

## ❁ ❁ The Story Page ❁ ❁

### The Spell of Home.

BY DAVID LYALL.

Old Malcolm MacVean, for forty long years shoemaker in Inchonnen, looked out by his cottage door in the still morning, shading his eyes from the sun with his hand. It was a morning in late September, and the sun having shone with unprecedented constancy for well-nigh a whole month, the scant sheaves were dotting the little fields everywhere. And there was great rejoicing in the hearts and on the tongues of the tillers of the soil. For once in cycle of years Inchonnen had belied its reputation of being a wet cold, dreary place, where the fruits of the earth could not ripen, but had to be gathered green and sadden from the field year after year, and given to cattle beasts as winter fodder. Now this mystery and great wastry had often lain heavy on the soul of Malcolm MacVean, and he had prayed over it, even wrestling with the Almighty for the heaviness of the blight that seemed to lie on the strath he loved. But after forty years he was no nearer solution than he had been at the beginning, and was forced to fall back upon Holy Writ, "My ways are not your ways, nor My thoughts your thoughts," said the Lord.

Neither Malcolm, nor any of his grumbling neighbors ever gave a thought to the folly of trying to cultivate farms on land that was never meant for it, of sowing corn and planting potatoes on furrows that were half the year under water, when the burns ran in spate from the hills, and the morass about the loch was impassable even for the sheep. And when the people, one by one dropped away, felled by the scourge which arose from these unhealthy conditions of life, they took no thought of the folly that had made a place of human habitation there at all. Who was first responsible for the birth of Inchonnen none could tell. Sure it was very old, nestling there in the silent, close shadow of its encircling hills. The houses themselves, with their grey walls and overhanging eaves, would tell you so; and the ruined, empty cottages scattered here and there on the lochside, and also further up on the slope of Ben-achree could tell, too, that the place had fallen on evil days. For looks it was picturesque enough, and in the summer they would come in coaches from distant places of resort to see what they called a typical Highland clachan (pronounced mostly as it were spelled clackan), and make little notes in pocket-books, or thumbnail sketches of the inhabitants and the quaint nestling little homes. Then they would write articles perhaps about the depopulation of the Highland, and give their own reasons for the same, and voluminous opinions not worth the paper on which they were written, though they did well enough for people who cull their knowledge from newspaper columns. For to know and to understand the inwardness of life at Inchonnen, it was necessary not only to live there, but to be native to the soul. All the dwellers of Inchonnen had this inwardness in their souls, and some of them were poets though they never presumed to set pen to paper, and had to dictate their rare letter by word of mouth to Malcolm MacVean or to the village schoolmaster. And because of the aloofness of their lives and their nearness to the great heart of nature, the people of Inchonnen were a people apart, silent, mystic, very reverent, given to endurance, and very little to speech. For these reasons they were not perhaps fitted to go out into the world and fight there with common citizens of the world; and so in the ordinary estimation Inchonnen had sent out many failures. It was for one of them Malcolm MacVean was looking that still, quiet morning, shading his eyes as they roamed the long winding trail of the white road. He had kept this vigil at the dawning for well nigh twenty years, each morning with a fresh access of faith and hope. Far down the road he could see a moving black speck, but was not unduly uplifted by the sight, for, like a mirage in the desert, it had deceived him often. He took out his big old-fashioned watch, and saw that it was just five o'clock, an unlikely time for any respectable traveller to arrive on foot at a place so remote as Inchonnen. No doubt it was some "gangrel body" or one of the tinkers women, with

her load of tins on her back, who had fallen by the way with fatigue, and slept under the dry brackens. He stepped back to the little kitchen, laid some more peat on the fire, and swung the singing kettle back from the smoke; then, taking his stout walking stick, set out for the road. He often took a walk in the morning before the day's work claimed him, and nobody seeing him wondered or thought it strange. Already the thin line of smoke was arising from nearly every chimney; there were few sluggards in Inchonnen, or any ants to shame them with their industry.

As he left the village behind, and came out on the treeless road, the wind seemed to spring up freshly from the hills, to stir his grey locks and fill his lungs with fresh vigor. Then he could see the flutter of skirts in the far distance, and knew it was a woman approaching. Perhaps his heart beat a little faster—it might be the woman he wished to meet, that he had been disappointed so often, took nothing away from the freshness of his hope.

As his foot quickened, hers seemed to lag; once she stood still, and even turned her head down the steep slope whence she had come. Then did Malcolm, with the sweat on his brow, break into a little run, in an agony lest she should escape. And all this before there was any possibility of recognition, only something told him the answer to his long praying had come at last. The ends of his plaid fluttered in the wind, he had his bonnet in his hand, and his stout stick under his arm so that he would not be impeded, and so he came quite close to her, she standing still in the road, with her thin hands folded, a look which cannot be described upon her face. It was a sad face, and weary—the face of one who had been down in the depths of life, and had tasted its bitterest cup. Yet she had left it a bonnie, fresh lass, with the bloom of the morning on her cheek, and the light of the sun in her eyes. It was not for her to speak. She was not clever, like the prodigal of old, to con a moving lesson beforehand; she had no words to pierce the heart of the father she had so grievously offended. But none were needed. The silence about them made fitting environment for a moment of acute anguish.

It was the old man who first found his voice.

"Elspet my woman, so ye have come hame."

There was a moving pathos in these bold words. Elspet MacVean shook as an aspen shivers in the wind.

"Ay, father," was all she said, and they looked at one another again in that strange, deep silence. It was deep enough and elastic enough to bridge the gulf of the intervening years. He was not learned in knowledge of the world from any experience of his own, but his daughter's story needed no telling. It was writ large upon her from top to toe. Her eyes had wept, her face had blanched and grown thin and weary through feeding on the husks; her poor clothing, though clean and decently whole, spoke the poverty that would not hide.

"Where ha' ye been, bairn, a' the nicht?" he asked huskily.

"I started frae Blair last nicht, but it tired me, an' I had to cr ep into the bracken. I could hae walkit it once, father—there an' back."

"Ay, but the bracken was dry, Elspet. It iss nineteen year come Martimas sin ye gaed doon the road to Blair. It has been a hard road, my woman."

"Yes, it has been a hard road; and what I'm come back for, I ken not."

"You might haf written, Elspet. 'Hope deferred maketh the heart sick.'"

"I had naething to tell that ye wad wish to hear." "Did he marry ye, lass?" he asked then, and his eyes seemed faithless as they dwelt mercilessly upon her face.

She shook her head.

He left me in three year. The bairn deed. I've been in service since. But there's something here," she said, pressing her hand to her side, "an' I couldna dee in the puihouse."

"God forbid! Ye are welcome hame, Elspet. Ye hae paid the price."

It was his verdict which covered the whole dreary vista of the years he had waited. He had no reproach for the child who had so ill requited his

fatherly care; he could leave that in other hands. What he was presently concerned with was her homecoming, and that "something here." Misery is ever selfish. Elspet MacVean had nothing to say regarding her father's looks. Had she been asked, she might have said that in twenty years he had changed but little. All the change was in her.

"What'll they say in Inchonnen, Father? It will be ill for me, aye, an' for you, to hear their clashes."

"We can shut the door, my lass; an' nae man or woman will clash to Malcolm MacVean when he has no mind or ear to listen."

"I will shame ye, father for I have nothing in the wide world but what ye see. For I hae been ill near a year, an' even in the hospital, an' all my siller is dune."

"I haf enough," he made answer. "Come then, bairn, let us hame, for it is jist on the clap o' six."

They quickened their steps a little, and presently with one accord began to cross a stubble field that brought them to their own door. Elspet MacVean was three whole days in her father's house before a soul knew of her return. Then it was the doctor that discovered it. He was riding past the cottage door when the old man signed to him to come in. And there at the fireside, wrapped in an old plaid, was a woman he had no difficulty in recognizing.

"So," he said, drawing a long breath, "you have come back, Elspet."

He regarded her steadily, and with a deepening gravity. He was a plain-spoken man of no mean skill, who never beat about the bush. After a brief examination, he nodded first and then shook his head. The old man followed him anxiously to the door.

"She'll not last long, Malcolm. It's a pity that she should have made such a havoc of her life."

"Then she iss to dee? When, doctor?"

"In about six weeks or so the stress will come. I'll drop in as I pass by, Malcolm; but it is little I can do for Inchonnen's fell scourge."

When the old man re-entered the cottage Elspet turned to him.

"He says I am to dee, father; but it wina be yet not this year nor the next, and you can tell him that frae me."

"In the Lord's time, lass," said the old man rebukingly, but there was a mist before his eyes.

The next morning his broken sleep was disturbed by the swish of a heather besom on the floor, and the stir of much cleaning. And when he drew the curtain of the box bed, in which he shut himself nightly in total defiance of all the laws of health, he saw that the place was empty of all its meagre furniture, and Elspet on the chair, with a pail of whitewash ready to her hand.

"Mercy me, lass, ye are beside yersel!" he cried with a gasp.

"Lie still or I bid ye get up; it's jist five. At six the wa's will be dune, an' ye'll get your breakfast. It's the dirt o' twenty years," she added, critically; "for what can a man body ken about a hoose?"

She spoke blithely; like one who had gotten a new lease of life. And she had. In some mysterious way home had laid a healing spell on Elspet MacVean, and in the midst of her gladness she had no mind to lie down and die as it was expected and predicted she would do.

That "something here" either disappeared, or remained in abeyance to her strong will—certain it never troubled her, and she lived to be a comfort to her father to the day of his death. Hers was a record of deeds rather than words. As for the neighbors, after they had gotten over the first shock of their surprise, and found what a different Elspet had returned from the one who had gone away, they bore her no grudge, nor did they cast her ill-doing in her teeth. Just as her soul, for the twenty years of her exile, had never ceased to be in blessed bondage to the memory of her father's righteous example, so now it bore rich fruit in a quiet life of service to God and man. The woman who had sinned and suffered became in the place of her birth a succourer of many. But of this more another day. —Commonwealth.

### The Boy Who Did His Duty.

It was to a lonely cottage, situated in one of the Scottish glens, that David Stewart had taken his young wife Margaret when he married her. Tourists as they went through the glen often admired the wild bleak hills that rose on either side, their varied summits presenting varied and picturesque