

said that the English feared the Scotch and the Germans just as the Americans feared the Chinese—because the latter were the most indefatigable workers. He declared that if the London men had less Amontillado sherry and cigarettes in their private office-rooms, their business would be conducted with much greater accuracy and despatch. Then another thought struck him; were the servants prepared to swear that no registered letter had been presented in the afternoon, and taken away again because there was no one in the house to sign that receipt? Inquiry being made, it was found that no such letter had been presented. But finally, when the turmoil about this wretched thing was at its height, the Laird was pressed to say from which part of the country the missive was expected. From London, he said. It was then pointed out to him that the London letters were usually sent along in the evening—sometimes as late as eight or nine o'clock. He went on with his dinner, grumbling.

Sure enough, before he had finished dinner, a footstep was heard on the gravel outside. The Laird, without any apology, jumped up and went to the window.

"There's the postman," said he, as he resumed his seat. "Ye might give him a shilling, ma'am; it is a long climb up the hill."

It was the postman, no doubt; and he had brought a letter, but it was not for the Laird. We were all apprehensive of a violent storm when the servant passed on and handed this letter to Mary Avon. But the Laird said nothing. Miss Avon, like a properly conducted school-girl, put the letter in her pocket.

There was no storm. On the contrary, the Laird got quite cheerful. When his hostess hoped that no serious inconvenience would result from the non-arrival of the letter, he said, "Not the least." He began and told us the story of the old lady who endeavoured to engage the practical Homesh—while he was collecting tickets—in a disquisition on the beauties of Highland scenery, and who was abruptly bidden to "mind her own business." We had heard the story not more than thirty-eight times, perhaps, from various natives of Scotland.

But the letter about which the Laird had been anxious had—as some of us expected—actually arrived, and was then in Mary Avon's pocket. After dinner the two women went into the drawing-room. Miss Avon sat down to the piano, and began to play, idly enough, the air called "Hemweh." Of what home was she thinking, then—this waif and stray among the winds of the world?

Tea was brought in. At last the curiosity of the elder woman could no longer be restrained. "Mary," said she, "are you not going to read that letter?"

"Dear me!" said the girl, plunging into her pocket. "I have forgotten I had a letter to read."

She took it out and opened it, and began to read. Her face looked puzzled at first, then alarmed. She turned to her friend.

"What is it? What can it mean?" she said, in blank dismay; and the trembling fingers handed her the letter.

Her friend had less difficulty in understanding; although, to be sure, before she had finished this perfectly plain and matter-of-fact communication there were tears in her eyes. It was merely a letter from the manager of a bank in London, begging to inform Miss Avon that he had just received, through Messrs. Todd & Buchanan, of Glasgow, a sum of £10,000 to be placed to her credit. He was also desired to say that this sum was entirely at her own free disposal; but the donor would prefer—if she had no objection—that it should be invested in some home security, either in a good mortgage, or in the Metropolitan Board of Works stock. It was a plain and simple letter.

"Oh, Mary, don't you understand—don't you understand?" said she. "He meant to have given you a steam-yacht if—if you married Howard Smith. He has given you all the money you lost, and the steam-yacht too. And there is not one word of regret about all his plans and schemes being destroyed. And this is the man we have been all making fun of!"

In her conscious self-abasement she did not perceive how bewildered—how absolutely frightened—this girl was. Mary Avon took back the letter mechanically; she stood silent for a second or two; then she said, almost in a whisper:

"Giving me all that money! Oh, I cannot take it—I cannot take it! I should not have stayed here. I should not have told him anything. I—I wish to go away."

But the common sense of the elder woman came to her rescue. She took the girl's hand firmly, and said:

"You shall not go away. And when it is your good fortune to meet with such a friend as that, you shall not wound and insult him by refusing what he has given to you. No; but you will go at once and thank him."

"I cannot—I cannot," she said, with both her hands trembling. "What shall I say? How can I thank him? If he were my own father or brother, how could I thank him?"

Her friend left the city for a second and returned.

"He is in the library alone," said she. "Go to him. And do not be so ungrateful as to even speak of refusing."

The girl had no time to compose any speech. She walked to the library door, timidly tapped at it, and entered. The Laird was seated in an easy-chair, reading.

When he saw her come in—he had been ex-

pecting a servant with coffee, probably—he instantly put aside his book.

"Well, Miss Mary?" said he, cheerfully. She hesitated. She could not speak; her throat was choking. And then, scarcely knowing what she did, she sank down before him, and put her head and her hands on his knees, and burst out crying and sobbing. And all he could hear of any speech-making, or of any gratitude or thanks, was only two words—

"My father!"

He put his hand gently on the soft black hair. "Child," said he, "it is nothing. I have kept my word."

CHAPTER XII.

BACKWARD THOUGHTS.

That was a beautiful morning on which we got up at an unearthly hour to see the Youth depart—all of us, that is to say, except Mary Avon. And yet she was not usually late. The Laird could not understand it. He kept walking from one room to another, or hovering about the hall; and when the breakfast gong sounded, he refused to come in and take his place without his accustomed companion. But just at this moment whom should he behold entering by the open door but Mary Avon herself—laden with her artistic impedimenta. He pounced on her at once, and seized the canvas.

"Bless me, lassie, what have ye been about? Have ye done all this this morning? Ye must have got up in the middle of the night?"

It was but a rough sketch, after all—or the beginnings of a sketch, rather—of the wide, beautiful sea and mountain view from the garden of Castle Osprey.

"I thought, sir," said she, in a somewhat hesitating way, "that you might perhaps be so kind as to accept from me those sketches I have made on board the *White Dove*—and—and if they were at Denny-mains I should like to have the series complete—and—and it would naturally begin with the sketch from the garden here—"

He looked at her for a moment, with a grave, perhaps wistful, kindness in his face.

"My lass, I would rather have seen you at Denny-mains."

That was the very last word he ever uttered concerning the dream that had just been disturbed. And it was only about this time, I think, that we began to recognize the simple, large, noble nature of this man. We had been too much inclined to regard the more husks and externals of his character—to laugh at his assumption of paternal importance, his solemn discussions of the Simple case, his idiotic stories about Homesh. And it was not a mere freak of generosity that revealed to us some thing of the finer nature of this old Scotchman. People as rich as he have often paid bigger sums than £10,000 for the furtherance of a hobby. But it was to put away his hobby—it was to destroy forever the "dream of his old age"—that he had been thus magnificent towards this girl. And there was no complaint or regret. He had told us it was time for him to put away childish things. And this was the last word said—"My lass, I would rather have seen you at Denny-mains."

The Laird was exceedingly facetious at this breakfast party, and his nephew had a bad time of it. There were mysterious questions about Messrs. Hughes, Barnes, and Barnes; as to whether consultations were best held in stibble or in turnips; or whether No. 5 shot was the best for bringing down birds; and so forth.

"Never mind, uncle," said the Youth good-naturedly. "I will send you some partridges for the larder of the yacht."

"You need not do anything of the kind," said the Laird; "before you are in Bedfordshire the *White Dove* will be many a mile away from the course of luggage steamers."

"Oh, you are ready to start, then, sir?" said his hostess.

"This very minute, if it pleases you," said he. She looked rather alarmed, but said nothing. In the meantime the wagonette had come to the door.

By and by there was a small party assembled on the steps to see the Youth drive off. And now the time had come for him to make that speech of thanks which his uncle had pointed out was distinctly due from him. The Laird, indeed, regarded his departure with a critical air; and no doubt waited to see how his nephew would acquit himself.

Perhaps the Youth had forgotten. At all events having hidden good-bye to the others, he shook hands last of all with his hostess, and said lightly—

"Thank you very much. I have enjoyed the whole thing tremendously."

Then he jumped into the wagonette, and took off his cap as a parting salute; and away he went. The Laird frowned. When he was a young man that was not the way in which hospitality was acknowledged.

Then Mary Avon turned from regarding the departing wagonette.

"Are we to get ready to start?" said she.

"What do you say, sir?" asks the hostess of the Laird.

"I am at your service," he replies.

And so it appeared to be arranged. But still Queen Titania looked irresolute and uneasy. She did not at once set the whole house in an uproar; or send down for the men; or begin herself to harry the garden. She kept loitering about the door; pretending to look at the signs of the weather. At last Mary said—

"Well, in any case, you will be more than

an hour in having the things carried down; so I will do a little bit more to that sketch in the meantime."

The moment she was gone, her hostess says in a hurried whisper to the Laird—

"Will you come into the library, sir, for a moment?"

He obediently followed her; and she shut the door.

"Are we to start without Angus Sutherland?" she asked, without circumlocution.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said the wily Laird.

Then she was forced to explain, which she did in a somewhat nervous manner.

"Mary has told me, sir, of your very, very great generosity to her. I hope you will let me thank you, too."

"There is not another word to be said about it," he said, simply. "I found a small matter wrong in the world that I thought I could put right; and I did it; and now we start fresh and straight again. That is all."

"But about Angus Sutherland," said she still more timidly. "You were quite right in your conjectures—at least, I imagine so—indeed I am sure of it. And now, don't you think we should send for him?"

"The other day, ma'am," said he slowly, "I informed ye that when I considered my part done I would leave the matter in your hands entirely. I had to ask some questions of the lass, no doubt, to make sure of my ground; though I felt it was not a business fit for an old bachelor like me to intermeddle wi'. I am now of opinion that it would be better, as I say, to leave the matter in your hands entirely."

The woman looked rather bewildered.

"But what am I to do?" said she. "Mary will never allow me to send for him—and I have not his address in any case—"

The Laird took a telegram from his breast-pocket.

"There it is," said he, "until the end of this week, at all events."

She looked at it hesitatingly; it was from the office of the magazine that Angus Sutherland edited; and was in reply to a question of the Laird's. Then she lifted her eyes.

"Do you think I might ask Mary herself?"

"That is for a woman to decide," said he; and again she was thrown back on her own resources.

Well, this midget of a woman has some courage, too. She began to reflect on what the Laird had adventured, and done, for the sake of this girl; and was she not prepared to risk something also? After all, if these two had been fostering a vain delusion, it would be better to have it destroyed at once.

And so they went out into the garden, where they found Miss Avon again seated at her easel. She went gladly over to her; she had the telegram in her hand. For a second or two she stood irresolute; then she boldly walked across the lawn, and put her hand on the girl's shoulder. With the other hand she held the telegram before Mary Avon's eyes.

"Mary," said she, in a very low and gentle voice. "Will you write to him now and ask him to come back?"

The girl dropped the brush she had been holding on to the grass, and her face got very pale.

"Oh, how could I do that?" said she, in an equally low—and frightened—voice.

"You sent him away."

There was no answer. The elder woman waited; she only saw that Mary Avon's fingers were working nervously with the edge of the palette.

"Mary," said she, at length, "am I right in imagining the cause of your sending him away? May I write and explain, if you will not?"

"Oh, how can you explain?" the girl said, almost piteously. "It is better as it is. Did you not hear what the kindest friend I ever found in the world had to say of me yesterday, about young people who were too prudent, and were mercenary; and how he had no respect for young people who thought too much about money—"

"Mary, Mary!" the other said, "he was not speaking about you. You mercenary! He was speaking about a young man who would throw over his sweetheart for the sake of money. You mercenary! Well, let me appeal to Angus! When I explain to him, and ask him what he thinks of you, I will abide by his answer."

"Well, I did not think of myself; it was for his sake I did it," said the girl, in a somewhat broken voice; and tears began to steal down her cheeks, and she held her head away.

"Well, then, I won't bother you any more, Mary," said the other, in her kindest way. "I won't ask you to do anything, except to get ready to go down to the yacht."

"At once?" said the girl, instantly getting up, and drying her eyes. She seemed greatly relieved by this intimation of an immediate start.

"As soon as the men have the luggage taken down."

"Oh, that will be very pleasant," said she, immediately beginning to put away her colours. "What a fine breeze! I am sure I shall be ready in fifteen minutes."

Then the usual bustle began; messages flying up and down, and the gig and dingy racing each other to the shore and back again. By twelve o'clock everything had been got on board. Then the *White Dove* gently glided away from her moorings; we had started on our last and longest voyage.

It seemed innumerable ages since we had been in our sea-homes. And that first glance round

the saloon—as our absent friend the Doctor had remarked—called up a multitude of recollections, mostly converging to a general sense of snugness, and remoteness, and good fellowship. The Laird sank down into a corner of one of the couches, and said—

"Well, I think I could spend the rest of my days in this yacht. It seems as if I had lived in it for many, many years."

But Miss Avon would not let him remain below; it was a fine sailing day, and very soon we were all on deck. A familiar scene!—this expanse of blue sea, curling with white here and there; with a dark blue sky overhead, and all around the grand panorama of mountains in their rich September hues! The sea is never familiar. In its constant and moving change, its secret and slumbering power, its connection with the great unknown beyond the visible horizon, you never become familiar with the sea. We may recognize the well-known landmarks as we steal away to the north—the long promontory and white lighthouse of Lismore, the ruins of Duart, the woods of Scallisdale, the glimpse into Loch Aline—and we may use these things only to calculate our progress; but always around us is the strange life, and motion, and infinitude of the sea which never becomes familiar.

We had started with a light favourable wind, of the sort that we had come to call a Mary-Avon-steering-breeze; but after luncheon this died away, and we lay idly for a long time opposite the dark green woods of Foinary. However, there was a wan and spectral look about the sunshine of this afternoon, and there was some long, ragged shreds of cloud in the southern heavens—just over the huge round shoulders of the Mull mountains—that told us we were not likely to be harassed by any protracted calms. And, in fact, occasional puffs and squalls came over from the south which, if they did not send us on much farther, at least kept everybody on the alert.

And at length we got it. The gloom over the mountains had deepened, and the streaks of sunlit sky that were visible here and there had a curious coppery tinge about them. Then we heard a hissing in towards the shore, and the darkening band on the sea spread rapidly out to us; then there was a violent shaking of blocks and spars, and, as the *White Dove* bent to the squall, a most frightful clatter was heard below; showing that some careless people had been about. Then away went the yacht like an arrow! We cared little for the gusts of rain that came whipping across from time to time. We would not even go down to see what damage had been done in the cabin. John of Skye, with his savage hatred of the long calms we had endured, refused to lower his gaff topsail. At last he was "letting her have it."

We spun along, with the water hissing away from our wake; but the squall had not had time to raise anything of a sea, so there was but little need for the women to duck their heads to the spray. Promontory after promontory, bay after bay was passed, until far ahead of us, through the driving mists of rain, we could make out the white shaft of Ru-na-Gaul light-house. But here another condition of affairs confronted us. When we turned her nose to the south, to beat into Tobar-moray harbour, the squall was coming bearing out of that cup among the hills with an exceeding violence. When the spray sprang high at the bows, the flying shreds of it that reached us bore an uncommon resemblance to the thong of a whip. The topsail was got down, the mizen taken in, and then we proceeded to fight our way into the harbour in a series of tacks that seemed to last only a quarter of a second. What with the howling of the wind, that blew back his orders in his face, and what with the wet decks, that caused the men to stumble now and again; and what with the number of vessels in the bay, that cut short his tacks at every turn, Captain John of Skye had an exciting time of it. But we knew him of old. He "put on" an extra tack, when there was no need for it, and slipped through between a fishing-smack and a large schooner, merely for the sake of "showing off." And then the *White Dove* was allowed to go up to the wind, and slowly slackened her pace, and the anchor went out with a roar. We were probably within a yard of the precise spot where we had last anchored in the Tobar-moray bay.

It blew and rained hard all that evening, and we did not even think of going on deck after dinner. We were quite content as we were. Somehow a new and secret spirit of cheerfulness had got possession of certain members of this party, without any ostensible cause. There was no longer the depression that had prevailed about West Loch Tarbert. When Mary Avon played bezique with the Laird, it was to a scarcely audible accompaniment of "The Queen's Maries."

Nor did the evening pass without an incident worthy of some brief mention. There is, in the *White Dove*, a state-room which really acts as a passage during the day, between the saloon and the fore-castle; and, when this state-room is not in use, Master Fred is in the habit of converting it into a sort of pantry, seeing that it adjoins his galley. Now, on this evening, when our shifty Frederick D'or came in with soda water and such-like things, he took occasion to say to the Rear-Admiral of the Fleet on board:

"I beg your pardon, mom, but there is no one now in this state-room, and will I use it for a pantry?"

"You will do nothing of the kind," said she, quite sharply.

(To be continued.)