

## The Inglenook.

### The Parting of the Ways.

BY DAVID LYALL,

The Rev. Gavin Hamilton sat before his study table on a May morning, and his face betrayed some sadness and perplexity, and he evidently found it difficult to fix his attention on his morning's work. It may be that the views from the bay window commanding the noble expanse of the Firth of Tay allured him more than was common; at least, his eyes never roamed from it, but his thoughts were far away. He was a man in the youthful prime of life, and he had a goodly presence and a face disposed to win trust and approbation. The only sign of weakness, perhaps, lay in the mouth, which was soft and mobile as a woman's. Yet the jaw had a massive squareness which betokened a man's strength of mind and will. It was a Friday morning, and his work for the following Sunday was sadly in arrears. He had but recently come to the flourishing seaside resort of Lowden Bay, and had not yet been tempted to give to his work anything but his best. But a mind distracted by personal concerns is difficult to give to abstract ideas. Finally he gave up and taking a letter from his pocket, read it through for the fourth or fifth time that morning. Its perusal was disturbed by his housekeeper's knock at the door.

"If you please, sir, that's the page laddie from Blyth House, and Miss Blyth would be much obliged if you would go up this morning. The laird is waur, and is askin' to see you."

"Very well, Mrs. Kippen; tell the lad I'll be up within an hour," he answered, and there was a curious look on his face as he refolded the letter and returned it to his pocket book. Then he shut up his desk began to put on his boots. He was inwardly glad of the diversion, only it seemed strange that it should come from the very quarter which had been in his thoughts.

"It may help me to a decision," he said to himself, adding with a sigh, "And yet after all, there can only be one decision; none know it better than I."

The road to Blyth House led him pleasantly by the seashore, and as he entered the grounds by a small wicket-gate, opening directly on the rough bents which skirted the shore. It was only a small property, and though Mr. Blyth was called the laird, it was a mere courtesy title. He was simply a wealthy Creetown merchant, who had built himself a goodly dwelling-place near the village of his youth, and who, by reason of his good deeds and kindly disposition, was much beloved therein.

It was a beautiful house, planned with artistic taste and skill, set like a gem in its pleasant woods near the ripple of a wimpling burn, which poured its waters into a miniature loch in the park. Hamilton looked round him with a passing sigh of envy. Here, surely, life might flow peacefully in its appointed groove. But here also hearts could ache and disappointments lurk, it being ordered that we shall have no continuing city or abiding place. The servant who admitted him—a middle aged butler of sober, respectable appearance—bore traces of agitation and distress on his face.

"Your master is not worse, I hope, Ben-net?" said the minister as he gave him good morning. The man only shook his head, making no attempt to speak.

"The doctor's just been sir," he said, finding his voice as they ascended the wide richly carpeted stairs. "He says it's but a question of days—may be hours." He opened wide the door of the sick chamber, and having shown the minister in at once withdrew. A professional nurse by the bedside stepped back as Hamilton advanced, and the patient welcomed him warmly. To Hamilton's untrained eye there was nothing alarming in his appearance, though the face was certainly haggard and worn; but it had looked so for many weeks, since the dread disease which baffled medical skill had obtained the mastery, and set the limit to his days.

"You have lost no time my friend," said the merchant, in a calm, clear voice. "You can go into the next room, nurse, within call. I want a private word with Mr. Hamilton." The nurse withdrew. Hamilton took a chair by the bedside, and for a moment laid his strong young hand with tenderness on the wasted fingers lying outside the white bed-cover. For this man had been a pillar of strength, an abiding friend to him in the first trying days of his ministry in the place, aiding him by his counsel, guiding him by his wisdom, and, above all, by the ripeness of his spiritual experience, keeping him ever in the upward way. And Hamilton, having no father of his own, and a heart gratefully responsive to the smallest kindness, now felt to him a son. For the moment the poignancy of a personal anguish, born of the knowledge that soon he would be bereft, shut all else out.

"I am a good deal worse. Baxter admitted it this morning, Gavin, and so long as I am suffering less, and have a clear mind, I want to speak to you about Kirsteen."

The minister started, and in the shadow of the curtain the red dyed his cheek.

"You have not seen her this morning? Poor child, she was up with me the greater part of the night, and has gone to rest now, I daresay. My greatest concern—nay, my only one, as you may easily believe—is leaving my one ewe lamb alone in the world."

"She will not be alone; she has troops of friends," said Hamilton, and his voice was thick in his throat.

The dying man smiled, but drearily.

"She wants more than friends; she wants one strong arm to lean on. Perhaps you can guess what I mean? You know how dear every hair of her head is to me—what she has been, and is, and will be all her days, in whatever home she is placed. Yet I would give her to you, Gavin. I could die happy if I knew you would be man and wife."

Hamilton rose to his feet, and the veins stood out on his brow, and his hands clenched themselves at his side.

"You know what she is. She needs no praise from gentle or simple. There are few like her; and I believe she could pick where she chose. But my heart cleaves to you, lad, as if you were my own son. I have proved you in the last year, and I know what you are. And I say I would rather

give her to you than to any man, poor in this world though you be, and I believe the bairn is of one mind with me."

Hamilton turned away so that his face might not be seen. It was almost more than he could bear—the joy and the pain of it, and the terrible ordeal through which his soul must pass to victory.

"Well, what do you say? You are taken by surprise; but at your age it ought to be a pleasant surprise. I have watched you close you and her together, in the last weeks and have hoped that perhaps the thing might come about without any word from me. Look round, and tell me what is in your heart, and if it should be that it does not move you this way, I know you will forget what I have said. For you have that tenderness to womankind which the Lord taught us in His own life, but which we so often forget in our dealings with them."

"Mr. Blyth, I love Kirsteen as my own soul. God bless you for your faith in me. Will you give me till to-morrow to think it over—not an hour longer?"

"Certainly; there needna be that haste," said the merchant, and immediately began to speak of something else.

Within an hour the minister left the house, and he only called in at the Manse to tell his housekeeper he was going to Glasgow by the midday train, and would not return till very late at night. Three o'clock of the afternoon beheld him seeking admittance at a handsome house in one of the western terraces, where abode one of the spiritual leaders and teachers of men, a man of God, whose name was revered through the length and breadth of Scotland, and beyond it among those who concern themselves with spiritual things. To this man it had been Hamilton's privilege to be assistant for two years, before his call to work in Lowden Bay. He was fortunate; he remembered as he waited admittance, this was one of the afternoons he was at home in his study from two o'clock until four to all who might wish to see him. He was still more fortunate in finding him at home and disengaged, and the warmth of his welcome filled his heart with joy.

"Curiously enough, I was speaking of you to my wife at lunch, and saying we should meet you at the Aberdeen Conference next week. Well, and how are you getting on? We hear glowing accounts from various sources. But it is always satisfactory to have firsthand accounts."

"I'm getting on all right in my work, sir, but I'm in personal trouble, and I've come to you for advice," said Hamilton; and forthwith told his old chief the experience of the morning.

"Well, to an unattached person like yourself, it is a great temptation, and the father's trust in you is a precious thing. Where, then, does the trouble come in?"

"I am pledged to someone else."

"Tell me all about it; it will be better for you; I see your heart is burdened," said the elder man, with that peculiar touch of sympathy which set him apart from men of commoner clay. "And remember that there is nothing a man need really fear in this world except dishonour."

"It was when I was a student" began Hamilton, not shamefacedly, but with the honest courage of a man who wishes and means to right. "She was the daughter of the house where I lodged."

The old minister nodded understandingly, but said nothing. He could have groaned aloud. It was so common a story, the basis of many a disappointed life and many fruitless ministry. Often he had said that it