

CHAPTER XII.—“THO’ ’TWERE TEN
THOUSAND MILE.”

It is an autumn day in Braithen. The Shiel, fed by the early rains, grows to its banks, and here and there overflows. The hill-sides are still purple with heather, and the woods about Cowrie Castle are a grand mosaic of colour. The yews, the pines, the rowans, and the oaks, are harmonious in the modulations of colour. Jean Fordie has come to the top of the tower, her habit of an evening, to see the sun ride out beyond the hills, and to take a good-night look at the town, whose buildings ambled beside the river in easy irregularity. Perhaps, to herself, she had never absolutely admitted that each morning and evening she looked towards the south, along that steep road belting the hills, if haply she might see someone travelling towards the town—some old friends from another land. If hope deferred makes the heart sick, expectancy makes the face young; and from the first she never doubted—such was the buoyancy of her nature—that these old friends would return. What should happen when they did come was not so clear. But she saw justice ahead; and justice, to her, was now greater than love. For she had suffered an injustice, and she knew that it was crueler than unsatisfied affection.

She leaned against the bartisan wall, her eyes upon the south, thinking; and only seeing the horizon lying dimly beyond. Presently, she raised her head with a quick gesture of interest. There were three horsemen on the crest of the hill. Of course, she could not see who they were, but there came to her a swift instinctive conviction. The colour heightened in her cheek, and warmed her eye, and sent her fingers trembling to her hair. She watched them until they disappeared into a glen; and then she went below. It was natural, perhaps, that while she waited for something, she dared not think what, she should turn to the loom, where so many waiting hours had been passed.

Her hand was steady; the shuttle shot back and forth with clacking music, and once or twice she paused to move her hand gently across the cloth. But, from the smile upon her face, one would have said it was a distant, not a near, thing, which occupied her mind.

There came a gentle knocking at the door of the room. She started up, moved forward a little, and then paused. “Come in,” she said.

Elsie Garvan entered. “Ye look sae strange,” said Elsie;—“by a’ the warl’ gin I were a ghost; as surely ye wer’na lookin’ for me.”

Jean laughed a little nervously and said: “I dinna ken what I expectet, Elsie: but, come here,” she added, “for I hae a thing to say.” Her eyes were bright.

“Is it that the waitin’s ower?” said the other; “is it that they’ve come?”

“I am no sure,” answered Jean, “but I hae a feeling.”

Then in a low voice they talked together.

... And three horsemen turned upon the town, not far away, and talked together also. These paused at the top of a brae, and looked down into the valley where the town reposed. And one said: “Faith, I’m thinking, ’twas but yesterday I roared for another pot of beer at the Rob Roy, and not ten years ago.”

“Many a man’s gone for ever from Braithen town since then,” rejoined a little man at his left.

“There’s Cowrie Castle,” said the third, his big hand levelled at his brow to shade his eyes.

“Ay,” said the first who had spoken, “there’s the Castle, Venlaw, and at its doors we’ll stand before we’re an hour older. And I’ll not say but it’s worth coming these five thousand miles to do. For, bedad, there’s no home like the old home.”

“And there’s no love like the old love,” rejoined Venlaw, beneath his breath. But Benoni spoke nothing further but whistled gaily *Rob Roy’s Return*.

An hour after there was loud knocking at the outer door of Cowrie Castle; and then, not waiting,—for the door was open—three visitors ascended the stone stairs. Benoni was leading. On the threshold of the door of the room where Jean sat, they paused, and the old man knocked, and then entered, followed by the others. Two women stood together by the loom. One started forward with a faint cry; the other hung back.

“I have brought them home, you see,” said Benoni.

The foremost one held out her hand to him. “Yes, yes,” she said, and her eyes shifted slowly from one to the other, as though she found it hard to be sure that they were there. Then she breathed hard. “But—but whaur’s my brither?” she added—“my brither!”

Benoni spoke up gently. “I could not bring him. He could not come back to Scotland, if he would.”

“Whaur’s my brither?” she urged. Her