

# His Home

By MARJORIE L. C. PICKTHALL

"SO old Mis' Murray's gone," said Jim Carpenter, munching a dried apple chip.

"Aye," returned Murchison, thoughtfully, "she's gone, poor soul. 'Twas said she'd not outlast Murray long. And young Jock's comin' home for the buryin'. 'Twill be a sad blow to him."

"She was a fine woman of her age," said Jim. "But what she ever see in Murray to make her that took up with him—she so lively and wide-awake, and keen over a bargain; and he half asleep the most o' the time and shiftless: Well, there! thought more o' them red lilies at the end o' the four-acre than he did o' his 'taters. Never would have the hay cut that end, on account o' cuttin' the lilies down with the grass. Crazy, I call it; but it seemed to suit her."

Old Murchison leaned over the counter, stabbing the crumbling wood with a skewer, his fierce white eyebrows drawn low over his sad eyes. "Why," said he gently, "I guess they just suited each other. I dunno how, but they did. They was lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their deaths, you see, they wasn't long divided. Which is a text, Jim."

"Aye," said Jim, respectfully, "you always did have the learnin', Mister Murchison."

"I knew 'em both," went on the old man, "for more than forty year. I knew her when she was Serena Brand, a handsome lass scarce out o' her teens. I knew him when he first come round these parts. I mind the very first-day I saw him. He come to the door here one day in early summer, and stood there in a mist o' golden dust. Young he was, and brown as a nut, with white teeth and solemn gray eyes. I mind, too, that my eyes was taken by a little red squirl that had been settin' sociable on his shoulder, and that whisked into his pocket at sight o' me. 'Good day t'you,' ses he, with a queer, plaintive lift and fall in his speech, 'd'you need any tinware?' He'd a little truck pullin' behind him, glitterin' with tin things. 'I've all here,' ses he, 'mugs, jugs, pie-plates, measures, bread-graters, and saucepans.' 'I need a quart measure,' ses I, 'an' while I'm choosin' it, come in and have a glass o' cider, for it's a real warm day,' and I liked the soft fashion of his way of talk. He drank his cider and talked a bit, and then thanked me so's I felt I'd done a heap for him. 'You've been very kind to me,' he ses, with that soft sigh in his words, 'and I'm a stranger in a strange land. I'll never see my own home again,' ses he, 'nor the shieling under the purple hill, nor the stars above the loch, nor my father foldin' the sheep. Eh! my home!' ses he, and the look in his eyes went to my heart. He thanked me again and went off quick down the road to Brand's, which in them days was the next house to this. I saw him stop on the way to pick wild roses from the bush."

"I'd talked to him maybe ten minutes; but he was the kind that makes 'emselves missed, and I thought a lot o' him,—o' the dusty, brown man but little younger than myself, with the wonderful soft tongue and the hillman's walk,—so like me in years, so different in all else—ah! Lord above, so different! I was far from envying him then. I'm not sure I don't envy him now. Time and again I looked up, half hopin' I'd see him stop at my door before he took the road to Brand's."

"He came to take that road often. You'll understand I don't remember everything. I don't hold all the thread o' the story clear, only a piece here and there. The first clear bit is this I've told you, my first knowledge o' Hamish Murray. The next link comes some time after, I guess it, for in the interval he'd become well known and better liked and watched for in all the farms and townships 'tween here and Westaway. Because we were talkin' of him on this day I told you of,—me and Silas and Tom Appleby and Macky Carter,—talkin' of him and his queer ways and his homesick speech, when in comes Serena Brand, straight as a young poplar, in laylock calico with that way o' carryin' her head that made a man feel like a turnip."

"I went on cuttin' ham for Macky and talkin', and I was young, and fuller of opinions than a apple is o' seeds. 'He's a nice feller,' ses I of Murray, 'and talks like a book; but it ain't no life for a hearty man havin' his senses, totin' a little waggon full o' patty-pans round the country. A thrifless pedlar,' ses I, superior-like, 'is little use to himself or others. 'Tis no life to respect in a man,' ses I, cuttin' ham."

"There was a flutter of laylock ribands, and Serena

stood facin' me. I remember her eyes was snappin' like sparks. 'No life to respect in a man?' ses she, in her low voice. 'It's as worthy of respect as the life spent behind a counter puttin' pebbles in the currants and water in the molasses,' ses she. 'Better a man should cheat himself out of wealth,' she ses, 'than cheat his neighbour's kid out of a cent's worth of taffy so that he could put it in the plate of a Sunday,' ses she. I remember how she floated out of the store like a laylock cloud, and how my ears burned."

"And then the mist shuts down again and the thread's lost. It's so long ago, so long ago. But I've an idea Murray took the road to Brand's more and more often, and that his eyes got lonelier, and he spoke more often of his home. 'Eh! my home!' he'd say, only he said it different. As for Serena, she'd scarce speak civil to him. If they passed on the road, he'd pull off his dusty hat, and look at her with them wistful eyes. And she'd pass with her eyes down and that little bend to her neck that made a man feel like a bunch o' beets, and whitey ones at that."

"The next thing that comes clear in my memory is that it's spring, wet and late, and the Knistenay in flood between here and Westaway, and no gettin' across. Then it's said that a man's tried the ford and been swept down to his death. And then it's said that the man's Hamish Murray. I dunno who ses so first. But it comes clear in my mind, the memory of four or five of us standing here in this store; of someone saying he'd left here three days ago for Westaway and hadn't got there; of someone else saying the wreck of his cart had been found at the Narrows four miles down; and of us being wretched down to our toes we'd ever made light o' Murray; and of me droppin' the measure he'd sold me down the well, it made me feel so bad."

"Then I remember the door openin' and Serena coming in, her eyes like fire and her face like chalk. 'I've heard,' ses she, 'and there's just one chance for Hamish. He may have been swept down to Gouttiere Island. Two men were once, and were found alive on it. We could cross to it above the rapids, trusting to the current. He may be alive on it now. Who'll come with me and see?' And such was her eyes, and such was her voice, that in two minutes three badly-scared men was trottin' after her to the river. Five had been willin', but she only wanted three, and she picked the strongest, of which I was one, spite o' what she said about the taffy."

"I remember the rush and swirl o' that brown current, I remember the thick yellow curves o' foam held rigid in the eddies, I remember the young spruces ridin' high upon the flood, and the pines washed down from the hills. Then, with, in my memory, no interval, we're all four in a big boat, pullin' like mad, and the river rushin' us down on Gouttiere Island."

"I remember the racing brown flood beneath us, the racing gray sky above, and Serena in the bows, still and steady. We was doin' the craziest thing I ever had a share in, and I told myself so at the time. But we'd seen her eyes and there was no more to be said. We'd looked at each other and follered like sheep."

"I remember that wild adventure on the deep waters, like as if it all happened in five minutes. Lookin' back forty years, it doesn't seem no time till the current flung us on Gouttiere, most wonderfully preserved. Gouttiere is nothin' but a pile o' rocks in the rapids, with a few spruces on top. And as if it were yesterday, I mind Serena leapin' up the rocks, her hands at her mouth, callin', callin', 'Hamish, O, Hamish!' she cried. And again,—'Hamish, O, Hamish, O, Hamish!' her voice risin' wild as a bird's above the thunder o' the rapids. I mind thinkin' as I toiled after her, that the very dead might wake at the sound o' such a voice, if love might bring them back."

"Macky panted behind me. 'It's against all reason she'll find him,' he ses, 'but, thanks be, reason ain't everythin'.' And we heard Serena call 'Hamish, O Hamish!' And we saw her stop, and look down between two rocks, and fall on her knees. 'She's found him,' ses Macky, 'and he's dead.' And we began to run."

"But, as you know, he wasn't dead, though near it. The river had flung him on the island, bruised and beaten and half-drowned. And there he'd been since, with nothin' to eat and no fire. He was lyin' among the rocks, talkin' to himself, clean off his head, and no wonder. His hands was full o' little wild flowers he'd found, and