

BEFORE THE SPRING.

The wind has blown the last year's leaves
From off the primrose head;
The lilac-shoot its rison cleaves;
The elm-tree tips are red.
And all about, though trees are bare,
And covert none to sing,
The blackbird heralds everywhere
The coming of the spring.
Sing on, sweet bird, for you have faith
To trust all darkness is not death!

The spring has signs to show her nigh,
And bid the world prepare;
Has joy no herald, or must I
Look for no future fair?
My heart seems barren as a wood
Where Spring comes nevermore;
No leaf shows from its sheath uncured;
No birds their raptures pour.
Yet, faithless heart, believing be—
The Spring must come again for thee!

—London Spectator.

The Professor's Darling.

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL.

CHAPTER I.

PROFESSOR ALAN NEIL.

Professor Neil was troubled in his mind. His breakfast remained untouched, and his fragrant coffee stood cooling in the cup into which he had poured it, with a steady hand and a tranquil mind, ten minutes before the postman had knocked.

He paced the little parlour with long strides and anxious looks; ran his fingers through his thick black hair, till it presented the appearance of a tumbled haystack; then unconsciously kicked the cat three good yards away from him, when she purringly rubbed herself against his legs, as was her almost hourly custom, causing the injured animal to beat a rapid retreat behind the arm-chair, from which safe ambush, if feline expression could be read aright, she glanced stealthily forth at intervals, and wondered if her beloved master had suddenly gone mad.

Alan Neil was the youngest professor in the College of St. Breeda, a university in the north of Scotland, which had sent more than one sturdy son across the border, to return in later years laden with honours gathered on the broad fields of science, where their opponents had been men of intellect and culture.

For more than a century St. Breeda had been famous for her professors and her scholars. Both, it is true, were of no ordinary calibre. Strongly-built, muscular Scotchmen mostly, who had been reared in Highland cottages, and played with nature among the purple heather until childhood imperceptibly merged into boyhood; and then came the teaching in the parish school-house—a plain, uninteresting building, generally situated in a clearing on the outskirts of a wood.

During the vacation, or "play," as it is termed in the North, as a rule, they were engaged in ordinary farm-labour on the paternal estate. This was the life even of the studiously inclined till about seventeen or so; and then, if they wished it, the gates of St. Breeda could be opened to the poorest of them through the competitive bursary system.

Not that each individual student could hope to gain a bursary, but in reality there were a great many who did; and if a poor Scotch lad is determined to go to college, he will find the means and way to pay his fees. He will fare scantily and dress poorly, but decently; will toil in the harvest fields in the autumn; will teach during the winter evenings; and, in the end, all barriers being overthrown, will drink his fill at the classic fountain to which he fought his way by slow and irksome but certain steps.

Alan Neil's father had owned the flour mills of St. Breeda. If you stood within the college portals on a still day, and listened, you could hear the great wheel turning in the stream, churning the water into the frost-like foam.

Alan was an only child, and his father's original intention had been to make a miller of him also; but the boy was destined to leave his mark elsewhere than on the old mill door.

Donald Neil lived long enough to see him leave St. Breeda the first student of the year—a circumstance which the old man scarcely appreciated as he ought to have done.

"Learning" was all very well in its way, he knew; but a flourishing corn merchant commanded more respect from him than the most gifted professors in Christendom.

From the little university town Alan went to Cambridge, and was a fellow of his college and a lecturer on some abstruse science when the professor of metaphysics in St. Breeda died, and Alan was offered and accepted the vacant chair.

So, at twenty-six, he was settled once more in his native town.

Society in St. Breeda was very exclusive, and old Neil, the miller's son, would have been completely ignored; but the young professor was quite a different person, and society longed to welcome him within her charmed precincts, but he waived her flattering overtures, and buried himself, socially speaking, in a quaint little house, amid a pile of dry and time-stained books.

His housekeeper was an elderly woman, a very dragon of respectability and virtue, who had known him when he was a curly-headed

boy, sailing his paper-boats in the old mill-dam, with his two constant playmates, Charlie Ross and Katey Glen, the minister's son and orphan niece, the latter of whom had found a home in the Manse since she was two years old.

Charlie Ross was a handsome, fair-haired, blue-eyed boy, who was perpetually in mischief. Who painted old Miss M'Whannel's pet cat a brilliant yellow, which effective top-dressing caused the poor animal great discomfort and several soapy scrubbing in hot water before she recovered her ermine whiteness. Who wrenched off door-knockers and changed shop signs with an energy worthy a better cause; sent half the parish on April fool errands; put pepper into the schoolmaster's snuff-box when he inadvertently left it on the desk an instant, and turned on the water-tap one evening, flooding the school-room, and thereby securing an unexpected holiday next morning. All these and a hundred other boyish escapades were laid, and not without good proof, at Charlie Ross's door.

But fifteen years had rung their changes since those halcyon days.

Old Mr. Ross slept with his fathers, and young feet pattered no longer about the Manse; for Mr. Graem, stern and grim to look on, reigned there alone in bachelor solitude.

Charlie and his wife—once little Katey Glen—had been five years in India, a friend of his father's having secured him a fairly remunerative appointment there. Now and then letters passed between him and his old chum. It was the advent of one of those rare missives which had caused the agitation previously mentioned on the part of the professor.

He sat down, and spreading it on the table, began to read it again; but after the first line, a great sob broke the stillness of the room.

Memory had flung her flood-gates wide open, and he saw three children sailing boats upon the surface of the old mill-dam. Two of the paper boats filled rapidly and sank, and one went floating bravely on to the other side.

So it had come to pass in earnest as it had been dimly shadowed forth in play. The waters of death had swamped their two frailarks; his alone still sailed securely on.

No wonder that the professor was sorrowful. The hand was powerless now that had traced those unevenly-pencilled lines. How characteristic they were of Charlie—lovable, handsome Charlie Ross! They were as follows:—

"DEAR OLD ALAN,—

"I have not written to you for nearly two years, and I shall never be able to do so again. But you must forgive me; for I have been in trouble, and all out of sorts. I am dying—that's a true bill. A tiger got hold of my leg yesterday when we were out hunting; but I am not able to write particulars. I was a fool to go, for I was as weak as a kitten. I had been down with fever and ague for weeks. However, I was feeling better, and up and about, and mounted my horse. I could scarcely keep in the saddle, and yet I went with a party into the jungle after an old brute who had been prowling around the station for some time.

"What I want to say is this: Katey died a year ago. I couldn't write at the time to let you know. I shall be gone by to-morrow; and my poor wee Stannie (she's just three years old) will be without a friend in the world. I am going to send her home to you. I know it will be a startler to you when you read this; but what can I do? I haven't a living sister, or cousin, or aunt; and what's worse, I haven't a penny to leave her. But I know that you will shelter the poor little thing—at any rate, till she grows up. Perhaps she can be a governess or something then. It's not her fault that her father was a ne'er-do-weel. I wonder if you are married; if you are, your wife is sure to be a nice woman. Ask her to be kind to Stannie. It's hard lines to die at twenty-six, but I've had a jolly life, taking it altogether; and it's weary work without Katey. I have—"

Here the letter ended abruptly, without signature or date. The professor put it back into his pocket, and took out another, written in a lady's delicate hand:—

"DEAR MR. NEIL,—

"Your friend, Mr. Ross, died about an hour after writing the unfinished letter which I have forwarded to you. My husband and I were with him at the last, received his wishes regarding his child, little Stannmore, and saw him buried beside his wife, in the English cemetery at Hydepore. We sailed for England almost immediately after, bringing little Stannie with us. I am anxious to deliver her into your keeping as soon as possible, for my mother, who resides in Devonshire, is very ill, and eagerly awaiting my coming. I am also impatient to see my children, who are with her. If you can be in London by Wednesday evening, I shall bring her to you at the Charing Cross Hotel. Telegraph immediately on receipt of this. I am at present at my sister's house, in Inverness Terrace. Captain Hunter has gone into the country to-day, or he would have written to you himself. He hopes to see you soon.

"With kind regards, I am

"Yours faithfully,

"CHARLOTTE HUNTER."

The professor got up in a hurry and consulted a "Bradshaw." By starting in an hour he could be in London at the time appointed. Summoning Janet, his housekeeper, he told her to put some things into a portmanteau at once, for he was going from home. The old woman would fain have questioned him as to the cause of his sudden resolution, but he gave her neither time nor opportunity.

Leaving the room, he walked into the passage, and put on his Inverness cape and broad-brimmed felt hat, which invested him with an aspect half clerical, half pedagogic, and going out, hailed a passing cab, and drove rapidly to the college.

He briefly explained to his assistant that urgent business called him suddenly to London, and that said assistant must go on as best he could for a few days without his superior.

Then he drove to the station, stopping an instant at his house in College Bounds to pick up his portmanteau. He sent off a telegram to Mrs. Hunter, took a second-class ticket, and before he had clearly realized what he was about, St. Breeda and her old grey towers lay miles behind him.

He had bought a newspaper, but he could not read; politics, English or Irish, contained no interest for him, and the Stock Exchange was worse than gibberish; but its pages served to shield his countenance from his opposite fellow-passenger, an obese farmer, who, nothing daunted by the slender encouragement that he received, discoursed eloquently on the merits of a new and fattening oil-cake, the excellence of which bovine delicacy the professor was willing to acknowledge, but unprepared to discuss.

Only one idea was in his mind during the long journey southwards. Charlie and Katie were both gone.

How fondly he had looked forward to making them welcome one day in his simple home they would never know now. Dearer than a brother had the minister's son been to Alan Neil. And Charlie Ross had known that, else on his death-bed he would not have bequeathed to him the most precious thing he possessed—his infant daughter. A legacy which most men would have hesitated to give, and few would have cared to accept; but neither time nor distance can put true friends asunder, and Charlie had felt very sure that Alan would be faithful to the trust reposed in him. Of the inconvenience and expense it would entail upon his friend, Charlie had not thought. He would have done as much for Alan, had circumstances demanded and permitted it.

Man like, the professor had not considered what he was to do with the child when he got her, or he would never have started off alone to London.

There were a dozen at least of his colleagues' wives or elderly sisters who would have gladly accompanied him on such an odd and romantic journey, had he expressed a desire for feminine help; but accustomed from boyhood to act alone, he took no one into his confidence.

The short November day was already ended, and the gas-jets scarcely penetrated the yellow fog which hung over London when the train rolled slowly into Charing Cross Station.

The professor stumbled awkwardly on to the platform, and stretched his cramped limbs leisurely, while his keen looks roved over the mountains of luggage in search of his diminutive portmanteau. He described it far down beneath a heap of hampers, despatch-boxes, and other bulky articles dear to the British tourist's heart. So waiting tranquilly, he watched his opportunity; and when his property was freed from its tottering top pressure, he grasped it boldly in his strong hand, and walked off with it in silent independence, to the undisguised contempt of a knot of unemployed porters who were hanging round.

"A private sitting-room and two bedrooms," was his brief order on entering the hotel. And declining all offers of dinner or refreshment in any form, he at once established himself in the former, and commenced to read again the letters which had been the cause of his hasty journey.

He stirred the fire into a blaze, and lighted a fourth burner, for the room seemed strangely gloomy. He wondered if the fog outside possessed some subtle power of penetrating through the stones and mortar? The thought suggested a problem worth working out, and he approached the still unblinded window with an idea of inspecting more closely the palpable yellow veil, when a knock at the door arrested his progress midway.

"Come in," he said, in his clear Scotch voice.

A waiter flung the door wide open in compliance with his invitation, and announced, "Mrs. Henry Hunter."

CHAPTER II.

STANNIE'S ADVENT.

"Good evening, Mr. Neil," said the newcomer, walking up to him, and holding out her left hand—her right one was clasped around a sleeping child, whose head nestled on her bosom. "Excuse the left hand; I did not wish to waken Stannie till she got here. She has slept in this position all the way, and the cab jostled fearfully over the stones. I'll let you see her in a minute; she is a pretty creature! I hope my Lotty, whom I haven't seen for three years, may be half as beautiful!"

He shook her left hand warmly, but otherwise stood like a man of wood. What on earth was he to do or say? He was not a ladies' man, scarcely knew how to address one. If it had been Captain Hunter, he might have got on well enough; but that outspoken, handsome woman took his very breath away. He could only gaze at her in an agony of shyness as she proceeded to take off the numerous shawls in which the child was wrapped.

"Wake up, dear!" she said, as she untied the black silk hood which hid the tiny sleeper's face. "Wake up, and look at uncle Alan! You remember papa told you about him out in India. Here he is, waiting to speak to you!"

Mrs. Hunter stooped down, and placed the child on the floor as she spoke; and Alan Neil's great chest heaved with emotion as he looked on the fragile Indian-dressed little one. Every feature in the lovely baby-face was Charlie's. The same finely-chiselled chin and nose; the bright blue eyes, and soft, clear skin and flow of yellow hair.

He held out his arms, and instinctively she made a faltering step towards him. The next moment her white dress, black sash, and shining curls were all crushed in an indiscriminate mass within his close embrace.

"She knows you quite well!" said Mrs. Hunter. "We have spoken of you constantly to her since her father died. I thought that you would like her to call you Uncle Alan, so we have taught her to do so."

"Thank you!" said the professor, hoarsely, speaking for the first time.

Mrs. Hunter looked around the room, as if in search of some one else, or, at least, some visible sign of another person; and a doubtful look came into her kindly countenance.

"Pardon me, Mr. Neil," she said, "but I am not aware if you are married or not. Mr. Ross said perhaps you were since he had heard from you."

"I am unmarried," replied the professor, smiling, and still studying Stannie's sleepy face.

"Then what will you do with this child? You had better give her back to me. She has been with me ever since her mother died. I have four children of my own, and one more in the nursery will make no more extra trouble. Shall I take her away again?"

"Never!" said the professor, clasping her closer to his breast. "I am grateful for your offer; but my poor friend left her to me. I shall keep her, and, in my rough way, try and fill his place towards her."

"You will do it very well," said Mrs. Hunter, quietly.

Some women can read men as they do an open book; and she read him in one swift glance. She had often heard the Rosses speak of him out in India, and had gathered from them that he was a man of rare talent, unfortunately combined with a reserve which at times amounted to bluntness. Consequently, she was prepared for his embarrassed silence, and took no notice of it; but she saw beneath the surface, and recognized his sterling worth, and to her his want of what is called manner was amply atoned for by the grand simplicity which characterized him, as it does all those on whom nature has stamped her royal insignia of gentleness.

"Stannie will sadly upset your bachelor arrangements," she continued. "Have you got a nurse for her?"

"A what?" asked the professor, nervously.

"A nurse," repeated Mrs. Hunter, laughing. "Do you propose travelling down to Scotland alone with her?"

"Had she a nurse coming home?" asked the professor, truly alarmed now, as a vision of himself making an entry into St. Breeda accompanied by a ginger-coloured ayah, rattling with bangles, and decorated with a nose-ring, presented itself in mental review.

"No; I took care of her myself mostly. When I was engaged, there was a soldier's wife who attended to her. I don't see what you are to do without a nurse. Shall I hunt up one to-morrow? I don't leave town till evening."

"I think not," he answered, unspcakably relieved. "I would rather leave that matter to my old housekeeper, Janet Scott. She holds the chief position in my small household; and I own to being the least bit frightened of her. I have not broken the news of Stannie's coming yet; but she will give her a warm welcome, for her parents' sake, I am certain; and an English nursemaid would find no favour with Janet, I'm sure."

"If you ever grow tired of your guardianship, Mr. Neil, or find that you are not capable of training up a little girl in the way she should go—for children are often more incomprehensible than grown people—I have had some experience of them, you see—will you promise to send her to me? I offered out in India to rear her as one of my own, and her father would have given her to me but for you; he said that you were the only person living whom he would like her to be indebted to for a home, so I could not press my claim. Indeed, I had none, except that I loved the child, and loved her poor mother, too. My husband, at present, is not what would be called wealthy; but he will be some day. He is the eldest son of Mr. Hunter, of Cumrie Chase. I merely mention this to let you know that the additional expense would be nothing."

Mrs. Hunter paused, and waited for his answer, half-regretting her words, for she knew that he would never, come what might, accept her offer.

"I hope that you will always be her friend,"—the professor spoke boldly now; his shyness had all melted away in the atmosphere of her genial presence;—"but Charlie Ross' dying wish must be honoured. Stannie is my child now. If anything should happen to me, however—life is a very uncertain thing, Mrs. Hunter—I shall have directions that she is to be sent to you. I'll even go further, and ask a promise