

The day was one of the few hot days which are seen in the Hebrides. The midsummer sun poured down its rays from a clear sky. There was no wind, and the sea that stretched out from the side of the road that led to Mairi's house was motionless as glass. A mile out a large steamer was passing up the Minch, and the black mass of smoke from its funnel was the only shadow on the face of the water. She had two miles to walk in the pitiless heat, and she was already wearied with the way she had come. The excitement had further exhausted her. The feeling that she was now disgraced before all the parish seemed to choke her. Her brain throbbed with racking pain. Her one thought was to hurry home and hide herself. The road looked to her as if it were heaving in billows before her. She staggered, but recovered herself; then again she faltered, and fell senseless at the roadside. There a passing neighbour found her, and brought her home in his cart. Her family gathered round her, and gently they laid her on her bed. Two days she lingered, but she was unable to speak. Twice did the old minister, her neighbour, read and pray with her, and her eyes watched him intently. The last time he read to her the wondrous vision of John, who saw the new Jerusalem and the followers of the Lamb. "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more," he read very slowly. . . . "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." When he stopped, she tried to speak. Her son declared that the words she tried to utter were, "He will not shut me out." Ere the prayer which followed was finished Mairi Ban had gone to Him who said, "Whosoever cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out."

III.

Two months after Mairi Ban was laid to her rest, there landed from the steamer at Dunskeith a bronzed and stalwart passenger. There was nobody to meet him, for nobody expected him; and among the little company that waited the steamer's coming there was none who knew him. He made his way to the hotel, and, hiring a dog cart, drove off without delay to Sligheach. Alistair MacRaid had come home from the far-off gold fields of Australia, and in his eyes there was a light which is only to be seen in the eyes of those who return after long years to the mothers they love. As he drove rapidly through the heather-covered moors, and felt the sweet air with the perfume of the thyme brushing his face, he drew long breaths. It was good to be alive, he felt. As the evening shadows were lengthening, at a sudden turn of the road he saw the long coast line of Sligheach stretching forth before him in reaches of sand diversified by rocks, tapering to a point in the Aird, which stretched far out into the sea, pointing to the west. The line where the shore and the sea met was drawn in loops and curves; and all the little bays and havens, where the waves danced gently, had each for him a memory of other days. From all the houses that were dotted over the braes the smoke rose in straight columns, and then spread out fan-like over the land, for the evening was very still. The wanderer felt a lump rising in his throat as he feasted his eyes on it all. In all the world there was not such a peaceful scene as this—the home of his youth, which he meant to leave no more. The night was falling rapidly, and in the gathering gloom he met none who knew him. As he wished to come quietly to his mother, he told the driver to turn a mile from her house, and that last mile he walked rapidly with fast-beating heart. With trembling hand he opened the wicket gate, set in the bountree

hedge he knew so well. There was no light in the house. He tried to open the door, but it would not give. He turned to the window, and he saw that it was covered with dust. At the sight a great fear seized him. Over the place he felt the brooding silence which one only feels in a deserted house.

The nearest house was the manse, and thither he ran. It was a white, drawn face that the servant saw when she opened to him, and it was a strained voice she heard asking for the minister. The old man was at home; and when he saw the long yearned-for son enter his room with a look of agony on his face, a feeling of great pity seized him, and he could find no words. It was in silence that the two men clasped hands.

"My mother!" said Alistair brokenly, as he took the proffered chair by the peat fire that glowed in the grate. "Where is she?"

"Oh, Alistair!" answered the minister, "have you not heard? It is sorry I am to be the first to tell you the sore news. Your mother is gone to her rest."

And Alistair buried his face in his hands, but through his fingers the minister saw the salt tears falling. For a long while there was silence in the room, broken only by the half-smothered sobs of the man who half an hour ago was the strongest of the strong. Then, when he was master of himself again, Alistair raised his head and looked at the minister.

"Tell me about her death," he said.

Very gently and slowly the old minister told him all, deeming it better that he should hear it from him than that he should be left to gather the garbled stories of the people. Slowly and reluctantly he told it, for he knew the pain it would cause him. When the sad story was told, there was again a long silence, while the peats were mouldering into grey ashes before them.

"Oh! how could they treat my mother so?" Alistair at last exclaimed. "She was the best of women. It was the knowledge that here at home she was always praying for me that kept me from ruin in the hell in which I lived these many years. Surely they must have had another reason."

"Many things have happened since you went away last," replied the minister. "The people have all left the church they went to in your time, and the minister is dead. They meet now for worship two miles away; and Eachann Donn is their leader. Your mother was frail and not always able to walk, and she seemed to think I was kind to her, so she came to my church now and then."

Again the strong man was unable to control his emotion, and he said: "For ten years I have toiled, and my one thought was that I might come home to my mother again to make her happy and comfortable till she died. Many a night, coming home, I stood on deck listening to the throb of the engines, thinking each throb was bringing me nearer the moment when I would steal in at the gloaming and say 'Mother' as I used in the old days—till I could feel out there in mid-ocean her hands going round my neck. And this is the end of it all!"

And he flung out his hands in an attitude of utter dejection and misery.

"She was the godliest woman I ever knew!" he exclaimed, as he was going out into the night; "and they killed her! I will never enter a church again!"

And he never did. He stayed a fortnight with one of his brothers; but the two Sundays he was in Sligheach, though there were four places of worship to choose from, where there used to be only two, he refused to go to any. He spent the days among the hills, and at the fortnight's end he left. He was

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a wanderer, he said, and now he could not stay. On the day he drove off to Dunskeith the wind drove the rain from the sea in blinding showers, and through the mists he passed to return no more. After a year had gone, word came that Alistair MacRaid had died of fever on the Rand.

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