent interest at the sight of a real live man at afternoon tea.

"Who is he?" she asked; "did he come with you?"

"He is my guardian--Dr. Kennedy."

"Kennedy! not the famous Dr. Kennedy--Tom Kennedy of Paris?" And before Marjory could get beyond the first syllable of acquiescence, Mrs. Vane had crossed the room and was standing opposite Lady George.

"I would ask you to introduce me to Dr. Kennedy," she said, "but it would be of no use, for while he has made a name for himself since I knew him, I have lost mine. So I will only ask him if he remembers the jasmine bush at the Chateau Saumarez?"

There was an instant's bewilderment, and then Tommy Kennedy, who had risen at her first word, took a step forward and both his hands went out gladly.

"Pauline!"

"Just so--and you are Alphonse! What a small place the world is after all! To think of finding you at Gleneira. Lady George, you were talking of theatricals this morning, and the idea fell through because no one--not even your brother--would do the *jeune premier* with me. He is found! Dr. Kennedy is one of the best amateur actors in Paris."

"The past tense, if you please, my dear lady," protested the doctor. "Consider my grey hairs."

"That is a remark which should not have been made, for we are contemporaries. He was my first--no! one of my first loves, Lady George. We used to give each other sweeties over the garden wall when his grandmother, the Marquise de Brisson, was not looking; but the jasmine bush, Alphonse, was at your uncle's, Prince Rosignacs's. Why! you have a bit in your buttonhole now, and I----" She pointed to the spray fastened into the laces of her tea-gown.

"Ce soir ma robe en est tout embaumee."

"Respires-en moi l'adorant souvenir," quoted Dr. Kennedy, looking at the lapel of his coat tenderly; and Marjory, standing a little apart, a mute spectator of the scene, felt a sudden sense of loneliness. He, too, was at home in this idle, careless life, and she was the only one who was out of it. It came upon her by surprise, for though she had known and been proud of the fact that her guardian belonged by virtue of his mother's birth to the best of French society, she had had no actual experience of him in the part of a man of the world. But he was that, and of a good world, too, she recognised frankly as she sat listening to the now animated conversation about people she had never heard of, things she had never seen, and at the same time trying to be agreeable to the girls who, dutiously, had taken her in hand. She felt that it was a duty, and a sort of indifferent resentment possessed her, even when Lady George hoped she would accompany Dr. Kennedy, who had kindly promised to dine with them next day and talk over the now possible theatricals. Yet, rather to his surprise, she accepted without even a look at his face, and made quite a polite little speech about hoping to see more of the girls; and so, with a certain independent grace, passed out into the hall, leaving him detained for a moment by some last remark. She could hear Mrs. Vane's light laugh, his voice, and then another laugh, as she stood waiting beside the deferential butler, and all involuntarily her lip curled.

"Miss Carmichael! How glad I am!" It was Paul, newly in from the moor, looking his best, as a handsome man does, in his rough shooting-clothes. He had a tuft of white heather and stag-horn moss in one hand, and with a sudden impulse he held it out gaily to her. "Tit-for-tat! you welcomed me here--though I never thanked you for so doing, did I? It is my turn now."

He had meant the offering for Violet Vane or Alice Woodward, whichever he met first, but now it seemed as if fate had sent it for Marjory and for no one else. He felt as if it were so, he looked as if it were so, and for the first time in her life Marjory felt an odd little thrill run through her veins.

"Thank you," she said soberly. "Yes! I did give it to you; so now we are quits--I mean," she corrected hastily, "that--that we are on the same footing."

There was quite a tremor in her voice, too, as, seeing Dr. Kennedy beside her, she turned to him quickly. "This is Captain Macleod, Tom;--he has been very kind to me."

In nine cases out of ten Paul Macleod on being introduced to a man belonging to a girl in Marjory's position, and, as it were, having a claim on her, would have been studiously, frigidly courteous, and no more; and so might have once and for all chilled Marjory's sudden confidence and relief in finding an old friend in her new environment; but it is difficult for an emotional man to be cold, when a sudden glow of content makes him feel absurdly happy. Consequently he went out of his way to be frank and kindly in expressing his pleasure at making the acquaintance of one of whom Miss Carmichael had so often spoken.

"In terms of reprobation, no doubt," replied Dr. Kennedy, lightly; "a guardian is a disagreeable appendage, though I try to be as little of a nuisance as I can."

"So do I," retorted Paul, with a smile; "but Miss Carmichael is so dreadfully hard to please."

As Dr. Kennedy's keen brown eyes took in the figure before him, he told himself that the girl must be hard indeed to please if she could find fault with it.

"That is the handsomest man I've seen for a long time," he said as they walked home. "What is he like inside?"

Marjory paused with her head on one side, considering. "Oh! nice in a way--the way of the world, I suppose, and I thought him nicer than ever to-day; being in his own house agrees with him. Oh, Tom! how I wish you hadn't accepted that invitation to dinner!"

Yet when she returned from the Big House, she had a little flush on her cheek, and when Dr. Kennedy challenged her to tell truth in answer to Mrs. Cameron's inquiry as to how she got on, she answered with a laugh and a nod: "Why not--it was rather interesting; quite an evolutionary process. Before I went I was protoplasmic--all in a jelly. Then at dinner we were all amoebic--digestive apparatus and nothing else. Afterwards, with the ladies, I felt like a worm, or a fish out of water. Then I wanted to have wings like a bird and fly away, but I couldn't, for the quadrumana appeared from the dining-room, and we all became apes!"

"What is the lassie talking about?" put in Mrs. Cameron, with a toss of her head. "Can you no answer a straight question wi' a straight answer? What then, I say, what then?"

"Yes! what then, Marjory?" asked Tom Kennedy, quickly; he knew the answer, and yet he wanted to hear it from her lips, because it would satisfy him that so far he had been right.

"And then--why then I suppose I became a girl--at any rate I enjoyed it. They were all so kind, and Mrs. Vane--I suppose in your world, Tom, there are heaps of women like that?"

"Not many so charming," he answered heartily. In truth it had been very pleasant meeting her again after so many years; for a man, even when he is in love, or supposes himself to be in love, with one woman, is never proof against the pleasure of being made much of by another. And Dr. Kennedy, with a quaint simplicity and wisdom, was perfectly aware of his own reputation as one of the boldest adventurers in new fields of discovery, and told himself that people made much of him for their own sake, and because he carried his restless energy with him into society as well as into his work. For energy is, as a rule, a godsend to *fin-de-siecle* men and women. So the conceit of it slipped off him like water from a duck's back, leaving him free to take his world as he found it.

But Marjory felt once more the little chill of regret for the things she had not known in his life.

"There is one thing I forget to ask you," she said quickly. "Your name is not Alphonse, is it?"

"No! But she thought Tom unromantic, and so I promised to change my name if she changed hers."

"Men don't generally do as much as that," grumbled Will. "So they are going to have theatricals, are they? That means that all the horses will be dead lame, and the laird will be wanting more."

"How on earth do you make that out?" asked Dr. Kennedy.

"Women," said Will, laconically. "Something will always be wanted in a hurry, the telegraph station is ten miles off, and women seem to think a horse can change its legs when it comes home."

There was some truth in his remark during the next ten days. Gleneira House lived in a continual bustle which gave no time for thought, save, perhaps, to Mrs. Vane, who, busy as she was, found time to congratulate herself so far on the success of her plans; for Marjory and Paul had perforce to meet constantly, and more than once something occurred to encourage her belief that there was material for mischief ready to her hand if it was needed.

But other material came to light also, or so it seemed to her cynical experience; and the clue to it came one day when she and Marjory, who had grown keen, as was only natural, over the novelty of amusement, were searching through an old portfolio of Paul's sketches for hints likely to be of use for a drop scene.

It was nothing more than the portrait of a girl with a bunch of red rowans held up to her cheek.

"That is very well done, Paul," said Mrs. Vane, holding it up for him to see, as he stood a little way off. "Who was the beautiful model?"

He came over to her hastily. "Oh! no one you know; and it isn't really worth looking at. A wretched caricature--I did not know it was there."

Something in his voice roused the amused malice which always lurked behind Mrs. Vane's treatment of Paul's foibles.

"I disagree with you; look, Miss Carmichael! Don't you think that quite the best thing we have seen of Captain Macleod's doing?"

"It is a lovely face," said the girl, "and it reminds me of someone----" Then she looked up in sudden interest. "Surely it is Paul--little Paul, I mean, Peggy Duncan's grandson; perhaps----" She stopped abruptly, remembering the big Paul's confession, and blushed, she scarcely knew why. Then, feeling vexed with herself for doing so, put down the sketch, and taking up another, made some trivial remark about its being very pretty. But Mrs. Vane had not done with the sketch. "That Highland type of face----" she began.

"There is no need to theorise over the likeness in this case," interrupted Paul, seeing through her, as he nearly always did. "It was little Paul's mother; and as I think I told you once, Miss Carmichael, the most beautiful woman I ever saw. That is why I call it a caricature, Mrs. Vane."

The anger in his voice was not to be mistaken, and Marjory, as he moved away to resume his *tete-a-tete* with Alice Woodward, was left with an uncomfortable feeling that she had somehow betrayed a secret, though her common sense resented the imputation. But Mrs. Vane looked after his retreating figure with one of her fine smiles. So the memory of this particular most-beautiful-woman-in-the-world--there must have been a good many of them in Paul Macleod's life--was not pleasant to him. Wherefore? The question came quite idly, and passed from her mind without an answer. Marjory, on the other hand, took hers--as to whether she was to blame or not--seriously to heart. So much so, that when she had speech with Paul alone, which occurred naturally enough when he brought her a cup of tea, as she sat stitching away for dear life at some ridiculous theatrical property near the window, so as to get the full advantage of the waning light, she reverted to the subject at once.

"Don't," he interrupted hurriedly, almost before she had begun. "Please don't; I would so much rather you said nothing more about it."

"But I don't understand."

"Thank heaven you don't," he replied.

"Why should you say that?" she cried reproachfully. "I cannot see why I should not, if I can. I am not a fool----"

"Marjory!" interrupted Dr. Kennedy, coming forward, "little Paul Duncan has just come round from the Lodge with a message that his grannie wants to see you. We might go round that way; it is getting late as it is."

"There's no hurry," put in Paul. "I will tell them to give the boy a piece, and he can wait till Miss Carmichael has finished giving me absolution."

"That is the wrong way about, surely?" she said.

"It is the usual way between a man and a woman," replied Paul, "and will be to the end of the chapter, I'm afraid."

Half an hour afterwards Mrs. Vane, who had come out into the hall with some parting instructions to Marjory, stood looking down with the others at little Paul Duncan, who, weary of waiting, had cuddled himself round on the doorstep and fallen into the heavy sleep of childhood. "He looks very delicate," said Violet, kindly stooping over him as he lay with one hand tucked into the back of his neck in rather an unusual posture; and then suddenly she looked up at the big Paul, for the trick had taken her back to the old days when she had watched his sleep with jealous care, lest her patient should be disturbed; and how often had she not wondered why he chose so uncomfortable a position?

Impossible! and yet there was a likeness. The name, too, and his evident dislike to the mention of the boy's mother! It must mean something--what? The thought left her pale, so that Paul, turning back with her when those two had gone, noticed it, telling her that she was overworking herself.

"Of course I am overworking," she retorted, with a strange mixture of self-pity, blame, and fierce resentment. "I always do. Is it my fault if I do things quicker than other people? Is it my fault if I see things more clearly? You think I am always managing, managing; and so I am. How can I help it when, everything keeps coming into my mind, and no one thinks or cares?"

"My dear Violet! You have been overworking, indeed. You must take it easier, or we shall be having you laid up----"

"And then what would Paul Macleod do?" she went on, with a reckless laugh. "No! I won't make myself so disagreeable as all that--if I can help it, Paul; but how can one help being disagreeable at times when one is wise--wise and old? Oh, Paul, how old I am!"

"I don't see it," he answered, with an amused smile.

"You! you never see anything," she began; then suddenly returned to her own light, half-jesting manner. "No! that is not true; you see most things, but you are too young to understand me. Dreadfully young for your age, Paul, so it is lucky there are so many of us to look after you."

When she went upstairs to dress for dinner she sat down before the looking-glass and stared at herself with a sort of repugnance. Yes! she was old, hatefully old, in mind, in knowledge of the world, in experience. That thought which had flashed through her brain at the sight of little Paul lying asleep on the doorstep was not a nice thought. Yet could she help its flashing? and, if there was anything in the thought, might not the knowledge strengthen her hand in the coming fight? For a fortnight's daily experience of Alice Woodward's calm attractions had raised Mrs. Vane's opposition to her marriage with Paul to virtuous horror. No true friend, she told herself, would hesitate to throw every difficulty in the way of so disastrous a connection. At the same time she felt almost afraid to reach out after this new weapon, lest it might prove too heavy for those delicate hands of hers, accustomed for the most part to leading reins. It was one thing to goad and guide people into the right path, another to split open their heads with a sledgehammer. Though how this could be such a lethal weapon she could not see, since she knew enough of Paul Macleod to doubt if he would have had the hardihood to mention Jeanie Duncan to Marjory if there had been anything between them in the past. And yet? So she stood before possibilities, shivering on the brink, and finally telling herself there would be time enough to think of such things if less heroic measures failed. It was a mistake to touch pitch needlessly; at the same time it was as well to make sure there was pitch in the pot. So the next day saw her, on some airy pretence of getting old Peggy to knit stockings, sitting beside the old pauper and bringing to bear on her ailments and wrongs all the gay cheerfulness and sympathy which Paul declared always put him in a good humour.

CHAPTER XV.

Apparently it had the same effect on Peggy Duncan, for the next Saturday when, as usual, her ancient schoolfellow and crony, Janet, came to give the hovel that weekly redding up which was beyond little Paul's ability, the old lady lay in her bed discoursing at length on the "bit thing just made up o' fal-lals that sits in the auld chair as if't belonged to her, and chirrup awa like the lady's o' heaven's hen. A sicht guid for sair e'en, no like what the house was maistly acquaint wi'--just puir, ill-fa'ured warlocks."

Whereupon Janet Faa tossed her head, and muttered in an undertone that Peggy might speak for herself; she was no warlock whatever. But she went on with her work, patiently, being accustomed to such sly hits and finding the description of Mrs. Vane's dresses and the puckles o' tea that appeared from her pocket far more interesting than the old lady's usual snappishness. But then, under any circumstances, Peggy's tongue would have been softened by the knowledge that help was more than ever necessary that day, since visitors were expected to tea. So the old woman watched the preparations with wrathful eyes, and did not even quarrel with the polish of the two silver spoons, which, usually secreted with her other treasures in the bottom drawer of the bureau, now graced the clean tablecloth. To tell truth, however, fault-finding would have had no practical effect, since Janet never took the slightest notice of it, beyond remarking every now and again: "Whist, woman! whist! It is no breath you will be having to crack with the doctor."

On the other hand, wee Paulie, who contributed his share by timidly presenting a mug full of early rowan-berries and heather for the middle of the table, was sternly bidden to take away the ugly trash, and solemnly warned against the sin of mistaking weeds for flowers, and thus setting himself up to be a judge instead of abiding by the will of Providence. The rebuke, however, did not seem to touch the child, who, with many previous memories of Miss Marjory's liking for the said "ugly trash," set the posy aside on a shelf at the back of the bed, and so beyond the reach of his grandmother's eyes.

"If Towpie wad lay anither egg," said the old lady at last, surveying the *tout ensemble* with a smile struggling with the frown which was necessary to keep Janet Faa in subjection, "it wad nae be sae bad; but I misdoot the silly thing is for clucking."

"But it is two eggs there are, Peggy, woman, and the shentlemans is never for eatin' but one egg," protested Janet, who occasionally helped at the Big House, and was great, in consequence, on the ways and customs of the quality.

Peggy sniffed. "That may be your way o' thinkin', it's no mine. Ye soudna press on a guest what ye're no able to tak' yourself. And I'd no cook it, ye ken--I'd just offer it up to show there was ane--Lord sakes! wha's yon at the door, an' me wi' my bald head. Quick, Janet, woman, my mutch, and pit it straight, woman! I'll no have it cockit over an ear as if I were tipsy."

"It will only be the master," said little Paul, coming from the door. "He will be having a letter for you he says with a penny to pay."

"Then bid him tak' it back and pay himsel' if he's carin' for it. I'm no. There's no letters for me that I'm carin' to have, and I'll just no be fashed wi' them when there is company comin'--Hoot awa' wi' the man comin' pryin', pryin', and me puttin' on my mutch for him."

"But, Mistress Duncan," came in remonstrant tones from the door.

"Oh! you're there are ye. Weel! I'm obleeged to ye, sir, for comin' sae far oot o' ye're road. An' I must pit ye to the trouble o' takin' it back again, and tellin' them as sent it that Peggy Duncan is on the pairish an' hasna a penny to spare for their trash."

Mr. McColl, standing outside, looked longingly at the blue envelope, with the seal of a well-known firm of Writers-to-the-Signet upon it, and hesitated. Was it worth paying a penny on the chance of being the first to spread news? A momentous question, which left a tremble in his voice as he called again. "But there will be naethin' to pay, Mistress Duncan. Here! Paulie, my man, rin with it to your grannie. And it will be Scriven an' Plead's name on the anvelope, and they will be the foremost Writers-to-the-Signet in Glasgow, whatever."

"They may be Writers to onybody else," retorted Peggy, taking the bulky letter, however, and nodding to Mr.

McCull, who had seized the opportunity of slipping in so far. "But I dinna ken what right they have to be Writers to me."

The master put in a deft suggestion. "Then ye can see inside, Mistress Duncan. If you are carin' for't I could be readin' it to you before I was goin' on. I'm no in a hurry."

Peggy's black eyes glittered with sheer malice as she tucked the envelope away under her pillow, and lay back on it defiantly.

"An' I'm no in a hurry, either, Mr. McCull, an' I would be asking you to have a sup tea, but that I'm expectin' the quality; sae gude day to ye, and mony thanks for your kindness."

And yet when poor Mr. McCull had retired discomfited, bemoaning the loss of his penny, and Janet Faa, having done her part of the business, had left the kettle in charge of little Paul, who sate outside watching for the first glimpse of Miss Marjory, the old woman brought out the envelope again and looked at it wistfully. Perhaps the thoughts of the long years, during which she had waited in vain for some word of the husband who had deserted her, came back to her; yet as she muttered to herself--as she did often when alone--it was not that thought which came uppermost.

"Aye! aye! it's a fine thing the readin' o' writin'. If it were aboot the lassie now; and me promising never to speir, never to let ony other body know! I canna break my word, an' me sae near the Judgment. It is no as if I were a Papist, like Janet, puir body, that can just awa' an' get absolution, ye ken. I maun carry my sins wi' me, and it will be ill eneuch flyin' wi' what I've got."

"May I come in, Mrs. Duncan?" said a clear voice, breaking in on the old woman's preoccupation. As a matter of fact, however, the permission was scarcely needed, for Violet Vane was already in the room, close to the bed, her eyes on the letter; yet her first words made it appear as if her attention had been given to something else.

"Ah! you are expecting visitors, and I shall be in the way."

"Naethin' o' the sort, ma'am," replied Peggy, hastily, as usual on the lookout for a grievance. "I'm no sae sair put to it yet but that I can spare a cup o' tea for them that takes the trouble to come and see the auld wife."

"And a very good cup of tea, too," put in Mrs. Vane. "What you gave me the other day was delicious. I only meant that strangers may not be welcome when friends are talking secrets."

"I've nae friends and nae secrets," retorted the old woman, looking up quickly.

"Then you are lucky," continued her visitor, lightly. "Friends are often troublesome, especially over secrets; nine times out of ten you daren't ask their advice for fear of their knowing too much."

"Ye'll no be askin' mony folks' advice, I'm thinking," said Peggy, shrewdly. "Ye've plenty brains; eneuch for yoursel' and ithers to the bargain."

Mrs. Vane laughed. "Perhaps; but other folks' brains are better than one's own sometimes. When I am in a difficulty I go to someone who is as near a perfect stranger to me as possible and ask for advice. I needn't take it, you know--Gracious! what is that?" That was a clamorous cackling at the foot of the bed, and the stately march therefrom of Towpie, the hen, triumphant over the laying of an egg in her favourite nest.

"Oh ye o' little faith!" cried Peggy; "and me misca'ing the puir beastie! It's a special Providence, aye, aye. He neither slumbers nor sleeps, ye ken. And you will no be goin' to stop at Gleneira long, I'm thinking." The question followed fast on the quotation as if there was some connection in the old woman's mind between them.

"I leave it very soon, I'm sorry to say, as I think it the loveliest place in the world; and it is sad to know that I shall not see it again."

The envelope had come put of its hiding-place again during this speech, and Peggy was turning it over and over as if to attract attention to it; but she failed, and had to resort to more direct methods.

"I canna think why they pit sic'can a big seal to a letter. Will there be something on it that shoudna be broken?"

"Not that I can see," replied Mrs. Vane, taking it up carelessly. "Only the name, 'Scriven and Plead'--lawyers, Peggy--for there below is W. S. Glasgow. It is what people call a lawyer's letter, I expect."

"An' what will that be about?"

"Heaps of things. I couldn't say without reading it; shall I?" But Peggy's claw-like hand shot forth in quick negation.

"I'll no be troubling you. I thocht, maybe, ye might hae had experience o' such things."

"So I have, Peggy. Sometimes they are wills, and sometimes they are money."

"Aye!" interrupted the old woman, with a sinister chuckle, "but when they're written to bit pauper bodies like me?"

"Then they are generally questions," replied Mrs. Vane, and though she spoke easily she was conscious of a certain agitation of mind. "Agreeable or disagreeable. Something to help a lawyer in tracing somebody, or finding out some secret."

Peggy lay back on her pillows with a sort of groan. "'Tis only the pain, ma'am," she explained, then paused awhile; "I was thinkin' maybe 'twas that. An' if you coudna answer them, what then?"

"Nothing; they can't make you; only it is impossible to tell if you can or cannot till you know the questions."

"But if I canna know them without breaking a covenant? I might just let the letter bide, maybe?"

Mrs. Vane hesitated an instant to run over the pros and cons hastily. There was some secret, that was evident, and though the letter might not be concerned with it, on the other hand it might. Peggy was disinclined to trust it to her on the instant, but might think better of it by and bye; anyhow, the first thing to ensure was that no one else should have the chance.

"In that case, of course, you should, as you say, let it be. If it is really important they will write again, and then it would be worth while considering the matter. In the meanwhile, as a perfect stranger, I should advise your setting it aside."

Peggy looked at her admiringly. "It's a fine thing to hae decesion o' character, and me just fashing myself about it."

"Shall I put it away for you in a safe place?" asked her visitor, as the old lady proceeded to put the letter back under the pillow.

"It's safe eneuch there," she retorted sardonically. "I'll no move till they lift me to my coffin, an' that will no be far, for it's to stand on the table whaur the tea is setten oot. I've planned it a' ye see wi' Janet, and there's twa bottles o' gude whiskey wi' the deid claes in the bottom drawer. Ye canna expec' sinfu' man tae sit wi' a corp without spirits."

Despite the humour of the thought, which at another time would have outweighed the grimness, Mrs. Vane shivered. It seemed to her as if old Peggy were a corp already in that dim box bed, where she lay so still, only her angry eyes and twitching fingers showing sign of life. It was a relief to hear the grumbling voice again.

"Weel, yon's settled, thanks to you, an' I'll no be kep' lingerin' in the deid thraw about papers that, for a' I ken, wad be as weel in the fire. O, ma'am! ye dinna ken what it feels like to think o' bein' called to the Throne, an' no bein' able to stir for the weight o' yer sins. For a broken word is as heavy as lead ye ken."

"Why should you talk of being called, Peggy," protested Mrs. Vane, uneasily. "You are no worse than you were." But here in her nervousness she forgot her tact, and the old woman was in arms at once. "Maybe ye ken better nor me, ma'am, that's only tholing the pain alone in the night watches."

"Then you should get some of the neighbours to sit up."

"Neebors!" interrupted Peggy, with an eldritch laugh. "They'll have eneuch to do in settin' up wi' my corp; sae let them sleep on now an' take *their* rest."

Mrs. Vane shivered again, and, a sudden distaste to the whole business coming over her, made an excuse to escape; yet when, almost at the threshold, she met Marjory and Dr. Kennedy on their way to Peggy's entertainment, she paused with the lightest of laughs to tell them that the old woman was in one of her worst moods, and would make their hair stand on end. For her part she had had her fill of horrors, and intended to shock Mrs. Woodward by asking

for a spoonful of brandy in her tea! It was a relief to joke over it for the time, even though in her heart she knew that she would have a *mauvais quart d'heure* sooner or later; most likely later, when the time came for sleep and she would have to seek the aid of that bottle of chloral--for Mrs. Vane's mind was fragile as her body, and could not stand any great strain. She could handle the reins deftly, and drive her team gaily along the turnpike road, but she had never driven across country. So it was a further relief to meet the butler in the hall carrying a fresh teapot of tea into the drawing-room, while the footman followed decorously bearing eight cups on a tray. Lady Hooker, the former functionary replied, in answer to her inquiries, had driven over from the Forest to see her ladyship in a *char-a-banc*, with seven other ladies, some children, and a piper playing on the box. He added the last item in tones of tolerant contempt, born of a dispute downstairs as to whether the musician should have his tea in the housekeeper's room or the servants' hall; the womenkind, dazzled by his gorgeous array, favouring the former; the menkind the latter, on the ground that fine feathers did not make fine birds, and that without them he was only Roderick the gillie's brother and a "hignorant 'ighland beast" to boot.

Lady George's face relaxed even at the sight of another woman, seeing that that other was Mrs. Vane; for as she said afterwards, "It is nearly twenty miles, you know, and a bad road, so the horses were bound to have an hour's rest, and it requires a dreadful expenditure of tissue to make tea last an hour; yet, if you don't, you have to put on your boots in a hurry and begin the conservatories and the garden, which no one wants to see in the least. Really, in the country, it would be a charity to have a room where people could wait until the horses came round, or rather, till the coachman got tired of flirting with the maids, for in the end it comes to that, you know."

To tell truth, there was cause for Lady George's welcome of reinforcements, for, despite the fact that the hall positively reeked of mackintoshes, the drawing-room was redolent of the shower-proof mantles worn by a bevy of ladies of the type so common on Mr. McBrayne's steamers; ladies whose conception of the Highlands and islands might be likened to a volume of Scott bound in waterproof!

"We brought our sandwiches for lunch with us," explained one in reply to Mrs. Vane's commonplace about the long drive; "and dear Lady Hooker said we might rely on Highland hospitality for tea; and really it was exquisite, a dream of beauty, and so interesting, too! Dear Lady Hooker says that a portion of Waverley was really written in this neighbourhood."

"I hope they were not the opening ones, then," remarked Mrs. Vane, carelessly. "They always make me inclined to agree for the time with the man who said it was a pity Sir Walter wrote in such small print."

A perfectly bovine silence fell on her group, broken, however, by a determined voice from over the way:

"I agree with you absolutely, at least, as absolutely as the limitations of human life allow. There is a lack of spiritual insight in Sir Walter, a want of emotional instinct, an almost brutal content with things as they are. His style is doubtless good, but personally I confess to being unable to appreciate it fully. Even on a second reading I find the story distracts my mind."

The speaker was a slim, rather elegant-looking girl, with an odd mixture of eagerness and stolidity on her face.

"She writes a great deal," said Mrs. Vane's next-door neighbour in an undertone of gratification, as if she gained a certain distinction by being of the same party.

"Only a hundred brace!" came Lady Hooker's voice, compassionately. "That's very poor, scarcely worth writing for--but then, you don't rent the place, of course; that makes the difference. Sir Joseph doesn't go in for grouse, of course; he is a deer man. But we couldn't get on under five hundred brace for the table, we really couldn't. Cooks are so extravagant. You will hardly believe it, Lady Temple, but my Glasgow beef bill last week was over nine pounds, and we had three sheep besides, and--how many deer was it, Miss Jones? Six? Yes, six deer."

"That seems enough even for Noah's Ark or a menagerie," said Mrs. Vane, sympathetically, and Lady George gave her a grateful smile.

"But then, of course, the servants won't touch venison," went on Lady Hooker, contentedly; "though really it makes very fair clear soup--it does, indeed. Even Sir Joseph does not object; and he is so particular. When we had the Marquis of Steyne's place in Ross-shire----"

"Ah! there are the children," said Lady George, with a sigh of relief. "I thought, Lady Hooker, that my little boy and girl--oh, nurse! I did not intend Master Blasius----"

But nurse apparently had other views--possibly that of hearing the pipes downstairs--for she feigned not to hear, and set Blazes down on his feet with that final "jug" behind to his smock frock which is the usual parting admonition to behave nicely.

"Eve, my darling! Adam, my love! go and shake hands' with your little visitors," said Lady George, keeping an apprehensive eye on Blazes, who, with his legs very far apart, was clacking the whip he had brought down with him, and making extraordinary cluckings in the roof of his mouth, like a whole bevy of broody hens, in which occupation, what with his close-cropped hair and white smock, he looked a carter to the life. "Really, nurse!" she continued nervously; "I think, perhaps, it would be better. He is so much younger than the others, you see, Lady Hooker."

But nurse was not to be put off with this subterfuge, and as she happened to be keeping company with the carrier, she felt outraged by the palpable suspicion. "Indeed, your ladyship," she said, in an indignant whisper, "it is only the man as drives the ferry cart, and 'e is most respectable!"

So it appeared, for beyond the usual "*ger'up*" Blasius' vocabulary was, if anything, too endearing. So much so, that Lady George suggested that since the children had had their tea, she thought it would be nice for them to play on the lawn. She would ring for the nursemaid to keep an eye on them, not that it would be necessary, since she could trust darling Adam and Eve not to get into mischief anywhere--out of Paradise. But here a difficulty presented itself. One little girl, a very pretty child dressed in white serge and fur, refused to go, and stood burying her face in the window curtain, and digging the toe of one shoe into the carpet after the manner of children who have made up their minds to give trouble.

"She isn't my girl," came Lady Hooker's loud voice. "Sir Joseph wouldn't tolerate that sort of thing, he is so particular. When we had the Duke's place in Sutherland----"

"Cressida, my sweet!" said the authoress, plaintively; "if you can possibly wish to go, do wish; it would be so much more convenient for dear little mother. I never coerce her, on principle, Lady George--she is the only tie I have to life."

"Separated from her husband," put in Mrs. Vane's next-door neighbour, in the same self-complacent whisper. "It is quite the proper thing when you write, you know."

"That is what Lady George says also," broke in Mrs. Woodward, a little spitefully. "And I tell her that children were made to obey their parents----"

"Should be made to obey them, you mean, dear Mrs. Woodward," interrupted her hostess, rising to the bait; "but, as I say, it depends upon experience. You may have found it necessary with--with yours, but mine----"

"And mine also!" broke in the lady who wrote, enthusiastically. "Cressida's mind is so beautiful in its intense naturalness, so delicate in texture. It is the instinctive shyness of a sensitive organism which----" She started, and turned round, for a loud, full, yet childish voice rose confidently above her words.

"Blazeth' goin' to kiss the little gurl, then she won't be flighted, but come along o' Blazeths."

And she did, hand in hand, admiringly, while he cracked his whip and cried, "*Ger'rup!*" to amuse her.

"And he can do old Angus awful well, too," whispered Eve to her companion, as they passed out of the door. "We'll get him to do it by the burn when Mary isn't looking. Mary doesn't like it, you know, because her young man is a shepherd, too; but he really is quite a genteel young fellar, and kept company with the under 'rouse last year at the Forest--that's your place, isn't it?"

"It's a deal bigger than this," remarked the other. "And we have deers and grouses."

So the game of brag--which children play more naively than their elders--began, while the authoress was explaining at length how it came about that Cressida had consented to Blasius's methods of persuasion.

"I don't think you need distress yourself," remarked Mrs. Vane, with an odd little smile; "Blazes is really a remarkable boy; he invariably goes down straight to first principles, and that is a deadly method of argument--especially with our sex."

"Sex!" echoed the authoress, scenting the foe. "I deny the right of man----"

"Lady George!" said Mrs. Vane, hastily, "perhaps some of these ladies might like to see the conservatories. I have on my boots."

Blanche gave her another glance of heartfelt gratitude, and as she saw her bear off a large contingent, told herself that she was worth three of Alice Woodward, who was only equal to the bread and butter! And Paul was anything but bread and butter! The thought, as such vagrant ones have a trick of doing, begged for more consideration as she sate turning a polite ear and tongue to the task of amusing the authoress, who had remained behind; Mrs. Woodward meanwhile appearing deeply interested in a certain place the Hookers had had in Perthshire, where the gillies expected champagne and *pati de foie gras* for their ball supper. And she was fast approaching that condition of mind in which the only thing which prevents our owning up that we are out of our depth is the conviction that we know quite as much of what we are talking about as the other party to the conversation, when the sudden reappearance of the garden contingent bearing two bundles wrapped in waterproofs supplied an all too efficient distraction.

For the waterproofs being set on the ground disclosed the coy Cressida and Blasius, both dripping, and inconceivably smeared with tar; but both to all appearance in the highest of spirits.

Poor Lady George stood up tragically.

"Yes!" replied Mrs. Vane, striving to be grave. "They are bad children--all bad children," she added, turning to the group of elder ones behind.

"Oh, but we wasn't there!" came in a chorus, led by Adam and Eve, "we wasn't, really. It's all his fault."

"Don't! Don't come near me, child!" cried the devoted mother, hastily retreating from the embrace of her only tie to life. "Cressida! What--what have you been doing?"

"Oh mummie! it was bewful. First he washted me, and then I washted him, an' then we washted each other, didn't we, Blazes? and we said, Haud up--ye----"

"The child is dripping!" interrupted Lady George, hastily. "I will ring for nurse. Oh! Blasius, how could you think of such a thing?"

Mrs. Vane pointed slyly to the furred white pelisse. "It is rather tempting," she said, aside; but Blanche was not to be mollified.

"And Mary? Where was Mary?"

"Mary's dancing the Highland fling with James in the boot hole," blabbed Eve, readily. "An' we wanted to dance too, but nursie was there, an' so we comed away."

"But where did you go? What were you doing? How came you not to see? you two whom I can generally trust," persisted Lady George, growing tearful from vexation, yet feeling vaguely that it all arose from people bringing a piper with them when they came to call--a piper who disorganised the household and introduced Highland flings into the boot hole! "I insist, children, on hearing what you were all doing."

There was a dead silence, until for the first time Blazes lifted up his loud, mellow voice, as he stood disregarded by a chair smearing his tarry hands stolidly over its cover in a vain effort to amend matters before nurse appeared.

"They was flicking piggy wif a pin, and piggy was 'quealin' louder nor Blazeths."

And even Lady George--when the *char-a-banc* had driven off, piper and mackintoshes and all, with Cressida kissing her still tarry hands to a struggling figure in Mary's arms at the nursery window--was forced to admit that Blazes generally went straight to the point; and that after all it had helped to pass the time. And as for Mary, she declared that her ladyship might say what she liked about 'orseplay, an' lendin' 'erself to savage an' indignified dances in a boot 'ole, but 'ighland flings wasn't in it--for a stetch in yer side an' no 'airpins to speak of--with Master Blazes when you 'ad to 'old 'im and 'e didn't meant to be 'eld.

CHAPTER XVI.

For the next few days after the visit to old Peggy, which convinced her that some secret lay in the old woman's keeping, Mrs. Vane refrained from any attempt to interfere with Providence. To begin with, she felt vaguely that the Scotch marriage laws were dangerous, and the very fact that she knew enough of Paul to be sure that this was not likely to be a mere vulgar entanglement, made her hesitate before her own suspicions. On the other hand, this possibility of a new string to her bow inclined her to slack off the other; the more so because here again she was beginning to be afraid of her own weapon. She had always recognised that, but for her interference, Paul would have held to that discretion which is the better part of valour, have seen no more of Marjory, and forgotten her; also, that the girl herself had been quite as ready to dismiss this strange, if alluring, figure from her thoughts, as belonging to a society--nay! to a world--in which she had no part. But now? Mrs. Vane, as she watched the easy familiarity which had of necessity recommenced between them, as she noted the girl's quick, healthy response to the thousand and one new thoughts and ways of this new life, could not help wondering if the awakening to new pleasures might not rouse into action a new set of emotions and instincts. For Marjory, as for Paul, there was also danger; to her from the unfamiliarity, to him from the very familiarity of the environment, which threw him back on past experience, and rendered it well-nigh impossible for him to forget his own nature, and dream himself in Arcadia. And then Dr. Kennedy's appearance had complicated matters for Mrs. Vane, who, kindly to all, had a weak spot in her heart for the friend of her earliest youth. It did not take long for her sharp eyes to pierce through his pretence of mere guardianship, and it gave her quite a pang to think of giving him one. Yet here she comforted herself by the palpable jealousy which Marjory showed towards those youthful days; a jealousy she did not scruple to stimulate, for Mrs. Vane, with all her *finesse*, occasionally made a mistake, and in the present instance did not realise that in thus, as it were, emphasising a hitherto unknown side of Dr. Kennedy's life she was adding to the strangeness of the environment in which Marjory found herself; and at the same time suggesting that it was no new thing to the one person to whose opinion she was inclined to defer. So that, instead of helping her old friend by the time-honoured device of exciting jealousy as a prelude to love, Mrs. Vane, in reality, made it easier for the girl to drift from her moorings.

"You are very kind to your ward," said the little lady one day, feeling impelled to give comfort as she noticed Dr. Kennedy's eyes following Marjory rather wistfully. "But virtue has its own reward. Do not pretend you don't understand, *Monsieur le Docteur!* for you do. And I will give you my opinion--when she has seen a little more of the world she will see what *it* has seen already--that there are not many men in it like Dr. Tom Kennedy."

"She will see exactly what she chooses to see, *Madame!*" he replied, with one of his little foreign bows, which, to Marjory, seemed to reveal him in a new and worldly light.

"Exactly," retorted the little lady; "and being of the Truth will choose the Truth." And then suddenly her mood changed, and she laid her hand close to his on the table as if to attract his attention to her quick emotion. "Ah, *mon ami*, I envy you! you can afford to wait for Paradise, and I have had mine. At least, I feel as if I had eaten my apple and been turned out into the cold, for there hasn't been much happiness in my life."

He looked at her with 'grave pity, noting with the eye of one accustomed to the work the thousand and one little signs of wear and tear in the clever, mobile face.

"You have put plenty into other people's lives, anyhow," he said, in kindly, if cold, comfort; and his words were true. With all her faults Mrs. Vane had given more to the world than she had ever taken from it.

Marjory, watching the little scene from afar, felt something of this, as she told herself it was quite natural that Tom should enjoy the companionship of his old friend. Who, in fact, would not enjoy talking to so brilliant and charming a woman? at least, in this new world, which could not somehow be cleft in two by a straight line dividing right from wrong, darkness from light.

Yet, though she acknowledged this, she was as far as ever from understanding it, and as ready as ever to disdain anything which bordered on sentiment; on that unknown ground of Love or Passion.

Dr. Kennedy, repeating to her his part of *jeune premier* in the little play which was to precede some tableaux, realised her lack of change in this respect with mingled gratification and regret.

"I must keep my own counsel," he recited, in the even yet jerky tone sacred to the learning of parts, "em--and not let her suspect the deep attachment she has inspired--inspired--inspired. Now, don't tell me, please; I know what comes

next. Yes! I do, Mademoiselle! In nine cases out of ten a proposal! So there! Well, where were we? Ah! 'But, soft' (depends greatly on the stage floor, my dear sir). 'But, soft! she comes!' Go on, Marjory. 'Enter Blanche--she comes,' is your cue."

"'Tis he! Henri! Oh! Tom, do let us skip all that bosh!"

Dr. Kennedy put down the hazel root he was whittling into a shepherd's crook and looked at her in feigned surprise. "Bosh! Why, I intend to work this up until I draw tears from every eye."

"Not from mine, Tom," smiled Marjory; "that sort of thing always makes me laugh."

They were lounging under the beech tree which grew close to the burn at the bottom of the garden, and the dappled sunshine and shade from the green canopy overhead made the green draperies outlining the fine curves of Marjory's slender figure seem like a dress of leaves. Leaning forward on the grass, her chin resting on her hands, her curly head thrown back half-defiantly to look him in the face, she reminded Dr. Kennedy of Rosalind; yet it was of another heroine that he spoke.

"Poor Juliet! I suppose she ought not to have survived to the nineteenth century!"

Marjory's eyebrows puckered themselves in doubt. "I don't mean that; perhaps I don't know what I mean; but Juliet loved Romeo, and these"--she nodded at the little book between her elbows in careless contempt--"they--they--Tom! you must allow there is too much of--of that sort of thing."

He went on whittling for a moment; it was the first time he had ever touched on the subject with Marjory, and he felt at once curious and constrained.

"I am afraid that sort of thing--as you call it--will not reduce itself to please you; it is part, and perhaps a necessary part, of life," he said shortly.

"A part!" returned the girl, eagerly. "Not all? Now, in the novels and these plays one hears of little else. It is all hero and heroine; work, ambition, failure, success, are nowhere. It is very uninteresting--don't you think so?"

Dr. Kennedy's face was a study in humour and gravity.

"Upon my word, I don't know, my child! But most people think otherwise at some time of life. And you are a little hard, surely; you should remember that after all the love-season is generally the crisis of life's fever. Put it another way; the touchstone by which we can test the lovers' ideal;" he paused till his innate doubt made him add: "At least it should be so, though I'm afraid it isn't--not always."

She looked at him, and a troubled expression came to her eyes. "I suppose not," she said absently; "that has always been a puzzle to me. To love, and yet not to approve, seems to me a contradiction in terms." The chips flew faster from the knot Dr. Kennedy was smoothing.

"You talk as if love were reducible to logic, but it isn't." Then the impossibility of a mutual understanding made him add more gently: "It isn't a thing you can reason about. It comes and goes as it chooses--not as you choose. That is the difficulty."

"Difficulty," echoed Marjory, raising herself with a belligerent air to clasp her hands about her knees and subside again into a half-dreamy defiance as she sat looking out over the burn to the sunlit point stretching into the blue loch. "It is manifestly unfair if it is so; only I don't think it is. Else how is it possible to hold love sacred? How is it possible to believe in it?"

"I am afraid it will be believed in to the end of the chapter all the same," replied her hearer, with a smile. "And it isn't so unfair when all is said and done, since 'a love that is tender and true and strong crowneth the life of the giver.'"

She turned on him sharply. "Where does that come from? Some extremely sentimental--- Why, Tom! I believe you wrote that--now did you? Come! own up!"

"I might have guessed it wouldn't pass muster with a young person who has taken honours in English literature and knows the Elizabethan poets by heart," he replied gravely. "Yes! Marjory, I am responsible for that particular version of a time-honoured, trusted old sentiment. I wrote it in delirium, or something like it--if that is any excuse."

She edged closer to him in girlish eagerness. "This is quite delightful. I never knew you wrote rhymes. I do, and burn them; but *you!* Come, tell me the rest at once."

"Perhaps I burn them, too."

"Oh! but that is only pretence, you know, just to keep oneself in subjection. One remembers them all the same. I do. So now, once, twice, thrice!"

He gave an odd little grimace. "It was last year when I had fever," he began apologetically.

"In Paris?"

"No! They had sent me to the country, and there was a stream and some reeds. I could see them as I lay in bed, and so---- Now, mind, if once I begin to swear I won't leave off under half-a-crown!"

"I wouldn't mind giving three shillings if it were worth it; so go on, Tom, why should you be bashful?"

"Because I was delirious when I wrote it, of course," he replied; yet there was a real tremor in his voice, as he began:--

"Where the river's golden sheen floats by
The plumes of the tall reeds touch the sky,
Like arrows from out a quiver.
But one bends over to reach the stream,
Dreaming of naught but the golden gleam,
Weary for love of the river.

"Oh, river! river! thou flowest fast;
Yet leave me one kiss as thou goest past--
One kiss, to be mine for ever!
She bent her head to the shining flood;
On swept the river in careless mood,
Mocking her poor endeavour.

"Oh, river! river! give back to me
Some token of all I have given to thee,
To show thou art my lover!
But the only answer to her prayer
Was the shade of her own love mirrored there,
With the reeds that grew above her.

"The proud reeds chid her, yet still she sighed,
Wondering such love could be so denied;
While ever towards the ocean,
Dreaming deep dreams of that future free,
The river swept on to the unknown sea,
Careless of her devotion.

"A bird flew down when the sun set red,
To sing his hymn from the reed's bowed head
To God, the All-good Giver.
Bowed by the weight of the singing bird,
At long, long last the waters stirred,
As the reed's plume touched the river.

"Oh! glad and sweet,' sang the bird, 'is Life,
And Death is sweet, bringing Peace to Strife,
But Love is God's best treasure.
It cometh best when it comes unsought,
It giveth all, and it asketh naught,
For true love hath no measure,'

"The bird flew home when its song had ceased.
The reed, from its one dear kiss released,
Shall give another never;
But a silver crown of dewdrops shone,
Telling of true love given, not won,
In the reed's bright plume for ever.

"Go forth, my song! so that all may learn
Love, like the reed's, needeth no return,
Save the baptism of the river.

Though the heart be sad, and the way be long,
A love that is tender, and true, and strong,
Crowneth the life of the giver."

Dr. Kennedy recited well; the tremor of his voice had soon passed, and with it, apparently, all sense of the personal application of the verses; for as he sate, still whittling away at the hazel root, his keen brown face wore a half-humorous and half-puzzled look, and after a decent pause he gave an odd sort of laugh.

"It sounds pretty," he said; "but upon my word I don't know quite what I meant, and I am almost certain it was not love, not what is generally understood by love."

Marjory looked at him judgmentally. "Nonsense! Of course it was love, and what is more, Tom, I think you must have been in love when you wrote it. Now confess, were you not?"

Once again the temptation to say "Yes! with you," rose uppermost; only to meet with the old revulsion of feeling, born of the knowledge of things hidden from her, and please God! always to be so hidden. In love! Great heavens, no! if that were love. And yet, how could he answer for her nature as well as his own? For a nature which his practised eye told him was full of vitality, full of possibilities; and young, ah! so young as yet in its knowledge of itself. If he told her that he loved her and asked her to marry him, the chances were ten to one that she would say "Yes." And yet the conviction that it was so brought him no content, but only something of tender reluctance for her, of vague contempt for himself.

"In love!" he echoed. "I was in a delirium if you meant that, or near it. Temperature a hundred and five point two, and Abbeville--he was nursing me--good luck to him!--had just confessed there was not much chance; as if I hadn't known that for days!"

"And you never told me," she said, after a pause.

"No; I didn't want to bother you, and----" He looked up to see her face white, and his manner changed. "Don't, child! it's past and over--besides I have a knack of pulling through--I am sorry I mentioned it, now."

"What is it?" she asked, in a constrained voice. "I should like to know, if I may?"

"My dear! of course you may. Pyaemia; the knife slipped, that was all. The veriest scratch. What a fool I was to mention it!"

"Don't say that," she flashed out suddenly. "Don't you know that I like to hear everything--everything----" She paused, and her quick resentment seemed to die down before a keener thought, and she sate silent for a while. "I can scarcely think what it would have meant to me," she went on, half to herself, before she turned her face to him again. "I should have been quite alone in the world then, you know, Tom."

"Until you made a home of your own, perhaps," he replied quietly, being, like most men of his temperament, somewhat given to self-torture.

"Perhaps; but it would never be the same," she said, as quietly. "It would never seem to be the haven of rest that the thought of your goodness is to me now. Do you know, Tom, that I always hearten myself up by saying that if I am tired I can always ask you to let me rest, and you would, wouldn't you?" As she spoke she stretched out her hand towards him in her favourite gesture of appeal, and both of his, leaving their work, had reached to it eagerly and clasped it close.

"Marjory!" he said, a surge of sheer happiness flooding heart and brain with unalloyed content. "Promise me that always--and--and I am satisfied."

"Promise what?" she asked, smiling through the sudden tears which brightened her eyes. "That I will come home to rest if I am tired? Of course I shall. What is the use of having you, Tom, the best, the kindest, if I don't make use of you? And I will. I'll come home fast enough, you'll see, if----" She paused to give a wise shake of her head, and then, clasping the hand he had released over the other which lay upon her knee, she looked out absently over the running water at her feet.

"I wonder how I shall like it?" she continued. "I wonder if it will be what I have fancied it?"

"Probably not," replied her companion, with a quick dread at his heart. For how could it be so? What could this girl's imagining have to do with that world which he knew so well: so well that the finer tissue in him rebelled against the teaching which his very profession forced him to accept as true, at any rate for the majority of men and women. "Probably not," he repeated more quietly, "though that is just the sort of thing it is impossible to predict of a girl who has been brought up as you have. So it must be settled by experience."

Half an hour afterwards Paul Macleod, coming over to the Lodge on the pretence of giving notice of an afternoon rehearsal, found them still busy over the loves and woes of Henri and Blanche. In fact, Dr. Kennedy was on his knees disclaiming his part passionately; whereat the newcomer frowned. First at the sight, secondly at his own dislike to it.

"I have been trying to teach Miss Carmichael how to refuse an aspirant firmly, yet sympathetically," said the doctor, coolly, rising to his feet and putting the handkerchief he had spread on the ground into his pocket; "but she finds a difficulty, apparently, in keeping her countenance. It is a mistake, Marjory. Half the unhappy marriages in the world come from the difficulty which the untutored mind has in saying 'No' with decent courtesy. It is so much easier to say 'Yes,' since that requires no diplomacy. If I had daughters I should always impress on them that the eleventh commandment does not consist in 'Thou shalt not refuse.'"

"I shouldn't have thought it necessary to impress that on the girls of the present day," remarked Paul, rather hastily, and Marjory flushed up at once.

"It is never safe to generalise from a single experience, Captain Macleod," she retorted, "and yours may have been exceptionally fortunate--hitherto."

"Perhaps it has--hitherto," he replied, and, after delivering his message, went off in a huff. Yet he felt himself more on a plane with Marjory than he had ever done before, slightly to his discomfiture; for this atmosphere of quick give and take, this suspicion of jealous anger, was familiar to him, and he could not mistake its possibilities. So he devoted himself more than usual to his duty, and though, of course, he made up his tiff a trifle sentimentally with Marjory, he chose to be rather lordly over her relations with Dr. Kennedy, and even went so far as to mention to his sister that he suspected her *protege*, Mr. Gillespie, was forestalled.

"My dear Paul!" said Lady George, distractedly, "I really don't care at the present moment who marries who. I might be in a better world for that matter, if I weren't in Purgatory."

"Wherefore?" asked Paul, kindly.

"Oh! the supper, and the servants, and the general civility," replied Blanche, who was in reality enjoying the bustle, but, at the same time, liked to pose as a victim. "Really, in these out-of-the-way places one has to be a virtuous woman, and bring one's food from afar; and then there is always Blasius. I suppose it is the name, as you say, George, but, really, I don't believe that child *can* do what is right."

"Nonsense, my dear," retorted her spouse, who ever since he undertook to interpret the laws of nature to his youngest born had been a trifle jealous of his pupil's reputation. "Blasius won the Derby in '73. What has the child been doing now?"

"Oh! nothing much; only he wouldn't eat his dinner just now because it was only an egg, and the others had mutton. He really is too young to have meat every day; so, as I was busy, I told nurse to put him to bed, and he is sitting up in it making the most unearthly noises, as if the whole farmyard were in the top landing. Listen! you can hear him down here."

There could be no doubt of it, and as they stood in the hall, looking up involuntarily, a perfect babel of cluckings and cacklings, crowings and quackings, seemed to come down the stairs with Mary, the nursemaid, who was bearing the dirty dishes from the nursery dinner; among them Blazes' despised egg.

"The worst of it is," went on Lady George, in her high, plaintive voice, "you never really know what the child means. Why, for instance, should he cackle, as if he had laid an egg himself?"

"Um!" grumbled her husband. "More to the purpose why he refused his dinner? Here, let me look at that tray, will you? By Jove, Blanche!" he went on, holding out the egg-cup excitedly, "it's bad--no child could be expected to eat that--what a fool!"

He was half-way up the stairs impetuously when his wife begged him to be discreet, and wait for her.

"It is just what I said," she confided to Paul, who followed full of laughter. "You never can tell what he means till afterwards; now, of course, I can guess that--that----" She paused, feeling that words were unnecessary before the spectacle of Blasius, standing beside the round, white pillow of his cot, and cackling vehemently. But Lord George was too angry for amusement, and after an elaborate apology to Blazes for the mistake, handed him over to the nurse with a sharp order to re-dress him and take more care in future, which enabled that functionary to veil her real regret under a show of indignation until Blasius, who was sitting on her knee, and could presumably see more of the truths than others, said consolingly:

"Never mind, nursie! Cocky eat his own egg next time." Whereupon, she burst into tears and hugged him for a darling, and a treasure, and the one comfort of her life.

"I don't think his meaning was obscure that time, Blanche," said her husband, as they went downstairs. "If Cocky had committed the indiscretion of laying a bad egg, why then--God bless the boy, he is a little trump!"

"And has a wisdom beyond his years," added Paul, rather cynically; "for he lays the blame where it should be given--on the Creator."

"My dear Paul! what a dreadful thing to say; please remember he is your god-son."

"Well, if he doesn't hear it from me he will from others, my dear girl," replied her brother, with a shrug of the shoulders. "It is the teaching of to-day. We are none of us responsible beings."

"And upon my soul," growled Lord George, "I'm inclined to agree with it in one sense--think of that fool of a nurse!--you should dismiss her, Blanche."

"But, my dear Paul," persisted Lady George, disregarding her husband's suggestion, "the question of heredity does not exclude the forces of education. We can be altered----"

"I've heard you say a dozen times, Blanche, that an altered body is never satisfactory, even with the best of dressmakers," interrupted Paul, as he turned off to the smoking-room. "So why should you think it would answer with a soul?"

"There is something the matter with Paul," remarked his sister, who disliked above all things to have the logical sequence of her own theories flung in her face; "but that is only to be expected. When one is busy troubles come crowding in on every side. However, I have written to Lady Hooker, and begged her as a personal favour not to bring the piper to-morrow night; for, though I have warned the servants about Highland flings, you cannot expect people to overcome their natural instincts nowadays, and of course we shall be enjoying ourselves, in a way, upstairs."

"I hope so," assented her husband, gloomily; "and I suppose, my dear, I shall get my towel-horse back when it is all over."

"Now, George! isn't that like a man?" cried his wife, triumphantly, as if appealing to him for verification of a new and interesting fact about himself. "As if you didn't know that tableaux in the drawing-room and towel-horses in the bedrooms were quite incompatible when scenery is required--especially rustic scenery. And Mrs. Vane requires so many rocks! You may be thankful it wasn't *boulders*, for then the pillows would have gone, and what would you have said to that?"

Lord George said nothing, but as he followed his brother-in-law's example and turned off to the smoking-room, some connection of ideas made him hum to himself:--

"Out of my stony grief Bethels I'll raise."

"Really, George!" called his wife, indignantly; "you and Paul are *impayable*. It is a wonder Adam and Eve are so good."

CHAPTER XVII.

Private theatricals as a rule need no description, but these in the barn at Gleneira House merit at least so much attention, in that, for the major part of the audience, they were the first attempt at play-acting it had ever seen; since even in the British Isles culture and civilisation have not harried the glens which are hidden away in the hearts of the hills. To tell truth, not a few of the audience came doubtfully with a fear lest they might be backsliders; but, as luck would have it, the Free Church section, being in process of choosing a new minister, felt it could afford, for once, to test the iniquity of the stage by actual experience. Besides, if the laird led the way, there were still sufficient of the clan to follow him even to the jaws of hell. So they came and waited for the curtain to rise, with a quaint trepidation lest they should really enjoy themselves, and so give place to the devil.

But there was someone else besides the "*unco guid*" who felt vaguely as if it would have been better she had not been there, as if she wished that both the immediate past and the present had never come to pass. And that was Marjory, as she stood at the far corner by the door, whence she could escape easily when she was wanted behind the scenes. Perhaps her face showed something of this, for Paul Macleod, pausing beside her for a moment, said in a low tone:

"I've seen Mrs. Vane act in 'Her Bitterest Foe' before, and she alone would carry it off. Then Bertie is splendid at the heavy parts, and Dr. Kennedy, by all accounts, is almost professional. There is no fear, I'm sure."

She turned to him quickly. "Do I look nervous? I think I am, chiefly from the novelty. It is the first play I've ever seen, remember."

He knew that, and yet the idea struck him again with a certain regret for her and for himself. For her that she should see one at all, for himself that he should have seen so many. "After all," he parodied lightly, "it is better sometimes never to have lived than to have lived it all! There goes the prompter's bell, so keep your eyes open, Miss Carmichael."

There was no need for the advice, since the first look filled the girl with astonishment at the almost ridiculous reality which the glare of the footlights gave to the shreds and patches of scenery she had helped to put together. No wonder, therefore, if Mrs. Vane, in her simple black dress, looked the *ingenue* to perfection, and Major Bertie's honest English face had quite a German cut about it. And how well they acted! The ring of rough tenderness in the General's voice was all that could be desired, while Mrs. Vane was faultlessly simple and girlish. It could scarcely, Marjory told herself, be better; and oh, how dreadful--how unbearable it would be if Tom fell below that high standard! Another minute and his cue would come; so much she knew, and a really hot regret rose up in her that she had not insisted on invading the privacy of the rehearsals; then she would have known what to expect. Yet what could he do with such a part? A part which had always sounded to her so unreal, so unlike the man himself, so unlike---- Then who was this hasty, hot-headed, imperious, impetuous boy who burst upon the stage? She gave quite a little gasp of dismay, and then forgot everything save that figure kneeling at its mistress's feet, and pouring out its love, its grief, its remorse.

"Bravo!" said Paul, under his breath, then added, in a different tone, "You see there is no need to be nervous--he does it *con amore*."

A sudden jealousy had leapt up in him at the thought that Marjory might listen to such wooing, and as he moved away to the vacant place left for him by Alice Woodward, he told himself, with resentful cynicism, that it was not the first time Dr. Kennedy had played the lover's part, and that even Marjory should be satisfied by the plaudits which were sure to follow.

But she was not thinking of applause. She was too startled, too dazed to think at all, for something new and hitherto undreamt of in her was responding passionately to the passionate appeal to which she listened, and her clasp on the chair behind which she stood slackened in relief as the kiss of forgiveness was given. Oh, that was right! Who, loving the man, would not forgive? Who could help it in such case? And this--yes! this was love!

It seemed to her as if the play passed in a moment, and yet that it had stolen the reality from all the rest of her life; nor did she realise who the actors were until, amid the applause with which the curtain came down, she heard two familiar voices from the row of chairs in front of her.

"Bravo! Bravissimo!" said one. "That was well done. He has my compliments."

"And mine," quoth the other, solemnly jocose. "But to think of it? Oh, Thomas, my lad, *quod medicorum est promittant medice*, but this is no healing o' hearts, man! Eh! Father Macdonald, but we will have at the learned impostor; we will!"

"*Amor al cor gentil ralto s'apprende*," put in the gentler voice, in the same jocose strain; and then they both laughed.

Marjory stepped back involuntarily as if to avoid hearing more; but she had heard enough, for there, as she raised her eyes, stood Dr. Kennedy and Mrs. Vane, bowing their acknowledgments of the recall. The old life had come back again, but with a strange new thrill in it which made her heart beat, yet left her dazed and weary.

"If I could always act with Tom Kennedy," said Mrs. Vane, jubilant over the success, when Marjory went behind the scenes to aid in the coming tableaux, "I should make my fortune. He is the only amateur I ever saw who knows how to make love!"

"He did it very well," assented Marjory, coldly. She felt glad that he was too busy with the scenery for her to have speech with him; she would not have known what to say--for she had liked it--she had understood--and yet!--- It was bad enough to listen for a moment to Paul's approval when he came round, escorting Alice Woodward, who was wanted for the statue in "Winter's Tale."

"You should be satisfied," he said with intent. "Personally I never saw it better done, on--or off the stage."

But then a look at the girl's face drove him back quick as thought to the old Arcadian days when they had been so friendly.

"I wish the whole business were over," he said sharply. "It's an awful nuisance, and you will all be dead tired to-morrow."

"But Lord George will have his towel-horse again!" she answered, lightly turning to a current jest as a shelter from the sense of his thoughtfulness for her. "And there are but three more tableaux."

"Three," he echoed; "there are only two on the programme."

"But the other is Mrs. Vane's *bon-bouche* to the house party. She said they deserved a surprise; but I believe she would just as soon let it slide--for she is very tired, Captain Macleod. Only it would be hard on Mr. Gillespie, who is full of his part; besides it really should be the prettiest of all--Mrs. Vane took so much trouble over it."

"Are you in it--and Dr. Kennedy?" he asked quickly.

"No, only I--and Mr. Gillespie, of course. You see it was for the house party."

And Paul, as he went off to do host, wondered angrily what Violet could mean; she always meant something--at least that was his experience of her. The wonder lingered as he sate decorously between Mrs. Woodward and Lady Hooker in the front row, listening between the scenes to the account the latter gave of some tableaux she had got up when they rented the Marquis of Tweedie's place in Peebleshire, and whispering to the former, when the curtain rose finally on Alice as Joan of Arc at the stake, that he hoped it was the last time her daughter would suffer martyrdom in his house. For Paul invariably said the right thing, if it paid him to do so, no matter what his real feelings were at the moment; at the present time they were somewhat mixed; the preponderant one being irritation at the whole round world.

And now, that being the last tableau on the programme, the guests were manifestly becoming filled with uneasy wonder as to whether they were expected to make the move or not, when the tinkle of the bell warned them of something more, and after a minute's pause the lights went out suddenly. Then from the darkness came Wagner's "March of the Gods to Walhalla," and the curtain, rising slowly, showed a scene which well deserved the murmur of recognition which ran round the more critical part of the audience.

"Shouldn't have thought towel-horses could have done it--but she is a deuced clever little soul," murmured Lord George to his neighbour, and in truth, considering the resources at Mrs. Vane's command, the effect was well-nigh marvellous. In the distance lay a stretch of sea and sky lit by the light of a dying sunset which gained an almost real radiance from the darkness of the foreground, where, with its back to the audience, its foot upon the brink, a mailed figure, sword in hand, bent, as if meditating a leap over the shadowy gulf which lay between it and a low platform of rock overhanging the misty blue depths of the distant sea. And on the rock, her silver helmet laid aside, her head pillowed on her white arm, slept a warrior-maiden with her face turned to the sunsetting. She was clad in soft, filmy,

white draperies, but the corselet of silver she wore above them rose and fell evenly with her calm breathing; while round about her--so close that it seemed to touch her wavy hair and silver, wing-shod feet--flickered and flamed a mystic circle of fire.

"What is it? What is it meant to be?" came eagerly from many of the audience. And Paul knew--knew all too well--but he sate silent, crushing down his anger at the skill of the thrust.

"What is it?" echoed Alice Woodward, who, with an opera cloak thrown over her last costume, had returned to her role of spectator. "Why, Brynhild, of course, mamma! The Nibelungen, you know--we heard that German tenor in it, if you remember. Mrs. Vane has staged it beautifully, hasn't she, Captain Macleod; and how well the dress suits Miss Carmichael's style. That is Mr. Gillespie, of course; he looks taller in armour. You know, mamma, it is a sort of allegory. Sigurd has to leap----" She paused abruptly to look at her companion. He had started to his feet, and a quick cry of "Take care! Take care!" rose from various parts of the house, for a breath of wind, coming from some opening door, had bent the flames perilously near to those filmy draperies.

"Look out, Gillespie! for God's sake look out!" he shouted; but the mailed figure, failing to understand, turned to the audience, and the next instant Paul, tearing off his coat the while, had leapt over the footlights, and scattering the circle in his hurry was on his knees beside Marjory crushing out the fire which had caught her dress. The heated spirit spilt on the floor blazed up fiercely, almost hiding those two, and rousing a shriek of dismay from the ladies.

"Down with the curtain and keep the draught out!" shouted Paul; "and run back the carpet some of you. Lie still a moment, please--it is beyond you."

As a matter of fact the sudden burst of flame was nearer to the mailed figure, who, being penned in between it and the falling curtain, chose the footlights and landed in Mrs. Woodward's arms a second before Dr. Kennedy's voice rang out reassuringly to say it was all right.

"You might bring a blanket, Kennedy," said Paul, still with his arms round Marjory. "If you will excuse me a moment longer, Miss Carmichael, it will be wiser--muslin is so apt to flare. Tell me if I am hurting you."

Perhaps he did not mean--being a gentleman in most ways--to lower his voice in the least, and yet he did lower it. He could scarcely help himself with that touch thrilling through him, and at the sound of the tenderness in his own tones something in him seemed to cast itself loose from all anchorage and, spreading white wings over the tempest of emotion that arose in him, to bear him swiftly to a haven of perfect content.

"I'm not hurt at all," she said; yet she looked at his face so close to hers with startled eyes, and gave a little shiver; then went on hastily. "But you--your shirt sleeve is all burnt--it is smouldering still. Tom! come quick! No! No!--not for me. There was a spark still, Captain Macleod--I saw it----"

"It is out now at any rate--be still for one more second, please. Thanks, Kennedy--just slip it under while I lift. So--a perfect roly-poly! That is well over!"

He spoke lightly again, but he had grown very pale, and much to his annoyance found himself in the doctor's hands for a scorch on his arm. However, as his sister said plaintively, that and the unfortunate break-up of Lord George's lamented towel-horse in the hurry was the only mischief done. It might have been much worse, and though of course it was really quite a lovely tableau--for which Mrs. Vane deserved the highest praise--still it was a dangerous experiment. It generally was dangerous to play with fire, remarked Paul, impatiently, and had not his sister better make some diversion among the guests, or they would be leaving with a sense of judgment on their souls. A reel or two would hearten them up, while a glass of whiskey, and some weak negus for the ladies before they went away, would finish the business. Of course there was no piper, but Miss Carmichael could play "The de'il among them" to perfection, and would do that much to help Gleneira, he felt sure.

There is no greater test of the quality of a man's fibre than the way in which he stands the goad of mental pain. Paul Macleod, smarting under the sting which the certain knowledge that he loved Marjory Carmichael as he had never loved any woman before and yet that she was beyond his reach brought to him, showed this indubitably. All his reckless self-will, all his wild resentment against controlling circumstance, rose up in him, and only the fact that he had no possible opportunity of so doing, prevented him from then and there making his proposal to Alice Woodward. This may seem a strange sequence to the discovery that you love another woman, but it was just this discovery which set him in arms against himself. For this love was a new emotion--a love which suited the girl with her clear eyes--a love such as he had hitherto scouted as a dream fit only for passionless, sexless idealists.

And the result of this deliberate choice of lower levels was in its way stranger still. For Alice Woodward, whose emotion under any circumstances could never have risen to a higher point than calm affection, felt more content than she had ever done over the future, and actually lingered in her mother's room--a most unusual event in that reserved family--to remark that Gleneira was really delightful in the fine weather when the house was full of people.

"Captain Macleod showed immense presence of mind, too," assented Mrs. Woodward, contributing her quota to the general satisfaction.

"Very!" admitted Alice, colouring a little, "and he behaved so nicely afterwards. In such good spirits, you know, though of course he must have been in pain."

So they retired to bed, well content with the state of affairs. Not so Mrs. Vane, who, long after the others were asleep, sat waiting for a well-known footstep to pass her door, on its way to the laird's own room, which lay, quaintly apart from the others, with a little further flight of stairs all to itself. And none came, though from below she heard the voices of the menkind dispersing when their smoke was over, and from above Lord George's stealthy tread as he passed the nursery. And yet she had made up her mind that she must say a word to Paul--must make certain of the truth--before she slept. She had not been deceived; he was angry with her. Nay, worse! he was unhappy, yet in a mood to make that unhappiness permanent. That must be prevented somehow; so after a time she stole out into the passages, dark save for the master's light--that light which has brought home the pang of widowhood to so many a woman's heart, as she pauses on her way upstairs to put it out. If she knew anything of Paul's nature, he would not be in the smoking-room; once the necessity for restraint was over, he would have taken the earliest opportunity of escaping from the eyes of others. The business-room most likely, where he was secure from most interruptions; but not from hers, though as he started to his feet as she came in, he looked as though he had expected otherwise.

"I waited for you upstairs," she said boldly, "for I must speak to you to-night"--then she paused, startled; for she had expected anger, and Paul had sunk wearily into his chair again, resting his head on his hand.

"Can't you let me be--surely you have done mischief enough already?" he said; and then he turned to look at her, and think, even in his resentment, that she had always liked him, always been good to him. "I don't understand why you brought this about--not the accident, of course; that no one could have foreseen, but all the other part. For you did bring it about. Why? Do you want me to marry---*her*? You know you don't. Then why should you have schemed to give me pain?"

He spoke with a concentrated bitterness which told her that his patience was far spent. When she had left her room to seek him she had been prepared to speak the truth, if need be, to a certain extent, but now her quick wit showed her that she must risk all.

"No!" she answered quietly. "I do not wish you to marry Marjory Carmichael; but neither do I wish you to marry that iceberg of a girl, and be miserable. Let me have my say, Paul, for the sake of old times. She does not love you, my poor Paul--I doubt if she can love anything--and you do not love her; you do not even admire her. But you did love the other, and when I saw you pretending that you did not, I said to myself, 'He shall know the difference.'"

"That is a kind of knowledge a man can generally find out for himself," broke in Paul, cynically. "But, still, I don't see--what possible use?----" He paused, and turned from her again to his old attitude.

"What use!" she echoed, laying her hand on his shoulder. "Listen! and I will tell you the truth--tell it you utterly. You are very dear to me, Paul, and come what may I am your friend. Do you think, then, that I could stand by and see you bring misery into your life needlessly; quite needlessly, for you could do better for yourself than that. Long ago, Paul, so long ago that the folly of it is over for you, and so I can speak of it--you loved me; and I----" she paused, but went on steadily. "I loved you--don't start, my friend, it is true; see! to your face I say it is true. I loved you. But I kept the secret then, Paul, for the sake of your future, as I tell it now for the sake of your future, so that you may believe that I am a friend indeed; for a woman will not stand by and see another woman sacrifice the happiness of a man for whom she once sacrificed her own. That is why I say you must not marry Alice Woodward--you must not, Paul! Give her up!"

"And, then?"

Her eyes met his unflinchingly.

"Yes, Paul! think what you like; I do not care. As for that, I should make you a better wife than Alice Woodward, for there would be the memory of a past love between us, at any rate--a fair, honest love." He had risen from his chair, and stood looking down on the brave, spirited little figure before him with irrepressible admiration. What pluck, what

address she had! How skilfully she had steered her way through dangers that would have wrecked another woman's self-esteem! And with the memory of the past surging up in him he could not deny her right to speak.

"I am no fool, Paul," she went on, holding up her hand to check some half-hesitating words upon his lips. "I know what I say. I know, too, what most men would say if a woman spoke to them as I have spoken to you to-night. Well! I risk all that. I never lacked courage in your cause, Paul, and if I gave up my love in those old passionate days for your sake, do you think I would let its shadow come between you and happiness? You are marrying the girl for her money. Well, others have money also. I have it now, if it comes to that. I do not ask you to marry me, Paul," she added, with a sudden, hard little laugh. "I have not needed Leap Year in my calendar of life, but I do ask you to think. There are rich girls whom you might love."

"That is so like a woman! Have you forgotten your own handiwork already? You would have me forget now that I am in love, but I shall never forget."

"Never is a long word," she answered, resuming her ordinary manner, "and you forget so easily, my poor Paul!"

"You have no right to say that, Violet," he broke in, hotly. "Have I forgotten you? Have I forgotten your kindness? Do you think I would let any other soul alive speak to me as you have done to-night?"

She swept him a swift, gracious little curtsy. "*Dieu merci, Monsieur!*" she laughed, "the temptation would be too great, I suppose? But I will tell you, if you like, why you have not forgotten. Because I have kept myself *en evidence*; that is why. You say that I see clearly, my friend. It is true. I see so clearly that the glamour goes even from my own actions. You are the captive of my bow and spear, Paul, but you would have escaped if you could. And Alice Woodward cannot spin webs as I do; she will never be able to keep you, and then----? Good-night." She held out her hand suddenly, but Paul stood irresolute.

"You are clear sighted, indeed. God knows you read me like a book sometimes." He hesitated, then went on hurriedly, "I wonder if--if Miss Carmichael----"

Violet Vane shook her head with a smile. "That is the kind of knowledge a man can generally find out for himself, my friend! Personally, I think she will marry Tom Kennedy if she is left alone."

"Thank you. You certainly have courage, Violet."

"The courage of a surgeon who sees the knife is kindest in the end. I have told you that you would be miserable with the woman you do not love. I now tell you that you would not be happy with the woman you do love."

"And why?"

"Because you have not the making of an archangel in you; that is why. Do you think you have, Paul?" She stood for a moment at the door to look up at him, as if she were making quite an ordinary remark. "But there is the earth in the middle between the heavens above and the waters beneath. Don't forget that, *my friend*."

When she had left him he lit another cigar out of sheer inability to think of doing anything more decided, anything which in any way affected his future, even to the extent of taking a night's repose; that feeling of uncertainty being largely a result of sheer surprise that he should have allowed Violet Vane's manoeuvring to pass unreprieved. And this, in its turn, convinced him, as nothing else would have done, that she understood him as no one else could do.

And she? When he, coming up to his room, turned out the lamp on the stair, he left the house in darkness, save for the candle he carried. Yet Mrs. Vane was not even undressed. She was face down on her bed trying to forget everything; above all, that old Peggy Duncan possessed a secret which might--which might---

For her own reference to the past had brought that other past back upon her, and, as she buried her hot face in the pillow, she told herself that she had not, after all, spoken the truth. She had said that his happiness was her motive, when it was her own. And wherefore not?

CHAPTER XVIII.

Marjory sate at the window pretending to be busy over laces and ribbons, but in reality watching Dr. Kennedy's deft hands lit up by the shaft of light from his microscope lamp, as, with the aid of a tiny pair of tweezers, and a watchmaker's glass fixed in one eye, he laid out the almost invisible film of some sea plant on a slide. For they, that is to say, Marjory, Will, and the doctor, had spent the day after the theatricals in dredging for oysters, as a relief to what the latter called fishing for men; and something interesting had come up in the dredger, which had to be set up despite the waning light. He looked more natural when so employed, and yet, despite the grizzling hair and the thin brown face, she seemed to trace in him as she had never done before a hint of that figure on last night's stage, which had opened her eyes to love in its passion, its unreason. And with this fancy came the remembrance of Paul Macleod's swift resource, his kindness, his courage. And both memories confused her, making her feel as if the old landmarks had been removed, and she could not be certain even of those she knew intimately; as if a man's ideals might yield no clue to his actions. For Tom must surely have felt that storm and stress before he could portray it so vividly? And then, even if this were not so, his vast experience of things which she had been accustomed to despise remained inexplicable.

"I had no idea that you were so frivolous, Tom," she said suddenly, laying down even her pretence of work.

He wheeled round in his chair instantly, and let the glass fall from his eye. "Are you aware that that is a very odd remark to make to a man who believes he has found a new infusorian which may revolutionise all our theories, especially when it is made by a young lady who is busy, or ought to be busy, over her first ball-dress."

"Ought I?" She smiled back a little wearily. "I'm afraid I'm a bad pupil, Tom. I was just wishing Lady George could have postponed it till you had gone."

He gave a little grimace. "Thank you, my dear, I daresay it would be pleasanter,----"

"Don't tease, Tom. You know what I mean, perfectly; it interrupts the holiday."

"Which is perilously near its close, by the way. I have to go back next Thursday."

"Yes, I know. But don't talk of it; let us enjoy it while it lasts!"

He turned back to his work again hurriedly. "Now, that is what I should call truly frivolous. So be it. However, *Vogue la galere!* It is a very easy philosophy, at any rate."

They were silent again for a space, and then she began again. "What I meant was, that you must have seen so much of the world; and then you are so interested in it. Last night," she hesitated a little, "it struck me, Tom, that for all I knew, you might have--have seen something like it when you were through the Franco-Prussian war, for instance. You--you were quite a boy then, weren't you?"

"A baby, so to speak. I remember nearly fainting over the first wound I saw. Yes, Marjory, I've seen such romantic young fools many a time. I see a good deal of that sort of thing necessarily in my profession. It is human nature."

"I suppose so," she said curtly. "Well, I suppose I ought to go and dress. Oh, Tom! why couldn't Lady George have put it off, and why won't you let me stay at home?"

"Because, when, after infinite toil, you have caught a netful of mankind for theatricals, you naturally choose the next day for a dance. And because a girl ought to go to a ball. How can she tell her *metier* if she only keeps to one? Besides, it is your holiday."

"I shan't like it a bit, and I shall feel dowdy in this thing." She held up a white stuff gown, with the oddest mixture of self-complacency and disdain. "Of course, it will do quite well, and it would have been recklessly extravagant of me to get another, seeing that I shan't want evening dresses at a Board School; but I shall be a dowdy all the same."

"I doubt it," remarked her guardian, busy adjusting his screws. "Now, you really ought to go and dress, my dear. In my time girls----"

"In your time!" she flashed out. "Why? Why, you are quite up to date, Tom, and I--I am hopelessly *arrieree*, especially in my dress! Oh, dear f I suppose I must----"

A minute afterwards she came flying down the stairs, followed by Mrs. Cameron, who had evidently been on the watch for the occasion in Marjory's room, and was determined not to lose the scene downstairs. It was rather a pretty one, though the first words were distinctly sordid.

"Oh, Tom! what did it cost?"

"Now, that really is the rudest question! I'm surprised at you," returned Dr. Kennedy, trying to jest, though something in the girl's face told him she was not far from tears.

"But it is dreadful," she began.

"Naethin' o' the sort," broke in Mrs. Cameron, breathlessly. "Just don't belie the nature God gave to you. It's just beautiful, and the doctor and me has been agog these three days lest it should not come in time, for it is ill getting things to Geneira from Paris."

"Paris!" echoed Marjory. "Yes, I thought it looked like Paris! How foolish of you, Tom!"

"And so that is all the thanks you're giving him. Wait, my lass, till you're as auld as I am, with no a soul in the wide world caring a bawbee if you're clad in sackcloth and ashes, and then see if ye woudna like to be made a lily o' the field. Just arrayed in glory wi'out a toil or a spin."

"Quite right, Mrs. Cameron," put in Dr. Kennedy, with a laugh. "She will have plenty of toiling and spinning by and bye; why shouldn't she be a flower and do credit to us all for one evening?"

She looked at him from head to foot. "A flower for you to wear in your buttonhole, apparently. Tom, are all men alike?"

"I am human, at any rate," he said quietly.

"Oh, come away, come away!" cried Mrs. Cameron, impatiently. "Come and put it on, like a good lassie, and don't be chopping logic. It's time enough to be an angel when you've done being a girl, and you'll have more chance o' bein' one if ye make the best o' your gifts in this world, I can tell you. So come away, my dear, there may be a stitch or two a-wantin', and the time is none too long."

But Marjory stood her ground even after the old lady had bustled upstairs again, and she looked so serious that Dr. Kennedy was driven into suggesting that if she preferred it, she might wear her old gown.

"It is not that," she said slowly. "It is beautiful. I could see that, at a glance; but--Tom, did Mrs. Vane choose it?"

His laugh had a certain content in it. "My dear child, I prefer people to be dressed as I like, and I am generally supposed to have good taste."

"Vèry, I should say," she remarked, with a curious accent of regret in her voice.

But the fact was indubitable. When she came down again in a shimmer of silver and white, set cunningly with frosted rowan berries showing a glint of scarlet here and there, she knew so well that her dress was perfect, that from a new bashfulness she turned the tables on him swiftly.

"Tom," she cried, "I declare you have waxed the ends of your moustache!"

"And if I had been in Italy, I should have curled my hair, too," he replied imperturbably. "It is not a crime."

"And that coat! It is not your ordinary one."

"It is not. The one I use here--since you are so particular--is a dress jacket; the correct thing, I assure you, for a shooting lodge. But I have the misfortune to be honorary surgeon to a potentate somewhere, who insists on brass buttons on state occasions, so I don't happen to have the intermediate affair. Besides, there are to be lord-lieutenants and generals hanging round this evening from the Oban gathering. If that is satisfactory to your highness, we should be going."

"And that red thing in your buttonhole?" she persisted, going close up to him and touching the bit of ribbon with dainty curious finger. "It is the Legion of Honour, I suppose."

"It is called so; you look as if that were a crime also."

"I did not know you had it, that was all," she said. And then, Will, coming in full of fuss because his very occasional white tie had not been folded properly in the wash, changed the *venue* by declaring that fine feathers make fine birds, and that he was half ashamed to belong to them.

"Naethin' o' the sort, Will," snapped Mrs. Cameron. "It's the fine birds that grows the fine feathers, as ye'd see ony day o' the week if ye went to my hen yard."

"And it is always the male bird which attends most to personal appearance," remarked Marjory, sedately. Yet, despite her pretended disdain, as they passed down the drawing-room corridor at Gleneira House, she paused involuntarily to look for a second at what she saw reflected in a pier glass at the end.

"We do look nice, Tom," she said, with a faint laugh; "but I feel like the old woman. I'm sure it isn't I. Now, you look as if you were born to it."

He had not the heart to tell her that she looked it also, so took refuge in claiming his right of the first waltz.

"But I can't dance. You seem to forget, Tom, that I have never even seen a waltz danced."

His face fell. "What an ass I am, when I could have taught you in half an hour. But you would pick it up in the first turn; let us try, at any rate."

"Please don't ask me," she began. "I don't want to dance. In fact, I didn't tell you--on purpose."

"That was unkind," he replied, and this plain statement of his unvarnished opinion making the girl see her silence in the same light, she added, hastily, "I will dance later on, if it will please you."

He laid his hand on hers as it rested on his arm and looked at her with a kindly smile. "That is right! It always gives me pleasure when Mademoiselle Grauds-serieux unbends a little. I want you to enjoy yourself to-night. Why not? You are young, happy, and will probably be--pardon my incurable frivolity--the best-dressed girl in the room. But there is our hostess, and after that I had better go and find a partner. It is a duty at the beginning of a ball. Shall we say number four or six for ours?"

"Oh, six, please; something may have happened by that time."

She felt, to tell the truth, as if something must be going to happen, as she sate watching the scene from the quiet corner where Dr. Kennedy left her. The lights, the music, the buzz of conversation seemed to go to her head, and the sight of him skimming past like a swallow made her suddenly regret her refusal. It seemed easy and pleasant. Yes; it must be pleasant, and there were four more dances to sit out before her chance came.

"Is it one of the mortal sins, Miss Carmichael?" came Paul's voice behind her. He had seen her enter with Dr. Kennedy, and, aided by Mrs. Vane's one-syllabled verdict "Worth," had guessed the history of the dress. And there he was looking very handsome, his arm still in a sling so as to give him a pretext for laziness if he chose, and meaning mischief out of sheer contrariety.

"I can't dance," she answered, flushing a little, "but I am going to try number six with Tom. I am almost sorry now I didn't say four; I think I should like it."

"Try four with me," he answered, seating himself beside her.

"But it will hurt your arm," she began.

"If it does we can sit down again; but I don't think it will. I find I can generally do what I want to do without serious injury either to my mind or my body." And then he added in a lower tone, "I should not ask you if I was incapable; but if you would rather not trust me I must submit."

"But Tom--Dr. Kennedy----" she began, doubtfully.

"Is dancing number four with Mrs. Vane. I heard them settle it just now."

Why this information should have influenced her decision is not clear, since she was perfectly prepared to see them dance not once but many times together; yet it did, as Paul had guessed it would. Still, when he had gone to play

the part of host elsewhere, she began to regret her promise, and the sight of him returning with the first bars of number four to claim her made her attempt escape by pleading the risk to his scorched arm. "It was surely," she said, "rash to have removed the sling."

"I am always rash," he replied. "Come! you owe me some reward, and I am quite capable of taking care of you."

His words brought back the remembrance of the night before, and sent a thrill through her; the next instant it seemed to her that she was alone with him again, despite the whirl of dancers around them. Alone with him, and a bunch of red rowans which, for the first time, she noticed he wore in his buttonhole, and to which he began drawing her attention at once.

"We wear the same badge once more, you see, Miss Carmichael," he said fluently. "It must be your welcome to a new world, as the white heather was to me. Only, as usual, I am natural, and you are artificially iced. Which is best? Well, if you will defend your position, I will defend mine; for we must agree to differ since I cannot freeze, and I sometimes wonder if you can thaw. Perhaps if I had let you burn a little longer last night I might have found out and been happy. I almost wish I had, only then--only then," he repeated in a louder tone of triumph, "I shouldn't have had the pleasure of taking you a whole turn round the room without your remembering that it *was* your first turn--No! don't stop just because you do remember; another turn will finish your lesson."

"That was very clever of you!" laughed Marjory, as they went on, she gaining confidence at every step.

"I think it was," he replied; but he did not add that his art had extended to exchanging the bouquet he had originally worn for some rowan berries filched from the decorations.

But Mrs. Vane, who had been more or less responsible for the discarded jasmine, noticed it at once, and her voice was hard as she remarked to her partner, "Your pupil has preferred another professor, Dr. Kennedy; the patient instead of the physician. It is really very foolish of Paul, with his arm."

Tom Kennedy felt glad of the possibility of ignoring the first part of her remark, for he was conscious of bitter disappointment, not to say vexation. "He is not likely to hurt; it was the merest scorch." And then his obstinacy made him add, as much for his own edification as for hers, "She is lucky to begin so well; a tall man can steer better as a rule."

Mrs. Vane smiled. "That is overdone, my friend; there is not a better steerer in the room than you are."

"How can you tell; you need no guidance?" he began, when she stopped him peremptorily.

"Don't, please; if you knew how sick of it I am. It comes, I know, as part of the business with the lights, and the music, and the coffee, and the ices; but you and I are such old friends." There was rather a crush at the moment, and her partner being too busy to speak, she had the conversation to herself for the time, and went on evenly, "How well they dance! and her dress is simply perfection. I must get you to choose mine. Yes! they look a charming couple; for he is wonderfully handsome--handsomer than when he was younger--don't you think so?"

"I never met him before this summer," replied her victim; and, to change the subject, added, "but I knew his brother Alick in Paris. Very like him, but not so fine a fellow--rather--well! he got into a very fast set, and that accounts for a great deal."

Mrs. Vane looked up in sudden interest. "Ah! I had almost forgotten. Of course, he had a brother who died."

"Yes! quite suddenly. By all accounts none too soon for the estates. He had half ruined them."

"And so the present laird has to marry money, if he will. But you never can count on Paul Macleod doing the wise thing. A pretty face, a dress from Worth's, a---- Is that the end? Then I should like a cup of coffee, if you please."

And as they passed down the corridor she passed to other subjects, leaving that barb to rankle. She was not often so cruel, but, to tell truth, she was really angry with Paul, and told herself there was no use in trying to keep him out of mischief. Doubtless, she had so far startled him by her plain speaking as to prevent him from bringing matters to a crisis with Alice; but here, at the slightest provocation, he was flirting outrageously with Marjory, and looking----

"A message for you, sir," said the butler, coming up to Dr. Kennedy, as they were about to return to the ball-room. "A little boy, sir, to say a Mrs. Duncan is ill, and wants to see you."

"Little Paul!" cried Mrs. Vane; "poor old woman! I am sorry. Where is he, Grierson? In the housekeeper's room?"

Then don't let us disturb you; I'll show Dr. Kennedy the way."

"Why should you trouble?" he began.

"'Tis no trouble, my friend, and you may need something to take with you."

"I may need nothing," he answered. "I was round seeing her, as you know, a few days ago; and she might die at any moment; her heart is almost worn out."

Mrs. Vane's gave a sudden throb. What if she died, and carried the secret with her, just when it was most needed? The thought became insistent as she listened to the boy's frightened tale of how his grandmother had looked so strange, and bidden him seek Dr. Kennedy, and then seemed to fall asleep.

"You had better keep the lad here awhile," said the latter, in an undertone. "He has been delayed by not knowing where to find me, and, without stimulants at hand, a fainting fit might pass into death." He turned to ask for some brandy, and was off into the still moonlit night hastily.

She stood looking after him for a moment, and then made her way back to the ball-room mechanically. Another waltz had begun, and she hastily scanned the dancers for Paul's figure, but neither he nor Marjory were to be seen. Without an instant's hesitation she went to the conservatory, and found--what she knew she would find.

"Excuse my interrupting you," she said, "but I have a message from Dr. Kennedy for Miss Carmichael. He has been called away for half an hour, but will be back then; and he hopes, my dear," she laid her hand on Marjory's arm affectionately, "that you will be ready for number ten. Meanwhile, Paul, you ought either to continue the lesson, or find Miss Carmichael another tutor. Ah! Major Bertie, have you found me! and I have turned the heel of my slipper and must go and put on another pair, but perhaps Miss Carmichael will console you."

She waited till they had moved out of sight, and then turned to Paul, almost passionately:

"And you--you are engaged for this dance, I presume?"

"You presume a little too far, my dear Violet," he replied dangerously. "I am a helpless cripple, and I cannot run in harness, no matter how skilful the whip may be. If you are going back to the ball-room may I give you my one arm?"

"No, thanks. I shall stay here."

Never in their lives before had they come so near a quarrel, and, even though Mrs. Vane was wise enough to see the provocation which her own loss of temper had given him, the fact decided her. The change of slippers included other alterations in her toilette, and five minutes afterwards she was following Dr. Kennedy to Peggy Duncan's cottage. The walk was nothing on that warm September night, and the excuse of a desire to help sufficiently reasonable, her kindness in such ways being proverbial. Many a deathbed had been cheered by her cheerful aid, and yet, nerved as she was by experience, she shrank back at the sight which met her eyes as she lifted the latch of the cottage and entered. For the deep box bed, whereon old Peggy had passed so many years, had been inconvenient, and Dr. Kennedy had lifted her to the table, where she lay unconscious, looking like death itself, in the limp, powerless sinking into the pillow of her grey head. The old woman's dreary prophecy came back to Mrs. Vane, though this was not certain death, as yet; since, with his back towards her, his warm hands clasping those cold ones, his face bent on the watch for some sign of life, stood Dr. Kennedy, trying the last resource of artificial respiration. There is nothing in the whole range of experience more absorbing, more pathetic than this struggle of the living for the dying, whether it be for the new-born babe doubtful of existence, or, as here, for an old worn-out heart. And if it is so, even among a crowd of eager helpers, what was it here in the little circle of dim light hedged in by darkness? Those two alone, so strangely contrasted. It had been a sharp, fierce transition, even to his experience, from, the ball-room full of lights and laughter; for Tom Kennedy was not of those whom use hardens. He was one of those to whom ever-widening vision discloses no clear horizon of dogmatic belief or unbelief, but a further distance fading away into the great, inconceivable, infinite mystery between which and him lay Life--Life, whose champion he was, whose colours he wore unflinchingly, counting neither its evil or its good. Life--nothing else. It is a queer mistress, taken so, but an absorbing one, and he scarcely slackened the rhythmic sweep of his arms even in his surprise at the figure which, after a moment's pause, stepped forward.

"You ought not to have come--it's no place for you; you had better go back and send me help; though I fear it is no use," he said authoritatively. For answer she slid her hands under the blanket he had thrown over the old woman's limbs, and began to rub them with a regularity matching his own.

"They would not help so well as I."

"You have done it before then?"

"Often--once all night long in cholera--a great friend--he died at dawn." Yet the memory which had brought tears many a time failed to touch her now, for her mind was intent on something else.

"Was she unconscious when you came?" she asked.

"Not quite. There were some letters on her mind, and after she had given them to me she went off--one often finds it so."

Then they were given! and she was too late! Yet stay! where could they be--in his coat, of course, which he had taken off and thrown aside on a chair for the sake of greater ease. Doubtless in the coat, for he must have had it on at first, when the old woman was still conscious.

"Perhaps hot water," she suggested, looking towards the kettle swinging over the dying embers, but he shook his head, and she stayed where she was. Ah! that was surely a change--a greyer tinge on the worn, wrinkled old face, the faintest suspicion of a greater rest in the slack limbs.

Dr. Kennedy paused, still holding the hands in his, and bent closer.

In the great silence, Mrs. Vane seemed to hear her heart beating at the thought--not of rest, but unrest; for something would have to be done soon, if done at all. Nay! done now, for with a half-impatient sigh the doctor gave up the struggle, folded the old hands upon the old breast, and walked away to stand for a moment or two looking moodily into the dull fire.

"It is always a disappointment," he said, turning to her again, and mechanically going over to the dresser, where in the interval, calculating on habit, she had set a bowl of water and a towel. And she calculated rightly. As with his back towards her he washed his hands, hers were in the pocket of his coat, and two packets of letters lay on the floor behind the chair, as if they had slipped out, before she went forward, coat in hand.

"Thanks!" he said, still in the meshes of habit; but then he paused, and for an instant her heart was in her mouth, even though she had her excuse ready should he discover the absence of the letters. It was only, however, a remembrance of her which came to him.

"I must call someone," he said; "and you should go home at once. It was good of you to come."

"Yes! you had better call someone. I will stay till you return--I would rather."

"You are not afraid?--Ah! I forgot you had lived your life in India. I shall not be more than ten minutes if I go up the hill to the shepherd's; that will be the quickest."

"Do not hurry on my account," she replied, quietly beginning to pile some fresh peats on the fire. The doctor, as he turned for a last look, his hand on the latch, told himself she was a plucky little soul indeed; and yet, had he known it, her heart was melting within her at the deed she was about to do, and her only strength lay in the thought that it was for Paul's sake; for herself she would scorn such meanness.

The candle flickering to an end gave her little time, however, for consideration, and almost as the door closed the letters were in her hands. One long, blue, red-sealed, intact, as she remembered it, the other an open envelope yellow with age, tied round with thread, and containing several papers. Her wits were quick, and even as she looked, the certainty came to her that if the blue letter asked questions the other might answer them; besides there was no necessity for breaking a seal; she shrank from that as yet. Even now her hand shook, so that as she drew out the contents of the smaller envelope, something fell from it to the ground. She stooped to pick it up just as the candle flared up in the socket, and by the sudden blaze of light she saw on the fallen paper a signature, and a line or two of print.

Great heavens! a marriage certificate--Ronald Alister Macleod! Who was he?--Paul's brother, of course.

These thoughts flashing through her brain did not prevent her starting, as the flickering light seemed to give a semblance of movement to Peggy's folded hands. The next instant she was in darkness, still holding the letters, and she knelt hastily to coax a flame from the peats, for time was passing, and she must know--must read. Then, in swift

suggestion, came the thought of substituting another packet; Dr. Kennedy would be none the wiser, and that would give her time. There must be other letters or papers at hand if she could find them. Oh for a light!--and yet people deemed such deeds to be deeds of darkness!----

As if in answer to her thought, a tongue of bluish flame leapt through the warmed peats, and by its light she found herself fumbling at the old bureau. For it was, as it always is at such times, as if fate were driving her against her will. Even as she acted, she felt that she had not meant to act thus--to search and pry! The old woman's cherished shroud, folded and frilled, made her shut one drawer hastily. And that was a step--a step surely, and yet not an atom of paper was to be seen anywhere! Ah! there was an old Bible on the shelf with blank pages. She had torn some out, and slipped them into the envelope none too soon, for Dr. Kennedy was at the door, breathless with running.

"I hurried all I could," he said; "for I felt I ought not to have left you--it was not fair. But they are coming, and then I will take you home." The words seemed to bring a remembrance, for he paused and began to feel in his pocket.

"What is it?" she asked, with a catch in her voice.

"The letters. I had them, certainly----"

"Perhaps they dropped--ah! here they are on the floor."

"Thanks." Then he paused, looking curiously at them. "I wonder why I fancied this one was tied with thread?"

Even in her anxiety she could not resist a smile at the keenness of the man; and how dull *she* had been, for there on the dresser stood two candles in brass candlesticks. If she had only noticed them she would have had time--would not, perhaps, have had this terror at her heart.

"It may have been tied," she said coolly; "and something may have dropped out when it fell. I'll light the candles and see." Then as she came forward with them in her hand, the deadly anxiety in her would brook no delay, and she asked, "Do you miss anything?"

"I do not know--I have not the least notion what it was supposed to contain; but this seems only to be an entry of births, marriages----Great heavens! are you ill?" For Mrs. Vane, who had stooped down on pretence of searching the floor, but in reality to hide her intense relief, was standing as if petrified, her face white as death.

"Nothing," she gasped, with an attempt at composure--"the strain, I suppose--it is foolish."

More than foolish, she told herself. It was perfectly insensate of her not to have remembered the custom of entering such items in the family Bible; and now she might unwittingly have given away the information she was attempting to conceal. If so, it would be better for her to know at once.

"Such registers contain many secrets," she began, when a look of curiosity in Dr. Kennedy's eyes made her pause.

"Secrets," he echoed; "why should there be any? though there is one in a way," he added, holding out the paper to her. It was the last entry to which he pointed, and it ran thus: "Jeanie Duncan, born 17th April, 18--; married----; died 20th August, 18--." "A sad blank that," he continued, adding, after a pause: "Perhaps the other letter may be more important."

Perhaps it might be, and Mrs. Vane, as she waited, felt her breath coming fast and short. It seemed an eternity of time until once more he held something out for her to read, and turning silently to where the dead woman lay, drew the sheet tenderly over the worn face. "The irony of fate, indeed," he murmured as she read:--

"DEAR MADAM,--We have to advise you of the death of our esteemed client, Mr. John Duncan, of Melbourne, Australia, and to inform you that under his will you, as his widow, come into property amounting to close on PS100,000."

Mrs. Vane's hand holding the letter fell to her side, and Dr. Kennedy's voice said gravely:

"Strange, isn't it, that the letter was never opened? All that money, and a pauper's death----"

The voice was his, but it might have been the accusing angel's for the effect it had on Violet Vane. She gave one step forward, her arms outstretched as if for pity, and with a little cry sank to her knees. Her head was pillowed on the old woman's breast when Dr. Kennedy, catching her as she fell, found that she had fainted, and anathematised himself as a consummate ass for taking her at her own estimation. Plucky as she was, the contrast had been too sharp. Life and Death--Poverty and Riches. The whole gamut of harmonies and discords lay in these words.

CHAPTER XIX.

Mrs. Vane being one of those heaven-sent pivots or jewels, without which the wheels of society are apt to come to a standstill, it was only natural that her sudden collapse, joined to the general depression which invariably follows on a country house entertainment, should have reduced the inmates of Gleneira to a condition of blank discontent. To tell truth, a large proportion of them had reasonable cause for a vague uneasiness, if not for actual discomfort, though Lady George wrinkled her high, white forehead in tragic perplexity over some of the resulting phenomena.

"Of course," she said at lunch, "I was quite prepared that the cook should give warning. They always do when they have worked hard, and, really, the supper left nothing to be desired; besides, it is an empty form when we are all going away next week. But why the housemaid should want a new set of brushes *to-day*, when she knows I have to send to Glasgow for them; and why Ean, the boy--such a good-looking boy, too--who cleans the boots, should demand an immediate rise in wages, I cannot think."

"What's enough for one ain't enough for two," broke in Eve from her sago pudding, with an indescribable twang and a semi-sentimental air. "Mary's going to marry him; he asked her in the boot hole when the piper was playing the 'Blue Bells of Scotland' in the kitching. The thought of her 'ighland laddie bein' gone was too much for her feelinks, so she accepted him, and he gave her a kiss."

"Eve!" cried her mother, in horrified accents, "don't say such things."

"But it's true, ducksie mummie," retorted the young lady, unabashed. "Mary said so. We heard her telling nurse, didn't we, Adam?"

"Yes, we did, Evie; and nursie said----"

"Paul!" cried Lady George, in desperation, "you might give the children some of that trifle before you; it won't hurt them once in a way. And I really think it was too bad of the Hookers to bring the piper to the ball, after my making such a point of his not coming to the play. I call it most unneighbourly."

"My dear Blanche," protested Paul, "what is the use of being a rich Highland proprietor if you don't have a piper, and what is the use of having a piper if he mayn't play at functions? You agree with me, don't you, Miss Woodward?"

Alice, looking dainty in the elaborate simplicity of a Paris *batiste*, agreed with a smile, as she had learnt to do as a matter of course whenever he chose to make these little appeals for sympathy, with their underlying suggestion of a common future. He was really very handsome and charming; everything a girl could desire in a husband.

"It is all very well for you to talk of functions," continued his sister, in aggrieved tones, "but the question is, what is a function? Marriages, of course, and, I suppose, funerals; but that reminds me. We really must have that projected picnic to the old burying-ground this week. I want Mr. Woodward to see it, and he was talking of London this morning."

The end of the sentence was prompted by that desire of the hostess to see her team of guests working fairly together for their own good, which Lady George felt to be a part of her duty, and the guest thus challenged had not opened his mouth since he sate down, except to fill it with cold beef and pickles, which he swallowed gloomily, like a man who, having missed his connection, is trying to while away the time before the next train in the refreshment room.

"You are very kind," he said, in sepulchral tones, "but the method in which Her Majesty's mails are delivered--or rather not delivered, in this place, renders it necessary that I should return at once. Just before lunch I received a letter which, I give you my honour, had been mislaid in the post-bag--a most important letter--a--a most---- However, as I was to have told you after lunch, I--I feel it my duty--but, of course, this--er--will not make any change in--in plans."

He glanced comprehensively at his daughter, and Paul Macleod, seated at the bottom of the table, felt as if the guard had come into the refreshment room and said, "Time up, gentleman!" The closing scene of the comedy was close at hand, and though he was quite prepared for it, he still objected to the *force majeure* which compelled him to go through with it; just as he objected to that other restraint which the knowledge of his absurd feeling for Marjory brought with it. The whole position irritated him to the last degree, and in one and the same breath he told himself that he wished the business were over, and that it had never begun. And yet, when he and Alice, in strolling round the

garden together, found themselves among the orange blossoms, he grew quite sentimental. The heavy perfume and, artificial atmosphere seemed to suit the growth of his physical content. Then, courteous by nature to all women, he had already felt that this girl had a stronger claim on his consideration than others, and this feeling produced just that calm, continual attention which suited her lack of sentiment. There was nothing in it to disturb her placidity or shake the quiet conviction that in deciding on Gleneira and its owner she was distinctly doing her duty by everybody, herself included. For Jack had apparently acquiesced in her decision; at least, he wrote quite cheerfully from Riga. So she listened contentedly to the covert lovemaking which long experience had made so easy to Paul Macleod, provided his companion had a decent share of good looks. In fact, one of his chief causes of irritation in regard to Marjory was that he never had the slightest desire to flirt with her.

Meanwhile Mrs. Vane remained in her room by Dr. Kennedy's orders, who, to tell truth, was rather surprised to find how severe a shock her nervous system had sustained. When, in consequence of a little note saying that if he would so far forego his holiday as to take her for a patient, she would far rather see an old friend than a strange doctor, he had gone over to see her, he had found her far worse than he had expected. The truth being that she was in a fever of excitement to know whether he suspected anything, and to hear all the particulars of this strange bequest to poor old Peggy. If she had only known what the long blue envelope had contained, she would not have advised the delay in opening it, which had led to the poor old soul dying a pauper's death, dying with bitter thoughts in her heart of the world she was leaving. Mrs. Vane would have liked to tell so much to the doctor as a sort of salve to her conscience, but she did not dare to do this. There was a certain packet of letters locked away in her dressing-case which forbade her risking the least inquiry. Yet she could not refrain from asking if any other papers had been found which--which threw any light---

Dr. Kennedy, noting the nervous intertwining of her fingers, made a mental note of bromide for the prescription he intended writing, and then set himself quietly to tell her all he knew, just as if he were exhibiting another sedative. The somewhat romantic aspects of the case had evidently excited her imagination, and it would do her good to talk over it soberly.

"Then there were no other papers, after all," she said, with a sigh of relief. "You seemed surprised at the time, I remember, but now you are satisfied."

"I must be--no one could have taken them, and I certainly did not drop anything from my pocket when I went to fetch help, for I have been over the ground this morning. Besides, she only gave me two things--the envelope and something else. I certainly thought it was a bundle of letters, but I must have been mistaken."

"But there was no entry in the register, was there, which would account for old Peggy's anxiety that you should have it?" persisted Mrs. Vane, with a little hurry in her breath.

"None. Except that she had something on her mind always, I feel sure, regarding that unfortunate daughter of hers. She never behaved naturally to little Paul; and now, of course, it is doubtful if he will get the money. I must see the lawyers about it as I go through Edinburgh. If old Peggy had only lived to make a will---

Mrs. Vane rose from her pillow and looked him full in the face, with a startled expression.

"You mean she would have had the power to leave it to him."

"Yes, apparently she would have, to judge by the will. You had better lie down again, Mrs. Vane! So--quite flat, please."

He chose out the smelling salts unerringly, as if he knew all about such things, from the bevy of silver-topped bottles on the dressing-table, and when he saw her colour returning, went back with the same certainty, apparently, of finding sal volatile or red lavender.

"Chloral!" he said, turning to her quickly as he smelt at a bottle. "You mustn't take that, Mrs. Vane. I forbid it, and I expect you to obey orders."

A touch of her own airy, charming wilfulness showed on her face as she looked at him while he stood dropping something into a glass for her to take. "I won't--not while you are here."

"Nor when I am gone, I hope. It isn't worth it--Pauline."

She gave him an odd look, then buried her face in the pillow and began to sob. Inarticulate, hysterical sobbing

about Pauline--or was it Paul? Dr. Kennedy could not be sure.

"She is utterly upset; a case of complete nervous prostration," he said, as he was leaving, in answer to Captain Macleod's eager inquiries. "I don't wonder, for she works herself to death to make things pleasant for everybody. Don't let them worry her by going to sit with her, and that sort of thing. She is best alone. Or, if you could spare ten minutes or so this afternoon--I've told her to get up for a little change--she would like it, I know. She is very fond of you."

"We are such old friends," put in Paul, quickly. "And she has sate up with *me* often enough, God knows. I shouldn't be alive but for her. Of course, I will go."

"Talk of old times, then. It will make her forget the present, and that will be good for her."

So Paul went up with the afternoon tea tray and a bunch of jasmine, which he had been down to the garden to gather, and talked about old times in his softest voice, while Mrs. Vane sate and listened in the big chair by the window. And she cheered up so much under the treatment, that he sent the maid down for another plate of bread and butter.

It was very pleasant, but whether, as the unconscious suggester of the entertainment had said, it was good for her, was another matter, though, in a way, it relieved her nervous strain by making her more certain of what she was going to do. Of one thing there could be no doubt--the man who sate and talked to her, who forestalled her every want, must not suffer. Paul must be saved, somehow, and so, for the present, no one must know of that marriage certificate hidden in her dressing-case, which would, if it were genuine, give Gleneira to Peggy Duncan's grandson. Perhaps, after all, he would get his father's money, and if so, a hundred thousand pounds would be enough for anyone. Why should he rob Paul--her handsome, kindly Paul--of his birthright? Of course, in one way that would make matters smooth for her, since his engagement would certainly come to an end if he ceased to be a Highland proprietor. The Woodwards would, in that case, never hear of its being fulfilled. But it would give him such pain, and she was not selfish enough to gain her own pleasure at such a price, if it could be avoided. She was Paul's friend, his true friend, and she would take the responsibility of concealing this thing for the present; for ever, if need be. And then she gave up thinking, and took to dreaming of what life would be if they two lived at Gleneira. They would not be dull; men were never dull with her. He had not been dull that afternoon when they had sate and talked. Ah! how pleasant it had been, and surely to gain such content, both for him and for her, it was allowable to conceal those letters for a time--only for a time?

And while they were talking upstairs, Lady George had been entertaining a solitary visitor in the drawing-room, the rest of the party having gone out to take luncheon to the shooters on the hill. This was the Reverend James Gillespie--who had come with a strict attention to those trivialities of etiquette, which the Bishop had often assured him should be a distinguishing mark of those set up to teach the people--to inquire for the ladies after their fatigues. Now, Lady George *was* fatigued, hence, indeed, the fact that she had remained at home; and there is no doubt that she said, "Bother the man!" when first informed that the Reverend James was in the drawing-room. Then the love of posing came to her rescue. Here she was, alone, wearied out, unable to go forth and enjoy herself. What an opportunity for patient unselfishness! Besides, it was tea-time; she could have the children down and provoke that ardent admiration of her system which the Reverend James extended to everything at Gleneira.

"Tell nurse to let Miss Eve and Master Adam have tea with me," she said, as she swept downstairs. "I expect Master Blasius has not been a good boy; in fact, I am sure he hasn't, but he can have jam in the nursery. He will like that just as well."

Unfortunately, it is never safe for a grown-up to predicate the thoughts of a child. Perhaps, because something may strike the opening mind as novel, or desirable, which the mature one has tried and found wanting. Be that as it may, ten minutes after Adam and Eve had left the nursery spick and span, hand-in-hand, Blazes was captured for the fifth time on his way down the stairs in that curious succession of bumps and slides, which was his favourite method of progression. And the look of determination on his round, broad, good-natured face was not in the least shaken by nurse's vehement upbraidings.

"There ain't no use talkin' to 'im when he's like that," she said, aside to Mary; "and he ain't a bit cross or naughty--look at 'im smilin' be'ind my back--but my tea I must 'ave in peace an' quiet. So into bed 'e goes, tucked up without 'is nighty, an' a bit of sugar to suck. The joke of it'll keep 'im quiet a bit."

Apparently, it did, for he lay in the night nursery chuckling to himself, that "Blazeths wath a pore 'ickle beggar boy wif no thoes or 'tockings, an' no thirt to hith back," until nurse, sympathising with the sentimental Mary, forgot to be vigilant.

Meanwhile, Adam, in his green plush Vandyck suit, and Eve in a smock to match, were seated, with decorously still

tan legs, at the tea-table, eating thin bread-and-butter daintily.

"It is most gratifying," the Reverend James was remarking, in his most professional manner, "to--to see such good children as yours, Lady George. It is a lesson in the art of education."

"It is most gratifying to hear one's parish priest say so, Mr. Gillespie," she replied, with meek dignity; "but, as you know, I make it a study. I devote myself to them. I feel that one cannot too soon recognise the sanctity, the individuality of the soul, the human rights which these little ones share equally with us. Equally, did I say? Nay, in fuller measure, since they are nearer Heaven than we are--since they are pure and innocent, with better rights than ours to happiness."

The Reverend James cleared his throat. There was a flavour of unorthodoxy about the latter part of these remarks which, in the present position of spiritual authority to which Lady George had exalted him, he could scarcely pass over.

"It is a fallen humanity we must not forget, my dear lady," he began; "these children----"

Lady George's maternal pride flashed up; besides she was beginning to get a little tired of the Reverend James.

"I see very few signs of fallen humanity about mine," she interrupted.

"But, my dear lady, you must remember also that your children have privileges--they are baptized and regenerate--they are not in a state of nature--Good Heavens, my dear lady! what is the matter?"

The Gorgon's stony stare was genial in comparison with poor Blanche's look of petrification.

"Blasius!" she cried, starting to her feet, "go away! go away at once."

But Blasius had no such intention. He advanced with a confidential nod to his mother, a perfect picture of sturdy, healthy, naked babyhood; beautiful in its curves and dimples.

"Blazeth's a pore 'ickle beggar boy wif no thoes or 'tockings or---- Oh, mummie! that tickles awful!"

The mellow chant ended abruptly, for Lady George had dashed at him with an Algerian antimacassar, and now held him in her arms, trying hard to be grave. She might have succeeded but for the Reverend James's face of bland concern. That finished her, and she gave up the struggle in a peal of laughter, in which her companion tried to join feebly.

"Bring Master Blasius' flannel dressing-gown, please," she said, when nurse, full of explanations and excuses, flew in in a flurry; "that and the antimacassar will keep him warm, and he can have his tea with me."

This incident, however, made it quite impossible for her to continue the role she had been playing before. How could she? with Blasius huddled up on her lap, eating bread and jam between his attempts to count his bare toes; an arithmetical problem which he insisted on solving, despite her efforts with the antimacassar. Not that the necessity for change mattered, since she had a variety of other parts to fall back upon, and so, being slightly bored by the Reverend James's failure to respond, and evident disposition to remain the spiritual director, she assumed that of Great Lady and Helper-in-General to her world. In which character, she gave it as her opinion that all parish clergymen should be married--if only in order to make them understand children, and grasp the true bearings of the education question.

Whereat he blushed violently, and five minutes afterwards had confided his hopes regarding Marjory to his hostess's sympathising ears. Nothing could be more suitable, she told him; in fact, the idea had occurred to her before, and she had no doubt that he would bring his suit to a successful issue. Only, as a woman of the world who had seen more of life than he had, she would advise a little boldness, a trifle more self-assertion. His position, she said, was really an excellent one on the whole, and she need hardly say that both she and her brother would welcome Mrs. Gillespie as one of themselves.

So, with a complete reversal of their mutual positions, they parted, and the Reverend James as he walked home, full of blushes and budding hopes, told himself that since Lady George agreed with the Bishop it was time he bestirred himself. The picnic at the old burying-ground would afford him an excellent opportunity of proposing, and if he made up his mind definitely on that point, it would make him less nervous.

So when he reached home he went to the calendar of the daily lesson, which hung by his bed, and ticked off the five days remaining to him, just as schoolboys tick off their holidays. Five days--and then--yes! then he would ask Marjory to marry him.

CHAPTER XX.

A morning in late September on a Highland loch. How good it is to be there! The centre just rippled with crisp waves, while shorewards the rocks show mirrored clearly in the smooth water, each bunch of russet bracken or tuft of yellow bent almost more brilliant in the reflection than the reality. The hills free from haze, standing like sentinels, solid and firm; the wild cherry leaves aping the scarlet of the rowan berries, the birch trees beginning to drop their golden bribe into the still, emerald laps of the mossy hollows, as if seeking to buy the secret of perpetual summer.

A scene where it is meet to put off the travel-stained shoes which have borne our feet along the trivial round, the common tasks of life, and go back to the bare feet of simple pleasure. The pleasure of children on the seashore, of young lambs in a blossoming meadow.

Yet there was an air of conscious effort, a virtuous look of duty on many of the faces which assembled at the boat-house in order to be ferried over to the other side of the loch, whence the ascent to the old burying-ground was to be made.

The shadow of coming separation lay upon most of the party; on none more than Tom Kennedy, who had filched a few extra hours of Marjory's companionship from the Great Enemy by scorning the mail cart in favour of a solitary walk over the crest of Ben Morven to the nearest coach, the place settled on for the picnic being so far on his way. And she, though all unconscious of the keen pain at his heart, felt vaguely that she would miss the touch of his kind hand, the sound of his kind voice more than ever now, now that it seemed the only thing remaining of the old calm confidence. Lady George was a prey to a thousand cares, beginning with the lunch and culminating in the certainty that some one of the three children--whom her husband had insisted on bringing--would be drowned; just at the last, too, when she had brought them safely through all the dangers of Gleneira, for they and their nurse were to start by the early boat next morning. But the day was indeed to be a fateful one, for was not this Paul's last chance of speaking to Alice? and did not Mrs. Woodward, for all her conspicuous calm, show to the watchful eye that she also was aware of the fact? Paul himself showed nothing; but, then, he was always exasperatingly cool when a little touch of excitement would, on the whole, be pleasing.

But of all the faces that of the Reverend James Gillespie displayed the sense of duty most clearly, and what Paul lacked in animation he made up for in sheer restlessness, since the time had come when he must carry out his intention and ask Marjory Carmichael to marry him. If only because it would be advisable to set up house at the November term, when they would have a chance of furnishing cheaply and of getting a good servant. So he wandered about in a fuss, alternately trying to make an opportunity, and then flying from it, until Paul, always observant, began to wonder what was up, and then, chancing upon one of the bashful lover's bolder attempts, swore under his breath at the fellow's impudence. Tom Kennedy was a gentleman, and Marjory, with her iceberg of a heart would be happy enough in his keeping by and bye; but this rampant, red-faced fool! And then he laughed, thinking suddenly, causelessly, of a certain little face, looking very winsome despite its weariness, which would have laughed too; for Mrs. Vane had somehow failed to rally from the shock of old Peggy's death with her usual elasticity, and was still in her room visible only to a favoured few, Paul amongst the number. Only that morning she had looked at him with her pretty, quizzical eyes and met his offer to escort her so far on her southward journey with the remark that by that time he would no longer be his own master.

And it was true. Before he rowed across the loch again his future would be settled, he would be Alice Woodward's Highland proprietor.

"Your left, please, Miss Carmichael," he said, giving stroke with a longer swing; "there is a nice, comfortable landing-place just beyond the white stone, and I hate getting my feet wet, even in helping ladies to keep theirs dry."

"But we shall miss----" began Marjory.

"Do as you're bid, my dear," put in Will Cameron, resignedly, from the bow; "haven't you learnt by this time that the laird knows where he wants to steer and sticks to it? After all, it saves a lot of trouble to others."

"Right you are!" assented Paul, gaily; "your left, please; not so much as that; thank you! I've no desire to find the sunken rocks."

The words were light, and a boat-load of people were listening to them; yet Marjory, guiding the tiller ropes, felt

that they were spoken for her ear alone; that she and Paul were face to face, as they so often were before his future, and the fact annoyed her. Yet, as they stepped out on the little causeway of rock jutting forward like a pier, the waves blab, blabbing upon its sides, reminded her of the evening when she had sat listening to them and Paul had come along the shore behind her, like another St. Christopher, bearing the burden of the world's immortality--its childhood.

"Tom," she said, in a low voice, turning to him in swift appeal, why she knew not, "let us get away from all this; we might go along the point and look for clams, as we used to do. Remember, it is the last I shall see of you; so don't talk about manners and being wanted; don't think of what other people think."

She spoke petulantly, but there were sudden tears in her eyes. Yet as they moved off together neither of them realised that a fateful moment had come and gone; that the trivial words covered an unconscious revolt of one side of her woman's nature against the other, and that if, instead of hunting clams like a couple of children, he had taken her hand and told her the truth of love and marriage, as he had seen it in life, she would have turned instinctively from the world's apotheosis of passion, and so have found a compass to guide her out of danger; but Tom Kennedy, being conscious that he himself was once more under the glamour which had come and gone many times already even in his sober life, could not find it in his heart to decry it utterly. So they stalked clams instead, advancing on tiptoe over the wet sand with eyes alert for every sign of an air-hole, and then pouncing like a cat on a mouse to seize the collapsing tube before it sank down, down, into the depths of gravel where even finger nails could not follow it. And to them, as they laughed and hunted, came the Reverend James, restless as ever, yet showing to advantage in a sport which he had practised from his barefoot childhood.

It was good to see his fair, florid face come up red with smug triumph from each dive as he added another clam to the heap, until Marjory forgot everything else in emulation, and Tom Kennedy, smiling at her eagerness, sat down to a cigarette beside Lord George, who, engaged in the same business, was watching the children paddle in the shallows.

A silent, yet sympathetic audience were these two men of middle age, smiling to themselves over the gay voices and childish sallies. Over Eve's eleventh ineffectual attempt to swallow an oyster which would have been successful if Adam hadn't made her laugh; over Marjory's indignant claim to a clam, which, during the dispute, disappeared for ever. Smiling, too, over Blasius' solemn face as he informed daddy that there was a "big crawly wild beast down there wif wobbly legs, and Blazeths wanted daddy's hand. Blazeths wathn't afwaid, but he wanted daddy's hand."

The incoming tide was drowning the round brown heads of the boulders out on the far point, as those two red ones, so curiously alike, bent over the "wild beast wif wobbly legs," which Adam and Eve, with wide-eyed superiority, said was nothing but a crab, a tiny crab! A heron, driven from its last inch of seaweed, flapped slowly across the bay, its trailing feet almost touching the water, and the sea-pyots circled screaming round the invaders of their happy hunting-ground. In the bend of the bay beneath a clump of alders showed a cluster of gay dresses busy about a tablecloth, and above them, in wooded curves merging into sheer slopes of rock and bent, rose Ben Morven. Half-way up, right in the open, a single holly tree, like a black shadow, marking the turn to the old burying-ground. Lord George came back from the wild beast with a sober face, and eyes still watching that little red head, bent now over a stick with which the wobbly legs were being boldly prodded to a walk.

"Queer start, children--aren't they?" he remarked confidentially, as he lit another cigarette. "I never thought of it before I married, give you my word. I suppose men don't--more's the pity." He gave a glance at his companion's face, and went on with more assurance: "You see no one ever talks of the paternal instinct; the women are supposed to have it all their own way, in the maternal business, and it's a shame, for a man needs that sort of thing more than they do. A woman can't be done out of her motherhood, but a man loses everything except a passing pleasure if he doesn't keep straight. Look at that boy, Kennedy! He is the very moral of me, and I had to whack him the other day. Well, I assure you, that I felt for the first time in my life that I was immortal--that I had a stake in time and eternity. Why don't they teach us this when we are young? Why don't they say something about it in the marriage service, instead of letting a couple of young fools undertake responsibilities for which they are not fit?"

Tom Kennedy shook his head. "Because we are not brave enough to face our own instincts and call a spade a spade. I served a few years in India once, and Hindooism is, I think, the only religion which sets personal feelings aside utterly; and there the idea has been overlaid with a horrible sensuality. Though on the whole it is not more sickening than our artificial sentiment. But it's a weary subject. Everyone talks of it, and yet no one cares to go back to the beginning; to give up the romance----"

His eyes wandered to Marjory, and he was silent. It was true. When all was said and done he craved for it.

"Well," remarked Lord George, judgmatically, after a pause, "there is something wrong, somewhere. Take my own

case. I married, as most fellows do, to please myself, without a thought of the consequences. And though, of course, some romance is necessary to make a man give up his club and undertake the responsibility of a boy like Blazes--Good Lord! and I promised his mother to keep him out of mischief!"

The last words being evoked by the sight of his youngest born prone on his back kicking madly in six inches of water, with the crab attached to his big toe.

"I wanted it to come a walk wif Blazeths," he wailed pathetically; "and it bited Blazeths instead, with a wobbly leg."

"I knew how it would be, George," said his wife, with patient dignity, when the culprits appeared before her. "But you are so self-confident. You are always undertaking responsibilities for which Nature has not fitted you. Give him to nurse, and cut the cucumber, do--there's a good boy."

Lord George shot a queer glance at Dr. Kennedy, and did as he was bid; as most people did when Blanche put on her superior manner.

"And, Dr. Kennedy," she continued, "I want you to do something for me. The Hookers have brought--no! I don't mean the piper, George, though they have brought him--not that it matters so much, for I have told John Macpherson to keep him in the 'Tubhaneer,' which is anchored in the stream, so he can do no harm, and the pipes will sound nice over the water--No, Dr. Kennedy, it is a German professor, very distinguished, but none of the Hooker party speak German. George will, of course, take him in tow by and bye, being in the Foreign Office; but just now, I thought--if you would not mind. Thanks, so much! it always looks well to have more than one linguist. At present, I have sent him to admire the view with Major Bertie, who says 'wunderschon' at intervals; but that can't last long, you know."

"My dear Blanche, you are as good as a play!" protested her husband, convulsed with laughter, at her unconscious mimicry, and even Dr. Kennedy found it hard to keep his countenance over her innocent surprise. Yet he was in no mood for amusement, and his face showed it when, lunch being over, he drew out his watch, and looked meaningly to Marjory.

"Is it time?" she asked, with a sudden sinking of the heart.

"Quite time," echoed Paul, coolly, from his place by Alice Woodward; "that is to say, if we are to be back to tea. It is a longer pull than it looks. Now, good people! who is for the burying-ground? You are coming, of course, Miss Woodward; I want you to see all the beauties of Gleneira, and the view is splendid."

The Reverend James, who had made up his mind that the descent, when Marjory should have lost her natural escort, would be the very time for his purpose, stood up manfully, and Major Bertie, under orders for the time being to the athletic daughter of a neighbouring laird, followed suit; but the rest, for the most part, declined what they stigmatised as a gruesome invitation. The pull was not only long but stiff, especially after lunch, and the view from below, enhanced by idleness and a quiet cigar, good enough for them.

So it was a small single file which, led by Paul, and brought up by John Macpherson with the whiskey flask in case of accidents, toiled up through the fern brakes, till half-way up the hill they struck the path, and paused for breath beside a spring roughly set in masonry. Beside it lay a pile of broken broomsticks, one of which Alice Woodward took up, intending to use it as a staff.

"It will be the staves they are using to carry the coffins," remarked old John, cheerfully, as he wiped his forehead with his coat sleeve; "it is breaking them they are when they come down, at the wishing well; and the lassies will come with them to wish for a jo--- Ay! ay! it will be what they were using for old Peggy that the leddy will be choosing, for it's new whatever."

Alice dropped the stick with a little shiver of disgust, and Paul moved on impatiently, while John, in reply to a query from the Major, went on from behind in garrulous tones, "Ou, ay! it is a job, whatever, but it's most the auld bodies like Peggy that's wantin' to come to the auld place, and they're fine and light; all but the old *bodach*, Angus MacKinnon, and by 'sunder he will be a job when his turn comes, for he's as big as a stirk. Ay! ay! as big as a stirk, whatever."

"There! is not that worth the climb?" cried Paul, with a ring of real pleasure in his voice which Marjory remembered so well on many a similar occasion, as they reached the twin holly trees--sacred to an older cult than that which had prompted the selection of a burial site whence Iona might sometimes be seen--and sank down upon the short thyme-set turf to admire the view.

"We are in luck!" cried Marjory, breathlessly. "Look! yonder is Iona."

Out on the verge, between the golden sea and the golden sky, lay a faint purple cloud no bigger than a man's hand.

"But why Iona?" asked Alice Woodward. "I mean why did they want to be buried in sight of it?"

"As a perpetual witness to their faith when they could no longer profess it, I suppose," said Tom Kennedy. "I like the idea."

"Would be rather difficult to carry out in Kensal Green, I should say," put in Paul, lightly. "It wouldn't do to bury by belief nowadays."

"But, surely," protested the Reverend James, "the Church custom of burying towards the east is strictly enforced in all English cemeteries." He might as well have kept silence as far as those three--who by chance were sitting together--were concerned, for their thoughts were far ahead of him.

"I don't know," replied Dr. Kennedy, absently, "I think a broad division would suffice. Those who hope--not necessarily for themselves personally--and those who don't. And most of us, who care to think at all, look 'sunward,' as Myers says, 'through the mist, and speak to each other softly of a hope.'"

"A mistake," broke in Paul's clearer voice. "It is better to thank with brief thanksgiving 'Whatever gods there be, that no life lives for ever----'"

"Finish the quotation, please," put in Marjory, quickly. "'That e'en the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea.' What more can anyone want?" She stretched her hand, as she spoke, to the glitter and gleam on the far horizon, and then turned with a smile to her companions. "And this is the sunniest spot in the whole glen--the first to get the light, and the last to lose it. I couldn't wish for a better resting-place."

"I should prefer the society of a cemetery," remarked Paul; "one's tombstone would not be so detestably conspicuous as it would be up here. Imagine it--Macleod of Gleneira, etc., etc.!"

"Why should you have a tombstone at all?" asked the girl, lightly. "I hate them; horrid, unsatisfactory things, full of texts that have nothing to do with you, yourself."

"Well," put in Major Bertie, who had just returned from a tour of inspection, "there's an epitaph up there, which, as the Americans say, wraps round everything, and makes discontent impossible--'To John Stewart, his ancestors and descendants.' That ought to satisfy you, Miss Carmichael; or you might compose your own curious derangement, like a fellow I knew in the regiment--classical sort of chap. He used to write the most touching things, and weep over them profusely. Got blown up in the Arsenal one day, and didn't need any of them. It's a fact, Macleod. Before your time. So, if you have a fancy that way, Miss Carmichael----"

"I'll note it in my will," she replied evasively; then, hearing a low voice beside her quoting the lines beginning, "He is beyond the shadow of night," she turned to Paul in quick surprise.

"I have the knack of reading your thoughts, you see, though I don't share them," he said quietly, adding in a lower tone: "And now, Kennedy, I hurry no man's cattle, but if you are to catch that coach you should be going, especially if Miss Carmichael is to see you to the top of the ridge."

The inexpressible charm, which was his by nature, born of a gracious remembrance of other folk's interest, was on him as he spoke, and contrasted sharply with the lack of it in the Reverend James Gillespie, who jumped to his feet in a moment in a desperate resolve.

"If you like, Miss Marjory, I will go so far, and escort you back."

Paul looked at him distastefully from head to foot, and Dr. Kennedy frowned, and set the suggestion aside decisively. "Thanks, Gillespie, but I have some business to talk over with my ward. Good-bye, Macleod, and thanks--for many kindnesses."

"Good-bye, and--and good luck! Miss Woodward, if you don't mind, I think we ought to be starting tea-wards. The downward path is easy, but there are plenty of beauties to admire on the way. I am always too much out of breath to do so on the upward path. Excelsior is not my motto."

Yet as they paused at the first turn he looked back towards the two figures cresting the rise, and remarked easily to his companion that Miss Carmichael was quite a picture on the hillside, and walked like a shepherd. And then, as easily, he proposed taking a *detour* through a nut wood, and so by a path he knew back to the beach.

"Alice would like a cup of tea, please; she is rather tired," he said to his sister, when they arrived there, and Lady George gave a little gasp of relief. "Oh, Paul! I'm so glad! What a dear boy you are!"

And about the same time Tom Kennedy and Marjory Carmichael stood side by side on a neck of land connecting one range of hills with another. The bog myrtle, crushed under their feet, sent an aromatic, invigorating scent into the air. The fresh cool sea breeze, which had gathered a heather perfume in its passage over the windswept moor, blew in their faces, and a golden mist cloud, growing above the rising shadow of the little valley on either side of them, shut out the world below. The only sign of life, save those two standing hand in hand, being a stone-chat twittering on a boulder, and a group of scared sheep, waiting with backward turned heads for the next movement to send them with a headlong rush and a clatter of stones into the mists below.

But none came. For those two stood silent for a time.

"Oh, Tom!" she said at last; "was there ever anyone so good, so kind as you are?"

He paused a moment, looking into her tearful eyes, and something of the earth earthy, seemed to slip from him, leaving him a clearer vision.

"You shall answer that question for yourself, some day, my friend," he said. "A year hence--two years--three years. What does it matter? *Auf-wieder-sehn!*"

"Auf-wieder-sehn!"

The echo of her own reply came back to her from the mist as she stood, after he had gone, looking into the valley.

Auf-wieder-sehn! Yes!--to such a tie as that there could be no other parting.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Reverend James Gillespie had a certain coarse fibre in him, which made it only natural that the snub direct he had received from Dr. Kennedy should make him more determined than he had been before on a *tete-a-tete* with Marjory. Consequently, much to her disgust, she found him solemnly waiting for her on a tombstone in the old burying-ground. The spectacle was an irritating one.

"Why didn't you go down with the others?" she asked crossly. "You know quite well I didn't need--anyone." A certain politeness prevented her employing the personal pronoun. Not that her lover would have cared, since he came of a class in which a certain amount of shrewishness in the wooed is not only considered correct, but, to a certain extent, propitious. And, although he had a veneer of polish on those points which had come into friction with his new world, love-making was not one of them. There he was, simply the cottier's son, full of inherited tradition in regard to rural coquetry. A fact which, at the outset, put Marjory at a disadvantage, since he refused to take the uncompromising hint, which she gave as soon as it dawned upon her what his purpose really was. And yet she could hardly refuse the man before he had asked her the momentous question. So it was with concentrated mixture of sheer wrath and intense amusement that she suddenly found him, as they paused by the wishing-well, on his knees before her declaiming his passion in set terms. The disposition to box his ears vanished in almost hysterical laughter, until the blank surprise on his face recalled her to the fact that the man was, at any rate, paying her the highest tribute in his power, and had a right to be heard. But not in that ridiculous position!

"You had better get up, Mr. Gillespie," she said peremptorily; "the ground is quite damp, and I can hear what you have to say much better when you are standing."

The facts were undeniable but the prosaic interruption had checked the flow of Mr. Gillespie's eloquence, and he stood red and stuttering until Marjory's slender stock of patience was exhausted, and she interrupted him, loftily:

"I suppose you meant just now to ask me to be your wife? If that was so----"

Her tone roused his temper. "Such was my intention," he interrupted sulkily. "I thought I spoke pretty plainly, and I fancy you must have been prepared for it."

Prepared! prepared for this!--this outrage on her girlish dreams. For it was her first proposal. What right had this man to thrust himself into her holy of holies and smirch the romance--the beauty of it all? It is the feeling with which many a girl listens for the first time to a lover.

"Prepared!" she echoed. "Are you mad? The very idea is preposterous!"

His face was a study. "The Bishop," he began, "and Lady George didn't seem to--to think----"

"Then I am to understand that you have consulted them?" she asked, in supreme anger; but his sense of duty came to his aid and made him bold.

"The Bishop, of course. Apart from his spiritual authority, he has claims upon me which I should be indeed ungrateful to ignore, and--and it meant much to be sure of your welcome."

The real good feeling underlying the stilted words went straight to Marjory's sense of justice, and made her, metaphorically, pass the Bishop. Besides, this little discussion had, as it were, taken the personal flavour from the point at issue and left her contemptuously tolerant, as she had been many and many a time over the Reverend James's views of life.

"And Lady George," she asked, categorically, magisterially; "has she also claims to be consulted?"

He coughed. "I rather think she broached the subject. She--she saw I loved you." And here the man himself broke through the clerical coating. "For I do love you. It isn't preposterous. I would do my best to make you a good husband, and--and you could teach the school children anything you liked."

"The Bishop wouldn't approve of that," she replied impatiently, yet in kinder tones. "Oh! Mr. Gillespie, it only shows how little you understand--how little you know. You would never have dreamed of such a thing, you and the Bishop, if you had had the least conception of what I really am. Perhaps I had no right to call it preposterous, but it is

impossible, utterly impossible, and he ought to have seen it."

This slur on his patron's acumen roused the young man's doggedness. "I do not see why it should be either preposterous or impossible, unless you love someone else."

Then she turned and rent him, a whole torrent of indignant regret and dislike seeming to loosen her tongue. "Love! Oh! don't dare to mention the word. You don't understand it--it is profanation--I don't know anything about it myself, but *this* must be wrong. Ah! Mr. Gillespie, for goodness sake let us talk about something else!"

"Then I am to understand that you refuse," he began.

"Refuse! of course I refuse." She felt she would have liked to go down among the whole posse of people--Paul Macleod among the number, for all she knew--who had deemed such a thing possible, and cry: "Listen! I have refused him, do you hear? I hate him, and you, too." But the next moment the very thought of coming amongst them, with him, as if of her own free will, seemed to her unbearable, and she stopped short in the headlong course downwards, which she had begun.

"I suppose you couldn't help it," she said, with a catch in her breath, "and it is very kind of you, of course, and I am obliged and all that; but if you wouldn't mind leaving me I should prefer it. I don't want any tea, thanks; all I want is to get home."

"I--I am sorry," he stammered, utterly taken aback.

"Oh, don't be sorry!" she interrupted; "it has nothing to do with you, I assure you. Only it is so strange at first. Good-bye."

She was off at a dignified walk, with her head in the air, in an opposite direction before he had recovered from his mingled surprise and consternation at the effect his proposal had had on her. At any rate, she had not been indifferent, and this thought bringing a certain consolation with it, he made his way down to the picnic party, and was soon recovering his equanimity over scones and jam.

Marjory, on the other hand, felt her indignation grow as she hurried along, regardless of briars and brakes, to the shore beyond the Narrowest, where, out of sight of the others, she might hope to find a boat which would ferry her across the loch.

She found one, but hardly what she desired, since, as she made her way through the alder brakes to a projecting rock, she saw the "Tubhaneer" lying close in, with Paul Macleod and Alice Woodward in the stern, while her brother and two of the children were lolling about in the bows. They had been amusing themselves by tacking lazily about in the slack water.

She would have beaten a quick retreat had not Paul's eye been quicker and a swift turn of the rudder shown her that she was observed.

"Oh, don't trouble," she called, "I only want to get across, and I'll find one of the rowing boats about, I expect."

"They are above," he called back; "the tide is running out fast now, so I sent them to the upper bay. Just step on the further rock, if you can, and I'll run her up to it for a second."

There was something in the easy familiarity and decision of his manner which always soothed her into reasonable compliance, and the next minute she found herself apologising to Alice Woodward as the bellying sail slanted them across the loch.

"Oh, Alice won't mind," said Paul, cheerfully; "she likes sailing, don't you, Alice?"

Marjory looked at them, as they looked at each other, and was silent.

So that was settled. And that again was Love. Love and Marriage! What a ghastly farce it was when you came close to it!

"I'm sorry Kennedy has gone," remarked Paul, with his eyes on her face; "he is one of the best fellows I ever met. We shall have to tack, Sam; the tide is too strong."

Even so; the uncertain breeze failing ere they reached the slack water, they missed the landing-stage by a few yards and drifted into the shallow, seaweedy bay below. But Paul was over the side, knee-deep among the boulders, ere Marjory could expostulate. "Steady her a bit, Sam, you can get a grip on that oarweed. Now then, Miss Carmichael, if you please; I'm a duffer at steering, but I can lift you across easily, if you'll allow me--thanks."

She would have preferred to wade but for the opposition it would have provoked, and when, after a few slippery strides, he set her down on the shingle, turned to go with the briefest of acknowledgments.

"Wait a bit, please," he said, quietly. "Alice, I must see Miss Carmichael past the gate. MacInnes' bull is loose, and he isn't always quite canny. I'll be back in a minute. Keep the helm in, Sam, and don't let her drift; the current runs like a mill race round the point."

They were already well over the soft, sea-pink set turf; Marjory walking fast, with heightened colour.

"There is really no need for you to keep Miss Woodward waiting," she said impatiently. "I am quite accustomed to take care of myself."

"Alice will not mind."

Alice! Was he so eager for her to realise the new position that he must needs enforce the knowledge of it upon her in this fashion?

"I am glad Miss Woodward does not mind. I should."

"I am perfectly aware of that--you have not her philosophic acquiescence in the inevitable. It is a pity, for you fret yourself needlessly over people--who are not worth it."

Was he not worth it? The thought made her walk faster, until a sudden cry from behind made her companion pause and look back hastily.

"Good God! they'll be on the rocks," he cried, as, without an instant's delay, he dashed across the sward down to the shore, followed closely by Marjory, whose heart throbbed with sudden fear as she realised what had occurred. The boat which they had left safely in the backwater a minute before, was now racing down the stream with sails full set. How this had occurred was another question, which could not then be answered. Possibly Sam, proud of his new seamanship, had proposed a sail. Anyhow, there they were in the stream, and even without knowledge of that sunken shelf of rock half a mile further down the curve, over which the water rushed in a fall at this time of the tide, the young man sufficiently grasped the danger of the situation to be doing his best to lower the sail again. But the rope had kinked in the pulley, and the sudden discovery that he had forgotten to re-ship the rudder--which Paul had removed in order to bring the boat closer into shore--completed his consternation, rendering him absolutely helpless. All this Captain Macleod took in as he ran, and ere Marjory had reached him he had kicked off his boots and flung coat and waistcoat aside to free himself for the sharp, short struggle with the racing tide, in which lay his only chance of reaching the boat. Then he waded breast high in the slack water, and bided his time. It needed quick thought and quicker decision to seize the exact moment when, by one supreme effort, he could hope to succeed; and yet Marjory, watching with held breath, felt a wild rush of exultation, not of fear, as with one splendid stroke he shot far into the current. Swimming has always an effortless look, and the sweeping stream, carrying him down, remorselessly aided the illusion, so that not even Marjory, with her knowledge of the tide, guessed how nearly Paul Macleod's strength was spent as his hand touched the gunwale. But touch it he did, and the next moment, with Sam's help, he was aboard and busy at the sail, while Alice Woodward, deeming the danger over, began to cry helplessly, and even Marjory breathed again. Only for a moment, however; the next, though the sail was down, she realised that the boat was still in the current, and that Paul was vainly trying to tear up a thwart. The rudder! the rudder must have gone adrift in Sam's clumsy efforts to ship it!

Then they were no better off than before--nay, worse! since they were nearer those unseen rocks, and he--*he* was in danger now.

What was to be done? The thought was agonising as, scarcely knowing why, she kept abreast of the drifting boat, stumbling over the boulders, slipping on the seaweed, unable to see, to think, to do anything save listen to the ominously rising roar of the water which just beyond the turn fell in a regular cascade over that black jagged shelf of rock.

Ah, those helpless children! and Paul! She must do something--try to do something. And then on a sudden it came

to her, as such things do come, as if they had all been settled beforehand clear and connected. At the last spit of land, not fifty yards above the fall, a streak of sand bank, capped by a pile of boulders, jutted out. If she could cross the dip and reach them! The herons used to sit there till well on to half-tide, and once she and Will had found oysters. The trivial thoughts came, as they will come in times of stress, flashing through the brain without obscuring it. Even as she thought them, her mind was busy over the one certainty, that somehow she must give help! By cutting across the next grassy curve she would be there in time. They might think she was deserting them. What then? If she could succeed even so far, *he* would know that it was not so--*he* would understand that she meant to be nearer--nearer.

He did; and a great glow of pride in her pluck came to him, when, as the boat swept round the curve, he saw her floundering, half swimming towards the boulders, and at the sight bent quickly for a coil of rope. But she had not thought of that--her one impulse having been to get nearer.

And now she is as far as she can go. Sheer at her feet, sliding among the stones, is the stream--below her is the roar and rush of the fall, save to her left, where it shelves to an eddy--above her is the boat drifting, drifting, more slowly now, for the shelf of rock backs the water a little. Then for the first time she realises what is to be done, for there is Paul at the bows with the coil poised in his hand.

Of course! that was it! that was it!

She dug her heels into the crevices of the boulders as she stood knee-deep among them, and kept her eyes upon his face.

"Now!"

As the cry left her lips, something like a black snake shot out through the air and flung itself across her breast, stinging and almost blinding her with pain; but there was no time for pain--no time! To seize it, bend it round the nearest boulder, and so twice round her waist with a loop through across her arm, took all her thoughts, all her strength, till, with a slow rasping noise of the wet rope slipping on stone, the strain began and the knot grew tight. Tight--tighter--then a slip--then tighter again.

Pain--yes, it was pain. My God! what pain. Ah! another slip. But Paul--was that a knife he had in his hand? No! No! that should never be; there should be no more slipping even if she drowned for it. With more of sheer obstinacy than courage she flung herself sideways in the water among the rocks. So, with her whole body wedged in behind the two boulders, there could be no more slipping. There could be nothing more but life or death for both of them.

And it was life. Paul Macleod, standing knife in hand, ready to cut the rope, felt the claim of her pluck to fair play, and paused. She should do this thing if she could! And even as the decision came to him, came also the knowledge that she had done it, as, with a sidelong sway the boat brought up and drifted into slacker water.

Five minutes after he was untying the knot and binding his wet handkerchief round her bruised arm.

"Salt water," he said, a trifle unsteadily, "is the best thing in the world for bruises, and you are more bruised than hurt, I fancy. No! Blanche," for Alice Woodward's shrieks had by that time attracted plenty of help, and the boats had come over in hot haste from the other side; "don't fuss over Miss Carmichael with sal volatile and salts. She doesn't need it. But we are both wet through, and if she is wise she will walk home with me at once. It is better than waiting for the carriage."

"Yes, please," she replied, catching eagerly at the chance of escape from the general excitement and gratitude. "Indeed, I would rather, Lady George; I am not a bit hurt, only, as your brother says, wet through, so I had better get home at once."

They started off together at a brisk pace, but silently, until as they topped the nearest rise, the chill evening wind striking through her wet garments, made her shiver. Then he held out his hand to her suddenly, with a smile.

"Come! let us run. It will take off the stiffness and keep us both warm." So hand in hand, like a couple of children, they ran through the autumn woods, startling the roe deer from the oak coverts, and the sea-gulls from the little sheltered bays. Hand in hand, while the shadows darkened and the gold in the west faded to grey. Warm, human hand in hand, confident, content in their companionship, and seeking nothing more than that confidence, that content.

"I don't think you'll take cold," said Paul, with the blood tingling in his veins, and his breath coming fast.

"I don't think I shall," she laughed.

CHAPTER XXII.

But the remembrance of that thoughtless run through the darkening woods seemed incredible--to the girl, at least--when next morning her companion in it came down, as in duty bound, to inquire after the result of her wetting, for he was palpably conventional and commonplace. Partly because Lady George accompanied him, eager to renew her protestations of gratitude, and partly because it was his way whenever he had made any special departure from the ordinary line of conduct, which he laid down for himself. This evident artificiality had the effect of producing the same sort of unreality in Marjory, so that the only straightforward part of the interview came from Lord George, who, with an odd little quake in his voice, thanked her for the fact that Blazes was at the present moment rehearsing the scene in the nursery.

"You should see the little beggar," he said. "Pon my word he doesn't seem to have missed a single detail. Has Sam to the life, and we have been obliged to forbid Alice's screams; they were heard all over the house."

"And what does he say was his own part in the business?" asked Marjory. "All I remember is a face--very like yours, Lord George--with great wide eyes, while Eve and Adam were hiding theirs."

Lord George gave another odd little sound between a laugh and a sob. "He says he sate still and swore, like Uncle Paul!"

"I'm afraid I did, Miss Carmichael," confessed the culprit, with a flash of the old manner; "but really, the tangle that young idiot had got things into, and stramash----" He turned to the window with a frown, and looked out. "You are the heroine of the hour, I see," he added cynically. "There is the Manse machine, with your two devoted admirers in it, come to congratulate you. Blanche, if you have induced Miss Carmichael to dine with us to-night--our last night--we had better quit the court. By the way, Mrs. Vane desired me to say, Miss Carmichael, that she did not intend to leave Gleneira without seeing you again; so, as she is not well enough to come to the Lodge, you may be induced to take pity on her."

The covert implication that some such inducement was necessary to overcome her reluctance, stung the girl's pride, without her recognising the cause of it, and she accepted the invitation hurriedly, telling herself she was glad it was the last, and that after to-morrow she could return to the old peaceful days. The thought made her turn with a quick expansion of face and manner to the two old men who advanced to meet them, as she accompanied Lady George to the garden-gate. Two old men almost tremulous with pride and delight.

"*Tanto fortior tanto felicior!*" cried the little Father, his fresh, round face beaming with sheer content.

"So, so, young lady! we have heard the story," put in the minister, full of courtly bows, in which those suggestions of a shapely calf had a fair field. "True is it that *Fortis cadere, cedere non potest*. Ah, Lady George! I have to express my great thankfulness that a dreadful bereavement has been spared you, under Providence, by our dear young friend's courage; or, rather, by her wisdom, since, without the quick thought, the former would have been useless. In this case, to paraphrase the saying, *tam Minerva quam Marte*, as even a soldier must allow."

"You will not find me backward, sir, in acknowledging either Miss Carmichael's wisdom or her courage," replied Paul, thus challenged; but his tone had that suggestion of a hidden meaning in it, to which Lady George objected, and rightly, as bad form; so she covered it by a remark upon the beauty of a boy, who stood holding open the gate.

"He is a little like that crayon portrait of you when you were a boy, Paul," she added cheerfully.

"He is old Peggy's grandson," replied Marjory, "and as he has been left to Dr. Kennedy's care, I am to look after him. He will be my first pupil."

"Then the likeness will soon disappear," said Paul, in a low voice, as he passed out.

"Perhaps he will be not the worse of that," retorted Marjory, in the same tone.

"I don't know. Men who are brought up by women are generally prigs."

"And women who have been brought up by men?" she asked sharply, not thinking of herself or her past.

"Are brave," he said quietly.

Brave! So he thought that of her. The one word was worth all the rest. And as she went up the path again with Father Macdonald on her right hand and Mr. Wilson on her left, all their fine phrases seemed forgotten in that simple acknowledgment. She would remember that always, even when the old peaceful days came back, as they would on the morrow. There was only the dinner at the Big House between her and that desirable consummation; but that was an ordeal without Tom, who was at home anywhere.

To tell truth, it would have been an ordeal to one less reluctant than Marjory; for a general air of uncertainty, like that of amateur theatricals when the prompter is best man, pervaded the party. Mrs. Woodward called her host by his Christian name with a manifest effort of memory, and when Sam ventured on a like familiarity with Blanche, her face betrayed her real feelings. Indeed, she took a private opportunity of confiding to Lord George her relief that it was only a one-night part, as she could not stand it much longer.

"Yet you condemn poor Paul to a life-long connection with that young bounder. Upon my soul! you women are queer creatures;" and the perversity of the feminine nature appeared to absorb him for the rest of the evening. Even Mrs. Vane, who ventured down to dinner for the first time, could make nothing of the ghastly function, so she retired immediately afterwards on plea of being tired, chiefly because she wished to have an opportunity of seeing Marjory alone, which she secured by bidding her in a whisper be sure and come to her room after she had said good-bye to everyone else.

Her departure reduced the drawing-room to flat despair.

"It is the sadness of farewell," remarked Miss Smith, part of whose contract was that she was to remain to the last and see nothing was forgotten; not even a decent show of sentiment.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow," murmured the Major under his moustache. He was the most cheerful of the party, since his flirtation had resulted in another week's grouse shooting with his charmer's father.

"Mr. St. Clare has written such a sweet thing called 'Good-bye,'" continued the Moth, appealing to the Poet. "He might recite it to cheer us up."

"I wonder how many poets there are who haven't written a piece on that subject," put in Paul, hastily, as Mr. St. Clare gave a preliminary cough, "and yet it will supply tons of agony to generations still unborn."

"There are forty songs of that name," remarked Alice, practically. "I wanted one for a friend, and the music man told me so."

Then the remembrance of that friend, a certain young fellow with a pleasant baritone voice, busy over tallow at Riga, gave her quite a pang of regret.

"Mostly trash, too," assented the Major; "Tosti's is the best, but even there one is all battered to pieces before the end."

"That is true," put in Marjory, eagerly. "You see, the poet begins by fine-drawing the agony, the composer follows suit, and the singer carries out the distortion. So in the third verse there is nothing for it but to 'kill the coo.'"

"I haven't heard 'Auld Robin Gray' for twenty years," murmured Lord George. "No one sings anything but German nowadays. German or comic operas."

"Miss Carmichael sings Scotch songs; I've heard her," said Paul from the skein of silk he was holding for Alice Woodward.

"Oh, do!" cried the Moth. "Something touching."

"Somethin' to cheer us up, you mean," put in Sam; "somethin' with a chorus, you know."

"Something old-fashioned," protested Lord George.

"Something appropriate to the occasion," suggested his wife.

"Something Miss Carmichael approves of," came from the skein of silk.

The girl stood by the piano for an instant, looking at them all with a touch of fine scorn in her face.

"I will do my best," she said at last, with a laugh. The next instant, with a crash of chords, her clear, fresh, young voice rang through the room in that gayest and saddest of songs:--

"A weary lot is thine, fair maid,
A weary lot is thine;
To pull the thorn thy brow to braid,
And press the rue for wine.
A lightsome eye, a soldier's mien,
A feather of the blue,
A doublet of the Lincoln green,
No more of me you knew,
My love,
No more of me you knew."

Paul's hands turning the skeins paused, his eyes were on the girl's face as, with a mixture of recklessness and regret, she went on--

"The morn is merry June, I trow,
The rose is budding fair,
But she shall bloom in winter snow
Ere we two meet again!
He turned his charger as he spake
Upon the river shore,
Said 'Adieu for evermore,
My love,
And adieu for evermore."

"What a heartless, unromantic, roving wretch!" remarked Lady George, in the pause which followed the refrain. "I hope he was jilted after all by the heiress; there generally is an heiress in these cases." Then, becoming aware of the possible indiscretion of her words, she looked at her brother hurriedly.

"In that case he married and lived happily ever afterwards; at least, that is what I should have done in his case. And I don't think he was so heartless, after all. He told the truth. It isn't as if he had sneaked away without saying good-bye."

Marjory rose from the piano with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"I must say good-night, at any rate, Lady George, and sneak up to see Mrs. Vane; for it is getting late, and you have all to be up so early."

Paul, standing at the door holding it open for her to pass through, was the last of the group to whom she had to give the conventional farewell.

"Good-bye," she said, feeling above her real regret a relief that this was the end.

"*Auf-wieder-sehn*," he replied. That was what Tom had said. As she ran upstairs to Mrs. Vane's room she was telling herself passionately that she did not want to see Captain Macleod again--that she would rather he went out of her life altogether, and cease to make her wonder at his changeful moods.

"*Entrez*," said the soft voice to her knock, and the next moment she felt herself in an atmosphere in which she had never been before. The semi-darkness of the pink-shaded light, the littered dressing-table, the soft perfume, the thousand and one evidences of an almost sensuous ease were to her absolutely novel. And the small figure, nestling in the armchair, so dainty in its laces and little velvet-shod feet. All that meant something she had never grasped before, something which attracted and yet repelled her.

"How pretty it is," she said, in sudden impulse, as her fingers stroked one of the soft folds almost caressingly. Mrs. Vane's hand went out swiftly, and drew hers closer.

"Don't, child! That does for me, not for you. So this is good-bye. You are not sorry?" Her eyes scanned the girl's

closely, and then she smiled. "If you are, you will get over it soon. That is the best of work. I often wish I had some--to make me forget myself."

"But you do work--you work harder than anyone I know, in a way. Why, to-night we were quite dull; so dull without you! Everyone missed you; and yet----"

"And yet? out with it, little one!"

"I was wondering if it was worth it?"

"Yes! if you have a craze to be admired, as I have. But I didn't ask you to come here in order to talk about myself. You would not understand me if I did. Pray Heaven you never may. So you have said good-bye to them all, and you are not sorry! That is well. Now, let me wish you good luck, and give you a word of advice."

"Twenty, if you like."

"Make the most of that luck--and *Alphonse*."

"You mean Dr. Kennedy?" asked the girl, stiffly.

"Dr. Kennedy. There are not many like him in this world."

"I doubt if there are any. At least, I have not met them," she replied, with a quick flush of impatience.

"I am glad to hear you say that. Good-bye, my dear, and forget us all as soon as you can."

"I shall remember your kindness--for you have been kind--all of you. Good-bye."

When the door had closed, Mrs. Vane leant back in her chair with a sigh of relief. That was over then, and, so far as she could judge, without harm to the girl. And now--now she could face the other problem. Perhaps there need be no harm there, either, but she must think--she must think. So in the softness, and the dimness, and the luxury, her face grew more anxious, more weary, until the memory of Marjory's words came back to her.

Was it worth it all? Whether it was worth it or not did not matter; the plotting and planning had become a second nature to her--she must think--she must think!

And Marjory, passing out into the calm cool of the night, gave a sigh of relief also. It was over; that strange life, so different from the future one which lay before her. Was she sorry? Yes! a little. No one could know Paul Macleod and not feel a regret at the thought of his future. Yet she was glad it was over despite that queer sort of numb pain at her heart at the thought of his unfailing kindness to her. And now she would never see him again, never---- A red star showed low down behind a turn in the rhododendrons, and a moment after Paul's voice said easily, as he threw away his cigar:

"You have not been long."

So it was not over! That was her first thought, and then came a quick flutter at her heart. Over! was not it rather just beginning for this--*this* was new. Her pride rose in arms against it instantly.

"I did not expect--" she began almost haughtily.

"Did you not? That was rather foolish of you. You expected me to let you walk home alone; but I think I know my duties; as a host, at any rate."

It was true. He did know them. There could not be two opinions as to his considerate courtesy to all. She admitted the fact to herself gladly, telling herself that it was quite natural he should see her home, though the possibility of his doing so had not occurred to her. Hitherto, of course, Tom had been with her; to-night she was alone. It was the usual thing; yet not usual, surely, that they should be walking fast through the darkness without a word, just as if they had quarrelled. What was there to quarrel about? Nothing. Not his engagement certainly, though he might think so if she kept silent on a fact which no one had attempted to conceal. Hitherto she had had no opportunity of alluding to it, but now there was no excuse. The merest acquaintance would be expected to take such an opportunity of wishing him good luck, unless--unless some personal motive prevented it. And there was none. How could there be? since Paul was surely welcome to do as he liked.

Yet, for a time, the crunch of the gravel beneath their feet as they walked on in silence was the only sound upon the cool night air. But the glimmering white of the Lodge gate nerved her to the effort.

"I want to congratulate you, Captain Macleod," she began, when he interrupted her quickly.

"Hush! If there cannot be truth, don't let there be falsehood between us."

It was as if a thunderbolt had fallen, piercing her ignorance. She stopped short, her pulses bounding to that strange new thrill in his voice which seemed to make her forget her surprise, her indignation. She had to steady her own tones ere she could reply.

"There has been no falsehood on my part."

"Has there not? Then there shall be none on mine. Marjory! I love you! Nay! you shall listen----" His outstretched arm barred her quick movement of disdain. "I shall not keep you long, but you must hear the truth. I've loved you from the beginning--I love you now--I feel as if I should love you always----"

She stood there as if she had been turned to stone, listening, listening, like a child to some fairy tale; and in the darkness a look that had never been there before crept to her clear eyes, and a quiver to her mouth.

"Yes! I love you; not only as most men count love, so that the touch of your hand thrills me, and the thought of your kisses is as heaven---- Don't shrink from the truth--you must face it sometime--why not now? It is so, and God knows it is no new thing to me. But this is new--that you are my soul--if I have one--Marjory! Marjory! Why have you made me feel like this?--why would you never see me as I really am?--why would you always believe me better than I was?"

His passionate questioning seemed to pass her by. She stood silent till, in the darkness, he seized her hands and drew her closer to him, peering into her face as if to read the answer there.

"For pity's sake don't look so kind, so sweet," he burst out vehemently, for even in the faint starlight he could see something of her eyes. "Tell me how vile I am--then I could go--then I could leave you! Listen to me, Marjory--" his voice grew calmer, and a sort of bitter entreaty came to its passionate anger--"I know quite well--I am certain that my only chance of living what you hold to be a worthy life lies with you, and yet I have renounced it--I do renounce it without a shadow of remorse. Is not that enough? You are my better self, my one hope of redemption, yet still I say, Adieu, my love, adieu, for evermore!"

And then the half-seen softness of her face seemed to madden him. "Before God you *shall* see me as I am. You *shall* understand."

His arms clasped her close, his reckless, passionate kiss was on her lips, and then----

Then he stood as it were before the tribunal which he had invoked--that tribunal of perfect knowledge, of blinding truth, in which alone lies the terror of judgment.

"Marjory!" The whisper could scarcely be heard. "Marjory! is it true? My God! is it true that you love me?" He still held her, but with a touch which had changed utterly, and his tone was almost pitiful in its appeal. "Marjory! why--why did I not know? Why did you hide yourself from me?"

"I did not know myself," she answered, and her voice had a ring of pain in it; "how could I know? But it would have made no difference--no difference to you."

The keenest reproach could not have hit him so hard as this instinctive defence of her own ignorance, her own innocence; it pierced the armour of his worldliness and went straight to that part of his nature which, even at his worst, held fast to life in a sort of veiled self-contempt.

"You are right; it would have made no difference, no difference to such as I am." Then in the darkness he was at her feet kissing the hem of her garment.

"Adieu, my love; adieu for evermore!"

The next instant the sound of his retreating footsteps broke the stillness, and she was alone.

Alone, with a smile upon her face--a smile of infinite tenderness for his manhood and for her own new-found womanhood, which tingled in each vein and seemed to fill the whole world with the cry, "He loves me! he loves me!"

So this was Love. This unreasoning joy, this absorbing desire to hap and to hold, to let all else slip by and be forgotten as nothing worth; to live for oneself alone--oneself, since he and she were one--one only!

Yes; she loved him like that. And he? The memory of his voice, the clasp of his hand, the touch of his lips came back to her in a rush, dazing and bewildering her utterly, so that she stretched her arms into the night and whispered into the darkness: "Paul, come back! you must come back and tell me what it means. Paul! Paul!"

But he was gone; and then the pity of it, the shame that he had left her came home to her, not for herself, but for him, and with a little short, sharp cry, such as will come with sudden physical pain, she turned on her way tearless, composed, half stunned by her own emotion.

When she had undressed she blew out the candle, and, kneeling by the window, pressed her forehead against the cool glass while she gazed unseeingly into the night.

So this was Love!--the Love which the poets called divine--the Love to which she had looked forward all her life. What did it mean? What was it, this feeling which had come to her unbidden, unrecognised? For now with opened eyes she understood that it had been there almost from the beginning; that it had been the cause of all her moods and his. The curious attraction and repulsion, the unrest, the desire to influence him. Ought she to have known this sooner? Perhaps; and yet, how could she when neither her own nature or her education had given her a hint of this thing? The Love she had dreamed of had been a thing of the mind, of conscious choice, and this was not. No! best to tell the truth--it was not!

As she knelt there, alone in her ignorance, not so much of evil as of the realities of life, she could yet see that this unreasoning attraction--though with her it could not but be indissolubly mixed up with something higher, something nobler than itself; something which craved a like nobility in its object--was yet in its very essence of the earth earthy.

Without that something what was it?

She was clear sighted was this girl, whose reasoning powers had been trained to be truthful; so she did not attempt to deny that Paul Macleod was not her ideal of what a man should be. That her whole soul went out in one desire that he should be so, and in a tender longing to help him, to comfort and console him, did not alter the fact. That desire, that longing, was apart from this bewildering emotion which filled the world with the cry, "He loves me! He loves me!" She loved him as he was; not as he ought to be.

As he was! And then her eyes seemed to come back from the darkness and find a light as she remembered those words of his: "It is not only as if I loved you as men count love."

Then he, too, understood--he, too, was torn in twain. A sense of companionship seemed to come to her; she rose from her knees and crept to bed. And as she lay awake the slow tears fell on her pillow. So this was Love! this bitter pain, this keener joy; but underneath his stress of passion, and her fainter reflection of it, lay something which might bring peace if he would let it, and the thought of this made her whisper softly:--

"Paul, I love you. Come back to me, Paul, and we will forget our love."

But up at the Big House he was cursing his own folly in yielding to the temptation of seeing Marjory home. Yet what had come over him? He, who for the most part behaved with some regard to gentlemanly instincts. What had he done? The memory of it, seen by the light of his knowledge of evil, filled him with shame. Well! that finished it. When she had time to think she would never forgive him. She would understand, and that look would fade from her face--that look which--- But she was right! Even if he had seen it before, it would have made no difference; he would have gone on his way all the same. Why had he ever seen it to give him needless pain, and be a miserable memory? The only thing was to forget it--to forget, not the love which thrilled him--that, Heaven knows, could be easily forgotten--but that other! Yes! he must forget it. That was the only thing to be done now.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Luckily, perhaps, for his determination to forget, a variety of causes combined to give Paul Macleod breathing space before he had, as it were, to take up the burden of his engagement with Alice Woodward. To begin with, he had to pay a visit on the way south, and the delights of really good partridge shooting are of a distinctly soothing nature. There is something fat and calm and comfortable about the stubbles and turnip fields which makes one think kindly of county magistrates and quarter sessions, of growing stout, and laying down bins of port wine. A very different affair this from cresting the brow of a heather-covered hill, with a wild wind from the west scattering the coveys like bunches of brown feathers, while the next brae rises purple before you, and another--and another--and another! Up and up, with a strain and an effort, yet with the pulse of life beating its strongest.

Then, when the North mail finally set him down at Euston, the Woodwards had gone to Brighton; and there was that going on in the artistic little house in Brutonstreet, which would have made it unkind for him to leave town and follow them, even if his own inclination had not been to stay and see what the days brought forth. For Blasius was ill, dangerously ill, and Lord George was a piteous sight as he wandered aimlessly down to the Foreign Office, and, after a vain effort to remain at work, wandered home again with the eager question on his lips, "Is there any change?"

But there was none. The child, after the manner of his sturdy kind, took the disease as hardy as it could be taken, and then fought against it as gamely. So the little life hung in the balance, till there came a day when the pretence of the Foreign Office was set aside, and Lord George sat in the nursery with his little son in his arms, an unconscious burden in the red flannel dressing-gown, which somehow seemed connected with so much of Blazes' short life. Blanche, almost worn out, stood by the open window holding Paul's hand--Paul, who was always so sympathetic, so kindly when one was in trouble. So they waited to see whether the child would choose life or death; while outside the people were picking their way gingerly through the mingled sunshine and shade of a thunder shower. It was so silent that you could hear the clock on the stairs ticking above the faint patter on the window-pane, almost hear the splash of the slow tear-drop which trickled down Lord George's cheek, and fell on Blazes' closed hand. And then, suddenly, a pair of languid eyes opened, and the little voice, mellow still, despite its weakness, said quietly:

"Ith's waining. Blazeth wants a wumberwella."

In the days following, if Blazes had wanted the moon, Lord George would have entered into diplomatic relations with the man in it, regarding a cession of territory; but the child, according to the doctors, wanted sea air more than anything else. So, naturally enough, they all migrated to Brighton, and, though he did not realise it, the general sense of relief and contentment pervading the whole party did much to make Paul Macleod feel the shackles bearable. Then Mrs. Woodward and Alice were at one of the big hotels, the Temples were in lodgings, while he, himself, had rooms at a golfing club, to which he belonged; an arrangement which gave everyone a certain freedom. Finally, as Paul discovered on the very first day, Alice showed much more to advantage on the parade, or riding over the downs, or putting on the green, than she had ever done at Gleneira.

"Oh, yes!" she said gaily, "I am a regular cockney at heart. I love the pavements, and I hate uncivilised ways. I know when Blanche told me she had to see the sheep cut up at Gleneira, I made a mental note that I wouldn't. I couldn't, for I hate the sight of raw meat."

"You bear the butchers' shops with tolerable equanimity," returned her lover, who hardly liked her constant allusions to Highland barbarism; "as a matter of fact, raw meat intrudes itself more on your notice in town than it ever does in the country."

"Perhaps; but then the sheep with the flowery pattern down their backs don't look like sheep, and as for the beef, why, you can't connect the joints with any part of the animal. At least, I can't, and I don't believe you can, either. Now what part of the beast is an aitchbone?"

Paul set the question aside by proposing a canter, and by the time that was over he was quite ready to be sentimental; for Alice looked well on horseback in a sort of willowy, graceful fashion, which made the pastime seem superabundantly feminine.

Still, the subject had a knack of cropping up again and again; and once, when she had excused herself for some aspersion by saying, good-naturedly, that it was a mere matter of association, and that she was of the cat kind, liking those things to which she was accustomed, he had taken her up short by saying she would have to get accustomed to

Gleneira.

"Shall I?" she asked. "Somehow, I don't think we shall live there very much. It is nice enough for six weeks' shooting; but, even then, the damp spotted some of my dresses."

"You are getting plenty of new ones at any rate," retorted Paul, for the room was littered with *chiffons*.

She raised her pretty eyebrows. "Oh, these are only patterns. I always send for them when I'm away from town. It is almost as good as shopping. But I don't mean to buy much now. I shall wait for the winter sales. They are such fun, and I like getting my money's worth--though, of course, father gives me as much as I want. Still, a bargain is a bargain, isn't it?"

Paul acquiesced, but the conversation rankled in his mind. To begin with, it gave him an insight into a certain *bourgeoise* strain in the young lady's nature, and though he told himself that nothing else was to be expected from Mr. Woodward's daughter--who derived her chief charm from the fact that her father *had* made bargains and got his money's worth--that did not make its presence any more desirable. And then he could not escape the reflection that *he* was a bargain, and that the whole family into which he was marrying would make a point of having their money's worth.

He would have realised this still more clearly if he could have seen one of the daily letters which Mrs. Woodward, with praiseworthy regularity, wrote to her lord and master in London, for it is a sort of shibboleth of the married state that those in it should write to each other every day whether they have anything to say or not.

"Alice," she wrote, "is so sensible and seems quite content. At one time I feared a slight entanglement with Jack, but Lady George has been most kind and taken her to all the best places, which is, of course, what we have a right to expect. By the way, there is an Irish member here--O'Flanagin, or something like that--and he declares the Land League will spread to the West Highlands. So you must be sure and tie up the money securely, as it does not seem quite a safe investment."

Mr. Woodward, on receiving this missive, swore audibly, asserting that the devil might take him if he knew of any investment which could be called safe in the present unsettled state of the markets! For his visit to Gleneira, where, as he angrily put it, telegrams came occasionally and the post never--had somehow been the beginning of one of those streaks of real ill-luck which defy the speculator. The result being that Mr. Woodward generally left his office in the city poorer by some thousands than he had entered it in the morning, and though he knew his own fortune to be beyond the risk of actual poverty, it altered his outlook upon life, and threatened his credit as a successful financier.

Nor did it threaten his alone; there were uncomfortable rumours of disaster in the air, which, in course of time, came to Lady George's ears.

"I do hope Mr. Woodward is not mixed up in it," she said to Paul, as she sate working bilious-looking sunflowers on a faded bit of stuff for the Highland bazaar; "but he was a little *distract* when he came down last Sunday, and he didn't eat any dinner to speak of--we dined with them, you remember."

"Perhaps I gave him too good a lunch at the club," replied her brother, jocosely; "besides, he wouldn't let a few losses spoil his appetite. He is well secured, and then he could always fall back on his share in the soap-boiling business."

"I was not thinking of him, Paul, I was thinking of you. You could not boil soap."

The fact was indubitable, and though her brother laughed, he felt vaguely that there were two sides to a bargain, and when his sister began on the subject again, he met her hints with a frown.

"I am perfectly aware," he said, "that Patagonians are dangerous, and Mr. Woodward knows it as well as I do."

"But he was nicked--that is how that city man I met at dinner last night put it--he was nicked in Atalantas also."

"If you had asked me, Blanche, instead of inquiring from strangers, as you seem to have done," interrupted her brother, with great heat, "I could have told you he was nicked, as you choose to call it, heavily--very heavily. He has been unlucky of late. He admits it."

"Good heavens, Paul! what are you going to do?"

"Nothing. He is quite capable of managing his own affairs."

"Don't pretend to be stupid, Paul! I mean your engagement."

"What has business to do with that?" he asked, quickly taking the high hand; but Lady George was his match there.

"Everything, unless you have fallen in love with her."

Home thrusts of this sort are, however, unwise, since they rouse the meanest antagonist to resistance.

"Have it so if you will. I am quite ready to admit that love has nothing to do with business. Honour has. I am engaged to Miss Woodward, and that is enough for me."

Lady George shrugged her shoulders. There was a manly dogmatism about his manner which was simply unbearable.

"My dear boy," she said, "if a man begins to talk about honour it is time for a woman to beat a retreat. Since you have such strict notions on the subject, I presume you have explained to Mr. Woodward the exact state of affairs at Gleneira? The estate overburdened, and not a penny of ready money to be had except by sale."

"I really can't discuss the subject with you, Blanche. Women never understand a man's code of honour on these points; and they never understand business."

She crushed down an obvious retort in favour of peace, for she was genuinely alarmed. So much so, that the moment she returned to town she went to see Mrs. Vane, thinking it more than likely that Paul might have confided something to her. She was just the sort of little woman in whom men did confide, and Paul was perfectly silly about her, though, of course, she was a very charming little woman.

Now, Mrs. Vane had heard the rumours of Mr. Woodward's losses before, and heard them with a glad heart, since the possibility of having to use those letters which were locked up in her dressing-case weighed upon her. But she had not heard them from Paul; had not seen him, in fact, as she had only returned from the country two days before, and had since been ill with fever.

Nevertheless, the very next afternoon, in obedience to a little note left at his club, Paul walked into her flower-decked drawing-room and gave an exclamation of surprise and concern at the white face and figure on the sofa.

"You have been ill," he said quickly; "why didn't you let me know before?"

"Only a go of fever; and I've danced all night long--some of the dances with you, Paul--when I had a worse bout, and no one found me out. Let me make you a cup of tea."

"Please not. I'll take one. Yes! I remember; that was our regimental ball, and there were so few ladies; you never spared yourself, Violet, never knew how to take care of yourself."

"Perhaps not. I must pay someone to do it, I suppose, like other old women; for all my friends are deserting me. Two married last month, and I hear from Mrs. Woodward that your wedding-day is fixed."

"I was not aware of it," he replied, with a frown; "but if it were, I fail to see why I should desert--my friends."

Mrs. Vane laughed. "My dear Paul! you are something of a man of the world; did you ever know of anyone like you keeping up a friendship with anybody like me after his marriage? I mean out of the pages of a French novel. Certainly not; and I am quite resigned to the prospect. I suffered the blow in a minor degree when you left India. Besides, I should not anyhow see much of you if you lived at Gleneira; and you will have to do so, won't you, till Mr. Woodward recovers himself?"

Paul stirred his tea moodily. "So you have heard, too," he said distastefully.

"Everybody has heard, of course. Such things are a godsend at this time of the year. Lady Dorset was quite pathetic over your bad luck yesterday, but I told her no one would think the *worse* of you or Miss Woodward if you were to think *better* of it, since poverty--even comparative poverty--would suit neither of you."

The spirited pose of her head, as she spoke, the bold challenge of her tone, were admirable.

"You said that! Would you have me break my word because my promised wife had a few pounds less than I

expected?"

She laughed again. "How lofty you are, Paul! You caught that trick from Marjory Carmichael. By the way, I heard from her to-day--she comes up to town soon."

"So I believe." His heart gave a throb at the sound of her name, but he would not confess it, even to himself. "Excuse me if I hark back to the other subject. I should like to hear what you have to say on it. Women have such curious notions of honour, at least, Blanche----"

"So Lady George has been taking you to task, has she? That was very unwise of her. For my part I have no opinion. I never liked the engagement, as you know; I like it still less now, when, if tales be true, Mr. Woodward will not be able to make his daughter so handsome an allowance as--as you expected. But they may not be true."

"There is no reason why I should not tell you that they are true. The allowance will be about a quarter of what was intended. Mr. Woodward spoke to me to-day about it, hinting that it might make a difference; but, of course, I cut him short."

"Of course." There was a fine smile for an instant on her face ere she went on. "Still, he was right, it does make a difference."

"Undoubtedly it makes a difference," echoed Paul, testily. "No one knows that better than I do. But that is no reason why I should back out of my word. We shall have to vegetate at Gleneira, I suppose, or live in a villa somewhere----"

"My poor Paul, how funny you are!" she interrupted, taking up a letter which had been lying beside her, and giving it a little flourish. "That is just what you could have done--with someone else! So you will do for a girl you do not love, what you would not do for one--but it is really too funny! One half of you being unable to exist without love, the other without money, you cut the Gordian knot by experimenting on life without either! Now, I should have tried to secure both--you might have managed that, I think." She paused a moment, and then went on. "As it is, my friend is not unwilling to play the hero, to a limited extent, because it soothes him and makes him feel less mercenary. Ah! my dear Paul, I understand. Only, might it not be more heroic and less mercenary to give Miss Woodward a chance of something more to her taste than a villa somewhere?--plus, of course, the heroic husband! She may not like heroics; some of us don't. You must be prepared for that."

The gentle raillery of her tone had a touch of seriousness in it which seemed to throw a new light on his view of the subject.

"You mean that it is likely----"

"Yes. I think it extremely likely that the Woodwards would rather break it off."

"But why?" he asked, angrily rising to pace the room; "my prospects have not changed."

"They twain shall be one flesh," quoted Mrs. Vane, lightly. "And do you really think so much of your heroism, that--unaided by love, remember--you will fancy it will compensate Alice Woodward, who loves the pavement, for the damp and dulness of Gleneira? I remember, Paul"--her voice grew a trifle unsteady--"having to decide a similar question, once. To decide whether I could compensate the man I loved for something--well, for something which was not more dear to him than civilisation is to this young lady, and, though I loved him, I knew I could not."

"And--and were you right?" he asked with a sudden interest.

"Of course I was right. He recovered the loss of me rapidly, and yet I am not unattractive--what is more, I am generally considered good company, which I defy anyone to be if he careers up and down the room like a Polar bear. Please sit down and let me make you a nice cup of tea. The last, I am sure, must have been horrid. You don't know how to take care of yourself a bit, Paul, but *you* are lucky. *You* will get plenty of people to pay for the privilege of doing so."

He told himself that she talked a great deal of nonsense at times, but that she did it, as she did everything else, with infinite verve and grace. Blanche, who had not said half as much, had made him angry; and here he was seated beside Violet's sofa, enjoying his tea, and feeling that sense of *bien etre* which he always felt in her company.

Yet even she might have failed in producing this for once, if he could have overheard a conversation which was going on over another cup of tea in Queen's Gardens, where Mrs. Woodward, with a real frown on her usually placid

face, was listening to her husband's account of his interview with Paul that morning.

"Very honourable, no doubt, but exceedingly unsatisfactory," she remarked, with asperity. "I must say that I think you failed."

"Did you wish me to give the man his *conge*, my dear?" interrupted her spouse, irritably. "If so, you should have told me so distinctly, but if it comes to that I can write and dismiss him."

"You have such a crude way of putting things, James, and though I don't presume to understand business affairs I must own it seems inexplicable how these difficulties have come about. And Alice is so accustomed to civilisation, and Jack is coming back from Riga next week, so it does seem to me a flying in the face of Providence."

Mr. Woodward looked at her in impatient amaze. "Good heavens! Maria, what do you mean? Who or what is flying in the face of Providence?"

"Everyone! Everything! It seems as if he had been away on purpose, so that there should be no fuss. And they have always been so fond of each other. Alice would be miserable if she had to think about money; so why should she be sacrificed to Captain Macleod's notions of honour----"

"My dear!----"

"Yes, James! Sacrificed! You say you told him plainly the state of the case, and he----"

"Behaved as a gentleman would. Expressed sorrow at my losses, but gave me to understand that it would make no difference to him."

"And to Alice? He never gave a thought to her, I suppose; but you men are all alike--selfish to the core."

"Really, my dear," protested Mr. Woodward, roused by this general attack.

"Well, *you* are selfish. Are you not sitting there calmly proposing to sacrifice Alice to an adventurer--a principled adventurer if you like, though that is a miserable attempt to--what was it you used to call guaranteed stock?"

"A disastrous attempt to combine safety and speculation," suggested her husband, meekly.

"Just so! and this is a disastrous attempt to combine common sense and romance. But I will not have Alice sacrificed. I will speak to the man myself."

"You shall do nothing of the sort, my dear. If necessary, I can do it; but there is no hurry."

"It must be settled before next week, unless you want a fuss; I tell you that."

"It shall be settled; but I must talk to Alice first. It is surely possible she may be in love with the man?"

Mrs. Woodward shook her head wisely.

"But why, in heaven's name, Maria? He is handsome--gentlemanly--well born. Why should she not love him?"

"Because she is in love with Jack."

"God bless my soul!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

When Paul Macleod left Mrs. Vane's drawing-room that afternoon she told herself that she could, for once, afford to sit with folded hands and let the world go its own way for a time. Everything seemed working for her, so there was no need for her to work for herself. The question of those letters could very well wait for a time. For all she knew to the contrary, the lawyers might have similar proof of little Paul's legitimacy; if they had not, why they ought to have. Unless, indeed, that marriage certificate had nothing to do with the boy at all. That in itself was conceivable with such a woman as Jeanie Duncan must have been. Anyhow, for the present, the child was in comfortable circumstances, since Dr. Kennedy had taken him in charge, and, as Marjory mentioned in her letter, he was to come to London and become a scholar at her school. The first thing was to see this foolish, ridiculous engagement broken off, and then if the big Paul were wise, and realised that both love and money were at his command, it might be possible to tell him the truth. But under no other circumstances, since none could console him as she could for the loss of Gleneira. Therefore, for the sake of everybody concerned, the best thing that could happen was that she should be Paul's wife. A great tenderness showed in her face at the very thought. "Poor Paul," she said half aloud; "he would be quite happy with me, quite content, and I, oh! surely I deserve something after all these years? I am getting tired of doing everything for people I do not care about, as I have done all my life long."

And it was true. In all the trivial details of life she was as thoroughly unselfish a woman as ever stepped, ready at a moment's notice to weary herself out for the sake of making the world more pleasant to others.

So those letters should remain locked up, perhaps for ever. In sober truth she could scarcely imagine herself using them. Their melodramatic force was so unlike the gentle spiriting by which she usually effected her object; and though she could never recall the night of poor old Peggy's death without a shudder, her sound common sense told her that after all in advising the old woman not to open the lawyer's letter, she had done so in ignorance. She had acted, as she thought, for the best, and everybody was liable to make mistakes.

So much for the one party to the interview; the other, once the spell of Mrs. Vane's personality was removed, felt vaguely that matters were becoming uncomfortable. It had never occurred to him before that *he* ran the chance of being jilted, and the bare idea filled him with indignation; and yet he saw the justice of Mrs. Vane's remarks. He was not a good match for a girl who wished for nothing better than to remain in that state of social comfort to which it had pleased Providence to call her. But, if this were so, it would be better to save his dignity by broaching the possibility himself. Anything was better than being dismissed like a footman. He was never long in deciding a question of this sort, yet, quick as he was, he found himself not a moment too soon, for when he walked round to see Mr. Woodward next morning, before that gentleman went down to office, he found him in the act of writing a note asking him to call.

"The fact is, Macleod," said the elder man, a little nervously, "I wanted to continue our talk about your engagement to my daughter."

Paul flushed up, but took the bull by the horns without a moment's hesitation.

"I came for that purpose, sir. It has occurred to me that I have somewhat overlooked Miss Woodward's side of the question, and I shall be infinitely obliged if you would treat me with perfect frankness in regard to what you, no doubt, know better than I."

The dignity of this speech soothed him, and he awaited the reply with tolerable equanimity.

"Very straightforward--very straightforward on your part, Macleod," said the man of business, approvingly. "One can scarcely be too careful in regard--er--in regard to such contracts; and your remark makes me regret more than ever--my--my duty. For you really have been all that is--all our fancy painted you, I may say. But that does not alter the fact that I am now a comparatively poor man. Of course, I may, I very probably shall, recoup. At the same time it is not the sort of security for--for--marriage settlements and trustees; you understand me, of course. Now, what we have to face is this: Do you think my daughter is suited to be the wife of a poor man--even a possibly poor man? I don't. And, then, would she be content if she had to live most of the year at Gleneira, away from society and--and telegraph posts--I mean posts and telegraphs? It's a pretty place, Macleod, and an interesting place--with--with a sort of--er--*respectability* about it, but it is a devilish bit out of the way."

"Perhaps; but I would do my best to make your daughter forget that," said Paul, gloomily; the sense of being weighed in the balance and found wanting--he, Paul Macleod, whom so many women had fancied--was exquisitely

painful.

Mr. Woodward blew his nose elaborately. "Just so; of course, of course! Very right and proper; very much so, indeed; only, my dear Macleod, marriage, after all, is a speculation, and I don't like to see my girl putting her capital into a concern which hasn't even a good prospectus. How many shareholders would even my name produce, if all we could say of a new railway was that, though the chances were dead against traffic, we would do our best to ensure it? Of course--er--if you were violently attached to each other one might allow something for the--er--the good-will of the business. Under those circumstances, I am led to believe--though I know nothing about it myself--that young people are content to live--er--on a ridiculously small income. My own impression is, however, that Alice is not that sort of girl; but, of course, I may be mistaken."

"In that case," put in Paul, loftily, "it would be best to refer to Alice herself."

"Exactly what we--I mean--er--decidedly. You two can settle it for yourselves. Her mother and I have no wish to interfere unnecessarily. That, I think you will own, is fair dealing, though, of course, as a business man I have felt it my duty to warn her against risking what is virtually her all in a concern which, to put it briefly, has an unpromising prospectus. And, if you will allow me, I will give you the same advice."

There was a pompous warmth in his shake of the hand, but as he accompanied his visitor to the door his tone changed to a confidential whisper:

"You see it isn't as if it were a limited liability, but the Lord only knows how many children you might have."

Paul, as he made his way to the little boudoir where Alice frittered away so much of her time over *chiffons* and picture papers, felt that he was being pursued by a Nemesis of his own creating. He had entered into this engagement by the light of reason, in obedience to the dictates of sound common sense, and it seemed likely that he would be driven from it by the same means. He found her, for a wonder, busy with needle and thread, and though the subject of it was only the stitching of tinsel round some remarkably large velvet leaves pasted on satin, it gave her a more solid air than she usually had. That, and a brighter flush upon her cheek, told him that he was expected, and forewarned him of her decision. Indeed, he felt that words were really unnecessary, and that he might just as well have turned round and gone downstairs again, leaving her white fingers busy with the gold thread. But there was a certain strain of savagery in Paul Macleod, as there is in most men when their dignity is touched, and he resolved to go through with it.

"I have just seen your father," he began, "and now I have come to you."

She might have been excused for turning a little pale and letting her work drop, for his tone was not reassuring. He saw her dread of a scene, and gave a faint laugh.

"There is no need to be afraid, Alice. I have never made myself disagreeable to you yet, and I am not likely to begin now, when I have come to ask you plainly whether you could be happy with me? Could you?"

She clasped and unclasped her hands quite nervously. "I am ready to try--if you like--if you think I ought to."

"That has nothing to do with it. Put me out of the question, please. Of course, it is always painful for a man to know that a woman does not care for him sufficiently----"

"It is not that," she broke in hurriedly. "I would not have promised if I had not liked you--it is the dulness, and the poverty. I have never been accustomed to it, and I might not be contented, and then how could I be a good wife if I were not happy? It is not as if there would be distractions, but there would be none, and I don't like the country as some girls do--Marjory Carmichael, for instance."

He looked at her sharply, but her eyes met his without any hidden meaning in them.

"She would not be dull, but I should, and then how could I cheer you up? For you need cheering at Geneira--you know you do."

The truth irritated him. "From which I infer that you would rather be free. Well! you have only to take me or leave me," he said curtly.

She caught in her breath, and, as usual, the display of temper made her piteous. "Don't be angry, Paul! There is nothing to be angry about. If you wish it, I will try; but we can always be friends, and if it is wiser to part, then it is wiser."

"That is for you to decide. I am at your orders." He stood there looking very handsome, and she gave a sigh of indecision, though a certain resentment at being, as it were, thrust into the breach, came to her aid.

"Do you think it wiser?" he repeated.

"How can I tell? All I want to do is my duty, and I am afraid----"

"If you are afraid, that is enough," he said, losing patience. "Good-bye, Alice; if you had decided otherwise I would have tried to be a good husband to you."

A faint flush came to her cheek. "And I would have tried to be a good wife; but----"

"Well?"

"Don't you think that with you trying to be a good husband and I trying to be a good wife, life would have been a little dreary--sometimes?"

The curse of home truths seemed in the air, and Paul felt he had no answer ready, and yet he liked her the better for the first touch of sarcasm he had ever heard from her lips. It reminded him of Mrs. Vane.

As he shook hands with her, the servant entering announced Mr. John Woodward, and Paul, going downstairs, met a big, florid young man coming up with a gardenia in his buttonhole, and a parcel tied with gold thread in his hands. It was a box of Paris chocolates which Jack had purchased on his way from Riga. The two scowled at each other as they passed, after the manner of Englishmen who have never been introduced, and Paul, as he put on his hat, felt a sudden insane desire to go up again, and tell Alice that he had changed his mind. And yet, as he walked aimlessly through the Park, and so northward into the streets beyond, the certainty that life had been changed in the twinkling of an eye came slowly to him, and as it did he scarcely knew whither to turn for a little solid self-esteem. Of late he had been nurturing his own magnanimity, and, as Mrs. Vane had told him to his face, the fact that Alice Woodward's fortune was for the time diminished, and in the future uncertain, had not been without its consolation. It prevented him from feeling that people knew, to a fraction, what price he had put upon himself. And now, though he was, as it were, a "genuine reduction," he had been rejected! Rejected! the thought was intolerable. Even the memory of Marjory, and the look in her eyes which he had seen that last night, brought him cold comfort, for he told himself that, even if he had wished to do so, he could never go to her and say he had been jilted; yet he would not tell her a lie.

But he did not want to seek consolation from Marjory; after all, it had only been the old story of a passing fancy fostered by romantic surroundings. Since he had left Gleneira he had scarcely thought of her, and for himself would have been quite content to fulfil his engagement. Therein, to tell truth, lay the whole sting of the position.

So he wandered on until he found himself in Regent's Park, and then, with that idle distaste to some decisive action which a return clubwards would necessitate, in the Zoological Gardens. It was years since he had been there of a morning without a band and a crowd. Years since he had brought papers of nuts and biscuits, and given them to the bears. But now he was free--yes! that was one comfort! he was free to do as he liked, so he watched the Polar bear--which made him smile at the recollection of Mrs. Vane's sally--and found a certain dreamy pleasure in strolling round by the antelopes and recognising beasts the like of which he had shot in strange climes. There is always some satisfaction to be got from bygone prowess in sport, and, as he finally found himself leaning over the railings of a tank where a pair of dippers were bobbing about, he had in a measure forgotten the present in the past.

So, as he watched the birds indifferently, a sleek round head slid suddenly, oilily from the water, and a pair of wistful brown eyes looked into his.

The card affixed to the railings only bore the legend:

"Phoca vitulina;
or, Common Seal."

Yet no magician's wand could have been more powerful in transformation--say, rather translation--than the sight of the creature so designated was to Paul Macleod. In the twinkling of an eye the London haze--that condensed essence of millions of men, women, and children, struggling confusedly for breath--had passed from him, and he was in a new heaven and a new earth. A boat was rocking idly on the summer sea, the blue clouds were sailing overhead, the world, its ways and works, were beyond the rampart of encircling hills, while a girl, with clear bright eyes, leant against the

rudder.

"Why didn't you shoot, Captain Macleod?" He could hear the odd little tremor in her voice, as she gave the challenge, and feel the dim surprise of his own answer: "I never thought of it!"

Then, with a rush, the one side of his nature challenged the other. Why--why had he done these things? Why had he given up paradise? Had he not been happy? In very truth, had he even thought of the world and its ways, of himself and his instincts, when he was beside her? Yet, what a return had he not made to this girl who had taught him to forget these things. Had he not in a way taught her to know them? Had he not roused in her something, blameless enough, God knows! in its way, beautiful enough, though of the earth earthy, compared to that other strange comradeship, in which there seemed no possibility of passion, no sense of sex. In truth, he had taught her to love him as women and men will love to the end of all things. Taught her, and left her to face it alone--as he had left Jeanie Duncan long years ago.

The unbidden remembrance brought a new shame with it for that old offence, even while it intensified the sudden remorse he felt for the present one; since Jeanie, in all her sweet maidenhood, had never seemed so hedged about from evil as this Brynhild, whose very womanhood had been hidden beneath her glittering armour of mail. That he should have thought these things showed the strain of romance, the touch of mysticism, which was in him by right of his race, and though, as ever, he chafed against these things, he could not escape from them, or from the self-contempt which took possession of him. Ever since the night when he had said good-bye, as he had boasted, to the best part of him, there had been something to prevent his realising the extent of his degradation. First, the relief of certainty, bringing with it a very real content; then, the anxiety for the child, bringing out all the kindness of his nature--finally, the knowledge that he was not, after all, so mercenary. But now he was defenceless against his own worldliness, against the memory of his wanton insult to Marjory--for it was an insult, nothing less.

As he wandered moodily back into the town, back to face his world and its comments, it seemed to him as if there were not a rag anywhere wherewith to cover his wounded self-esteem. One thing he could do: he could go down and ask Marjory to marry him. He owed her so much. She would refuse him, of course, since she was not the sort to care for other folks' rejections; and he knew, by long experience, how keenly such love as he had seen in her eyes resented neglect, how quick it was in changing to repulsion if the pride were outraged.

Yes! he would go down to Gleneira and regain some of his belief in himself by giving Marjory her revenge. Then he would go abroad and shoot lions, or do something of that sort. Everyone would know he had been jilted, so he might as well play the part to the bitter end, and behave as a man ought to behave who has had a disappointment.

Meanwhile he might as well go and see Violet, and congratulate her on her acumen. He might even go so far as to tell her that, taking her words to heart, he was about to propose poverty to the girl he loved, as he had proposed it to the girl he had not loved. She, of course, not knowing of that wanton insult, would not understand how idle a proposition it would be; but she liked to be thought clever--liked to be at the bottom of everything.

So he was not exactly in an amiable or easily managed mood as he followed the servant upstairs at Mrs. Vane's house. And, as luck would have it, he came at a time when she herself was too disturbed to have the cool head and steady nerve necessary to steer him into the haven where she would have him. Yet it was a trifling thing which had upset her: merely the certainty that little Paul Duncan would not get a penny of his grandmother's money. There it was in black and white, set down in the wills and bequests column of the *Illustrated London News*. Now, the difference between keeping a boy with a hundred thousand pounds from possibly inheriting some acres of heavily mortgaged bog and heather, and keeping a nameless, penniless waif from a name and some hundreds a year was palpable. She was no hardened criminal, and for the first time she found herself really facing the question: "Am I to do this thing, or am I not to do it?"

Should she put those letters in the fire and say no more about them, or should she tell the truth?

Though she knew its contents almost by heart, she took the slender packet out once more and looked doubtfully at the marriage certificate.

"Captain Macleod," said the servant at the door, for Paul was a privileged visitor, with the *entree* at all times to Mrs. Vane's little sitting-room. She had barely time to thrust the paper under a book ere he was beside her.

"How you startled me!" she said, with a nervous laugh, as she took his hand. "I did not expect you to-day; you were here yesterday."

"I came to inquire for your fever," he replied a trifle coldly. "You have it again, I see--and feel. You should be in bed as it is."

He wheeled the armchair to the fire, brought a cushion from the sofa, and waited, holding it in his hand to settle it comfortably for her as she sate down.

She gave an odd little sort of choke.

"What a coddle you are, Paul! There is nothing really the matter with me. I grow old, that is all; I grow old." It was not a good beginning for an interview in which she would need all her self-control, all her common sense; and had the letter been within reach at that moment it would have received scant justice at her hands, for nothing in the wide world seemed worth consideration save this man with his kind ways and soft voice. He, at any rate, must not suffer.

CHAPTER XXV.

The room was growing dusk. That pleasant duskiess which obliterates corners and seems to concentrate comfort on the flame-lit circle by the fire.

"What a good nurse you are, Paul," she said, with an effort after her usual airiness. "The woman you marry will be lucky."

"I'm glad someone thinks so," he remarked briefly, "for there does not seem to be much competition----"

"Paul!" she interrupted, with a sudden flutter at her heart. "Do you mean----"

"Yes! you were right, as usual, if that is any comfort to you. I have got my dismissal. Does that satisfy you?"

She looked at him frankly. "It does. You do not like it, of course, but I cannot be sorry. She was never good enough for you, even when she was rich, and when she was poor----"

"Don't let us discuss it, please. The thing is over; and what with those who are too good and those who are not good enough I seem to have made a muddle of it. By the way, I suppose Miss Carmichael is still at Gleneira?"

"Certainly--but--but why? I fail to see the connection." It was not true; she saw it clearly enough, and her voice showed it.

"Only because I am going down there to-morrow."

"To burn your wings again?--that is foolish!"

"I have no wings to burn; but I am going to ask her to marry me--to face the villa with me, as you put it."

Mrs. Vane started from her pillow with fear, surprise, dislike in every feature.

"Are you mad, Paul? The girl does not care for you; I'm certain of that. Then she is half engaged, I believe, to Alphonse--Dr. Kennedy, I mean. Her letter is full of him; you can see it if you like."

"I have no doubt of it; he is a far more admirable person than I am. I fully expect she will refuse me, but I mean to ask her all the same."

"But why? Since you have told me so much you may as well tell me all. Why?"

"Because I choose, and because I like following your good advice."

"My advice?" she echoed; "my advice? That is too much." Then recognising the fact that no good would follow on direct opposition, she tacked skilfully. "If you choose, I suppose you will do it, though I cannot for the life of me see why you should put yourself to needless pain, for it must be pain, since you were certainly in love with her at Gleneira--"

"I believe I was," he interrupted, "but I'll risk the pain."

"No doubt," she answered bitterly; "self-inflicted pain is always bearable. But for the girl--why not consider her comfort? It is always a disagreeable thing to refuse, and a man who forces a girl into that position without due cause is--"

"Is what?"

"A presumptuous cad, my dear Paul."

"Thank you! You are clever, Violet, and your conclusions are generally right; but in this case you argue without knowledge of the premises."

"I know that Paul Macleod never did and never will come under that category," she replied readily, "and that is

enough for me."

"If it were true, but it is not." He had not meant to tell her the truth, but a certain contrariety led him on. "I used not to be one, perhaps; but I was one to her. That last night, after I was engaged to Alice, I told her that I loved her."

A little fine smile showed on Mrs. Vane's face. "Well, it was not fair on Alice, but it was very like Paul. Only why repeat the mistake?"

"You do not understand. I was half mad, I think, at leaving her--and at her unconsciousness. And then--and then, I kissed her."

"Really? That was very naughty, of course; but still more like Paul."

He winced, as if she had struck him. "Don't laugh, Violet, as if it were the old story; it isn't."

His tone struck a chill of fear to her heart, yet she still kept up her amused serenity. "Is it not? Yet she is surely not the first girl you have kissed without a 'by your leave.'"

He was silent, and then to her infinite surprise, as he sat leaning forward looking into the fire, covered his face with his hands as if to shut out an unwelcome sight.

"You don't understand," he said, in a low voice. "She hadn't a reproach--she--I can see the look in her eyes still."

There was another silence, and then Mrs. Vane's voice came with an indescribable chill in it:

"You mean that she loved you, or you think she did."

"I am sure of it. She did not deny it. Violet! she is the first woman, I verily believe, who has loved me truly, and I repaid her by insult."

A dangerous rush of sheer anger came to send tact and prudence to the wind for the time. "You say that! The only woman! Then I say, Paul, that you insult others by your doubts--others who have loved you longer. Paul!" She was very close upon the verge, when she pulled herself up short, and gave a little laugh. "You cannot think her love very deep if you say she will refuse you. But what reason have you to think she will? Because you kissed her? That is absurd, and you know it. I believe you wish her to accept you."

"Do I?" he asked wearily; "for the life of me I scarcely know; but I mean to ask her. I must. Surely you can see that; you generally understand me."

"I do understand you, Paul; better perhaps than you understand yourself. That is why I tell you not to go down to Geneira. You are *tete montee* now. You are not yourself. Look the matter in the face! Supposing she were to accept you; what then?"

He paused a moment. "I should marry her, I suppose--but she won't. I am not the sort of fellow she could marry." His voice had the tenderest ring in it, but his head was turned away. To see it she leant forward closer to him, almost on her knees, and the firelight lit up her eager, appealing face.

"Paul, don't deceive yourself with doubts. You love her more than ever, and if, as you say, she loves you, the result is a foregone conclusion, if you meet. It is a future of poverty, and, oh, how you will regret it! Don't go, Paul, I beg of you; I beseech you--I am an old friend, my dear."

As she laid her flashing jewelled hands on his shoulder, his went up mechanically and drew them down. So holding them in his, he looked into her face kindly. "You are, indeed--but I must go--I have no choice."

His soft, caressing touch made her risk all, and her breath came fast in swift denial. "No choice! That is not true! You said but now, no one had loved you truly but this girl. Think, Paul, did not I? You know I did. Was it for my own sake that I gave you up--that I sent you away? You know it was not. I am not of the sort on whom the world turns its back. I would have faced it gladly. It was for you. Because you loved your profession--because--but you know it all! Even when I was free, but poor, I would not claim you. Will Marjory do as much for you? Will she say, 'I love you, but I will not injure you by marrying you'? I think not. But I should not injure you now--I am rich, I am rich, and I love you."

Once before she had told him so plainly, but it had then been with an easy self-control, suggesting the idea but

withholding its inception. Now she was pleading as if for life.

"You are very good," he muttered, feeling the truth of what she said.

"Yes!" she echoed, with a tinge of bitterness at her lack of power to move him more. "How good you will never know. I have stood between you and more evil than you dream of; and now I ask you to stay with me, Paul, not because I love you, but because you are always happy with me, because you will be safe with me--with me--only with me."

That was true also; he was always happy with her. But safe?

"I do not understand," he said. "Why should I be safer with you? I know of no danger." Then he clasped her hands tighter, looking into her face curiously. "What is it, Violet? Is there danger? You speak--- By Heaven! there is something, Violet! What is it?"

She drew from him quickly, realising her own imprudence, for she was not prepared for any decisive step. "Nothing, Paul--nothing to speak of," she said, rising to her feet with a hasty laugh, but her voice shook, her hands were trembling. "Since you will not listen, go to Marjory; she can protect you as well as I can."

"I don't care to hide behind any woman," he said sternly. "Not even behind you. What is it? You are not the kind of woman to say that sort of thing unless you meant it. What danger do you know that I do not?"

Even to hear his questioning roused her to a sense of what the knowledge would mean to him, and the instinct of defence overcame even her pride. "Am I not the sort of woman? All women are alike when they are jealous. Can't you see it, Paul--can't you understand? or will you force me to say it all over again? I know nothing, positively nothing, to prevent your marrying Marjory. Go down to Gleneira if you will."

He shook his head. "Don't prevaricate, Violet. I had rather you lied to me, but for pity's sake do neither. Be my friend and tell me the truth."

For an instant his gentleness overcame her fence. "I cannot, Paul--I cannot," she almost wailed; then remembering herself, she went on, "How can I, when there is nothing to tell?"

"I will not leave the room till I know," was his reply. "There *is* something, and you shall tell me. You will not; then I must find out for myself--there was a letter in your hand. Let me go, Violet! I don't want to hurt you, but I must and will have that letter, unless--- No! I cannot trust you for the truth. I must see that letter for myself."

She knew enough of him to recognise that now his imperious temper was roused, her only chance lay in an appeal to his affection.

"Listen, Paul! I have done so much for you. Pay me back now--only this little thing. I don't want you to see that letter--you have no right to see it."

He shook his head, and she flung the hands she had been detaining from her with a cry.

"You do not trust me! You do not trust me! That is hard after all these years."

"No! I cannot trust you, dear; you are too good to me," he said gently, as he walked over to the table.

The dusk had grown into dark, and he passed on to the window, in hopes of sufficient light to decipher the letter he held; failing that he came back to the fire.

"Don't strain your eyes over it," she said bitterly, as she leant--as if tired out--against the mantelpiece, watching him sombrely. "I strained mine over it once--needlessly. I will ring for lights, and you can surely wait for so much, now you have got your own way."

So they waited in silence, standing side by side before the fire, till the servant had set the shaded lamp on the table, and drawn the window curtains carefully, methodically. Then he glanced at the superscription, and pointing to it, said, "Why did you read it?" for across the first blank page was scrawled legibly, "Not to be read by anyone till Paul Macleod of Gleneira is dead."

"Because I chose--the reason why *you* read it, I suppose."

The old admiration for her spirit which, even now, did not hesitate to meet him boldly on his own ground, rose in him as, instinctively, he turned to the signature for some further light to guide him in reading the closely written sheets. Then his eye caught a name at the bottom of a page where the writing merged from ink to a faint pencil.

"Jeanie Duncan!" he exclaimed, half aloud; "what can she have to do with me?" The instant after he turned to Mrs. Vane, as those who are puzzled turn to those who are better informed. "Janet Macleod! did she marry a Macleod after all?"

"She married your brother Alick, and the boy is their son. Now you know the worst--and *I* have told you it--*I*, who would not hurt you for the world."

"She married---- Then little Paul?" He stood as if unable to grasp the meaning of his own words.

"Sit down, dear, and read it, since you have chosen to read. There is no hurry. You know the worst," she said gently.

So with a sort of dazed incredulity he read on in silence:

"Paul Macleod! yes! Paul! you shall read this some day; some day soon. I am revenged. You were ashamed of me, and now I am the laird of Gleneira's wife. Yet I did not mean to be revenged till he came, like a fool, and put it into my head. I was getting tired of the life, too--of the hard, thankless life. It was by chance I fell in with him in Paris. I went there with someone and stayed on; so he could not guess that I was Jeanie Duncan, whom he had never seen. And I hated him because he was your brother; so he grew mad after me, and promised marriage. Then the thought came--I, whom the laird's Jock did not think good enough to love or marry, will take the laird himself, and flaunt it over them all. So we were married, and then, before I had time to settle anything, he died--died of drink, Paul!

"Well! I hated him, so I did not care. I hated him for being so like you, and caring for me when you did not----

"And now, if it is a boy, I will have my revenge--my just revenge--and turn you out of the old place. But I wait, because, if it is a girl, you will not care, and I will not have you jeer because my revenge has failed. I pray day and night that it may be a boy, and lest I should die, I write all about it, and put my marriage lines with the letter. Then my son can come, and turn you out. I did not seek revenge, remember. It came into my hand, and it is just. You know that it is just!

"JEANIE DUNCAN.

"P.S.--Look in the photograph shops in Paris for 'La Belle Ecossaïse,' if you wish to know what I was like when *he* married me."

Paul, reading methodically, paused for a second, passed his hand across his forehead as if to clear his mind, and then went on to a fainter pencil scrawl:

"Well! I have waited, Paul! It is a boy--so like you, Paul! I lie and think--for they say I am dying, and so it cannot hurt now--that he *is* your son, and that we were married in the old days. But it is all a lie! He is *his* son, and I will have my revenge! If only I could remember anything but the old days, Paul! Ah! surely when people love as we did---- No! I do not understand. Only, the boy is so like you. I lie and think, and I feel he must never turn you out. Never! never! Only, if you die, then the boy must have his rights, for he is your son.

"JANET MACLEOD.

"P.S.--Mother will keep this; she has come to see me die, so it will be quite safe. She does not know I am married, and I have written outside that no one is to read it till you are dead. Ah, Paul! I wish you could have seen it. Forgive me, Paul--forgive me that he is not your son!"

A greyness had come to the handsome face, and, as he folded up the letter methodically, his hands trembled.

"How long?" he asked; and it seemed almost as if he could not finish the sentence.

"Since the night of old Peggy's death. I suspected something, so I stole it."

"You suspected!" he interrupted quickly. "What could you suspect?" Then he laughed bitterly. "I suppose you suspected I was the boy's father, and thought the knowledge would be useful. If I had been it would have been better." His hand holding the letter came down heavily on the mantelpiece as he rose in sudden passion. "My God! what a devilish revenge!"

She gave a quick catch in her breath. She had been silent till now, but now it was time to begin--time to make him think.

"You forget that she repented--that she gave up her revenge. That is why I said nothing, Paul. I am a woman, too, and I know how she repented. I did not dare to speak--to disobey her dying wish; who has a right to do that, Paul?--no one."

"But the boy," he murmured, "the boy."

"The boy will not suffer. If you die he will have his rights, as his mother wished. If he were really your son he would not have Geneira till then, and you can look after him. It is not as if he were in want, dear."

He sat listening, listening to that soft, persuasive voice, which had such a knack of following his every thought, and yet of leading them.

"I had no right to steal the letters, of course," it went on a little louder, "but I am not sorry; for others might not have understood, and so the poor thing's repentance would have come to naught. Now, no one knows but you and I. You who loved her, I who pity her; because I love you, Paul, as she loved you."

She came a step closer with wide-open, serious eyes, and touched him on the breast with her slender white hand. The faint perfume of jasmine which always lingered round her stole in on his senses familiarly, taking him back to many a past pleasure and kindness associated with it, and, half unconsciously, his empty hand clasped hers; and so they stood looking, not at each other, but into the fire.

"So it is easy to fulfil her wish--her dying wish. You did her a wrong, Paul, in the old days, and you owe her reparation. She did not wish you to read the letter, remember; but that can be as if it had not been. Give it to me, dear! I would have burnt it before, as she would have wished it burnt, but I wanted you to know for certain what she had wished."

Her small, white hand was on his, the paper rustled and seemed to slip from his hold while he stood, as if mesmerised, looking into the fire. It was all true--every word of it true.

"Give it to me, Paul. You are thinking of the boy; but we could bring him up, you and I, if you would have it so. Paul! This is my reward at last! I can do this for you, now that I am rich."

But still his fingers resisted faintly, and there was a pause, a long pause. Then the hand which lay in his seemed to slacken, to lie in his like a dead hand, and her voice came with a sob in its softness:

"Paul! do this for me, and I will ask no more. Paul! let me save you--save you and Marjory!"

It was her last plea. She had kept it back till now, hoping against hope, and, as she made it, she touched the highest point of self-forgetfulness it is possible for a woman to reach. But in touching it she struck a false note in the siren's song, and Paul Macleod's hand closed like a vice over his one tie to an honest life--the letter.

The name had roused him. "Marjory!" he echoed absently. Then he turned and looked at his companion compassionately, yet decisively. "You mean to be kind, Violet, but you don't understand," he said quietly; then raised her little slack hand, stooped to kiss it, and left her so, standing by the fire alone. She had played for her love boldly, skilfully, and she had lost. She had tried to save Paul for his own sake, and she had failed. Yet even so, the innate courage of the woman faced the facts without a tear, without a complaint.

"It is my own fault," she said, half aloud. "I ought to have burnt the letter long ago, but I was not meant for that sort of thing. My heart is too soft." Then she smiled a little bitterly. It was at the remembrance of Paul Macleod's assertion, "You do not understand!" If she did not understand him, who could?

CHAPTER XXVI.

Nearly a month had gone by since Marjory Carmichael had whispered to the darkness, "Come back to me, Paul, and we will forget our love." The sudden awakening to the realities, not only of life but of her own nature, caused by his reckless avowal of love, had passed, as all awakenings must, into calm acquiescence in the commonplace facts of consciousness. There was no denying of the truth possible to her clear sight, and as she sate on the last day of October, on the last day of holiday before she and little Paul set off together to make acquaintance with a new world, she laid down her pen in the middle of a sentence in the letter she was writing to Tom Kennedy, and looked out over the stormy whitecrested waves of the loch set in its rampart of grey, snow-powdered, mist-shrouded hills, and wondered how she could have been so blind for so long. Blind to half the great problems of life! And then, with a smile, infinitely sweeter than it used to be because infinitely stronger, she took up a letter which lay beside her, and leaning back in her chair began to read it over again, just as she had re-read a letter down by the river side three months before, on the day when her holiday began--on the day when she had first seen Paul Macleod.

But it was a very different letter from the one Dr. Kennedy had sent her then; for all unconsciously the girl, in the first bewilderment of her awakening, had stretched out her hands to him, as it were, for help, and he had given her what he could, smiling a trifle bitterly as he wrote to think how little that was. "You ask me to tell you the truth," she read, "but how can I when I do not know it myself? If I had, the world might have been different--for us both. Only this seems clear, that friendship is a bigger thing than love, unless they both grow from the same root, and then--I fancy, Mademoiselle Grands-serieux, that the botanists ought to characterise the product as a sport! It is rare enough--God knows! I have sate for hours over the puzzle, trying to get at the bottom of myself, only to come back to the old paradox that Love is not worth calling Love unless it is something which is not Love. And that is no solution. Pure and simple, unveiled of mist and sentiment, it is all too easy of explanation. It is ever-present, and must be so--it seems--till the end of all things. Then there is--shall we call it the transcendental form conceivable only to those who recognise some innate, or almost innate, sense of order or beauty in mankind. That too, given this premise, is easy. I believe I understand it. I am sure you do. It is the hybrid of these two held up to our admiration, and believed in by the majority of cultivated people, which beats me altogether. Look round you, dear, and think for yourself. A man and a woman have mental sympathy with each other. What has that to do with marriage? A man and a woman are married. What has that to do with mental sympathy? The two things are not incompatibles. Heaven forbid! But have friendship and what the world calls love any real connection, and what part have they to play in marriage? That sounds like a conundrum, and perhaps it is as well, since we were getting too serious, and that is a fatal mistake when there is no answer to the riddle. But there is a sacrilegious little story, my dear, regarding the reasons for not enforcing celibacy on the clergy, which is not altogether irrelevant to our subject. Luther, I believe, is responsible for declaring that marriage is a 'discipline' not to be surpassed in spiritual efficacy; a discipline before which hair shirts and flagellations are sensual indulgence. N.B.--Was Luther any relation of the Cornish man who said, 'Women was like pilchards; when 'ums bad 'ms bad, and when 'ms good they is but middlin'?' I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle G.S., but one must laugh--if one is not to cry. What if love were the mutual attraction of certain elements, which combined and neutralised in the children, would go to form a more useful compound of humanity? Would not this go further towards raising our instincts out of the mire than all the romance in the world? And then it would account, of course--since chemicals are apt to evolve heat in combining--for a good deal of friction in the married state, which in its turn must polish the sufferers! But as this theory canonises Mrs. Caudle, and makes wife-beating a virtue, perhaps we had better change the subject by saying, as we said at the beginning--friendship is a bigger thing than love, and so pass on to the lives we have to lead, love or no love."

So with kindly thought, and a plentiful humour irradiating every page, he went on to tell her of his work, of stirring scenes in that hand-to-hand fight with Death, the great enemy of Love, in which he lived. A tender, charming letter, such as his were always. Letters which none know how to write save those who, despising the control of time and space, have learnt to lean over the edge of the world, and claim a part in some far-off life. Letters which, without one word of sentiment from beginning to end, leave both the writer's and reader's hearts full of a great kindness and peace.

They set Marjory a thinking, as they were meant to do, and the result was good, since her clear common sense never failed her. Yet side by side with that common sense existed a certain fanciful idealism, which took the place of the former in matters beyond the limits of plain reason. And this, as she read, made her pause to wonder if Tom could be right, and the calm content which came to her from him, so different from the unrest which the mere thought of Paul produced, meant that they were too nearly akin to need neutralisation. Then she laid down the letter and took up the pen again, striving unconsciously to imitate his playful touch.

"No, Tom!" she wrote; "I am not growing morbid. I am not, as you call it, trying to measure my world with home-

made imitations of the imperial quart; still, I do wish I knew what the cubit was! Then I would add it to my stature and rise superior--perhaps. If I had known what I know now when my holiday began would it have made any difference? If I had had a mother, if I had been brought up with other girls, should I have gone on as I did, using a wrong terminology? I will tell you something, Tom. What I thought was love in those old days is just what I feel for you, dear. Perhaps I might have thought so all my life if I had not met him. And now, if I meet him again, Tom, what will happen? I sit down before the proposition; but it is not to be solved like a problem in Euclid, because I have discovered that my heart and my brain are quite separate, and I used to think they were both a part of me. Don't tell me, please, that I am wrong. Perhaps I am physiologically. I know all about that horrid little V-shaped spot in the *medulla oblongata*, isn't it, where a pin-point will stop Tears and Laughter, Love and Friendship for ever. What then? Does it make it easier to understand why the heart beats, to know that we can stop its beating? I wish I knew! I wish I knew! I don't want it to beat, but it will. Oh! what a mercy it is that we two do not love each other!"

She laid down the pen as a knock came to the door.

"A strange shentlemen to see Miss Carmichael," said the new servant who had replaced the peccant Kirsty discovered--direful offence--in putting a dirty skimmer into the milk.

Now, in the country a "strange gentleman" generally resolves itself into the piano-tuner, so Marjory bade him be shown up with a certain calm impatience at the necessity for explaining that his services would not be wanted; then, the thread of her thoughts broken rudely, she sate waiting, her eyes fixed absently on the words, "that we two do not love each other!"

She looked up from them to see Paul Macleod standing at the door. He had come back to her!

Five minutes before she had asked, almost passionately, of her friend what she would do in such case. Now there was but one answer.

"Paul!" Her outstretched hand sought his, as he stood tall and straight trying to master his emotion, to preserve the calm to which he had schooled himself through the long journey which had ended here--here, where he might once have found rest; here, where all, save such self-respect as apology might leave him, was lost for ever.

"Paul--Oh! how tired you look--how cold your hands are! Come, dear--come and warm yourself; you must be perished!"

He did not speak, perhaps because the hoar frost of pride which had chilled his eyes melted before the radiance of hers; and hoar frost is but water after all. So she drew him to the fire, and then, still holding one hand as if loth to lose touch of it, knelt on one knee to stir the peats to a brighter blaze.

"I'm so glad you have come back," she said, with a little tremble in her voice; "so glad!" And then she looked up suddenly into the face above her, surprised at the almost painful strength of his grip. For Paul Macleod's composure was almost gone, and he was struggling hard for self-control. What she saw kept her silent; but she bent towards him till her soft, warm cheek touched his hand caressingly. The action, with its tale of tender solicitude, its boundless sympathy, was too much for him. He drew in his breath hard, and resting his arm on the mantelpiece turned from her to hide his face upon it, and so escape the pity in her eyes.

And he had dreamed of something so different! Of something coldly just, reasonably reproachful! Without a word she had guessed, had *known*, that he must be free to come, because he *had* come back.

"What is it, dear?" she asked softly, as she stood beside him. "Are you afraid that I am angry? Are you afraid that I care--about *that*? Paul! I do not choose to care--I will not. Look at me, and you will see if that is not the truth!"

What he saw was a face soft with the passion he knew so well--the passion which lies so perilously close to self--which claims so much, and resents so easily. But it was radiant also, as with a white flame of cleansing fire, pitiless in its purity.

"What is it to me?" she went on, her voice ringing clearer. "What is it to any woman unless she stoops to care? Oh! I understand now, Paul--I understand things of which I never even dreamed before; things which have been in your life--things which might have been in mine, perhaps--God knows!--if I had been in your place. But they are no more to me than this--a grief, a regret, because they are a stain upon your past, as all wrong must be. They are no more to me than that, because I do not choose to count them more!"

So, with a smile in her eyes, and a quiver of pain on her lips, she raised her face to his and kissed him.

Thus neither humiliation nor forgiveness was allowed a part in this woman's reading of the Divine Comedy. Perhaps she was wrong, and yet no scorn, no righteous indignation, could have made Paul Macleod feel more acutely the gulf which lay between his past and hers. Between their futures also. They might be friends, but from that pure Love of hers he was for ever outcast, though she might not know it--though he might spend his life in trying to conceal the fact that he lived on a lower plane than she did. Why! the past was with him *now*, even at the touch of her lips. He loved her, as he had loved so often before.

"Marjory!" he cried passionately, "I don't deserve it, but I can't miss it--if you will put up with me?"

She drew herself away, and looked at him with a half-tender, half-mocking expression.

"Put up with you? What else is there to be done now that you have come back to me?"

What else, indeed! She was right; it was he who had taken the responsibility, he who defied natural consequences in this dreaming of something beyond and above his past. He was not hardened enough to be blind to this, and the thought showed on his face.

"Come," she said consolingly, "sit down and tell me all about it--why you came back, I mean; I know why you went away."

If she did, he felt that she was wiser than he, since, sitting so beside her, sure of her sympathy, her confidence, it seemed incredible that he should have fled from this sure haven of his own free will. He told her all, it seemed to him without a pang; told her of his dismissal, of the change in his prospects. Yet, when he put Jeanie Duncan's letter into her hands, and walked away to the window while she read it, he felt more of a cur than he had ever done in all his life before. What would the girl say? What could she say but that it served him right? If she dismissed him also, and told him that she did not care to exchange her love for his, would not that serve him right also!

And so, as he stood frowning moodily at the growing glint of sunshine far out in the West driving the mists in dense masses up the Glen, her voice came to him as she laid down the letter with a sigh:

"I am glad she called him Paul."

He turned quickly to her in a sort of incredulous amaze! Was that all she had to say? A sort of chill crept over him, even though he found himself at her feet, with her hands in his, kissing them softly as he told her, with a break in his voice, that she was too good--too good for any man. The thought brought him a certain consolation, as she went on, evidently with the desire of taking all sting from his memories--to speak of the strange coincidence of little Paul's devotion to her, and of her liking for the lovable little lad. Surely, if Gleneira had to go, he would far rather it went to him than to some stranger, who would care nothing for her and her ways.

"Why?" she said, a trifle tearfully; "he has been so much with me lately, since old Peggy died, that I felt quite lost without him when he went yesterday for a farewell visit up the Glen to the Macintoshes. The boys were his great playmates. So you see, Paul, it will not matter so much, for he will live with us, of course, and it is a long, long time before he comes of age. And even then I don't believe he will turn you out of house and home altogether. We will teach him better things than that! Won't we?"

In truth, spoken of in her calm, clear voice, and with her wise eyes on his, and that sweet convincing "we" in her phrases, the prospect did not seem so hopeless. Yet he caught himself wishing that she had not taken his renunciation quite so much as a matter of course; wishing that she appreciated his victory over temptation more keenly. Yet, how could she, when he had not told her that part of the business, or how near he had been to purchasing peace with dishonour by destroying Jeanie Duncan's letter and the marriage certificate it contained. But there were many things in his past, he told himself, with a sigh, of which it was better she should continue to know nothing; for her own sake, not for his. He could scarcely fear her blame, and it would have been a certain comfort to, as it were, bring her closer to him by confession. But Paul Macleod was too much of a gentleman for that kind of self-indulgence, and he was realising for the first time in his life the supreme impotence of repentance either in the past or the future. Had he not, even at the time, repented him of the evil in regard to Jeanie Duncan; yet had not a Nemesis grown out of his very repentance?

"Come with me part of the way back, dear," he said, when the necessity for writing business letters broke through even his desire to linger within touch of her kind hand. "I can't bear somehow to lose sight of you for an instant, but I must go--there are the lawyers--and Dr. Kennedy."

"I can tell Tom if you like," replied Marjory. "I write to him most days."

Something rose up in her hearer and cursed Tom, though the next moment he was reviling himself. That sort of thing would have to be put away for ever when he was Marjory's husband.

"You will have to marry me as soon as you can," he said, with what to her seemed great irrelevance.

"I will marry you as soon as you like, Paul; you know that," she replied cheerfully.

Yes! so far was easy; but afterwards? How would she ever put up with him? Yet the question was once more forgotten in the charm of the present.

It was the end of a soft day, and the summitless mountains looked purple and green under the mist wreaths which every now and again seemed to descend to fill the valley and leave sparkling drops of dew on the little curls below Marjory's cap, while the river ran roaring beside them, making a kind of droning accompaniment to the shriller drip from the trees upon the stones. Then the fine rain would cease, the birds begin to twitter, rustling the damp leaves, and sending a faster shower on the path; while from the West a gleaming blade of light would sever the mists, and give a glimpse of a new heaven and a new earth, where the sun was setting peacefully.

As she walked along beside him, her face seemed to hold the sunshine, his the mist, and once, in the middle of some talk over the future, he paused to hark back to the past.

"If we could begin it all over again from the day I first met you on the river, I think I might have a better chance--at least, I would not play the fool so utterly--at least, my memories of *you* would be free from pain--and I should have left undone the things that I have done."

"Why should you say that?" she asked. "Is it not enough that what you did made me love you?"

"Your godfathers and godmothers should have christened you Barnabasina," he replied, with an effort after his old, light manner, "for you are verily a daughter of consolation, Marjory; but even you cannot take the sting out of some things. If I could have the past over again! Nothing short of that will satisfy me."

Her quick, bright face grew brighter.

"Then you shall have it, dear, as far as I'm concerned. Yes! you shall! It will be pleasant for me, too. Don't laugh at my fancy, for I like fancies sometimes; they help one along the dead level bits of the road. I'll say 'good-bye' here, Paul, here in the very spot where you said good-bye before--do you think I could forget it? And then to-morrow----" she hesitated in her very eagerness.

"Yes, to-morrow, Marjory?" he echoed.

"To-morrow you shall meet me at the old place on the river--you remember it, of course, and we shall begin all over again--all over again from the very beginning, to the very end. I remember them all, Paul; everything, I believe, that you ever said--everything, at any rate, that you ever said which I disliked. Is that unkind? And so when the time comes for those bits you shall not say them--we will cut them out of the past."

"It will be Hamlet with the Prince left out," he said, falling in with her playful mood.

"Not a bit of it! Besides if it were I should not mind. It was never the prince I liked, but Paul--the real Paul."

"I wonder which one that is," he replied quickly, yet with a smile; for her radiant face would not be cheated of its due.

"We shall see to-morrow--good-bye, Paul."

He shook his head.

"No! No! Marjory. Neither that, nor adieu, any more. Till to-morrow--*Auf-wieder-sehn*, my love! *Auf-wieder-sehn*."

CHAPTER XXVII.

The beginning of a new day, a new life!

That, perhaps, should have been Marjory's first thought when, drawing up the blind, she stood in the early dawn at the window looking out on a world white with hoar frost. But it was not; for her eyes fell upon a bunch of late rowans still adorning the tree, which stood so close that, on windy nights, the berries would tap against the panes like some ghostly visitant claiming admittance. They also were veiled in a silvery tracery, and so the trivial remembrance of a certain ball-dress came uppermost, instead of any sober reflection. As a matter of fact, the larger half of existence can be excellently executed on a penny whistle.

What a very good imitation those berries had been which Tom had sent from Paris; and how unlikely it was, since she and Paul were both poor, that she would have so magnificent a garment again. It would not be wanted, that was one comfort, if they lived quietly at Gleneira, which, of course, they must do, unless Paul were to try and get back to active service again. She must talk that over with him--that and many another thing--when they began life again down by the river side.

"It's ill singing the mavis' song but in the mavis' time," quoted Mrs. Cameron, with a wise shake of the head, when Marjory came whistling down the stairs to breakfast. "And half-past eight o' the clock on a chill November morn in a white world is no the time for anything save a sup o' hot porridge."

"I wasn't singing the mavis' song," she laughed; "it was the lark's, and they always begin early." And her clear voice broke gaily into the phrase, "And Phoebus 'gins to rise."

"Then it's ill singing on an empty stomach," persisted the old lady; "and ill manners, too, to be sae blithe when ye are leaving us. What's up wi' you, lassie?"

Marjory gave her a queer look. "Everything! it's going to be a fine day for one thing."

"Wha kens? That's no a thing ye can say at half-past eight o' the clock. Sing you the 'Flowers of the Forest,' my bairn; that's more o' the truth in this world."

Her old, faded voice quavered over the first line, "I've seen the morning, wi' gold the hills adorning," and Marjory's clear, young one took up the song cheerfully, "And loud tempest storming before the mid o' day." Then she paused mischievously. "That's a foolish version, though; the old one is better: 'I've heard the lilting at our yowe milking, Lassies a' lilting before the dawn o' day.' And dawn is before half-past eight o' the clock, even in November."

Mrs. Cameron looked at her somewhat mollified, beating time with her mittened fingers to the familiar rhythm.

"Weel! weel! One way or the t'ither it's the bonniest song ever sung in this world, and I mind, when I was a lassie, thinkin' that my jo--he wasna John, my dear,--sang it like the angels out o' heaven. But there! commend me to a lassie that's in love wi' the most ordinar' o' men for a blasphemous sacrilegious creature, if he's weel favoured, and that's the truth. There isn't one o' the cardinal virtues, but she'll dig up--maybe from some ither decent man's kale yard and plant it amang his weeds wi' a light heart. Aye! and watter it wi' tears too when she finds it no thrivin'. It's the way o' women, and she's happier when she gives up the gairdening and sets to rear bairns instead."

"I wish Will could hear you admit that children are a comfort," laughed Marjory, from her porridge.

"And what's hindering him but sloth?" asked the old lady, rushing eagerly to an old battle ground. "But there! was it not predicted as the end o' a' things. Just a great Darkness as o' Night, and that is what folks is coming to nowadays. It just beats me to roust the hussies from their beds before six. And it's no from them bein' hirelings a'together, for it's the same with the cottages. Where the peat smoke used to go up wi' the mist wreaths at the earliest blink, there's naething but an empty lum. Aye! and a cauld hearth! Not even a gathering peat to keep the warmth o' home about the place. But there! what could ye expect wi' such names as they give the matches--Lucifers and Damnstickers."

"My dear mother!" exclaimed Will, in horrified accents, as he lounged in lazily.

"I'm no swearing, William," she retorted, with great dignity. "Tho' maybe I hae a claim to be angry an' sin not, wi' a farmer son that comes down to his breaking o' bread when the beasts have begun to chew the cud."

"My dear mother!" quoth Will, good-naturedly. "You look after the beasts, and my corn is all carried."

"Weel! weel! When I'm carried to me grave ye'll find the difference, even if ye get a wife. Aye, aye! I ken fine what she'll be like--just one o' the sort wi' a hump somewhere. I kenna whaur the fashion'll put it then, since 'of that hour knoweth no man,' but it will be somewheres, an' her hair will be as if a clucking hen had bin scrapin' in't."

"I deny it; I deny it," laughed Will; "when I marry, I shall marry a girl just like Marjory. Only she shall not be quite so tall, or so clever, and shall be thinner, and less opinionated--more of my sort, and----"

"And her hair shall be of a different colour," laughed Marjory, in her turn; "I'm glad I don't leave you heartbroken--or anyone else, either," she added, half to herself.

And as she passed through her little sitting-room, before starting on her rendezvous with Paul, she paused for an instant before her letter to Tom Kennedy, which still lay unfinished, as she had left it, and looked down again on those last words. They were true still, and with a sudden impulse she took up the pen to say so.

"Tom!" she wrote, "the problem is solved! Paul has come back to me, and we are going to begin a new life together. Yet, I stretch out my hands to you, dear, as I did before, and say 'Friendship is a bigger thing than love!'"

Then she went gaily through the garden to pick a late carnation for Paul's buttonhole, and as she picked it she sang the "Flowers o' the Forest."

"I've seen Tweed's silver streams,
Glittering in the sunny beams,
Grow drumly and dark as he row'd on his way."

The tune, with its haunting cadences, lingered in her mind, and more than once fell from her lips, when with a light heart she faced the ups and downs of the white road as it crept round the loch to where the bridge, spanning the river, would enable her to strike across the moss-hags to the alder-fringed bank above. And Paul would be on the other side as he had been before. But he should not jump this time, for that was one of the things she did not like; those things which she was going to take out of his life and hers. The very thought, indeed, of the risk of a slip made her shiver as she paused for a moment on the bridge, and saw the yellow-brown flood, swollen with the night's rain, rushing against the piers.

"Drumly and dark!" Drumly it was, yet scarcely dark. It ran too fast for that, and up yonder, where she was to meet Paul, it would be a mass of foam with yellow lights in it. A sort of syllabub of a river pouring over the curved edge of the rock heavily. Not like water at all, but like some drugged draught; falling not with a roar or a rush, but with slow, deafening boom. The waters of Lethe might fall so, she fancied. Well! Paul should run no risk of them to-day, for she was before her time, and would be there to warn him. So thinking, she clambered down to the water's edge, and seating herself on the only level slab of rock, which projected slightly over the boiling pool below, she faced the downward course of the river, certain thus of seeing the first glimpse of her lover's tall figure above the bracken which crested the almost perpendicular rocks on the other side.

"I've seen this morning." It was a most distracting tune! All the more so because the words would follow Mrs. Cameron's sentimental lead, instead of keeping to the old lament with the lilt of battle and sudden death in it.

"The flowers o' the forest that fought aye the foremost,
The prime o' our land are cauld in the clay."

That was why they played it as a Dead March in the Highland regiments. If Paul decided not to retire, it might be played at his funeral some day. At Paul's funeral! The very thought seemed impossible; and yet the girl's heart throbbled more with pride than fear. "That fought aye the foremost." Yes! if she were a soldier's wife that was what a soldier should do, even if she had to sit "drearie, lamenting her dearie."

It was too bad, she told herself, for the tune to haunt her so, since Paul would be coming soon now, and when they had first met her head had not been full of the "Flowers of the Forest" and such things; she had been reading one of Tom's letters. How foolish of her not to have brought one to complete the illusion! unless, indeed, there were, by chance, one in her pocket. Yes! a scrap of one, old enough to rouse her curiosity and engross her attention as she

smoothed it out and began to read.

"To be disappointed in love! The phrase is arbitrarily bound up with the state of celibacy. Wherefore, my dear Marjory? wherefore? If love, as we once agreed, I think, is the touchstone of life, then marriage appears to me to be the continual essay of love, where, alas! the gold does not often reach the standard for hall marking; therefore it is conceivably better to be continually in love and not to marry. I don't know how it is, Mademoiselle Grands-serieux, but my philosophy invariably ends in paradoxes of doubtful propriety--now, doesn't it?"

She looked up smiling, then rose to her feet quickly, for there was a rustle behind her. Paul might have been there ahead of her after all, and have gone up to look at the river. Yes! there was someone at the head of the fall, where the solitary rowan tree leant above the alder-bushes, for the branches swayed.

"Paul!" she cried across the boom of the river, "is that you? Come down a bit; I'm here!"

"I'm coming, Miss Marjory, I'm coming," answered a childish voice; "but it is the berries I'm getting for you first. It is the last I will be getting you in Gleneira, I'm thinking, and they're real beauties, whatever."

Great heavens! how reckless of the boy! yet, was not recklessness in the blood? There he was, clinging to an overhanging branch; any instant he might fall, and---- "Paul!" she cried quickly, peremptorily; "come down at once. I don't want them."

She saw his bright, flushed face through the sparse yellowing leaves, close to the bunch of red berries, clutched by the little brown hand. So like that picture of his mother--so like--so like Paul, too!--her Paul. Ah, God in heaven!

The child had slipped. "Hold tight, Paul! Hold tight!"

Vain cry! Almost before it was uttered the seething foam with the sunny glints in it had stifled his swift scream.

Marjory made no sound. White, desperate, she leant over the slippery edge of the shelf, clutched at something that seethed upwards for a second, lost her balance, and was gone--in silence. The heavy foam closed over her like a snow-drift with the sun on it, and all the help the bravest heart could have given was the hope that unconsciousness might come quickly through some kindly rock, and not in the slow agony of suffocation.

It was all over in a minute, for Nature knows her own mind when she is in the tragic mood. She allows no time for unavailing tears. When, not a minute afterwards, Paul Macleod's cry of "Marjory! Marjory!" with its ring of glad certainty, echoed over the pool, there was not a sign to show that she would ever give answer to his call again.

"Marjory! Marjory! Marjory!"

Pitiful appeal, though he knew it not, not even when a vague wonder at her tardiness clouded the careless joy which had come to him with this dawn of a new day, a new life. For the night seemed to have stolen his fears as fit companions for its shadows, and left him nothing but his hopes.

"Marjory! Marjory! Marjory!"

Is there anything in the wide world so terrible as the slow dread which comes as the minutes pass unavailing by? --as the certainty that something has gone amiss seems to grow from the very passion of protestation against the possibility?--and then, when fear has gone, and unknown grief is the companion of the fruitless search, in which a wild hope will spring up sometimes to intensify the pain? Of such things all men may surely pray that fancy, and not memory, may speak.

It was Tom Kennedy's letter--lighter than the love which had penned it--that gave the first clue, and the hope went out from Paul Macleod's face for ever when his quick eye found it like a foam bubble in a backwater near the ford.

"It will be in the Long Pool we must be looking," whispered the rough, tender voices to each other, but Paul heard. Paul knew, Paul understood what would come--if not that night, then the next day--or the next.

But Fate was merciful, and did not prolong the agony.

"Don't look, laird! Oh, my dear! you that I carried in my arms as a laddie--don't look," sobbed old Macpherson, as, with the first streak of the following dawn, the men who had been working all the night long bent over the oil-strewn, torch-lit depth through which the grapnel came up, slowly, heavily.

But Paul was no coward. He had looked death steadily in the face many and many a time.

"Stand back, John!" he said quietly. "I'll lift her in."

And as he held her there in his arms while they drifted down stream a space to a shelving grassy bank, he bent over her calm face, and thanked "whatever gods there be," passionately, for the gift of that sharp cut just showing beneath the damp curls through which some friendly rock had brought a quick end to life. As he looked up again, the dawn was out-paling the stars, and the birds in the alder-bushes were stirring into song.

"What day is it?" he asked, drearily, of old John; and that sudden forgetfulness was the only sign he showed at the time of the terrible shock he had sustained. Yet none who noticed it could ever forget the look which came to his face, when, guided by the clue given by the child's cap still clenched in the girl's hand, a further search ended in the discovery of little Paul's body, and Marjory's lover realised that she must have lost her life in the effort to save his namesake. Indeed, in after years, old John, telling the tale, would often say that he never went in such fear of seeing murder done as when Mr. Gillespie had suggested the touching propriety of burying the brave girl and her little friend side by side. He had even taken the bunch of rowan berries found in the boy's fingers from the girl's breast, where they had laid them, as no doubt they had been intended to lie, saying, in a sort of fury, that nothing of the child's should come near her. But beyond that he made no sign.

And old John said true. Paul Macleod came back courteous and calm among the many mourners who climbed one sunny afternoon to that sunny spot on the southern slope of the hill, where Marjory had said the light lingered longest. James Gillespie, his fair, florid face gaining a dignity from his office, leading the way bareheaded, in his white surplice, through the dead bracken and over the heathery slopes, while his voice steadied itself over the words of consolation and hope. Tom Kennedy, and Will, the laird, and Mr. Wilson--who, old as he was, would not be gainsaid--carrying their dear dead, resting at times upon some lichen-covered rock, or aided by other hands, tenderly, sorrowfully, willing as theirs, falling for a time a step behind. All, save Paul, who, setting even old John's offer of help aside, kept his clasp tight upon the tough ash staff until, as they passed the wishing-well on their downward way, he broke it across his knee fiercely and flung the pieces on the dismal little pile. And then it was that Father Macdonald, who, with sad, serene eyes, and softly moving lips, had followed at a little distance, pleaded with the Great Judge for another soul needing mercy.

And Paul came back courteous and calm also from that smaller, drearier procession, which laid the new-found heir among his forbears in the stone vault belonging to the Macleods, far over by Ardmore point, in the old kirk-yard. Dr. Kennedy, knowing all the circumstances, would fain have spared the empty honour to the dead boy, but all his arguments in favour of silence were unavailing. So old Peggy's little grandson rested under a broad, silver plate, proclaiming him to be the only son of Ronald Alister Macleod, of Gleneira, and Janet Duncan, his wife. The sleet showers were slanting bitterly; and the outgoing tide, buffeting with the westerly wind, almost swamped the little white coffin as it lay in the bottom of the "Tubhaneer," while Paul sate steering for the point steadily, as if he were not chilled through to the marrow of both body and soul.

It was the drenching he got, no doubt, as he stood alone, as chief mourner, on the bare, wind-swept point, that made him look so ghastly. He said so, at any rate, when Dr. Kennedy, noting his appearance with professional eyes, recommended him to go to bed. It was Indian ague, he said, nothing more; he was subject to it; had, in fact, had several similar attacks at Gleneira.

So he retired, courteously, calmly as ever, to the Big House, where he set aside all offers of companionship. And there, Dr. Kennedy, with that look on Paul Macleod's handsome face haunting his professional soul, sought him next morning on pretence of saying goodbye. But by that time Paul was past anything save that odd, rhythmical tossing from side to side of the restless head, which comes when the brain is conscious of nothing but the fever raging in it.

Lord George came down at once, gentle as any woman, and surprised to hear the long tale Dr. Kennedy had to tell, for Paul had only written of the sad accident. And Lady George followed, with two plain, black dresses and a little assortment of highly starched linen collars and cuffs in her portmanteaux, ready at all points to take up the role of nurse; though why a woman should nurse better in handcuffs, which prevent all natural play of the wrist, and why a patient should be supposed to like the dangling of starched cap-strings in his face, is another matter.

And still the head tossed restlessly, and the parched lips went on muttering, muttering. At the first, of many things faintly articulate; many things, and of many places; then, by degrees, centring round one time, one scene; finally emerging into a monotonous whisper--

"Violet! Violet! Violet!"

"I think we had better telegraph for Mrs. Vane," said Dr. Kennedy, looking grave; "his mind has gone back to that time when she nursed him through something similar. It is often so in brain cases, and we cannot afford to lose a chance of saving him--sane. That previous attack lessens the chance terribly."

She came, of course, without an instant's delay, as she would have come to anyone who needed her extraordinary tact and care; and Dr. Kennedy gave a sigh of relief when, stealing in for a look about dawn on the next day, he found her seated on a stool beside the low camp bed, one hand laid lightly on the sick man's breast, the other as lightly keeping the ice bag on his forehead, while he lay still, quite still.

"I used to do it before," she whispered, "and it seems to soothe him--do you think it foolish?"

For Dr. Kennedy, with a smile, had looked round the room, wondering at the woman's quick touch which had transformed it. A night-light flickered from the floor in one corner, the curtains had gone and the bed was shifted to the centre, so that the mingled light of waning night and dawning day fell sideways on the patient, and he could have seen--if he could have seen at all--the door set wide open to the long corridor to which some of Peter Macpherson's orange trees, the scarlet hibiscus, and a few hot-house plants gave the look of a verandah. A faint scent from them filled the air, and the large, empty room, almost devoid of furniture, had lost its snug English comfort altogether.

"Foolish?" he echoed, going to the window, and looking out, absently. "Who can say? The brain knows its own secrets. He seems to have responded to the suggestion, and, for all we can tell, is ten years younger to-day than he was yesterday."

"I wish he were! I wish he were." The whisper came so passionately, that Dr. Kennedy turned and looked at her curiously, sadly.

"He is no worse, surely," she asked, rising softly, her hands seeming to melt away, as it were, leaving the sick man unconscious of their going. "Surely he is not worse?"

"No! I was only thinking it might be better for us all if his memory stopped where it is now--if he could forget."

She clasped her hands together tightly. "If he could!--if only he could forget--I would not care how much I remembered."

EPILOGUE.

It was once more autumn. The rowans were as red, the heather as purple, as it had been in the year when Jeanie Duncan had sate for her portrait and Marjory Carmichael had taken her holiday; as red, as purple, as both will be until--

"The slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,
Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,
Till the strength of the waves of the high tides humble
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink."

For Nature is supremely indifferent whether she gives birth to fools or knaves, or whether the Great Reaper fills his sheaf with wheat or tares.

The evening shadows were lengthening in the Glen, and from the little school-house by the horse-chestnut tree the cadence of children's voices rose and fell over the stirring measure of a processional hymn.

"Not so fast! not so fast! who told you to gallop it like that?" cried a smartly dressed young woman at the harmonium; a young lady with that curious resemblance to a commonplace book, which the profession of teaching brings to all but clever faces.

"Miss Marjory was saying it should be gay-like," murmured a rebellious voice among the elder scholars; the younger pausing with awed glances at the only authority they had known.

"Then she was wrong," retorted the Reverend James Gillespie's owner. "It should be stately and solemn as befits a--a hymn. Don't you agree with me, James?"

"Perfectly, perfectly. The Bishop agrees also." His face beamed unalloyed content; for he had read "dust to dust, ashes to ashes," over many a coffin since his voice broke down one November morning some years ago, and the memory of one funeral scarcely troubles him more than another; each and all have a place in that growing sense of his sacerdotal position, which makes him greatly regret that in those earlier days he did not wear a biretta when exercising his priestly function in committing his flock to their graves.

And the evening shadows were lengthening also along the white road that curves and crests the points and bays of the loch. A glint of light where Paul had stood like St. Christopher, a deeper shadow where Marjory had sat listening to the blabbing of the waves. Light and shadow mingled in the woods, through which they had run hand in hand, though with every moment the sunset glow left some golden birch or scarlet cherry; and down among the tall, silver firs by the house a faint white mist was beginning to rise over the trim lawns.

"It is growing chill, Paul!" said an anxious voice.

"To be continued in our next, Blazes; your aunt is inexorable!" The tone was gracious as ever, but thinner, as Paul Macleod rose from his lounge chair.

"But, Uncle Paul! How many runs did you make?" cried Blasius, eagerly. It had been his first term at Harrow, and this tale he had been hearing of past prowess in cricket was too interesting to be thus left pointless.

"How many? I forget. Perhaps your aunt will remember----"

A little spasm of pain passed over Violet's face. "How lazy you are, Paul! You will end by remembering nothing."

"Why should I remember when you do it so much better than I? It was a good lot, Blasius, and I recollect being awfully proud at the time. But these things slip by, somehow. When you are as old as I am----"

"You really ought to go in, Paul!" came that warning voice, with a studied patience in it. "This is not the Riviera, remember."

"No, worse luck! I suppose it is the proper thing to come down here, but it is an awful bore in some ways. Ah! there's George, back from the hill--well, he likes it, that is one comfort."

Blanche stood at the jasmine-covered porch to welcome her husband, for the advancing years had, as is so often the case, decided her final selection of a part in favour of the devoted wife--the fact being that she was becoming a trifle too matronly for most of the others, while the growing independence of the children stood in the way of a satisfactory rendering of the maternal one.

"Taking him in? That is right," she said approvingly, to her sister-in-law, as Paul, on his wife's arm, paused to look at the birds old John's son was laying out on the step. Old John himself, sturdy on his legs as ever, but mindful of the dignity due to head keeperdom, standing by. And then, not to be outdone, she turned to her husband. "George! you ought not to dawdle about in wet feet. Please go in, too, and change."

"Wet? My dear, the moors are as dry as a bone. Aren't they, John?"

"As dry as they will have been these fifty years, whatever," replied the old man. "As dry as they would be that summer, Gleneira, when you and----"

"Do come in, Paul!" came the anxious voice, again. "Look, how the mist is rising----"

"By Jove! that's a fine young bird!" interrupted Paul, inconsequently, with a flash of his old interest. "By the way, Violet, you might tell the cook not to roast them to cinders as she did last night, and, while I remember it, I wish you'd speak to Cunningham about that horse----"

"Really, Paul!" said his sister; "I think you might give the grooms their orders yourself."

He smiled kindly, and laid his other hand upon his wife's, as together they went slowly to the smoking-room.

"I am afraid I give you a lot of trouble," he said apologetically, as he held the door open for her to pass through-- "but I have such a wretched memory, and you are so kind."

"Don't say that, Paul! don't say that; what does it matter? I am quite happy if you are."

She watched his face curiously, eagerly, almost passionately; but she saw nothing save that easy, kindly smile.

Had her wish been fulfilled? and had he left memory behind in the Valley of the Shadow, where he had left so much of the old Paul? She could scarcely tell, for he never spoke of that one summer, but lived his life as if it had not been.

* * * * *

But the light was lingering still on that steep slope, whence the purple cloud of Iona could be seen lying like an amethyst on the golden shield of the sea--for the sky was hung with blood-red pennants as if the hosts of heaven were going forth to war.

And Tom Kennedy looked out over sea and sky from the gravestone which told that Marjory Carmichael died in attempting to save the life of Paul Macleod. There was a bunch of red rowans on the green grass. He brings one every year when, his brief holiday over, he climbs over the hill--as he did on the last day he saw her--on his way back to the work-a-day world, and that hand-to-hand fight with Death in others which will cease with his own.

His eyes are troubled, for it comes back to him every year as he sits there that he might have saved her--if he had known.

Known what? A smile comes to his face as he takes out an old letter and reads the last words she ever wrote to him, "Yet I stretch out my hands to you and say, again and again, Friendship is a bigger thing than Love!"

The mists are rising even there as he turns to breast the hill, the cloud wreaths sweep solemnly in from the sea in stately curves, and as he pauses on the summit for a last look downwards, lo! there is nothing at all in earth, or sea, or sky, save himself and a grey, encircling mist. Love and Friendship, Life and Death, Sunshine and Shade! Where are they?

THE END.