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The Book of Judgment

419

The Royal birthday came and went, bringing heart-throbs of elation or bitterness as expected honours were conferred or withheld. A little later the newspapers announced that the Home Secretary was taking a holiday among early scenes with his friend Sir Percy Quinton, Q.C., M.P. The argus-eyed diligently reported their comings and goings; but one event was missed. On an afternoon in the flush of summer a carriage travelled at a leisurely pace along the highway from Aberfourie to Pitweem. It had four occupied with age, Quinton, and Kinloch. Opposite the beech-tree field it stopped.

"You will rest, sir, while I walk down to the wood for auld lang syne," said Kinloch to the dominie. "Quinton, perhaps you will bear Mr. Proudfoot company. My sister can come or stay as she likes." And Jessie, divining her brother wished to be alone, elected to stay.

It was a day of such incomparable sunshine as Nature in her happiest mood vouchsafes in the Highlands. It seemed she was adorning herself in a thousand unsuspected elusive charms to surprise her lovers to ecstasy. As Kinloch went slowly towards the big beech-tree, the picture on which he paused to look once or twice to look was strangely, hauntingly familiar. It was as if he were treading the flowery ways of a long-remembered dream, now all at once revived with a magical vividness and reality. The scene glowed and smiled as it had so often glowed and smiled for him in the far past. The lush pastures were once again damasked in midsummer richness; upward the broomy thickets had the bewitching yellow glint that had refreshed imagination in the dusty city. He noted the green deepening into hazy purples, and these again fading into grey granite cliffs, which to-day looked soft in the warm light. The shining fields were dotted with labourers who hardly moved in the restful sunshine. So he had seen them basking and drowsing hundreds of times before. The thatched, crouching houses seemed asleep; bees hummed, burns glimmered and danced, massy white clouds made the horizon cool, and the breath of summer was as a gently moving censer, giving out sweet balms of wood and hill and meadow. In the beech-tree field itself cattle browsed ambrosially, while the herd, bare armed and bare legged, guddled trout in the Tullyven burn.