

Simon Gray.

CONCLUDED.

Simon Gray was no more a Minister of the Church of Scotland, and he left his parish. It was said that he was dead; that shame and remorse, and the disease that clung close to his soul, had killed him at last. But it was not so. The hour was not yet come, and his death was destined to be of a different kind indeed.

The unfortunate man had a brother who, for many years, had lived on a great sheep-farm in Strathglass, a wild district of the Northern Highlands. He had always stood high in the esteem and love of this uneducated but intelligent farmer; he had visited him occasionally with his wife and children for a few days, and had received similar visits in return. This good and worthy man had grieved for Simon's bereavement, and his subsequent frailties; and now he opened the door of his house, and of his heart, to his degraded, and remorseful, and repentant brother. His own wife, his sons, and his daughters, needed not to be told to treat with tenderness, respect, and pity, the most unfortunate man; and on the evening when he came to their house, they received him most affectionately, and seemed, by the cheerfulness of their manners, not even to know of the miserable predicament in which he stood. Happy were all the young people to see their uncle in the Highlands, although at first they felt sad and almost surprised to observe that he was dressed just like their father, in such clothes as become, on decent occasions, a hard-working labouring man, a little raised above the wants of the world.

Even before the heart of poor Simon Gray had time to be touched, or, at least, greatly revived, by the unrestrained kindness of all those worthy people, the very change of scenery had no inconsiderable effect in shrouding in oblivion much of his past misery. Here, in this solitary glen, far, far away from all who had witnessed his vice and his degradation, he felt relieved from a load of shame that had bowed him to the earth. Many long miles of moor—many great mountains—many wide straths and glens—many immense lakes—and a thousand roaring streams and floods, were now between him and the manse of Seatoun, the kirk, where he had been so miserably exposed—and the air of his parish, that lay like a load on his eyes when they had dared to lift themselves up to the sunshine. Many enormous belts and girdles of rock separated him from all these; he felt safe in his solitude from the power of excommunication; and there was none to upbraid him with their black silent countenances as he walked by himself along the heathery shores of a Highland loch, or plunged into a dark pine-forest, or lay upon the breast of some enormous mountain, or sat by the roar of some foaming cataract. And when he went into a lonely sheiling, or a smoky hut, all the dwellers there were known to him—and, blessed be God, he was unknown to them;—their dress, their gaze, their language, their proffered food and refreshment were all new—they bore no resemblance to what he had seen in his former life. That former life was like a far off, faint, and indistinct dream. But the mountain—the forest—the glen—the cataract—the loch—the rocks—the huts—the deer—the eagles—the wild Gælic dresses—and that wilder speech—all were real—they constituted the being of his life now; and, as the roar of the wind came down the glens, it swept away the remembrance of his sins and his sorrows.

But a stronger, at least a more permanent, power was in his brother's house, and it was that from which his recovery or restoration was ultimately to proceed.

The sudden desolation of his heart, that in so brief a period had been robbed of all it held dear, had converted Simon Gray from temperance almost austere, into a most pitiable state of vicious indulgence; and his sudden restoration now to domestic comfort and objects of interest to a good man's human feelings, began to work almost as wonderful a conversion from that wretched habit to his former virtue. New eyes were upon him—new hearts opened towards him—new voices addressed him with kindness—new objects were presented to his mind. The dull, dreary, silent, forsaken, and haunted manse, where

every room swarmed with unendurable thoughts, was exchanged for an abode entirely free from its recollections and associations either too affecting or too afflicting. The simple gladness that reigned in his brother's house stole insensibly into his soul, reviving and renovating it with feelings long unknown. There was no violent or extravagant joy in which he could not partake, and that might form a distressing and galling contrast with his own grief. A homely happiness was in the house, in every room, and about every person, and he felt himself assimilated, without effort of his own, in some measure to the cheerful, blameless, and industrious beings with whom it was now his lot to associate. He had thought himself lost, but he felt that yet might he be saved; he had thought himself excommunicated from the fellowship of the virtuous, but he felt himself treated, not only with affection, but respect, by his excellent brother, all his nephews and nieces, and the servants of the house. His soul hoped that its degradation was not utter and irretrievable. Human beings, he began to see, could still love, still respect, even while they pitied him; and this feeling of being not an outcast from his kind, encouraged him humbly to lift his eyes up to God, and less ruefully, and not with such bitter agony to prostrate himself in prayer.

He thus found himself out of the den of perdition; and, escape into the clear unhaunted light, he felt unspeakable horror at the thought of voluntarily flinging himself back again among these dreadful agonies; His brother rejoiced to behold the change, so unexpectedly sudden, in all his habits; and, when they went out together in the evenings to walk among the glens, that simple man laid open to Simon all his heart—spoke to him of all his affairs—requested his advice—and behaved towards him with such entire and sincere respect and affection, that the fallen man felt entitled again to hold up his head, and even enjoyed hours of internal peace and satisfaction, which at first he was afraid to suffer, lest they might be the offspring of apathy or delusion. But day after day they more frequently returned and more lastingly remained; and then Simon Gray believed that God was, indeed, accepting his repentance, and that his soul might yet not be utterly lost.

Simon Gray went out with the servants to their work, himself a servant. He worked for his brother and his children, and while his body was bent and his hands were busy, his heart was at rest. The past could not take direful possession of him when labouring in the fields, or in the garden, or in the barn, or searching for the sheep in snow or tempest, with his brother or his nephews. The pure fresh air blew around his temples—the pure fresh water was his drink; toil brought hunger which the simple meal appeased—and for every meal that his brother blest, did he himself reverently return thanks to God. So was it settled between them; and Simon Gray, on such occasions, in fervid eloquence expressed his heart. He rose with the light or the lark—all his toils were stated—all his hours of rest; and a few months he was even like one who, from his boyhood, had been a shepherd or a tiller of the earth.

In this humble, laborious, and, it may be said, happy life, years passed over his head, which was now getting white. Suffice it to say that once more Simon Gray was as temperate as a hermit. He knew—he remembered—he repented all his former shameful transgressions. But now they were to him only as a troubled dream. Now, too, could he bear to think on all his former life before he was tried and fell—of his beloved Susanna, and the children sleeping by her side in Seatoun churchyard—and of that dear, but guilty boy, who died in a foreign land. In his solitary labours in the field, or on his chaff-bed, his mind, and his heart and his soul were often in the happy manse of former years. He walked into the garden and down the burn-side, through the birch-wood, and by the little waterfall, with his wife, and boys and girls—and then could he bear to think of the many, many Sabbaths he had officiated in his own kirk, on all the baptisms, and that other great Sacrament, administered, on beautiful weather, in the open air, and beneath the shadow of that wide-armed sycamore. Calmly, now, and with an untroubled spirit, did he think on all these things: for he was reconciled to his present lot, which he knew must never be changed, and to his humble

heart came soothingly and sweet all the voices of the dead, and all the shadows of the past. He knew now the weakness of his own soul. Remorse and penitence had brought up all its secrets before him; and in resignation and contentment, morning and evening, did he for all his gracious mercies praise God.

Simon had taught his brother's children, and they all loved him as their very father. Some of their faces were like the faces of their dead cousins—and some of them bore the very same voices. So seemed it that his very children were restored to him—the power of the grave was weakened over his heart—and though like the dead, were not his own blessed creatures, yet he gave them up all of a father's heart that was not buried in those graves which had so quickly, one after the other, employed the old sexton's spade. And often, no doubt, when his heart was perfectly calm and happy, did he love his brother's children even as he had loved his own.

Many years thus passed away, and with them almost all tradition, in this part of the country, of Simon's degradation from the clerical order. It had faded in simple hearts occupied with their own feelings; and where he was in company with others at church or market, not even those who knew all the circumstances of his case could be said to remember them—they saw before them only a plain, simple, grave, and contented person like themselves, in a humble walk of life. Simon's own mind had been long subdued to his lot. He felt himself to be what he appeared; and he was distinguishable from his brother, whom in aspect and figure he greatly resembled, only by an air of superior intelligence and cultivation. His hands were, like his brother's, hardened by the implements of labour—his face was as embrowned by the sun—and his dress, on week-day and Sabbath, alike plain, and in all respects that of a respectable tenant. It seemed now that he was likely to terminate his blameless life in peace.

His brother was now obliged to go to the Lowlands on the affairs of his farm, and so many years having elapsed since Simon's degradation, he felt an irresistible desire to revisit, once before he died, the neighbourhood at least of his dear parish itself. Many must have now forgotten him, and indeed ten years, at his period of life, and all his severe miseries, had done the work of twenty—so although but sixty years of age, he seemed at least a man of threescore and ten. Accordingly, he accompanied his brother to the Lowlands—once more walked about the streets and squares of the city, where so many changes had taken place that he scarcely knew his way, and where the very population itself seemed entirely changed. He felt comforted that no eye rested upon him; and next day—a fine clear bright frost, and the ground covered with snow—he went with his brother to a village distant about ten miles only from his own manse of Seatoun. But a river and two ranges of hills lay between—so there was little danger of his meeting any one who would recognise him to have been the minister of that parish. Simon was happy, but thoughtful, and his nearness to the place of his former life did not, he thought, affect him so powerfully, at least not so overwhelmingly, as he had expected. A party of farmers from different districts dined together, and after dinner one of them, who had been rude and boisterous all day, began to indulge in very brutal talk and to swallow liquor with an evident design to produce intoxication. Simon endeavoured to avoid all conversation with this person, but on one occasion could not avoid gently remonstrating with him on his grossness. He also kindly dissuaded him from drinking too much, a sin of which, from better experience, he had known the miserable effects, and of which he had in many others wrought the cure. But his remonstrances enraged the young farmer, who, it seems, came from the parish of Seatoun, and knew Simon's whole history. He burst out into the most ferocious invectives against his reprobate, and soon showed that he was but too intimately acquainted with all the deplorable and degrading circumstances of the case. In the coarsest terms he informed the whole company who they had got amongst them; directed their attention to the solemn hypocrisy of his countenance; assured them that his incontinence had not been confined to drinking; and that even in the Highlands,

the old sinner had corrupted the menials in his brother's house, and was the reproach of all Lowlanders that visited Strathglass.

This sudden, unprovoked, and unexpected brutality annihilated Simon's long-gathered fortitude. The shocking, coarse, and unfeeling words were not all false—and they brought upon his troubled and sickening heart not the remembrance of his woeful transgression, but it may be said its very presence. Ten years of penitence, and peace, and virtue, and credit, were at once destroyed—to him they were as nothing—and he was once more Simon Gray the sinner, the drunkard, the disgraced, the degraded, the madman. He looked around him, and it seemed as if all eyes were fixed upon him in pity, or contempt, or scorn. He heard malicious whisperings—curious interrogatories—and stifled laughter; and, loud over all, the outrageous and brutal merriment of his insulter, the triumphant peal of self-applauding brutality, and the clenched hand struck upon the table in confirmation of the truth of his charge, and in defiance of all gainsayers. Simon Gray saw—heard no more. He rushed out of the room in an agony of shame and despair, and found himself standing alone in the darkness.

He thanked God that it was a wild, stormy winter night. The farmers had not ventured to mount their horses in that snow-drift—but Simon turned his face to the flaky blast, and drove along knee-deep, turning a deaf ear to his brother's voice which he heard shouting his name. He knew not whether he was thus rushing—for as yet he had no determined purpose in his mind. One wish alone had he at this hour—and that was to fall down and die. But the snow was not so deep a short way out of the village, and the energy which his despair had given his limbs enabled him to pursue his solitary race through the howling darkness of the night. He noticed nothing but the tops of the hedges on each side that, marked out the road;—and without aim or object, but a dim hope of death, or a passion for the concealing and hiding darkness, he thus traveled several miles, till he found himself entering upon a wide common or moor. "I am on the edge of the moor," he exclaimed to himself, "the moor of my own parish—my own Seatoun. No eye can see me—blessed be God no eye can see me,—but mine eyes can see the shape of the small swelling hills and mounts, covered though they be with snow, and neither moon nor stars in heaven. Yes, I will walk on now that I am here, right on to the kirk of Seatoun, and will fall down upon my knees at the door of God's house, and beseech Him, after all my repentance, to restore to peace my disconsolate, my troubled and despairing soul."

There had been but little change for ten years in that pastoral parish. The small wooden bridge across the Ewe-bank stood as it did before, and, as his feet made it shake below him, Simon's heart was filled with a crowd of thoughts. He was now within a few hundred yards of the manse that had so long been his own, and he stood still and trembled, and shivered, as the rush of thoughts assailed him from the disturbed world of the past. He moved on. A light was in the parlour window—the same room in which he used to sit with his wife and children. Perhaps he wept by himself in the darkness. But he hurried on—he passed the mouth of the little avenue—the hedges and shrubs seemed but little grown; through a pale glimmer in the sky, while a blast had blown away some clouds from before the yet hidden moon, he saw the spire of his own Kirk. The little gate was shut—but he knew well to open the latch. With a strange wild mixture of joy and despair he reached the door of the Kirk, and falling down prostrate in the pelted snow, he kissed the cold stone beneath his cheek, and, with a breaking heart, ejaculated, "Oh God! am I forgiven—and wilt thou take me, through the intercession of thy Son, at last into thy holy presence?"

It snowed till midnight—and the frost was bitter cold. Next morning was the Sabbath; and the old sexton, on going to sweep the little path from the churchyard gate to the door of the church, found what was seemingly a corpse, lying there half-covered with the drift. He lifted up the head; and well did he know the face of his former minister. The hair was like silver that formerly had been a bright brown; but the expression of the dead man's countenance was perfectly serene—and the cold night had not been felt by Simon Gray.