

UNDER THE EVENING LAMP

A HIGHLAND CHURCHYARD.

I.

The long dazzling glint of a golden sunset lay across the churchyard of Ballonaver, on a chill evening late in the autumn. In its mellow light the green smooth-cut grass on the graves around took on once again the emerald tint and vivid freshness of summer, but even now decay was broadly stamped across the face of Nature. The leaves of the trees now fluttered nervously in the breeze, and anon, yielding to its caresses, chased each other in among the old tombstones. The farm-lands adjoining the churchyard wore a bare and deserted look. Where but a week or two before the waving of the rich golden corn had made music in the wind, there now remained but long stretches of darkening stubble.

The church—a plain whitewashed building with a loop of red stone on its western gable wherein hung the bell—stood on a little eminence, on three sides of which the churchyard clomb upwards till it nestled close under its walls. To the west the churchyard opened out into a gentle incline, smoothly gravelled and thickly lined with trees, leading to the manse. In the opposite direction it overlooked the school and school-house, an old thatched Highland shieling, and, just in the hollow on the nearer side of these, a marshy place where three waters met—brown babbling country burns, neither deep nor strong. People said that the restless spirits of the dead came to the streams in the eerie hour of midnight, and, thanks to the running water, dared not go farther. There, 'twas said, on the churchyard side of the water's brink, their shrill cries broke with startling distinctness on the silence of the night. A stone bridge spanned the larger burn formed by the meeting of the three streamlets. On the bridge, it was believed, phantom funerals in their slow procession to the churchyard often came to a halt, resting their melancholy burden on the broad stone wall which protected either side. This latter phenomenon, unlike the other, was sometimes to be seen in the daylight, but oftener in the dusk between gloaming and dark.

There were numerous tombstones in the old churchyard. Three of them stood high and conspicuous forming a triangle in the centre; a plain, flat slab marked the resting place and recorded the brave deeds of a clansman who had fallen 400 years before in the battle of Pinkie-clough. Another was built into the wall of the church, and bore, besides a long Latin inscription, a chiselled representation of skull and crossbones.

A stranger would wander about lost in thought as he marked these and other objects of interest. Suddenly the stillness would be broken and his thoughts recalled by ringing laughter and a loud hurrah, telling of the dismissal of the school, and for once the reverse of an old truth would become true—"In the midst of death we are in life." On the afternoon of this autumn day the children had dispersed at the dinner hour as usual. On their liberation there was for the first few moments a wild scamper, seemingly in all directions, but gradually the majority went homewards for dinner, while the others betook themselves to their favorite playtime resorts. The latter had their luncheon in their school-bags, their homes being too far away to go to in the hour allowed for dinner.

Among these was Anna Stour, a daughter of the farmer in Mullindive, a small farm located miles away up in the hills. Anna was the youngest in the family, and in appearance was rather plain compared with her sisters, who were considered good-looking. She was quiet and meditative. They were bold girls of the mountain side, daring and agile as the rock-goats in the corries of Choille Mohr.

Anna had not much appetite for luncheon on that particular afternoon. These past days she had been eating the strong food of a bitter sorrow, the bitterest that can possibly befall the tender years of a sensitive child. The grim messenger had been to the farm-house of Mullindive, and had taken away the light of that home—Anna's mother. No one had understood Anna as her mother had done. Thus it was a big weight, almost of despair, that settled on her gentle spirit when they lifted the black coffin out of the house and slowly carried it down the hill-side to the churchyard by the school.

Her father was a kind-hearted man, but plain and blunt in speech and manners. On the other hand, his wife had been one of those loving and gentle creatures whose very presence creates a haven of quiet rest. People wondered when the bluff, outspoken farmer took her to be his wife; but they had been very happy together all those years. As the ivy twists itself around the sturdy oak, so his wife's trustful disposition had entwined itself around the coarser, stronger fibre of Farmer Stour's nature; and when she was taken away he felt the loss keenly. But he never spoke of his grief, scarcely even would admit it to himself; much less could he realize the poignancy of his children's sorrow.

"Let Anna go back to school," he said, the day after the funeral; "her lessons will soon cause her to forget the change." Next morning, accordingly, Anna was in her place, attired in plain black dress and hat, both heavily trimmed with crape. But it all seemed like a dream to her. What a strange, terrible, mysterious thing death must be, she thought. Could she not die too, and go to be with her mother; or was she doomed to draw out a long life of loneliness and sorrow ere she could look on that dear face again? She was left very much to herself in school. The schoolmaster was a kind-hearted man, and did not exact from her the same fulfilment of her tasks as he would have done in ordinary circumstances. The boys spoke in subdued voices in her presence. The girls felt as though there were a great black shadow overhanging them, in the presence of which any attempt at gossip would be nothing less than sacrilege. The awe of death is strong, and fresh on young minds, and the sympathies it awakens are great in comparison with the outspoken condolences of maturer years.

When the dinner hour had come Anna betook herself unobserved to the churchyard. This was the first time she had ever looked upon a grave holding anyone dear to her. As her eyes lighted on the mound standing a little higher than the graves around—the earth had not yet quite settled down over its kindred earth—a great passion of grief seized her. Scarcely knowing what she does, she

casts herself prostrate on the grave, and begins to pour out her sorrow there, unheard and unheeded, save by Him who puts the tears of the orphan in His bottle; and their despairing cries—are they not recorded in His book?

The flood of tears brought her a certain relief. The first passionate outburst over, she thought she would like to remain always by her mother's grave, and perhaps at length, on some clear summer morning, when the sun shone warm and bright, and the birds sang in the trees around, she would go to be with her forever.

It was not strange that Anna did not hear the bell when it rang for the reassembling of the school. Lessons had gone on for nearly an hour ere it was noticed Anna Stour did not occupy her usual place. Three of the boys knew where she would be found, when it was told she was missing. They had been in the churchyard in their playtime. With merry hearts and amid the jingle of bells, two of them, held in with bit and bridle by the third, had run round the corner of the church into sight of the spot where Anna lay. Unconscious of their approach as she was, no sooner had they set eyes upon Anna than they fell back very much like cowards caught in the act of doing something mean. The bells ceased to jingle, and the boys quietly took their way down the hill to the school.

Anna did not quite understand when the schoolmaster's wife came and led her gently away from the grave. She muttered something about her head, and it needed but a glance to show that there was something seriously wrong with her. Her face was white, and she trembled as with cold, and yet there were great beads of perspiration on her brow. She was well cared for in the school-house until the time for the dismissal of the school came, and then word was sent by one of the boys from the neighborhood of Mullindive for her father, who immediately left in the gig, well provided with warm wraps, to bring her home.

II.

The silvery sheen of the moon was on the waters of Loch Goille far away in the west—so far that it seemed on the utmost verge of the world—as Farmer Stour drove in again through the old-fashioned stone gateway that led to his home, on that chill, late autumn evening. On that homeward journey, with the still little form by his side, and as the gradually lengthening shadows crept over the mountain ridge, strange, deep reflections, stirred by the memory of the past, took an irresistible hold of him. For the first time in many years the strong unemotional man found himself wiping away two great tear drops from off his cheeks.

That night Anna was delirious, and when the doctor came he said she was dangerously ill with brain fever. For weeks it was a question of life and death with her. In her ravings she often imagined herself in her mother's company, sitting with her in the garden after school, or strolling of a Saturday afternoon down by the hedgerows to the river side. One day, when all was quiet, she spoke of a certain Sabbath afternoon when she and her sisters were gathered round their mother's knees for their usual Scripture lesson. Gradually, and in confused sentences, she repeated some of the conversation that had passed between them on that occasion. Jessie, her eldest sister, who scarcely ever left the sick-room, heard Anna's words, and her mind also went back to that afternoon's lesson. Their Scripture reading had been in John xiv.; and as their mother read the opening verses, Jessie now remembered there had come a slight tremor into her voice and a look of sadness into her eyes. She stopped at the third verse—"In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go"—and then she explained that these words were spoken by the Son of Man to comfort His disciples in view of His approaching death. Now that He is going back to God, He gives them the assurance of His unchanging love. Then followed the application, and the voice was husky this time: "My children, you will remember these words when I have gone to these many mansions, and you will think of them as a message from your mother, who waits for you in that better land. God will take care of you, my dear ones, and bring you all there in His own good time."

The crisis in Anna's illness came the night following. The only opinion the doctor had ventured for a week was that if she survived the crisis he had little doubt she would soon be well, and those who knew the doctor interpreted that to mean that he believed she would never reach the fever's height. He remained at the farm house all that night, and nearly all the time was at Anna's bedside. Slowly the watchers counted the hours. By the time the first grey streaks of dawn began to light the eastern sky, either the little life would have ebbed away, or new hope would have set in. The wind moaned deeply as it rose and fell all through that long night; above its sound could be heard the steady, long "waa" of the river as it rolled over its pebbly bed. But those who watched heard Nature's voices as though they heard them not.

When the doctor left for home in the early morning, it was with a lightsome heart. The case had been successfully carried through; far above and beyond that he was glad at the thought that the motherless child of his friend Farmer Stour had been spared, and was now on a fair way towards recovery—a joy and gratitude in which many others shared.

Winter had passed away, and the return of spring once more gladdened the earth ere Anna Stour had regained sufficient strength to enable her to go out into the fresh green fields, or down the old favorite walk to the river-side. But during the long days and weeks of her slow recovery she had been wonderfully happy. The first deep wounds of her great sorrow were closed up; the long night of semi-consciousness that followed had given place to a quiet serenity, and even buoyant hope, which astonished those who knew her best. Explain it, or trace with any degree of certainty how it had been wrought, she never could, but out of the great unseen the message of that Sabbath afternoon's lesson—her mother's message from the better land—had come to her in the power of the Divine Love: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."—JAS. MACKENZIE.