

take any responsibility as to the children, whose interests I and my late wife attended to far better than could be demanded of us. You will, no doubt, receive a communication from Scotland from parties who, as I understand, mean to claim the children; but I know no particulars, and you must not any further look to me. Mrs. Johnston considers that I have been very ill paid for the trouble I have taken, and which my former wife's family led me to incur. The address that you had better write to in Scotland is, Mr. A. Burke, Deacon Macclacklan's Land, near Coat Bridge, Glasgow.—Yours,

J. JOHNSTON."

The remittance which generally came about a fortnight or three weeks after the usual quarter day was not sent; and, small and inadequate as it was, its being withheld, even for a time, increased the pressure on the fast falling resources of Mr. Hope. It was incumbent on him to tell Norry, at all events, the purport of the letter. Hitherto a delicacy as to dwelling on details that might be felt as humiliating to the children, or laudatory of the kindness of those who had of late years protected them, had kept both Mr. Hope and Marian from referring to the past. Both had also repressed any romantic thoughts, such as isolated children sometimes encourage. This latter had not been difficult. The orphans were so kindly cared for, that they craved for no other home relations. A haunting memory of a dwelling where strife and blows, dirt and drink had been their portion, still troubled their dreams, and made the name of Canada hateful to them—ay, even to see it on the map gave them a cold chill, and revived recollections of neglect and suffering. Little Mysie bore on her feet the scars and seams of frost as indelibly as if they had been bars; and she knew that before she was brought over to England by Mrs. Hope, she was for months a helpless cripple. So all that past was allowed to be shut away in the distance. An ocean rolled between it and the present—an ocean that in no sense did the children wish to cross.

When, therefore, Mr. Hope called Norry into the little room or book closet that opened out of his bedroom, and was dignified with the name of study, and put the letter he had received into the boy's hand, there was rather a sense of indignant alarm than curiosity as he read it.

"Trouble!" cried the boy, laying down the letter—"responsibility! We have not him to thank that we are alive. If the man in Scotland is like Johnston, I shall not care to know him."

"But if he has a claim—the right of a blood relation?"

"He surely gave up any such claim when he let us go to Canada with these Johnstons."

"I don't think you did go with them. I rather believe, though I am not clear about it, you were brought out by people called Burke, and left with the Johnstons."

"Yes sir; but if so, we were left uncared for. I can recollect how it was with me and poor Mysie, who was crippled, when Mama Hope rescued us. Why, father, I remember hearing you say once that you could have got us protected by the law, and that Johnston's fear of the indignation of his neighbours enabled you to get and keep possession of us."

"True, my boy; but you are aware that the sum allowed must have come from some one interested in you; and small as it is, its payments at regular intervals show that it is sent from people not unaccustomed to arrange money transactions. I am rather glad of the address of these Scottish people. It removes a fear that has harassed me of late, as to whether Johnston has told his correspondents where you are."

"What did it matter to them?" said the youth gloomily.

"It mattered to me. I could be in no sense an accomplice in keeping any one, who had a right to know, in ignorance of your whereabouts. Besides, those who have given the little help hitherto, might afford you more aid."

"I would rather work, sir, for myself."

"Yes; but there's Mysie."

"I may be able to take care of my sister."

"Yes, if you are put in away to do so."

"Does no one work out a way?"

"Doubtless some do. By God's help, all things are possible. But it's not the way to succeed in life to begin by wilfully casting off aid that one may have a right to. Your parents would not be entirely without kindred."

"If they were honest folk, that's enough. Haven't I heard you quote Robert Nichols' lines?"

"I ask not of his lineage;
I ask not of his name;
If manlike be in his heart
No noble birth may claim."

"Ah, Norry! that's more poetic than heraldic."
"But it's true, sir."

"Nevertheless, my boy, I shall write to Scotland."

CHAPTER XI. THE PACKMAN.

"Something weird, not good to see,
Has to my threshold come;
A raven on a blighted tree,
Is croaking near my home." ANON.

While these matters were occupying the attention of the Kensington household, the Austwick woods were putting on their full autumnal splendour, and the little fairy, whose coming had drawn into a tangle the frail thread of her Aunt Honor's intentions, was enjoying their sylvan beauty like a wood nymph. Thus day by day passed, and found the lady of the Chace undecided as to her course, and therefore at times uncomfortable.

A state of doubt, with a restless conscience, is trying, yet the days sped fast enough; for what lonely life could resist the charm of having a companion who combined all that was winning in the grace of childhood with all that was fascinating in the intelligence of riper years? Whether the stately Miss Honoria was won to the woods by the little creature whom she loved, and gratified by allowing her to send presents of superabundant game, and who in her turn tripped daily at her aunt's side, uttering in the sweetest voice the prettiest fancies about the country sights and sounds, which she enjoyed with the keenest zest—so that it was her errand to see the tints one day, or to watch the sunset another, or to gather ferns on a third—always the staid lady of forty-five found herself allured forth by the little dryad. And at evening, when the logs were put on the old-fashioned hearths that no modern fire-grate in any room in the old Hall had been permitted to displace, and "True," as her aunt called her, was making the lengthening nights pleasant with her bird-like warblings, or even more musical poetic readings, time sped on; and the northern journey, for which the portmanteau had been packed, was more distant than ever from becoming a reality.

Perhaps, when people are undecided exactly as to what course to take, they are glad of an interruption that postpones the necessity for action.

To resort to writing, as a substitute for more active effort, had more than once occurred to Miss Austwick; for when she retired to her chamber, then her unfulfilled promise troubled her, and every night saw a resolution formed that every morning dissipated.

Several times had Gertrude said her aunt about the uncle whom she had never seen, and whose death seemed to her young imagination, so sad.

"To land only to die! To come home only to find a grave!" was her comment, that would no doubt have been enlarged on, but her fine tact told her it was distasteful to her aunt. However, as Gertrude was a great letter-writer, she sent pages of feelings and fancies on the subject to her parents, who, if they read her epistles—which is doubtful—were more likely to be amused than affected; certainly Mrs. Basil made no pretence to great kindred sympathies. She regulated the degree of her emotion as a well-bred person should, and resented, as a culpable eccentricity, Captain Austwick coming unexpectedly from India. Still, neither parent checked "the child," as they called her, for writing as she did. "True was a clever creature, and, with pen or tongue, would have her say." Moreover, they quite approved her having gone to the Chace. Some idea that Miss Austwick might be induced to ask for Gertrude in permanence had occurred to the young lady's mamma, who

was far more interested about her three great comely boys than her tiny daughter, pretty and clever as she was. All the love that Mrs. Basil had ever felt for her feminine offspring had been concentrated on a sister, three years the junior of Gertrude, who inherited so completely the features of the maternal ancestry—was a Dumoon in complexion, growth, high cheek-bones included—that, while she lived, little True had been quite cast into the shade. But the mother's idol was broken, while as yet unblemished by the influence of favouritism. A baby boy, the third son, came soon after to soothe the mother; and as this, the youngest, was now seven years old, Gertrude had a certain consideration, as the only daughter of the family, none but her mother retaining any unpleasant recollections in connection with the child. It was not likely Mrs. Basil Austwick could entirely forget that the autumn which first gave little Gertrude to her arms had been a time of such danger to her own health that she had been obliged, by her physician's advice, to resort to a milder climate, and had wintered in Madeira, taking her eldest boy with her, and leaving her baby, Gertrude, in the charge of an old and valued Scottish nurse—a circumstance to which some observers, and it may be the child herself, attributed a certain kind of indefinite coldness felt, rather than outwardly shown, between daughter and mother. Nothing would have shocked Gertrude more than any comment on this coldness—she shut out the thought from her mind; but the very effort that she made, when at home for the holidays, to win her mother's approval, and the long, enthusiastic letters she wrote when away from them, diffused from the sweet, unconscious trust of undoubting filial love.

On the same October evening that Mr. Hope was pondering the future with apprehension for others more than himself, the echoes of Austwick Chace were resounding to the measured tread of a man carrying a pack. He was a thin, bronzed, elderly man, with what is commonly called a "wizened face." His scanty, ash-coloured hair, flecked with grey, that blew about freely, was the only thing that looked free about that countenance, for his features were all pinched together, as if to economise space; and the puckered skin round his mouth and eyes, which drew them up to the smallest compass, seemed meant to impose caution in the one case, and to increase keenness in the other; though, as the small, peering eyes were as restless as they were furtive, and the man had a habit of passing the back of his hand across his lips when he was speaking, it was not easy to get a view of these features. The voice, like the man's skin, was dry and hard; and from his brown leggings and rusty fustian garb to the summit of his wrinkled forehead, the words that best indicated his look were those by which he was often called, "Old Leathery."

As this personage came down the wooded glade that led to the open Chace, he saw before him two ladies—the elder sauntering leisurely, the younger sitting about among the heathery knolls, and, making little runs and circuits, tripping back again, with head aside like a bird. The man stepped behind a large tree, put down his pack, and laying the back of one hand across his scrowed-up mouth, arched the other over his sharp eyes, and scanned them unobserved. He lingered a while as the ladies, whom our readers recognise for Miss Austwick and little True, quickened their pace homeward. They walked so completely along the setting sunbeams' track, that he could trace their figures darkly flecking the brightness until they entered the grounds of the Hall; and then, shouldering his pack, he started off at a quick pace by a short cut, and went to the back entrance round by the stables, and thence across a yard to the door of the servants' hall.

A believer in the Eastern superstition of the Evil Eye, might have been pardoned for a feeling of fear, if he had seen this man's stealthy approach, his wily glance all around, and then the gathering up of his puckered visage into an obsequious leer, as he softly lifted the latch. What but evil could such a visitor bring?

To be continued.