

Jeannie Sinclair, THE LILY OF THE STRATH.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SHEPHERD'S SHEILING AND ITS IMAGERY—THE TRAVELLER WALKED—THE NATURE OF WILL SANDERSON'S REVENGE SHADOWED FORTH.

It was growing dark rapidly, and the keen wintry wind came over the heights in mournful gusts. The sky, too, was lowering, and small hard snowflakes began to whirl through the air.

'Make you anything out yonder, Randal?' asked. 'Sometimes I see a speck, which as often I lose again in the gloom.'

'Yes, I see something darker than the road—a man's figure, as near as I can guess.'

'Is he whom we expected—it can be no other,' said Will, his ill-favoured countenance brightening with eager satisfaction.

'He won't be here for ten minutes yet—let us have the glass prepared.'

Returning to the interior, Will threw a fresh log on the fire; and by the light of the blaze it produced, he brought out an empty phial of coarse glass, which stood on a shelf, beside a larger stone flask.

'That's enough for a last dose,' muttered Will, 'Mark must dole out the rest of it as it is needed.'

'It's bitter cold,' remarked the youth, as with a shiver he sat down again near the fire.

'Take a pull at the flask, that will warm you,' replied his companion, as he put the glass on the shelf again, and handed him the article he had named.

'After you then, father.'

'Nay, boy, I shan't drink to-night. The fierce delight which vengeance gives is warm enough for me. I want nothing to come between my task and the full feeling of its triumph. There, take the flask, while I go to intercept the man whose office I covet for the morrow.'

'When I return with him, you go outside with the lantern and make a signal to Mark.'

'All right,' was the reply, accompanied with a nod, as he took the flask from the other's hand. Without saying more, Will went out and proceeded down the slope till he came to the road, along which he slowly sauntered, peering eagerly forward through the deepening darkness for the form of him whom he expected to meet.

The night was now getting to be a wild one. The keen north wind blew more severely than ever, and with the coming on of darkness, the storm, which had been all the day gathering in the lowering sky, threatened to burst forth in bitter fury.

Already the snowflakes flew thickly through the air, and rustled with dreary hiss among the withered grass and thistles and hard brown heather on the moor. The cold was intense, the driving particles of snow smarted the skin of the face as they struck against it, and the piercing wind chilled the frame to the very bones.

In his impatience, Will Sanderson thought the figure he looked for would never meet his view, and he began to think that he and Randal had mistaken a thorn bush or the stump of a tree by the wayside for the presence of a human being.

With a muttered curse of disappointment he was about to return to the sheiling when his eager glance into the darkness was rewarded by seeing a form emerge and retraced his footsteps, but at a pace so slow that the traveller behind should soon overtake him.

The man—for man he was—came on with rapid and surly step, bending his head to escape as far as he could the biting frost, wind and peppering snow.

Under his arm he carried a small bundle, but otherwise he was unencumbered.

Not many yards from the footpath which led from the road to the sheiling, he came close to Will Sanderson's rear that the latter paused and turned towards him.

'A wild night this for travelling, friend,' observed the grey, darting towards the stranger a penetrating look.

'The worst I was ever out in,' was the reply, in a deep, gruff voice. 'I wish to heaven I was at my journey's end. Can you tell me how far I am from Shawhead?'

'A good four miles.'

'Good gracious! so far as that yet?' 'No less, and the road is a bleak one in a night like this. You are a stranger you had better not venture it. You are welcome to what shelter yonder sheiling can give. I and a companion are passing the night here. Better join us, and travel forward in the morning.'

'Many thanks for the offer, but my business is too urgent to allow me to accept it. I must get to Shawhead to-night though the devil was in the way, let alone this winter's blast, bitter though it be. In fact, I should have been there before this time, and a pretty uneasiness my not coming must have produced. But I was too late in starting, and missed my way among the hills.'

'What, you must go on?' said Will. 'Must, positively must,' replied the man. 'Can't be wanted in fact. Some folk's errands can wait, but not mine.'

'Come up, at least, and have something to keep the cold out. I've got a flask of the best stuff that can come out of a Highland still. 'Twill put a glow in your heart that will keep its place till you reach Shawhead.'

'Well, I won't refuse that, at any rate,' rejoined the stranger; 'for my limbs are nearly frozen, and that cursed snow is like to skin my face. This is just a night and a place for a pull at the Glenlivet.'

'This way, then, and look to your feet. The road is something of the narrowest and roughest.'

'Faith, friend, you are right there,' cried the traveller, as he made a great stumble, and pitched forward till he was nearly on his knees. The bundle under his arm was nearly jerked from its place, but he made a clutch at it and kept it from falling.

No farther mishap occurred till they gained the open door of the sheiling, when Will entered, followed close by the stranger.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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