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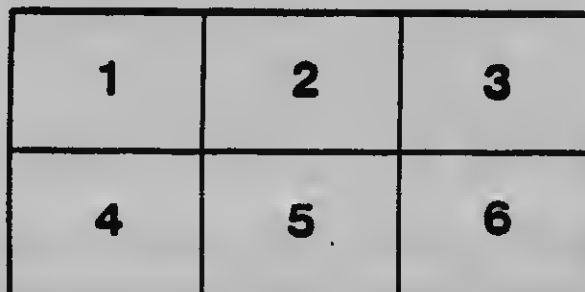
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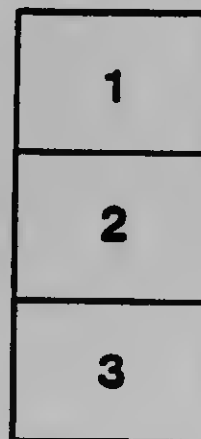
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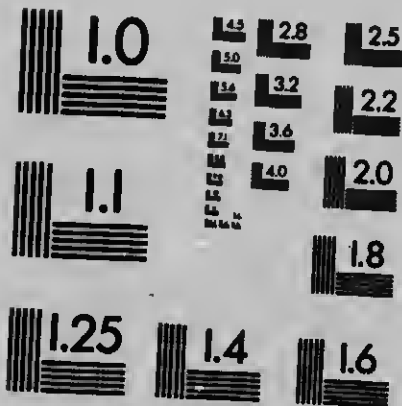
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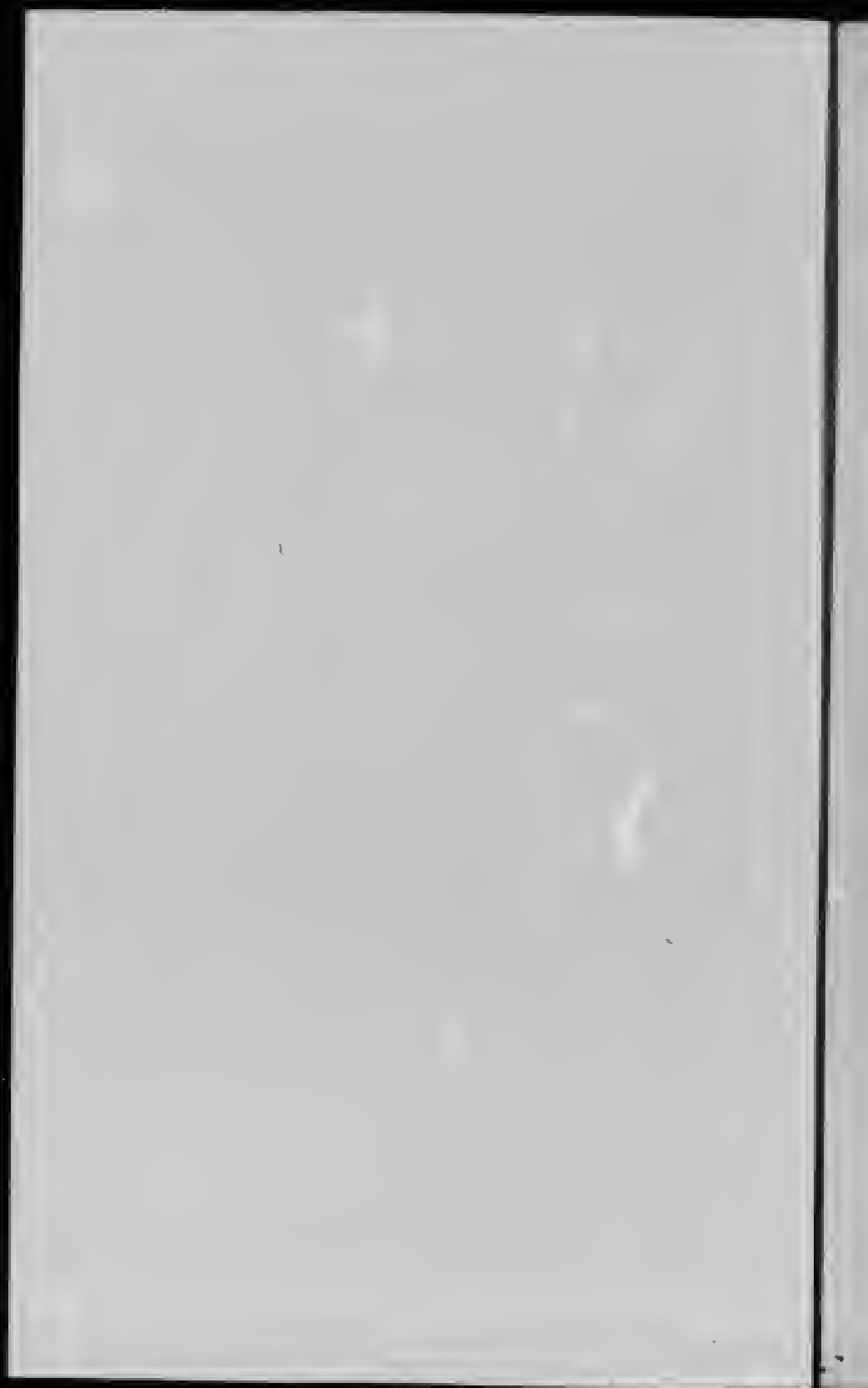
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The House not Made with Hands.

CHAPTER I.

THE QUEST OF THE ABSOLUTE.

75

THE Rev. Patrick Fleming, Free Church minister of Rochallan, in the county of Ayr, after attending a meeting of his Presbytery in Seadoon, walked with two of his colleagues to the station to catch the Glasgow train. They moved up the middle of the narrow old street with a long swinging tread, being pressed for time, and their tongues kept pace with their feet. It had been a more than usually interesting Presbytery, the business including a question of discipline, which had awakened a good deal of sympathy as well as criticism and censure.

Fleming walked between his *confrères*, and was easily the tallest of the three. He had a big slack figure, not improved by the very provincial hang of his rather shabby overcoat; his face was clear, and ruddy, and clean-shaven, except for the moustache, which, like his hair, had more than a tinge of red in it. He had a pair of kindly, rather humorous grey eyes, and his laugh, which rang out easily, had a pleasant infectious sound. His age was thirty-six, but he might have passed for five years younger.

"I was sorry for Renshaw," he observed in his deep sonorous voice. "Whatever his fault or weakness, he paid for it to-day. I couldn't face a pillory like that. I'd run away first, I verily believe."

"Not a bit of you, Pat," said Naismith, minister of Meretoun, a small eager person, with a thin face and melancholy eyes. "But there is no doubt his wife ought to have been in his place to-day. She's the sinner, if there's one at all."

"Right you are, Jimmy," said Macfadyen, a rotund comfortable man, who had married a rich wife, and was therefore exempt from the ordinary harassing cares of manse life. "But that doesn't absolve Renshaw from his responsibility. A man should be master in his own house. When he isn't, well, confusion worse confounded supervenes. I'm not sure but that you have chosen the better part, Fleming. At least you've taken no risks."

"That's all you know, my man," answered Fleming. "A bachelor can be just as much under petticoat government as a Benedict. But here we are at the station."

"Glasgow?" inquired Macfadyen, as Fleming paused in front of the booking office. He nodded, and the other two being possessed of return halves passed on to the platform, where the train was already waiting. Starting from the terminus, it was rather empty, and they had a smoking compartment to themselves. Macfadyen's destination was Kilmarnock, while Naismith had to get down at a village station a few miles further on.

Macfadyen took out a rather elaborate cigarette-case, with a gold monogram, and offered it to his brethren. Both, however, preferred the humble pipe.

"You take my advice, Fleming," he said, in his easy-going drawling fashion. "Look out for the right kind of wife. If she has a bit of a tocher, so much the better. If poor Renshaw hadn't plunged into the matrimonial sea with his eyes shut, he wouldn't be in Queer Street to-day. That obvious fact ought to be a signpost of warning to you. But you don't look as appreciative as you might."

"You may save your breath to cool your porridge, Mac," observed Naismith, who, greatly comforted by his pipe, was now able to take a happier view of everything. "A man marries to please himself, and has to bear the brunt. But if he's happy, what's the odds? That's what we all want, I suppose, first and last."

"Do you subscribe to that, Fleming?" asked Macfayden, as he leaned back in his corner, the picture of prosperous content. "Do you think the majority of men are out in quest of the absolute, in happiness, eh?"

"Most men certainly would prefer happiness," he answered, with a smile which gave a certain softness to his rather harsh features. "But then, again, ideas of happiness are set as wide apart as the poles. One man's meat is another man's poison."

"Well, I confess I couldn't have faced matrimony with Mrs. Renshaw," observed Macfadyen, with that absence of reserve which he called plain speech, and which made him actively disliked by many.

"She can be a very agreeable woman," maintained little Naismith stoutly. "Any time I have preached for Renshaw, and had to stop over, she has been more than kind."

"To everybody but Renshaw," observed Macfadyen, who always stuck to his guns. "They're an object-lesson, anyhow, to any man who is going to make ducks and drakes of his life by marrying an unsuitable party. Always aspire, Fleming——" he added as the train drew up, and he prepared to leave it. "Hitch your wagon to a star, a golden one for preference."

He nodded to them with the patronising kindness of a man who has his full share of the good of this world, and very little of its trouble. He had married, after his settlement in his first parish, the eldest daughter of a manufacturer, who had brought him a very handsome dowry, and there were some who said

it was not his duty to stick to one of the best livings in the Presbytery, when other men were in need. But then again he was a kindly man, who did great good with the means which his wife permitted him to spend freely. They were very happy together, and if their ideals were not very high, at least they tried to make life pleasanter for those around them. Macfadyen's aggressively successful air was really on the surface, and those who knew him best were able to discount many of his words, at which others were apt to take umbrage.

"Alec Macfadyen means well, but he doesn't understand the ordinary manse difficulties," said Naismith, who had an invalid wife and a lot of little children. "He's right up to a point, of course. Money makes a lot of difference to life."

"Undoubtedly, though it isn't the highest good," said Fleming, who had managed to preserve most of the ideals of his youth, chiefly because he had had little to threaten or dispel them. "It's my belief that Macfadyen would be a better man if he had less."

"That may be, but it's his money I envy him. Not that I want it for myself, but an extra hundred or two would make all the difference to us, Fleming. My poor wife could then get a little of the rest which might make her well."

Naismith's tone was so poignant that it arrested Fleming immediately, and a shade of compassionate sympathy crossed his face.

"Mrs. Naismith is not worse than usual, I hope?" he said very kindly.

"She's tired out, and the Doctor says it's a rest-cure she needs. The ordinary rest-cure at a nursing home costs four guineas a week, at the lowest. He might as well prescribe a journey to the moon. And we're very anxious about Annie too. She's just sixteen, and outgrowing her strength. Poor lassie, at an age when she ought to be feeding up and resting

in the sun, she's had to put her hand to a woman's work. "I'll tell you what, Fleming, though I've had my full share of happiness, for which I thank God, I sometimes think the man is wise who does not marry in his youth. I'm speaking of men in our walk of life, with nothing but what they can earn. I've never had more than two hundred, and am never likely to have now. Once I had ambitions too, but they've gone under in the struggle for existence"

Fleming listened with a curious sense of detachment to this deliverance, and his face was a kind of study, had his companion been at leisure to observe it. It was odd that the conversation should have turned that day on such a theme.

"But a bachelor lives the incomplete life," he said rather quickly. "Looking at him critically, he is even not fully equipped for his work. He has not touched life at all its points, and these the ones that really matter. How can he have full sympathy with men and women whose life his own experience has put him outside of? The best ministers, like the best doctors, are married men."

"All the experience in the world will not give a man sympathy unless it is inborn in him," observed Naismith quietly.

"But fuller experience can enlarge it, surely you will concede that?"

"Oh well, perhaps, but of all the men of our year, Fleming, I have oftenest been inclined to envy you. Your sister is so splendid, and a visit to Rochallan Manse brings home to a man the comfort of a perfectly equipped and well-ordered house. There's a great deal in it. I could write splendid and well-polished sermons like yours if I had your environment."

Fleming's face slightly flushed.

"You see only the outside of the kernel," he answered lightly. "Heaven forbid that I should seek to take away anything from the sum of my sister's service for us all. Yes, she is very nearly perfect,

as a housekeeper and a woman. Her sense of duty is developed to an abnormal degree, but she takes a lot of living up to, and sometimes a man longs for something else, a little human touch, that would not be quite so exacting."

Naismith looked at him narrowly, struck by the passion in his voice. At the moment the train slowed down to the station, at which he must get out.

"We must thrash it out another day, Fleming," he looked through the carriage window to say, "but think well before you make any change."

It was a bow at a venture, but watching Fleming keenly, Naismith departed in no doubt but that he was contemplating matrimony at an early date.

Left to himself, Fleming sat looking out of the window for several minutes waiting until Naismith should cross the line by the bridge, and wave to him from the path which he would take across the field to the manse.

Meretoun was one of the few weaving villages now left in the west country of Scotland, though the old industry was practically dead.

One or two looms remained in the older cottages, but the pious, indomitable spirit of the weavers had left its glamour over the place. As a field of labour it would not perhaps have appealed to a man of energetic habits of mind and body; Naismith's congregation might be small in numbers, but it was excellent in quality and tried the mettle of his pasture. These old men and women, remnant of the Pen-folk, were jealous over doctrinal points and permitted no juggling with the Word of God. Naismith sometimes said there was more theology in Meretoun parish than in the whole of the Presbytery of Ayr. He was very happy in his work on the whole, and only longed for change so that it might better his material circumstances. But in the struggle Naismith had got left behind. He saw other men, less conscientious, and not more highly gifted, pushing to the front and

obtaining the plums of Church livings. Even Fleming was a case in point. He had succeeded his father, the first Disruption minister in the seaside hamlet of Rochallan, which in the last thirty years had become a thriving watering-place. A new church of red sandstone had been built within the last five years, which Fleming was easily able to fill to overflowing in the summer months, when city people flocked in increasing numbers to Rochallan, drawn by its fine air and its matchless golf links. His salary was not very large, but the housekeeping powers of his sister Alison were more than equal to it, and there was always a margin in Rochallan Manse. As Naismith had said, it was a well-ordered household, with which we shall presently make acquaintance.

But it had ceased to satisfy Patrick Fleming, and he was now eager to make a drastic change, even to take the step which is either a man's making or undoing.

When Naismith's small shabby figure became a mere speck on the green of the distant field, Fleming drew out his pocket-book and took a letter from its inner flap. As he did so, the faint sweet odour of violet floated to him, and with a quick rather shamefaced glance round, he just touched the folded sheet with his lips. It seemed to bring him a message from the woman he loved, before even he had read her words.

It was a small sheet, closely written, in a clear, delicate hand, but which bore some signs of haste or nervousness.

"DEAR MR. FLEMING," it began, "father died last night. He did not suffer much at the last, but just slept away. I am so thankful for that. I shall be so very glad to see you, when you think you can come up, the sooner the better. I shall be waiting in for you. You will know not to come in the morning, for I must still go out to my teaching: I can't afford to do without the money, and the people here, at least those I have worked for, won't pay if they don't get their

lessons. I am quite alone in the world, and just to-day it seems very dreadful. Father is still at the hospital; they advise that he should be buried from the mortuary. Perhaps it is better for me. I shall be very glad when you come to help and advise me. You have been so kind all these months, and father liked you so much.

"Yours sincerely,
"EDITH BROOKE."

The train moved very slowly, Fleming thought; but when it deposited him at last at the terminus in a pouring rain, he lost not a moment in getting out to the car-line. It was now after four o'clock. He had little more than an hour to spare for the writer of the letter, as he must get back early in the evening to Seadoon, where he was due to speak at a meeting at the Town House at eight o'clock. It was then the beginning of October, when a popular minister has to attack his winter programme, and has often difficulty in keeping it within bounds.

About ten minutes' ride in a westerly direction brought him to his destination, an unpretentious and rather ugly street, in the vicinity of Charing Cross. It was a street consisting entirely of flats, a little superior to those occupied by working folks. Fleming, no stranger to the place, to which he had paid a good many visits in the last six months, ran impatiently up three flights of stairs, and knocked quickly at the door. It was opened to him immediately by a tall, slender girl, with a pale but rather pretty face, big dark eyes, which seemed accentuated by the lack of colour in her cheeks, and an abundance of dark hair which parted in the middle, and, brushed loosely down behind her ears to the coil behind, gave her a somewhat Madonna-like look.

A dull flush overspread her face at sight of Fleming and her eyes brightened.

"It is very good of you to come. I was just begin-

ning to give up hope. Come in, will you, I am all alone in the house."

Fleming, upon whom a curious silence seemed to fall, obeyed her, laid his hat on the small side table in the narrow hall, and after a brief hesitation removed his overcoat. The atmosphere of the house struck him as close, and his blood was in a ferment.

"I came as quickly as I could," he explained, as he followed her into the sitting-room. But I had an important Presbytery meeting at Seadon, and could not get away sooner.

"It is very good of you to come at all," she answered, without having the smallest idea what a Presbytery meeting was. "After I had posted the letter I felt dreadfully frightened, in case I had presumed too much. But you have been such a friend to us in the last six months, and father was very fond of you."

She asked him to sit down, but Fleming, after placing a chair for her, stood at the end of the mantel-piece regarding her with a very intense interest. It was a small mean room, poorly furnished, the concert grand piano across one angle being out of all proportion to its size, and seeming to dwarf the remaining space. A shabby carpet, and a couple of easy chairs composed the rest of the furnishing, and it was badly kept. The dust of weeks was on the frames of the few engravings on the wall, and the fireplace indicated the lack of a pair of capable hands. The only beautiful thing in the room was a handful of flame-coloured chrysanthemums in a blue and white vase on one end of the mantel-shelf.

"I need not say how sorry I am for you," Fleming said in a voice of great gentleness. "I was in hopes after yesterday's letter that Mr. Brocks might pull through."

"He had very little reserve strength for the operation, and I don't think he minded much. Poor father, he had not had much of a life. He seemed to feel it more as he grew older."

"You are going to have the funeral from the mortuary, you thought? You would like me, perhaps, to come and take the service?"

She looked a little troubled.

"If you think it necessary. Poor father was not a church-goer, you see, and you were the only clergyman he had any respect for."

"You would not surely put him in like that, without a prayer or anything," said Fleming, in a shocked voice. "You say he was not a church-goer, but I am certain he was a Christian man. We had several talks at Craigellan at Christmas, and he struck me as a very broad-minded, even in some directions a pious man."

"He believed in humanity up to the last, even though the world had treated him so badly," she said quietly. "Whatever you like, Mr. Fleming. I am leaving it to you. I have nobody to help me here at all. I have found Glasgow a cold city, but I suppose most cities are cold to the poor."

"It was because you would not permit yourself to be known. At Craigellan everybody liked you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"A kind of patronising liking, such as one may bestow on a street musician; I don't think we ranked higher. But I'm not complaining, don't think it. I simply don't care."

"May I ask what you are going to do now?" asked Fleming rather eagerly. "You can't stay here; the idea of your being quite alone here even for these few days is unthinkable. I feel as if something must be done."

"I am not in the least afraid, and I have my little maid. She is really quite devoted. I shall not be able to stop on here, because I could not afford it. I shall have to find a cheap lodging somewhere, and go on with my teaching. I have got a small connection here. Poor father enjoyed Craigellan and the people he met there so much. When he felt himself getting

seriously ill, he often suggested that I should seek a permanent appointment in one of these places. But don't you think it would be rather an awful life? To spend one's entire time getting up entertainments for a constant succession of people, to have something on every night! It would give me a nightmare. Even to make a livelihood, I couldn't face it."

"I agree with you. The idea is horrible. I couldn't bear to see you in such a position even temporarily, even though you filled it so well. But have you no relatives to whom you could go at least for a time?"

"None that would be of any use to me. There are some in London, but we have never been intimate with them. You see poor father was the failure of the family. He just missed being a great musician. If he had been that, of course they would all have been only too glad to know him. That is the way of the world."

Fleming could not gainsay it.

"May I bring my sister to see you?" he asked presently. "I will come back to-morrow if you'll permit me, and bring her. Then perhaps after everything is over you will come to us at Rochallan for a few days. It is beautiful there now. All the summer visitors have gone, and we have three miles of uninterrupted shore to ourselves. The rest and change would do you good."

"I should like to come very much for the week-end," she answered frankly, "if your sister would like to have me. I have not many friends among women, and I think I'm a little afraid of them. And your sister is so very good. I remember all you told us about her at Craigellan."

"She is very good," answered Fleming, and a little chill fell across his eager heart at the moment, for which he could not account.

But quite suddenly he looked across at the woman on the other side of the fireplace, sitting so quietly

with her long artistic hands crossed on her lap, and said bluntly,

"I ask you to come, hoping that when you've seen my home you'll be willing to make it yours. Will you marry me?"

CHAPTER II.

"COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE."

"THIS is a day, Miss Ailie, when things will go wrang in spite o' ye. They are jist as thrawn as the very de'il."

Thus observed Janet Aiken, servant at Rochallan Manse, late in the afternoon of the same day.

As the minister, by reason of the Presbytery meeting, did not come home to early dinner, she and her mistress had taken the opportunity to make the apple jelly, which, as every woman knows, is the most difficult conserve to render perfect on the housekeeper's list. Alison Fleming's brows were sternly knit as she stood at the well-scrubbed table between the kitchen windows, with a wooden spoon in her hand, anxiously dropping a small portion on the cool white surface of a plate in order to test its consistency. She was a comely woman of thirty-eight, and looked her age as a woman may well do who has spent the better portion of these years in the practice of small economies, and in continuous ministry for others. Alison Fleming had been born in Rochallan Manse, where her father had been the first Disruption minister. It was then a small detached village little over a mile from the coast town of Seadoon, but in the last decade it had grown into a more pretentious place, and was now almost a suburb of Seadoon, though trying to keep its own amenity intact.

The reason of its prosperity was that it had been discovered as a seaside resort, having fine natural

golf links, and uninterrupted expanse of shore, besides having accessible and very pretty country stretching inland to a low range of sheltering hills.

Alison Fleming, whose entire life had been spent there, with very few breaks, had been called, at an age when other girls are enjoying the heritage of their youth, to mother a widower's household and to fill a woman's part. Her mother had died when she was only ten, leaving her the eldest of four. Two brothers, Patrick and Gavin, usually called Guy, came between her and the baby Isabel, commonly called Tibbie or Tib. These three had Alison conscientiously, if not too tenderly, mothered, and the process had had its sobering effect. She was a tall, fair woman, built on generous lines, wide-bosomed and great-hearted, with a glory of nut-brown hair, and a pair of fine but rather keen grey eyes that very occasionally when she was alone, and her heart touched by memory, had a soft, pathetic look in their depths. Sometimes the outlook from them had been as grey as the sea on a winter's day. Since she had first taken up the woman's burden, she had had the outlay of her father's meagre stipend, and from him she had not received the smallest help. He was one of these lovable, helpless men, who in their domestic affairs are wholly at the mercy of their woman-kind.

A student and a bookish man, the only vexation between him and his capable daughter had been his tendency to spend recklessly on books the money sorely and constantly needed for household affairs, for the children's clothes and schooling, and doles for the needy, who abounded even in that remote seaboard parish. But in spite of Alison's sometimes almost tearful protests, the study bookshelves waxed fat, and were a constant source of wonder and envy to the "supply," who occasionally came to relieve the minister when he was required to officiate elsewhere.

They seldom went away, even the crudest and least observant of these youthful probationers, without

paying a silent tribute of worship and admiration to the brave young house-mother, from whose eyes, even in her teens, there looked out a wistful, anxious woman's soul. She had done her duty nobly, but over-anxiety had been her bane. In the process she had mastered the whole art of doing without. She had loved to make Tibbie look pretty, and had often done it, at her own expense. Any old thing decently put together was good enough for Alison herself to wear. Tib must have the pretty and the new. Nobody looked at Alison and nobody cared, such was Alison's conviction, often quite wrong. She was clever at make-shifts with the needle, but she lacked the particular grace which enabled Tib to invest a cheap cotton frock with her own individual charm. Alison could not coquette with a ribbon, or pin a rose to her bodice with alluring effect. A hewer of wood and a drawer of water, she sometimes said she was, and would remain to the end of her days.

Did she ever sigh for a different destiny as the years rolled on, bearing away her youth and insensibly hardening a nature intended for softness? She did not pose as a martyr, nor desire that others should praise her in the gates; she did desire, however, whole-heartedly, that folk would walk in the path which seemed to her righteous and incumbent, the pathway of duty which ever involves sacrifice. She had given up cheerfully; she sometimes wondered why others seemed to find it so hard. Even her brother Patrick, acceptable and eloquent as he was in the pulpit, often fell far short of her ideal. The fiery Fleming temper was strong in him, and he took all things, even the stupendous sacrifice of his sister's whole future, as a matter of course. There were even moments when she had asked herself whether it might not be possible that Pat, while preaching to others, should be himself a castaway. She never breathed this fear to mortal, not even to her faithful friend and henchwoman, Janet Aiken, who had been through so

much with them, and had grown grey in the service of the manse. Janet's adoration for her mistress was only equalled by her scorn of the other members of the family, though even that was mingled with a secret pride.

"A selfish crew," she had been known to characterise them, not even exempting the minister, who, if she had been brought to close quarters, she might have pronounced the chief offender. The two women talked of many things in the kitchen of Rochallan Manse, but not very often of family affairs. Janet, however, was perfectly well aware that things were not going smoothly in the dining-room or the study; she could feel strain and stress in the air. The minister had been very short in his temper of late, and Miss Alison sad and silent; and sometimes Janet, pondering the thing while she busied herself about the house, wished there could be an explosion and end it one way or the other. She was pleased to see Miss Alison smile as she examined the drop in the testing spoon.

"The de'il has nothing to do with this little lot, Janet. I put too much water in it at the start, and we have to get it out, that's all. But I'm tired of it, and now I'll leave you to make a kirk or a mill of it, and run down to see Mrs. Dunlop. If the minister comes in before I get back, be sure to ask him whether he has had any dinner."

"And if he hasna, eggs to his tea, I suppose?" said Janet drily. "I'll dae my best wi' the jeely, but it's naething but thae Rochallan crab aipples. They are a bad kind, jist like some folk, a' the mixin' an' coaxin' in the world winna sweeten them, or gar them settle doon to their proper wark."

"It's a lovely colour, anyway," said Miss Alison, as she peered into the glowing pink heart of the big preserving pan, too much engrossed to combat Janet's philosophy. "Just have patience with it, and don't let me come back to find that you have poured it away."

Patience, Janet, do you hear, miles and miles of patience, then everything, even thrawn folk and watery apple jelly, comes right in the end."

"Dootful," was Janet's grim retort; and Alison sighed faintly as she untied her apron and folded it neatly, ready for the corner of her own drawer in the dresser.

"I believe it's the day after all, Janet. I didn't feel right when I got up this morning, and you have been more than usual snappy yourself all day. They've had a long meeting of Presbytery, surely. It's after five o'clock."

As she climbed the stairs to get her boots and hat, she wondered why it was that so many days of late had been dreary and ill-conditioned. Their blighting influence was beginning to sap her comfort and well being. There were undercurrents, of which she was fully conscious, but which she would not probe, or look squarely in the face. When a really strong and capable woman adopts the policy of drift, it is certain a crisis is not far off. She peered closely into the toilet mirror as she was about to pin on her veil, and was struck a little painfully by her ageing looks.

"I look forty-eight to-day," she said half aloud. "On the shelf ye are, Ailie Fleming, that's what ails ye, I do believe."

Her voice was undoubtedly one of the most beautiful of all Alison Fleming's possessions. It was not so very low, but of round and sweet quality, and such sympathy could vibrate through it that its comforting note had travelled further than she had any idea of. She was needing comfort herself that red October day. She had mothered many, but her arms were empty, and to-day her heart. God had undoubtedly meant her for the closest and dearest of family ties, but when they were within her reach she had wilfully and deliberately set them aside, for her family's sake. Tibbie had been but fifteen then, Gavin still a student at the University of Glasgow, and Patrick a very young

minister just started as assistant and successor to his father. Her duty then was clear. She could not leave her motherless household, and as marriage with Archie Mackerrow meant going out to the East with him, she had bidden him good-bye in Rochallan woods, with what anguish none knew save her Maker. He had gone to the East alone with untold bitterness in his heart. That was the end. He had never written, nor had she any definite news of him, and his folk at Rochallan never looked at her, blaming her for winning him first of all, and then for making him an exile from his home. He might have married, and she never heard, but certainly in fifteen years he had never revisited his native land. The Mackerrows were poor folk, but their pride was high. All their three sons had been obliged to seek fortune across the seas, and two of them had achieved it, and married well into good families such as are approved by the needy and proud cadets of ancient houses.

But Archie, the flower of the flock, the heir to the hungry Rochallan acres, had disappointed all their hopes. Nobody seemed to know anything about him.

To-day, Alison, going back in thought over that old love-story, wondered whether her sacrifice had been worth while. She had done her duty, because it seemed the only thing in front of her, and now nobody had any particular need of her. Something of late had whispered to her that her brother Patrick needed her in the Manse of Rochallan least of all. He had the sanguine and casual temperament which often goes with popular gifts, and a good deal less than his sister's high ideal satisfied him. She was his senior by two years only, but he seemed to her still very, very young. The ease and lightness with which he accepted the responsibility of his high office seemed to her a fearsome thing. Once she had passionately asked him whether he realised that he was handling the souls of men. He had received her rebuke with a look of surprise and a laugh which in no way reassured her.

Patrick Fleming, preaching peace in the pulpit, felt the irony of things, for he had not always peace at home; while Alison, in the pew, often felt her heart grow stone cold in her breast.

He would preach with convincing passion and sincerity about the beauty of home life, and the same evening throw his boots out into the passage after Janet Aiken, telling her that if she could not clean them better she could find another job. The Fleming temper, naturally high and hasty, was, in Alison's case, under complete control, but her slow resentment against her brother was growing mountains high. She had taken herself to task mercilessly, without arriving at any conclusion. She could not discover any gross fault in herself, except the growing habit of silence when her brother was in the house. They seldom now talked over church affairs, all the old happy comradeship that had been so easy and so precious at the beginning of things had gone, never to come back. Patrick Fleming had grown out of swaddling clothes, and he longed to have his house to himself, and with it freedom to order his life as he thought fit. The habit of the mentor had grown upon Alison undoubtedly, she was always keeping him up to the mark. And he was tired of it. That was all.

She looked into the kitchen before she left the house, just to give Janet another heartening word, and stepped with a sense of relief into the clear crisp October air. There was a touch of frost on the far horizon, she thought, and just where the sun dipped towards the sea the rim of the cloud was red. It sent a shaft of flame athwart the old grey house huddling on the bank of the big, new aggressive church which dwarfed it so completely. There was something pathetic about that little old house, but all its sacred charm seemed to fall away from it that night, as Alison Fleming paused at the green gate and looked back upon it. It was no longer a home. It was the house in which she had been born, where all the poignant and the happy hours of

her life had been lived, yet what had it given her now in middle age when she seemed to need things desperately, the things other women had in plenty and did not prize? She shut the gate with a little snap, and turned away from the sea to walk briskly into the heart of the town, where the Old Manse of the parish was set in a walled garden by the side of the churchyard. As she walked her eyes travelled often, not seawards, though she loved the sea, but to the sloping uplands where, on a sheltered hillside at the edge of a strip of wood, much thought of in that bare and wind-swept coast, stood the old white house of Rochallan with its windows to the west. The frowning heads of Ayr, washed by the wild Atlantic waters, and the wide sweep of the sea to the hills of Arran, made a magnificent picture and one to linger in the memory.

Rochallan was a small estate, its land so poor that it had never been able to keep those dependent on it. But as a home it was lovely as a dream. As Alison's eyes caught the flame of the sunset on its windows her heart beat dully with the exquisite pain of remembrance. There in Rochallan woods had she and Archie Mackerrow said their long good-bye. Where was he now? she wondered, the gallant lover of her youth, whom many had coveted, but who had turned aside to the humble manse on the wind-swept shore to seek her, Alison Fleming, who was now of little account to any in the wide world? She wondered whether the spirit of her longing and regret could be borne on unseen wings across the dividing seas, and if it would be strong enough to bring him back to her side. It was only a phantasy, but for the moment it was so sweet and real that when some one addressed her on the road, she gave a great start, as she came back to earth again. It was only a beggar-woman craving for alms, and because she had a baby at her breast, and was therefore blessed among women, Alison emptied her slender purse into her hand, then hurried on to escape her astonished blessing.

She came presently to the narrow street of the old town that stood well back from the shore, and was therefore not so much patronised by those who came in summer-time for commerce with the sea aloft. It was old and quiet and picturesque, dominated by the tower of its parish church, which stood on a gentle eminence in the very heart of the town, with its narrow and crowded graveyard about it, and the high red wall of the manse garden shutting it in on the further side. Alison crossed the churchyard to a small door in the wall, whose catch was known to the privileged few. The wife of the minister of Seadoon, who had been forty years in the Old Manse, was sister to the Laird of Rochallan, and therefore aunt to Archie Mackerrow. She alone of all the Mackerrow connection had extended a friendly hand to Alison Fleming at the time of the love-affair, and had remained her staunch friend throughout. But they never now talked of that faraway story, Mrs. Dunlop believing that where speech cannot mend, it is better withheld. She was a mother and a succourer of many, and Alison's heart turned naturally to her now, when she was feeling the burden of things pressing, and the spectre of intangible care stalking by her side.

When she had let herself through the door in the wall, she stood just for a moment looking across the sheltered spaces all gay yet with the gorgeous autumn bloom. There is something remote and enchanting about a walled garden, and Alison had often contrasted it with the narrow strip of grass in front of her own unpretentious home and wondered whether environment, actual physical environment, has not a narrowing effect. Once a small army of merry children had made the walled garden the playground of their happiest days; now all the Dunlops were scattered wide, sons and daughters of them, nine in all, and the mother, white-haired and stately, with the seal of a noble life set high on her brow, walked its memory-haunted spaces alone. She was there now, bending lovingly

over her herb border, and when she saw Alison hastened to meet her with signs of welcome.

"My dear, I was only saying to the minister at tea-time that you had deserted me. What has happened? And you look tired to-night, most frightfully tired."

"I'm in trouble," said Alison shortly. "Dear Mrs. Dunlop, let me sit down here under the apple-tree, and be quiet with you. There is peace inside these walls; everywhere else in the world outside of them there is strife. I can't think how they could all bear to go away. I have never got over wondering about it since Evy married."

Mrs. Dunlop sat down on the old garden seat under a gnarled apple-tree, and folded her hands on her lap.

"We can't keep them, Alison. They are only lent us for a while, and then God shows them their appointed work and place in the world. All we can do is to prepare them a little for it, and leave the rest with Him."

It was a gracious and a comforting philosophy, but it fell on unheeding and rebellious ears.

"Do you think, Mrs. Dunlop, that God has really anything to do with it, or that He is interested in any of us? I doubt it very much."

Mrs. Dunlop looked neither surprised nor askance.

"What's the trouble, my dear? If you would like to tell me, then do it. But if not, then sit quiet with me for a bit, and look at the sun on my herb-border. It's only a little narrow border, but very comforting, Alison. It is like some women's lives—yours, for instance—it can perfume a whole house."

"My life perfume a whole house!" cried Alison in high scorn. "Dear Mrs. Dunlop, you don't know me, when you can say that. I'm nothing but a worm, and a mean, spiteful worm at that."

"I've never met a spiteful worm yet," said Mrs. Dunlop, with a slight smile. "But what ails ye, Alison? Are they not well at Birtley?"

"Oh yes, quite well; there will be the usual letter

from Tibbie this evening. The trouble is not at Birtley, but nearer home, between Patrick and me. Things are wrong, very wrong, but I can't lay my finger on the spot. We have hardly spoken a civil word to one another for weeks."

"Bad, my dear; better have it out!"

"But there isn't anything to have out. Something in the background of Pat's mind there is, I feel, but can't get at it. He has not been the same since last Christmas, when he spent a week at Craigellan Hydro. And, since then, there have been lots of letters in a handwriting I don't know, and which he does not show to me. And he goes a great deal to Glasgow without saying why or where."

Once more Mrs. Dunlop evinced no surprise.

"Your brother wants to take a wife, I don't doubt, Alison; and you, a sensible woman, ought to have been prepared for it by now."

Alison's breath came in a little catch that was almost a sob. When she would have spoken her wise friend lightly touched her arm.

"Quietly, my dear. Hard things are easy to say, difficult to recall, or forget, especially when they are said about our own folk. The less we say about them the better at all times. I have five daughters-in-law, and I am at peace with every one of them. That is not achieved, Alison, except by the virtue of silence."

Alison struggled with her feelings a moment longer.

"Don't think I am so selfish as to wish that he would never marry, indeed I have tried to keep it in front of me all these years. But I do want him to marry the right person."

"The one *you* think the right person, Alison," said Mrs. Dunlop, with a gentle humour. "But that person would have to be made by these fine capable hands. It is certain she has no existence in the flesh. And remember, men do not see with our eyes. They like a woman for the very qualities we should think little of, or even despise."

"He is thirty-six years of age, and he knows what a minister needs in a wife, and that Rochallan folks are not very easy to do with. If he marries for any nonsense of his own——"

"Hush, my dear, and again hush! If it is given to the keepers of the house to know what men really are, then surely it is their duty to keep silence. I had five brothers and I have reared six sons, and what are the best of them but bairns needing guiding from the cradle to the grave? But it is only by love they can be guided. Thraw with them, and there will be naught but bitterness and confusion. It is plain, I think, that your work at Rochallan is coming to an end, Alison, and while we bless God for all you have been able to be and to do for us, we are not going to make a useless moan of it. There is other work in the world, and it is just possible that it may be the very best thing that has ever happened to you yet. You will go to a place where your soul maybe will have more room to grow."

Thus spoke experience, wisdom, and affection so sincere that together they unlocked the floodgates of Alison Fleming's soul. When she crept through the door in the wall a little later there was peace upon her face.

CHAPTER III.

THE DELUGE.

SEVEN o'clock was ringing from the old kirk steeple when Patrick Fleming arrived at his own gate. At eight he was due at the Town House, to take part in a discussion regarding the prevention of distress and unemployment in the coming winter, which some predicted was going to be a hard one.

He had already in his mind a rough draft of a scheme which he proposed to offer as a solution of some of the difficulties in the way.

He ought to be at his desk now to formulate his ideas and make a hasty *résumé* of his speech, but nothing was further from his thoughts.

He made a good deal of noise at the door, as an uneasy person sometimes does when not sure of his welcome. He even cleared his throat in the passage as he hung up his coat and hat, and lifted two letters from the table. One bore the Birtley postmark, and was from his brother Gavin. But he did not feel in any hurry to open it. Guy did not write often, to be sure, being an exceptionally busy man, but his business could wait. He could hear voices in the remote distance, indicating that Alison was in consultation with Janet Aiken. Now, though fully recognising the good domestic qualities of his sister's faithful henchwoman, Fleming did not like her, and had often the exasperated consciousness that he had two watchers and critics in the house instead of one. Hence his frequent sour looks and sharp words to Janet, who

took them stolidly as part of the day's work, and merely saying to herself inwardly, with a sort of large pity, "Puir cheild, he canna help it."

Alison had returned to find Janet triumphant, and was now standing in genuine admiration before a dozen glass jars of firm delicate conserve, which Janet, who never left till to-morrow what could be done to-day, was already covering for the storeroom shelf.

"There's the minister," she said, with a significant nod as she heard the shutting of the glass door in the passage. "He'll no be for tea noo, surely, and a meetin' did ye say at aicht o'clock?"

"I'll see," answered Alison, and with her gloves in her hand and her scarf over her arm went out to greet her brother. She had prepared herself as she thought for any announcement, but at sight of him her face perceptibly hardened, and the thought of the injustice of things leaped to the surface.

But she managed to steady her voice.

"You have got back rather late, haven't you? Have you had any tea? Would you like some before you go to the Town House? I think Janet has the kettle boiling?"

"No tea, thank you; and will you come in here, Alison? I want to speak to you."

He was looking grave and serious; all the hesitation and the shrinking were now on Alison's side. She looked as she felt, very nervous, and for the moment thought that she could not face it. But the next minute she was inside the dining-room door and Patrick had turned up the peep of gas which, with the light from a clear fire, sent a glow over the comfortable, homely room. It had an old-fashioned look, a queer old rosewood cabinet with a marble top, more suitable for a drawing-room, did duty as a sideboard, and the solid mahogany chairs covered in haircloth were shiny from much use. But it was a well-kept and well-cared-for room, and full of comfort.

"That's a letter from Guy, isn't it? He doesn't often write. I very nearly opened it, only we never open each other's letters, do we Pat?" said Alison, in the same short, nervous way.

Pat was fingering the letters, but made no effort to open them.

"Was it a long Presbytery meeting?" she asked then.

"Not very. It was over by three o'clock. I went up to Glasgow by the three-fifteen. I've been there ever since."

"Oh!" she said, and the monosyllable came with a little gasp.

Then Pat, who had conned many suitable and preparatory sentences in the train, suddenly took the plunge in the baldest and fewest of words.

"I daresay you have wondered why I have been going so often to Glasgow of late. It—it was to see a lady, the lady I want to marry."

"Yes," said Alison in a low voice. "I'm not so very much surprised, Pat; I think that on the whole I have been expecting it."

He looked at her very keenly, and with an odd touch of wistfulness which took ten years off his age. For the moment the boy came back to Patrick Fleming's face, and it touched his sister, in spite of herself. It was a painful moment for them both, but undoubtedly a more poignant one for him. Many a man in like circumstances has felt himself a culprit though his whole life had been void of offence, and the thing he wished was only his right and his due.

"Alison," he said, and his very voice shook. "You'll be kind to her, won't you? as you have been kind to me, to us all? She's a forlorn creature, without a friend in the world."

"Hasn't she any folk?" asked Alison, with a somewhat aggressive note in her voice.

"None; but if you wait till I come back after the meeting I'll tell you the whole story."

"Very well."

She made as if she would leave the room ; but he, still craving for a word of sympathy or good wishes, sought to detain her.

"Alison, you're not going to take this very ill, I hope? You would not have condemned me to the solitary life all my days?"

She swallowed something in her throat. This was how her sacrifice had been estimated then, she had merely sought to condemn another to the solitary life!

"Of course I was prepared to see you married some day, Pat. But I will say here, for we shall not be speaking again about it, that I wish you had been more open about it. I have seen all these letters, of course, and guessed the meaning of your frequent trips to Glasgow ; but it would have been kinder not to have kept me in the dark so long."

"You don't understand what a man feels about these things, Alison. He can't speak about them, and besides, I was not really sure. I only asked her to-day, so you see I haven't lost so much time."

"Who is she?" asked Alison then with the air of a judge.

He glanced at the clock. "I would like to leave it till I come back, Alison, if you don't mind. I'll have to get something ready for them at the Town House. They have asked me to follow Lord Monksbarns."

"Very well ; is that all you want me for just now then?"

"Yes, I think so," he answered, and again the wistful look came back. She had taken it better than he had expected, but he craved for a word of the sympathy which Alison was lavish with outside. He knew how kind she was to the poor and the suffering. He heard of it in every house. She was only hard, he sometimes thought, to her own. Alison did not understand that look ; if it appealed at all, she hardened her heart to it, and with a sudden little quick gesture swept out of the room.

In her own room, she closed the door and sat down in the dark.

She had thought she was well prepared, but now that all her fears were confirmed, and her brother's marriage had come within the region of the things that would happen, she realised that so far as she was concerned it was the deluge.

Eight-and-thirty years she had been sheltered under the eaves of the little grey manse; during the greater part of that time ministering rather than being ministered unto. She had seen her nestlings go forth into the world, where they were doing well, and now the last had no need of her. Yet, to her thinking, Pat was the neediest of them all. For in some things he was slack, and ever inclined to trust to the popular gifts which will tide over a man for a while, but which in the long run weary the folk, unless they be strengthened and buttressed by qualities more lasting and solid. Alison, never more fiercely critical than in that moment of sharp and peculiar anguish, beheld in her imagination the gradual decline of her brother's popularity, and the final setting of his sun. Then she pulled herself up sharply, and said that she must suspend her judgment until she should know more, even until she had seen the woman who was going to supplant her.

Meanwhile Pat at his desk sat dumbly, his mind a chaos of whirling thought. Finally, at a quarter to eight, having done nothing, he left the house and set out with a long swinging gait to cover the mile of distance between Rochallan and the Town House of Seadoon. He had gotten the great item off his mind, but well he knew that the worst was to come. His face wore a dour sour look as he breasted the fine thin rain that had come up out of the fiery sunset, and the Fleming temper was riding high.

He was angry with his sister, angry with himself, most of all angry with destiny that had served him scurvily. For at six and thirty he had not begun to live. He envied the lot of the tramp who sleeps under

the stars, with the hedgerow for a roof, or at best the shelter of the common lodging house, hut at least he is master of his meagre fate.

Yet in spite of his perturbation never had he spoken more eloquently or to better effect than he did presently, when called to move the first resolution of the new scheme, after it had been touched upon by the chairman, Lord Monksharns. He was complimented by all when the meeting was over, and though praise was sweet to him he hurried away that night as if seeking to avoid it. He found Alison sitting quietly and apparently unperturbed at one end of the dining-room table, with a small heap of household mending in front of her. On the other end was spread a modest supper-tray, and the fragrant smell of coffee was in the air.

She rose at his entrance and went to the kitchen to fetch it, Janet Aiken having already gone to bed. She was such a very early riser, addressing herself to her work summer and winter on the stroke of six, and even earlier in times of extra stress, that she usually went upstairs at nine o'clock. The manse kept early hours and one small hone of contention between Alison and the minister was his consuming desire to sit late. She did not ask any questions when he came to the fireside after having, in accordance with early training, left his muddy boots in the kitchen passage. His slippers were waiting on the hassock before the fender, she had omitted nothing. If any bitterness lingered in her heart there was no outward evidence of it. But her eyes were cold, only Pat with a strange new shyness upon him looked very little at her face.

"It was a small meeting," he volunteered, as he drew on his comfortable slippers. "People talk a lot about the things that ought to be done, but when it comes to the bit, the interest is very lukewarm. I've noticed that about other things, besides the unemployment question."

"Was anything settled?"

"Nothing; certain propositions were referred to a sub-committee for investigation and report. I expect that'll do us for another winter, unless the distress happens to grow to abnormal dimensions, then doubtless we shall call another meeting. That coffee smells uncommonly good, Alison. Have you had yours?"

"Oh yes, Janet brought it in as usual on the stroke of nine."

"Laws of the Medes and Persians," he observed with a faint smile as he rose to take his place at the table. Some buttered scones, and a piece of the sweet Ayrshire cheese, and a plate of honey, looked tempting enough, but, though he had gone without his tea, he seemed now little inclined to break his fast. But the strong coffee put heart into him, and he laughed as he asked whether he might carry the tray back to the kitchen, and then take a pipe.

Alison answered him by swooping up the tray herself, and she was about five minutes absent, putting away the eatables in their proper place, and washing his cup and saucer and plate.

When she returned to the room, he was still busy filling his pipe, staring hard into the fire.

"I think if you don't mind, I'll go to bed, Pat. I'm tired, and we can talk to-morrow."

"No," he cried with sudden alarm, knowing how cold and merciless the day can be. "Sit down, Ailie. It's only half-past ten, anyway. The night's but young. And this is the time when folk can talk best, and arrive at an understanding. Each day brings its own toll of work."

She sat down then at the end of the table, so that its breadth was between them and took up the pillow-case into which she had been putting her fine darning stitches.

"I don't know that I can speak to you there, Ailie, you're too far away."

"No, no; I need something to work at. You

know I'm never happy sitting idle," she answered, and there was nervousness in her tone.

"A time to work and a time to be idle," he said, with a touch of whimsicality. "I'd like you to give me your whole attention just for a wee while."

"I can do that even while I'm sewing, Pat. That is purely mechanical, and it is always a help to a woman to have her hands occupied. Please go on."

"Well then needs must. I must go back a bit, to last Christmas, when you drove me out to the Hydro-pathic at Craigellan much against my will."

"You needed the change, Pat, and were the better for it," she answered, but there was a wince in her voice.

"That might be, but it was the turning-point all the same. It was at Craigellan I met the girl I'm going to marry."

"Yes, and who is she? Somebody that was stopping there, I suppose, with her folk from Glasgow for the Christmas holidays?"

"Yes, and no. She was stopping there with her father, a musician who was then conducting a rather popular orchestra in Glasgow. She herself was engaged to help with the entertaining. Her name is Edith Brooke."

"To help with the entertaining!" echoed Alison, and her work fell from her hands as she stared aghast.

"Oh, Pat, a woman like that! For you even to think of bringing her to the manse seems to me terrible."

"Wait till you have seen her," he replied; and having prepared himself for the shock he must give her, he accepted its expression meekly. "She is not what you think."

"I have been at Craigellan once, you forget that," she replied with dignity; "and I remember the sort of person who got up the theatricals and what not. She was impossible."

"But Miss Brooke is not like that. I only ask one thing, Alison, that you wait till you have seen her."

"And when will that be?" she asked, but her tone was dull and her manner hopeless.

"To-morrow, I should like it to be," he said quickly. "I had a letter yesterday telling me her father had died at the Western Infirmary after an operation. The poor gentleman was very ill when they were at Craigellan, though he would not admit it. He has got rapidly worse of late, and now he is dead, and she is quite alone in the whole world without a friend, and with very little money. Will you, who are kind to everybody, befriend her, Alison, for my sake first, until you get to know her, when you will do it gladly for her own?"

It was a stupendous thing he asked, but his tone had confidence in it. He could not conceive of her refusal. She did not refuse. She merely and very suddenly bowed her head.

"I would not be hard on anybody, Pat, God forbid, but this has overwhelmed me. I have prayed about your marriage of late, and that you would be guided to choose the right person."

"Well, and I have, she is the right person. She is beautiful and good, and there is something about her different from other women. You will feel that when you see her, I am sure."

"But she is so unsuitable. If you had searched the length and breadth of the world, surely you could not have found one more so."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, look at her upbringing. Her father a musician, and she herself getting a living entertaining folk at public places. You must admit that it is a very poor training for manse life."

"She'll learn," he said, with all a lover's high hope.

"And she is counting on your help, just as I am."

"Learn!" she repeated slowly. "Pat, I do believe you are not a day older than when you came first as a raw student to take up the work here. Have you any idea, I wonder, what the manse woman, be she

wife or mother or sister, has to do ; how what she is, and what she does, makes or mars the Church life only in a slightly less degree than the minister himself ? ”

“ I know that a good deal is expected of her, but I have always thought and said that you have done much—too much, Alison. You have simply slaved and toiled, often unnecessarily. It is bad for the folk. It creates for one thing an impossible standard. I have often felt the difficulties of my own position absolutely increased by your very zeal.”

“ Oh ! ” she said, and there was a little catch of pain in her voice.

“ I’m sure it is better to take things a thought easier, Alison ; and I should never dream of allowing my wife to do the half of what you have done. So much of it was unnecessary, though of course I knew how you enjoyed it, and how well you did it.”

She gave a little dry and ominous cough.

“ I’d like to hear just how much of it was unnecessary. Do you mean the Mothers’ Meeting, or the Lads’ Bible Class, or the Dorcas, or the Women’s Guild ? Which of them could we do without in Rochallan ? ”

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“ Oh, don’t let us go into all that in detail at present. That isn’t the point, my dear. I want to interest you in Edith, to bespeak your kindness and your sympathy for her, and your help after she comes here.”

“ But I shall not be here,” she answered firmly. “ I have made a lot of mistakes in my life, Pat, I see clearly, but this one you may be sure I shall never, never make. I have too much sense, I hope, and your wife when she comes to Rochallan Manse will have it to herself.”

“ But what will you do ? ” he asked bluntly, yet with the anxious air of a man who has studied the problem in secret.

The prospect of having his home to himself, shared only by the woman he loved, was alluring indeed,

but his strong sense of justice put in an immediate claim for his sister. Where could she go if she left Rochallan Manse? She was without means, her only asset the labour of her hands. It was unthinkable that she should ever hire out that labour to others. Gavin and Tibbie in their little home at Birtley, their path still beset with financial uncertainty, could not offer her a home, and to permit her at thirty-eight to go out as a housekeeper to strangers would be the basest ingratitude.

The problem had kept Patrick Fleming awake through many a weary night. He took his pipe, which indeed had gone out some minutes ago, from his mouth and turned round, so that he could observe more closely his sister's face. But she had turned it away from him, and her hand was over her eyes as if she would shut out some vision of the future which gave her exquisite pain.

CHAPTER IV.

"IN-LAWS."

"We shall never let you leave the manse, Alison," said Fleming quickly. "Edith would be the very last person in the world to wish it."

"But the right thing has to be done always, Pat, and at whatever cost," she made answer, embodying in her words the whole litany of her life.

"Yes—well, then, the right thing for me is to keep you here undoubtedly. To let you go out into the world to earn your living (for it would mean that, Alison, in the state of our finances), would be the basest ingratitude. If I were to do it I should not deserve even an hour's happiness."

He spoke with a passion which might have convinced her of his sincerity, but somehow it left her cold.

The only way he could prove that sincerity was open to him as it had been to her. He could give up his hopes, walk in the path of renunciation, even as she had done fifteen long years ago. It had not been easy for her. For one whole week the sun had been absolutely darkened for her, and her pillow had been wet every night with unavailing tears. But nobody had known. She had gripped the obvious duty with both hands without a question or a doubt. Yet she belonged to the so-called weaker sex, and in herself aspired to no teaching of others. In a like crisis the man failed. Nothing could alter that. He would have the thing he desired at whatever cost to others. Suddenly she put a question.

" When do you think of getting married ? "

He answered by a remark that seemed wholly irrelevant.

" If only I could get a better living, Alison. Sometimes I think I've not been treated very fairly. I've done my duty here, and you know how the membership has trebled itself. Other men who have done less have been advanced more quickly. Perhaps it's push I lack, the kind of cool cheek that shifted Alexander Wardrop from Entwistle to Glasgow and eight hundred a year when he was only twenty-nine. Yet what is there in him ? The very last time he came for our anniversaries you said yourself he was nothing but a sounding brass."

" Abuse of other folk won't mend our situation, Pat," she answered coldly.

Her hurt was so great that she had no womanly feeling at the moment for the pathos underlying her brother's words. The world is so full of lost, of unappreciated endeavour ! Its tragedy, seen through human eyes, would fill many books.

" Don't go to bed yet, Alison," he said, noticing that she began to fold her work. " Can't we go into a proper committee of ways and means ? I am sure Edith and you would get on. Naturally, situated as she has been, she has not had the opportunity of acquiring household knowledge like yours. You'll stop for a while at least and show her how."

But the proposition angered her, and the words " stop for a while " were stupidly chosen. She was to be made a convenience of just for so long as she could be of use, then she could go.

" I have said that I will leave the manse when you marry ; it will be my duty no less than my pleasure Pat," she answered with dignity. " You haven't answered my question. When do you think of getting married ? "

" I thought about Christmas," he answered shamefacedly. " You see, Edie is quite alone, and I thought

if you would go to Glasgow with me to-morrow and be introduced to her, and then ask her down for the week-end, it would be a very great kindness both to her and to me."

"Oh! I can't!" she cried. "Ask me one thing at a time, Pat. And now I must go to my bed. Good-night! To-morrow no doubt everything will look different and perhaps easier than it does to-night."

She swept her things together and made such haste from the room that he could not doubt she was on the verge of a breakdown.

He drew a deep breath as the door closed and the difficulties of his position dashed for a space the happiness that welled in his heart. He could hear Alison moving about in her bedroom above; her step was measured as if she were pacing steadily to and fro. No doubt she was, and he was the cause of her painful unrest. He was neither unjust nor selfish, he felt to the full the poignancy of the situation for his sister, but he could do nothing to ease it. He had undertaken for another, and someone had to suffer in the process. He would gladly have suffered himself in his sister's place. He drew the embers of the fire together, placed a little log on it, and turned to his neglected pipe with the air of a man at his wits' end. There was no light upon the path for him at the moment. His salary of two hundred and thirty pounds a year, with the manse, had no margin to offer to Alison should she actually leave him.

It was only her careful handling that had made it elastic enough to cover all their simple needs. He was fully aware that never again probably would he know such comfort, or have less anxiety of a sordid kind.

What he was to gain was still hid in the womb of the future. For one brief moment he was tempted to regret the Christmas holiday out of which such great issues had arisen.

But presently his thoughts wandered to the woman he loved, and who had not so many hours ago accepted

him as the arbiter of her future destiny. In memory he saw the play of light upon her mobile face, its little touch of pathos, the dusky eyes lit by womanly feeling, and his manhood glowed within him, and he knew that whatever this step would cost it was worth while, because it would give his nature scope in wholly new directions and develop all that was best in him. He had been cared for and legislated for too long.

The minutes sped, and it was on the stroke of midnight when he rose rather heavily to put out the lights and go upstairs. Sleep was far enough from his eyes, but his brain felt tired. He had had an exacting and exciting day. Just as his hand was on the gas bracket to put out the light, he heard the patter of feet on the stairs, and waited a moment expecting he knew not what. For some little time there had been silence overhead, and he had imagined and hoped his sister had fallen asleep. But immediately she appeared with her night-gown on, and a loose wrapper of pale blue stuff above it, which seemed at the moment to match her eyes, as well as to throw up the glint of her bonnie hair. A red spot burned on her cheeks, and when she spoke it was quickly, like one labouring under some emotion.

"Pat, I'm sorry if I seemed hard. It was a kind of shock, of course, but I don't want you to think I am angry or vexed about it. Indeed, my dear, I'm not. I'll try to like Miss Brooke, and I shall be ready to go with you to-morrow afternoon to see her. We could go, perhaps, by the three-fifteen train."

She did not wait for his answer, but sped away silently and swiftly as she had come. Patrick Fleming's lip trembled a little as he put out the gas. He was more touched than he would have owned. He guessed something at least of what that concession had cost.

Alison shut the door of her room and slipped in the bolt, and curling her feet up under her eider-down quilt, with a candle on the old-fashioned stand by the

bed, opened her Bible. It was comfort she needed and must have, for the days to come. She was a diligent student of the Bible, but there were certain well-loved passages which were apt to open of their own accord. Here were the words which came to Alison Fleming and gave her courage and strength for the coming stress.

" If any man come to Me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.

" And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after Me, cannot be My disciple.

" For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he hath sufficient to finish it? "

The book dropped from her hand, and her eyes closed while her lips moved. " The whispered words were these : " Lord, give me sufficient to finish it. "

Then she slept sweetly as a child, undisturbed by care or a single terrifying dream.

They met at the breakfast-table next morning cordially, and chatted of the ordinary happenings of life, as if no heavier issues stayed upon the background. Once or twice Patrick's eyes somewhat anxiously scanned his sister's face, and he wondered whether he should acquaint her with certain news that had been contained in the letter of their brother Gavin, which he had only remembered after the morning post was in, and it was thus recalled to his mind. He decided not, and was even thankful that she made no allusion to it.

After breakfast they separated, he to the study, and she to her household ways, to which however that morning she had very little attention to devote. By half-past ten she was on the wind-swept road towards Seadoon, and as eleven was ringing let herself into the Old Manse garden by the door in the wall.

Mrs. Dunlop, sitting at her knitting in the bay window of the dining-room, saw her coming and immediately discerned trouble.

She met her at the door.

"Forgive me coming at this unholy hour, but I had to, Mrs. Dunlop. I have so much to tell you. My brother is going to be married. He told me all about it last night."

Mrs. Dunlop, with an expression of lively sympathy and interest, drew her into the warm cosy family room.

"My husband has just gone to Glasgow, so we can have our crack undisturbed. Well, and so it is true, and who is the lady? Anyone we know?"

"No, no; I wish it were. It is not very satisfactory, I'll just sit down and tell you all about it."

The story was very short, but told so graphically that Mrs. Dunlop had a very vivid picture of the scene before her mind.

"It doesn't sound quite what we would like, my dear," she said, trying to put a cheerful face on it; "but at least she must be a lady. Mr. Fleming would never be interested in the type of person you are imagining. I think nothing can be done, nor much said, until we have seen her. Did you say you had promised to go up to see her with him to-day?"

"Yes, and he wants me to ask her down for the week-end. She has just lost her father and is quite alone in the world. Apparently she has not any folk at all. Don't you think there is something queer about that fact alone? Even the poorest have folk. It seems somehow to make us all more respectable."

"You and I think that because we have never in all our lives got away from our folk, my dear. Now listen, I have no objections to your going to Glasgow with your brother, that is necessary and fitting. But I will not let you have Miss Brooke for the week-end, just yet at least. You are not in a fit state. If you were anybody but Alison Fleming I should say frankly you are on the verge of hysteria."

" Me on the verge of hysteria ! " exclaimed Alison, rather indignantly. " I assure you I am perfectly calm. I never slept more soundly in my life than last night. Pray where is the hysteria ? "

Mrs. Dunlop merely nodded wisely.

" If you persist in bringing Miss Brooke here for the week-end, disaster will follow, I'm as certain of that as I'm sitting here. Listen, Alison, and I'll tell you the programme. This is Thursday. Well, this afternoon you go up to Glasgow to be introduced to your future sister-in-law, according to arrangement, and let it be settled, if you like, that she will come to Rochallan for the week-end, only she will come to this manse, instead of to yours."

" But that would be silly, and perfectly unexplainable, Mrs. Dunlop ! Besides, Pat would hate it. How could I be at home and yet let her come here ? "

" But you are not going to be at home," said the old lady, chuckling softly. " You are going to be at Birtley. I'll see that you leave to-morrow morning by the ten o'clock train, if I have to buy your week-end ticket myself."

Alison's eyes shone, and her mouth trembled.

" Oh, Mrs. Dunlop, do you think I might ? that I dare, and would you be so kind ? I have never heard of such kindness."

" It's a wonder you don't tell me I'm devoured by pure curiosity ; I'm not sure about it myself. Leave it all to me. Send your brother in to see me this evening as you go up from the station. You I would rather not see, because then I will be able to form my own judgment of Miss Brooke without prejudice."

" It seems a great deal for you to do," said Alison doubtfully.

" It is a very little thing indeed. We are your oldest friends here, and your brother knows very well that if his *fiancée* is stopping as a guest here nobody can say much, and I will see that the interesting fact is well advertised. that is, if—if the young lady is at

all what I think she must be to have attracted your brother, who is no fool."

Alison's eyes opened still wider. She saw that this apparently simple act of kindness was intended to have consequences much further-reaching than were apparent on the surface. She was quick to appreciate at once the diplomacy and the exquisite kindness of heart that had prompted her old friend to such unexpected action.

"What a thing it is to have a friend like you! Why already everything seems easier," she said almost cheerfully.

"That is its object, my dear. You in the bosom of your family at Birtley can thresh the matter out and give Pat his deserts if you like. It will do nobody any harm, and will be a safety-valve for you. And I'll safeguard the family interests, and the dignity of Rochallan Manse here. She will be a brave woman who will ban the coming Mrs. Patrick Fleming in my presence."

Alison rose quickly, crossed the space between them, and kneeling down kissed the hand of her old friend, with a gesture of such humility and grace that Mrs Dunlop was slightly overcome.

"Get up, you silly woman! Why, this is a little thing, merely a part of the business of life, and I'll enjoy doing it above everything. Now tell me what plans you have for the future."

Alison had none that were feasible, but though she talked a little wildly Mrs. Dunlop did not seek to check her, realising that her pent feelings must have vent. It was near one o'clock before they parted, and Alison sped home, but not to tell Pat, she had faithfully promised to leave the engineering of a difficult business to Mrs. Dunlop, fully aware that in no hands could their interests be safer.

They travelled together to Glasgow rather silently, and Pat observed with a small thrill of gratitude and appreciation that Alison wore a black frock and that

she had taken the coloured flowers from her hat and put in a black feather.

It was a sunny and clear morning after the rain of yesterday, with a south wind blowing, and it seemed as if the city had been washed clean and rejoiced in newness of life. Alison observed her brother's growing nervousness as the car approached Charing Cross, where they got down to cover the remaining distance on foot.

" A flat ? " she asked, as they turned in by the tall houses, which under one roof represented so many families, with their widely varying interests and all the mingled tragedy and comery of life.

He nodded, and the next moment they had reached the door and were mounting the stairs. The little maid, not so tidy or so spick-and-span as Alison would have liked, answered their ring and they were ushered in.

But Edith met them at the door of the sitting-room, looking shy and just a trifle embarrassed perhaps, yet not half as anxious as the two she welcomed.

To Edith indeed the coming of her lover's sister, though interesting, was a matter of small importance, in comparison with other things, and she was not inclined to take her at all too seriously.

" This is my sister, Edith," said Pat eagerly, when he had shaken hands with her himself. " She came at once, as I thought she would."

He stood aside, and Edith, smiling slightly, merely answered by an inquiring " Yes ? " and offered her hand. Quite well aware that the fine grey eyes of Alison Fleming were full of searching scrutiny, she was wholly undisturbed.

" It is most kind of you to come. Won't you sit down, and presently we shall have some tea."

Alison murmured something, she did not know what, and meekly subsided into a chair. She was not the woman she had expected. Pleased in one sense, she was yet disappointed in another, for Edith Brooke

had a repose of manner, a perfect dignity, that were slightly disconcerting.

The deprecating humbleness suitable to the occasion was conspicuous by its absence, certainly the outstanding characteristic of Edith Brooke at that trying interview was her complete self-possession. It was so great that it made Alison feel gauche and awkward, like any country-woman introduced for the first time to unfamiliar surroundings.

The sensation, while surprising, was a little irritating. It opened the door of so many possibilities.

They sat down and the silence grew. Patrick Fleming's tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth, and he had not the sense to rise up and go out of the room, to leave the women to their talk. Alison sat on the edge of the chair, her cold eyes roaming over the extraordinary-looking room, not failing to discern the dust on the picture frames, and the rust on the fire-irons, and tried to picture this tall, slight girl with the dead-black frock, which gave an uncanny whiteness to her skin, mistress at the manse of Rochallan, co-operating with Janet Aiken in the household ways, attending to the multifarious duties of a minister's house. She could *not* picture her; it was a niche into which Edith Brooke absolutely refused to fit at all.

"It was kind of you to come up so quickly," said Edith, as she rocked herself to and fro in the dilapidated rocking-chair, with the toes of her very pointed patent leather shoes peeping from under the hem of her frock.

"It was my duty to come," said Alison bluntly. "And besides——" when she saw a slightly perplexed uplifting of Miss Brooke's level brows, she added rather quickly, "Of course I wished to come to make your acquaintance, and I hope you will come down to-morrow to Rochallan for the week-end."

She repeated the words as those of a lesson well conned. Edith listened, wondering whether she would ever get under the cold hard crust of Miss Fleming's

nature, and what she would be like, if she ever succeeded in reaching the real woman.

"I will come, thank you, if I shall not be in your way."

"Of course you will come; to-morrow will it be? When, when——"

She paused there, rather suddenly remembering the whole sad circumstances and thinking with a shiver of compassion that probably the dead might be in another room.

"We are burying my father to-morrow at half-past two, Mr. Fleming," said Edith, looking straight at Patrick. "What time will you come to-morrow?"

"I shall come up in the morning, of course," he answered; "and stay with you till it is time to take you down to Rochallan."

At the moment there was a small knock at the door. Edith called out to the girl to come in, and the maid appeared with a tea-tray which she placed awkwardly on the end of the table, without troubling to spread a cloth. Edith jumped up, and then Alison saw that she was very tall, and that her figure was elegant, that she wore her shabby frock with a strange grace, that there was about her an indescribable something which for lack of a better name she would call an air. Unsuitable, incompetent she might be, but there was nothing common about her; nay, she was one who would command respect.

The mystery of the whole affair seemed to grow, and a new phrase presented itself to Alison, a questioning and doubt as to what there could be in common between her brother and this woman who was obviously out of their sphere. Edith herself, talking very little, offered no solution of the difficulty; she was like one weary of life, and in no great anxiety or apprehension regarding the future.

"Sugar? Miss Fleming, and milk? There is no cream in Glasgow within the reach of slender purses. I am sorry I have no cake to-day. I have not been out."

Alison said it was of no consequence, and began to remove her gloves to partake of the slender refreshment. Patrick then threw himself into the breach, talking hard about the most trivial subjects.

It was evident he felt the strain no less than Alison. Edith was the only perfectly possessed member of the trio.

When she had drunk her tea and eaten a morsel of bread and butter, Alison suddenly rose.

" If you don't mind, Miss Brooke, I'll go out and pay a call. You two naturally will have much to talk about. I'll go round and see Mrs. Gourlay, Pat. She lives quite near here. And probably I'll go down at six-fifteen. If you are not at the station I shall understand, quite."

Pat looked relieved. Edith stood by the table with the same calm air of detachment as if nothing mattered. She walked out to the passage with Alison and opened the door, and there they paused a moment in the dim light that was almost twilight.

" My dear," said Alison, with a little catch in her voice, " I'm very sorry for you. I'm not a woman that can say much, but I hope—I hope we are going to understand each other. I will do my best."

Edith Brooke had no idea what these few simple common-place words cost. She accepted them as her right. But as they were about to part, the veil seemed to lift from her eyes for a moment, and a tremor crossed her face.

" I hate life, it is cruel and full of unnecessary pain," she said ; " I have the feeling inside of me that I have hurt you."

" No, no," said Alison, a little brokenly. " It is going to be all right—quite, quite all right."

Edith stooped from her height of grace, and kissed her future sister on the cheek ; and when Alison found herself on the stairs that cheek was wet.

CHAPTER V.

THE BOSOM OF THE FAMILY.

THE cinder hills of Birtley on a wet day add depression to a landscape conspicuous for its sheer ugliness. They rise sharply, little conical mounds, from the flat earth, and the accumulations of years have made them fairly high. The outer hills, which have had no new waste added to them for many years, have now a kindly covering of green upon them, chiefly weeds, since honest grass would disdain such a bed, but on the inner rim, close to the pits and the works, the abomination of desolation reigns. In the moonlight and on misty days the cinder hills, weird shapes that have no kinship with the surrounding plain, look like Titans ranged for battle. Birtley is the beginning of the Black Country and still within easy reach of green lanes and open fields which make some of the prettiest sylvan scenery in England. But the little town, busy hive of labour and sorrow, interwoven with much homely joy, has little to redeem its outward face.

Its long, straight main street, full of cheap shops and small houses with nondescript gardens, or untidy yards behind, has numerous streets and alleys opening off it, all set with the little houses of the industrial population. The houses stand back to back, all alike as peas in a pod, each back-yard seeming to have been measured by a plumb-line, and the vista meeting the eye from the slope of the High Street is bewildering by reason of its very exactitude.

The better residential part of the town, where the

prosperous tradesmen have reared their abodes, is scattered on the slope of Lawford Hill, a slight rise to the east of the town, approached by a gradual ascent from the High Street. This suburb has not been improved by the introduction of the tram-lines, which now run right through it to the pretty little residential town of Barbridge, about four miles distant.

It makes a pleasant ride on a summer evening, much appreciated by the working folk of Birtley, though in less degree by the inhabitants of Barbridge. The main industries of Birtley are coal and iron, the latter predominating. It is responsible for most of the great chimney stacks which fill the air with thick vapours, and for the weird glow after dark; but the place where its operations do most harm is in the homes of the poor, where the women and the children carry on the business of nail-making, to the great detriment of home comfort and the well-being of the children.

When Tibbie Fleming came first to Birtley, the state of things she discovered in the homes of certain of her brother's poorer patients filled her with sorrow and dismay. She had even set herself with all the kindly resource of her nature to try and alter or mend things, but after a time she realised that one small woman, however well-intentioned, could not cope with existing forces so stupendous as those which ruled the destinies of Birtley.

But Tibbie had never ceased to suffer in silence. A less exacting and competent housekeeper than Alison, she was a more human person, and the quality of her sympathy of a finer fibre.

It managed to probe beneath the surface of things, and the women who had scowled at her at first, as an interloper, in whom they only scented a new form of espionage or district visiting, quickly grew to love and to welcome the little trim figure of the doctor's sister. Nobody knew better than Guy Fleming himself how she had consolidated his position in the place.

They were very happy together, and, though Tibbie had found few congenial friends in Birtley, she had contented herself with that particular slice of her destiny, and was greatly aided by her quick eye for the queer side of things. She was often home-sick for the clear air and the wideness of the grey sea-girt Rochallan Manse, but most of all she longed for the services of the kirk on Sunday, never having been able to make herself at home in the Church of England, which Guy had decided they must attach themselves to when they came. She often longed to slip into the Primitive Methodist Bethel at the corner of Slack Street and Brunner Lane, or the more pretentious Baptist Tabernacle on the slope of the High Street, but she had never had the courage. She, too, had given up things for her brother, but she never mentioned them, or even thought of them, which is a different and more admirable thing.

For undoubtedly there is a silence of endurance which can scourge more effectively than a multitude of words.

She bore very little resemblance to Alison, as she tripped down the High Street towards the close of the afternoon in the same week of the upheaval at Rochallan. She was cast physically in less generous mould, was in fact a small bird-like person with a freshly-coloured, rather piquant, face, and a pair of very roguish and winning dark eyes. Her lips so frequently smiling had acquired the expression of a child that is always pleased. Possessing perhaps less strength of character and body than her sister, she was much easier to live with. Yet, without asserting herself, she managed to make her influence felt, and knew very well that her brother depended on her in many things. She had a quick imagination, and lived in a dream-world of her own to which no alien had ever obtained entrance.

Hers was the temperament that in more favourable circumstances might have found expression in the

writing of successful books. It will be necessary here to give her secret away, and say that she had written books, though none of them had ever seen the light. From her earliest years she had loved to sort out folks' lives, to give their stories different beginnings and always happy endings, a fascinating pursuit which, since she had come to the forlorn Black Country town, had taken the edge off much of her loneliness, and filled up a great deal of the leisure which would otherwise have hung heavily.

She had, during the four years of her residence at Birtley, amassed a large quantity of stuff in copy-books, the record of her goings-out and comings-in among the folk, the value of which as an absolute pen-picture of their lives she had not the remotest conception.

Not a living soul knew of the treasure she possessed under lock and key in her little back bedroom, overlooking the cinder hills. She herself counted nothing upon it, though she sometimes read it over with interest and no little emotion; surprised at something it contained, the power to move, an advantage a plain record often possesses over a more elaborate effort.

She saw very little of her brother, whose work took up all his legitimate time, and much that he ought to have spent in rest. Life at the branch surgery at Birtley would have driven Alison crazy in a week. At her rare visits she had frankly said it would.

The meals at all hours, mostly untimely; the bells ringing and the knocker going without cessation, dirty footmarks everywhere, and the penetrating odour of nauseous drugs permeating the whole house—to her it was all intolerable.

"I can't think how you stand it, Tib," she said one day. "If I were here I'd have to do something. I'd begin by teaching them to be clean and punctual."

"Then your work would be cut out for you, Ailie."

Tib laughed back. "There are no mats at their front doors, and as for time, one hour is as good as another to them, so long as they catch the doctor.

That, believe me, is not always an accomplishable feat."

The branch surgery was going to spell ultimate success for Gavin Fleming, and, being a Scot, he wisely stuck to his guns, well aware that he was acquiring a complete and unique knowledge of his business during these lean and hard years, and that in the ordinary course of things everything was sooner or later bound to come in his way. His principal, who lived at Barbridge, was an elderly and a childless man, and having found in Fleming the ideal, hard-working custodian of his interests for whom he had been searching and waiting all his professional life, meant to do well by him. Those years of incessant labour had robbed Guy of something however, his capacity for play. The absolute lack of diversion or recreation had dulled his faculties in that direction, and he now wondered how anybody could take the trouble to wrest a few hours from business and go down to Birmingham for a theatre or a concert, as he and Tibbie had sometimes done at the beginning.

Tibbie never grumbled, but often she was homesick on rainy days. Then her thoughts would roam, swift as a bird on the wing, to the clean, sweet little township by the sea, where the air was salt with the soft Atlantic breeze, and the rain only gave an added beauty to a scene always fair. Then she would see the Heads of Ayr through a mist of tears, and would have to dash them surreptitiously away. But nobody was ever hurt or vexed by these tears, and she was all the better. She was now returning from one of her numerous errands of mercy, carrying a basket of wholesome food and some old linen to a riveter's wife, lying by with her tenth child.

The number of children in some of these poor homes appalled Tibbie, and the burdens borne by the mothers, mostly with a stolid and wholly uncomplaining patience, seemed to her sublime. Sometimes, however, she could not help asking herself how God, Who

loved and pitied all, could bear to have it so. In the house she had just left there were three babies who could not walk, and the elder ones being boys there was nobody to lend the mother a hand, except the inevitable neighbour, who in the intervals of what Tibbie called "her ain fecht," would run in from nail-making or house-cleaning to do the necessary turn.

It was all done as a matter of course, merely a part of the day's work. In the face of achievement so gigantic, what mattered a spoiled kettle of jam, or a copperful of clothes soiled and dashed by a windy rain? Since Tibbie's own horizon had widened, she had often felt that Alison's power of magnifying trifles was a terrifying thing, and even maybe wrong. She had a most devoted and tender affection for the sister who had so capably mothered them all, yet in her secret heart there were moments when she was thankful she had no longer to live with her.

Somehow Alison was very much in her thoughts that day, though the usual weekly letter, written on Sabbath night and due at Birtley on Tuesday morning, had contained nothing of an unusual nature, but was merely a minute epitome of the weekly work, from which Tibbie had now become a little detached. The branch surgery stood at the corner of Brunner's Lane, which was the first opening at the lower end of the High Street, after the railway station was passed. It was a good site for a doctor's dwelling, but the black dust from the cinder hills, and all the smoke from innumerable trains, seemed to descend upon the front plot, and penetrate through the windows, so that housekeeping was at best but a disheartening business. Tibbie did her best, but worried not at all. Alison sadly noted that in many things she had become hopelessly slack, and even thought it her duty to remonstrate. But Tibbie had merely smiled again, and replied that Gavin was not the kind of man who could enjoy being cleaned out of the house.

About the middle of the High Street, Tibbie suddenly

met the gig being driven up the hill at Guy's usual terrific speed. He had long distances to cover, and the two thick-set cobs responsible for the work were not spared in any way, though always well fed and kindly treated. At sight of his sister, Gavin drew rein with a jerk, which nearly brought the cob to her haunches. Then he beckoned her to the edge of the kerb, and bent down rather excitedly.

"There's a letter from Pat. What ho! He's going to get married, and there's likely to be ructions. When you weren't in I put it behind the clock in the dining-room. Ta-ta! I'll be in for tea at six or thereabouts. Meanwhile, it's Amblecote and Oldfield, worse luck!"

Guy Fleming was a pleasant young man to look at, fair and ruddy, like all the Flemings. He had an honest, good face, without much pretensions to looks, but people trusted him, and liked his straight, kindly, honest way. Without possessing any great gifts, his quiet steadfastness and capability had won their complete confidence. When he entered a sick room those in charge felt the burden, not only shared, but shouldered by one able to deal with it. He was liked none the less for his quick temper, which he had well under control, though some of the Birtley men had come in contact with it, and learned to respect it. Tibbie hurried home breathless, reaching the little corner house just as five o'clock was pealing from the Town Hall steeple. She was in such haste to get her hands on Pat's letter that she left her latch-key in the door. But she did not get as far as the mantelpiece in the dining-room, for when she got inside the door who should rise up from the table but Alison herself?

"I suppose you're surprised, Tibbie; but after what has happened, I just took a week-end ticket and came away to talk things over."

Alison had put off her coat, and her gloves and hand-bag lay on the clear end of the table, while at the other the cloth had been laid for afternoon tea.

Tibbie was too much astonished for the moment

to speak. Alison was such a deliberate person, and would write about her rare visits to Birtley for weeks in advance, arranging every minute detail.

"I'm very glad to see you, of course, on any pretext whatever, Ailie," she said, a little breathlessly still. "You can't have seen Guy, of course. I've just met him, and he never said a word about you being here, though he told me there was a letter from Pat. When did you arrive?"

"About half an hour ago. A letter from Pat is there? I'd like to see it," she added, and there was a dry curious note in her voice. She glanced round the room with a vague inquiry, but Tibbie did not miss the opportunity of displaying her native tact, a quality which Alison sometimes lacked. She said nothing about the hiding-place behind the clock, surmising that perusal of Pat's letter by Alison at that particular moment might not add to the family peace, or make difficult places easier.

She seated herself at the table with the cheerful air of a thoroughly interested person.

"To think you are here, Ailie! How frightfully exciting everything is! I was feeling specially dull this afternoon, as I always do when it rains. I only spoke to Guy for a moment. So please tell me instanter who it is that Pat has got engaged to. I've been simply racking my brains for the last five minutes to find out."

Alison uttered a sound that somewhat resembled a groan.

"You don't know her; and as for me, though I've seen her once, I don't know what to say about her, and that's the truth."

"But surely you can tell me her name, and where she belongs, and where he met her, if she isn't a Rochallan or a Seadoon girl. I even wondered if by any chance it was the Rochallan teacher, that pretty girl from Girvan that played the organ the last Sunday when I was at home for the week-end."

She said this rather mischievously, remembering that Alison had been critical even to the verge of unkindness about the girl whom Pat had ventured to admire and to praise.

"It's worse than that, I do believe, though she would have been bad. It is a Miss Brooke; he met her at Craigellan Hydro last Christmas, where she was the paid entertainer."

"Oh!" said Tibbie, slightly aghast. "It doesn't sound like our Pat. But you have seen her, you say? What is she like, and what do you think of her? Of course, circumstances might have compelled her to do that for a living. No nice girl could be expected to enjoy it or choose it voluntarily. Tell me all about her, Alison."

But Alison's words did not flow. When she set herself to describing their brother's *fiancée* she found herself most oddly at a loss. She was too elusive, too shadowy, too much outside Alison's own plane of things to be easy of description.

"The fact is, Tib, I can't describe her. She doesn't belong to our kind of people. She and her father are what are called Bohemians, which generally means a lot of dust on the furniture, and very little in the larder or the linen cupboard. That describes Miss Brooke quite as well as anything I can say."

"But I don't see her, Ailie. Tell me whether she is fair or dark, short or tall. Is she pretty?"

"She's long and thin, and has a sallow face, and lots of dark hair. I shouldn't call her pretty, but as Mrs. Dunlop said, men admire women for the very things we condemn in them."

"Have you told Mrs. Dunlop already, then?"

"Yes; and Miss Brooke is spending the week-end at the Old Manse."

"But why at the Old Manse instead of Rochallan? I don't understand. Didn't Pat want you to have her at our manse?"

"Yes, of course; but I didn't feel equal to it, and

Mrs. Dunlop, you know how kind she is, said she would take her. In a way, it is quite a good thing for Pat, for of course if Mrs. Dunlop takes her up, nobody can say a word against her."

"I'm beginning to feel most frightfully interested. But I can't think how you could come away from Rochallan when so much was happening. I should simply have been dying to get her for a week-end, to know all about her, and to watch Pat and her together. What kind of a lover does he make?"

A kind of cold scorn swept over Alison's face.

"Oh, you may be sure, he'll be as silly as the best of them. I couldn't stop to see it. She's young, not more than four-and-twenty, and she knows nothing. Never heard of a Presbytery in her life! If she has any religion at all, which is doubtful, probably she's a Catholic."

"Oh, Alison, don't take such a gloomy view! She's English, I suppose, at least her name is, so probably she belongs to the Church. But, after all, the only thing we need bother ourselves about is whether she will make Pat happy and he her. Do you think they will be happy?"

"How can I tell? They know nothing about one another, nothing at all, and what training has she had? I'm seeing the botch they'll make of things at the manse on front of me now. Pat isn't a handy man about the house, and the stipend doesn't go far unless it's properly handled."

"Well then, and what are *you* going to do?" asked Tibbie.

Alison at this question took the pins out of her neat felt hat, laid it on the table, and smoothed her hair. It was lovely hair still, and not a thread of grey in it. A vainer woman would have made more of it, perhaps, but the very simplicity with which it was dressed drew attention to its beauty. Tibbie was struck all in a moment by her sister's good looks, by the sort of comeliness which is given to a woman sometimes when

her first youth is past, and she has lost all the awkward curves of her girlhood. Alison was a gracious woman, wide-bosomed and wide-eyed, the kind of woman who undoubtedly should have been the mother of many sons. It was the nation's loss that she was still unwed, Tibbie thought. She had many such quaint, out-of-the-way conceits, to which she never gave a voice.

"I've thought of a good many things in the train to-day, Tib, but tell me, first, has Guy a sweetheart?"

"Why, of course, he's been in love with Celia Crewe since ever he came here and saw her first a young girl with long plaits down her back. Now she has come back from her last boarding-school, and she's nineteen, and I believe he means to speak soon. He's waiting for Dr. Houghton to make the final arrangements about the full partnership."

Alison set forward with an almost painful eagerness, like one scenting fresh battle.

"Celia Crewe! but will her father like that? He's a very rich man, isn't he, and purse-proud as well?"

"He likes Guy, and, after all, he has other two daughters. I don't believe he'll refuse."

"So we are both in the same boat, our occupation gone," said Alison grimly. "That's what comes of sacrificing oneself for brothers. I wonder so many women do it."

"Oh, I don't think it was altogether that, at least in my case," said Tibbie quickly, for the memory of Archie Mackerrow brought a pang to her heart for her sister. "And after all we had to live somewhere."

"It's perhaps a good thing that we are going to be stranded together," said Alison briskly. "We must think of some plan. If only we had sufficient ready-money, we could open a boarding-house at some sea-side place. Even at Rochallan they make quite a lot. Mrs. Blair has been able to buy her house off the summer visitors in five years."

"I should hate it!" said Tibbie fervently. "It's

bad enough making meat and cleaning up houses for one's own folk, but to do it for strangers and for a living, would be what Guy calls the limit——"

"Then what do you propose to do?" asked Alison blankly. But Tibbie was spared the necessity for an immediate answer by the roll of wheels at the little gate, and the stoppage of the gig.

She sprang up, and ran to the window.

"It's Guy, and he's got Mr. Crewe with him. I do believe he's bringing him in."

CHAPTER VI.

ENTER MR. CREWE.

ALISON had only seen the great man of Birtley in the distance, and when he entered that small room his presence seemed to fill it.

Astonishment sat on Gavin Fleming's face at sight of his sister, and his voice stammered a little as he welcomed her.

"Why, Alison, wherever did you spring from like a mushroom in a night? Were you hiding under the table when I was in an hour or so ago?"

"No, of course not, I arrived at half-past four exactly. Gavin, don't be silly," she said a trifle primly; and her colour was heightened, not by the excitement of meeting her brother, but by the consciousness that another pair of eyes were bent persistently on her face.

"Alison, this is Mr. Crewe," said Guy, stepping aside to introduce the man who governed so much of the destiny of Birtley, and who incidentally had the power just then to make or mar Guy's own happiness. For that reason he wished to be conciliatory and deferential to him, though until he became as wax in the hands of Celia the Doctor had held his own independent course towards the magnate, doing his duty, no less and no more, in that part of his business which concerned the Birtley Iron Works, to which he was medical officer. In fact, on more than one occasion he had come to loggerheads with Mr. Crewe by reason of his plain speech concerning the provision made for the treatment of accidents at the works.

"Many a man," he had said fearlessly, "had lost his life by being sent to Birmingham for treatment or operation when attention on the spot would have saved him."

"Very pleased to meet you, ma'am," said Mr. Crewe, with a somewhat old-fashioned courtesy; and, as he shook hands with Alison, he greatly approved what he saw. He was a man on the shady side of fifty, dressed in a dark lounge suit, and though neither conspicuously tall nor yet good looking, somehow his personality had the power to govern the whole room. He had a large-featured face, the mouth being harsh in outline, and the eyes had a lightning gleam in them that could work confusion at a glance. His iron-grey hair did not lie smoothly on his massive forehead, but was inclined to bristle upwards, which gave to his face a look of odd alertness. His complexion was highly coloured and even a little coarse, suggestive either of continuous exposure to the elements, or to over-indulgence in spirituous liquors. Alison decided that she did not like him, and that all the tales she had heard to his discredit were true.

"I hope you have come to make a long stay, Miss Fleming," said Mr. Crewe, with an impressive smile. "And that we shall have the pleasure of seeing you at Old Hall."

"I have only come for the week-end," answered Alison primly. "It is a matter of urgent family business, so that I arrived unexpectedly."

"Urgent family business! I know something about that," he answered, with a somewhat grim smile. "I have four, and there are always some of them in hot water. This time I believe it is Celia," he added, with what was meant to be a sly glance at Guy. "I say, you are dining with us to-morrow evening, aren't you? I think Anne mentioned the fact at breakfast this morning. Of course you will bring both your sisters, Doctor?"

"Oh, I think I must be excused, Mr. Crewe," said

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Alison quickly. "As I explained, I came only for a night or two, and I have brought no dress suitable for a dinner-party."

"Oh, we are not so particular about our togs at Old Hall as all that, so we'll call it settled," said Mr. Crewe with evident satisfaction. "Yes, thank you, Miss Fleming, I'll be glad of a cup of tea, though I believe I have been inveigled here for a very different purpose." Then he addressed himself once more to Alison. "This brother of yours thinks he has a mission to set this particular corner of the world right, and especially to keep me up to the scratch. As I tell him, when he has been as long in Birtley as I have, he'll take a less exalted idea of his duty to the folk who do so little to help themselves."

Gavin held his tongue, though a few months ago this would have been an innings which he would not have lost.

"Mr. Crewe is too hard on me altogether, Alison," said Guy easily. "What we really began to discuss in the street was a surgical case that I've had considerable trouble over, and which I think might have been mended sooner if we'd had a small hospital or even an accident-room here. It's an old bone of contention between Birtley and the doctors, isn't it, Mr. Crewe?"

Crewe nodded and sat down, his white, well-preserved hands fumbling with the massive chain across his ample waistcoat. All the time his keen eyes dwelt with pleasure and interest on Alison's comely face, to a degree that rendered her desperately uncomfortable.

There was something about him which seemed to her uncanny. His strength was terrific, and she began to understand how even it was possible to be the best-hated man in a whole community. Power is a terrible thing, unless it waits on mercy and kindness. It was the firm of Ansell, Crewe & Co. that had made Birtley, that permitted its existence now. And Mr. Crewe's wealth was supposed to be beyond the dreams

of avarice. At that moment Alison, stranded on the shores of fate, was a little inclined to exaggerate the power and the province of wealth, and to long for it as she had never longed for anything in her life.

"Is this your first visit to Birtley, Miss Fleming?"

"Oh no," answered Alison. "I have been here a great many times."

"So far as I am concerned, it is the first time," was his quick retort. "What are you to be doing to-morrow? Will you let me come and drive you and your sister over some of the prettiest bits of our country? It isn't all cinder hills, you know," he added with what was meant to be a facetious touch.

Alison did not answer, only looked hard at Guy, but at the moment Tibbie entered with the freshly-made tea, and hearing Mr. Crewe's offer, also stared hard in astonishment.

"Do you hear, Miss Tibbie, that is your name, isn't it?" he said, turning to the younger sister with his affable smile. "I'm suggesting a drive to-morrow if it's fine, perhaps as far as Reredon Priory. It isn't warm enough for a picnic, but I daresay we shall be able to pick up something by the way. I don't suppose we need expect you to go with us, Doctor?"

"I? Oh no; Saturday is my busiest day, and I have an inquest for half-past twelve at the Cat and Raven. But there is nothing whatever to prevent my sisters accepting your very kind offer."

Then there followed an odd and slightly awkward silence.

Alison wanted to decline. She did not desire to be legislated for in this fashion, to have her day ordered for her by Mr. Crewe. It was not for that purpose she had come.

"Mr. Crewe is waiting, Alison; what do you say?" suggested Tibbie, as she filled Mr. Crewe's cup.

"Could we leave it till the morning? It would depend on the weather, wouldn't it?" said Alison desperately then, and with that provisional acceptance

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Mr. Crewe had to be content. He did not hurry over his tea, however, and it was half-past six before he left the little house, again reiterating his pleasure at having met Alison and fervently hoping for a fine day.

When the door closed on Gavin and him, Tibbie gave a small and conscious laugh.

"Looks as if you had made a conquest, Ailie. I never saw Mr. Crewe behave in that manner before. He has not been more than twice in this house in his life before."

"Don't be silly, Tib!" said Alison, in an exasperated voice; and at the moment Guy returned, also smiling broadly.

"Ailie, at your time of life to stoop to conquest!" he said in his most teasing voice. "Now if you want to give your decent, hard-working brother a leg-up, you'll smile on old Scrap-Iron for all you're worth to-morrow."

"I didn't come for that purpose, and surely you have got very intimate with these folk since I was here before. Are they nice folk, that are worth knowing?"

"By Jove! Hear her, Tib, weighing the lord of Birtley in the balance!" cried Gavin in mock dismay. "It happens to be important that we keep him sweet just at present. I daresay Tib will tell you why. So I hope you'll put on your best smile to-morrow, and then we'll go to dinner at night and you'll see the whole family."

"How many?" asked Alison with interest.

"Four; Anne, or Miss Crewe, is the eldest and keeps house. Then there's Madge, a student at Girton. Then Celia, and Stephen, the only son."

"Is he in the business?"

"No, he's a cripple, poor little chap, and a great sufferer. It is only lately I have seen him; since I got the Crewes for private patients."

"Is he only a little boy?"

"Seventeen now. His mother died when he was born, and Crewe, who wanted a son more than any-

thing in the world, was so disappointed in this poor hunchback that he has never forgiven him. He just potters about Old Hall among the flowers and birds and beasts. I'm often sorry for him."

"Isn't he even strong enough to do some light work? It seems to me it would be better for him."

"No, he is not strong. He'll never see twenty unless some miracle happens," said Gavin in tones of kindly regret. "You can finish the inventory of Birnie's Old Hall for Alison's benefit, Tib, while I go and get some medicines made up."

"Don't go just yet! Ailie hasn't seen you," said Tibbie. "There's such a lot to talk about, Pat first and foremost. Why, you haven't even heard who it is he's going to marry."

"Yes, I have; he told me all about her in that letter."

"Can I see it?" asked Alison with undisguised eagerness, but Gavin shook his head.

"Better not, Ailie. Pat intended it for my eye alone, and let himself go. He seems to me to be rather badly hit. It's quite time he settled down if he ever means to do it. You've just about finished the education of the complete bachelor."

The words offended Alison, whose mood was touchy.

"I've never prevented his marrying; indeed, I've often said I expected it."

"But all the same you didn't," laughed Gavin easily. "You don't approve the lady, of course, but you must remember that Pat, with his meagre screw, couldn't aspire very high. None of the Kyle aristocracy would look at him."

"Gavin, I really do think you grow slangier than ever. Why don't you check it, Tibbie? It isn't at all dignified."

"But it's nice, and nobody can deny that it's expressive," answered Tibbie, with her mouth full of bread-and-butter.

"It must be very wasteful to cut bread-and-butter

so thin," said Alison, eyeing the wafer-like slices with disfavour.

"Tib and I are off doorsteps and scrape," put in Gavin irreverently. "Well, and what are you going to do when Pat brings the first violin to the manse? Of course you're going to be sensible, and let them have the house to themselves?"

"That's quite certain," answered Alison rather grimly. "It's to talk things over I'm here."

"You haven't been too rough on Pat, I hope? It isn't any good, don't you know. In families it's better to take things as they come, and not to be too intense or too serious over anything."

"That's all very well for a man, Guy, but I'm a middle-aged woman, and, unless I go out as a house-keeper to strangers, what's to become of me?"

Gavin looked round in a vague discomfort. He could not gainsay the truth of his sister's remark. The indisputable fact that the double marriage would leave two partially equipped women absolutely unprovided for stared them all in the face.

"There are too many women in the world," said Tibbie cheerfully, as she rose to shake the crumbs from her lap to the fireplace; "but I daresay Ailie and I will warstle through with the rest."

"I was saying to Tib that if only we had a hundred or two we could open a boarding-house. Lots of women make a living at that," observed Alison anxiously.

"I won't add to their number," said Tibbie quite positively, and Gavin nodded approvingly.

"There ought to be some other way out. Meanwhile I'll go to the surgery and earn a shilling or two towards the solution. Hard work solves most problems."

He took himself off cheerfully, having been much encouraged by Mr. Crewe's extraordinary affability.

Tibbie changed the subject the moment the door closed.

"I wonder whether Mr. Crewe will really do anything

to-morrow. He has splendid horses, and he could give us a perfectly lovely day in the country. He'll bring Celia, I should think. Miss Crewe is rather an awe-inspiring person. Guy is mortally afraid of her. You'll love Celia, Alison. Nobody could help it, she's so sweet. And I do hope Mr. Crewe won't put anything in the way when Guy asks for her. I'm rather glad the boys are going to marry. It will create such a lot of new interests in life."

"For them, no doubt, but what about us?" asked Alison, refusing to be comforted.

"It's no good pulling a long face. It won't avert the evil day," urged Tibbie; "and, after all, they've been good brothers to us, and we needn't grudge them their happiness and homes of their very own."

"We've done a lot for them, though, Tibbie; and I can't help thinking they might consider us a little more," sighed Alison.

But Tibbie stoutly opposed such a view, and, jumping up, suggested that they should go upstairs and see whether by any chance they could concoct some sort of evening frock for Alison to wear at the Old Hall dinner next evening. In spite of herself, Alison felt her gloom being dispelled. There was something infectious in the light-hearted atmosphere of the branch surgery, and Tibbie's unfailing cheerfulness was a thing to wonder at. They sat late that night, for Guy did not finish his day's work outside till eleven o'clock; and Alison, restless and wakeful during the first part of the night, towards morning fell into a heavy and dreamless sleep. When someone bade her a cheery good-morning, and opening her eyes she beheld Tibbie at her bedside with a breakfast tray, she started up rubbing her eyes.

"Tibbie, what on earth o'clock is it?"

"Ten minutes past ten," answered Tibbie cheerfully. "Guy has gone out on his round, and there's been a footman from Old Hall to say Mr. Crewe is calling for us with the carriage at eleven o'clock, so I think you'd better get up."

"For mercy's sake why did you let me lie so long, lassie?"

"Well, you were tired, and needed the rest. Besides it's a pouring wet morning and the excursion is off."

"Oh!" said Alison, with a breath of relief. "I think I'm very glad."

"Oh, but you can't escape Mr. Crewe. There's been a footman down from Old Hall already with a note asking us up to lunch, and offering to send the carriage to fetch us."

"But if we're going to dinner at night we can't go and live on the folk."

"Well, that's what I thought, so after consulting with Guy we decided to decline. Besides, I want to take you to see some of my poor women to-day. I think it will be excellent for us to see some folk that are a lot worse off than we are, or ever shall be."

"Then we needn't do anything all day? I mean we have no particular place to go."

"No, not till the evening. It will be quite good for Mr. Crewe to have 'No' said to him just for once. I don't know why he should be so keen about us all of a sudden, I'm sure. It is you who have wrought the miracle."

"Do be quiet, Tibbie! It's only that the man wants to be kind to me for Guy's sake."

Tibbie laughed scoffingly at this as she threw a shawl about her sister's shoulders, and set the table at a comfortable angle by the bed.

"Mr. Crewe is seldom kind to anybody out of a disinterested motive, Alison. Sorry that I should be obliged to state such a cold truth. Don't let's think any more about the man until we need. He'll bore us for three mortal hours this evening."

"Then don't let us go. Couldn't we invent an excuse?"

"No, Guy won't let us. Besides, you want to see Celia; she's the sweetest thing in the world, and I don't wonder Guy is crazy about her. But it's not a

happy house. There's something wrong in it, I don't know which of them I'm sorriest for. Sometimes I think it is Anne, she is so dull and purposeless. Then again I think it is poor Stephen, with his hump and his poor pinched face. Madge and Celia don't need pity so much, because somehow they have made interests for themselves outside of their father's house."

"But isn't he a good father to them?"

Tibbie shrugged her shoulders.

"Mr. Crewe couldn't be really kind to anybody. He's too selfish. And nobody could ever forgive him his treatment of that poor cripple boy. No, he doesn't hurt him, he simply neglects him. Stephen knows perfectly well that he is an eyesore and a disappointment to his father, which of course is not calculated to add to a sensitive creature's happiness."

"It's horrible," said Alison quickly and decisively.

"It ought to be stopped. It is the boy's misfortune, not his fault."

"Of course, and nobody knows just how much his father may be responsible for it, after all. There are heaps of stories about Mr. Crewe in Birtley, Ailie, some of them not nice. But there, don't let us fill our horizon with Crewes. Goodness knows we get enough of them in this place."

"But I'm interested in them," said Alison reflectively. "I suppose Mrs. Crewe has been dead a long time, and the one you call Anne has mothered them. I think I'd like to see her."

"I know what you are picturing, somebody like your dear self," said Tibbie mischievously. "But get it out of your head. I can't imagine Miss Crewe mothering anybody, she's so cold and stiff. She does care for Stephen, I think. She's only twenty-five. No, the Crewes have brought themselves up in the intervals of evading their father. It's a sort of heathen house. Now will that suit your ladyship? Supposing you give me a sheaf of Rochallan and Seadon

gossip in exchange. I want to hear more about Miss Brooke."

"I've told you all there is to tell about her."

"Oh, no, you haven't. I really can't think how you came away this week when you had the chance to have her at the manse and to watch them together. I do love a love-story, and between ourselves, Ailie, you and I remaining single have missed a lot."

Alison made no reply, but drank her tea, though in her veiled eyes some bitterness lay.

"From all I can see matrimony doesn't appear to offer anything special in the way of happiness."

"Happiness! but that's not what we women are out for," said Tibbie, with one of her quaint flashes. "It's things and people to care about. Yes, Eliza, what is it now? If it's the butcher, tell him I'll be down the street presently."

"Taint no butcher, Miss. It's Mister Crewe," panted Eliza from the head of the stairs.

"Why, bless the man, are we to have him even for breakfast?" cried Tibbie. "He's come in on his way to the works, I suppose, all on account of you, Ailie," she whispered as she whisked through the door.

"Tibbie, come back here a minute, you can tell the man I'm not coming to his dinner-party."

"Oh, I can't; you'll have to get up and tell him yourself. I should never have the courage," was Tibbie's answer as she finally disappeared.

Presently Alison could hear the sound of their mingled voices ascending from the room below, and in about five minutes' time the closing of the front door. Tibbie was smiling broadly when she entered the room.

"I don't know what has come to the man, Ailie. It looks like a case of love at first sight."

"Don't be silly, Tibbie Fleming," said Alison, reddening in spite of herself. "At our time of life such a thing is out of the question, and you ought to have more sense."

"Well, anyway, his attentions are just prodigious. The brougham is to come for us to-night at a quarter-past seven."

"I won't go then, just to show him somebody has got a mind as strong as his."

"He'll come and fetch you by main force," laughed Tibbie. "Besides, you know that you are dying to go. What a queer thing life is, to be sure! It's interesting, chiefly because one never knows what is going to happen next. If we really knew even what a day would bring forth, it wouldn't be worth living at all."

"I wonder," said Alison, and a curious shade crossed her face.

The most wonderful thing to her mind at the moment was that Rochallan, and all it had meant in her life twenty-four hours ago, should seem to have receded into illimitable space.

CHAPTER VII.

IN NEED OF HER.

ONCE inside the big iron gates of Birtley Old Hall it was difficult to realise the grim desolation of the Black Country without.

Set in a delectable park of five hundred acres, in which there was scope for both water and wood, the old Tudor house, with its mellow eaves peeping out between the rare spaces of the creepers, was a dream of beauty. Originally the dower house of an older demesne, it had been considerably added to before it achieved an independent existence as the residence of various commercial magnates who desired a comfortable home within easy reach of their own hives of industry.

Birtley Old Hall fulfilled every condition they had required. It was less than half a mile from the town, and yet once its garden gates were passed, the abomination of desolation ceased as if by miracle to exist. Even the smoke and noisome vapours, which so often descended like an unclean pall on the little town, seemed to stop short at the boundary walls of the Old Hall. Certainly no finer trees, no softer, more velvety turf of emerald green, could be found though search were made throughout the length and breadth of England. A small natural sheet of water, with an island in the middle, provided a haunt for wildfowl, the terraced garden sloped to it from the back of the house, and the panorama to be viewed from the library windows was beautiful beyond compare.

The inside of the house, while completely in keeping with the exterior so far as plan and architectural beauty were concerned, was spoiled utterly by the vandalism of the decoration and the furniture, which belonged to the ugliest period of the Victorian era.

Crewe himself, a man of no taste, had married his housekeeper, who lived in awe of him to the day of her death, and was not sorry when the strain was over. She had been a gentle, shrinking soul, with a natural refinement which suffered many rude shocks at the hands of Edmund Crewe. It had not been a love-match, but simply one of these matrimonial arrangements which turn out disastrously or otherwise, according to the temperament of those who undertake them.

Crewe, by nature a tyrant, having climbed by sheer force and cleverness to power and place, continued to exercise his natural prerogatives. That he had been a working-man himself did not so much enlarge his sympathies as render him suspicious and exacting. He built his life on the creed that all men are enemies, until they are proven friends. Such an one has few friends. As he grew older, Crewe realised with a sense of extreme bitterness that he had practically no friends, that even his own children misunderstood and feared him. But he did not admit to himself that he was the best-hated man in Birtley. "As a man sows, that shall he also reap," was the text Edmund Crewe might with full appropriateness have nailed to the lintels of his door. Yet underneath the repellent exterior of this strange man there were yearnings after the infinite. Now in his fifty-fourth year he had suddenly become acutely conscious of the personal loneliness of his life.

It is an awakening which comes to many, and whether the consequences shall be disastrous or the reverse depends upon principle and opportunity.

A chance meeting with Alison, Crewe had called into active being in his heart the desire for a home. If such a woman had mothered his children then they

might have been different, he told himself, less cold and strange and self-centred. In such mood, ripe for development, he awaited the coming of his guests that evening.

Laughed out of her reluctance by her brother and sister, Alison had permitted Tibbie's clever fingers to deck her for the feast.

There was not much decorative material available; such as it was, Tibbie made the best of it. Alison's gown for evening occasions was of black satin of uncertain age and undateable style. A fichu of old needle-run lace, one of their mother's very few treasures, was draped by Tibbie about her sister's shoulders, but when she would have tucked a bunch of flame-coloured chrysanthemums into the folds, Alison drew back primly.

"Keep your flowers to yourself, Tib. I'm not a mountebank, but a sober, middle-aged woman, and my cameo brooch will hold the lace together more securely."

"It's like an inscription on a tombstone," said Tibbie irreverently. "I'll let you off the flowers, but I absolutely bar the cameo. This little miniature is the very thing. But oh, Alison, if only you'd let me take away the neckband. It's a shame to cover up that sweet neck of yours."

"Tibbie Fleming, living in England has made you queer about a lot of things. You know my views about bare necks."

"All the same, they were made to be seen, especially when they are pretty like yours," said Tibbie with a sigh. "Look at mine, a thing of scrag and bone, yet I don't mind."

Tibbie, an intensely sympathetic, even in a sense a clairvoyant person, was conscious of an odd feeling of exhilaration mixed with apprehension regarding the evening's entertainment. Usually it was a dull enough function, dining at Old Hall, but somehow to-night the air seemed charged with electrical forces.

Gavin, looking handsomer than usual in his evening dress, was as gay as a hopeful lover ought to be. Alison was the most silent of the three.

"It seems a big place," she remarked, as they drove along in the dark shadow of the avenue trees.

"It's a noble residence," answered Guy, "but the outside is the best of it. The drawing-room is the ugliest room it has ever been my lot to enter. Isn't it, Tib?"

They swept at the moment round the well-shaven curve to the front entrance, from which a soft flood of light poured out into the quiet night. Immediately the man-servant appeared to receive them, and Alison, interested in spite of herself, looked round with quick, inquiring eyes upon the spacious hall, which, with its wide oak staircase and gallery running all round the first landing, gave a keynote of space and dignity to the interior.

In a small retiring-room on the ground floor, a housemaid was waiting to receive their wraps, and in a few moments' time they had reached the drawing-room door. Inside the room, as they were announced, the master of the house came forward to receive them. Genuine pleasure redeemed his face altogether from its usual harshness, and Alison thought, carelessly, as she shook hands with him, that his evening dress was very becoming to him, and made him look younger.

"My daughters, Anne and Celia, Miss Fleming," he said, with a sweep of the hand towards the fireplace where both the sisters stood.

Anne came forward immediately, a figure of some height, extremely thin, and with a sad, dark-coloured face. She wore some sort of plain, dull-coloured frock with a sweeping train, and a plain gold chain with something attached to the end of it hung from her neck. Her very black hair, which had a natural ripple, was parted in the middle and brushed low about her ears, then coiled loosely behind. Alison thought her an extraordinary-looking person, and turned with

relief to the child Celia, who, with her fresh colouring and fair hair, looked a being of another world.

Celia had a smile, many smiles, for her lover and his sisters; but Miss Crewe smiled not at all. Her long, thin lips closed immediately she had spoken a casual word of greeting, and she relapsed into a silence which seemed to be habitual to her. Alison sat down on a corner of the big chintz-covered couch and looked about her interestedly.

It was a vast room but devoid of comfort, and there were very few flowers. The walls were panelled in silk damask of an old gold colour, and there was not a single picture. Its bareness was impressive, but rather painful.

"So we were cheated of our excursion to-day! What would you say to it to-morrow if it is fine?" said Mr. Crewe, standing directly in front of Alison and looking at her steadily.

"To-morrow is Sunday, Mr. Crewe," she answered bluntly.

"The better day the better deed, eh, Doctor? Can't you persuade your sister to give us the pleasure of her company in a drive to Reredon to-morrow? It's a slack day with you too, I hope, then we could all go."

Gavin shook his head.

"You would need to go and spend a Sunday in a Scotch manse, Mr. Crewe, then you would realise the enormity of your suggestion," he answered with an easy laugh.

"Would I? Then I must try the experiment. So you won't come out to-morrow, Miss Fleming?"

"No, Mr. Crewe, thank you very much for asking me all the same. Shall I see your son to-night?"

Alison had not the remotest idea that she had asked anything out of the common, or even that she was on debatable ground. She did observe, however, that Miss Crewe turned her face suddenly to the fire and that Celia's colour slightly rose.

"He doesn't usually come down to dinner. He is not coming down to-night, is he, Anne?"

"No, father, you know he isn't," answered Anne, in a low, quiet even voice, and without looking round.

"You see my son isn't strong. I thought perhaps the Doctor had told you about him," said Mr. Crewe, with a laboured effort to explain. He is over-sensitive about himself, and is always happier in his own quarters among his books. Isn't that so, Anne?"

"Yes, father," answered Anne, but her tone lacked conviction, Alison thought. She began to wonder more and more about the son of the house and to feel an inordinate desire to see him. The conversation was quickly diverted, however, by the entrance of the butler to say that dinner was served. Mr. Crewe immediately stepped forward and offered his arm to Alison, the others following in a little group behind.

It was only a short distance to the dining-room, which, while less spacious than the room they had left, seemed handsomer and more appropriately furnished. Large oil paintings adorned the walls, and immense bronzes stood on the mantel-piece, in which electric lights glowed with fine effect. The table, exquisitely decorated with white chrysanthemums in specimen glasses, looked beautiful, and all the appointments were of the best. Alison found herself taking a mental inventory of everything, and decided that in all her dining out she had never eaten better food.

Every kind of wine was offered, and she observed that Mr. Crewe took some of each.

"What will you drink—nothing, Miss Fleming? Water is very cold cheer. Won't you celebrate the occasion even in a mild glass of Grave? It's very fine, I do assure you."

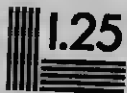
"I don't doubt it, but I'm a teetotaler, thank you," answered Alison without the smallest hesitation, and in a voice which she imagined would close the discussion.

"Now will you tell me why you are a teetotaler?"



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her host asked, and Gavin, inordinately happy, finding himself next the girl he loved, paused a moment interestedly for the answer.

"It's a matter of principle, and because I have been brought up so, Mr. Crewe," Alison answered simply.

"But why principle? I don't understand," he said, bending towards her a trifle eagerly. "I don't see what principle has to do with it."

"It has everything to do," said Alison quite clearly and quietly. "A thing that does so much harm in the world, that makes so many people unhappy, should be left severely alone by Christian folk."

It cost Alison no effort to say this, and she did not care a fig what effect her words would have on Mr. Crewe. She knew of no reason why she should not stand true to her temperance principles in his company. But Gavin, who knew of many reasons why silence might have been better policy, coloured a little, and tried to catch his sister's eye. But it was bent studiously on the delicious morsel of sole on her plate, and her expression was wholly unperturbed.

"But surely you are speaking of its abuse, Miss Fleming," said Crewe earnestly. "Every good thing can be abused, and is, of course; but it would be hard lines if we were all deprived of them, simply because there are so many fools in the world."

"We have to help by example," said Alison, in the same quiet, convincing tone. "You, for instance, Mr. Crewe, might do a great deal by example in Birtley, which I have heard from my brother is a very drunken place."

"Oh! Alison, it isn't worse than other places. You must excuse my sister, Mr. Crewe," said Guy confusedly.

"It's the Scotch manse of which I told you."

Mr. Crewe, however, was still smiling, and he pushed aside his half-emptied glass.

"I'd most uncommonly like to see that Scotch manse when it turns out such courageous opinions," he said, with a gallant bow to Alison, who, hating

the attention of the table being directed towards her, looked a little defiant.

"It is an opinion held in many other places besides Scotch manses," she said quietly. "Do you grow these beautiful flowers in your own greenhouses, Mr. Crewe?"

"I believe so. If you would come up to-morrow you would see them. Anne tells me they are very fine this year. I don't take much interest in them myself, though they cost me a pretty penny each year."

"They are very beautiful," said Alison. "You must be very happy, Miss Crewe, to be fond of flowers, and to be surrounded by so many lovely ones."

"I'm afraid I don't think about them," answered Anne rather dully. "Personally, I think the most beautiful flowers are found in woods and fields. These are more or less artificial."

The conversation was not brilliant at the table, there were even moments of silence and strain, which nobody seemed able to break. But both Gavin and Tibbie were fully aware that Mr. Crewe was doing more than he usually did for their entertainment. Never had Alison been more unpromisingly blunt and Scottish in her manner and speech. Her tongue seemed positively to enjoy giving short answers. Gavin noticed that their host left his wine wholly untouched after Alison's speech, even passing the champagne, which from him was an extraordinary compliment.

It was a short dinner, and immediately it was over Miss Crewe rose, as if relieved to have it over. She led the way to the drawing-room and sat down on the big settee beside Alison, while Tibbie and Celia, already fast friends, retired to a far corner for a little private talk.

"Surely you don't come often to Birtley, Miss Fleming," Anne began; and now sitting close near to her, and looking into her face, Alison saw how interesting it was.

"I don't come very often, you see. I keep house for our other brother, and it is not easy getting away."

"I have heard from Celia how good you have been to them all."

"Oh no, I have done nothing more than my duty, the same as you have done. When I heard that you were the eldest of four, I thought we might have things in common; but of course you are so much younger than me, and your circumstances are altogether different."

"I am twenty-five, but I feel fifty, and I have stayed here not because it was my duty particularly, that would not have troubled me, I think, but because there was nothing else to do. I am not clever like my second sister, nor pretty like Celia, so I had to make myself useful."

"But you have a kind father and a beautiful home, and you could do a great deal to make many people happy."

"Oh, no! I could not make anybody happy. There is no opportunity, and, though my father is a rich man, he does not give us money to spend. Everything has to be accounted for."

"But that is only right. Why be extravagant if one is rich?" said Alison encouragingly.

"Oh, but there is a difference between extravagance and meanness, and we have no friends. Nobody likes us here. It is because we belong to father, who is the best-hated man in Birtley."

"Oh, my dear, you must not speak like that, and to a stranger too!" cried Alison, in a shocked voice.

"I don't feel as if you were a stranger. I like you, and it was splendid the way you talked to father about the wine. If he had someone to talk to him like that always, it would be excellent for him. We are all afraid of him here."

Alison did not know what to say to this strange speech. Fearful of encouraging any further confi-

dences of such a nature, she changed the subject by asking whether Miss Crewe was fond of music.

"Yes, I should like to have devoted my life to it, but there has never been anybody to be interested in us in that way. We have been cheaply and badly educated."

"But your sister, who I understand is at an Oxford College?"

"She's at Cambridge, but she got there by fighting her way, and by winning a scholarship. And directly she gets her degree, she will go out and teach mathematics. She will never come home here to live any more. That is what I should like to do too, not to teach mathematics, of course, because I'm not clever enough. Sometimes I get up of a morning, and wonder whether I shall live through the day. I shall walk into the lake some day and end it all."

"Oh, my dear, it is very wrong to talk like that!" cried Alison, and with an unwonted gesture of sympathy she laid her hand lightly over Anne's long, thin brown hand. "God knows all about you, and is watching over you. You must never forget that."

"God! I don't know anything about Him. Nobody has taught us. We don't go to church as a family, though sometimes when father is away I go down to Birmingham to attend the Catholic Church for the music. It is the only thing I care about in the church service. Yes, Ricketts, what is it?"

"Please, Miss, Master Stephen would like very much if you would come up and see him before he goes to bed," said the man who had come in with his tray to remove the coffee cups.

Anne started up, then, looking down suddenly at Alison, said, "Will you come up? You asked about my brother before dinner. I am going to say good-night to him now, will you come?"

Alison rose eagerly. Tibbie and Celia, astounded at the rapid strides in friendship these two had achieved, looked at one another in mute surprise.

The door closed, and the two ascended the wide, shallow staircase together, and at the end of a very long corridor, covered by rich soft crimson carpet which gave forth no sound, Anne opened a door.

It gave admission to a very large, wide sitting-room, rather low-ceiled, panelled in oak, and with quaint projecting windows. It belonged to the oldest part of the house, and was part of a wing that could be quite shut off from the rest of the house.

"Is that you, Anne?" asked a thin, querulous voice; and just under the glow of a big crimson lampshade Alison saw a figure lying on a couch.

Always at home where there was suffering or sickness, her face softened marvellously, as she stood about the middle of the room, while Miss Crewe moved forward to the side of the couch.

"Are you very tired to-night, darling?"

"Yes; why have you been so long? It isn't fair, Anne, to keep me waiting like this."

"We had company, dear. I have brought a lady to see you, a lady you will be sure to like."

"Where is she?"

A pair of dark, melancholy eyes set in a thin, white, pinched-looking face turned themselves restlessly on Alison's face, and there dwelt with a sort of piercing inquiry. Something he saw there seemed to please the lad, and he smiled faintly.

"What's her name, and why have you brought her up? You know you never bring anybody up."

"It's the Doctor's sister, Miss Fleming."

"Oh, but not the one that lives with him. I've seen her."

"No, I come from Scotland," said Alison stepping forward eagerly. "I suppose you are a great reader, and know all about Scotland from your books. I live in Ayrshire, quite near where Burns was born."

"I don't care where you live. I wish you lived here," said the lad feeling comforted, even as Anne had been, by some hidden quality in Alison Fleming's

heart. She needed no further invitation. Next moment she was kneeling by the couch, and had laid her cool soft hand on the lad's brow. When she removed it after a moment she leaned forward and kissed him.

Then the querulous, fretful look died out of the hunchback's face and an indescribable sweetness crept to his mouth.

Anne, looking on without jealousy or understanding, felt her eyes fill with meaningless tears.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOME ONCE MORE.

ALISON arrived at Seadon station about seven o'clock on Tuesday evening, and was momentarily disappointed not to find her brother on the platform.

While she stood just a moment on the outlook, one of the town cab-drivers appeared, touching his hat.

"Please 'm, Mr. Fleming ordered me to be here to drive you up to the manse; it's a very weat nicht."

"Oh, thank you," said Alison, pleased by this little attention, and she hastened out to the waiting cab.

"Is Mr. Fleming in the town, then?"

"No, Miss, he's at Glesca; he left the order as he gaed doon in the efternune."

It was what she must expect from Pat now; continuous running to and fro to the city which held Edith Brooke, but at least he had not forgotten her.

Alison Fleming was not a woman hard to satisfy so far as personal attention to herself was concerned. The things other women looked for and accepted as their right were to her special occasions.

That Pat should have ordered and paid for a cab to drive her up to Rochallan sent quite a little glow to her heart.

It had not faded when she reached home and found Janet Aiken waiting on the doorstep. She ran down to take her bag, betraying lively signs of satisfaction at sight of her mistress.

"There ye are, Miss Ailie! I kent about the cab, that's what wey I didna' come doon mysel'."

Alison nodded, found a threepenny-piece for the cabman, and followed Janet towards the door.

"Everything all right, Janet?"

"Oh yes, mem, as richt as it can be when you're awa'," she answered guardedly. "Are ye tired? I hae made tea, and there's a nice bit o' biled ham. She was up at her supper last nicht, and the minister ordered on Seterday a hen an' a bit ham."

"Oh!" said Alison, with a small gasp, realising through this item of domestic intelligence the greatness of the change that had come over the manse life. She did not think of reproving Janet for the disrespectful "she," which of course indicated Miss Brooke. But she became all at once insatiably curious regarding even the smallest happening during her absence. Janet was equally anxious to impart the intelligence, in fact she was, to use her own expression, "fair burstin' wit' it."

She ran to make a small piece of crisp toast, while her mistress removed her travelling coat and hat, and by the time she appeared in the dining-room for her meal, was prepared both to talk and to listen.

"Hoos the Doctor, and Miss Tibbie?"

"Quite well. I've never, I think, seen them look better. Tibbie is fuller of nonsense than ever."

"Dear lamb!" said Janet, and her hard face softened. "An' is the Doctor daein' as weel as ever, plenty ill folk to look after?"

"Hundreds. Oh, Janet, yon's an awful house! Meals at any and all hours and never a moment's peace, but Tibbie doesn't care a fig. She's as happy as the day's long."

"It wad hae killed you, Miss Ailie," said Janet briefly. "But Heaven be praised the back's made for the burden."

She busied herself about the table, setting the plates

a little nearer her mistress, and then stopping to cut a tender slice from the ham.

"So you had Miss Brooke to supper? Did Mrs. Dunlop come with her?"

"Oh, no, she cam here lane. They were jist lad and lass like! Mercy me, I couldna keep frae lauchin to mysel' in the kitchen, to think it was really the minister wi' her here! It seemed the queerest thing I ever kent in my life."

"Well, and what do you think of her, Janet?" Alison forced herself to say, and waited with some perturbation for the answer.

Janet cleared her throat, and put her hands on her hips and assumed a judicial air.

"Well, Miss Ailie, I'm no sure that I jist hae inade up my mind. She's no' what I expeckit. She's no' like you, of course, but still there's nae ill in her, an' she was very nice to me."

"I'm glad of that. How long was she here?"

"The minister brocht frae the evenin' service. Yes, she was at it, sittin' in your seat. Eh, mighty, if the kirk had but kent wha they were lookin' at in the manse pew! I wager ye the minister wadna hae gotten muckle attention. She's no' bonnie, Miss Ailie, but she's a leddy."

"You think so?"

"Yes, and so does Mrs. Dunlop, for Manse Leeb-
telt me thay were fell ta'en up wi' her. But I tald ye what, Miss Ailie, you'll need to bide an' keep the hoose as ye hae aye dune. She doesn't ken a mortal thing about it. A bonnie manse it wad be left to her."

"That's the one thing I won't do. Well, tell me all the rest. Did the minister show her all over the house?"

She didna gang up the stair. Efter their supper they went into the study, and it was eleven o'clock before he took her awa' doon the road to the Old Manse. He's very happy like, Miss Ailie. He was singing this morning in his bath, and he was at the Auld

Manse a' the morning, an' was to take her up to Glesca in the efternune. I reckon we'll no see muckle o' the minister in Rochallan noo, not until he brings her hame. Do you ken when it is, Miss Ailie?"

"I believe about Christmas."

"She's no' to mourn long then for her faither, but it's maybe better. But, Miss Ailie, ye werena in airnest when ye said ye wasna gaun to stop on at the manse?"

"Yes I was. It would be wrong and unfair to her, as well as to myself. And, besides, I could not bear to play second fiddle, Janet. I may as well own to it."

"Ye wadna be second fiddle in the pairish, o' y wey. I'll tell ye what I think. She'll tak' nae interest in the kirk, or the wark outside. I ken by the look o' her."

"But she will have to, Janet. Her duty will appeal to her as it does to other folk."

"Wait or ye see. If the minister lets you awa frae the manse he'll rue it only wance, and that'll be aye. Forby where would ye go to, tell me that. I've never been at Birtley, but I have not heard that they hae sic a very big hoose there."

Alison's colour rose, whereat Janet greatly wondered. At the moment there rose before her mistress's eyes a vision not of the little narrow rooms at the branch surgery, but of the wide, spacious old family house in the middle of its beautiful acreage, with the gleam of the moonlight on the lake among the trees. Why did her colour rise, and something beat at her heart? She could not have told.

"You've no' telt me yet what they're sayin' to it at Birtley," said Janet pawkily.

"Oh, they're quite pleased, Gavin especially, for he wants to get married himself to a Miss Crewe, the daughter of one of his rich patients."

"Oh, so they've baith ta'en the disease at the wan time," said Janet drily. "So there'll be Miss Tibbie

to be provided for. Nae word o' a man for her up about England?"

Alison shook her head.

"She is not troubling herself, I assure you, Janet. She says the way will open up, and I suppose we shall have to leave it at that. But of one thing you may be sure, when Mrs. Patrick Fleming comes to the manse I leave it."

"So do I then," said Janet firmly. "For wherever ye gang, Miss Ailie, ye can *not* do without me."

"Perhaps we shall not be able to pay your wages, my dear. But anyway there is plenty of time to settle things before Christmas. I wonder if it would be too late to run down to the Old Manse yet. I do want to hear everything from Mrs. Dunlop."

"Not wan foot do ye go to the Auld Manse the night, if I have to hide your boots," said Janet grimly. "Tak them aff an' sit doon an' rest. There are some letters lyin' in the desk for ye, wan o' them had the Birtley postmark. Somebody evidently that didna ken ye were there. My, they'll be chawed when they hear ye have jist left."

"The Birtley postmark?" said Alison, with a curious look on her face. "Are ye sure, Janet?"

"Perfectly. It jist cam in at half-past six. Are your slippers in the bag? I'll get them for ye."

"It's my good ones in the bag. Bring me the other pair," said Alison; and when Janet left the room, she walked over to the old sliding bureau in the corner, pulled back the flap, and looked down at the little pile of letters that had accumulated in her absence.

The latest arrival, bearing the Birtley postmark very clear and legible, lay on the top.

But she opened all the others first, and even permitted Janet Aiken to clear the table and leave the room before she looked at it again. She knew perfectly well who had written it, the big bold writing, like that of a man who had set himself to conquer all the defects of early education, had a sort of fascination for her.

It was a business envelope, and when at last, being left quite alone, she ventured to break the large black seal, she found the address at the top as she expected.

" BIRTLEY IRON WORKS,
Monday, Oct. 15th.

" DEAR MISS FLEMING,

" I called this morning, only to find that you had gone to Birmingham with your sister for the day; and as I have to go to London on business this afternoon, I shall not have another opportunity of seeing you. I shall be detained in London probably till Thursday, and it is quite possible I may then have to travel to Glasgow. If so, I will do myself the pleasure of calling on you before I return. Your visit to Birtley was all too short, but I hope it is but the beginning of your interest in the place.

" Yours faithfully,

" EDMUND CREWE."

It was not a love-letter in any sense. Alison dropped it with a feeling of relief upon her lap, and after a momentary impulse to thrust it into the fire. But the mere fact that it should have come as the harbinger of a personal visit filled her with astonishing disquiet.

She was no fool, and though she had never had an offer of marriage in her life save from Archie Mackerrow, and a faltering declaration from a shy young probationer in the far back days, her womanly intuition told her what was behind these few brief conventional lines.

For some to her inexplicable reason she had attracted the iron-master, and he wished to see more of her. A man at his time of life, with all his days filled with important interests, does not go out of his way to pay visits to a single woman in a country manse, unless there is some strong personal interest in the background.

This wholly unexpected vista in front of her not only took the edge off her keen personal disappointment about her brother's marriage, but positively thrust it into the background.

When she heard his key in the door her colour rose. She grasped her letter nervously, almost as if it had held some guilty secret, and after another hesitating glance at the fire, which could hide and consume everything, she thrust it in the bosom of her frock, and rose to receive him.

When he opened the door she was immediately struck by his boyish look. He resembled Gavin more than he had ever done. She had never until that moment thought them in the least alike.

"Well, Ailie, and so you've got back! Did old Greig turn up with the cab all right? Sorry you had such a wet day to travel. How are they all?"

The questions tumbled from his lips as he held out his hand, and he was struck by the sweetness of his sister's smile, which assured him as no words could have done that all was well with her, and that the Birtley visit had been an undoubted success.

"They're fine, Pat, and I had a most delightful visit. I really meant to have come home yesterday, only Tibbie wanted a day's shopping in Birmingham."

"I'm glad you stopped to the limit of your ticket. I suppose Janet has told you Mrs. Dunlop insisted on Edith stopping till this afternoon. We had a glorious day yesterday in the country. And I took her back to Glasgow this afternoon."

"Everything went well then, Pat?" she asked, with a little wistful touch. "And Mrs. Dunlop was pleased with Miss Brooke?"

"I think she was, anyway she has asked her back. But there, you will be going down to-morrow morning to hear all the news. I'm glad you had a nice visit. Sit down and let me hear every single solitary thing about it."

The tone was joyous and intimate. In some odd

way the barrier had broken down, and the old comradeship returned. The happiness which radiated from Patrick Fleming sought to bless the world. Every bitter word and cold look was swept away. And the strange thing was that Alison should not only feel it, but that she could respond to it at once.

She felt that it was good to come back, even to the home which would only be hers now for a little while.

She sat down, Pat opposite to her, and, watching him while he took off his boots, the mother-instinct stirred mightily in her heart. She saw in him no longer the man whose actions, whose very motives she had watched and judged, but only the boy, by whose bed she had sat in the long-ago time, soothing him to sleep with some wonderful story, or more rarely with a comforting prayer. Pat had been a nervous lad in his youth, often kept awake after hours of study, and hating, even when nearing man's estate, to be left alone in the dark. It was all these memories which rushed upon Alison and brought the sweetest of looks to her face.

"They're just fine," she repeated in tones of deep satisfaction. "It seems to me that Guy is not only the best-liked doctor, but that soon he will be the only one in Birtley; and it is quite decided that Doctor Houghton retires altogether after the heavy end of the winter's work is over, and that Guy will go to live in his house at Barbridge. The old Doctor himself thinks of retiring to Malvern beside his married daughter."

"Good news! and will the branch surgery be closed?"

"Oh no, for it's the backbone of the business. Guy will get another Scotchman to go there. He's coming down at Christmas to look for one."

"And Tibbie; is she pleased at the prospect of going to Barbridge to live? She'll be able to keep her blinds and curtains cleaner there."

Alison sat silent a moment.

"Tibbie will never go to Barbridge, Pat. Guy expects to marry Celia Crewe."

Pat gave a long, low whistle.

"He said something about it in his last letter, but I didn't think it would be a settled thing. He wrote as if it were quite a long way off."

"Well, it isn't," said Alison, and her hands began to work rather nervously on her lap.

"Did you see her this time?"

"Yes, I saw them all. We went up to the Old Hall to dinner on Saturday night."

"Very rich, aren't they?"

"Yes, they seem to be."

"And what did you think of the lot? The old man Guy calls a corker; a bit of a martinet, isn't he?"

"He seems very kind. I believe that he is called worse than he is," answered Alison steadily.

"And what is Miss Celia like? Is she the goddess Guy paints her?"

"She's a bonnie, sweet lassie, and Tibbie is very fond of her."

Pat sat silent, astonished at many things, but most of all astonished at the even calmness of his sister's voice.

Twenty-four hours ago he had deplored the fact that Guy was also contemplating matrimony, which undoubtedly complicated the situation. At the back of Pat's mind had been the unexpressed hope that Alison would find a refuge at Birtley, where Guy's increasing practice made his income more secure. But as matters now stood, not only would there be no room for Alison, but Tibbie too would be bereft of a home. Once more Pat marvelled at his sister's calm.

"Edith was very sorry you were not here to receive her, Ailie," he said, in a gentle voice. "But she quite understood. She understands more than any one thinks. But I should like to tell you that above

everything she hopes that she will not drive you away from the manse. At least promise that you will stop for a while, and see how you get on together."

Alison's face preserved its serene expression, but she rather definitely shook her head.

"That would be a fatal mistake, Pat. I know what I am talking about. It would just mean that I should have to go later on, and perhaps not quite so pleasantly. Miss Brooke and I will have a talk over it. I am glad that you think she understands everything. If she knew why I was glad to go away to Birtley last Friday, and did not take it ill, then other things will be very easily explained to her."

"That's all right, but what will become of you, and Tibbie too? It's a problem, Ailie; you can't deny it."

"I'm not bothering my head about it any more, Pat," she answered as she rose to her feet.

"But why aren't you?" he asked presently, mystified. "A week-end at Birtley seems to have worked wonders. Did Tibbie laugh you out of all your qualms about the future?"

"She laughed a good deal," answered Alison, with a tender, reminiscent smile. "But I don't think she had anything particular to do with my state of mind. I rather think I'm just leaving it, Pat, as we have to leave most things sooner or later, to somebody who manages them better."

She spoke quite cheerfully; and Patrick Fleming, at no time an emotional man, least of all emotional where his sister Alison was concerned, felt oddly moved.

"Ailie, I'm sure we can never let you go from us. Rochallan folks would never put up with it, and though Edith is what she is, and the only woman in the world for me, I can see quite well that it's not your place she is going to fill."

"No, of course not; nobody ever fills another's place, though they may try to do the same work in a different way. It's her own place your wife is going

to fill, Pat, and it will be a good place, I feel sure, though she is very different from me and from most of the women I have known. If only she is good and inspires you in your work, God will bless her, and make her a blessing in this place."

With that she went away, and in the silence of her own room, among all the familiar landmarks of her girlhood, she sat down with a sudden feeling of weakness, and took out once more the letter bearing the Birtley postmark.

Should she have told Pat about it, and prepared him for the impending visit? Something held her back. For she felt that a visit from Mr. Crewe could only have but one significance in her brother's eyes. The mere fact that he was a patient of Gavin's would not explain it away.

How she was going to act, how receive him, what answer make to any question he might ask, Alison did not know. She felt as if the years had rolled back to very early days, when others legislated for her, and she had no say in the common things of life. It was an odd experience for one who had so long borne the burden and heat of the day for others, and whom so few had considered. In the midst of it all, she was strangely calm, and daily conscious of a growing serenity of spirit.

The certainty that destiny had something in store for her beyond any reckoning of hers deepened in her heart, and gave a certain air of detachment to her actions and her thoughts.

But nevertheless a strange fluttering seized upon her heart, when, sitting at the dining-room window on Friday afternoon, just before tea-time, she looked up from her sewing to behold Mr. Crewe coming in at the garden gate.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MOMENTOUS QUESTION.

"THERE'S a gentleman askin' for ye, Miss Ailie," said Janet's voice. "A Maister Crewe. He doesna belong here. I've put him in the study."

Janet spoke in a quiet, natural voice, for callers whom she did not personally know were by no means infrequent at the manse. If she had heard the name in connection with Birtley, then undoubtedly she had forgotten it. She went back to her kitchen without further comment, and after a moment Alison put her sewing neatly in the basket, and walked from the room across the narrow hall to the study door.

Mr. Crewe was standing in a characteristic attitude before the fireplace with his hands behind his back, his lounge jacket open, so that his massive gold chain showed thick and shining against his waistcoat. She caught the sparkle of the diamond in his breast pin with the very opening of the door. She had lost something of her gracious dignity, but Mr. Crewe had never looked more at his ease, more conscious of his power. There was no doubt about his pleasure at sight of the woman he had travelled so far to see. It shone in his face, sparkled in his eye, infused itself into the warmth and impressiveness of his manner as he hastened to greet her.

"You got my letter, I hope? I arrived in Glasgow last night, put my business through so far this morning, and here I am."

"I got your letter last evening," she answered.

"I hope your family are all well at Old Hall, Mr. Crewe."

She spoke haltingly, and with an odd hesitancy, while her fingers tingled through the warmth of the pressure he had given them.

"They are all right, I think. I don't carry my household cares with me, Miss Fleming," he answered, with a genial laugh. "That's a good tip for travellers. Why trouble about what may happen in one's absence? When I used to be on the road I have known men whose lives were rendered a perfect burden to them by their home letters. I never have any. It's the simplest way."

"If you can live like that, it is all right," said Alison soberly. "Won't you sit down? I'm sorry my brother happens to be out, but he will be home presently, as we take tea at six o'clock. We can't dine late, especially in winter, because there are so many meetings."

She said this to prepare him for the simplicity of their household arrangements, but he did not appear to notice the latter part of her speech.

"I shall be very happy to make your brother's acquaintance, but it is you I have come to see," he said bluntly.

"Oh, no," murmured Alison a trifle confusedly, and wished with all her heart she had brought her work from the other room, so that her eyes could have anchorage, and her nervous fingers something to busy themselves with.

"I was very sorry I did not manage to see you on Monday before you left Birtley. If I had, perhaps I need not have come to Scotland so soon. As a matter of fact, my business was not due there for ten days, and I am obliged to wait till Monday to meet a man who has gone up north for the week-end."

"Oh," said Alison. "So you will stay in Glasgow till Monday."

"Not in Glasgow, I hope," he answered quickly.

"It poured with rain all the morning there, and I thought it a more wretched place even than the Birtley cinder hills on a wet day. Is there not a decent hotel in this place?"

"In Rochallan? Oh, no! we are only a village. But the Seadoon Station Hotel is not so bad, they say. It is used by golfers and travellers and by the Americans who come in the summer-time to worship at the shrine of Burns."

She smiled a little as she said this, and the sweetness of her face once more made its mighty appeal to the man's heart. There could be no doubt that the ironmaster had fallen in love, so far as he could understand the meaning of love. Alison had no idea of the magnitude of her triumph. She, who by her own admission was on the shelf, had entirely captivated at first sight the great man of Birtley, of whom a whole community stood in awe. He felt himself at a loss, for he possessed no key to a woman's heart. Up till now he had despised and belittled the sex, regarding women merely as necessary appendages to existence. His first wife had never risen to the dignity of her position, nor even to the height of her own womanhood, but had lived in fear of her husband to the day of her death. A mere cipher, she had left neither regret nor tender memory behind. She had had the misfortune to enter Edmund Crewe's life at the acute fighting stage, when, intent on carving his career, his hand had been against every man's, and every man's against his.

Since her death the feminine influence in his life had been either too slight or not of a kind to develop the better side of him.

What attracted him in Alison Fleming was her womanliness first, and a kind of quiet but splendid courage that looked out from her eyes and which nothing could quail.

He stood upon the hearthrug, and looked down at her, and his hard face was strangely softened.

"If you were really glad to see me, Miss Fleming, you know, you would ask me to stop here till Monday." Her face reddened.

"I do ask you, but this is a very plain house, and I don't forget that I have been in yours. But if you care to stop you will be made welcome."

"I will stop and very gladly, even on such an invitation, which shows you how keen I am."

"It will be plain living and high thinking," said Alison, with a smile. "Perhaps just for once that may be quite good even for Mr. Crewe of Birtley Old Hall."

Crewe nodded delightedly. He had succeeded in rousing her interest, and felt that he was getting on. His next words might have been a shade warmer, had there not been an interruption at the moment. Alison had heard the front door bell, and was not surprised when Janet presently ushered in Mrs. Dunlop. She rose with haste, and a sense of relief, to receive her, and gave her in consequence an even warmer greeting than usual. In her outdoor garb, Mrs. Dunlop was an elegant and striking figure. Her quick eyes, directed towards Mr. Crewe, missed not a detail of his appearance.

"Janet ought to have told me you had a visitor, my dear," she said, as she waited for the introduction.

"Why, dear Mrs. Dunlop? It is always a pleasure to see you. This is Mr. Crewe from Birtley. You have heard Guy speak of him, I am sure. Mr. Crewe, my dear friend, Mrs. Dunlop, from Seadon Manse. You will understand the situation perhaps when I tell you that Mrs. Dunlop's husband occupies the position of rector here, just as Mr. Ffolliott does in Birtley, while we are the Dissenters, like the Brunner's Lane Chapel folk."

"I have heard of the innumerable religions of Scotland," began Mr. Crewe, but Mrs. Dunlop raised a quickly deprecating hand.

"No, no, my good man, not religions; you've got

hold of the wrong word. We have only one religion; it is the denominations that are uncountable," she said, with a little laugh, as she sat down for a moment on the edge of a chair. "I mustn't stop, Alison. I merely called to say I have had a letter from Miss Brooke. I can leave it for you to read, or if Mr. Crewe will excuse you for a moment, and you'll come to the door with me, I'll tell you what it is about."

"In a minute, dear Mrs. Dunlop. Don't come and go in a whirlwind. It is not like you," said Alison; and just for a few minutes Mrs. Dunlop sat still, using the opportunity to study Alison's visitor and incidentally to wonder what had brought him there.

When she found herself alone at the front door with Alison, she put the question without the smallest embroidery or hesitation.

"Who is that man, and why is he here, Alison Fleming?"

"I have told you his name, and he is here because he had business in Glasgow and could not get it finished till Monday."

"Stuff and nonsense. He is here for one purpose only, to see you."

Alison's colour rose in spite of her steady efforts to control herself.

"No, no! It was quite natural he should come here to see what sort of a home we had. I told you, don't you remember, that Guy hopes to marry Celia Crewe."

"I can't help Guy's hopes. It's that man's hopes that are in the air at present," said the old lady drily. "Is that to be the solution of the problem of Rochallan Manse? Have a care, my dear. In the language of the psychics, that man and you are on different planes."

Alison's colour deepened and her distress was so evident that Mrs. Dunlop mercifully forbore.

"There's Edith's letter, you can read it at your leisure. A sweet creature, if ever there was one. You can't help loving her, unless you have a heart of stone, but to picture her in Rochallan Manse, under

the eyes of Rochallan folks! It'll be a comedy for the gods. But Patrick is ridiculously happy. Haven't you seen that she has made him a boy again?"

"I thought he looked different when I came back on Tuesday night."

"You're in a hurry to get back. Anybody can see that. Well, you are of age to know your own mind, but don't mistake wounded pride and ambition for the other thing, my dear. Good-bye."

She hastened down the path, shaking her head, while Alison lingered a moment to cool her burning face.

She re-entered the dining-room with a question on her lips.

"Where have you left your luggage, Mr. Crewe? I suppose that you brought some."

"My gladstone bag, and it is at the station. It can be brought up easily if you are going to allow me to trespass till Monday. It is what I should like better than anything in the world, what I have been hoping for. But I feel that it is a good deal to ask."

"Oh, no, we have plenty of room, and my brother will be quite pleased, only you will not see very much of him, it being the end of the week, and he has two sermons to preach on Sunday."

"Hard lines. Does he preach two sermons every Sunday?"

"Always when he is at home. You look as if you thought it hardly worth while, Mr. Crewe, but I assure you that here in Scotland people still like sermons, and go willingly to hear them."

"I have not been in a church since my marriage day, nearly thirty years ago, Miss Fleming. Perhaps after that you'll withdraw your invitation."

"No, there is the more reason why I should press it," she said lightly. "Only I warn you that you will be expected to go to church at least once on Sunday, twice if you wish to be very polite to us."

"I shall probably enjoy it. Up to now churches

have not been much in my line, and I have never liked parsons. The few I have known have been too fond of telling me my duty, without attending to their own. I have a brother-in-law a Congregational minister in Lancashire, and we quarrelled over this very point."

Observing that Alison's expression was discouraging, Mr. Crewe tried to explain further.

"He thought he ought to have a voice, I suppose, in the upbringing of his sister's children, and made a special visit to Birtley to give me instructions. What he chiefly found fault with was that I did not take them all to church. I replied that when they became of age to judge for themselves I should not hinder them."

"And what was the result of that?" asked Alison interestedly.

"Two of them go occasionally, the other two not at all."

"It was a great loss to them, as children, I am sure. I am in sympathy with your brother-in-law, Mr. Crewe."

A fresh interruption was made by the entrance of Patrick, who had learned in the roadway from Mrs. Dunlop of the arrival of so unexpected a visitor.

He expressed the liveliest satisfaction, and left Mr. Crewe in no doubt whatsoever but that he was welcome to the manse and all it contained.

Tea being ready then, they went in to partake of it; after which the minister suggested that they should walk together to Seadon station and fetch back Mr. Crewe's belongings in a cab. When this was decided Pat managed to get a private word with his sister in the passage.

"We must make him very welcome, and do our best to give him a good time, Alison, for Guy's sake. Undoubtedly he wishes to be friendly, and probably wants to know all there is about us, before he commits himself about Celia and Guy. Spare no expense.

Is there anything you would like sent up from the town?"

Alison smiled somewhat weakly as she shook her head. It seemed incred'ble to her that Pat could be so blind. But to associate Mr. Crewe's visit in the remotest degree with Alison was the very last thing that would have occurred to his mind. He was pleasurably excited over the unexpected happening, and anxious for Guy's sake to make the best impression.

Love had undoubtedly widened Patrick Fleming's sympathies, and given him a fellow-feeling with his brother, if not indeed, with all mankind.

Alison proceeded to the adornment of the prophet's chamber with very mingled feelings. She took great care to take out the best from her household stores. Janet had never seen her so particular or so extravagant in the matter of fine linen.

Patrick undoubtedly did the honours of the manse well that night.

He talked so much that Alison kept oddly silent and retired early to bed, chiefly because the need to be alone, to think over this strange thing that had come into her life, became insistent.

She slept very little, and was up betimes. As she was hunting in the garden for a few late roses for the adornment of the breakfast-table, Mr. Crewe appeared in the porch to bid her good-morning.

"A beautiful morning, Miss Fleming. I have been up an hour watching the sea from my window. You have a pretty place here. How is it in winter?"

"It has its own beauty then," answered Alison. "I have always lived here, and I love the place in all its moods. I hope you rested well and that the boom of the surf did not disturb you. In certain directions of the wind it sounds very loudly."

"I heard it, but it soothed me. I haven't been sleeping well lately, and I'm hoping great things from this change. I fancied I heard somebody moving

about the house in the small hours. I hope it was not you."

"I—oh, no! It would be the minister. He is always late on Saturday night. Often he does not go to bed till the dawn."

She gave a little sigh as she spoke, for this habit of her brother's had long been one of the mild thorns in her flesh.

"Why does he sit up so late?"

"Why, getting his sermons ready. Most of them do it. I've been keeping house for ministers all my days and have seen hundreds of them here, but I've never met one yet who would get his work forward sufficiently to get a good sleep on Saturday night, and go fresh to the pulpit on Sunday morning."

"Is it such a hard business then, this making of sermons?" asked the iron-master bluntly. "It seems to me easy enough. If a man has been educated to express himself in proper language, talking from a pulpit would seem to me as easy as talking—well, from a chair."

Alison laughed.

"The only test would be to go and try it," she said lightly. "There's the feeling of responsibility about the message, which every conscientious minister must have, if he is to do any good in the place at all."

"What message?" asked Crewe, and his expression was one of blank inquiry. To him the ministry was merely a trade or profession, which men entered for the purpose of getting a living. To him it appeared one of the poorest in the world, and the least attractive.

"I don't know that I can explain, Mr. Crewe," answered Alison, with a little hurried note in her voice. "It is the sort of thing that has to be felt. It can't be put into words. Perhaps if you come with us to church this morning you'll understand. There's the breakfast bell, and here comes Patrick, punctual for once. That is in honour of you, Mr. Crewe, so I hope you are properly appreciative."

Immediately after breakfast Alison took herself to the kitchen to prepare for the mid-day meal, to which she had added one or two items in honour of their guest. Practically no cooking was done in the manse on Sundays; the Flemings adhering to the old idea that had prevailed in their father's lifetime, that Sunday should be kept as strictly as possible as a day of rest. There was in Alison a strain of honesty, and as well a certain sort of pride. She would not bend to flatter, or even to cater specially for the great man of Birtley. He must take them as they were. Time was when such an event would have filled her with an unrest that the whole household would have felt. Janet, accustomed to every mood of her mistress, was astonished at her prodigious indifference, which seemed to have been growing steadily since the moment of Mr. Crewe's arrival. At a quarter to eleven the bells began to ring, and Alison, dressed in her quiet Sunday garb, appeared in the study to say that it was time for them to go. The minister had, after smoking one pipe with his guest after breakfast, retired to the privacy of his vestry.

There was a little path from the manse garden to the wide green spaces surrounding the new church, and this path Crewe and Alison took together. The folk interested in manse doings were astonished to behold another stranger in the manse pew, and were unable to place him, just as they had been unable to place the unknown lady on the previous Sunday evening. Crewe was greatly interested in his surroundings, chiefly because it was part of the setting in which he found the woman who had suddenly come into his life to change all its colour and purpose.

Alison stepped into the pew first, leaving him the outer corner. After she had seen that he was provided with books from the box fixed under the board, she sat well away from him and, bending her head for one moment, closed her eyes. And with one sweep everything was shut out, and she became oddly and swiftly

a child again, kneeling at her mother's side asking guidance and help and comfort.

She knew, by some strange intuition, that this was to be the most momentous Sunday of her life. There was no organ yet in the new church of Rochallan, the debt being still on the building; they had no funds for its purchase. But the choir was well trained and efficient, and there was nothing to complain of in the conduct of the praise. The fine cadences of the hundredth psalm filled the wide spaces of the building, but Crewe heard only the sweet voice of the woman by his side.

Something had come over the man, a moving consciousness that, in spite of all the success he had achieved, something lacked in his life, something which, if Alison Fleming could not actually give him, at least she could put him in the way. So there came a message to his soul, though it was not from the lips of the minister in the pulpit.

Alison was disappointed in Patrick that morning. He did not warm to his theme, or at least he left her cold. She had thought of asking him to remember who was listening to him, but an odd shyness had kept her back. She was of course wholly unaware that a benediction had already fallen upon Mr. Crewe's heart, that there stirred in him through the singing of the old familiar psalms vague longings he could not have put into words.

"Would you like to take a little walk up the road before dinner?" Alison asked, as they left the church. "We do not have it till a quarter-past one. No, we won't wait for my brother. We see nothing of each other on Sundays until the evening, when his work is done."

She added this because she imagined that Mr. Crewe was looking round expectantly for Pat. He was not thinking of him, however, but merely taking another look at the church and the people scattering from its doors, unaware of the poignant interest they were

taking in him. In homely little communities like Rochallan, the presence of a visitor in any house is an event in which everybody takes the deepest personal interest.

"I should like that above everything," he answered; and when they passed through the gates they turned their faces naturally towards Rochallan Woods, always the favourite walk.

The sun had dimmed since morning, and the glory had faded from the trees; it was a soft grey day now, very autumnal in its tone.

They walked in leisurely fashion, not talking very much, until they reached the lane from which the wood could be entered. Alison suggested that they should pass through the gate, promising him an enchanting view of the Heads of Ayr through a gap in the trees. But when he held it open for her to enter, she suddenly remembered with a little poignant thrill that they were come to the place of trysts, and that in another moment they must pass over the Bridge of the Allan Water, where she and Archie Mackerrow had said their last good-bye.

She would have turned back, oppressed by the strange feeling that she could not stand there with Mr. Crewe. But it was there he detained her with one arresting sentence.

"Miss Fleming, don't hurry from this place, I have something to say to you. I hope you have guessed what has brought me to Scotland. I want you for my wife."

CHAPTER X.

A MOMENTOUS DAY.

No woman, even if her heart is quite cold to a man, can listen to a declaration of his love unmoved. The colour flooded Alison Fleming's face as sweetly and redly as it had done fifteen years before; then it receded, leaving her a little wan and pale.

"Oh, Mr. Crewe, no; please say nothing more, we have not known each other long enough. It is impossible you can feel like that about me."

"It's not only not impossible, it is true," he answered eagerly, and with a most convincing passion. "When I saw you that day in your brother's house at Birtley, I knew that the boast I had made that I would never tie myself up in the matrimonial knot again was a vain one. Will you let me plead my own cause?"

"I can't prevent you, but—but I don't think it will make any difference. It is as I say, we are practically strangers to one another."

"Dear woman," he said—and if the ears of Birtley had heard that tender cadence they would have been astounded—"what man and wife ever know one another, or can know one another, until the same roof covers them? We would have to take our chance like the rest of the world."

"But in our case the risks would be very great," she said, and her voice lost its tremor, and the more natural colour crept back to her face. "There is such a tremendous difference between us, in every way.

I have been to your home, and now you have seen mine. Don't you see the gulf for yourself?"

"There is a little difference, but what of that? What are you afraid of? Be frank with me, as I am trying to be with you: I don't want you to take me under any false pretences. I daresay you have not paid several visits to Birtley without hearing my character."

"I have heard a great deal about you, of course, but I should not allow that to influence me," said Alison clearly. "I am speaking now of the obvious. I am not cut out for a rich man's wife."

"If there is anything to learn about it, you would not take long. I have never heard of the woman yet who could not adapt herself to a change for the better. And besides, I know that your brother is going to marry. He told me so last night, and anyone can see that the problem of your future is lying heavily on his soul. What did you propose to do after he brings a wife to the manse?"

Alison struggled a moment with her pride.

"I can earn my living, Mr. Crewe. I am, in certain directions, a capable woman."

"You are that, but my gorge rises at the thought, and so does yours, only there's that in you that can fight, and fight game. It's a poor thing to try and bribe you with the loaves and fishes, but I don't care about the means so long as I get what I want, and that's you, Alison Fleming. Don't you see that if you'll only marry me, all your difficulties will be solved. You'll get even with everyone of them. I'm a rich man, and I swear to you that you shall appear as a rich man's wife should. Doesn't that tempt you?"

She looked him straightly in the face and answered honestly,

"Yes, Mr. Crewe, it does; it tempts me horribly. It tempted me last night and the first thing this morning, and tormented me in the very church where my thoughts ought to have been on higher things."

"Then you guessed what brought me?"

"I suppose I did. How was I to help that? After all, there are things we know by instinct."

A little silence fell between them. It was broken at last by Mr. Crewe. He took a step nearer to her, where she leaned with her arms on the mossy parapet of the old bridge.

"Don't you stop to weigh everything up," he said urgently. "Just say yes, and the mole-hills you are making into mountains will disappear."

"Others will come in their place," she answered slowly. "You don't seem to understand what a tremendous thing this would be for me, I mean. It's absolutely the biggest thing, but one, that has ever come into my life."

"Well, take courage for it. As I said before, you're game all through. You've done a lot for other people. I want you now to do something for me."

"What's that?" she asked, for some strange new note in the man's voice awakened her deepest interest.

"Make a home for me. I've never had one, never in all my life. My mother was a drunkard, my father left her in the end, and I was kicked up. People forget all the suffering I had at the beginning, when they are judging me."

Alison hid her face, because in front of her she saw Stephen's, with the unutterable pathos in his eyes, and the lines of pain about his mouth. There was not, there could not, be any doubt that Mr. Crewe had failed, and failed miserably where his children were concerned; and that if he had never had a home himself, neither had they. But perhaps after all he had never had a chance. If only someone had taken him by the hand earlier, all might have been different. She felt compassion for this hard, lonely man, of whom so few spoke well, and who yet had something good and kind in him. Perhaps it might be her mission to foster a better side of him that might yet bless the world. It was a view of things calculated to make instant appeal

to Alison Fleming. She, who had so long mothered others, and who saw her empty hands now, had the chance to begin again in an entirely new field. But something kept her back, she knew what it was, but would not or could not put it into words. This engagement, offered to her in undoubted sincerity by the man at her side, held awful obligations and possibilities for her. She would have to give herself, to enter upon a new and untried relationship, which only love can sanctify. And she could not pretend that she had that sanctifying love. She looked up at him swiftly, and her brave eyes were keen and unfaltering.

"I am sensible of the honour you do me, but the risks are terrible, I—I don't care for you in that way. How could I? We have only known one another a week."

"It has been the week of my life, and I'll teach you to care," he said, with a quiet passion which again had the power of dominating her whole being.

"And I ought to tell you that long ago, when I was a girl, there was someone else. We parted here on this very spot," she added with a catch in her voice.

"But I will never forget him."

"I'm not afraid even of that," he said grimly. "I've spent my life pushing obstacles out of my way. Who is the man? Does he live here, and has he never married anyone else?"

"He was born in that old house among the trees, but he has been abroad for fifteen years, and I have never seen him since the day we parted here. Whether he has married or not, nobody seems to know."

"Then he is out of the count," said Mr. Crewe steadily. "I'll take my chances. It will be a queer thing if I can't make you forget him."

"Then your children——" she began, but he smiled upon her, and in spite of herself something of her gravity died away.

"If they knew—they would plead with me. You carried them off their feet, everyone, except the one

you didn't see, and she, like your friend abroad, doesn't count. She is making what she calls her career. Anne is sick of her life. She wants to go out and try a bit of something else, and when you come to Old Hall she can do that. Then there's Celia. Your brother Guy has asked me for her, and I am considering it. I did not tell him that my decision would depend entirely on the answer I should get from you."

She looked up at him again with a little flash of pure anger.

"You would make your consent about Celia depend on me; but that is unfair and unkind. It would make me almost say no on the very spot."

"But a man as much in earnest as I am is not too particular about the means he uses to gain his end. I have never wanted anything so much in the world as I want you. Take me, Alison, and I verily believe you will be able to do with me pretty much as you will. If they heard me speak like that in Birtley they would think either that the millennium was coming or that I was nearing my latter end. I'm not held in good odour in Birtley, and I'm not seeking to pose as worthy of you. Don't I know I could never be that? I'm offering myself for, shall we say, the missionary effort your brother was talking of in the pulpit this morning."

Alison drew a long, deep breath. That is not what a woman wants in married life, which is at best an arid field for missionary effort. Involuntarily her thoughts sped back to the day when she had said good-bye to the lover of her youth, how she had gloried sadly in his strength and goodness, in his thought for others, in all that made him so worthy of her love, or any woman's. And yet Crewe's words opened up an alluring vista. At least she would have something to mother, to help, to guide into the paths she herself loved, the paths of righteousness and peace.

"You might take me as a housekeeper for six months, until we see——" she said, on the impulse of the moment and with a fleeting smile.

But Crewe at this very properly and scornfully shook his head.

"Not if I know it. I can foresee the end from the beginning of that. Come as a wife to Old Hall, Alison, and leave the rest to—to——"

"To God," she said very low under her breath, and with the words wondered whether God could possibly bless a union entered into in such a strange way.

"I don't care for you," she repeated, "and I am afraid. If—if I should fall short or disappoint you—because I'm not a weak woman at all, and I warn you, I should want a good deal of my own way—what will happen then?"

"How can I tell? We'll have to leave that with all the rest. But I love a good fighter."

"I would not fight," said Alison quickly. "At least not to any great extent. I should simply go away."

"I will take care of that," he answered; and the light was in his eyes, for he imagined his ultimate triumph near.

"You know how poor we are, of course. In all the twenty years I have kept house in Rochallan Manse there has never been more than two hundred and thirty pounds a year to do everything with——"

"You poor thing! I'll give you that to keep in your pocket to buy pins and needles with. Look what you could give away! You could help some of the people your kind heart is full of, and I will never ask what you have done with the money. I've spent my life in getting it, and now I hate it. It is powerless to buy a man an ounce of happiness or peace of mind."

"Oh, no!" said Alison softly. "Only it has to be consecrated, it has to be laid on the altar. I am so sorry for you, because you seem to have missed everything in life, and I thought I was the only one that had been cheated." Her tone was soft, her look so sweetly kind, that he ventured a step nearer.

"Take me then, and give me a taste of happiness before I die."

She gave a little sob as she turned to him.

"I will marry you, but I can promise nothing. I don't even know whether I am doing right. Now let us go home, and please don't say anything more about it to me to-day. Above all, don't tell my brother yet. I must have time to get used to the idea."

"You shall have everything you want," he answered, and smiled a little as she made haste to pass him and make for the gate again. Perhaps she feared, and that greatly, that he might seek to kiss her; but if it were in his mind, he made no sign. In that he showed himself a wise man, for it would undoubtedly have hindered his cause.

She quickened her pace out in the open road, horrified to discover that it was nearly half-past one, and that Patrick must be wondering at the delay over dinner.

"If I leave in the morning to go and do my business in Glasgow, may I come back again at night and start out for home from your station of Seadoon, or will you condemn me to a Glasgow hotel for my sins?" he asked humbly as they came within sight of the red sandstone of the new church which from that part of the road quite hid the little grey manse behind.

"Don't be absurd, of course you are welcome to stay; but, please, may I ask you once more to say nothing to my brother? I should prefer to tell him in my own time and way."

"I will leave everything to you, my dear," he answered. "If only you will give me your assurance that you won't go back on your promise."

"I don't think I will do that, at least, not without fair cause," she answered him; but her voice was a little unsteady, and she longed above everything to be able to go and shut herself up in her own room, to face the thing squarely and arrive at some just estimate of it. But that was denied her. Presently, as they

made haste through the manse gate, she saw Janet Aiken from the kitchen door in the gable-end, anxiously peering forth, and the smell of roast mutton filled all the air.

"I am sure you must be hungry, Mr. Crewe," she said. "Do you see my servant watching out for us? Such a thing has never happened before in the annals of the manse, that I can remember. I daresay Pat will be in the study. Here he comes to inquire after us too."

"I am the culprit," cried Mr. Crewe almost gaily. "We have walked to a wood, and as it seems to be the only wood you boast of here, it is a respectable distance off."

"It is Rochallan Wood he is talking of, Pat," said Alison quickly, as she brushed past her brother. "I am sorry we have kept you waiting. I shall be down in two minutes."

She ran up to her room, and having laid her hat on the bed approached the dressing-table to see to her hair. The soft flush on her cheeks, the odd light in her eyes, struck her in conjunction with the fact that she looked younger than she had done the day before.

"No fools like old fools. Oh, Alison Fleming what a day! And how are we to get through the rest of it? Pat must take him off my hands for a walk along the shore, for some time to myself I must have, after all this."

When she reached the dining-room they were waiting, and the joint was on the table. She took her place quickly at the head of the table, and Pat said grace and proceeded to the business of carving, happily inclined to talk. He was extraordinarily well pleased to have the iron-master as a guest, and accepted the visit as a very happy omen. He was surprised, however, that Alison, usually so fussy and so over-anxious, like Martha, over the smallest upheaval in their domestic affairs, should make so little apparent effort to entertain Mr. Crewe. Never had

the table seemed simpler, never had the food been so plain.

He dismissed it as part of the problem of his sister's nature, which he had never understood; but was glad to think that she appeared so easy in her mind. Patrick Fleming did not number among his gifts the acute power of observation, or he could very easily have discerned that his sister was very far from being at her ease. There was a quick nervousness about her, and she spoke very little at the table, which passed unnoticed by the minister, because he talked a good deal himself. Immediately the meal was over, Alison excused herself, and left them. "I am tired, Pat, and will take a little rest before I go to the Sunday School."

"More church?" said Mr. Crewe, in an inquiring voice.

"I have a Bible Class at half-past three, and I'll not see you again till tea-time, Mr. Crewe," she answered. "If Pat takes you down to the sea for a walk, see that he brings you back by five o'clock, for I won't promise to wait my tea for either of you."

This speech filled Patrick Fleming with the liveliest amazement.

"You see my sister is literally not making any stranger of you, Mr. Crewe," he remarked, as the door closed. "I've never known her quite so off-hand with a visitor before."

"I like it," answered Crewe easily. "Have a cigar. They're very good. Are you off duty now until the evening then?"

"Yes, until half-past six."

"And is this the routine every Sunday all the year round?"

"Yes."

"And what is it all for? Does it do much, if any good, eh?" asked Crewe. "I listened attentively to you this morning, but frankly, half of it was Greek to me. Of course, I'm not a religious man."

For a moment Patrick Fleming was a little at a loss.

Mr. Crewe spoke of religion as a thing which, if not altogether superfluous, was at least not necessary to life. It was hardly the place to enter on a religious discussion, though a manse study and a fine cigar on a Sunday afternoon seemed to provide the environment. He decided to let the observation pass. It was of the utmost importance for Guy's sake that the great man of Birtley should not only be conciliated, but even flattered. They had a long tramp together over the golf-links and the wide spreading stretch of sand, and returned to the manse just before five. Immediately after tea, Pat excused himself to his study, leaving Alison to entertain the guest. There was no way out of it, and no room in which they could sit, except the dining-room; and when Janet Aiken came in to clear the table, it was observable that her face wore a dour look. She at least was not easy in her mind, and she disapproved of the man from Birtley, though, if she had been asked to give a reason for that disapproval, she would have been hard put to it. She felt something in the air, and when she heard next morning from her mistress that he was coming back for another night, she openly expressed her disapprobation.

"What's he needin' to come back again for? Is Glesca no nearer his ain place then Rochallan? It seems queer."

Alison, usually not averse to discussing things with her faithful maid, gave no answer, good or bad; but proceeded to give certain orders for the day with special reference to the evening meal.

"What's to be dune wi' a' that cauld mutton, if ye buy a hen?" asked Janet stormily. "I see naething to hender him eatin' it. It's guid meat, and weel cookit, though it *was* half an hour longer in the oven than it should hae been."

"We'll eat it to-morrow, Janet, and don't look so

glum. There have been waur happenings than this," said Alison, with a slightly humorous smile.

"Not in my time. The fact is, Miss Ailie, life's hardly worth leevin' the noo, for naebody can say wi' ony certainty what's gaun to happen next."

Alison was in the garden when her brother returned from speeding the parting guest at Seadon station. She saw from his expression that he was in the highest spirits."

"Ailie, undoubtedly the luck of the Flemings has turned," he called as he came hastening up the path. "Guess what has happened this morning?"

She shook her head, and kept her eyes steadily on the tree from which she had been cutting the last rose of summer.

"He says he'll give me five hundred for the organ, as a thankoffering for something he has set his heart on. What can it be, Ailie? It's uncommonly like a fairy tale, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," she admitted, but still did not look at him.

"It just shows how firmly Guy and Tibbie must have established themselves in Birtley, especially Guy. He speaks very highly of him, and told me this morning he would write to him from Glasgow, giving his consent about his daughter."

"Yes," said Alison very low.

"Queer, isn't it? that he should have taken such a fancy to the family? And to be willing to come back here, to prefer, in fact, our plain fare when his purse can command the best. I don't quite understand it, do you?"

"Yes," answered Alison, and turned to him with a look on her face he had never before seen there.

"Can't you guess, Pat, what has brought Mr. Crewe here, and why he is doing all this?"

"No, I can't, except of course that he must approve of us as a family. What other reason could there be?"

"There might be me!" she said, with a little sudden thrill of laughter which sounded sweetly on the quiet morning air, and caused Janet Aiken to put her head out of the spare bedroom window to discover what it was all about.

CHAPTER XI.

SPREADING THE NEWS.

TIBBIE FLEMING, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, sat on a chair near the door of her little dining-room, staring blankly at a letter that had come in by the second post. It was written by Pat, and conveyed, a trifle incoherently, the astounding news of Alison's engagement to Mr. Crewe.

Tibbie's expression was not only one of astonishment, but blank dismay, unutterable trouble dwelt in her eyes. The news was not welcome to her, nay, it was little short of appalling.

Tibbie did not like Mr. Crewe, neither did she respect him. Who did in Birtley, who knew him well? she might have asked, and moreover she was secretly a little afraid of him. To come into nearer relationship with him, above all to contemplate him as a husband for Alison, was terrible; no other word could describe what she felt.

His money and his position made no appeal whatsoever to Tibbie, her simple, honest, wholesome nature having long since relegated these to their proper place in the scheme of things. Though she had teased Alison unmercifully about Mr. Crewe's surprising attentions during her brief visit to Birtley, the thought that he meant anything serious by them had never actually suggested itself to her mind. She had indeed only teased Alison, because she was anxious to see the cloud lift from her face, and anything that served to distract her mind and rouse her interest in other things

served a useful purpose. It was astounding that Mr. Crewe should have been attracted by Alison, unless it was accounted for by the difference in their natures; but that Alison should for one moment entertain a proposal from him was more astounding than all. To Tibbie, it was like the deluge upsetting and destroying everything. She gave a curious little laugh that was half a sob, thinking of the copy-books upstairs in which Mr. Crewe figured largely, and certainly not as the good angel of the Cinder Hills. She half wished she had given Alison these books to read, just to let her see what sort of a man the iron-master really was.

Eliza, with her cap more awry than usual, came in to put away the breakfast dishes, and, seeing her mistress looking so queerly, ventured to ask whether she had bad news.

"Yes, my dear, I have had bad news—no, nobody is ill or dead. But there are things in the world worse than that, much worse."

She sighed a little heavily, and rising to her feet began to wonder where she could find Guy. She felt that she could not positively wait until two o'clock to tell him, and hear his opinion.

She had intended to do a special bit of household work that morning, had indeed made Eliza turn out a room in preparation for it. Alison, in a similar position, would have thrown herself into it with might and main, seeking to find in work some cure for her pain; but Tibbie simply and very characteristically shut the door on the dismantled room and, entering her own, took off her overall and began to put on her boots. She must go out, and in her wanderings hoped to come across Guy. He had said he would have a busy morning in the town and would not take his country visits till the afternoon. For that reason he had gone on his bicycle. Birtley was not so very large but that in one of the side streets she might come across him. It was a grey and rather heavy morning, with a cool touch in the air, the little spell

of St. Martin's summer having now completely faded. Winter was in the air, and Birtley was looking its ugliest.

Tibbie marched forth, her face wearing its most discouraging look. As she stepped out into the Brunner's Lane she saw that the twelve o'clock train from Birmingham had just come in. A few passengers on foot were already straggling up the road, and she saw the station omnibus in the distance loading up. As she was about to turn into the High Street, a high dog-cart with a prancing horse came sweeping round the curve. In it sat a groom and Mr. Crewe. She turned her head away swiftly, reddening almost painfully, and would have run back only it would have been so obvious. She prayed that the man might either not notice her, or go by with his usual salutation; but not he. The moment his eyes fell on her he drew the mare up to the kerb with a jerk, and Tibbie was obliged unwillingly to pause and receive his greeting.

"Good-morning, Miss Tibbie," he said gaily, and she gathered from his expression that all was well with him, and that he was in the very best of health and spirits. "I have just come from Scotland. At least I arrived in London last night. I suppose you know that I was at Rochallan for the week-end."

When Tibbie did not immediately answer, he gave the groom the reins and let himself down to the ground. Reaching Tibbie's side, they moved a few steps away, so that the groom might not overhear their words.

"You have heard from Scotland?" he said anxiously.

"Yes, Mr. Crewe, I have. A letter from my brother Patrick came in by the second post."

"And did he tell you that your sister has made me the happiest of men?"

"He told me that she had promised to marry you. Oh, Mr. Crewe, I can't pretend to be happy about it. It has astounded me, and I am a little afraid."

"Afraid of what?" he asked, and a different note crept into his voice, for these were the very words

Alison herself had used in Rochallan Wood, and they perturbed him.

"Well, of everything. You have known one another too short a time, and you are so very, very different. I can't understand Alison, nor what it means, in fact; yes, I am desperately afraid, Mr. Crewe."

It was not possible for Tibbie at that moment to hide her real feelings and she made not the smallest attempt. It was unfortunate that Mr. Crewe should have encountered her before she had had time to digest the contents of Pat's letter.

Mr. Crewe, however, elected to take it all in the best spirit, and even to assume that it was chiefly the difference in material things which made lions in the path.

"You'll get used to the idea, Miss Tibbie, as your sister has. I hope it is not me personally you are afraid of. I think I have been able to convince your sister that I'll do my utmost to make her happy."

"Oh, you may do everything in the world!" cried Tibbie hotly, and then stopped short, biting her lips.

Suddenly she looked up at him with eyes a little wistful.

"How did you get Alison to say "Yes" in so short a time, Mr. Crewe? She is usually one of the most deliberate persons in the world, who thinks over everything for ages before she does it. If it had been me now"—she added with a faint tremulous smile—"it might have been understandable. I fly at things, and very often have to repent them in sackcloth and ashes. But Alison never does. What did you say to her to make her consent?"

Going back over the interview afterward, Tibbie was amazed at her own temerity, but at the moment she seemed to be lifted clean above all convention, even above ordinary prudence. To her the thing was a calamity, and a calamity which might well have a more disastrous end.

Mr. Crewe smiled the large, comprehensive, happy smile of the man who has won.

"I did not say so very much, except that I was a lonely man, and begged her to give me a little happiness before I died. I suppose it made some sort of appeal to your sister."

He paused there, and when Tibbie, still with a troubled face, made no comment, he added disappointedly,

"Aren't you going to congratulate me then, Miss Tibbie? Am I to take it that you have personal objections to me as a brother-in-law?"

Tibbie recovered herself with an obvious effort.

"Oh no, Mr. Crewe. I wouldn't go so far as that. I'm only saying I don't understand it, and the thing is so wholly unexpected that I haven't got used to the idea yet. Please forgive me. So you enjoyed your visit to Rochallan? I somehow can't picture you there, I can't indeed."

Mr. Crewe did not resent this plain speech; in fact, it refreshed him beyond all telling, because it was an atmosphere to which he was wholly unaccustomed. Those in his employment had got into the habit of cringing before him, and those who were under no obligation to him either steered clear of him, or kept him at arm's length. Here was a woman who would do neither. He thought for the first time that even in looks she resembled her sister, and he took the greatest joy in them both.

"I had a very good time, and I like your little hamlet by the sea, and your old manse, and your brother, and even your kirk, which I attended twice and was the better for it. When am I likely to find the Doctor at home? Can I come down to-night after dinner, say about nine o'clock, and reasonably expect to see him?"

"I'll make an appointment and keep the patients at bay as best I can," answered Tibbie, and nodded as she walked away, while Mr. Crewe returned to his seat in the trap.

She would liked to ask a thousand questions now

that the barriers had been swept down, and above all to inquire how he thought his children would be likely to accept the situation.

She imagined, though her common sense scouted the idea, that already some subtle change had been wrought in Mr. Crewe, and she fell to wondering, as she wandered in the lanes and by-ways of the little town, what would be the ultimate result of this stupendous change.

She came upon Guy at last, at the very top of the hill, coming out of a house in a side street, which skirted the base of Lawford, and she ran to him breathlessly. He evinced no surprise, thinking that she was merely the bearer of some more urgent message than usual from the surgery door.

"Well?" he said, as he touched his hat, "who's after me now?"

"Only me, Guy. Just come over against this railing till I tell you what has happened. It's a simply awful thing. Alison is engaged to be married to Mr. Crewe."

"Oh, draw it mild!" he said incredulously. "Who's been spinning you that yarn?"

"A letter from Pat, by the eleven o'clock post; and I've just met the man himself on his way from the station, and he's told me it's quite true, but I simply can't take it in."

Guy's ruddy face was a study. That he was immeasurably surprised was, of course, evident; but there was no consternation in his face. Men look at these things from a different standpoint; and he considered his sister Alison was more capable than most women of judging the affairs of life, especially where they concerned herself.

"Why don't you say something?" asked Tibbie with a feverish impatience.

"Well, I'm trying to get the hang of it. It's—it's stupendous! Tib, there's no doubt of it, and the haste of it is, well, a trifle indecent, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't think that matters at all. If these things do happen, it's generally in a heap. Calamities are always in a hurry. Do you think we can possibly prevent it?"

"No, I don't; and if we could, why should we? What does Pat say?"

"I didn't bring his letter, but Pat thinks it's glorious, and is full of praise of Mr. Crewe and a sort of tardy appreciation of Alison, which rather made my gorge rise," said Tibbie with candour. "Of course it solves his immediate problem, but it is we who know Mr. Crewe, Guy; Alison doesn't. Do you think we can let her do it, without telling her what we know?"

"After all, what *do* we know?" he asked, looking her straightly in the face.

Tibbie coloured a little.

"I know some things which would prevent *me* from marrying him," she said frankly. "And of course it is quite common talk that he takes too much drink."

"Alison might cure him, and probably will. We must suppose that he cares about her, because she has nothing but herself to give to a man like Crewe. Such miracles have been wrought in a man before now by such saving grace."

"But I don't want Alison to marry a man to reform him," groaned Tibbie. "She would hate it all so desperately. And though she's so much older than me, she's a baby in innocence and purity. She has never seen anything, and when I would begin to tell her some of the experiences I've had here, among the folk, she would always turn the subject. She hates evil, and it has never come near her. I can't help feeling that for Alison marriage with Mr. Crewe would be a positively awful thing——"

Gavin observed that Tibbie had gone straight to the heart of things, deeper far than he, or any man, could follow her. And he was more than a little astounded at the depth and height and breadth of his little sister's observation.

"Oh well, Tib, we can't thrash it out here," he said soberly. "And anyway it's Alison's business. Of course it's a big thing for us as a family, in a way, and it'll give me Celia. I'm selfish enough to rejoice at that, and I hope that the view you are taking is too serious. I must be off."

"Come home as soon as you can to dinner, for I feel as if I could never be done talking, and that, at the end of it, there would be things left to say. Oh, I forgot, he's coming to-night at nine o'clock to see you! We must get our bearings before then, but Alison, oh, dear me! I can't picture it. It's unthinkable, and I don't know how he ever got that length in two days."

Her tone was so rueful that Guy could not help laughing as he mounted his bicycle and rode away.

Tibbie, in no mood for the confinement of the house and the smallness of the domestic routine, continued her walk down the side street, thinking she would go home another and quieter way.

At the bottom of the side street whence Guy had emerged there stood a tiny cottage of red brick, in which dwelt a widow and her daughter who was engaged as a typist in the office at Birtley Ironworks. Mrs. Odell was the widow of a former cashier at the Ironworks, and was a very superior person, who had fought a brave fight in her widowhood by giving lessons in music. Tibbie and she were very friendly, but Tibbie did not much like the daughter Clara, a pretty creature, vain and foolish, and very careless and selfish in her behaviour to her mother.

Just beyond Rose Cottage it was possible to get to the open fields and back to the lower end of the town by a pleasanter way. When Tibbie reached the gate of Rose Cottage she found Mrs. Odell working in her little spot of garden ground, and paused to bid her good-morning. She was a gentle, faded-looking woman bearing in her person the signs and tokens of her somewhat hard life. She had a profound admiration

for the Flemings, ever since she had been pulled through a dangerous illness by the Doctor, and had much sweet kindness shown to her by his sister during the time of her convalescence.

Her face brightened as she raised her head from the border and came forward quickly to the gate to return Tibbie's greeting.

"Odd thing, Miss Fleming, I dreamed of you last night, and I was thinking so much about you this morning, that I had made up my mind to call on you this afternoon. I hope you're quite well."

"I'm all right, but I've had a sort of shock this morning, Mrs. Odell. Yes, I'd like to come in, and hear your opinion about it."

Mrs. Odell dropped her garden gloves hastily in the basket, and hastened to open the door. She had no servant, and her life was full of petty drudgery for a daughter who did not appreciate it at all. But she never complained.

"I don't seem to have seen you for quite a long time," said Mrs. Odell, "though Clara told me someone had told her you had a visit from your sister."

"Yes, she was here last week, and we did talk of coming round, but somehow the time got filled up. I am rather sorry you didn't see her this time, but you remember her quite well, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course, and I admired her so much. I thought her handsome in a stately sort of way."

"I suppose she is," said Tibbie, thoughtfully wondering why they as a family appeared to have been totally blind to Alison's qualities and charms, and had taken her so much for granted, in the good Scotch way.

"I have got some very wonderful news to tell you, Mrs. Odell, I am sure I can trust you not to spread it about. You never gossip about anybody, and I do feel that I would like to tell some woman, and hear what she thinks about it."

"Yes, dear Miss Fleming, what is it?" asked Mrs. Odell, and her small, thin mouth looked a little eager.

"Well, it is this; my sister is going to marry Mr. Crewe."

Even Tibbie was struck by the expression of Mrs. Odell's face. A tremor crossed it; it was rather the absence of expression that was striking, just as if a mask had dropped suddenly over the small features, and the pale, rather grim mouth.

"Yes, how extraordinary; but you speak as if you were not quite pleased about it."

"Well, I don't know whether I am; in fact, to be quite candid, I am not. You have known him much longer than I have, Mrs. Odell. Do you think he could make a woman like my sister happy?"

"I don't." The answer came without a moment's hesitation. "I knew his first wife well. She used to come to my house sometimes when we lived in Dove Lane and my husband was alive. She was often unhappy, poor thing, and cried a good deal. She was far too meek with him. Is it—is it quite settled?" she added, with a kind of trembling eagerness which once more struck Tibbie as odd.

"I have not heard from Alison, but I have seen Mr. Crewe this morning, and there is no doubt in his mind. He has been up to Rochallan for the week-end, and it was settled there."

"Then it must be true," said Mrs. Odell, and suddenly rising she walked over to the door and shut it, which seemed unnecessary as there was no one in the house but themselves. When she came back to the side of the table she did not sit down, but stood quietly, with one hand resting on the table, and looked very straightly at Tibbie Fleming. Her face was very white and her eyes gleamed oddly.

"You have been very kind to me, Miss Fleming, and I do care for you. I should not like to think that your sister would not be happy. I think I ought to tell you."

"To tell me what?" asked Tibbie faintly.

"About Clara. You know she has been quite a

long time at the Works and latterly as private secretary to Mr. Crewe. This will upset Clara very much."

"How much or how little do you mean by that?" asked Tibbie, and her voice, though trembling a little, sounded cold.

"Well, he has made love to her, and I believe she expected that one day he would marry her. If she had not expected that she would have left Birtley long ago. I never approved of it, and I really know very little, only what Clara has told me."

"What has she told you, Mrs. Odell?" asked Tibbie, in a judicial voice which astonished herself.

"Oh, well, you know, not very much, but just the sort of things a girl would say about a thing like that. Clara is not very communicative. But in the summer after the holidays when I suggested that we should leave Birtley, she had the offer of a better situation at Stockport, where my only sister lives, she refused, and said it would be better for us to stop on here until Mr. Crewe could be brought to the scratch. I hardly like telling you this. It sounds vulgar and horrid, but you know what Clara is and how long she has been out of my control. It is not because I wish her to marry Mr. Crewe, indeed, I should dislike it very much, but simply because I love you, and respect your sister, that I should not like her to marry him if there was anything in the background."

"No, no, certainly not, it is most kind of you," murmured Tibbie drily. "But do you think Clara has any claim on Mr. Crewe? In a matter of this kind we must, of course, get down to the bedrock of facts."

"I don't know, you know really as much as I do now. We shall find that out perhaps after Clara hears. May I tell her, Miss Fleming?"

"Certainly not yet. Can I depend on you, Mrs. Odell?" asked Tibbie, looking doubtfully at the meagre face of the woman in front of her, and blaming her own incredible imprudence in having given away

Alison's secret in such a quarter. Never had her impulsiveness been so bitterly punished.

"Very well, I shall say nothing to Clara. You can absolutely depend on me, Miss Fleming. Clara and I do not talk intimately together on many subjects, indeed I see very little of her, so that the temptation will be lessened. Do you think Mr. Crewe—I mean, will they wish to keep it quiet for a long time."

"I don't think Mr. Crewe wants to keep it quiet at all," said Tibbie abruptly. "He struck me this morning like a man who was overflowing with joy in the possession of some happy secret. At least, promise me, you will say nothing till I see you again."

"I promise that, and I hope you won't trouble about it," said Mrs. Odell, vaguely conscious that a subtle change had crept over Tibbie's blithe manner. "Perhaps I ought not to have told you, but I was so surprised, so taken aback, that somehow I could not help myself."

"Oh, I am glad you told me. If there is anything of that kind in the background of course it will have to be cleared up before my sister could, or would, marry Mr. Crewe. Good-morning, Mrs. Odell, you and I have often discussed the difficulties of life. They seem to be on the increase, that's all."

Tibbie's face was a little white, her bright eyes hard and cold, as she turned away from Rose Cottage and made for the open field.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE TRAIN.

On the Friday of the same week Patrick Fleming had to travel to Stirling to assist at the ordination of an old college friend. Alison took the opportunity of going to Glasgow to see Edith Brooke. She did not tell her brother her intention at breakfast; truth to tell, her mind was wholly occupied by a letter from Mr. Crewe. The warmth of its tone, its very lover-like phrases, had slightly disconcerted her, and the colour was in her cheeks yet, though the letter, half-unread, was in her pocket. She had not counted upon love-letters, and the answering thereof. She did not even realise that she was only at the beginning of things in a new and altogether disturbing life.

She felt the need of a woman friend, and Mrs. Dunlop had been summoned to Ireland to nurse a married daughter through a serious illness before Alison had had time to confide the news to her. Remembering what she had said, however, on the day she had seen Mr. Crewe, Alison was perhaps a little relieved that she had been spared the necessity of telling her just yet. But Edith would be different. Probably, Alison thought, with a sudden change of front towards her, she would be sympathetic without being critical. She anticipated her visit with a lively satisfaction. She arrived in Glasgow at twelve o'clock, and went out to Charing Cross at once, not expecting to see Edith, because she was aware that the morning hours were occupied in the teaching of the violin, but to tell

the maid that she would come back at three o'clock to spend the afternoon. The interval she spent in some necessary household shopping and in paying a call on some working-folk at Govan, who had migrated from Rochallan during the slackness of trade the previous winter.

It was about half-past two when she reached the flat again, and Edith herself opened the door to her, welcoming her with a quiet grace, and evidently pleased that she should of her own accord come to see her so soon after her return from Birtley.

"I was so glad you called and left a message, for I should have gone out this afternoon, and I should have been so very sorry not to see you," said Edith; and after looking rather keenly at Miss Fleming's face she leaned forward and kissed her. It was quite simply done, but the look was an inquiry, and the kiss its answer. It made the air warm between them, and Alison was conscious of a comforted feeling at her heart as she followed her into the sitting-room. She was not critical to-day, she forgot to look for the dust on the picture frames, or the rust on the fire-irons. Other and deeper things were in the air.

Yet the little room was comfortable and homely, rendered so by the bright fire and Edith herself looked very pretty, though her face was too colourless for Alison's liking and her figure seemed frail.

"Let me help you to take off your things. Won't you come to the bedroom and take them off and stay a long time?"

"I can stay till half-past five, and then——"

"And then, I hope you are not going to say your brother is coming to-day. I want you all to myself."

Alison smiled at that and rose quickly.

"Oh no, he is at Stirling, and I did not even tell him I was coming for fear he would follow on. Men are like that. We don't tell them everything, never at any time."

She laughed a little with an odd joyousness as she

followed Edith to the bedroom, where she laid her coat and hat off, not even thinking hard things because the bed was just as Edith had left it after lying down half an hour when she came in. Edith herself did not notice it, or think it necessary to apologise for it.

To her these things were of no consequence at all.

"Did you have a nice time at Birtley with your brother and sister?" asked Edith, as she watched Alison smoothing her lovely hair before the glass.

"Yes, I had. I have come to tell you about it, but chiefly about a wonderful thing that has come out of it. But how are you, my dear? I think you look very thin and tired, and there are big, dark rings under your eyes. You want nursing up and taking care of."

The girl's lip suddenly quivered, and she made a little haste to the door as if afraid that she might break down. It was the unexpectedness of Alison's demeanour which overcame her. On the occasion of her last visit she had been as cold as ice, and as rigid and unbending as a pole. Now she seemed to breathe warmth and kindness and tender human feeling naturally, as the sun gives light and heat. She could now almost believe all the praise of Alison Fleming she had heard in Seadon Manse. They re-entered the sitting-room and made themselves comfortable by the fire.

"I want first to say that I am very much obliged to you for not being vexed with me for running away when you came to Rochallan," said Alison frankly.

"Why should I have been vexed? I understood perfectly. You did not want me quite so soon, and I told Patrick so. But I was very happy with the dear Dunlops. They could not have been kinder."

"And they liked you so much. I have never heard Mrs. Dunlop speak so warmly about anybody or such short notice. You just carried them away like," said Alison. "And the funny thing is I am not a bit

jealous, though you were trespassing on my very best preserve."

Edith smiled and stretched out her hands before the fire's comforting blaze. Alison did not fail to notice the curve of the long thin artistic fingers, which she could not by any stretch of the imagination picture busy with household mending or common tasks. Edith was one who would always leave these to someone who came after. Alison there and then decided that at any cost Janet Aiken must be left at Rochallan Manse.

"And tell me what did they say at Birtley? Oh, I must tell you I had a letter from your sister, such a sweet, sisterly letter. I do think that everybody has been most kind to me, and that I am a very lucky girl to be so much cared for. I only wish my father could know. He was so often troubled about what would become of me after he died."

"Oh, but I think he knows, don't you, where he is to-day?" said Alison gently.

Edith gave a little startled glance through her tears.

"I wonder, but then you see none of us know where they go when they leave this world. My father believed in reincarnation, and that the soul comes back immediately in some other casket. So when I am out now I often wonder whether he has come back to Glasgow. I am sure I hope not, for he hated it so much."

Alison looked a little shocked.

"Oh, I don't think we have any justification for such a belief, my dear. There is nothing in the Bible about it. Personally, I should not like the idea. One life is enough for anybody, and too much for most."

"Well, certainly it would be appalling to contemplate another spell of it unless it were going to be very different. But of course the whole kernel of reincarnation is progress, so that each new life would be an improvement on the old. Father and I used to have long discussions on it, and when we met particularly

disagreeable people he would say, 'Poor dears!' with his big patient smile, 'let us be sorry for them, my child; they are here for the first time.'"

Alison was for a moment at a loss for a word. She did not like the turn the conversation had taken, to her it seemed heathenish and irreverent, and she could fancy the sensation the mere hint of such ideas would create in the orthodox Rochallan kirk.

Presently Edith of her own accord put an end to it by a straight question on another subject.

"I hope your brother at Rochallan has made it quite clear to you that the only condition on which I shall marry him is that you don't go away."

"He has made it quite clear, but——"

"I won't have any 'buts.' I know all about everything, because Mrs. Dunlop told me. And if my coming to the manse meant your going, it would be a monstrous thing. Don't you think we could live together comfortably; or do you feel that I am a very aggressive person?"

"Oh no, but that is not quite the question. It would complicate your life if I were there, and even, I am quite sure, prevent you taking your proper position in the place."

"But what do you mean exactly by that?" asked Edith, leaning back and beginning to rock her chair gently to and fro. "If my position is to depend on you or anybody except myself, don't you see it would not be worth having. We must make our own."

"That is true in a sense," admitted Alison. "But you see I have become kind of use-and-wont in the parish, taking charge of all kinds of things, the Bible Class and the Mothers' Meeting, and the Dorcas."

"Oh, but I shouldn't take any of these, of course. I don't mean to do anything in the parish, Pat quite understands that. Of course, if anybody were ill, and I could be kind to them or take care of a sick child, I should be glad to do that, but I could not be a head

of anything. Besides, I shall have my music, that will take up a great deal of my time."

Alison was silent a moment, hardly knowing how to meet this plain statement of fact.

"So you see how absolutely necessary it is going to be for you to stay on, and to do just what you have always done. I shall take great care not to be in the way, and now I know you, I should simply love to have you."

"God forgive her, she's nothing but a bairn; ten times more of a bairn than Pat," said Alison under her breath. "And what will teach them both but life?"

Aloud she answered, with the colour surging in her face,

"My dear, it is kind of you to speak like that, and on that bitter day when Pat brought me here, I never thought you and I should meet on this intimate platform. But what you are talking about can't happen, for a very sufficient reason. I am going to be married myself."

"You are!" cried Edith, sitting forward eagerly. "But Pat told me you would never marry. He speaks about you as if you were about eighty, and he laughed when I told him I thought you were one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen."

Alison put up a quick, deprecating hand.

"Oh, my dear, wheesht! I am surprised at you, but not at all at Pat, because of course I've mothered him and the others since I was fourteen, and sometimes maybe they have forgotten that I am only thirty-eight."

"Yes they have, but we shall keep them in mind of it now!" cried Edith delightedly. "Who is the man?"

"It is Mr. Crewe, at Birtley."

"Mr. Crewe, the great rich man you have just had at Rochallan! Pat told me about him in his letters, but he did not know surely that it was for you he had come."

Alison sat back and laughed.

"No, it did not occur to him. He had put me on the shelf long ago."

Edith looked very oddly and searchingly at Alison Fleming's face. "Why are you going to marry him?" she asked.

"Well, because I think he needs me, and that there is something I can do in his house. He has children, and I should help to mother them."

"It does not seem to be a sufficient reason. I am marrying to be taken care of and not to care for other people. I wonder which is the right thing."

"It is possible that both may be right," said Alison quaintly. "Only, of course, circumstances alter cases and persons."

"Oh, do you think they alter persons? I don't. You must be you, and I must be I, to the end of the chapter. I am frightfully selfish, and I have warned your brother that I shall not be able to do any of the things that will be expected of me."

"But if you care for him, you will consider his position," said Alison quickly; "and try and do some of the things that rightly or wrongly the folk will expect of you."

"I am not sure. I want a home, and I should dearly love to have a little child," said Edith, with such perfect calmness that Alison, though a little shocked, could not reasonably find fault. "But I shall never be bound by rules or creeds. I don't know anything about creeds, and I am not sure even that I believe anything, so you see what a very faulty and unsuitable person your brother is going to marry. I am always telling him it is not yet too late to draw back."

"He will never do that. He loves you too much."

"And I love him, and I'll make a home for him, only it won't be the kind of home he has been accustomed to. I am going to develop the other side of him, for you, dear woman, have made him the most

selfish and helpless of men. Now, having cleared the air so thoroughly, let us have tea."

They spent a further delightful hour together, and at the appointed time Alison departed to the station completely in love with her new sister. Her cooler judgment bade her disapprove of her in many directions, but the charm of her personality, her transparent truthfulness and candour, and her winsome ways did their work. But as she sat for a few minutes in the waiting-room, resting before her train should draw up to the platform, she could very easily forecast some difficult days for Rochallan Manse. In two short weeks, how swift and stupendous had been the change in the outlook for all of them! From herself downwards, each had to face an entirely new set of circumstances, and to adjust his or her mind to a fresh outlook. It was too much to expect that success would attend them all. She had just looked at her watch, and was about to gather her few small parcels together, when someone spoke her name, and looking up stupidly, she beheld a woman's figure and a face that looked like Tibbie's.

"Yes, it is me! I came off on my own, just as you did a fortnight ago, to have a talk with you," said Tibbie, nodding sagely as she came forward to kiss her. "Took a week-end ticket and followed your excellent example in every particular. I started early this morning, and have had an hour in Glasgow. Well, shall we go down? and we'll take a first-class compartment, Alison, for once, just to get peace to talk; we can pay the difference in the train."

Alison felt a little emotional, she could not tell why. Events followed so fast upon one another in these days that she could hardly grasp them. Often six months, and sometimes a year, had elapsed without any meeting between the parted members of the family. This sudden journeying to and fro on the face of the earth seemed to be part of the strange new disturbing scheme of things. She had made no demur at what

at another time she might have characterised as a piece of needless extravagance, and she followed Tibbie with meekness to a first-class compartment in the middle of the train, where they secured privacy. The train, which was a non-stop one, started punctually to the minute and they had the carriage to themselves.

Tibbie arranged her belongings, took off the blue chiffon veil that had swathed her hat to protect it from the dust, and wiped her face over with a clean pocket-handkerchief saturated with eau-de-Cologne. Then she laid off her dust cloak and sat down, looking very neat and trig in her well-cut coat and skirt of blue serge, trimmed with a key pattern of Russian braid.

"Now I feel better. I never expected this bit of luck, Alison. Shopping, were you?"

"A little; but I really went to see Edith Brooke to-day. What a pity you did not let me know you were coming, then I could have met you and taken you out to see her."

"Oh, that can wait," said Tibbie indifferently. "It's your affair that has brought me. I haven't had a decent night's rest since Pat's letter came. Alison, you can't marry that man. I won't let you."

Tibbie's tone was firm, and her eyes a little hard and defiant.

"You can't prevent it," answered Alison, a trifle unsteadily. "I am of full age."

"Oh, of course; but I can reason with you, I hope. How did you ever bring your mind to it, Ailie? I have never ceased to ask myself since the letter came how he dared have the courage to ask you, how he ever got to the point. I think myself he had a good cheek."

Tibbie spoke with a boyish candour, but her eyes were dark and troubled.

"Oh, Tibbie, at least be just to the man! He paid me the highest compliment in his power."

"One he had no right to pay. He isn't nearly good enough for you; in fact, as your husband, he's clean impossible. I said to Guy this morning that I

was going to Rochallan to stop until I had broken off the engagement, if it should take till doomsday——”

“I hardly think you will do that, my dear, and why should you wish to do it?”

“Because it’s an unsuitable marriage, looked at from every point of view. There is the man to begin with, and he is the insuperable obstacle, Ailie; you don’t know what kind of a man he is.”

“I believe that he is better than he is called. He is very humble and anxious to do the right thing, and it seems to me that nobody has tried to help him much.”

“So that was the line he took; and you, poor dear, with your deep-seated mania for sorting things, think you are going to sort Edmund Crewe, and see him grow into a great and splendid man for your sake. It’s the biggest task you’ve ever undertaken, my dear, and it’ll break your heart, I doubt, in the process.”

“I’m taking the risks.” I’m not in the least afraid. The thing appeals to me, Tibbie, and I’m going to do it, so if that is what you’ve come for, you had better have stopped at home.”

Tibbie bit her lip, and gazed rebelliously out of the window.

“Listen, Ailie,” she said presently. “I’m nearly ten years younger than you, but I’ve seen a good deal more of the world, and I know more about human nature and life than you do. It’s because I know so much, I can’t let this thing happen.”

“You exaggerate things, Tibbie. I’m not afraid of a man’s bit of temper, and it will be quite good for Mr. Crewe to have somebody who will not be afraid to speak up to him. I warned him that I should not be a meek, submissive wife, and the idea seemed rather to please him than to dismay him.”

Tibbie bit her lip again.

“That’s not the point, Alison, not the point at all. A bit of a temper in a man is nothing if he is good in other ways, in fact, the best men have tempers. But it’s bigger questions I’m thinking of, moral questions,”

she added desperately. "You and Edmund Crewe are separated on moral grounds as wide as the poles, and there isn't any bridge that's going to be wide enough to cross that impassable gulf."

When Alison made no answer Tibbie suddenly turned from the window and, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, looked very, very keenly at her sister's now flushed face.

"Alison, whatever made you say 'Yes' to him? Own up now; weren't you tempted by his money, and his fine house, and his position, and wasn't there just at the back of your dear mind a sort of triumphant feeling that you could, by becoming Mrs. Crewe, get even with all of us, and take the wind out of Pat's sails."

Tibbie's knowledge of the human heart and its motives seemed to Alison at the moment nothing short of uncanny.

"Yes, I went through all that, I admit. I'm not blind to what he can offer me, but I don't dislike the man, Tibbie, very far from it. I think he would be kind and good if he had a chance."

Tibbie sank back on the cushions again and pondered for one more desperate moment.

"But, Alison," she said suddenly, "I'm not even sure whether he was free to ask you to marry him. With a man like Mr. Crewe, about whom there are all sorts of stories in Birtley, one never can be sure, and I have heard something. There is another woman, a girl called Clara Odell, who has been employed as his typewriter for some time at the Ironworks. You will have to clear up about her before you marry, or before we can let you marry with an easy mind."

Tibbie did not look at her sister as she said this, but she knew she had risen and gone to the opposite corner of the compartment.

So fast had they been running, that in a few more minutes she knew they must come to Seadoon Station. It was only when they began to slow down there that

Tibbie too moved along, and tried to look into her sister's face.

"Well?" she said inquiringly. Don't think I have enjoyed telling you this. What are you going to do or say about it?"

Alison replied with a dignity which had never been excelled, and a coldness which might well have repelled and daunted Tibbie. "I am very much obliged to you for your anxiety and your care about my affairs, but this is a matter which will have to be between Mr. Crewe and me, and of which I can't even speak to you. He may be all you say, but no man could have spoken as he did to me last Sunday, unless his conscience had been clear and his hands free. Now here we are."

Tibbie swallowed something in her throat, and gave a short but prodigious sigh as she leaped from the compartment to the familiar old wooden pavement of Seadoon Station.

CHAPTER XIII.

HIS CHILDREN.

So far as Tibbie's observation could detect, Alison seemed to be quite undisturbed by their talk in the train. She made only one allusion to it as she drove up in Greig's old cab to Rochallan Manse.

"Please don't say anything about what you've come for to Pat, Tibbie. This is a thing with which I am perfectly capable of dealing myself."

"Very well," said Tibbie, but in her voice there was a rebellious note.

"Perhaps you can tell me something about Mr. Crewe's children? I have not heard from any of them yet," remarked Alison then.

"He hasn't told them, depend upon it," answered Tibbie shortly. "He is the kind of man who would look round at the breakfast-table one morning and remark casually, 'I am going to be married to-day. You can please yourselves about how you act.'"

"Oh, Tibbie, try to be a little less unjust! And your tongue is too nippy for anything."

"It's because my heart is sore, my dear, and anxious as well. What does Mrs. Dunlop say?"

"Well, she doesn't know yet, because she's in Dublin at present, nursing Evelyn. Tell me, have you thought any more about what you are going to do when Guy gets married?"

"I have heaps of plans. My future will not be difficult to arrange, nor will it present any problems, Ailie. You see it won't have a man in it."

"But when I am at Old Hall, Tibbie, things will be different. You will come to me there, of course."

"I will come and see you, but I have a plan for myself. I think probably I am going to London to live altogether."

"Would you take a situation there, do you mean?"

"Not exactly. I should like to go and live at one of the Settlements. I have a friend who is at the Presbyterian Settlement at Canning Town, and she is very happy there. But I should need to have a little income of my own first. I am in hopes that I may be able to earn it."

Tibbie spoke the words rather low, for it was about her literary work she was indulging the hope, and had that very week, after much secret polishing, sent one of her Birtley sketches forth upon a voyage of discovery.

"It's a sweet spot this, Ailie," said Tibbie with a sigh, as they came within sight of the little grey house nestling low among the trees behind the big sandstone church. "And I often wish we were all bairns in it again."

"I never was much of a bairn, Tibbie. You've got to remember that when you are thinking about my future," said Alison, without any bitterness, but slowly and deliberately, almost as one would marshal an important fact that had been forgotten by the counsel for the prosecution. "I wonder whether Pat is home?" said she vaguely, when Tibbie made no response.

"Yes, there he is, looking out of the window. Oh, I say, Ailie, do you think you could get Miss Brooke to come down to-morrow? I may as well see her, since"—she added a little grimly—"the major part of my mission has failed."

"We'll see about it," answered Alison, with a quiet smile. Then Pat was at the door, and in the happy family greetings following the troubles looming on the horizon were forgotten.

Tibbie had a very happy visit on the whole to Rochallan Manse, and she took at once to Edith, who came down on the Saturday evening and stayed till Monday morning. But all the time she was conscious of a subtle and distinctly growing barrier between Alison and herself, and somehow the difference in their years had never been more accentuated. Alison, from some prim and exalted height, looked down on Tibbie as one might regard a child of too tender age to be admitted to full confidence. Yet in the estimation of Tibbie it was Alison who was the inexperienced and guileless child, and it was altogether a little comedy of errors that might have amused, had it not had its tragic side.

"As you are going to be one of the family, Edith," said Tibbie, as they roamed together on the shore late on Sunday afternoon, "I'd dearly like to know what you think about this marriage of Alison's."

"I haven't seen the man," answered Edith. "But she seems to be quite happy about it."

"That's the whole tragedy of it; she's happy because she knows nothing about the man. I don't know whether Pat has told you that Mr. Crewe is the big man of Birtley, and he is the big man at his worst. He's self-made, and he has the self-made man's most aggressive faults. I've lived there just over five years, and I know more than a little about him. He is neither liked nor respected in the place, and there are stories about him one hardly likes to repeat. What would you think my duty in such a case? Oughtn't one to try to tell one's sister when she doesn't know?"

Edith pondered a moment, and her eyes, as they swept the far grey horizon where the storm-clouds were piling up, had a touch of pathos in them.

"I don't know. It seems to me that in life one knows so very little. It is just so much blind stumbling."

"Oh, no!" cried Tibbie quickly. "Because you see there is God over all. We must believe in the Plan, I think, or we could never go on."

"Well, if there is a Plan, we can only fall in with it," said Edith shrewdly. "And there seems to be less need than ever for troubling."

"Well, but we are free agents."

"How can we be if there is a Plan?"

"God has given us so much power of free will, and if it includes common sense, as it ought to do, we take ordinary precautions not to make shipwreck of our lives."

"But your sister would never do that. She is so good herself, she could not have any affinity with a really bad man. I hope you don't insinuate that Mr. Crewe is that."

After brief counsel with herself, Tibbie told Edith about Clara Odell. Edith received the story calmly, without so much as a hint of horror or consternation.

"I should say from what you tell me that both the mother and the girl are schemers. Don't attach too much importance to what Mrs. Odell said. Is it likely, do you think, that Mr. Crewe would have made a definite offer to your sister unless he were a perfectly free man?"

"Well, that seems reasonable, and certainly, when I spoke to him the other day, he did not behave like a man that had anything to hide. But that is not the only rumour. Birtley is full of them."

"The fierce light that beats upon a throne," murmured Edith, with a slight smile.

"Well, perhaps there might be something in that, but it is perfectly true that he takes too much drink, because my brother, as his doctor, has had to warn him about it. The fact is, he is not a suitable husband for Ailie, and she has not an idea what she is taking on. There is a difficult family as well as him. And she is such a serious person, with a very high standard. And worse than all, she has no sense of humour. Now I can see the queer side of things all the time, and I should find heaps to amuse me in that queer house at Old Hall. It has amused me times without number,

but Alison will take it all with the utmost seriousness, and set about its reformation at once. Then the fun will begin in earnest."

"But she might succeed, one never knows. And she is most frightfully good! I have never met anyone like her quite. Imagine me as her successor here! My only consolation is that Pat is going to expect nothing from me."

"Alison has certainly spent herself here for Pat and for the folk," said Tibbie. "And I'm afraid they'll expect a good deal from you as the minister's wife."

"Then I'm afraid they'll be disappointed. My only concern will be my home. I have never had one. Poor father and I lived in lodgings all our lives, and I have never had anyone to care for me in the sense that other women have. So you see my motive in matrimony is entirely different from your sister's. She is marrying to care for other people. I am marrying to be cared for."

"It will be excellent for Pat," said Tibbie; and she never spoke a truer word.

While they were thus happily and with much interest and sympathy discussing the family situation, Alison, being free of her Bible Class, was in her own room writing a letter to Mr. Crewe.

Tibbie might have been surprised at that letter, which cost Alison a good deal of thought. It may help us to a better knowledge of the situation if we have the privilege of reading it now.

"MANSE OF ROCHALLAN,
"Sunday Evening.

"DEAR MR. CREWE,

"I received your long, kind letter on Friday morning, and I am sorry my answer to your first one did not please you. But in Scotland it takes a while for us to get on intimate terms with people, and you must please give me a little time. Thank you very

much for all your kind inquiries about me. I am perfectly well, and it was nothing at all, no special effort, I mean, to have you as a visitor. Please don't think you gave any trouble. We have never had a more considerate guest.

"My sister Isabel is here from Birtley. She came here, as I went to them, without sending any word, and I met her quite by accident at the station at Glasgow on Friday afternoon, which I had gone to spend with Miss Edith Brooke, who is going to marry my brother Pat. She is here for the week-end too, so we have a full house. I am quite alone in it just now, they are all out somewhere. My sister, for some reason or another, does not seem to be very happy about what is coming. I have thought a great deal about what she has said to me, though I have forbidden her to speak of it to me again. And after thinking over it, and praying earnestly for guidance, I have decided to ask you quite frankly about it. It is the better way between two who are looking forward to spending the rest of their lives together. I wish to know first of all whether your children are pleased with the idea of my coming to Birtley Old Hall, for, if they are not, I cannot come. It would make me very miserable to enter the house unwelcome to those who had a better right in it than me, and I could not live happily or peaceably if any of them turned out of their father's house because of me. The next thing is not so easy to write about, and words are hard to find. My sister has heard in Birtley that there is someone else who has some claim upon you. I suppose she means some woman who has expected, perhaps, to marry you. I don't wish to ask any questions. I did not ask her a single one, nor permit her to enter into any particulars, so that I don't even know the lady's name. I told her it must be a matter between you and me. And all I wish to have from you is the assurance that I am taking no woman's place, nor disappointing anyone. I could not have any happiness

if I thought another woman suffered even remotely through me, so please assure me on this point, and you may rely upon me never alluding to it again. To ask you these straight questions is the only way possible to me. I have never shrank from anything in my life because it happened to be disagreeable, and I hope I never shall.

"You are asking me already to fix the day, and say there is nothing whatever to wait for. I should be willing to marry you sometime in November, towards the end of the month. But please come back again to Rochallan for a week-end soon, then we can talk it over. But, please, I should like to have an answer to these questions by letter before you come, then we can put them away for always. I am glad you had a good journey home and found everything right.

"Believe me,

"Yours sincerely,

"ALISON FLEMING."

It did not occur to Alison to try to make her letter more lover-like. She simply could not, but hoped that it would satisfy Mr. Crewe; and that he would grasp the racial difference between the English and the Scotch. Once she had been able to write a very passable love-letter, when the heart of youth easily found expression; but that belonged to the far-back days of romance, while this was the sober every-day business of maturer life. This letter, though posted at the pillar late on Sunday night, did not reach Birtley Old Hall until the first post on Tuesday morning.

It was laid with the rest of the bag by Mr. Crewe's plate, but he did not open it at the table. Only Anne sat at table with him, Celia having gone to Cambridge to spend a few days with her sister.

Anne had already seen and noted the letter in the characteristic woman's handwriting bearing the Rochallan postmark, but though she had her suspicions, they were not such as made her angry or bitter.

Her personal interest in her father's affairs was only such as concerned her own emancipation. She was sick to death of her life at the Old Hall, and ready to welcome any change which would bring relief.

She even observed the nervous haste with which he thrust the letter into his pocket. Nobody guessed how much Anne Crewe saw through those unbecoming spectacles, and her habit of silence fostered the impression that she was indifferent to most of what was going on around her.

Her father began to talk instantly with that sort of nervous haste which indicates some perturbation of spirit.

"You've got some letters too, Anne. Anything from Celia?" he asked, as he helped himself to bacon.

"Yes. She seems to be enjoying herself, and asks whether she can stop till Thursday, or perhaps even Friday. Madge has a party in her rooms on Wednesday, and would like Celia to stay for it."

"A party in her rooms!" he said grimly. "I thought she went to Newnham to study."

"Oh, yes; but I think they are allowed an occasional tea-party," said Anne a trifle drily. "I suppose she can stay, there is nothing to hurry her home, nothing at all."

"You are all keen on getting away from home, it strikes me," he said gloomily; "and you never seem in a hurry to come back."

"I don't go away much," said Anne quietly; "and of course it is a dull house for Celia."

"Look here, Anne, I suppose you know all about Fleming and Celia?"

"I know that they are in love with one another," answered Anne in surprise. "Has he said anything to you?"

"Yes, and I've given my consent. I told him so the other night; it was after Celia went away of course, but I daresay he has written to her. Does she say anything?"

He looked in the direction of the letter, asking plainly whether he might see it. After a moment's hesitation Anne passed it over.

"Dr. Fleming was at Cambridge last Saturday and Sunday. Of course what you tell me explains everything."

Mr. Crewe glanced over the closely written sheet, and Anne observed his features relax. He made no comment on it for a moment, then all he said was:

"That's what we bring up children for, they hop off with the first man that asks them. I've no objections to Fleming, he's an uncommonly decent chap. But Celia will know a difference living in a doctor's house, where there is nothing but work. She'll, maybe, think then of some of the advantages she's had here."

"I don't think any of us mind about the things money can buy," said Anne clearly.

"You say that, because you've never been where they couldn't be had," he answered. "I suppose you'd like nothing better than to go out on your own too?"

She did not answer, because she would not tell a lie about it, and Anne had learned in a hard school that silence was often the best when it was the only refuge from the thorns of life.

Mr. Crewe said no more, but finished his toast and bacon, and, after swallowing about the half of his coffee, rose and left the room. Anne was in no doubt but that he had gone to read his letter. She was not troubling herself at all about what it might contain. In her estimation nothing could happen to make the situation more intolerable. The dulness of her life, its absolute lack of aim or object, its appalling loneliness, had never seemed more insistent than now. It was her birthday, and she was twenty-five, but nobody had remembered it, except Stephen, who had painted a little water-colour sketch of Birtley from the Tower of Old Hall, and presented it to her, when she went in to bid him good-morning. Stephen had quite a talent

for art, but the lack of any proper tuition had caused him to make many mistakes. On more than one occasion Anne had pleaded with their father to let him have an art master, but with all the impatience of the utilitarian who despises art, he had declined. She was pondering on Celia's letter, a little envious of the freedom which Madge and she were enjoying, when the door opened and her father came back to his place. He did not sit down, however, but standing behind the chair he had vacated about fifteen minutes before, he looked at her steadily and rather oddly.

"It is right to tell you that I am contemplating a change in my life, Anne. I am going to marry Miss Fleming in November."

"Yes, father," answered Anne, in a perfectly even, matter-of-fact voice.

"I have never had a home in the sense in which most men understand it," he went on, clearing his throat a little, and with the air of a man who feels some slight explanation is due. "You have met Miss Fleming, and I think you liked her."

He paused there, and Anne murmured mechanically, "Yes, I—that is, we all, liked her very much."

"Perhaps then you will tell the others, and be kind enough to write to her. I—I think she expects it. She feels anxious about her welcome here, even though I have assured her there could not be any doubt about it."

"Oh no, none at all! We shall all be glad, I am sure!" murmured Anne as before. In fact, her own gladness was rising upon her like a flood, which she could hardly control.

"She will naturally, of course, be principally anxious about you. You may trust me to make proper provision for you. This will be your home as it has always been, but if for any reason, or for none," he added with a slight smile, "you should wish to join in the modern craze among women for a career, I shall allow you two hundred pounds a year, and not restrict you in any way."

"Oh, father, that is very generous," said Anne with difficulty.

"I will do my duty at any cost," he answered gravely. "Will you tell Stephen this morning, then?"

"I can tell him, of course, but do you not think you ought to tell him yourself?" she asked timidly. "Stephen will be more affected than any of us. He is dependent on the atmosphere of the house for his happiness."

Mr. Crewe slightly frowned, as if he did not like to be reminded of his son's dependence.

"I have not time this morning, for I have some rather urgent business in the town. You had better prepare him anyhow. I can see him in the evening, and you will also write to Celia and Madge. I shall be much obliged."

"Very well, father."

"But it is more important than anything that you write to Miss Fleming. Will you do so in time to catch the afternoon post?"

"Yes, of course I will," she said as she rose, her hands twitching a little nervously. "I hope you will be happy, father. Of course, this is very surprising, but I am sure it will be a very happy thing for us all."

"Thank you; you have been very good about it, Anne, and you might easily have been different. I shan't forget it in a hurry," he said, with an air of infinite relief. "Good-morning just now, we can talk over things when I come back. I'll try and get home earlier in the afternoon. There may be some things we should do to the house. I daresay you will be able to suggest them."

He went out quietly and closed the door. Anne dropped into her chair again, and to her own sheer surprise began to cry.

But there was not grief in these tears, nor any leaven of bitterness. They were tears of genuine relief and joy.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLEARING THE AIR.

It was Mr. Crewe's custom to walk from the Old Hall to the Ironworks every morning. It was the only exercise he took.

He started out from the house about an hour later than usual that morning, and took a circuitous route to the town. The park and woods surrounding the Old Hall were on the low ground, skirting the base of Lawford Hill, and there was a private footpath, which led through the fields almost to the confines of Barbridge. The most of the ground between Barbridge and Birtley belonged to Mr. Crewe, and the ground rents from the various properties on Lawford Hill made a very substantial addition to his income. The small property in Birtley itself, however, paid him even better, and though he was sometimes at loggerheads with the authorities about the scandalous state of some of the poorest houses, he managed to evade them cleverly.

But the housing of Birtley was spoken of with opprobrium for miles around, and on that score Guy Fleming had had more than one sharp passage with Mr. Crewe. He owned the whole of the houses in Parkins Street, at the bottom of which stood Rose Cottage, where the Odells lived.

Crossing the fields in a slanting direction from a particular angle of his park, Mr. Crewe came straight upon Rose Cottage, without being observed by anybody in the street. At that hour, half-past ten in

the morning, good housewives were busy in the rear premises, getting the family dinner, and it was too early for the other sort to be much in evidence. There were no nail-making shops in Parkins Street, which was a grade higher in the social scale than some of the streets lower down. Here abode mostly well-to-do artisans, or the smaller class of tradespeople, who had aimed at having a little house removed from their business premises.

Mrs. Odell was upstairs turning out one of the bedrooms, when she heard the click of the garden gate, and put her head out of the open window to see who it was. When she beheld Mr. Crewe her consternation was extreme. She simply fluttered away from the window, and began to tremble as her fingers nervously sought to unfasten the strings of her housewifely apron, which was much more becoming to her than the dingy black frock beneath. But Mrs. Odell had the attributes of a false gentility about her, and one of them was a rooted objection to be seen in her working garb. Her usually pale face wore a vivid flush when she opened the door, and her mouth could hardly frame an acknowledgment of Mr. Crewe's brusque good-morning.

"I can come inside, I suppose?" he said briefly. "I want to see you for a few minutes rather particularly, and I must ask you to excuse me making such an early call."

"Oh, don't mention it; very pleased, I am sure, to see Mr. Crewe at any time," she murmured, and her tone was pitifully abject and cringing. It filled him instantly with a kind of cold hostility, but he crushed it down, and laying his hat on the small lobby table, followed Mrs. Odell into the sitting-room, where she made haste to pull up the blind.

"That'll do, we don't want passers-by to be peering in. What I have to say doesn't require any particular flood of light," he said drily. "Won't you sit down? You give the impression of being always tired, Mrs. Odell."

"Oh, no," she said, with a little simpering laugh. "Of course, I have a good deal to do, and I am not so young as I once was. None of us are, Mr. Crewe."

"No, naturally we aren't, but doesn't your daughter help you or give you enough to pay for help. She has a good salary, and you have no house rent."

"No, of course. I know it is very, very good of you to let us it rent free, and you are very generous to Clara, of course."

"Not at all. I pay her what her services are worth, no more and no less, Mrs. Odell," he said coolly. "But I don't see that it should be necessary for you to slave like a charwoman. What does she do with her money?"

"Well, she spends a good deal on dress. Clara likes pretty things, and she goes down to Birmingham a good deal. You know how fond she is of the theatre and of concerts."

"I didn't know, but of course that'll swallow it up fast enough. Well, we'll get to business. How long is it since you saw Miss Fleming?"

Mrs. Odell began to flutter again, and her pale lips worked nervously.

"You mean Miss Isabel Fleming, the one who lives here?"

"Yes, of course, who else could I mean?" he asked clearly. "When did you see her?"

Mrs. Odell's fingers began to work with a fold of her gown.

"Let me see, it was—it was one day this week; why, of course, it was Wednesday morning. I think she said she had met you on the way up."

"Yes, perhaps she did," assented Mr. Crewe, satisfied that he was now on the right track. "Well, that was about twelve o'clock of the day. What did she want with you then?"

"Well, I think she came to tell me a bit of news, Mr. Crewe. I suppose I may mention it, as I suppose your own visit may have something to do with it. She told me that you were going to marry her sister."

"Yes, that is so; and you told your daughter, of course, the moment she came in, though I think Miss Fleming must have asked you not to."

"Well, she did say something about it," murmured Mrs. Odell uneasily, for she was more afraid of Mr. Crewe now than she had ever been in her life. "But does it matter much? I understood from Miss Isabel Fleming that soon everybody would know, and that you had no desire to keep it secret."

"Certainly not; but Miss Fleming was unfortunate in her choice of a confidante, and I think she hardly showed her usual perspicacity," said Mr. Crewe grimly, and there was a moment's rather strained silence.

Mrs. Odell, consumed with curiosity, waited for what Mr. Crewe would say next.

"I guessed from your daughter's manner during the last few days that she had heard some rumour, and I am going to speak to her on the subject to-day, but I thought I would come and see you first."

"Yes, Mr. Crewe, very kind indeed, I am sure it is."

"There is no kindness in it, Mrs. Odell. I am only going to refresh your memory regarding some small details. You remember the time when it became necessary for me to investigate certain acts of Frank Odell's, and what arose out of it?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Crewe. Pray don't recall that painful episode, which I have spent so many years trying to forget."

"It is necessary, Mrs. Odell. I think you and he both admitted at the time that I had showed him a good deal of consideration. I had it in my power to ruin him, to put him in a felon's place in the dock, and I did not; you admit that?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Crewe, freely. You showed the greatest kindness and forbearance both then and since."

"I reinstated him," continued Mr. Crewe mercilessly. "I never alluded to his defalcation, which I made

good, and, so far as I know, behaved precisely as if nothing had happened. Not a living soul in Birtley but old Waghorne, who held his tongue too, knew the jeopardy he was in."

"Oh yes, Mr. Crewe, you did all that, and, believe me, we have always been grateful. Frank was so to the day of his death, but of course he never was the same man after that. It killed him in the end."

"Ah well, that was his conscience, I suppose. He suffered no reproaches from me. Then I took your girl when she was a raw, useless creature, and I paid her well for her work then, and now."

"Yes, Mr. Crewe, you did; and I repeat it we have been very grateful."

"You may have been, she has never been. Times without number, especially during the last two years, I have been on the point of sacking her, not because her work was bad—she is, in point of fact, the best secretary any business man could ask for—but on other grounds. She has tried to make herself indispensable to me, she has; she has played up to me for all she was worth, and for what—in the hope that she would one day be mistress of Old Hall. Your daughter is a very pretty woman, Mrs. Odell, and a very clever one, but I could read her like an open book. Tell me, has she ever hinted to you that I might one day possibly marry her?"

Mrs. Odell pondered for one desperate moment, and then decided that she would best serve her own interests by being perfectly open and frank with Mr. Crewe, for he was really a terrible person, and would get at the truth in spite of her.

"Well, Mr. Crewe, she has. Last year—no, it was just in the spring of this year—when she had an offer from her Uncle Joe at Stockport to go into his office, she refused it, she said, for private reasons. She assured me it would pay her much better in the long run to remain here, and threw out hints about you and Old Hall, which I thought could have but one meaning,

though knowing you and the pride of your young ladies, sir, I had my doubts."

"You were wise in them, ma'am," said Mr. Crewe grimly. "What you tell me does not surprise me in the least. It coincides perfectly with what I have guessed all along. Well, now I am going to marry Miss Fleming in about six weeks' time, and Miss Clara's little castles in the air are exploded."

"Yes, of course they are," said Mrs. Odell faintly. "And it was presumptuous of her to see it perfectly, to have entertained such hopes for a moment. Now, I suppose, it is the end of everything, and you will pay her off? I shouldn't so much mind if her uncle had not filled up the post at Stockport, and good situations are difficult to find."

"I have no intention of paying her off, that would not suit me at all. It would give colour to my rumours that happen to be abroad. I intend to tell Miss Fleming precisely how I stand toward you and your daughter. I will tell her the whole story, and when she comes as mistress of Old Hall she will, I suppose, call on you, as my wife would on any person in whom she happened to be interested in the place. It is what I should desire; do you understand? There is nothing to hide, there never has been anything to hide, and no one knows that better than your daughter. Do you grasp the situation?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Crewe, of course."

"And I never have said a single word to your daughter which could not have been overheard by the whole of Birtley. I pass you my word of honour on that point. You have had a hard life, Mrs. Odell, and I have gone out of my way to come and have this out with you, this morning, expecting it will be the last of it."

Mrs. Odell was now in tears.

"And you'll still keep Clara on, and let me have the house after she has been so wicked——"

"Not wicked," he corrected, "but vain and foolish

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and feather-brained. I'd advise you to keep a tighter rein on her, my good woman, or you may have a handful yet."

"I have a handful now; I have no control over her at all. She's at Birmingham two nights a week at least, getting back by the midnight train, and I never know who she is with," said the frail mother tearfully. "I hope you'll give her a good talking to. It's a fright Clara needs, a good honest fright."

"Then someone else must give it to her. I wash my hands of the whole business. When my wife comes to Old Hall she may take her in hand. She's good at all sorts of missionary work. But my object this morning, Mrs. Odell, is to kill a lie. There have been a good many told about me in this place, principally by the people whose best friend I have been. This is the biggest one. I expect you to assist at its final extinction. Good-morning."

He went, brusquely, sternly, as he had come, leaving Mrs. Odell, in a state bordering on collapse. But very soon relief at the turn things had taken came to her rescue, and she regained her composure, while her thoughts sped anxiously to the counting-house at the Ironworks, where she had no doubt Mr. Crewe was giving Clara a talking to. As a matter of fact he said very little. When he left Mrs. Odell's house in Parkins Street he proceeded by way of the town to the Ironworks, keeping the middle of the road, as was his custom, and only moving from it when the tramcar threatened to impede his progress. A good many people looked at him interestedly, as he walked down the High Street; already, so rapidly rolls the gossip stone, the news of his possible marriage to the Scotch doctor's sister had got abroad. But Mr. Crewe walked with the air of a man whom common rumours could not touch. About midway down the slope of the High Street he turned off, and threading his way through a network of mean streets where domesticity and nail-making struggled rather un-

successfully side by side, he came, in about ten minutes' time, to the large area covered by the Birtley Iron-works. They stood in the centre of the Cinder Hills, to which they daily contributed their toll of waste.

A busy hive of industry, enclosed by high walls and dominated by belching chimneys, one felt that here was the kernel of Birtley life. Nearly a thousand men and boys were engaged within these walls, towards whom Mr. Crewe stood in the position of arbiter of destiny. He was now its sole head; and so consummate was his grasp of affairs that he had the whole machinery of that vast concern at his finger ends. There had been other partners, but when they retired, or died out in the natural course, Mr. Crewe sought no fresh sharer of his responsibility. He was happier in the last ten years than he had ever been in his business life, because he was not by nature a man who worked amiably with other men. He was too arbitrary, and apt to strike out on his own initiative without giving his partners' wishes and opinions the consideration to which they were entitled. It had been a relief to all when the strain of partnership had been cut, but to none more than to Mr. Crewe. But outsiders said it was a bad day for Birtley when old William Ansell, the founder of the firm, retired at seventy into Derbyshire, where he did not live long to enjoy his leisure. He had worked so long and continuously that he had lost the habit and desire for leisure. In fact, he knew so little what to do with it that it sapped his remaining strength and took away his life.

Since Mr. Crewe became head of the firm there had been many changes, some for the better and some for the worse.

But no one could deny that he had spent money freely on his works, to make them as nearly perfect as possible. He had a genius not only for organisation, but for machinery, and some of his own labour-saving patents were worth thousands to him. That he was a hard master goes without saying, but at least he

expected from no man a toll he had not in his working days been eager to give. His capacity for work, both mental and physical, was indeed a fearsome, almost an uncanny, thing, and advancing age did not seem to lessen it. Inside the big gates, which were kept strictly shut, order and symmetry reigned supreme.

The open space round which the various offices were ranged was like a barrack-yard. They had all been built within the last ten years, according to plans prepared by Mr. Crewe himself. All of red brick, with slate roofs, one-storey high, and wide windows of obscured glass, they represented the last word in comfort, utility, and convenience. There was no superfluous luxury in Mr. Crewe's private room. It was large certainly, and had windows of clear glass, so that he had an uninterrupted view of the yard and the other windows; but its internal arrangements and furnishings were spartan. Fitted oilcloth of oak-grain covered the floor, and small rugs before the fireplace and the desks made the only concession to comfort. The chairs were well upholstered, but not luxurious. They were made with straight backs for the use of men who sat down to talk business with all their faculties alert, and not to lounge over an expensive cigar.

A smaller room opened off, the door of which was of double oak, so that no sound could possibly penetrate from either side. In this room sat Mr. Crewe's confidential clerk and his typist, Clara Odell.

She was waiting the usual summons to Mr. Crewe's desk that morning, wondering what had happened to detain him. As she sat at her table, the very latest contrivance for the typist's convenience and speed, she certainly made an attractive figure; and Laurence Harding, who had been hopelessly in love with her during the whole of the two years he had occupied the same working-room with her, felt her presence most disturbing. For he was busy, and she was not, and she desired to waste his time.

"Boss late this morning, isn't he, Laurie?" she remarked casually. "Wonder what's up? Oh, do put down that wretched old ledger and be sociable. When are you going to take me to the 'Merry Widow' again? You've promised it ever so long. If you don't come up to the scratch soon, there are others that will."

Clara's big, violet eyes looked over the table saucily at him, and the pale-faced, anæmic-looking youth, who spent every week on this worthless and wholly ungrateful creature more than he could afford, winced at the threat.

"Give me half a chance, Clara. I had to stump up thirteen bob last week for the mater's rent. That takes it out of a chap, you know."

"More fool you!" she answered shortly. "Of course, if you prefer the old lady to me, well, I don't mind, why should I? There's better fish in the sea——"

"Oh, but I don't!" he stammered. "And I promise you faithfully I'll see about the seats to-night."

"Stalls, mind, no common or garden circle or pit for me. I don't mix with that crowd," she said warningly. "Say, I wonder what's happened to old Scrap-iron this morning; don't you see it's twenty minutes after eleven, and I ain't done a blessed thing. Wonder if he's had a fit or something."

"I hear him coming in now," said Harding, and from sheer habit dropped his eyes closely on his ledger, and set his pen busily scratching down the page. Clara listened intently, and with an odd look on her face. There could be no doubt of her beauty, which was of a rare and unusual kind. She had a very clear, fine complexion, absolutely without colour, and her features were delicate and refined. She had deep, rather appealing violet eyes and masses of reddish-brown hair which curled naturally and strayed about in bewitching little tendrils over her brow. She was not very tidy in her dress, and her waist-line, where the

belt joined the shirt and blouse, was not very neatly defined. One could imagine Clara Odell in certain domestic circumstances degenerate easily and quickly into a slattern and a slut. She sat tapping nervously with her pencil on the table, waiting for the summons to the adjoining room. It came in about five minutes' time, the usual quick, loud double-knock on the communicating door. She rose, wiped her mouth with her handkerchief, pinched her cheeks to try and bring a little colour into them, and grasping her writing tablets passed into the next room.

Harding heard the exchange of brief "good-mornings" between the opening and closing of the door. Mr. Crewe was already at his desk, which stood across the further window. He merely looked up as the girl entered, and remarked in his briefest and curtest tones,

"I shall not require you this morning, Miss Odell. I have just been to see your mother. I think she has something to say to you. You can go to her now, and come back to duty as usual at two o'clock."

The colour rose in the girl's cheeks, and, for a moment, something half-defiant, half-apprehensive flashed in her eyes.

When she did not immediately obey him, he looked up again, and glanced significantly at the door. That glance dominated her instantly, as it had a way of dominating all who came within reach of its baleful light. She made a hurried exit, and when Harding saw her face he had no doubt but that, as he elegantly expressed it, she had been "getting into the hat."

CHAPTER XV.

MR. AND MRS. CREWE.

MR. AND MRS. EDMUND CREWE at the Hotel Meurice in Paris, occupying a suite of rooms that had on more than one occasion been set aside for the use of royalty ! Alison, arriving off the London train at seven o'clock in the evening, and being ushered into the gilded sitting-room, looked round with a little shrinking. The mirrored walls, reflecting her face and figure at every turn, the soft carpets, the rich upholstery, and the subtle odour and blaze of hothouse flowers for the moment disquieted her. She was only a two-days' bride, and the memory of that last trying hour in the little old manse of Rochallan had not yet departed from her memory.

"Why do you look like that, Alison?" Crewe asked good-naturedly. "Don't you like the rooms?"

"Oh yes, they are very grand, they must—they must cost a terrible lot of money," she said, with a little nervous laugh.

"My concern, isn't it, old woman?" he answered easily. "Well, I don't know how you feel, but I'm hungry. How soon can you be ready to go down?"

"For dinner, you mean, to the restaurant? Shall I have to dress?"

"Why yes, of course, the best you have, that pretty frock you had on on Wednesday."

"My wedding dress, do you mean?" asked Alison breathlessly.

"Yes."

"I'll put it on if you like, but I wish we needn't go down. I'd much rather dine up here. Couldn't we?"

"We could, of course; but you want to see a bit of life, my dear. That's what people come to Paris for. Go and get ready. You ought to get a French maid here. I don't suppose a lady has occupied these rooms before without a maid of some sort."

"I shouldn't know what to do with her," answered Alison with perfect truth, and opening the communicating door looked into a large dressing-room which seemed to lead to other rooms beyond.

"Oh, Edmund, you have been frightfully extravagant!" she said, as she disappeared to her unpacking. The other rooms were equally magnificent, and for a space Alison felt oppressed by the drastic change that had come over her whole life. If it could have been accomplished more gradually it would have pleased her better. But having taken the fateful step she was far too courageous to be daunted on the threshold of her new life. Above all she realised that it was imperative she should not disappoint the man who had given her so much. His generosity throughout had been an astonishing thing. When she had poo-pooed the idea of settlements, he had taken great pains to explain to her that it was only common justice that her position as wife to a man with four children should be rendered absolutely unassailable. She had found it difficult, however, to grasp the fact that if she were left a widow, she would be the recipient of a yearly income of fifteen hundred pounds, with freedom to live where she willed. Her brother Patrick had been speechless when Crewe explained the position to him, and had, in a private word with Alison, asked her whether she was aware of her astonishing and unassailable position. It was no doubt natural that Patrick Fleming should exaggerate the value of money, because never in all his life had he had enough. A large part of the thirty-six years of his existence had

been spent in vainly sighing for the things absolutely out of his reach; and to see Alison so calmly indifferent to all that had come to her, filled him with an astonishment so vast that he could not give it any expression. He felt that it was impossible for any man ever to understand the nature of woman, and that he had better give up the attempt in despair.

The pretty frock of silver-grey satin, trimmed with Maltese lace, the gift of Mrs. Dunlop, suited her to perfection, but she looked demure, even to the verge of Quakerishness. Crewe looked at her critically when she came back to the sitting-room.

"You look beautiful, but it's too plain by half, my dear. To-morrow we'll go out and see about getting you a proper dinner frock."

"If you mean one like the women were wearing at the Carlton last night, I shouldn't put it on," she answered quietly; whereat he laughed, and touched the changing colour in her cheek with his forefinger.

Crewe looked prosperous and happy and even good-looking in his evening clothes, and together they made a presentable pair. Alison was glad that they found a table close to the wall in the restaurant, and that she had a screen behind her so that, almost unobserved, she could look around upon the gay scene. The hotel was full, for already the exodus to the south had begun. It was all so new to Alison, that she could hardly hide her surprise, sometimes her dismay. For here was a life such as she knew nothing of, or ever could know well. Her shyness, her delicious Puritan way, delighted Edmund Crewe. He had in the later years of his life travelled much, and was at home in most of the cities of the world. Away from his own environment there was nothing of the provincial about him, and Alison had so far found him a most delightful companion. He was so willing to answer all her questions, and to laugh her every misgiving away. And his personal consideration and kindness to her were beyond praise. She did not love the man, possibly

never would be able to give him the kind of love which alone makes marriage a sacrament, but at least she was grateful and over-anxious to fulfil her part of the bargain.

[] She was very comely to look at. The soft colour which excitement had brought to her cheeks was as sweet and becoming as any girl's, and her fine clear grey eyes shone.

"A glass of champagne you must have to-night, my dear. You are tired after the journey, and nothing bucks a woman up like champagne."

But she shook her head quite resolutely, and drew her glass away.

It was the third or fourth time she had showed herself quite resolute on the same subject. He looked a little chagrined.

"Teetotalers here are out of the running, my dear, and you mustn't make yourself odd. I hope you don't object to my having a drop."

"I would much rather you did not," she answered candidly. "Last night I thought you did not look well after it. Your face was so flushed, and the veins stood up just here," she added, touching her temples. "I'm sure that it can't be good for anybody."

He only laughed and drained his glass, which the waiter immediately refilled. Alison noted it, of course; she was too wise to say more just then, but neither that night nor any other night during their honeymoon trip was he able to persuade her to break her pledge.

In matters of conventional use and wont, she might be shy, and at times a little gauche; in matters of conscience she was wholly unafraid.

It was a curious experience for Edmund Crewe to live beside such a woman, and to note in her traits of character which seemed to single her out from all others. There is no doubt that in these early days Alison had great power over him; she was herself wholly unaware of the number of concessions he made

to her prejudices and likings. She accepted them rather as a matter of course.

What he delighted in most of all was her open-hearted candour, her fearless honesty, and her white-souled purity.

Tibbie had been wholly right when she said that evil could not come near Alison.

It was her first taste of continental life, and she was like a child in her delighted interest in everything.

"It's a pleasure to take you anywhere," he said one day. "You are so easily pleased."

"That is because I haven't seen much," she admitted frankly. "But what troubles me most of all is that you should be spending so much money on me when you have seen it all so often."

"It's what money is for," he assured her, and Alison said no more. It touched him to see her careful handling of the money he had given for her own uses, and to spend in gifts for her home people, and each evening when they returned to their hotel she would sit down with pencil and note-book and a little pucker in her level brows to make out her little bill of expenditure. Once he took it away and stuffed it into the glowing heart of the wood fire.

"Now I wonder at you," she said, but without a shadow of offence. "Don't you keep any books in your business?"

"That's different," he answered. "What are a few francs more or less, and at a time like this? Let yourself go, my dear; I should like nothing better than to see you take a fit of extravagance all of a sudden."

"God forbid!" she said, quite solemnly. "And twenty pounds for that brown frock, and fifteen for the green one! I am afraid when I think of it. It's sinful."

"Wait till you see yourself in them, and you won't say that," he affirmed; and certainly a frock made by a Parisian modiste and one from the hands of the

Rochallan dressmaker presented striking points of contrast.

They were kept in Paris a week waiting on the frocks, and then proceeded to Nice, where they hoped to spend another fortnight.

But there were letters for Mr. Crewe at the Hotel Splendide, and Alison saw him knit his brows as he read them. She did not go up to him and read over his shoulder as another kind of woman would have done, but her face was sympathetic, even a little anxious, as she watched his expression.

"You have something to worry you," she said quickly.

"Nothing much. It was brewing before I left, but they thought it would go on simmering for another month."

"Is it something at your works?"

"Yes, a little trouble with the men. Don't look so serious. When you've lived at Birtley for a while you'll learn that there's always trouble, more or less, with them. Their demands of late have become preposterous. I left my implicit instructions, but this looks as if we wouldn't get our holiday finished in peace."

He looked across at her with a kind anxiety which made her colour rise a little. She was still in the first flush of gratitude to him for all he had bestowed upon her, and she was glad of this small opening for its display.

"If it is anything that needs your personal supervision let us go back at once," she said clearly. "Don't consider me for a moment. I mean, why should you? I have had ten days, and Paris was big enough to fill my memory for months to come. Do let us go back, if you think it is in the least necessary."

"That's very good of you, Alison, but is it fair? I promised you a month of sunshine, and we've only just got to the sun. Paris was as cold as an ice-house."

"Oh, but I liked it, and enjoyed it. Do they think you should come home?"

"They don't say; they simply relate the facts."

"If you were here alone, you would go back?"

"Oh, most certainly."

"Then I won't unpack. Can we leave to-night?"

"No, no, there is no such tremendous hurry. It's only a threatening of a strike among a certain section of my men. They are seldom all affected at one time; but then, on the other hand, they are seldom all contented at the same time."

"What's it all about?" she asked interestedly.

"Aren't they satisfied with their wages?"

"Have you ever known a working-man who was?" he asked rather sarcastically.

"Yes, I think so. Of course, in Rochallan, we did not come in contact at all with labour problems. The nearest I suppose would be about Kilmarnock and Hurlford. I can just remember the year of the great strike in the West of Scotland. It was terrible. Nobody wants to see it repeated. There was a lock-out following on the strike; it lasted altogether seventeen weeks, and the suffering was terrible."

"They deserved it. We haven't had an out-and-out strike in Birtley for over twenty years, but we've had agitations galore. I'm in a position now to be independent of them. Within the last five years we have what is called the young labour party in Birtley. They give themselves a high-sounding title and corresponding airs. I expect we shall have a tussle with them sooner or later."

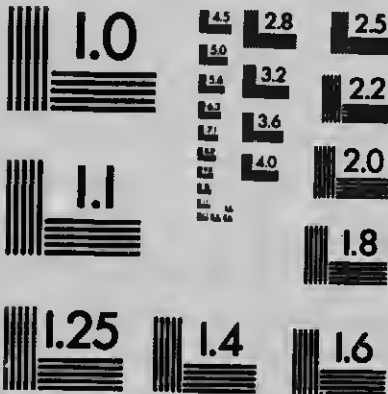
Alison sat silent a moment, for the expression on her husband's face was such as she had not seen before. It had become hard, harsh, even repellent; his large features seemed to be accentuated and his brows to frown cruelly. This was the man that Birtley feared and disliked, the man Tibbie had tried to warn her against. But as yet she was not afraid.

"If you don't really mind, then, I'll go down and



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wire to Waghorne that we shall be back on Monday night. I'll make it up to you, my dear," he added, for the placid sweet expression on her face touched him.

"Why should you?" she asked lightly. "It would be a very poor wife that would not be ready at a moment's notice to rise and run if it were necessary in her husband's interests. That she should is no more than her duty."

It was an admirable sentiment, but it caused Mr. Crewe to smile a little hardly.

"I don't like this word duty so often on your lips, Alison. I'd rather have a little less duty, and a little more of the other thing."

She jumped up a little restlessly. She was not used to love-making yet, and could pretend nothing. She was happiest when outside things so occupied their interest and attention that they could get away from themselves.

"I think I'll just go and see to my things. Will it be in the morning we are leaving?"

Often the quaintness of her Scotch idiom caused him to smile, but this time he hardly noticed it.

"If you are in such a hurry, we can, of course. Perhaps you're tired of it already?"

His tone was quick and jealous, and her colour rose again.

"Oh no, how could I be tired of it when I have never been here before? But I shall be pleased to be at home, of course, and if the letter is as you say, then I think we should go at once."

"Very well, I'll go down and wire Waghorne. Perhaps I'd better send one to Anne too, so that they can be ready for us."

Perhaps on the whole Alison felt that she was not sorry. She was looking forward with interest to her life at the Old Hall, and though Celia was the only member of the family who had come to Rochallan for the wedding, she had had kind letters from them

all, and her immediate misgivings were removed. She felt too, though she would not have dared to admit it, that it would be a relief not to have her husband round all the time. There had been moments in the last two weeks when the lack of personal freedom in her life had made her feel like a bird beating its wings vainly against prison bars.

This is an experience by no means so uncommon in honeymoon trips as might be supposed. Alison's honeymoon, perhaps, offered a little more scope than usual for the exercise of forbearance and courage.

They left Nice next morning, and travelled without a break to London, reaching Birtley at five o'clock in the afternoon of the third day. Alison had written a letter to Tibbie the night before they left the south of France, but though she looked round eagerly at Birtley Station, there was no familiar figure on the platform. The pair-horse brougham from Old Hall was outside the booking-office, and as Alison followed her husband out to it quickly, she was quite conscious of the curious and interested glances that followed her. She was not aware, however, that she was the most universally pitied woman in Birtley at the moment. A quick drive of ten minutes brought them to the familiar gates. Mr. Crewe, upon whom the burden of business care seemed to have descended, the air of Birtley wrapping him about like a cloak, did not speak at all to his wife until they were through the gates, and the lights of the house began to twinkle through the trees. It was bitterly cold, and a few flakes of snow were filtering through the black darkness of the December night, seeming to presage the first storm of a hard winter. As they swept round the curve, and beheld the cheerful glow of the lighted windows in front, Alison made a little movement that was like a shiver. Instantly Crewe bent towards her with evident anxiety.

"You are not nervous of anything, Alison?" he said quickly. "They'll be all right, quite all right—

and if they're not——" he added, with a harsh note in his voice. Her hand immediately touched his in protest.

"I was not thinking of them," she answered, and her voice was a little full and unsteady.

"Well, what were you thinking?"

"I was praying," she answered low, "Praying that God would help me to do my duty, and that I might be a blessing and not a curse to this house."

The words so movingly spoken, touched him, but he had no opportunity of replying to them, because at that moment they dashed up to the door, and moving figures came forward from the hall to meet them. Anne, anxious to do everything in her power to welcome the new wife, had followed the usual precedent. She had brought up all the servants, who stood in two decorous rows in the background, while she and Celia and Tibbie Fleming stood in front with Stephen hanging back a little, as if not sure of his own place in the pageant. It was upon his face that Alison's eyes fell first. She gave Tibbie a quick kiss, looked deep into Anne's eyes while a smile passed between them, and then she passed on to Stephen with all her heart in her eyes.

"Dear boy!" she whispered tenderly. "I hope you are glad to see me. I have thought about you so much. We are going to be friends, I hope."

"I hope so, I think so," answered the lad, and his eyes undoubtedly shone.

Alison saw them dull again however, as his father approached. She was fully conscious of and resented his shrinking. There and then she took her vow that her first work in the house should be to destroy the barrier and establish a proper understanding between Edmund Crewe and his son. She spoke a kind word to the servants, and was so completely mistress of herself, showing such quiet dignity, combined with a sweet friendliness, that Tibbie felt a glow of pride at her heart.

"Papa," said Anne, just as the strain was beginning to be felt, "Mr. Waghorne is waiting in the library to see you. He thought of going to the station, but came here instead. He was sorry to intrude to-night, he said, but it was something important."

Crewe immediately passed from the throng and walked towards the library door.

"Will you take—take Mrs. Crewe to her rooms, Tibbie," asked Anne, her face reddening as she hesitated on the choice of a name.

"Call me Alison, please," said Alison swiftly. "And don't any of you feel as if I were a stranger or going to meddle with anything. I'm not. I'm not, I do assure you."

"Come, dear, you are feeling the strain," said Tibbie, peremptorily laying her hand on her arm. She saw that she was trembling now and that her eyes had dusky shadows in them.

"You did it well, old lady," she said, as she closed the door of the spacious bedroom behind them. "But there is no use prolonging the agony or saying too much to begin with. None of them are going to be afraid of you, or going to be horrid, or anything. In fact, they are all genuinely, solidly glad, and their gladness will be a buttress behind you, Ailie, eh?"

"Yes, I know but—but——"

Alison's mouth was trembling now, and Tibbie put her two strong, firm hands on her shoulders and tried to quiet her.

"Steady old girl, very steady. It's all right, quite all right, isn't it? You're not sorry, I hope? For God's sake, don't say you are sorry."

"No, no, not sorry at all," said Alison, gulping something down. "Where's Guy? It is disappointing not to see him."

"Engaged with the usual thing, but he expected to get it over by half-past five, and he's coming up to dinner. Anne has thought of everything that was

going to make you feel happier and more at home. She has behaved splendidly."

"I am sure she has, everybody has," admitted Alison feverishly.

"Even Mr. Crewe?" demanded Tibbie, and could have bitten her tongue out for its crass impertinence.

"Even Mr. Crewe," answered Alison, the words quieting her as nothing else could have done. "What is the latest news from Pat and Edith?"

Then Tibbie knew that Alison meant to keep close the door of her married life; and that with what happened behind it, neither she nor another would intermeddle.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DAY'S WORK.

"I HAVE come to see how you spend your mornings, my dear," said Alison brightly, as she opened the door of Stephen's sitting-room in the Tower.

He was sitting at the table with drawing materials in front of him, but he had made no progress, and his face wore a wistful look.

It brightened, however, as he slipped from his chair, and stood up as straightly as he could to receive his father's wife.

"Oh, I'm not doing anything," he answered, as he pushed his slender white fingers through his hair, with a little boyish gesture which reminded Alison of her own brothers in the far-back days, when she had been wont to question them, without receiving satisfactory answers.

"I only just potter. Horrid day, isn't it? So cold. Won't you come and sit down by the fire?"

"Presently," answered Alison, glancing round the room with interest. It was only the second time she had been in it, and she had remembrance of the look that had then been on the lad's face when she had spoken a word of sympathy to him.

"You feel the cold then very much?" she asked.

"Yes, I hate it. I should like to go away and live where there never is any cold. Don't you think Birtley a horrible place? I can't think how you came to live at it when you needn't."

He blushed then, conscious that he had said something which might be misunderstood.

"It is very nice up here, though," she answered cheerily. "And, after all, it is people who make us happy more than places, don't you think?"

"I haven't thought about it. It is better not to think at all. I wish you'd sit down."

"Presently," she repeated. "I'm only taking a look at your treasures. So it is drawing and books you care about chiefly?"

"Drawing chiefly," he admitted. "But there isn't anything to show you. You see, I haven't had any lessons worth speaking of, and everything is so full of mistakes that I hate looking at it, after it is done. Oh yes, there are heaps of sketch books. Would you really like to see them?"

"I would, honestly, though I must tell you I don't know anything about art. Of course most people know what they like to look at. Probably I shall admire the wrong things. I believe I used to do that quite often at our local exhibitions in Seadoon, and even at Glasgow. I did not like, for instance, what they called the Glasgow school, though its cleverness was prodigious."

Stephen looked at her interestedly, and a smile began to play about his mouth. She looked so sweet and kind, so capable and so motherly, that she crept into his heart. He felt that things were going to be better for him, and that his world would be less dreary since his father's wife had come into it. All his ideas were crude, almost like a child's, though he was approaching manhood. His thoughts, however, had been warped, and his ideas about the injustice of life were quite definite, and even abnormal. But Alison had not heard them yet.

"I'm sure you would like what was beautiful," he said, impulsively. "You are so beautiful yourself."

Alison's colour sprang at this personal remark, and she lifted a warning forefinger.

"My boy, you are too young to be paying compliments of that kind. It isn't necessary with me, I hope."

"Oh, but I didn't mean it like that. It is perfectly true. I said so to Anne after you were here at dinner that night. I love looking at you."

"Get out your sketch book, Stephen, and let me see it," she said quickly.

He moved with his halting step across the floor to a large cupboard that was fitted into a recess beside the fireplace. Alison, watching him keenly with the vivid interest of one who would know the worst so that she might help and heal, saw that one leg seemed to be shorter than the other, and that it pained him a little to walk. At least she supposed it must, since he knit his brows with every step. She remembered hearing that he walked very little, and preferred to be left as much as possible to his own rooms.

She hastened to his side, and with her strong right arm reached to the upper shelf for a big portfolio of sketches, which were immediately spread upon the table, where they sat down side by side. Her genuine and happy interest in his work unloosed after a time the boy's unwilling tongue, and he began to talk animatedly about what he had done, and what he would like to do. Suddenly over his face there crept a shadow like a pall.

"But what does it all amount to, after all? It isn't work, it isn't even play. What I'd like, and what I never shall have, is strength to go out into the world like other men and earn my bread."

"But that will never be necessary, dear," said Alison softly. "What we must do is to make sure that this work you love is made worth while."

He shook his head.

"If you mean getting proper lessons, that'll never happen. Anne has spoken to father about it, and he despises the whole idea of it, just as he despises me, but not more——" he added with a furtive vindictive-

ness which gave Alison quite a shock, "not more than I despise him."

"Hush, Stephen, you are talking of your father."

"Oh, I know that. I wish I weren't, but you see he hates me, and I hate him. I ought not to be here. If I could have got about like other chaps I shouldn't be here, you may bet your boots on that. I'd put the breadth of the sea between him and me."

His whole face had changed, the sweetness and wistfulness had gone out of it, and a kind of cold vindictiveness terrible to look at had come in their place. It fascinated Alison, and afterwards she felt inclined to blame herself for having permitted him to continue in such a strain. Her justification was that of the surgeon who has to probe deep before he can work any real miracle of healing.

"Dear," she said softly, and her firm, strong hand closed for a moment over his thin, restless one. "Why do you feel like that? I am sure your father has never been actively unkind to you. Perhaps if you had not closed your heart against him, it would have been better for you both."

"That's what you think, what outsiders would think, I suppose; but I can't get away from the fact that it was through him I am like this."

"Oh, Stephen, how can you say that?" she asked quickly and in a voice of inexpressible concern.

"But it's true. You can ask old Primmie, my nurse. You haven't seen her yet, have you? He—he was unkind to my mother before I was born, and that's why I'm like this. She got a fright or something. It's quite true, so you needn't look so scared. I've got used to the idea, everybody knows about it, only I'll never forgive him."

"Stephen," she cried a little sharply, "Does your father know you feel like this. That you believe this about him?"

"I don't know; we don't talk about it, why should we? We never see one another except by accident."

Often I don't see him for a month, then I'm glad. Say, what did you marry him for? Anne and the rest of us keep on asking ourselves and one another. I beg your pardon, I oughtn't to have asked that. But who began the conversation? I didn't. Shall we go on with the drawings? But perhaps you don't care to see any more of them now."

"I want to talk about them anyhow. Would you be happier, do you think, if you could have proper lessons?"

"Oh yes, I would like that, but it isn't possible, so why say any more about it? There's nobody fit to teach in Birtley, and the Master at the Art School in Barbridge isn't up to much either. Anne says when she goes to London to live, she'll take me up for a long visit and let me see all the galleries properly. I'm looking forward to that."

Alison heard for the first time of Anne's intention, but did not suffer it to vex her soul. She was not in the least afraid of Anne, nor of having any misunderstanding with her. They would have a talk later, perhaps even that very day, but the problem of Stephen was the most pressing one. To her it seemed a terrible thing that father and son should be living under one roof feeling as they did to one another. To redress such a state of things, to try and improve the relations between them, must undoubtedly be her first work. But how? The path seemed to bristle with difficulties.

"Well, I hope you feel that I'm going to be a friend to you, don't you?" she asked, patting the restless hand lying on the table-cover.

"Oh yes, I'm glad you've come, we all are, jolly glad; and Anne is more glad than any of us, because it means that she'll get away. She's been jolly sick of living here as long as I can remember."

They talked a little more about the pictures, and Alison looked round among his books, and an hour slipped away before she knew where she was. When she left the Tower she walked downstairs slowly,

her face wearing an expression of deep thoughtfulness. This was her third day in the house, and she was beginning to get a grip of things. Already she had taken up the reins of government, so far as the servants were concerned, and had been astonished herself at the lightness and ease of the task. She had impressed them favourably likewise, and nipped a good deal of speculative grumbling in the bud. Miss Crewe had been in some directions an exacting mistress, in others too slack and indifferent. The new lady gave evidence at once of her thorough mastery of household affairs, and there are none quicker to weigh a woman's housewifely qualities in the balance than the servants in her employ. Their respect for capability is supreme.

Alison had hardly yet got accustomed to the spaciousness of her new home, sometimes its quietness and loneliness oppressed her.

It seemed more difficult, she thought, to cherish a warm family life where rooms were so scattered, and where each had his and her own. There did not seem to be in the whole house a place where they could meet for a common purpose. She hoped to alter it, but had no desire nor intention to make changes in a hurry. Meanwhile she was getting to know the members of her new family, one by one. In the hall she found Anne sitting by the fireplace, deep in the newspapers. As she approached, she observed that she was studying the advertisement columns of the *Morning Post*.

Anne looked round at her approach, and smiled readily enough. Her attitude towards her father's new wife was in its way a perfect as well as a unique thing. It was all friendliness, a little leavened with gratitude, because she had taken upon herself the burden which Anne had long found irksome.

"I've been in Stephen's room. I'm troubled about him, Anne. He isn't very happy," said Alison soberly.

"Poor boy, he isn't. I've promised him that when

I get settled in London I'll take him on a long visit, if you and father will consent."

"Then you are quite resolved to go away?"

"Oh yes. It's what I've been waiting for," answered Anne promptly. "Papa doesn't mind. He said so when he told me he was going to be married. Did he tell you he had offered to make me a very handsome allowance?"

Alison nodded.

"He did, and I was very much pleased. But what I don't understand is what you are going to do in London. It will be very aimless living in apartments. Have you an idea what use you will make of your freedom?"

Anne flushed a little.

"Your sister and I have been talking it over. She is going to London after Doctor Fleming and Celia marry. That is to be in the spring. We thought that about Easter we might take a little flat together."

Alison looked just a trifle hurt, because she heard of Tibbie's plan for the first time.

"It sounds all right, but I wish I knew what either of you intend to do with your time."

"Oh, Tibbie will be busy enough with her writing."

"What writing?"

Then Anne flushed again.

"Hasn't she told you? I suppose she feels as I do about things. One's own people are always the last to hear things, or to know what one is doing. If she hasn't told you, I mustn't say anything."

"I suppose not," said Alison good-naturedly, overcoming her momentary chagrin. "I do want most of all to make Stephen happier."

She hesitated a moment, then decided to speak out quite frankly to the eldest daughter of the house. After all, she had been standing all these years in the position of mother to the household, and things could not have been hidden from her.

"Anne, don't you think it's an awful thing that

Stephen should speak as he does about his father? Some wicked person has put it into his head that he is like that, I mean that his bodily infirmity was caused by his father."

Anne said nothing, but dropped her eyes on her newspaper.

"Such wicked gossip should have been stopped long ago. If I had been in the house the person who started it would have been sent away."

Still Anne said nothing.

"Anne!" said Alison desperately. "Don't you think anything can be done to improve matters?"

"Between papa and Stephen, do you mean? No, I don't. I believe that it is perfectly true what you have been saying. My mother got some kind of a shock before Stephen was born. Everybody knew about it. Yes, perhaps it was wrong for them to tell Stephen, but tongues are always busy with unpleasant stories. We can't help it now. Of course that is why papa doesn't care to see very much of Stephen. He reminds him of what happened. I'm sorry," she added, seeing Alison's strained face, "I'm sorry Stephen has been talking like that. You must have got rather deep with him, for usually he is very reticent. Of course everybody knows that we are not a very pleasant family. I think you had tremendous courage to come into it. I said so to your sister, and we ought to be most frightfully grateful to you. Personally I am, and papa is ever so much nicer to us since he has come home.

Anne meant well, but somehow every word carried its sting to the heart of the woman who listened. She had married Edmund Crewe in the best of faith, and in high confidence that he was a man whom few understood, and whom his own family had considered very little. But in the face of stern facts such as these, what could she say? Life seemed suddenly to become a very involved and complicated thing, bristling with unknown difficulties and dangers. But she was not daunted.

"I'll do my best to make you all happier," she murmured, as she left Anne and retired to her own room to dress for a walk. She felt that she must see Tibbie and get away for a brief moment from the great house with its overhanging clouds.

It did not occur to her to ring for a carriage; to much of the pomp of her new estate she had not yet become accustomed. Besides, all her life she had been an outdoor woman as well as a domestic one, never shrinking from a long walk even in the rain and storm if any good or useful purpose was to be served by it. Anne had gone up to Stephen when she came downstairs ready dressed for her walk, and the Tower windows were too high for its occupants to observe people leaving the house, though they could have seen her on the avenue, and watched her pass through the lodge gates.

The sleety rain had ceased, and the heavy clouds were now scudding across the sky with astonishing rapidity, as if they were being driven by an unseen force. They hung so low that some of them almost seemed to touch the swaying tops of the trees. The well-kept avenue was dry enough under foot, but the roads were black and muddy. The path, close to the ragged hedgerow on one side, and to the boundary wall of the Old Hall property on the other, had been laid with fresh refuse from the Cinder Hills. Of two evils Alison preferred the less, and walked in the middle of the road. The change from dignity and beauty within the Old Hall boundaries to the squalid outskirts of the little town was extraordinary. All at once Alison seemed to exchange luxury for sordidness. She beheld Birtley perhaps at its worst that dreary December morning, and her thoughts were a little tinged with greyness. She was sufficiently familiar with the outskirts of the town to keep in the right direction, and arrived at the bottom of Lawford Hill without accident. Then the tram-lines kept her straight.

She looked about the High Street with a new interest, almost a proprietary interest, and every person she met seemed to make a personal appeal. She was one of them now; in her husband's hands the destinies of many of them lay, just as hers did. She passed down the middle of the street wholly unrecognised, and came just as twelve o'clock was ringing to the corner house with the big brass plate and the red lamp above the gate. The little maid standing on the steps cleaning the outside of the dining-room window got down with such haste to greet her, that she upset her pail of water.

"Good-morning, Eliza, more hurry less speed," said Alison pleasantly. "Is Miss Fleming in the house?"

"No, miss, at least ma'am, she ain't. She's gone to Barbridge with the Doctor to lunch with the other Doctor, and Miss Fleming said she might not be home till tea-time."

"Oh," said Alison, and blank disappointment was in her voice as she turned away. Before she left the gate she turned back to put a question to the little maid.

"Can you direct me to the Ironworks, to Mr. Crewe's works, you know?"

"Oh yes, ma'am," answered Eliza breathlessly, as she hastened out to the gate. "Jes keep on along thet lane, see, to wheer the chimleys is, and you'll come to the big gates. You carn't miss 'em. There's a lot of idle men outside them this morning, I hear. At least, that's wot Simminses, the butcher, told me about a hour ago."

Alison thanked her, and passed on then, feeling a little uncertain. Her husband would be driving back in the dogcart for lunch at one o'clock, and it occurred to her that she might drive with him.

But would he like it? As to that she was not sure. She did not hesitate long, however; something seemed to urge her on, and within a few minutes she came under the shadow of the high-encompassing wall which

shuts in the works from the sight of the townsfolk. As she approached the gates Eliza's statement regarding the idle men was verified. There was quite a considerable number standing about in the roadway, broken up into little groups of twos and threes talking earnestly. Alison imagined their faces gloomy and threatening, as she passed by them, and again wondered whether she were wise in seeking to intrude within these frowning walls. But she had never in her whole life stood in personal awe of any human being, and reflecting that if her husband did not like her calling for him at the works he had only to tell her so, and she would not repeat it, she walked through the gates. But the porter challenged her presently, and when she gave her name, he was covered with confusion.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, you'll find the master at the office. Straight across, then turn to the right, jes under the clock."

Alison thanked him with a pleasant smile, and took a short cut across the smoothly shaven lawn in the centre of the square, admiring as she went the symmetry and orderliness of the buildings, which proved that they had been planned by a master brain.

As she approached the clock, Mr. Crewe with another man came out by the middle door under it, and at sight of his wife the uttermost astonishment sprang to his face. He even frowned, but that melted under Alison's friendly smile.

"I must explain," she said almost gaily. "I came down to see my sister, and when I found she had gone to Barbridge for the day I thought I might venture to come and drive back with you. The roads are rather muddy this morning."

"Surely, my dear, surely," he answered hastily. "Waghorne, this is my wife. You have heard me speak of Mr. Waghorne, Alison. He's my right-hand man. Just go in, will you, and I'll come to you presently. Here, Jenkins, show Mrs. Crewe into my room."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FIGHTING FORCES.

ALISON followed the young clerk into her husband's private room with a sense of quickened interest. She was quite unaware what a big step she had taken; never once in the whole course of her married life had her predecessor presumed, so far. It is doubtful whether the first Mrs. Crewe's interest in her husband's affairs ever wandered outside the four walls of the home where she had found so little happiness. When Alison entered the room, and the youth closed the door behind her, she saw that she was not alone in it. At the end of the broad desk in the window sat a girl bending over a big writing pad, over which her fingers seemed to be flying. She looked up at the opening of the door, and continued to stare at the unusual apparition of a lady in Mr. Crewe's private room. The next moment Clara Odell realised that she was in the presence of her employer's new wife. She did not know what was expected of her, but still staring hard, out of the keenness of her interest, she pushed back her chair and rose.

"Mr. Crewe has just gone out," she said, and Alison thought her voice had a sullen note in it.

"I have just seen him. I am Mrs. Crewe," answered Alison, pleasantly enough, yet with a touch of dignity which was not lost upon Clara Odell.

She imagined the words a dismissal, and began to gather up her things, but Mrs. Crewe reassured her.

"Pray don't let me interrupt your work," she said.

"I shall sit down here and wait. I suppose you are Mr. Crewe's private secretary."

"Yes," answered Clara dully, and not with any particular respect, "I am."

She sat down and affected to be busy with her work, but in reality she was waiting, with the curiosity of the underbred, to see what would happen when Mr. Crewe returned. She was insatiably curious, she would have liked to sit back in her chair and take stock of Mrs. Crewe, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot. The thing she particularly noticed was the very handsome sealskin coat which had been one of Mr. Crewe's wedding gifts to his wife. Her personal opinion of the new wife, however, was that she was elderly and stodgy. Alison, on her part, decided that the typist was a most unattractive person, with no manners to speak of. Presently the door opened to admit Mr. Crewe, and one glance from him was sufficient to send Miss Odell about her business. The moment she disappeared through the communicating door to impart the exciting item of news to the ever-receptive Harding, Mr. Crewe's face relaxed again.

"This is an unexpected honour," he said quite lightly. "Do you know that this is the first time any of my women-folk have been inside these gates?"

"But I hope you are not angry."

"Angry! why should I be? It is a pleasure to see you. But I am very much engaged this morning, and it is doubtful if I can get home to lunch. I shall have to be content with a chop here. The men have gone out."

"On strike, do you mean?" asked Alison excitedly.

"How many of them, and why?"

"About three hundred. Unfortunately they paralyse the rest of the work, and we have some heavy contracts in hand. I must stop here and put every agency in operation to fill their places."

"Oh, then their demands are not what you can meet?"

"No, they're not; I don't intend to meet them. I've had just about as much as I can stand. Can I offer you anything? We have a cupboard here with biscuits and what not in it. Will you take something?"

He unlocked the cupboard door as he spoke, and Alison saw the shelves well filled with biscuit tins, and several glasses as well as bottles and two decanters. When she said she did not want anything, he poured out half a glass of whiskey, filled it up with soda water, and drank it off.

"I've had a worrying morning, my dear; that makes me feel better. Now what can I do for you? I'll send Williams to drive you up presently. Would you like to see over the place first?"

"Not to-day, thank you," she answered, and her voice was a little low.

"Why didn't Anne or Celia come down with you?" he asked. "Did you leave them at home?"

"Yes, I came down to see Tibbie, don't you remember? and she was not at home."

"I see."

He leaned against the mantle-piece and took out his cigar-case with the air of a man who would take a few minutes' leisure and enjoy them.

"Edmund," said Alison suddenly, "I've had a talk with Stephen this morning."

"You have, eh?" he answered, and his face seemed suddenly to harden, and his whole personality to become bleak and unapproachable.

"May I speak to you about him?"

"Oh, sure. What's he been saying, grumbling as usual? Stephen's a cumberer of the ground, and it behoves him to keep quiet."

"But, Edmund, he needn't be. He has gifts. They have been neglected. Don't you think it would pay to teach Stephen some useful work?"

"He isn't fit for it, and besides, you needn't fear that he's going to be left a beggar when I peg out."

I've seen to that, Alison. He will have enough to live upon, and I've tied it up tight so that he can't get at the capital. You see you never can be sure of people like that. They are hardly normal. The probability is that, left to himself, he'd scatter it to the four winds of heaven."

"But that isn't the point, Edmund," said Alison persistently. "It is that he is unhappy, actively unhappy. And he will soon be a man, and things will become more difficult."

"He has been grumbling to you then," said Mr. Crewe, and never had his voice sounded so harsh, nor his features seem to stand out in such startling outline. His mouth especially hardened like the nether mill-stone.

"Oh no, not at all, don't run away with that idea. I asked him a few questions, that's all, and it is quite easy to see how unhappy he is. It is written all over his face. Let us try to do something to make him happier. It would be better for all of us."

"Well, what would you propose?" he asked, but the tone was quite discouraging.

Alison hesitated a moment, for the scheme she had in her mind was a bold one.

"I think a complete change would do him good. Anne is determined to leave Birtley. Why not send them abroad together, to Italy for the winter, and Stephen could then find his level about his art. It seems to be the only thing he cares about. It is just possible that he might make a success of it, and just think how much happier that would be for him."

Crewe looked at his wife from under his knit brows with a curious insistence. Naturally a suspicious man, he wondered just how much or how little this move on her part might mean. Did she wish to get them all out as quickly and as decently as possible, to have the whole house to herself? The idea rather amused him.

"Why this move, Alison? Are you sick of them all already?"

The wounded colour instantly sprang to her face.

"Oh no," she answered quietly, "I only wanted to help, that's all. Perhaps I'd better go now."

He smiled across at her with the large superior smile of the man who takes in the whole situation at a glance.

"Don't get a mission to set the whole world right, my dear. Confine your attentions to me, and you'll get on all the better."

Alison might have replied that she was confining her attentions strictly to him, since he was the sole arbiter of the destinies she wished to improve. But thus repulsed, she had no more to say.

"I met your brother in the town this morning. They've gone over to Barbridge to settle up details with old Houghton. He and his sister have practically decided to go and live at Matlock; in fact, they've bought a house there, and they're moving from Barbridge immediately after Christmas."

Alison looked interested but felt that she did not like to hear these items, relating intimately to her own family, from her husband.

"The Doctor asks whether I would have any objections to a marriage in January. What do you say?"

"I have no objections, of course. It is you who give Celia," she answered, and in spite of herself a smile crept about her mouth. She loved Celia. Her simple, girlish ways, her total lack of guile or prejudice, were the brightest things at the Old Hall. She almost grudged her to Guy, though she knew how happy they would be together.

"And your other brother is to marry before Christmas, so the Flemings have all broken out at once," he said, with a slow, sardonic smile. "Why doesn't your sister follow suit? She's rather thick with that parson chap at the Congregational Chapel, and everybody knows he's sweet on her. She should just take

him and make a clean sweep of the board, then we'd know where we are."

Alison did not respond to his somewhat heavy humour, she did not feel in the mood.

"I don't think Tibbie will ever marry. Well, I'd better be going now. Don't trouble about the machine, I'd rather walk."

"What machine?" asked Crewe, at a loss for a moment to know what her Scotch idiom meant.

"I don't want to drive. It is only a mile, anyway, and I'll get back in good time for lunch. Will you be home at tea-time?"

"I hardly know; I'll have to be glued to this spot telephoning and what not for the best part of the day. Waghorne has gone down to Birmingham. We'll fill up somehow before the end of the week, I hope. These chaps want to be taught a lesson."

Again the harsh note sounded in his voice, and Alison turned to the door a little discouraged. She did not know sufficient about business to make any comment at all upon the situation, but the words "strike" and "lock-out" were full of terrors for her.

"I wish it had not happened, and I hope it won't last long."

"It'll last just as long as I choose. The ring-leaders I won't have back at any price," he answered sourly. "I think I made that pretty clear to them this morning."

Alison felt desperately uncomfortable, and also a little helpless. Her life hitherto had been wholly uneventful; now she came into contact with forces of whose existence she had heard, but had never realised. They were the elemental fighting forces that bring out all that is worst in men. She had never seen a more uninviting-looking expression on any face than that which now dominated her husband's. She was too sensible to say more at the moment. She felt she had not the right, being entirely ignorant of

the subject in hand. But she loved peace, and had hoped to establish it as a permanent guest in her new home. Lo, on the very threshold, all the fighting forces seemed to congregate; and she was powerless to deal with them. This conviction gave an expression of sadness to her face, which Mr. Crewe noticed, but did not remark upon. He walked with her to the gate, and when he saw the knots of men hanging about the expression of displeasure deepened on his face. They met it defiantly, however; for the time being they were beyond his jurisdiction.

Alison made her way rather hurriedly and rather shrinkingly past them, and was glad to turn from the lane into the more cheerful High Street.

She was wondering about the short cut to the Park, when she saw in the near distance the tall, spare figure of the Rev. Charles Ambrose, the minister of the Congregational Church. She knew him quite well, having met him several times at the surgery house. Guy and Tibbie had not joined any Communion in Birtley. Guy had very little leisure on Sunday, and Tibbie alternated between the Parish Church, where the service was high and the music fine, and the Congregational Chapel, where Mr. Ambrose officiated. He was incomparably the best preacher in the town, and in his way a gifted, scholarly man. Many wondered that he should of his own free will remain in Birtley, when other fields of labour more congenial had been offered to him. He was a man about thirty-five, of tall, spare figure, with a rather serious face and melancholy dark eyes. When he saw Mrs. Crewe in the distance, he looked surprised, and then hastened towards her. The marriage had come as a genuine surprise to him, and he had not yet got over his speculation regarding it. The little he had seen of the elder Miss Fleming disposed of the suspicion that she could have married for position. But that she could care for Edmund Crewe seemed still more impossible. As a student of men and things the marriage interested Ambrose.

He was therefore anxious not to miss the opportunity of speaking to her.

"I offer you my congratulations, and another welcome to Birtley, Mrs. Crewe?" he said with the smile which brightened all his face and won him a place in every heart. "I heard only yesterday that you had come home."

"We arrived on Wednesday," answered Alison. "Thank you very much, Mr. Ambrose."

"I spent an hour at your brother's house last evening, and I hear from him definitely that we are to lose him. It will be a great loss to Birtley, Mrs. Crewe, how great we shall only know when it is accomplished."

"Oh, but he will have to come over a good deal, and four miles is nothing," said Alison lightly.

"Ah, but it is not the same as having him domiciled here. May I express the hope that you will be happy in Birtley?"

"Thank you, there is no reason why I should not be," answered Alison bravely.

There was a moment's silence, then she looked at him rather wistfully.

"Mr. Ambrose, you know the lives of the working-folk intimately, don't you? I wish you would explain this strike to me. Is it necessary—I mean, have the men any real grievance?"

Ambrose hesitated a moment, perfectly aware that a great opportunity was his, and anxious to use it to the very best advantage.

His face clouded as he answered.

"I have only just heard that it is an accomplished fact. Up till this morning I hoped it might even yet be averted."

She felt evasion in his answer, and waited in silence for him to say something more.

"There is a grievance of course, in some respects a just grievance. The men are out this morning on account of a member of their Union whom they imagine has been wrongly dismissed."

"Oh!" said Allison, with a little sharp breath, "I thought a strike was always a question of money."

"That is at the bottom of most of them. It is even indirectly at the bottom of this one."

"Who was dismissed, and why was he dismissed?"

"A man of the name of Amos Wrightson, who has been at the Ironworks for over forty years. His work failed to reach the required standard, I suppose; but he is a tremendous favourite among his comrades, and they have chosen to take his dismissal as a personal grievance. He refused to accept a smaller wage; that is the kernel of the matter."

Ambrose stated the facts of the case with a bald simplicity and of a set purpose. He hoped Mr. Crewe's new wife would speak of it to him. Although an unmarried man himself, he had an immense belief in the power and influence of women for good or evil, and while the marriage had surprised him, he had hoped its outcome might be the remedying of certain evils in the place which could undoubtedly be laid at the iron-master's door. He knew that the Flemings set a high standard for themselves, and he believed that Mrs. Crewe had only to be convinced of an injustice and she would do her utmost to remedy it. She looked intently at him while he was speaking, and when he concluded she answered quietly,

"I am very much obliged to you for explaining this, Mr. Ambrose. I'll say good-day now."

But Mr. Ambrose did not let her go yet.

"Mrs. Crewe, I wish you would allow me to call on you at the Old Hall, and have a good talk over matters in Birtley. We have long felt the need of some strong, fine woman in the place, who would not be above taking a personal interest in the people, in the women especially. You can't imagine the hardness of their lives. The industrial conditions here are really terrible. Perhaps your sister has told you a little about them. She has done a great deal. She is much beloved in Birtley, and when she leaves the women will

be left without a friend, unless you step into the breach. And you would have much in your power."

"I am not sure that I shall have much in my power, Mr. Ambrose," said Alison clearly, and a little sadly. "I intend to be interested in the place and the people, of course, but you must give me a little time. I am very new just yet."

"Surely," he answered apologetically. "I believe that my insistence is inexcusable. The greatness of the need must be my plea."

As Alison held out her hand, smiling as if to reassure him, he said awkwardly,

"Mrs. Crewe, will you excuse me if I take a still greater liberty? I hear that Doctor Fleming is to marry Miss Celia Crewe soon. Will this take your sister away from Birtley?"

"Yes, I am afraid it will."

He turned away his face, but not before Alison had caught its expression and understood that he loved Tibbie, and that, if she willed, she need not leave Birtley, but could have a home of her own in it.

Her look was very kindly as she bade him good-bye. She did not know that already Ambrose had spoken of his hopes to Tibbie, and had been refused.

As Alison walked back by the sodden roads to the Park gates her thoughts were full of the changes that had come into her life, into all their lives. It was as if time, after long tarrying, had suddenly awakened to the fact that the night was coming, when no man can work

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FIRST SUNDAY AT HOME.

THE first Sunday of Alison's life in her new home dawned clear and bright, an ideal winter morning.

As she dressed, she saw from the window her husband walking in the park. Always an early riser, he made no difference on Sunday, and breakfast was at half-past eight as usual. Alison missed the daily Bible reading and prayers with which the day had always been begun in the manse of Rochallan, but realising that she could not expect that little service in her new home, she had prepared herself to do without it.

But before she left her room she knelt down by the dressing-table, and prayed with astonishing earnestness that she might be guided in her new life, and, above all, that she might be faithful to her Master and Lord. Already she knew that she was to be tested, and that things that had formerly been easy, that had been the daily order of her life, would now be difficult of achievement, and must become victories only to be won by courage and resource. When she entered the dining-room, only Celia was there, sitting on the old-fashioned fender stool warming her hands at the cheerful blaze.

She sprang up to give Alison a kiss. The relationship between these two was already perfect. Celia presented no problem, had no grievances to redress, no career to be sighed for, she was just a happy normal creature, made for love and for happy motherhood. In her pretty frock of fine crimson cloth, with a great deal of white about the throat, her bright hair rippling

about her temples, she looked the embodiment of youth and health and joy.

"Anne has a headache, she often has on Sundays. They are such dreadful, interminable days, and everybody is out of temper," she said, with a little grimace. "Perhaps you will mend that with other things, and give us joy on Sundays."

Alison's mouth suddenly trembled.

"Have you seen Stephen, dear, and is he coming down?"

"Yes, I think he is, just to please you, and for no other reason. He would much rather be upstairs in his own den, and Primmie doesn't in the least mind waiting on him."

"But I think it has been bad for him to be shut off like that," said Alison firmly. "Is Anne having breakfast in bed?"

"She doesn't want any. She's had her morning tea, of course."

"You all have morning tea?"

"Why yes, of course; don't you?"

"I never have had. You see I had only one servant and I should have had to get it myself," said Alison, smiling and patting the girl on the shoulder. "Well now, where do we go to church?"

"Oh, we don't go anywhere."

"Nowhere at all?"

"Nowhere at all. Just once in a great while at Easter, or Christmas, or other festival times, Anne and I go down to the parish church, because they do have good music there, and at festivals paid singers."

"But don't you go anywhere regularly as a family?"

"No."

At the moment Mr. Crewe entered, bade them good-morning, and the gong was instantly rung.

"Will you wait a moment for Stephen, Edmund?" suggested Alison. "He promised to come down this morning to breakfast, and we don't want to begin without him."

"Don't we?" inquired Mr. Crewe drily. "Then he must learn to be in time. Sit down, my dear, and make out the tea."

Alison took her seat without demur, though she did not much like the tone of her husband's voice. It did not augur very well for Stephen's reception at the table. Mr. Crewe was not in a very good temper. All efforts to fill up the vacant places caused by the strikers had been unsuccessful, and he beheld in front of him a barren week at the works, where the press of work had never been greater. He was therefore in a mood to war with any handy person, even with his wife. Celia, long accustomed to her father's moods, did not appear to be disturbed by his grim silence, but Alison felt suddenly nervous under it.

"What an infernal nuisance Sunday is," growled Mr. Crewe. "It interferes with everybody's business except the parson's, and we could dispense with him."

"As a day of rest it is necessary," said Alison quietly. "Don't you remember at the time of the Terror in France they did away with it, and the consequences were disastrous."

"Were they? To whom? I'm sure that its total abolition here would be a boon to everybody. Go down in the town any Sunday after breakfast, and what will you find, on any handy piece of waste ground? A lot of idle, unkempt fellows betting on pigeons or dogs or bantam fighting, but on something they must and will bet. Why don't the parsons stop that sort of thing? All they do is to stand up and preach a lot of dry rubbish to the well-behaved section of the community, who don't need it. Well, Stephen, have you at last condescended to honour the family board?"

Stephen, coming in a trifle awkwardly at the door, and being met by these half-bantering words, shrank back. But Alison beckoned to him, smiling kindly.

"Come, dear, and sit beside me. You are not so very late, and everything is quite hot."

"I didn't hear the gong," he said in excuse, "I am sorry I'm late."

It was to Alison he addressed himself, and his father chose to take it ill.

"Do you think it is going to be a wet day?" she asked, as the silence grew. The long, uncomfortable silences at the table, to which the Crewes as a family were accustomed, had already begun to worry Alison beyond expression, and she tried everything to stop them. But the making of small talk for such a purpose is a sorry business, and soon, in spite of her efforts, her tongue refused to perform its function. She wondered whether she had made a mistake in urging Stephen to come down, certainly his father did not appear pleased to see him.

"When do you usually get up, young man? You don't seem to be enjoying your breakfast," observed Mr. Crewe, after a while.

"I don't eat much in the morning," answered Stephen, with a nervous start.

"A mistake; a good breakfast lays the foundation of the working day, but when all days are alike idle, it doesn't make much odds."

"I was reading somewhere the other day that people would be happier if the family breakfast were abolished," said Alison, with a small nervous laugh.

"I say amen to that," Celia made haste to answer.

"I think breakfast is a ghastly meal. People always look and behave as if they were out of temper, whether they are or not."

"It presents a fine opportunity to conquer oneself then, for, after all, why should people feel like that in the morning? After a good night's rest one ought to be grateful, and real gratitude is cheerful."

"Doubtful," commented Mr. Crewe. "I've never met the genuine article yet though, so I'm not competent to speak."

"Oh, surely you must have met with a little," said

Alison, smiling down the table at him bravely. "I have seen quite a lot, even in Rochallan."

"You've been lucky then, it don't grow here," he retorted grimly. "Now the very people I've been generous to in Birtley have turned to rend me times out of hand. They've turned again now. The Wrightsons are a case in point. Just because he has had to come down to the level of his market value he's posing as a martyr and inciting the rest of them to a howl of injustice."

Mr. Crewe's tone was rasping, and none of them ventured to make any comment. They had not sufficient knowledge of the actual facts to be able to offer any contribution, but somehow Mr. Crewe fancied that their silence implied sympathy with Wrightson and censure of him.

"Why do you glower at your plate like that, Stephen?" he said suddenly. "If you can't sit up like a man you had better stop upstairs."

"I'm going to," said Stephen, and rising suddenly he made his way with a very awkward haste to the door.

Alison's eyes, full of pain, followed him to the door, but she made no protest. Celia, toying with a morsel of toast on her plate, thought with inward joy of her coming release. Mr. Crewe, apparently unaware that he had done anything out of the ordinary, pushed back his chair, indicating that he had concluded his meal.

"I don't think experiments in Stephen's direction will be a success," he observed to his wife. "You see for yourself what an ill-conditioned chap he is. Leave him alone in future."

Alison's lips moved suddenly and quickly, but in the presence of Celia she abstained from what she wished to say.

Celia, an understanding person, rose from her chair.

"I'll just go and see whether old Anne is all right," she said, as she hastened from the room.

Then Alison spoke up without the smallest hesitation.

"Stephen is afraid of you, Edmund. Don't you see what a nervous, sensitive boy he is? He has lived that isolated life too long, and there is no reason why it should continue. It's a little kindness and encouragement he needs."

"Humph," was all Mr. Crewe said, but when his wife leaning towards him a little said rather pleadingly, "Won't you give it to him?" the hard line of his mouth relaxed. Nobody had ever given him such straight talking before, and he admired the woman who had the courage to do it.

"If he were down here with us more," continued Alison, quick enough to see that she had not altogether lost her point, "he would improve every day. Don't forbid my little experiment, Edmund. I promise you won't find me ungrateful."

He broke into a laugh then.

"You're a warrior," was all he said. "Have your way, have your way! It strikes me you mean to have it all along the line. Come and walk through the greenhouses with me to show that you are properly grateful."

Alison smiled as she rose quickly from her chair. A large conservatory opened off the dining-room, communicating in its turn by a covered way with the glass houses beyond. It was rather a clumsy arrangement Alison thought, which destroyed the symmetry of the house. Its one advantage was that it brought all the houses under the control of one heating system.

As they passed into the fragrant warm atmosphere of the conservatory, Mr. Crewe drew her hand through his arm.

"It's a front attack all along the line. You disapprove of everything here then, Alison, beginning with me."

"Oh no, oh no, but we might all be happier."

"Well then, let us be. I'm sure I've no objection in the world."

"But we can't unless you set the example, Edmund,"

said Alison bravely. "The children are afraid of you, and just think of the chances of happiness you have missed."

"Oh, happiness! that's a thing that has never entered. I am expecting a little now though, but not to be badgered."

His tone was not angry, however, and as he stopped to take out a cigarette, Alison continued bravely,

"You don't know Stephen in the least. He is delightful, and so full of fun when he is happy. Do get to know him, and let us both try to make a man of him."

The cloud descended on Mr. Crewe's brow at the moment, and Alison partly guessed his thoughts.

"If his mind has been soured against you," she said, anticipating the word she imagined he would speak, "you have the chance to alter all that. Won't you come up to him now and have a little talk?"

"Not now. I want to get the hang of it all. I didn't expect that you were going to dig up the foundations, Alison. That didn't enter into the scheme of things, but I hope that I don't make you, yourself, unhappy?"

"Oh no, you are so kind and good to me that I want you to be like that to everybody, even—even to Wrightson——" she added, with a little tremor in her voice.

"You're a queer creature, but it's your courage I admire."

"Oh, I haven't any really in my composition, it's because—because I must, that I do it."

"And why must you?"

Alison hesitated a moment, because this was a crucial moment in which she had the chance of a lifetime. It was open to her to confess in words that would leave no doubt, Whose she was and Whom she served, and to a woman of her temperament the task was not easy.

"God requires it of me. I am His servant," she

answered clearly. "He has given me everything. The gratitude we talked of at the table, if nothing else, 'demands my soul, my life, my all.'"

The words of the hymn rushed upon her like a flood, and her face was radiant. Never had the faith of her fathers been more real and precious to her, and never, oh never, had she needed it more.

"You're a queer card," was all the comment Mr. Crewe made, and then he changed the subject, which did not appear to Alison to be a bad sign.

"Where are you going to take me to church this morning?" she asked, when they had made the round of the houses and discussed the flowers, and the iniquities and extravagances of gardeners as a class, and of the Old Hall gardener as an individual.

"Church! Not this morning; I've got to go down and see to the furnaces at the foundry. I'm in bad odour in Birtley to-day. Besides, I've had my sermon. Leave it to sink."

Alison, too wise to add another word, kept silence. But her heart ached, none the less.

"You don't mind my going?"

"Surely not; telephone to the stables for something to take you down."

"It's a fine morning," said Alison, looking through one of the half-opened glass shutters, "I would prefer to walk. I have learned the short cut through the fields yesterday. Yes, I would rather walk, if you please."

She nodded as she left him to see to her household affairs, and when she came down ready for church he had disappeared. Hearing she was going alone, Celia volunteered to accompany her, and said she could be ready in five minutes.

"But I'm not going to the Parish Church, dear. I can't follow the service with any comfort to myself. I'm only going to chapel to hear Mr. Ambrose."

"Ambrose!" repeated Celia, in a puzzled voice.

"Oh, I know, that long, thin, lugubrious person who

speaks at Radical meetings. I should like to come, may I?"

Alison said she would wait, and in ten minutes' time they set out together. She would have preferred solitude that morning, but had long since discovered that the things we most desire are not always the most expedient for us to insist upon. It would have dashed Celia's friendly affection if her stepmother had pursed her lips and said she would rather go alone. And to quench affection in a house which had so little to spare was the last thing Alison Crewe would do. So she listened, and answered to the best of her ability Celia's pleasant girlish chatter, but her thoughts frequently wandered to the works, where she supposed her husband had gone.

It was a strange kind of Sunday, a day without object or purpose. For the first time she was absolutely and genuinely homesick. The Congregational Chapel stood in the middle of the High Street, a stone's-throw from the Parish Church, to which it was an eyesore. It was a substantial and rather ornate building of red brick, faced with white stone, and sufficiently new not to have been mellowed by the Birtley atmosphere. It had an open space of grass around it, and a square, rather heavy-looking spire, in which one sonorous bell pealed, making itself heard distinctly through the gayer chimes from the parish belfry. People were streaming in, for Ambrose was a popular preacher. It was mainly a working-class congregation, however, but Alison recognised several of the tradespeople on the side walk and approaching the doors. She asked for a seat, and though she was personally unknown to most of the people, Miss Crewe was instantly recognised. A little thrill ran through the folk. It augured well that the ironmaster's wife should appear there on the first Sunday of her new life. Many of the strikers were there that morning, and when Ambrose, in his opening prayer, asked that the way might be cleared so that industrial strife in the place might be brought

to a speedy end, several heads were raised and many eyes glanced in Mrs. Crewe's direction. Her head, however, was reverently bent, her whole heart was passionately re-echoing the preacher's words, and she was quite unconscious of any scrutiny. The simple service reminded her of home. Three Sundays had she spent in Continental cities without church ordinance of any kind, and her heart was hungered. When they stood up to sing the hymn, "Nearer, my God, to Thee," a sudden rush of tears obscured the page for her, and so surprised her that she did not know where to look. Celia saw these tears, and partly understood them. She gave Alison's fingers a sympathetic squeeze where they lay on the book board, and the emotional moment passed.

Ambrose preached a sermon on the crisis in the town. He was a fearless man, and he held the opinion that the pulpit was a place where all the affairs of life could be dealt with, and where they should be dealt with when necessary, thus lifting them up to the highest platform. It was his ideal of religion, that it should be part, if not indeed the very essence, of the common things of life.

Celia was frankly bored, and, after the first few sentences, did not listen. What has a young bright girl whom love has beckoned to do with the sordid problems of life or labour? She was a child yet in experience of life, and had no realisation of the magnitude of the themes with which the preacher dealt. She spent the half-hour of the sermon in arranging her drawing-room in her mind's eye, and settling with herself whether it should be green or pink. Alison listened with her whole heart in her eyes, and most passionately wished that her husband had been at her side instead of Celia. A more winning or more perfectly reasoned discourse she had seldom heard. Ambrose saw her when about half-way through his sermon, and his face flushed slightly and his eye kindled. But he omitted nothing of that he wished

to say, and, when he concluded, Alison had before her an absolute picture of the industrial community as it ought to be. Ambrose kept the balance true, swerving neither to the right hand nor to the left; in all honesty he tried to set before the men listening to him a high sense of their own responsibility, and closed with an appeal to them to be reasonable and moderate in their demands for the sake of those who depended on them. At the same time he denounced injustice and harshness on the part of employers, and tried to show how a quickened sense of duty on every hand might solve problems apparently unsolvable.

Alison glanced at Celia when he closed, and was perhaps relieved, though a little astonished, to behold the child's expression perfectly unconcerned.

"I'm going down to see Tibbie for a minute," she whispered as they rose to leave the chapel. "Will you come?"

Celia flushed at the chance of seeing her lover unexpectedly, and assented joyfully.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GOOD SEED.

EVEN twenty-four hours' strike makes a difference in an industrial community. A shadow lay over Birtley that winter Sunday, and the few persons Mr. Crewe met on his way to the works scowled at him furtively as the author of their misfortunes. He did not meet many, however, as he avoided the town and came to his destination by the field paths.

There was really no immediate need for his presence there, because the lack of men had stopped the greater part of the work, and several of the furnaces were closed down, for which reason the chimneys gave forth neither smoke nor smell. The air was in consequence singularly clear. A great restlessness was upon Mr. Crewe, and his mood of vindictive anger against his employees[™] suffered many variations during his walk to and from the works. He[™] did[™] not linger there, for there was nothing whatever for him to do, and the spectacle of the silent place was not cheerful or inspiring. His factotum Waghorne, a man he had raised to a position far beyond his actual deserts, was not visible, but was resting quietly at home, after the last strenuous days. Mr. Crewe made a brief tour of the place, spoke to the few men on duty, and returned home, feeling that his hour had been wasted. He even wished, looking back at the network of the roofs and spires from the field paths, that he had accompanied his wife to church. It would have been a new sensation for Birtley, and doubtless

it was his duty. But though she had looked disappointed, she had not tormented him with reproaches or entreaties. She had accepted his explanation as the truth. That was where she had the complete advantage; she believed in him, accepted his word as final and reasonable, thus forcing him to commune with himself. Up till now the hostility of a cold world had forced him to an attitude which had very easily become his second nature. Her sweet reasonableness made him ashamed, while her courage awakened in him a hearty admiration and respect.

In spite of himself, his mood became retrospective as he walked back to Old Hall in solitude. Looking back over the last thirty years of his life, which were all that really mattered, he confessed that they had failed in many directions, nay, in all directions save one. He had won a position for himself by sheer ability and perseverance, by work so arduous that it had robbed him of the power to enjoy leisure; he had acquired wealth, but of the things which actually make life, which are worth possessing, which inspire men to noble deeds and heroic self-sacrifice these thirty years were absolutely barren. They had been wholly destitute of love, which is the only force worth reckoning with in the world. It is the lever which moves all else.

Even now he was not sure that he possessed it. The woman he had married had been perfectly honest with him from start to finish. She had been his wife now for three weeks, and in that time she had never spoken one word of love to him. Kind she had been, kind beyond expression, forbearing, sweet-tempered, entirely reasonable, but that was all. There were, there must be, depths in such a nature which once stirred would give forth joy to a man worth giving up all else for. Would he ever be able to stir these depths, he asked himself, in the pauses of his walk. Would she ever lift her clear grey eyes, mirrors of truth and purity, to his, and tell him she loved him. To hear

these words from such lips a man might well imperil his soul. Of such strange warp was the web of Mr. Crewe's thought as he walked across the frost-bound fields in the sunny Sabbath quiet.

The very irony of things smote him as he entered upon his own demesne and realised that the thing he desired above all else his money could not buy. There rose up within him a vast remorseful pity for the woman who had been the wife of his youth, who had been by his side in the midst of his struggles, never inspiring them, but simply doing her duty in the life that had been grey and cheerless enough for her. She had done her best to make a home for him, she had given him children, but she had never known him, he had kept her on the outside. In his secret heart he had been ashamed of her, yet she was loved by many, and in Birtley her name was spoken as one might speak a martyr's name. The sorrows of her life had been common property, and he knew that had Alison been made acquainted with the whole story of his life, she would have turned from him in loathing and disdain. For it had been a wicked life, because wherever selfishness is supreme, there is wickedness and cruelty and shame.

In his steady march towards the pinnacle of his ambitions he had thrust aside many, and crushed many, without a thought or a misgiving. Some few acts of kindness and justice he had done, as in the case of Frank Odell, but they had been by stealth, and because some ultimate good for himself was to be the outcome. Face to face with himself that morning the poverty of his soul and heart was laid bare to Edmund Crewe, and he realised what a poor creature he was. Perhaps, nay, certain, in the church across the level spaces of the town his wife was praying for him. The thought touched him, for though he had no religion in his heart, he had been unable to scoff at or belittle the simple piety that had not been hid from him during the last three weeks. She had

knelt to her prayers before him, when there was no privacy for them, and caused him to slink away ashamed. There was a force here, a force to be reckoned with. It was so large a part of his wife's nature that he could not disassociate it from her heart and life. She was beyond all doubt under governance, joyful obedience to the Lord of her soul, to Whom all else must give way.

His face wore a curiously perplexed and softened look as he came back to the house, which was so empty and silent. He had never felt its silence so profound. It was a relief to behold a servant cross the hall with a tray on which silver lay, which he was about to put upon the luncheon table. He wandered to the library, which was the picture of comfort, beckoning a man who was weary to rest his body, and to find refreshment on the bookshelves for his soul. But Mr. Crewe had no use for it. After a few minutes' restless loitering he left it, and walked slowly up the wide staircase.

The house seemed full of memories that Sunday morning, memories that refused to flee at his bidding. He remembered the first time he had brought his wife to see it, and how she had shrunk from its size and pretentiousness, and how he had flouted her, when she said timidly that she doubted it would be a long time before she could feel at home in it. Home? It had never been a home, but perhaps now there was a chance. The woman with the home-making gift had come to it, and had begun her gracious work. Perhaps, had she been by his side all these years, things might have been different, and he a happier, because a better man. In these thoughts there was no disloyalty to his dead wife; she had passed out of his life, if indeed she had ever been in it, in the sense which she ought to have been. It may seem an anomaly, but he mourned her that day with a more sincere mourning than at any period of his long widowerhood. He would have liked to see her for a moment, to ask her pardon

for the things that had gone, to try and explain to her that he had not always been wholly to blame. In this strangely chastened mood he came to the end of the corridor where the door led into Stephen's rooms. He had never been there but once, when Stephen had been seized with a fainting fit, and he had been called by the old nurse in the haste of terror. He had waited there, he remembered, only until the doctor came. It had been a long time, because it was before Guy Fleming's advent to Birtley, and the trap had had to fetch Doctor Houghton from Barbridge.

He remembered then, as he looked at the lad's face in its white repose, where it lay on the pillow of the couch, how like he was to his mother. But the likeness had not softened him, nor awakened in him any depth of fatherly tenderness. All these things came back now, lying upon him in a great flood. He opened the door softly, but Stephen, lying prone on the hearth-rug before the fire, with a book spread out before him, heard it, and looked round interestedly. He spent many long hours in these rooms alone, ministered to by his old nurse, and occasionally visited by his sisters. But a visit from his father was so rare that it filled him with an instant alarm. Crewe saw it in his face, as he drew himself together, preparing to rise.

"Don't get up," his father said, in a quiet kind voice; and as he approached he glanced rather curiously at the book on the floor, and saw that it was a Bible.

"You and I seem to be the only people in the house to-day. Where's Anne? Isn't she up yet?"

"I don't think so. Celia said she had a bad head," said Stephen nervously; and having pulled himself together, he sat down on a low chair opposite to his father, who stood by the couch.

"Do you find it dull up here?" he asked awkwardly, thinking how he himself would feel were he shut up within the narrow spaces of a suite of rooms, however comfortably they might be appointed.

"Oh no, at least not much. Sometimes, when it

gets near the end of winter I wish spring would come, but then again, I don't mind. I'm used to it."

"Does your leg hurt?" asked Mr. Crewe, and the acuteness of his anxiety gave an edge to his voice which Stephen was quick enough to misunderstand.

"No, thank you, not at all."

"But you drag it very much more, I think, than you used."

"Yes. Last time the doctor was here he thought it was a little worse."

"Did he? I heard nothing about it."

"No, I asked him not to say anything."

Then there fell a little silence.

Mr. Crewe broke it a trifle nervously.

"Have you everything you want up here? Is there anything you would like that you haven't got?"

"No, nothing."

"Your—your new mother has been talking to me about you this morning. Would you like to go away anywhere for a little change?"

"No, I don't mind much. Anne said perhaps she would take me to stay with her when she went to London, but I don't mind about it now."

"You would like to have some more lessons in painting, perhaps?"

"Oh yes, I'd like that."

"Anything else?"

"Heaps of things, but I can't get them, so it's no use," answered the boy; and his mouth took on its usual patient, slightly peevish, expression, which is sometimes seen on the face of the perpetual invalid.

"Tell me some of them."

"I can't; at least I don't want to."

"But if I want to hear them," persisted Mr. Crewe, and his tone was so gentle that the boy looked at him oddly and with an ever-deepening surprise.

"Oh well, what I'd like first and most of all is to be like other boys."

"What would you do then?"

"Go out into the world, of course, and never come back to Birtley any more."

To Stephen this dream was not new, but the bald frankness with which he declared it gave his father something of a shock. He had been very apt all through his life to imagine that those under his roof were endowed with special advantages for which he feared they were not properly grateful. He had seen to it in a general way that Stephen had lacked for nothing, which was perhaps all that a son could reasonably expect from a father whose hopes he had disappointed. That had been Mr. Crewe's point of view; he now came face to face with Stephen's, and for the moment it staggered him.

"I always imagined that you were pretty well contented. You don't suffer much, do you?"

"In my body, a good deal," answered Stephen.

"But that doesn't matter much. One gets used to it. But quite often I wish I had never been born. Why was I born? I'm no use to anybody, and never will be. Once when I was bad last winter, and needed morphia for the pain, I asked Dr. Fleming to give me just enough so that I would never wake up again. Nobody would ever have known, only he and I, and everybody would have been glad."

Mr. Crewe got up suddenly and began to walk up and down the floor.

"Hush, boy, that isn't very pleasant hearing for your father. I'm sorry, very sorry——"

He stopped suddenly in front of him and looked him straightly in the face. Humility, and its language, did not come easily to Edmund Crewe.

"You have a good deal to blame me for, Stephen, but I didn't realise how you felt about things. I thought you were quite happy here with Primmie and the girls. I had no idea that you wished for anything else."

Stephen made no answer. He was surprised, and

did not know what to say more. Mr. Crewe's thoughts, however, travelled rapidly.

"You ought to go out more, Stephen. Does it hurt you to walk?"

"Oh no, but I don't care for it in the winter. Everything looks so dreary. Then I have to walk very slowly, and Anne gets impatient with me. Primmie used to walk with me sometimes, but now her rheumatism is too bad. She has to go even more slowly than I."

Mr. Crewe's eyes swept round the room in restless inquiry.

"Where do you keep your boots and things?"

"Oh, in my bedroom; Prim looks after them."

"Where is she? Has she gone to church?"

"To chapel, I think."

"If you'll tell me where your boots are, I'll get them, and help you to put them on."

"What for?"

"To take a turn with me in the park. The sun's out now, and it's quite pleasant. It would give you an appetite for lunch."

"I wouldn't be coming down," said Stephen slowly.

"I told *her* I wouldn't, after this morning."

"We'll see about that later. Come and show me where the boots are, and we'll get them on."

Stephen, with a very queer look on his face, came towards the door, and they went out into the passage, and entered the bedroom which adjoined. The boots were found without difficulty. It gave Edmund Crewe a strange pang to notice that one was queerly built on a very high heel, to adjust itself comfortably to the shrunken leg. He knew nothing about this boot. Others had discovered the need, and the partial remedy. He made Stephen sit down while he put on the boots with unaccustomed gentleness, and laced them up.

"Now your cap and an overcoat; you'd better get a muffler too; the wind's cold, and you're not much used to the open air."

All these things were found after some searching, and when Stephen was fully dressed, his white face looking very sharp and delicate under the brim of his cap, his father took his arm and began to pilot him out to the stairs. Just there Stephen paused, and began to laugh.

"Well, what is it?"

"I was just thinking how funny it was that you should be helping me to go out like this. It's like a story book. I wonder what they'd all say if they could see it."

Mr. Crewe did not answer, neither did he care what others thought.

There is implanted in the hearts of most men, even the hardened and selfish, the instinct to protect the weak, to care for that which is helpless and dependent. Hitherto Edmund Crewe had not troubled to come in contact with this side of his son, and now it appealed to him mightily.

The poor, bent figure, the shrunken legs, the pinched face with its expression of sad discontent, were an indictment against him which went home for the first time. The man-servant, still busy with preparations for lunch, nearly dropped his glasses when he saw father and son in the hall together, and after they had passed out he stood deliberately still and watched them with a very odd expression on his stolid face.

"Well I'm blowed," was his comment at last, as he disappeared to his own domain to report on what had happened.

The sun was shining pleasantly, and when they reached the end of the terrace, which ran the full length of the back of the house, Stephen stood still and drew a long breath.

"It's nice," he said simply. "If a chap could run about, he'd like to be chasing these rabbits with a good terrier, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, my boy, he would; never mind, perhaps you'll be able to do it some day," said Mr. Crewe,

and his voice had the queerest note in it Stephen or anybody had ever heard. "Lean hard on me now. Which way would you like to go? Down to the woods or across to the lake?"

"Oh, the lake, I think. I tried rowing last summer with Anne one day, but it made me awfully tired. She said she'd ask you to get a smaller boat and a lighter pair of oars."

Mr. Crewe remembered Anne making the request, and his own refusal to grant it.

"We'll see about it when spring comes again. Can't you walk a little way by yourself?"

"Not without a stick. I forgot to bring it. Shall we go back?"

"No, no; I was only wondering how much you could do in the way of walking."

"I just hobble," said Stephen, and a sigh broke from his lips, and his face resumed its somewhat peevish look. "There are some people coming up the drive. It's—it's her, and Celia, isn't it? They've been to chapel. Shall we go to meet them?"

"Not just yet. Let us take this short cut to the lake," said Mr. Crewe rather hurriedly, and looking a trifle shamefaced, as one might do, when caught in the performance of a good deed by stealth.

Stephen took off his cap, and waved it ere they turned away, and the two figures stood still as if in simultaneous astonishment.

"I do believe it is papa and Stephen; yes, it is!" cried Celia excitedly. "It must be the end of the world, surely. Do you know I never have seen that happen before; It never *has* happened. Let us go over to them quickly."

But Alison, wiser than the girl, laid her light hand detainingly on her arm.

"I think they want to be alone. Didn't you see them turn when they saw us? Let us go on to the house."

"But it's so queer. I want to go right up to them,

and ask what it means. *You* aren't surprised, for of course you don't know just how it has been up to now. Papa has always behaved almost as if he disliked Stephen, never caring to see him much, and now they are walking arm-in-arm. I must hurry on, and see whether Anne knows what has happened."

Impulsive as a child she darted off towards the house, Alison following more slowly, her eyes full of unfathomable light.

She had left the house scarcely a couple of hours ago, feeling dull and depressed, and her heart had been heavy as she knelt in the house of prayer and took part in its service. But she had left her burden there with Him who had promised to undertake for her.

And, lo, the light had shone in at a very unexpected place. Her face was shining as she stole towards the house scarcely daring to lift her eyes lest she should seem to intrude upon what, in her estimation, was both a sacred and a pregnant moment.

CHAPTER XX.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

THAT evening Guy and Tibbie came up to Old Hall by invitation to supper. Now that the engagement between Celia and the Doctor had been permitted, it was the recognised procedure that her lover should spend part of his day on Sunday with her. He was detained in the town until the last moment, however; and Celia, disappointed, whispered to him as she left the table that he must not stop long beside her father.

But Mr. Crewe seemed to have a good deal to say to the Doctor.

"I want to speak to you about Stephen, Doctor," he said, as he filled himself a glass of port after it had been refused by Guy. "What do you think of him?"

"Of his physical condition, do you mean?"

"Yes, for I suppose the mental condition depends largely on the physical. I have seen a good deal of him to-day, and had a long talk with him. It worries me to see him as he is. What can you do to help him?"

It was a very direct question, but at the same time a vague one.

Guy took some little time framing a reply which would not commit him too much. He had had experience ere this of Mr. Crewe's catechising powers, and had some reason to be chary of them. He had a way of bringing up a man's chance utterances against him at awkward moments.

"Well, of course there is a good deal of constitutional delicacy," he remarked at length, a reply which seemed for some reason or another to aggravate Mr. Crewe.

"I don't believe that. His mother had a very sound constitution, and I have never had a day's illness. His condition is largely attributable to the accident. If there is a delicacy, I am inclined to think that it has been caused by the mistakes of those who have been about him. In fact, he has been too much coddled. Is he really unable to walk? He thinks he is, and gets tired after he has gone a few steps."

"There is a good deal in what you say," said Guy, still guardedly. "I am glad you have spoken to me about this, and if you will allow me I'll come up tomorrow and overhaul him thoroughly."

"Why haven't you done it before? You have been about the house a good deal," asked Mr. Crewe, a trifle harshly.

"Last time I was here, I suggested to Miss Crewe that we should have somebody to see him either from Birmingham or from London. She promised to mention it to you, and to let me know, but from that day to this I haven't heard anything."

"There was no use making use of a third party," said Mr. Crewe irritably. "Your obvious duty was to have come direct to me."

"I spoke of it to you in the street one day about nine months ago, but you simply put it on one side, Mr. Crewe, and said the boy would never be well as long as he was so indolent and so spoiled. If he is indolent there is a reason for it. If he is spoiled, well, there is a good deal to be said for the kindness of heart which has tried to make up to him for all he has had to undergo."

Guy spoke quietly but with his usual frankness. He did not wish to offend his future father-in-law, but when it came to a matter of honour in his business, everything else, even Celia, must stand aside. Celia

did not understand that yet; she had not come up against it. But Tibbie knew all about it, and had often gloried in her brother's courage.

"Can anything be done for that leg of his? That boot he wears is abominable, a hideous thing," said Mr. Crewe, in the same harsh voice, which however disguised a real feeling.

Guy slightly uplifted his brows.

"I have never liked it. There are better things on the market, and——"

"Get them, then. It's what you are for," interrupted Mr. Crewe, in the same harsh voice. "Again, I say, it was your duty to have come to me about all this. But the first thing to be done now, undoubtedly, is to have what you call a second opinion. I will leave that to you. All I wish you to understand is that I want the very best done for the boy, the very best in every way, and that the question of cost need not enter."

"Very well, sir," answered Guy quietly, and suffered no hint of his inward amazement to show itself. At the back of his mind was the wonder whether Alison had anything to do with this.

"He says," went on Mr. Crewe, "that the last time you saw him, professionally, I mean, you thought his leg a little worse."

"I don't remember saying that, but I found a sort of general decline of all the powers, and it was then I put it before Miss Crewe very strongly that he ought to be roused, and made to take an interest in something outside of himself. The invalid habit has grown upon him, and ought to be broken."

"Again I say you failed in your duty, Doctor," said Mr. Crewe irritably. "What was the use of speaking to Anne? What power had she?"

"I have tried to speak to you many times, Mr. Crewe, on that, and on other themes, but——"

Mr. Crewe waved an impatient hand and filled another glass of port, which he drained at a gulp.

Guy wondered whether he were not further neglecting his duty by keeping silence regarding the wine, which he knew to be poison to a man of his temperament.

"I want you to tell me frankly what you would do with Stephen, supposing he were your son or brother."

Guy answered without a moment's hesitation.

"I should take him to Lowenstein at Vienna, without delay."

"What for? Why should you prefer an Austrian Jew to an honest Englishman. Don't you see you condemn yourself, and belittle your brethren in the profession?"

"I shouldn't mind that, in this case, or in any other of such moment," answered Guy lightly. "No, I don't say he is a better all-round man than any we've got here, but I do say for this particular thing I have never seen him excel. I spent six months in his *clinique* at Vienna, when I could ill afford it, and he taught me more in that time than I could have learned of that particular part of my business in two years elsewhere. No, it's nothing to boast of, but it's true, and the experience has been of immense service to me in this very place."

Mr. Crewe, now intensely interested, lighted a cigar and took a few puffs in silence.

"Could you take him to Vienna?"

Guy shook his head.

"No, Mr. Crewe, I couldn't."

"But I'll pay you well for it."

"I don't doubt it, but at the present crisis in my affairs I could not possibly afford to do so."

"I don't mean that you would stay there with him through any treatment this Austrian doctor might prescribe. But if you would take him over, say, and put him under his care, that is all that is necessary, and you could do it inside of a week."

"I could, but I don't know what Houghton would say. The transfer of the whole practice is going to be a fairly difficult business as it is, and don't forget

that I am hoping for a holiday in the spring. Why not take him yourself, Mr. Crewe? I could, after I have thoroughly overhauled Stephen, write an exhaustive report of the case to Lowenstein. After all, a man like that only needs a few hints. His power of diagnosis, as well as treatment, are marvellous."

"I would prefer you to go, if it can possibly be arranged, and I think we must manage it," said Mr. Crewe, whose thoughts travelled quickly and whose actions seldom failed to follow on them. "I can't get away just now. You know the hole we're in at the foundry. Anne would go with you and stop in the town while Stephen was in the doctor's hands. She's keen on getting away anyhow, and a winter in Vienna might just suit her, that is to say, if a long stay were necessary."

"It probably would be necessary. I'll think about it, Mr. Crewe, and try whether it can be arranged. Now may I go and see Celia?" he added with a frank smile. "I shall have to leave at ten, for I must see two cases before eleven, and it is ten minutes past nine now."

"All right, but I can't think why you want to moon about together like that, when you have the rest of your lives in front of you. I may as well tell you, Doctor, that when Celia marries, I'll make her the same allowance as I shall give to Anne, two hundred a year. It will keep her in frocks."

"I hope to do that, Mr. Crewe," said Guy sturdily, "and though I appreciate your kindness, I—that is we, shan't want it. The arrangement with Houghton is going to make us quite comfortable, and I shall be able to allow my sister something too. At one time I hardly thought my path was going to be made as smooth."

There was a frank appreciation, even a touch of gratitude, which struck Crewe with an odd sense of something that was not quite remorse but akin to it. How much had he taken, not gratefully or humbly,

but as his right through all the years that had gone?

"I'll never understand the Scotch," he said grimly. "They are the most serious folk on the face of the earth, and the least get-at-able."

Guy laughed as he pushed back his chair and went to seek his sweetheart.

They left the room together, and found Celia waiting in the hall by the fireplace for her lover. She ran to him the moment he appeared at the door and slipped her hand through his arm, with a delicious little gesture of proprietorship, without so much as looking at her father, who immediately and rather grimly passed on.

The light in his child's eyes as they rested on the honest face of her lover, who so soon was to be her husband, stirred in her father's heart a quick envy. No woman had ever, even in the days of his youth, looked at him like that, and it seemed unlikely that he would have the experience in later life. With an ever-deepening consciousness of the number of things he had missed in life, he made his way to the drawing-room door, and opening it softly, looked in unobserved upon the scene. Anne was playing softly in the far corner of the room, where no lamp had been lit, and on one of the chintz-covered couches Alison and Tibbie sat together talking earnestly. But they were not quite alone there. On a low stool by the sofa sat Stephen, with his head on Alison's knee, his face turned towards her, and an expression of the utmost contentment on his face.

He gave a little start at sight of his father, but when Alison, following the direction of his eyes, looked towards the door she only saw it quickly closed.

"That was father," said Stephen, and picked himself up from the stool, as if the spell of the moment were broken.

"Oh, why didn't you beckon to him? He might have come in, then we could have had some hymns. Do you never have hymns on Sunday evening?"

"Oh, never."

"But you would like them sometimes?"

"Should I? I'll go and ask Anne to play some then," said Stephen, and dragged himself slowly across the floor.

"Alison, that boy is going down the hill," said Tibbie quickly. "He's getting weaker as he grows older. How sad it is to see him! I can't think how Mr. Crewe can bear it, and not do more than he is doing."

"He is going to do something presently," said Alison confidently, "I am sure of it. Now that Stephen has gone, Tibbie, tell me about these Wrightsons," she said eagerly, and with the air of a woman who grasps an opportunity she has been lying in wait for. "Do you know them, and what sort of people are they?"

"Lovely people. They are Quakers, Ailie. You would like old Amos. A bit of a crank perhaps, and he has given away all his earnings, so that his dismissal comes doubly hard on him. He has no children, but only his wife and an old sister, and I'm so sorry for her. You must try and talk Mr. Crewe over about the Wrightsons, Ailie. If you could persuade him to keep Amos on that would be a victory. It would end the strike, and bind the hearts of the folk to you at the very beginning. Won't you try?"

"I'll try," answered Alison, but her eyes were a little shadowed, as they met Tibbie's with a sort of pathetic wistfulness. "There is a lot to do, Tibbie, in this house. Stephen must come first, and oh, they are so godless! It is fair terrible. Not a prayer, nor a hymn, nor any recognition of God at all. They just live like heathens."

"I told you," said Tibbie, in a low voice full of pain. "But you're doing splendidly. There's a change in him already. It's a missionary to Birtley you are going to be, and when I go away, the women will have a far better friend. I'm telling them that

every day. When will you begin to come round with me and get to know them?"

"To-morrow perhaps," answered Alison. "I think I'll go and see what Mr. Crewe is about, and to-morrow I'll come down soon after breakfast and you'll take me to see the Wrightsons."

Tibbie looked doubtful.

"Will you tell Mr. Crewe you are going there? Perhaps he won't like it."

"I'll tell him after I have been. I want to know about things for myself, and if I ask his leave for everything, it would be very slow work, though he has not refused me much yet. He has been kind to Stephen to-day. He took him for a walk in the park, a thing nobody remembers his having done before. I'll be back presently before you go. I suppose you'll have to wait for Guy, and he has got off with Celia at last."

She nodded brightly as she left the room and crossed the long corridor to the door of the library which she opened without knocking. There had never been any locked or forbidden doors in the manse of Rochallan, though neither Alison nor Janet Aiken had ever wilfully disturbed the minister during the making of his sermons.

Mr. Crewe was smoking by the fire, and staring hard into it. Alison had already discovered that outside of his business he had few mental resources, and that he read very little. She had often thought since she became his wife that the leisure of such a man must be an appalling weariness both to flesh and spirit. He did not know how to make use of it.

"Why did you run away after coming as far as the drawing-room door?" she asked brightly. "I didn't see you, or I should have called out to you. Won't you come back, and let us have some hymns? I've always been used to something of that sort, and I miss it quite a lot."

"Come in and sit down here," he said rather jealously.

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"You've eyes and ears for them all but me. I want you all to myself, so sit here and talk to me. I've seen nothing of you all day."

"That was not my fault. If you had come with me to church, I should have liked that, and I wished you could have heard Mr. Ambrose. He preached on the labour questions, and he was so fair and just all round, it would have done you good."

"I could not have sat patient under it," he answered whimsically. "I suppose you class me among the unregenerate, who need wholesale missionary effort."

"Oh, Edmund, don't speak like that!" she said, in a low and rather distressed voice.

"But, honour bright, isn't it true? I don't come up to the high-water mark."

"Do any of us?" she asked, with a sigh. "The best we can do is to keep on trying."

"Which would make a mighty poor business of life," he said grimly. "Come and sit down here, close to me, till I give you a bit of *my* philosophy of life."

She hesitated a moment and her colour rose a little. But after a moment she came to his side and sat down on the broad arm of the great easy-chair on which he sat, and he threw his arm about her waist.

"It doesn't do to be climbing stairs all the time, old woman; it's not what life is for, surely. None of us are here very long. It's our bounden duty to get the best out of it. Isn't that merely the common sense you're so set on?"

"Yes, but the crux of the whole matter is what is the best," she said bravely, and he was quick to see that she shrank away a little from him, though it did not occur to him that it was the smell of the wine she did not like.

"Well, I think the best is to be like Celia. She was waiting out there in the hall, for her sweetheart, and when he came she had eyes for nobody. Her old father was less than the dust under her feet. That's life, Alison, and I've never tasted it."

"Celia is young," said Alison faintly. "When people are young, all these things are different."

"Then it's too late?"

"Too late for what?" she asked, but if she had loved him she need not have put the question. She would have divined his meaning, and he would have had a different answer.

He laughed a little harshly, and his arm relaxed; and she, imagining that he drew away from her, rose at once and went back to her chair.

"We were talking about Stephen, dear," she said in her usual even voice. "You have made him happy to-day. Don't you feel different yourself about it? That is the way happiness lies."

"I've seen a duty I have been too careless about," he admitted. "And so far as lies in my power I will remedy it. I have given your brother *carte blanche* to do what he likes in Stephen's case, and if he gets better, the credit will be his and yours."

"Oh, thank you," said Alison joyfully. "Now, I have the courage to ask you something else?"

"Sure. It's what you live for, isn't it, to ask questions, and try to get them answered on your own lines."

He tried to smile as he said these words, which were open to so many meanings, but it was a mirthless effort.

"It's about the strike, Edmund," she said a trifle timidly. "Is there any reason, any real business reason, why it should go on?"

"None; on the contrary, there is every economic reason why it should be stopped, why it should never have begun at all. It'll cost me a thousand pounds a week while it lasts."

"A thousand pounds a week!" cried Alison aghast.

"But how?"

"Because we can't fulfil our contracts, and they'll have to be placed elsewhere, which creates the off-chance of losing custom in future."

"Then why let it go on?" she persisted in sheer wonder. "Why should it go on? Can't you reinstate Wrightson, if his dismissal is the real reason of it? It seems the easiest thing in the world."

"Who has been talking to you about Wrightson?" he asked briefly.

"Tibbie told me something about them to-night. She says they are lovely people, and as he has served you so long, surely he should have some consideration, even if he has been tiresome."

Mr. Crewe smiled, an odd smile, that was all hardness.

"My dear, I am sorry I must disappoint you this time, and perhaps it would be better if we came to an understanding here and now about business. This is outside your province altogether, I can't have you interfering with it. You are at full liberty to make what changes you like here. I'll fall in with them to the best of my limited ability, but the big industrial questions that arise out of a thing like this are beyond the comprehension of women. They mix up sentiment with it all, confuse the issues, and create a hopeless muddle. Birtley wants a lesson, my dear, and it's going to have it this time, whatever it costs me. And the Wrightsons are the people that need it most. He's been a thorn in my flesh all the time he's been at the foundry. Sometimes I'm not sure who is the master, he or I."

Alison shrank visibly before the tone she had learned to dread, the tone and the manner that had made him disliked in Birtley, and which destroyed all hope of a better understanding between him and his people.

"You understand, Alison?" he said briefly.

"I understand what you say, of course. But I hope, that is, I wish, it need not be like that. After all there are certain big human questions involved which women can understand, perhaps even better than men. A strike is a horrible thing, it makes so many innocent persons suffer."

"Precisely, and if you could rub that into the

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originators, you would be doing a signal service to them and to me."

"But this time you are the originator, Edmund," she said naively, yet with a surprising courage.

"You think so naturally, since you disapprove of me root and branch," he said drily. "This is an unprofitable discussion my dear. That's ten o'clock, isn't it? We'd better go back to our guests."

So Alison's bright Sunday closed in disappointment and perplexity and gloom.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE NEW RÉGIME.

"PLEASE, sir," said Janet Aiken, with ominous emphasis on the "sir," waylaying Patrick Fleming as he walked from the drawing-room to the study door, "can I speak to ye a meenit?"

"Surely, Janet, come in here," answered the minister, as he passed into the study. "But don't keep me long, there's a good woman. It's six o'clock and Saturday night."

"I'm well aware of it, sir," answered Janet quietly and with the same ominous note. "But what I hae to say will not take that long, unless ye start speirin. I want to leave the manse."

Only at the urgent and repeated requests of her dear Miss Ailie had Janet consented to remain at Rochallan Manse under the new régime, and now, after four months of it, she had reached the limit of her grimmest endurance. But we will leave her to tell her own tale in her own picturesque and graphic style, which left nothing to the imagination.

"That's not good news, Janet. What has happened?"

"Oh, naething has happened, that is, naething particular, but it's not the same hoose since Miss Ailie went away, and I canna bide in it."

Patrick Fleming, now a four months' bridegroom, knew full well the value of Janet Aiken in the house, and that her efforts alone kept it from absolute chaos. Therefore his face fell, and such real concern sat

upon it that Janet kept her eyes resolutely from it, lest she should be visited by misgiving that should turn her from her purpose.

"But that is a very thin reason, my woman," said the minister kindly. "Unless there is some just cause of offence, it is hardly a fair proceeding on your part. Never were you needed more, in fact, we just can't do without you."

He smiled as he uttered these words, and for the space of a moment Janet was shaken. But for that space only.

"It may be as you say, Maister Fleemin'," she answered civilly. "But I have not been used to the kind of hoose we're keeping noo, and I canna be daein' wi' that tippenny lassie in the kitchen. I'm cleanin' at her tail a' day. An' the mistress"—here her mouth shut rather ominously—"the mistress thinks naething maitters. Wull I gie ye a sample, sir?"

"No, no," answered the minister hastily. "You surely can't say Mrs. Fleming is not kind to you, Janet, or does not give you your own way."

"I'm no' sayin' onything against her. She gi'es us ower muckle o' oor ain wey. It's not guid for man nor beast," said Janet sturdily. "The fact is, sir, I'm gettin' auld, and new-fangled weys are hard on me. I canna fa' in wi' them. I said that to Miss Ailie when she askit me would I go to Birtley if I couldna bide here."

"Mrs. Crewe did ask you to go to Birtley then?" said the minister with interest not unmingled with chagrin.

"Only since I wrate her that I wasna bidin' here," she answered, scorning to lie or to prevaricate regarding her own conduct. "I promised her to bide at least six months, and I'll bide it oot, but I thocht I wad rather ye kent, and I cam to you rather than to the mistress, because, well, I ken ye better."

Janet's hard face shadowed a little as she spoke these words, and her work-worn fingers were very busy with the corner of her apron.

The minister was silent a moment, and took a turn across the floor. He was fully aware of the disastrous import of Janet's communication, and was frankly dismayed at the prospect it offered. His wife had brought him a personal happiness, such as he had no idea existed in this world, but it stopped there. Of domestic comfort he had had none since his sister left the manse, and in other things also Edith fell far short. It was not the time to go into them now, but he was forced to admit to himself that the chief buttress of the house would disappear with Janet, and that she must be kept at any price.

"If it is a question of wages——" he began, but Janet stopped him by an inimitable gesture, in which indignation and scorn were finely mingled.

"It is *not* a question of wages, Maister Fleemin', and I wonder to hear ye. But I canna get daein' my wark the way I like it. I've been used to days for things, and to hae some law and order in the hoose. The mistress thinks ony day will dae for turnin' oot the rooms, and that the washin' can jist as well be started on a Seterday mornin', as ony ither. An' half the time I'm nct kennin what she says, than I dae things she has not telt me to do, or else leave them not dune. It's wearin' me to skin an' bane, and I canna sleep in my bed at night, for the bother o' it. No," she added firmly, "the Scotch can *not* serve the English, and an English mistress should hae English servants, an' that's the hale truth, I'm tellin' ye, though if ye hadna pressed me I wadna hae spoken oot so frankly."

"I'm glad you have done so, Janet, it lets me know exactly where I am," said the minister, with a smile.

"Your objections, of course, don't seem to me to be at all insuperable. Promise, at least, that you will give us another chance."

"I've been giein' ye chances for the hale fower months, and I'm no' wan bit better. An' forby, I'm gettin' fair ill-tempered. I took and shook that lassie

the day for soopin the dirt under the stair-neid mats, and than I was that potten aboot I couldna help greetin'. It's not a wey to live, an' if I get muckle mair o' it, I'll be a heap waur than thae puir savage heathen the missionary was tellin' us aboot at the prayer-meetin' the ither nicht."

"Well, put it off for another week. I'm in hopes that Mrs. Crewe may come up for the week-end next week. A talk with her would do you good, wouldn't it?"

"An' that it would," she answered fervently. "But it'll be sair on her to see the manse. I wairn ye, Maister Fleemin', it'll be sair on her."

"Oh, I think she'll survive it! Well, off you go, and let me to my sermon. It's a truce till next Friday anyway, when Mrs. Crewe arrives. In the interval I'll try what can be done."

He spoke these words bravely and with good heart and purpose, but they made no impression on Janet, as she respectfully withdrew. Her opinion of the minister's domestic qualities was not high, in her estimation he was nothing but "a muckle bairn." Such indeed he had been, but new responsibilities were calling out new qualities in Patrick Fleming, unsuspected even by himself.

The interview with Janet so disturbed him that he could not settle to his desk, though he had two sermons to preach on the morrow, and had not yet found even a text for one.

He continued to walk slowly to and fro the study floor, his thoughts going back with an odd persistence to the day when, after a certain Presbytery meeting at Seadon, he had discussed the question of matrimonial happiness with two of his colleagues. He recalled with acute exactness the words that had been used by the fat and comfortable Macfadyen and their amendment by little Naismith.

"A man marries to please himself," Naismith had said, "and it is he who has to bear the brunt. But

if he's happy, what's the odds? It's what we all want, first and last."

These utterances were true so far as they went, but they did not go far enough. Already before the close of the first half year of his married life Patrick Fleming had discovered that there are many things contributory, if not absolutely necessary, to domestic happiness. And in the manse of Rochallan now a good many of these elements were lacking.

Edith, a delightful person to live with, was most casual in every action of her life. She did things or left them undone, just as it suited the mood of the moment, and openly laughed at her husband's serious attitude towards the small happenings of life.

The things Alison had cherished, the little duties she had performed almost like acts of worship, and which had gone to the making of the nearly perfect home, did not enter into Edith's calculations.

The cultivation of the ego, the need and the claim of the individual to perfect freedom, were the passion of her soul.

She disliked housekeeping; the quality or the regularity of meals troubled her not at all. She had all the indolence of the artistic temperament, and she pitied Patrick openly for having so long lived in bondage. Her raillery, however, was always gentle, and never unkind, and she was like a child in her enjoyment of simple things and unexpected happenings. She hated to have her day mapped out for her. When it was she would be seized with an insatiable desire to upset every plan. Indeed she often did so, yet it was impossible to be a spy with her. She lived in the clouds, adoring beautiful sunsets, and the lights on sea and land, and the spirit of books, and the soul of music. The things other women filled their days with did not exist for her, and already there were a good many ominous head-shakings in the parish about the minister's wife. She was, however, above criticism, in the sense that she was never conscious of it. She

loved her husband, and made love to him so sweetly that she was rapidly developing the other side of him, the kindly human side; then her frankly avowed helplessness made a constant appeal to him.

He realised before he had been a month at home with his wife that Alison had mothered him mightily. She had hedged him about with a care so constant and so complete, that he had been until his marriage wrapped in swaddling clothes. He found that he had now to think and act, not only for himself, but for his wife. He had to do much which, properly speaking, was in her province; and while he did it all ungrudgingly, he was often weary and amazed at the number of things in the world to do.

It filled him with an awe and appreciation of his sister that inclined him to set her in a shrine. It was good for Patrick Fleming, however, and though there was much criticism of his wife in Rochallan, it was frankly and warmly acknowledged that never in all the years he had ministered to them had the minister preached with greater unction and acceptance. There was a new note in his sermons, a warm fine human note, which springing from a heart touched to every issue of life, was swift to reach other hearts and find its ready response.

Love, and the sacrifice it had involved for Patrick Fleming, was raising him by slow degrees to his highest self.

That he was not conscious of this change only proved its worth and power. He felt a very human man at that moment, and was even tempted to go back to the corner of the drawing-room, where he had left Edith, curled up in a corner of the sofa with a new novel, and shake her for her stupidity with Janet Aiken. That sturdy menial was worth her weight in gold to the manse of Rochallan, and on no account must she be suffered to go. She stood for its dignity, she was the only buttress between it and absolute chaos. She must be kept at any price, even if Alison

should have to be summoned from Birtley for the purpose. He drew to his desk, and opened the big Bible, which bore so many marked and underlined passages representing the close and loving study of years.

But though he turned over the pages manfully enough, and even tried to pick and choose a text, he found it impossible to concentrate his thoughts. Every minister who has been in a like situation, late on a Saturday evening, with a two-sermoned Sunday in front, will know the dismay Fleming felt. At last he shut the book, with a small snap, pushed back his chair and walked out of the room. Now Edith had made one big, and to Janet Aiken a most awful change, in the arrangement of the manse; she had converted the dining-room into a drawing-room, and made a small, cold, ugly, eating-room at the back of the house.

"What does it matter where we eat? It is a horrid function," she had said airily. "Eating complicates life. When we can all support existence upon tabloids, then our souls will begin to live."

Janet had stared aghast at this pronouncement, understanding about the half of it, and disapproving of it all.

Edith had brought her piano from the Glasgow flat, and her own violin, and a few pictures and oddments which somehow set in the manse of Rochallan did not seem to fit. She had persuaded her husband to invest in a large Chesterfield couch, which she had herself covered with a big rose-patterned chintz; this, with the piano, comprised the chief equipment of the room. It had a bare look, and the matting on the floor, relieved only by two old rugs, struck Janet as heathenish and ugly, yet it was not without its charm. It was a lady's room, as well as an artist's, and Edith undoubtedly looked at home in it. When the door opened on her suddenly, and she peered into the semi-gloom beyond the radius of the small

shaded copper lamp by which she had been reading, she looked much surprised to behold her husband. At last he had succeeded in impressing on her that it was absolutely necessary that he should have his Saturday evenings entirely to himself. Sermons Edith could not, and did not, take seriously. She thought them entirely outside of life. She attended the morning service regularly, however, and her clear and lovely voice could be heard distinctly in the praise. It was whispered that she had offered to play violin solos to enliven the service, which filled Rochallan folk with a vague uneasiness. But she was so sweet to them all, and so entirely inoffensive in every way, and moreover looked so picturesque and sometimes so frail in her black raiment, that in some sort of way she made a universal appeal. They were interested in her, as people are interested in something a little removed from their scheme of things, and which possibly they do not expect ever to understand.

"Pat, is that you?" she called out. "Go back at once, at once, sir, do you hear? I can't have you playing truant like this. It's disgraceful!"

Patrick closed the door, and came forward until he reached the sofa, on the end of which he sat down. He was struck at the moment by the extreme fragility of his wife's looks. She had never looked robust, even when he had known her first, but since she had come to the manse the air of delicacy seemed to have become accentuated. But it undoubtedly added to her beauty, giving it a spirituelle touch.

"Are you very tired, Edie?" he asked, with the solicitous air of a man who greatly values a treasure about which he is sometimes anxious.

"Not tired at all, only lazy, lazy all the time. What is it? Now I know by the expression in your eyes that I have left undone something I ought to have done. I can't think of anything. I was just comforting myself in the intervals of Maeterlinck, with the assurance that I had got through the week pretty well."

"I have no fault to find with you," he answered, as he laid his strong sun-burned hand over her frail blue-veined one. "But Janet has upset me so that I can't get to my sermon. She has, what I think you call, given notice."

"Oh, is that all? There are threatenings of it most days. We live to the music of muttered thunder. I don't mind it in the least now. She doesn't mean it."

"But I think this time she does. We can't let her go, Edith. It's impossible! You must try and talk her over."

"But why can't we let her go if she wants to? Unwilling service never yet blessed anybody, either him who gives or him who takes," she answered, in a low perplexed voice. "What ails Sally? She could do for us. She's just as willing as she used to be in Glasgow."

"And just as incapable," retorted Fleming, on the spur of the moment. "She's the head and front of the offence this time. Janet calls her the 'tippenny lassie.'"

His laugh rolled out as he spoke these two words, struck by the comic side of things, and the memory of Janet's tragic air. "And to-day, she even so far forgot herself—Janet, I mean—as to 'cloot Sally's lugs,' *i.e.* box them. Then she went to her own room and incontinently wept. These things are getting on the good creature's nerves. Can't you devise some means of pouring balm of Gilead on such wounds?" Edith knit her brows.

"Janet is tiresome, Pat. She wearies and depresses me, like too much wind, or a succession of rainy days. I concede all her good points—oh yes, I sit in sackcloth and ashes before them—but she is not a comfortable person to live with. If she is determined, why then let her go, we'll get someone else."

Fleming sat silent a moment, contemplating all that these words might portend. And further contempla-

tion of a Janet-less manse of Rochallan did not uplift or reassure him.

"Look here, Edie, wouldn't you like to have Alison through for a week?"

"Through where?" she asked with her whimsical smile at his Scotch idiom. "Yes, I do want to see her, most terrible, as Janet might say. But she turns a deaf ear to all my hints. They've absorbed her up there, that terrible husband of hers, and all the hunger-stricken, locked-out folks; but it's life, Pat, and I don't wonder that she has forgotten us in our backwater."

"Well, but she has a duty to her folk," said Patrick grimly. "I'll write and ask her to come next week. Then you can add a postscript."

So saying, not much furthered or helped, but certainly comforted, in some odd sense, which he could not have put in words, Patrick Fleming bent over his wife and kissed her with deep tenderness; she patted his cheek and sent him off to his sermons with a smile, and so that queerly matched couple, who had found some inward meeting-place, settled down to spend their evening, each in a characteristic way.

Edith dipped into Maeterlinck again, and then drawing her writing case from the under shelf of the little table on which the lamp stood, began to indite a little letter to Alison. It was extremely short, but it accomplished what Patrick's more elaborate document might have failed to do.

"Dearest of Sisters," it began, "it is time for you to return to the bosom of your family, and sort them. That, I believe, is the right word, the only word that will bring you to, your ever-affec.,

"and oftentimes-hungry, EDIE."

Patrick did not see that little letter. With her own hands Edith slipped it into his envelope when he brought it to the supper-table at nine o'clock, having

then advanced so far in his Sunday work that he had chosen his morning text. They had a delightful meal together, after which Patrick smoked a pipe to the tune of certain choice bits from Maeterlinck, which Edie had selected for his delectation. Then she went to bed, and after he had tucked her in (without which ceremony she refused to go any night to bed), and bidden her a lingering good-night, he re-entered his study and shut the door. It was then half-past ten, the house was quiet, and the only sound that broke upon his ears was the boom of the surf on the shore, aftermath of a westerly storm. But it soothed him, and he addressed himself to his task with zest and courage.

What a change had six months wrought in Patrick Fleming! They had changed him from the complacency and the indolence of the sheltered and the legislated-for, into the alert watchfulness of the man who had awakened, as if out of a sound sleep, to a sudden and full sense of life and its meaning and responsibility.

Therefore the words that he wrote were winged words, inspired by the consciousness of his own abounding spiritual need.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PLACE OF TRYSTS.

JANET AIKEN stood breathless on the doorstep on Saturday night waiting for the rumble of the old cab wheels from Seadoon Station.

Alison had replied to her sister-in-law's letter that she and her husband could not arrive until Saturday night, and could therefore make only a short week-end. She had been so excited all day that her work had suffered, and even her brave intention to get as much cooking done as would tide them over the Sunday had fallen a little short. Alison had written that no late dinner would be required, as they would dine on the train. It was now half-past ten, and though they were not actually due till eleven o'clock, Janet could not keep away from the door. Her mistress was in the drawing-room waiting with exemplary patience; the minister having gone alone to the station. Janet could not help thinking of another night not so very long ago, though in some lights it looked like centuries, when she had waited the arrival of the cab bringing her dear Miss Ailie back from Birtley. That had been a fateful visit, a fateful home-coming, and the beginning of all the trouble. Janet had a strange inkling, though she had really very slender grounds for it, that things were not going so well as at first with Mrs. Crewe. It was not so much what she said in her letters as that which she left unsaid. Great love, even in an unlettered woman, has swift arrows of intuition, and Janet knew that her dearest Miss Ailie was not entirely

happy, that she had certain anxieties and cares of which she could not speak. And now she would see for herself, and though it was unlikely that any speech concerning the inmost things would pass between them, her eyes would be able to gather from the beloved face whether all were well, or only middling, or even ill.

It was a beautiful summer night, with a sky of clear stars, and a soft westerly wind, which relieved the sultriness, and scarcely stirred the surface of the sea. The red roses climbing about the manse porch smelt sweetly in the heavy dew, certainly nature smiled her kindest welcome.

Presently, when the undoubted rumble of wheels sounded on the quiet road, Janet felt her eyes suddenly moist, and dashing her apron across them sped to the outer gate. About a hundred yards down the road flashed the twin lights of the cab, and she could even hear the voices of the occupants, thus proving that the travellers had undoubtedly arrived. She ran back to the porch, and then again down to the gate, and was there standing when the cab drew up.

"Didn't I tell you, Ailie?" said the minister's teasing voice. "It's a wonder we didn't meet her half-way down the road, beating a drum."

"Haud your nonsense, sir," said Janet, in an odd voice; and looking beyond the burly figure of Mr. Crewe, as if it were of less consequence to her than the dust of the road, she reached out towards her old mistress.

"There ye are, Miss Ailie! I mean, mem; oh, hoo are ye? Say ye are quite weel."

"Quite, Janet, thank you, my dear," answered Alison; and their hands met in the starry darkness and the clasp spoke volumes to each. Janet, now openly in tears, turned about then, and ran into the house, ashamed of herself and angry too that she should thus demean and make a fool of herself in front of Miss Ailie's English husband

But she had dried her eyes, and was hovering about in the background of the little hall, where Edith had come out to welcome the arrivals; and when Janet saw the warm embrace, and the look of affection which passed between the minister's wife and his sister, she was filled with sheer amazement. She was not sure that she was pleased. There was jealousy in her, burning fierce and strong and hard, jealousy of everybody who aspired to steal any bit of her Miss Ailie. But presently she remembered that her immediate part was to see that their coffee was hot and strong, and she retired to her own domain a chastened woman.

She saw nothing more of Mrs. Crewe until an hour later, when she heard her being taken to her room by Mrs. Fleming. Then she sat down on the attic stairs without so much as undoing her shoe-latchet, though it was now long after her bedtime, and Sunday had dawned; and waited with a sort of slow rage for the shutting of her mistress's door. It did not matter at all to her that the door of the guest chamber was shut close and fast, indicating that the two meant to have their woman's talk, while the men-folk had their pipes downstairs.

Janet, with her chin on her hands, waited dourly for the moment when she could have Miss Ailie to herself. And she prayed fervently that the men would find their crack so interesting and absorbing that they would sit over their pipes till morning, which proves that all the foundations of her being were profoundly stirred.

The moment the door closed on them, Alison and Edith stood as if with one accord in the middle of the floor, and regarded one another with a sort of fixed affectionate inquiry. Each was conscious of change in the other. Alison was much thinner, and her face had more sweetness, yet had certain anxious lines upon it which disturbed Edith. Alison thought that her brother's wife looked fragile and even ill.

"You are not well, my dear?" she said quickly. "What have they been doing to you; working you too hard, or what?"

"Oh no, I don't do much, if anything I'm incorrigibly lazy. Ask Janet. She'll give you my character. That is why you've been sent for——" she added with her little laugh of sheer music. "Sit down, you dear and blessed woman, and tell me every single blessed thing about you. What have they been doing to you to make these little lines here, and here, and here?"

She touched Alison's face with a loving finger, and her eyes were full of the utmost and tender concern, "Are there lines? but consider my age," she answered trying to speak lightly but not able altogether to banish the fulness from her voice. "To-morrow will be my birthday, and I shall be thirty-nine."

"Age has no limit," murmured Edith. "Why didn't somebody tell me about to-morrow. We shall have no birthday feast. Janet will tell you I have no margin. I am the worst of housekeepers."

Alison smiled, and almost immediately it was followed by a sigh.

"You mustn't let her go, dear. Pat wrote to me, and she herself wrote. You don't know what it would be like without her. You would be harassed to death."

"My body might, but my soul would be free," laughed Edith. "Frankly, we don't understand one another. Can any amount of domestic comfort, well-scoured floors and mats beaten within an inch of their lives, make up for the lack of that? I am more at home with Sally, which shows the depths of my degradation. Janet, I fear, must this time please herself, and I have told Patrick so. We can't grovel. Tell me how do you think he is looking?"

"Oh, Pat looks splendid. I have never seen him look better. I wish I could say the same of you, my dear. You seem to have grown smaller, as if you were shrinking into yourself. Aren't you happy in my old nest?"

"Happy, oh yes! He is a dear, big child, but he is growing up fast, owing to having realised the fact that there is not room for two babies in one house."

There was a faint light in her eyes, and the rare colour, like the blush of a late sunset, dyed her cheek. Something in the tone, she did not know what, caught at Alison's heart, and she took her by the slender shoulders and turned her face to the light.

"Is it that, Edith, that has sharpened your cheek? Will there be—will there be another Patrick Fleming in the manse of Rochallan?"

Edith nodded, and when they had recovered from the little rush of feeling following upon the sharing of a secret so precious, they sat down again to talk.

Alison's eyes were alive with the wonder and joy of it, and she looked at her sister-in-law as if she were something precious.

"What does Pat say?" she asked, in an awe-stricken voice.

"Pat does not know," came the answer quick and a little breathless. "Why should he? There is time. I—I hate the women who talk of these things, Alison. They are ours, our very own, and who hawks them in the market-place makes a vulgar place of a sanctuary."

"My dear, my dear!" said Alison, patting the blue-veined hand that lay so near hers. "But think of the joy it will be to him."

"Some day, when I think he needs to be lifted up, I will tell him," answered Edith of the understanding heart. "To-morrow perhaps you will talk with some of the people, and hear my judgment. Some of them look at me with hard eyes, but many, oh, many of them are sweetly kind. You see, I am an alien. The other day I saw a wind-flower on one of the sand-dunes. Its head was not very high, but it was trying to be very sturdy. It was trying to bloom. To-day when I went back, we have had such storms all the week,

its poor head was bent, and its bloom was gone. Do you think that will happen to me, Alison?"

"God forbid," said Alison fervently. "Why should it? It is only a question of time when they will all be at your feet. Look how you conquered me, who was the hardest of them all."

"Ah, but you had the rich depths, and—and I think you need them all, Alison. Tell me how is it with you, away in that strange fighting place where there seems to be no peace. I have tried to get at the bottom of things in your letters; then Patrick says I twist your meanings, and that there is nothing behind them, that they mean only what they say. Are you at home there?"

"Oh yes, I am. I could not leave it now. There is a kind of fearsome joy in strife, Edith, in awaking to a new day, on which you never know what will happen. It rouses one up, makes all your forces live, brings you face to face with yourself. When I was here—oh, my dear, how very far away it seems, almost as if it had never been but in dreams!—I was a law to myself. I tried to be one to other folk too, and it was bad for me, all bad."

"No, no; for it made you strong," said Edith eagerly.

"It is not strength a woman needs so much, my dear, when life is a battle ground, as courage to be quiet. To be quiet, and hold on, and guard her tongue and pray hard, these are her weapons in places where ordinary ones are of no use."

Just one little corner of the veil did Alison lift, and Edith was too wise and too far-seeing to seek to raise it by so much as another inch. There was perhaps no need. She had not studied the hard face of Edmund Crewe at the table downstairs, watched the tenacity of his look, heard in his vibrating voice the iron will and the haste and impatience of trifles without getting an insight. She had no thirst for details, her nature was wholly above them.

"I only want to know one thing, you are not altogether sorry then, Alison? You are not wishing here and now that I was at the bottom of the sea, and you yourself back again in the old place?"

"No, no, my dear, that could never be. Whatever happens I am glad that things are as they are. I think that there has been something for me to do up there. Stephen will be coming home in the autumn. He and Anne and Tibbie are in the Austrian Tyrol at present, and he is so much better that he is climbing mountains with them. That was worth doing, Edie. If you had seen the poor laddie you would say that."

There was a far-away look in Edith's eyes which never found expression. But it had a vast compassion behind it, for the woman who had to seek reasons for her marriage, because the supreme reason and justification are absent, has an empty heart.

"I am going to put you to your bed now, my dear," said Alison, jumping up; "or there will be whiter cheeks to-morrow, and then Pat will scold me. Come!"

"I don't want to go yet, but you must be tired too, and it's after twelve o'clock," said Edith with faint unwillingness.

Then they went together to the other room, and talked a little more, only about things, however, and not at all about their own selves, and finally at twenty minutes past twelve, Alison, a little tired and done, found herself alone. But not for more than a moment. A quick step on the landing, a little hurried tap, a swift opening of the door, and there stood Janet, her hard face aglow, her thin hair drawn tightly back in its knot, and her harsh features unsoftened by the little cap she usually wore. Also her straight black frock, unrelieved by the snow of her apron, showed the angularity of her figure.

"Oh, Miss-Aillie, dinna be angry! but I maun see ye; I canna sleep without."

Alison smiled her welcome.

"Come in, my dear, and you can undo my new-fangled bodice, for I had forgotten that I couldn't do it myself. I've grown into a fine lady, Janet, with a maid to take off and put on my frocks."

"An' it's what ye deserve, Miss Ailie. And hoo are ye, my dear?" cried Janet, as her fingers flew to the willing service. "An' hoo are ye gettin' on up there among thae fechtin' folk, an' the smoke an' the noise. Are ye happy, my dear?"

"Oh yes, yes, quite happy," answered Alison a little breathlessly, and looking in the mirror at the moment, as Janet bent to her task at her back, she smiled as if to reassure herself.

"Well, it's mair than I am. Will ye tak' me to Birtley when I leave the manse, Miss Ailie?"

"I would do that, and be glad, but you are not leaving the manse, not a bit of you," was Alison's firm response.

Janet struggled a moment with a refractory hook, then emerged triumphant with a toss of her head.

"I am leavin'. Wild horses winna keep me here."

"No, that I believe, but something else will, my dear, something very different. Listen, Janet, you would never turn your back on the Flemings at this late day."

"I'm not seeking to serve anybody else," said Janet proudly. "I've saved a wee bittie, and I was thinkin' that if naebody needed me, I might gang into the ludgin' business. Me and Christie's cook has been speakin' aboot gaun thegither for a long time. We think we could mak' it pey."

"I haven't a doubt, but we can't do without you yet, Janet."

"Oh yes, ye can. I was in hopes that maybe Miss Tibbie might be takin' a sma' hoose somewhere, and that a guid general servant like mysel' might hae had a chance. But noo that she is for ever gallivantin' in furrin places, besides writing books—" she added, with a scathing note which suggested that it put

Tibbie altogether outside the pale of ordinary things—
"she doesna seem to be needin' onything o' the kind."

She smoothed the folds of her old mistress' gown, and gave it a little pat as she laid it across the end of the bed, and then stood still as if ready to argue the question to the day of doom.

"Janet, your place is in the manse of Rochallan, and here you must stop, for another six months at least."

"What for should I stop?" asked Janet dourly.
"Her an' me's no' gettin' on. She disna ken a single hate about housekeepin', an' cares less. Ony day an' a' days are the same to her, an' if she were left she wad bile the flannels, I'm sure."

"Then why go? Could you sleep comfortable in any strange bed, Janet Aiken, knowing that the minister's best flannels might any day be boiled?"

"Noo you're laughin' at me, an' it's no' fair. You've cheenged too, Miss Ailie. It's thae English folk, an' English weys. Whay wey do the Scotch seek to mix up wi' them? It was never meant that they should mix. Ilka country should keep to itsel', then there wadna be this fell confusion."

"The confusion is inside of you, my dear," said Alison, with a great and almost sad gentleness. "The things you bother your dear head about don't matter in the least. They are of less account than the sand on the shore. They have nothing to do with life. Oh, Janet, it is full of strange forces that bring us to our knees! You and me living here in the manse, doing each day what we willed, knew nothing about it. We never lived at all. We were nothing but bairns playing at the keeping of a house."

The strange fire that burned in her old mistress' eyes, the passion of her voice, laid a strange awe upon Janet's spirits and kept her dumb. She felt that she was nothing but a bairn being chided for wilfulness.

"Oh, but I wish, I wish, Miss Ailie, that we could

hae gone on in the auld wey. It was a good wey, and ye are sair missed."

"There was work for me to do elsewhere, Janet, and for you there is work to do here. Listen——"

She leaned forward, her eyes shining, and Janet greatly admired the white pillar of her throat where it rose from the snow of her bosom. What she whispered caused a sudden flush to overspread Janet's face.

"A bairn, a little bairn in the manse o' Rochallan, an' naebody but *her* to mither it!" she said passionately. "Yes, I'll bide; I'll bide through thick and thin."

There were tears in her eyes as she mounted her attic stair and laid herself down upon her spartan bed, not to sleep, only to ponder till the small hours on the complex mystery of life.

Saddest of all thoughts, she felt that an immeasurable gulf—the gulf of experience—now divided her from the mistress of her heart.

She had no doubt, looking at her face, noting the untold depths of her beautiful grey eyes, that she had been down in the deeps, where none could reach to help her, save God. Janet Aiken prayed hard that the God of their fathers might be round about all the children of her love, and that they and she might be guided into paths of peace. So praying, she fell asleep.

Next morning Alison sat with a deep satisfaction in her heart between her husband and her brother's wife in the manse pew.

A little flutter ran through the church at sight of her, for she was not and never would be forgotten. She felt their kindly scrutiny, the friendly welcome in their eyes, the homely and comforting atmosphere of the place. But when the first note of praise rang out to the beautiful old appeal—

"O God of Bethel, by Whose hand
Thy people still are fed,
Who through this weary pilgrimage
Hast all our fathers led,"

her eyes filled with foolish tears. All the chords of her being were vibrating under the old spell of memory, of faith, and of hope. She glanced up into her husband's face; it was set like an iron mask, but conscious of her mute appeal, he smiled back into her eyes and touched the fingers that lay upon the book-board. To him the service made no appeal and he was even wearied of the sermon, every word of which Alison drank in with a breathless interest, as one parched might inhale some refreshing draught. Her soul was uplifted by it, and filled with a great thankfulness. For here was no falling off, nay, there was a new note of gladness, of assurance, of warm human sympathy, precious as Gilead's balm in her brother's words. Alison knew, and the knowledge comforted her at a moment when her heart was heavy that her going forth had been a blessing to her brother, that it had widened his borders, and made his whole nature to blossom like the rose. She assured herself that in the Great Plan of a wise and all-loving God there can be nothing lost. To give up is not necessarily to lose, nay, it may be the forging of new bonds, which having their roots in eternity, will blossom among the immortals.

In this uplifted mood, her heart and nature cried for solitude and silence. She escaped early from the church doors, though many sought her, and without saying a word to anyone made haste up the Rochallan Road in the direction of the little wood where she had met at least two crises in her life. As she walked, she communed with herself; and the silence was good for her, and the breath of her native air, sweet yet with the freshness of the sea in it, seemed to rest upon her like a benediction. She knew then that the hurried journey had not been objectless, that it had its place in the scheme of things, that for her it was a necessary part of the day's work. So she came in a somewhat subdued and pensive mood to the white gate, and the place of memories. She hesitated only

a moment, ere she plunged into the cool green depths of the wood. She was fain to stand just one moment by that place of tryst, to commune with her own heart, and then she would go back and go on again.

But when she came to the old bridge there was someone before her, and when the figure turned, and a shaft of sunlight struck the open bronzed face of the lover of her youth, and she saw his eyes, kind and true and winning as of old-time looking into hers, with a strange hunger of sadness she gave a little cry, and put out her hands as if she would push away from her some memory that was more than she could bear.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DREAD SABBATH DAY.

"ARCHIE!" she said at last, and in her voice there was an odd quavering note, "Is it you or your wraith?"

He scarcely smiled, nor did he seek to touch the hand she somewhat hesitatingly extended, and which she immediately drew back.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, and the pleasant voice that seldom uttered harsh words to man or woman had such a note in it as drove pain to her heart. Also she saw that time had ravaged his face, that he looked old and sad, that the dark hair had whitened at the temples and that the laughing merry eyes were sad. To him, no less than to her, life had hardly been kind.

"I! oh I!" she said a little unsteadily. "Surely it is not forbidden that we should come sometimes to the places we have loved, even after we have gone clean away from them."

"And do you bring your new husband here?" he asked, with a sort of scorn which made her colour rise. "The rich husband who has given you all the things they say that women prize."

Her wounded look stabbed him, and in a moment he threw off his cruel air.

"Alison, why did you do it?" he asked, with all the earnestness she remembered of old, when he had so eloquently made his plea. "Did nothing tell you

I was waiting yet at the other side of the world for the word that would bring me to you ? ”

“ No, ” she answered dully. “ Nothing told me, and the other side of the world is too far away, when there comes never a word from it. How was I or any woman to know ? ”

She answered him simply and truly as he had himself spoken ; she was incapable of anything else.

“ I don't understand it, ” he said more quietly. “ I had a letter from my Cousin Evelyn in Dublin, and then another from my aunt at Seadoon Manse, both saying the same thing, that it was time for me to come home, that you were left, and that it was not too late. I would find you waiting. I did not write. I simply rose up and came. I got here on Wednesday night, and the first news that met me in Glasgow was that you had married somebody else. So now, there is nothing left but for me to gird up my loins and go back to my own place. It has only added another pang to a useless and not too happy life. It was not fair, Alison, nor was it like you, but I suppose that the years have changed us both. ”

“ I didn't know they had written, ” she said faintly ; “ and I don't know how it was that they did not tell you the whole truth, for it was not many days after I heard of my brother's coming marriage, that I myself— I myself— ” here her voice faltered— “ gave my promise to Mr. Crewe. ”

“ The mere day, more or less, makes little difference to the deed, ” he said grimly. “ The fact remains that you did not keep the troth you plighted here. You said you never would marry another man. ”

“ But I left you free, Archie, ” she said faintly. “ Don't forget that I left you a free man. ”

“ I did not consider myself free, and you knew it. ”

“ But the long silence ! ” she pitifully urged. “ How was I to know ? ”

“ You asked too hard a thing of a man, Alison, that he should carry on the lover's traffic without hope

of his reward. What would have been the good of letters? Would they have fed a hungry man? I have never ceased to want you out there, I will never cease to want you now, and though you are changed in one way, I have never seen you look more like—more like the Alison Fleming I have been thinking of all these years."

Just for a moment Alison listened to these lover-like words, and the glamour of the old time crept over her with a sweetness that surpassed, then suddenly she bethought herself that it was unseemly that she, a middle-aged woman and the wife of Edmund Crewe, should be hearing them on a Sabbath Day, or any day, from the lips of another man not her husband.

"I am sorry, Archie. I can say no more," she answered; and it was as if she drew herself away, and put on some curb that was hard to find and to fix. "It has all been a mistake, a hideous mistake, but— but don't think that nobody but you has suffered. Have I not suffered? Look at me, an old woman in my prime."

"Not you, you have never looked sweeter," he asserted, and he was the boy again, and the man's sadness and grimness had died clean away from his handsome face. "A mistake, you say—but it was wrong from the beginning. God made you and me for one another, Alison, and nobody, not even what you called your duty, had the right to come between us. Now I shall go back and care nothing what becomes of me, for who is there to care? I was kept alive by the crumbs I had thrown to me about you from my relations, from my Aunt Kate, who understood. When I accused her of double dealing with me the other day she had not a word to say."

"You hadn't the right to blame her," said Alison faintly. "And don't, oh don't, say nobody cares what becomes of you! Your mother, growing old and frail in Rochallan House, and your brother so long ill. Surely you will stop beside them now, and do your best

for them. There are other things in life besides our own selfish happiness, and it is possible to go on, when one has care for others. It is the only thing which makes life possible sometimes."

She made as if she would move away from him, but he was loth to let her go.

The great gulf was between them now and for ever, the great unbridgeable gulf, but surely some little lingering on its edge was permissible and would do harm to none.

"As it happens, Alison, I have made money out there, in that God-forsaken place; money comes to a man when he does not care about it, one way or another. And I could have given you all the things you want."

"I wanted nothing," she said desperately. "It was not for that I married, but just to clear the way, and make it easier for other folk. I was a problem, don't you see—" she added with a dreary half-smile—"the problem of the middle-aged woman without visible means of subsistence, and nothing but her hands, which a woman of our class may wear to the bone for her own folk, but which the law of convention says she must not soil for other folk without losing caste. Not that these things matter, but I thought they did, and I was not proof against temptation. That is the whole matter in a nutshell, Archie Mackerrow, and the best thing you and I can do now is to say good-bye sensibly, and forget one another as fast as we can. You have the better chance, and it may be that even yet you will find some woman worthier of you, and who will make you happier than I could have done."

But though she spoke brave words, her eyes belied them, and it was a moment of peril for these two, to whom it had come unsought. For though their youth had for ever passed them by, the hot heart of youth remained, and they had been cheated of the joy which is the best thing life has to give. But at the

moment another footstep on the underwood startled them, and Alison, wheeling round suddenly, grew fiery red, and then ashen pale, for it was her husband, who had come to the place of trysts to seek her. There are moments that need no explanation, their very poignancy explains them. For one brief moment these three, whom destiny had so strangely caught in her web, faced one another and the veil was rent. Even in that moment of desperate strain the one thing which stood out most clearly before Alison was the swift sharp contrast between the man she had married, and the man she had loved. Archie Mackerrow, tall, slender, lean and brown, with breeding stamped on every feature, whom clean living and high purpose had kept unspotted from the world in the midst of fierce temptations, and Edmund Crewe, the embodiment of selfish indulgence, the man who had made money his god! The expression upon his florid face, at the moment was a sinister one; and Mackerrow, with a look of surprise and disgust in his eyes, which hurt Alison acutely, slightly raised his cap and walked away. Alison, scarcely acknowledging it, turned to her husband and began to walk in the opposite direction. She could not speak a word. She did not know what to say. It seemed to her at the moment as if the heavens had fallen, and nothing else mattered.

"So that's the fine lover—" Mr. Crewe said at last. "And that's the upshot of all the psalm-singing and the praying; after all, it don't amount to much."

The coarse innuendo of the words, their unmistakable suggestion, filled Alison with such loathing and dismay that her courage, momentarily quenched, returned to her like a whirlwind. She stood still on the mossy path and looked at him with a kind of cold fury.

"How dare you speak like that to me? How dare you?" she said, in a high clear voice. "I have no lover. I had one, yes, many years ago, and that was he, and I was proud to see him again, and him to see

me. We were parted by a mistake. We have cleared up that mistake; and that is all. If you had been there to hear every word, they would have been spoken just the same. I would to God you had——"

"And now what's the upshot to be," he continued precisely, as if he had not heard her words. "Whether it is to be him or me?"

The passion of her righteous wrath blazing in her eyes, daunted even him who seldom shrank from the face of man, and certainly never before from the face of woman.

"I will not speak to you; you are a wicked man to say such things which you know to be untrue!"

Her pride being so outraged, her womanly feeling hurt, she walked away with her head in the air, careless for the moment of the pain which had prompted these hard words.

She forgot—for even a good woman can be selfish in her uttermost pain—that this man had married her for love alone, that awaking late in life to a sense of the things he had lost, or never had possessed, he had hoped there was still time to come up with happiness.

He had done her no wrong. She and she alone had wronged him, by marrying him when her heart was cold. Now both must pay the price.

They were half-way down the road, presenting to any chance passer-by the odd spectacle of a man and wife walking many paces apart, and with such gloom on their faces that all who ran might read, before she suddenly pulled herself up and waited for him to come alongside of her.

For in a few more minutes' time they would reach the manse gate, and the part, however difficult, would have to be played. They must, out of decent pride, if nothing else, arrange in what spirit they would meet it.

She waited, and her eyes timidly fixed themselves on his scowling and forbidding face. Never had it looked more bleak and unapproachable. Remember-

ing the sweet kindness and forbearance he had shown in the Paris days, she wondered whether she had but dreamed that this hard man could have a softer side.

"Have you nothing more to say?" she asked in a low voice. "Whatever we suffer at least we must not let them suspect anything at my brother's house. That would be the hardest thing of all to bear."

"As far as I am concerned, you needn't trouble yourself," he answered surlily. "I shall go to Glasgow to-night, and travel home by the night train."

She wrung her hands in an agony of perplexity and misery that was absolute. The open road, with its chance passers-by, is hardly the place for talk so serious and intimate, for the settlement of a bit of the tragedy of life, but the white manse gate was in sight, and the viands would be on the table. It was necessary to arrange the mask.

"I need not say I am sorry," she said, in the same low, pleading voice. "But I do assure you, Edmund, that nothing passed in Rochallan Wood which you could not have heard. I told you about Archie Mackerrow before we married. I kept nothing back."

"Except the fact that you cared about him yet," he reminded her. "Don't make excuses. Let the thing lie. At least I'm no worse off than I was before. I'm accursed, and have been all my life. You can go on to them at the house. No, I can't come and sit at the table. Tell them I've gone for a long walk. I'll come back later on, in time for the train."

"I will not let you go like that," she said firmly. "Wherever you go I will go, and I will pack my things ready to go back to Birtley with you to-night."

"I don't want you; you'd better stop with your own folk," he said ruthlessly. "Where the treasure is the heart is, isn't that somewhere in the Bible you're so fond of. I don't care—I'm cured."

He spoke the words in a tone of such cold menace that she stood still on the road, and looked at him with wide, questioning eyes.

"What do you mean by these words, Edmund? Do you cast me off? Do you mean that you don't wish me to go back to Birtley with you, that I'm to have no home any more under your roof?"

"No, I don't go so far as that. You can come back when it suits you, but I don't want any more pretence, I'm sick of it. Once bitten twice shy, you know. I'd never believe in you again."

They had now come to the gate, and without further word he turned on his heel and went off down the road towards Seadoon.

Alison, with horror in her eyes, and a sort of spasm contracting her white face, steadied herself against the gate and looked after the retreating and lonely figure, with a vast compassion in which apprehension mingled. She felt powerless, paralysed; she did not know what to do or say. But he had forbidden her to follow him, he had cast her out. All life seemed to crumble in ruins at her feet. Suddenly the opening of the door and her brother's voice, cheerily calling to her, caused her scattered wits to gather themselves by an effort that was supreme.

"Come along, Ailie; Janet is in despair, and we're all waiting. It's near two o'clock. Where's Edmund?"

She shut the gate, uplifted her heart in a brief petition for help, and bravely faced the world again.

"He does not care for any lunch, he has gone for a walk. Don't trouble about him, he'll be all right by tea-time. I'm sorry I'm so late. I walked as far as Rochallan, where I met Archie Mackerrow. We stopped to speak, of course, and—and, well—fifteen years take a lot of handling. Tell Edie I won't be a minute."

She passed him in the doorway, and ran up to her own room.

A woman is a better actress than a man; be she ever so frail and delicate she has somewhere in her composi-

tion an inflexible purpose which rushes to her aid when there is something to be hidden, some hurt to be kept from the public gaze. Nobody could have guessed from Alison's demeanour as, a few minutes later, she slipped into her place at the table that she felt the foundations of her life tottering, that she did not know what lay in front.

"So you saw Archie?" said Patrick Fleming, as he applied the edge of his carving knife to the cold steel, at the same time regarding his sister with a puzzled look. He had only heard on Friday that the second son of Rochallan, still a bachelor, had returned home, and, after brief consultation with his wife, had decided not to mention his name to his sister. "I heard he had come, of course, but nobody seems to have seen him. How does he look?"

"Very little changed except that he is a little grey, like the rest of us," Alison answered flippantly. "I'm really sorry, Edie, only I know you don't mind, and you don't take the Bible Class, as I used to, so you can lie down in the afternoon."

"But I've to take it," said Patrick, with a mock groan. "I've had to take up the most of your work, my dear, and the trouble is you had set the standard rather high. Hadn't she, Edie?"

"Oh yes, but I do believe that they find it rather a relief not to be kept up to such high-water mark," answered Edith, with a half-teasing smile at her sister-in-law, at the same time wondering what had given that feverish brightness to her eyes, and the deep pink flush to her cheeks. She guessed that the interview with the old lover had stirred her pulses, and woman-like she hoped to hear Alison's version of it later. But in that she was mistaken. Soon after lunch, to which Alison did poor justice, she excused herself, on the plea that Rochallan air affected her now as if she were a stranger, said she would go and lie down for an hour, and be ready to see them all at tea-time, when she hoped her husband would be back.

"Pat," said Edie, the moment the door closed on her, "something's happened."

"What kind of a thing? Ailie saw her old sweetheart, but you heard how lightly she spoke of him. It neither gave her a shock nor a qualm. Yet here have I been biting my tongue stiff ever since she came, in the effort to keep back the news of his return. It just shows that no man can ever fathom any woman."

"Patrick Fleming, you are as blind as any bat," she answered unexpectedly. "There has been a scene of some sort, and Mr. Crewe has disappeared to work it off. Didn't you notice Alison's nervousness? She was in a perfect fever, and her eyes were blazing like stars. As for her voice, it hadn't a true note in it."

"All imagination, Edie, and diseased imagination at that," he made answer, trying to speak lightly, though his brow clouded in a sudden gloom.

"I wish it were imagination, I sincerely wish it," said Edie fervently. "It isn't at all comfortable to be able to see inside of people and things. It gives you too many bad half-hours. Did you ever know your sister to admit that she was tired, and wanted to sleep in the daytime? She has gone up because she needs to have it out with herself."

"We sent for her to help us," said Patrick Fleming dolefully. "Instead, is she bringing us her own troubles?"

"It had to be, Pat. Don't you know that life is like that, and all the things that happen, just so many milestones that have to be passed. And the men and women who have passed the most are the happiest."

It was one of the cryptic utterances which so often fell from Edith's lips, and which her husband mostly refused to take seriously, though he freely admitted that they gave the perpetual charm of the unexpected to his wife's company.

He retired to look over his work for the afternoon, pursued by the idea of serious friction between his

sister and her husband. He had already sufficient knowledge of his brother-in-law to feel assured that friction with him was an experience to be avoided.

Alison, in the guest-chamber, had shut the door, and now sat before the open window which looked seawards, with a blank expression on her face. Her brief married life had been full to the brim of fresh experiences, some of them difficult and disconcerting, but this was the worst of all. She had seen the spirit of evil in her husband's eyes that day, his worst self aroused by the fierceness of an unreasoning jealousy, which made her afraid. She did not know how she was going to allay that demon, since she could not get away from the fact that he had seen her with Archie Mackerrow, and that he refused to take her word.

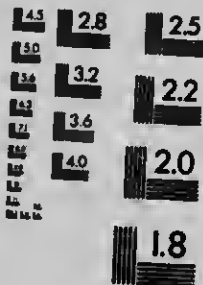
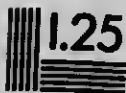
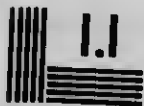
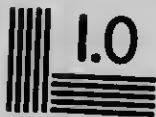
She did not know what to do. Her terrified thoughts followed him in imagination, picturing impossible and dreadful happenings. Men in such dour passion had even been known to take life—their own, or another's.

It was a terrible Sabbath day, a day to be blotted out afterwards from the book of remembrance. She could not pray, she could not uplift her heart or her thoughts, she could only sit alone waiting dumbly for something to happen, she knew not what. She heard some movement in the house from time to time, her brother leaving it for his duty in the vestry, the old clock on the stairs striking three, a few notes on the piano struck by Edith, and then stillness. A little later the closing of another door, then from her window she beheld Sally, the under-servant, dressed in her Sunday best, proceeding shorewards by the path through the kitchen garden. Then silence again. It was about four when she heard the noisy opening of the outer door and a heavy footfall come stumbling towards the bottom of the stairs. She flew out, pale as death, and took some agitated steps downwards; then she saw her husband and knew what had happened. The thing she had feared above all others



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had come to pass. He had simply sought the only solace he knew. She went down, and took him by the arm, and helped him up, dreading each moment that her brother or his wife would appear on the scene, and witness the degradation she fain would hide. But no one came, except Janet, who, on her way from the attic, where she had been changing into her afternoon gown, beheld the strange spectacle of Miss Ailie helping her husband into their room. She hesitated, longing to rush to her aid, but something held her back. Then the door was shut, and she knew that she was not needed or desired.

About half an hour later, when she was trying in vain to compose her mind to a study of her Sunday afternoon chapter, sitting by the white scrubbed table that stood across her kitchen window, the door was opened softly and Miss Ailie came in. She was as white as the delicate lace which composed the upper part of her gown, and in her eyes a still anguish burned. Janet sprang up, trembling in every limb.

"Oh, Miss Ailie, Miss Ailie!" she said "What is't? Is he ill or what?"

Ailie shook her head.

"He has fallen asleep. I want you to get some strong coffee ready against the time he awakes, and when I want it, I'll come for it."

"Yes, Miss Ailie, for sure—is there anything else?"

"Nothing. But—but—oh, Janet! Janet!"

She suddenly gave way, and sobs shook her voice.

Janet, now white and desperate, ran to her.

"My dear, my dear. Dinna greet. It's—it's—the drink, is it, but there are waur things—I never thocht——"

But Alison laid her hand on her lips, and drew herself up as if speech pained her beyond silence. Then a great fear and awe fell upon Janet Aiken, and her tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TIBBIE OF THE BRIGHT FACE.

TIBBIE FLEMING had become a woman of affairs.

She arrived in London on the evening of the twelfth of August for the purpose of having an interview with a publisher, who had remained in town to meet her. Tibbie was unaware of the vastness of such a concession on the part of a man who had been asked to shoot over one of the best moors in Yorkshire, and was naturally impatient to be gone.

She had exhibited no undue anxiety to meet him; the pressure had come from his side, which was also significant.

Intending to travel to Birtley after her interview was over, she drove from the boat train at Victoria to the London and North Western Hotel at Euston, having decided that she would find it the most convenient for her renewed travelling on the morrow.

She had made acquaintance with such a varied collection of hotels in her travels, that no new experience could daunt her.

But she was genuinely chagrined when she was told at Euston that they could not accommodate her.

She was pondering where to go next, standing biting her lip in the vestibule of the hotel, when she saw a man come in at the door, who instantly arrested her attention. A tall, lean brown man, wearing a grey lounge suit with an easy grace, a handsome though rather serious face, and a pair of keen dark eyes, all passed in review before her a full minute before

she could give them a name. But Archie Mackerrow remembered her, and after one quick, puzzled glance came forward, hat in hand.

"I'm not mistaken, and it is Tibbie," he said, with the smile which long ago had won her heart. In these far back days Tibbie had been consumed by a fierce though unacknowledged jealousy of Alison for having first secured and then flouted the only lover in Rochallan, nay, on the whole Kyle seaboard, worth anybody's while. And Tibbie, then a wiry maiden of fifteen, with two long pigtailed and unfathomable eyes of blue, had wept oceans of tears, and even written reams of doleful verse in search of relief, to her broken heart. But nobody had ever known; the secret had been carefully guarded, from Alison most of all. Doubtless it was these old and ridiculous memories which brought the flush to her face, and the suspicious brightness to her eyes, as she extended a frank hand to meet Mackerrow's kindly grasp.

"I thought—and yet when I looked again I felt sure it was you," she said a trifle unsteadily. "When did you come home?"

"I have been in Scotland a matter of six weeks," he answered. "I should have known you anywhere. Except for the long frocks and the elaborate hair, you are very little changed."

"Oh, Archie, are there any blarney-stones where you come from? We won't mention age. It is one of the things that have to be accepted with what grace we can muster. Well—I've been trying to haggle for a room here, but it's no good. I must go out again with all that baggage, and explore London."

"You are not going to Scotland then?"

"Not just yet. To-morrow I'm going down to Birtley to my sister."

She did not look at him as she said these words, beginning to walk slowly towards the door. Somehow she knew that there were closed doors, behind which maybe skeletons were hid. Tibbie's creed was to

keep such doors firmly shut, and to cultivate whatever would keep them shut. She had discovered long since that the greatest need of the world is joy, and she had done her little best to add to its sum.

Her happy face, the brightness which seemed to emanate from her, the familiar, kindly tone of her very sweet voice seemed to warm Mackerrow's empty heart. He had set out a wanderer again; in fact, he was on his way back to what he called "his own place."

"I'm stopping at the Russell. I believe they've room. Shall we go and try?"

"I don't mind; a place to lay my head I must have," she answered, and they passed out together; and he put her into the waiting cab, and followed himself.

"But hadn't you an appointment or something here?" she asked, after he had given the word to the driver.

"Not exactly an appointment. I heard of a man I knew in the East stopping here, and I sauntered round to ask him to dine. It's the abomination of desolation eating alone, but now I shall have you."

"Oh, shall you, Archie Mackerrow? I see you are not much changed," she answered, with a little trill in her voice. "And have you always been getting that way of yours, wherever you have been?"

Then she could have bitten her tongue for the crass stupidity of her speech, remembering what had sent him abroad first of all.

He made no answer, but after a full minute asked her from what end of the earth she had come, which unloosed her tongue, and they talked without ceasing until the hotel was reached. By that time Mackerrow was in full possession of all the facts, save one, of Tibbie's life. He knew that she had been abroad with a part of Mr. Crewe's family, but she did not tell him what had brought her back to London.

They had accommodation at the Russell, and Tibbie, very well content with what had befallen her, for her

heart was genuinely glad to behold the friend of her youth, proceeded to unlock her trunk, and try to find something suited to the occasion. In Vienna her artist's eye had been charmed with the women's dress, and she had invested to the limit of her means. Therefore it was a very alluring vision which met his eyes as he watched near the door of the hotel drawing-room for his unexpected guest. It was only what is mysteriously called "a little gown." Its foundation was black and white, but there were alluring touches of a delicious turquoise blue about it, which matched Tibbie's eyes. Never had her trim figure been so admirably treated, and the soft Mechlin lace at the throat, clear enough to show the white contour beneath, put the finishing touch. Archie Mackerrow admired her exceedingly. Tibbie saw it in his eye, and her heart was innocently glad. She guessed his hurt perhaps, and would have healed it if she could. Mackerrow, in his well-cut evening clothes, looked what Tibbie had always thought him, the handsomest man in the world.

Mackerrow, an accomplished diner, had already secured their seats, and in a little alcove in one of the windows they were as remote as if they had been alone in the room.

"This is a nice place," said Tibbie critically. "We've been in all sorts and conditions of hostels in the last two months, while we have been moving about. Most of all I loved those dear little mountain gast-houses, where you can live for three marks a day, and have unlimited beer. True, sometimes you are very near the cows and the pigs, but that, in such surroundings, is a mere and fitting detail."

Mackerrow asked her a good many questions just for the pleasure of hearing her answers. It was the touch of fun he loved, the irresistible desire and inclination to see the queer side of things first; then her laugh was the most delicious thing in the world. He fell to wondering how old she actually was, a sum in

mental arithmetic which caused him to give a somewhat divided attention to one of her little episodes of travel.

"You're not listening," she said, with a mock coldness. "You are bored, so now I shut up. It is your turn."

"I was listening," he assured her humbly. "Shall I tell you, I wonder, just what took me off at the moment?"

"Yes, do."

"Well, I was wondering how old you are."

"Stupid, can't you count?" she asked, darting a little bewildering glance across the flowers and the shaded lights. "When you went away from Rochallan you were twenty-five, and I was fifteen. How long have you been away?"

"So you are thirty-one—well, you don't look it."

"Of course it is polite to say that, but it isn't necessary. I've got some grey hairs, but, oh Archie, I don't like—I don't like to see yours!"

He pushed his fingers through the offending locks and gave a little hard laugh.

"Oh, they don't matter a—a—I want to say a naughty word, only I won't. Are you eating anything? I can't see for this lamp shade business. There, that's better!"

He moved it with a masterful hand, so that the table was clear between them. It was no great space, and he could watch every play of her features; and again he blessed his uncommon luck.

"Now may I ask you a question or two?"

"Oh sure, so long as you don't expect them all to be answered."

"But I do. You are going to your sister's house after you leave to-morrow, you say. Is it to be your home now?"

"Oh no, thank you."

That answer came with decisive enough promptitude.

"Will you go back to Rochallan again then? Guy is married, too, I understand."

"Yes, there came a sudden epidemic, and swept all the Flemings off, bar me," she said, with a little whimsical touch; "so you see before you the last leaf on the tree."

"And what are you going to do with your life? Where are you going to establish yourself?"

Tibbie was silent for a moment, appearing to devote her whole attention to the *soufflé* on her plate.

When at last she raised her eyes, they were very sober, and her mouth had lost its smile.

"Can you keep a secret, Archie?"

"I think so. I've had several handed over to me in the course of my life. But if you are going to tell me you are getting married to some man, I don't want to hear it."

Tibbie laughed, but her gaze was still abstracted.

"Oh no, there isn't any man, there never has been, at least, none that mattered," she explained, as the memory of certain persistent suitors rose up accusingly before her. "It's worse than that, a lot worse; I've written a book."

"A book!" he repeated, and there was no doubt about his interest. "A book, you, Tibbie Fleming, what about?"

"Ah, that's it. I've been scribbling off and on since I was about ten, only nobody suspected it. I even wrote a poem to celebrate your departure from Rochallan."

"I'll see that poem," he said, with the utmost daring.

"No, you won't; besides, it's destroyed."

"I suppose it was a chant of praise, as you say you *celebrated* my departure," he remarked grimly.

"I suppose it must have been," she answered demurely. "Well, and do you want to hear any more about the book?"

"I want to hear all about it."

"That's what brought me here. I have an interview with a real publisher to-morrow in Bouverie Street at half-past ten. I do believe I'll send you, Archie, in my stead."

"But he'd know, unless you've been masquerading as a man. That's what some of them do nowadays, isn't it?"

"I haven't any name, the things I've published have been anonymous, and a very good thing for me."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, they were written about Birtley, and real folk. My brother-in-law was among them, only he did not recognise himself, for Alison told me."

Mackerrow, at this, suddenly leaned his arms on the table, and looked across at her with a kind of steady glower.

"Tibbie, why did you let her marry that man? In Heaven's name, why did she do it?"

Tibbie's eyes fell before the poignancy in his voice.

"Ask me another one," she answered very low.

"I p'eaded with her, we all did," she added a trifle recklessly, "but something seemed to possess her just then. She was awfully put out about Pat's engagement, don't you know. It clean put her back up, and I do believe"—she added confidentially—

"that in the first instance she accepted him out of spite, just to show them she could make a grand marriage if she liked."

"But, Tibbie, the man himself—I only saw him for a moment, but he's an outsider. It's written all over him. He's miles below her. To picture them together is intolerable, unthinkable! She couldn't be happy with him."

"Oh, but I think it's not so bad. You see, he happens to be fond of her, really fond; it was a love-match on his side, though it seems rather ridiculous to speak about a man like Mr. Crewe being in love. Then did you see Alison when she was at Rochallan?"

"Yes."

"Where did you see her? Did you call at the manse while they were there?"

"No, we met accidentally outside, in Rochallan Wood in fact, on Sunday after church."

"They were walking there?" pursued Tibbie rather mercilessly; but she felt insatiably curious to hear the ins and outs of the story, and as Mackerrow had spoken of Alison of his own free will, even introducing the subject of her marriage, she supposed he did not mind very much.

"She came there by herself, and I rather think he followed, seeking her," he answered evasively. Then Tibbie guessed that he did not wish to say more.

"She has been able to do a great deal for his family, and they all adore her," she went on rather quickly. "I've been abroad with two of them, and Stephen, the only son, who has been an invalid all his life, is now much better, thanks to the interest Alison began to take in him the moment she went to the Hall. Well, what is it now?"

She broke off there because she imagined signs of restiveness in her companion.

"I was only wondering, it's just after eight o'clock, whether you would like to go to a theatre. It isn't too late yet, I can telephone to some of the box offices.

"I'd rather not, thank you. I'm feeling just a little tired. But I can go to my room now. I don't want to bore you, and you've been most awfully good to me. I can't tell you how much I have enjoyed seeing you like this, and isn't it queer that we don't feel a bit strange to one another, though I was only a leggy creature in pigtails when you went away."

"It's not odd at all, it's very good," answered Mackerrow, in tones of great satisfaction. "Look here, is it absolutely necessary that you leave London to-morrow. Is your sister expecting you?"

"No," answered Tibbie rather doubtfully, "that is, not to-morrow exactly. I should have written to her to-night, I must wire in the morning."

"Will you stop till Friday and see me off, and to-morrow we'll have a day in the country somewhere; we'll go on the river, or to Oxford or Windsor, or wherever you choose, only say you'll stop.

"Oh, but!" said Tibbie, with colour a trifle heightened, "wouldn't that be rather a queer thing for you and me to do, Archie Mackerrow?"

"What's queer about it? It's no more than your duty to a countryman anyway, especially when he's the most forlorn one on God's earth. You sort of owe it to me, don't you know, for auld lang syne."

"I'd like to do it," said Tibbie frankly, "and I will."

She felt an extraordinary sense of contentment and well-being which undoubtedly increased in the course of the next day, which they spent entirely on the river, travelling by train to Maidenhead, where they got a boat, of which Archie Mackerrow, like all the Kyle lads, was absolutely master. It was a day of complete happiness for them both. But more than once Tibbie wondered what Alison would say if she could see them. Next morning, at half-past ten, she drove with him to Waterloo to see him off at the boat train.

"You won't desert me wholly after all this, Tibbie?" he said, turning to her in the cab as it made its way slowly in the long stream of vehicles towards the main platform.

"The breadth of the sea will soon be between us," Tibbie made answer. "But at least I can promise to write to you, and to send you my book."

"That's all I want meanwhile, and you'll never know just what you've done for me in these two days. Some day, perhaps, if you'll let me, and Heaven is kind enough to let us meet again, I'll tell you."

"Perhaps you'll write it," she said in rather a low voice, and looking straight ahead, somehow not caring just then to see his face.

"No, it belongs to the things a chap doesn't write,

but only speaks when the hour comes and the woman."

Tibbie did not ask what he meant, being hard put to it at the moment to hide the tears that were welling in her eyes at the prospect of the last good-bye. But Archie Mackerrow had not yet come to the end of his resources or his presumption.

"Tibbie, won't you—" he asked as he leaned out of the window when the green flag was waving—"just one, for auld lang syne; look, I'm the only poor beggar on the station who hasn't somebody to kiss him good-bye."

Tibbie lifted up her face, and they kissed one another, and when she walked away the tears were raining down her cheeks.

"It wouldn't be believed out of a book, Tibbie Fleming," she said to herself severely. "I am sorry for him, but I'm most of all sorry for Ailie, who had the chance, and who let it go by her."

But she never told Ailie about that kiss, nor did she so much as mention that she had seen Archie Mackerrow until a long time after, when it was easy to speak of it casually, and when the throng and press of other matters at Alison's home allowed them a little breathing space.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RENT VEIL.

THE sisters had not met for four months, and though letters had passed between them they had hardly been of an intimate kind.

Tibbie was conscious of an acute interest, almost bordering on apprehension, as the train slowed down at Birtley station on the evening of that day, and she looked out for Alison. But she was not there. Instead, she beheld what Janet Aiken might have called a most purpose-like young woman in a very short leather-bound tweed skirt and a shabby jersey walking up and down the platform with her hands in her pockets.

It was Madge Crewe, just returned from a tramping tour in Ireland with a couple of college chums. Madge was the plainest of the Crewe daughters, but there was something undoubtedly attractive about her frank manliness. It was the only word to apply. She was what her comrades, men and women, called a thoroughly good sort. Since she had obtained her desire, a definite object in life, she was thoroughly content and a credit to everybody concerned. She worked like a Trojan at her studies, and would certainly obtain her degree with distinction.

Afterwards she intended to earn her living. Her scorn of conventionalities, in which dress was included, was merely an excrescence on a fine and wholesome character. Tibbie had always liked her, and though she did not want particularly to see her just then,

as a substitute for Alison, she advanced to meet her with a pleasant smile.

"It's very good of you to meet me. What's the matter with Alison?"

"Don't know exactly, but probably hump," answered Madge laconically. "Got oceans of stuff, I suppose, as you've been abroad so long. You should see what we hoofed it with in Ireland. We mastered the whole art of going without."

"I don't doubt it, but as my only habitation happens to be a box at present," answered Tibbie with engaging dryness, "it has to be big enough, and occasionally to be duplicated."

"Oh, I don't mind, don't apologise; it's merely a matter of how much you can endure. Been hot abroad, I suppose? You look a trifle thinner, but jolly fit."

"I'm all right, thank you, and I've never seen you look better, Madge."

"Oh, I'm Ar, though Birtley always does take a bit of the gilt off my ginger-bread. Is this all? Come then."

They walked out to the waiting carriage, and got in.

"Isn't Alison well, then?" asked Tibbie apprehensively.

"Oh, she doesn't say she's ill. It's this beastly place," answered Madge, whose loyalty would have shamed many a man. She would not speak against her father, whatever she might think. "And then all the trouble about the works. My, what fools they be, everybody, not one, but every man jack of them from the boss downwards. Why people aren't born with a smattering of common sense economy in their compositions, I can't think. The omission was undoubtedly a mistake on the part of the Creator. Just a smattering might have saved them!"

"Then the strike is still going on?"

"The lock-out is. The foundry has been closed down for twenty weeks, and Birtley's like a place of the dead. It's horrible."

Tibbie looked out at the moment, for they were passing the corner where her old home had stood, and where the red lamp had just been lit above the gate.

"Do you see much of Celia?"

"I go over, but turtle-doves are not much in my line. She's panning out all right. The Doctor's a lucky man. She's spoiling him for all she's worth. I've told her so, but that's her look out. I must say the Scotch are level-headed and take a lot of spoiling. Mrs. Crewe's a trump, a good all-round out-and-out trump."

There was a warmth in Madge's voice which warmed Tibbie's heart.

"Of course we know that, but—but—I didn't like what you said about her a minute ago."

"Oh it's her conscience, and other things. She can't reconcile them," said Madge, with an insight which surprised Tibbie not a little. "I keep telling her it isn't any use trying. She'd better just give up and get what she can out of it. But unfortunately for her, dear soul, she's one of the sort that wants to squeeze the last drop of good out. It can't be done."

Madge delivered her ultimatum with the philosopher's air, which at another time would have infinitely amused her listener, but now, it merely made her sad.

"Is it true that Stephen is better and that he can walk and climb?"

"Quite. They're coming home next month."

"Well, *she* did that, and it was a miracle for which we as a family can never thank her enough. She took hold of the raw material, and stopped the economic waste. Pity she didn't get a hold of the whole shoot before the deluge, then she might have had a chance for herself."

It was Madge's custom to speak in picturesque and rather obscure language, but there was no need for explanation for Tibbie. She understood every word. Old Hall Park in the fading light looked

beautiful as ever, the great trees sending forth their gracious shade upon the arid heat, and in the distance the gleam of the lake in the soft radiance of a rising moon. But over all, some hush of apprehension, almost of fear, seemed to brood. Tibbie was conscious that it deepened as they neared the house. The butler was there to greet her, but no Alison.

"Oh, she'll be about," said Madge encouragingly. "Dinner's put forward half an hour for you, I believe. A quarter-past eight didn't Mrs. Crewe say, Ricketts?"

"Yes, miss, a quarter-past eight."

"And what room for Miss Fleming? Perhaps you know yourself, Tibbie," said Madge inquiringly. "I'd better come up with you and exploit; oh, there she is——"

On the half landing Alison appeared, and Madge with her usual good feeling which never obtruded itself, turned away immediately to hang up her things in the cloak-room. Tibbie ran up the stairs, dropping her wraps *en route*.

"Oh, Ailie, I have wanted to see you; how are you, my dear?"

She was almost breathless, and her voice shook with tenderness. Alison smiled the old kind, motherly smile, a little wrung. She was much changed. Tibbie could have cried out at the havoc these months of separation had wrought in the dear comely sister of her love. The fine contour of her figure, then inclining to matronliness, was destroyed; she was thinner than Tibbie had ever seen her, and her colour was gone too. The cheeks, from which the rounded contour had fled, were quite pale. But it was the expression which grieved Tibbie most of all. It was not one expression, but a mingling of many, not one of which could be welcome on a face one loves. Sadness, pathos, anxiety, and an odd expression of fear in the eyes seemed to be accentuated rather than banished by the brave smile with which she sought to welcome her sister.

"Don't look at me like that, Tib. I'm all right, quite all right. I was sorry not to come to the station, but Madge is a dear. She steps into every breach at the right moment, and without a word. I'm so glad Madge is here."

Tibbie caught her close, and kissed her with a sort of hungry tenderness. But Alison seemed to hold her away, to be mortally afraid of her loving scrutiny, to be feverishly anxious just to keep to commonplace and outside topics.

"I told them to get ready the blue room because you used to admire it so much, and it will match your eyes," she said, as she began to move rapidly up the few steps to the first-floor landing. "When did you come to London, and how and where did you leave the rest of my family?"

"At Ischl, in Tyrol; they seemed charmed with that, and Stephen was doing no end of sketching. He is so much better, you would hardly know him, Alison. But he doesn't want to come back. He sent a message by me for you. Will you get leave from his father for him to go to Florence or Milan for the winter, where he can have some proper lessons?"

"I daresay that can be arranged," said Alison, as she went to the window for the purpose of putting straight a blind that was slightly awry. "You would think it worth while, Tibbie? I mean, do you think the boy will ever do any good as an artist?"

"One never knows, and at any rate it is worth trying, since to be happy everyone must work. Madge is a case in point. She's alive, every inch of her; and Anne told me how difficult she was in the year she spent at home after she left school, and before she went to college."

"Yes, of course, you are quite right," answered Alison, coming back rather slowly to the brighter light shining above the dressing-table. She feared acutely the scrutiny, the questioning that was bound

to come, from which, between members of a family, there is no escape.

"Alison," said Tibbie quite quietly, after she had unrolled her veil and smoothed it out and laid off her hat, "You're not well yourself. You think about everybody, you take care of everybody. Who is taking care of you?"

"I'm all right, Tib. Don't worry. It's just the state of affairs in the town. It's horrible to be mixed up with labour questions and all these big industrial problems into which everybody says neither sentiment nor common feeling must enter. And I never can, night or day, get away from the fact that there are women and children who never have enough to eat, not more than a stone's-throw from my door."

"But why does Mr. Crewe hold out so long? Isn't it what Madge would call a frightful economic loss to him?"

"Yes, but either he is rich enough not to care, or he is determined to make them pay in full."

The vagueness of the reply filled Tibbie with dissatisfaction.

"How is he, Alison? You have said very little about him in your letters of late."

"He is as well as any man can be who lives as he does, but you'll see him presently. Dinner will be on the table in ten minutes, so I'd better leave you in peace. How did the interview with the publisher go off?"

"Oh, excellently. My book is to be published in November in time to catch the Christmas trade. Mr. Dennington was most kind and encouraging to me and not at all fearsome."

"He has got something he's been looking for perhaps," said Alison absently. "Well, I'll be off downstairs."

Tibbie by speed and effort was almost ready when she heard the gong, only rung when there were visitors in the house.

When she reached the ground floor she was informed by Ricketts that they had already gone in.

She had hesitated about putting on the frock in which she had dined with Archie Mackerrow; she had an odd feeling about that frock, he had admired it, and that had set it apart. So she had compromised by putting on the old black silk which Alison remembered as her only party frock when she had lived at the surgery.

Mr. Crewe, from his chair at the bottom of the table, turned his head to nod to her but did not offer to rise.

"No, it isn't at all necessary to get up," Tibbie assured him rather hurriedly to cover her dismay at sight of him. "How are you, Edmund? It seems a long time since we met."

"I don't know how long it is," he answered grumpily. "How did you leave Anne and the boy? Where is she to sit, Alison? Oh there. Well, perhaps now we can go on. Another whisky, Ricketts."

Tibbie felt rather than saw a spasm cross Alison's face.

Tibbie had no difficulty in deciding that during the last months her brother-in-law had been drinking heavily. The fact was proclaimed by the purplish hue of his face, and its puffy fullness, and by the blood-shot eyes, and the unsteady hand, in which the glass shook. She was so stunned and grieved that for a moment she could hardly hide it, and was thankful to Madge who slipped into the breach.

Mr. Crewe's manners improved a little as dinner progressed and he became more affable towards his sister-in-law. He took very little notice of his wife, and when Tibbie contrasted that dinner with a certain supper on the first Sunday Alison had presided at the Hall table, she felt a little shudder within. Things had gone wrong; she kept asking herself how it was possible that they could have gone so horribly wrong in such an incredibly short time.

There was no falling off in the quality of Old Hall

hospitality, so far as material things were concerned, and Alison was completely mistress of every detail of her household, and was, furthermore, adored by the servants, adored and pitied by turns. Only in the biggest thing of all apparently she had failed; undoubtedly Mr. Crewe had deteriorated since his marriage. The tragedy of it so nearly overwhelmed Tibbie that she could hardly eat, and the delightful winsome gaiety which had cast such a spell over Archie Mackerrow in London and sent him off in a very curious mood had totally disappeared. By the end of the meal she had relapsed into silence which Alison made no attempt to break. When they retired to the small drawing-room for coffee, they found themselves alone. Madge, a considerate person, waylaid Ricketts with the tray in the hall, and carried hers off to her den in the higher regions of the house. She knew that the sisters must have much to say to one another. But it was a long time before the ominous silence was broken.

At last Tibbie was forced to speak.

"Ailie, can't anything be done?" she asked desperately.

"No," answered Ailie, in a quiet, level voice.

"Nothing whatever can be done except endure and wait for the end."

Tibbie beat her hands on the air.

"For God's sake, don't speak like that; it's—it's horrible! Can't you take him away, get someone to look after him, shut him up?"

"No, for the simple reason that none of these things can be done without the consent of the principal person concerned. You may believe that I've tried everything, and that I've failed. Let us talk about something else."

"But there is nothing else," said Tibbie dismally.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!"

At that wailing sound, Alison went a little white and turned her eyes with some passion on her sister's face.

"Listen, Tib; if I'm to live at all, I mustn't be pitied. I've got this battle to fight, and I must be left to fight it my own way without any help. God has forgotten me, and it will be better perhaps if you forget me too."

These words, so unlike the steadfast faith that had once inspired Alison's tongue, sounded in Tibbie's ears almost like the crack of doom.

She was silent, stirring mechanically at her coffee till it had become quite cold. But she could not leave the subject.

"Of course there were rumours about him in Birtley long ago," she said after a while; "but somehow we hoped that you were going to change him completely. We thought you had, Alison; he was so altogether different after you came back from your honeymoon trip. It looks as if something had set him back."

Alison made no answer, but rose to set her coffee cup on a side table. Well did she know what had set her husband back; but of that episode, of that unforgettable day in Rochallan Woods, she would not speak even to the sister of her soul.

"It is true what I said, Tib. I've failed, and failed utterly, with Edmund Crewe, and the less said about it the better," she said clearly. "Let us talk about you now. You won't stop here, of course; indeed it's no place for anybody who is not obliged to stay in it. When will you go down to see them at Rochallan? Pat is very anxious about Edie. She's not at all strong. Latterly she has hardly been able to be up at all."

"When is the event expected?"

"I believe in November."

"But Janet is there to take care of her, and it seems to me that you need me more," said Tibbie, greatly daring.

Alison shook her head.

"Ailie, I never will believe you have failed. I've never known you to fail; something will happen,

some miracle of grace will change the man's heart. There is good in it; and it ~~was~~ touched. You'll touch it again."

"Never; for he knows, and I know, that irreparable wrong I did him when I married him without an atom of affection in my heart. Now, having wrung so much from me, will you hold your tongue, or will you not?"

She tried to smile with something of the old sweetness, but Tibbie only felt her rising tears.

"I think I'll go up and rummage in my boxes," she said ruefully. "I brought you things from the places we stayed at, penny nicknacks; heavens, how light-hearted I was there and how happy with those children. You've done something at least, Ailie; you've given that forlorn little family a mother, and it would be hard to say which loves you most."

Tibbie left her sister with that crumb of comfort and she did not see her a little later creeping towards the library door with that watching fear in her eyes which belongs only to the woman who is afraid.

Tibbie did not see her brother-in-law again that night, and the household by one consent retired early. But she was a long time getting to bed, thinking of the strange events of the past year that had changed the aspect of life for everyone of them. She mourned over many things, but most of all over Alison's loss of faith. It might be only temporary, but it marked an epoch of suffering against which Tibbie naturally rebelled. For Alison of all people in the world had least deserved it. She, who had all her life long been a martyr to duty, might very naturally have looked for some reward in the end. The great house was very still, and the August night was hot. A long time Tibbie leaned over the open casement looking across the dim spaces of the park, and often uplifting her eyes to the starry heavens. Neither smoke nor flame obscured them now, though a year ago she had seen the sky alight night after night with the glare of the furnaces, and felt the summer air heavy with the smoke

from the great chimneys. Birtley had been restored apparently to its pristine cleanliness and quiet, but at what cost? She shuddered a little, thinking of all the tragedies hidden under the quiet pall of the night. Though some might be of more immediate poignancy, there could be none more heartrending than the one beneath the very roof which sheltered her. Pondering upon it, she tossed uneasily upon her luxurious bed, and finally after midnight fell into a heavy sleep, disturbed, however, by unwholesome dreams.

From these she was awakened by a confused sense of something happening; she seemed to hear surging through the windows the sound of angry voices, a murmur at first, then swelling like the billows of the sea into a menacing roar.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE DARK NIGHT.

TIBBIE sprang up and ran to the open window in her nightdress. Leaning as far over as she dared, she beheld what appeared to be a great gathering of people on the terrace before the house. Some of them carried lighted torches, which they swung to and fro in their hands, instruments of menace in the hot dry air, with the wind coming up out of the west. She was fascinated by the weird light thrown upon the sea of faces—gaunt, hungry faces, upon which starvation had already set its mark. They were strangely silent, an occasional whisper, a colloquy carried on in hurried, low tones, was all that could be heard, but there was a curious impression of concerted purpose.

Wondering whether the rest of the household had become aware of this strange ambushade in the night, Tibbie, consciously excited, threw on her dressing-gown and opened her door. She fancied even then the smell of burning to be in the air, but there was no smoke indoors, nor any indication of wakefulness on the part of other sleepers. Remembering by a kind of instinct where Alison's rooms were situated, she crossed the wide landing and ran along the little corridor which partly shut them off. It was a large suite in the new wing which did not overlook the front terrace.

She knocked hurriedly, but received no answer. Then, after knocking again, she opened the door. It was the dressing-room door, and a night-light

burned on the little table in the window, shedding a very faint glow on the inner room where the bed stood. Alison was in it alone, and when taking a step forward Tibbie saw how sound asleep she was, and how her face had lost its wrung expression, she felt a qualm at waking her.

"Alison, wake up, dear; something is happening," she said, touching her shoulder.

Alison stirred uneasily, then opened her eyes with a start.

"Is that you, Edmund? Surely you are very late. Do come to bed quickly," she said confusedly; then, recognising Tibbie, she raised herself on her elbow.

"It's you, Tibbie. What is it? Can't you sleep? What o'clock is it?"

"Half-past one. I was awakened by a noise outside. There are people on the terrace, a great lot of them, and they seem angry in a quiet sort of way. They have lighted torches in their hands, some of them. Where's Edmund?"

"Edmund hasn't come up yet. I left him in the library. People on the terrace! Are you sure you haven't dreamed it, Tib?"

"No, come back to my room, or to the landing window, then you'll see."

Alison sprang out of bed; Tibbie handed her the dressing-gown from the back of the chair over which it had been thrown, and she thrust her feet into slippers. Then together they went back to the landing window which stood open wide to let the current of the cool night air play through the house. By this time the crowd had scattered, as if they had surrounded the house, and there were only some odd units on the front terrace.

"I must go to Edmund, Tib," said Alison, growing very white. "It looks like the workpeople. I've heard they have been threatening things. We'd better both get some clothes on, in case we have to go outside."

"You won't be afraid to go out to them, Allie?"

"Afraid? I? Why should I be? Of course I'll go out. I must get to them if possible before Edmund. By this time," she added grimly, "he will not be master either of his actions or his speech."

They parted to their separate rooms, and dressed as quickly as possible. But by the time they had got ready to go down, the smell of burning had increased, and the smoke was beginning to creep through the house. Tibbie, now thoroughly affrighted, ran downstairs and undid the bolts of the front door at the very instant that Ricketts, disturbed in his little bedroom next to his pantry, had rushed out to see what was happening.

"The house is on fire, Ricketts," said Tibbie quite calmly. "There are a lot of people outside. I'm going to speak to them."

Tibbie was absolutely without fear of Birtley folk, and she knew them all. There was hardly a house represented on that fateful night which she had not visited at one period or another on an errand of mercy or kindness. Others, who did not know them, called them the roughest and most dangerous set of people in the world. Tibbie had not found them so. She had not the smallest hesitation in facing them, nor did she feel that she was in any special danger. When, with Rickett's aid, the heavy bolts were drawn back, and the doors thrown open wide, she did not find any formidable crowd to greet her. They had moved to the other side of the house as if drawn thither by some magnet. It only occurred to her a minute later that the library, which, presumably, the master of the house still occupied, was at the back of the house.

She ran back through the house, and at the library door encountered Alison wringing her hands.

"Edmund is gone, Tibbie, I don't know where. Haven't you seen him anywhere?"

Tibbie shook her head.

"I must go and ring up the fire-engines," she said

steadily. "The fire's gaining, and in that wind, and with everything as dry as tinder, there won't be a thing left of the Old Hall in the morning."

She ran to the telephone call, but something appeared to have gone wrong with it, for she was unable to obtain any answer to her call.

She guessed that someone more vindictive than the rest had cut the wire. Every minute was precious, every minute gave fresh impetus and power to the dread force which can work such havoc in a little space.

Strangely enough, it was Tibbie who took the initiative, who behaved as if the place were hers. Alison, white and dry-eyed, stood still, quietly looking on, apparently unaware that the moment was desperate.

In the midst Madge came flying downstairs half-dressed, and the frightened women servants, each one more helpless than another, huddled together, weeping in company, and bewailing the event of the night. Tibbie managed to get hold of a young groom, and to dispatch him on a horse for aid in the town, and then she began very quietly but efficiently to direct the efforts of the servants to save some of the more valuable contents of the house. There were not very many. A house of similar size inhabited by people of refinement and good taste would undoubtedly have been filled with good pictures and bric-à-brac worth making stupendous efforts to save. The silver and the personal belongings were really the most valuable assets of the house, the pictures being of little account. As for the furniture, though it had cost a great deal of money, it was cumbersome and uninteresting. Presently, through the open windows of the library, Tibbie stepped out and spoke to the men gathered there with menace still on their faces.

"It's the master we want, the man who has destroyed us in Birtley," one said. "Let him coom out and face it like a man. 'E won't, well, let 'im stop an' burn."

"Birtley men, you have taken leave of your senses,"

said Tibbie's voice, clear and sharp; "and you know that you will not improve matters by this night's work, but make everything worse for yourselves and your wives and children. Mr. Crewe is not in the house. Are you going to stand by and see it burn, and do nothing to help its mistress, who has always been your friend. I am ashamed of you!"

"We didna set fire to it, miss. It were the Lord's doin'," some of them cried back in chorus. "An' 'E won't rest satisfied till there ain't a stick or stone of t'owd Hall left upo' another."

But Tibbie's brave words shamed them, and they stepped indoors, and worked with a will to carry out the contents of the house under her direction.

Alison stood like one paralysed, offering to do nothing, apparently caring not at all that her home must soon become the prey of the flames, and that probably by the morning light there would be nothing left but a mass of charred ruins or four walls standing naked and gaunt to the dawn.

"Look at Alison, Tibbie!" whispered Madge, in a shivering voice. "She looks as if she were not quite right in her head. I wish you'd go to her. What does it matter about the things being burned; probably they are all covered and more by insurance. Father left nothing of that kind to chance."

"Madge, where is your father? Perhaps she's thinking of him. We must make sure that he isn't anywhere in the house. She said he was not in the library when she came down to seek him. Where can he have gone?"

Tibbie sped over to Alison's side, and laid her hand on her arm, only to be met with a smile which was sadder than any tears.

"Alison," her sister said sharply, "have you no idea where Edmund is? They have been all through the house. We have searched everywhere we can think of. Is there anywhere in the tower, or any little den I have not thought about where he can have

gone late at night, and perhaps"—she added half hesitatingly—"fallen asleep."

"No, there is no place of that kind. He had gone out, Tib. When I came down the library window was open to the back terrace. I don't know where he is, and I don't care. Everything is at an end. God has laid a curse on this house; let it burn. Only when it is burned right down to the ground will justice be done."

"Oh, Ailie, my dear, you are distraught," cried Tibbie, in a voice vibrating with compassion. At the moment, however, her attention and the attention of the crowd was arrested by the fierce onslaught of the fire engines which, with a great ringing of bells, swept up the avenue to the house. In their wake came the police, and when the ringleaders of the demonstration, which had had such a disastrous and unexpected close, saw the representatives of the law, they seemed inclined to slink away out of sight. They had come up, not with the intention of setting fire to the Old Hall, but merely to give its master a fright and, if possible, compel him to come to terms. The fire was merely a contributory accident to a scheme that had been badly organised and feebly carried out. Starving men are not good organisers, but are like wisps of straw in the wind, liable to be swept hither and thither. Most of them were so weak now that they were dismayed at what had fallen out. It was Tibbie who went up to the inspector of police to hold converse with him.

"No, I'm sure there was no deliberate attempt to set fire to the house," she said clearly. "I saw the demonstration from the moment of its arrival at the house. I am sure the fire was a mere accident arising from carelessness with the torches on a dry hot night. Their one idea was merely to force Mr. Crewe to come out and listen to the recital of their grievances, which they thought might be more effective under cover of the night."

"Precisely; but where is Mr. Crewe, miss? Has he spoken with the men? Feeling is very high and bitter against him in the town."

"I'm aware of that. Mr. Crewe is not in the house. Will you send one or two of the men to look for him about the grounds, in the direction of the lake, perhaps?" she added significantly. "No, don't say anything to Mrs. Crewe. She is not really capable just at present of giving her mind properly to anything. She has had a great deal to bear of late."

The inspector nodded comprehendingly, and Tibbie went back to her sister, where she stood out upon the parched grass of the lawn, watching the progress of the fire, which had now got a permanent hold. In vain the powerful hose played upon the flames, merely quenching them at one corner to make them leap forth at another. Very quickly all realised that nothing could save the house. All this time, Tibbie, anxiously watching her sister, was greatly troubled by her looks. Her set, cold stare, the complete absence of any expression of feeling, the absolute indifference, to Tibbie's quick understanding, all told their own tale. Alison had been tried beyond her endurance.

"Now it is all over and it can never be rebuilt again," she said at last, when the great flames had ceased to shoot their tremendous tongues up to the breaking sky. "It's my work, Tibbie; nobody's but mine."

"No, no, my dear; it was a mere accident, through these stupid men, who hardly knew what they were doing, brandishing naked torches. Any baby could have foretold the result. How could it be your fault?"

"It has all been mine. If it had not been for me, the lock-out would have been ended long ago."

"No, no, Alison. Come, we must seek shelter somewhere in the lodge or at the gardener's cottage, until I can get a conveyance to take you over to Guy and Celia."

She stepped across to Madge, who was watching with great interest a tottering great beam in the eastern gable, which, being burnt clean through, could no longer support its dependent brickwork. Presently it fell into the innermost ruin with a great crash.

"Madge," said Tibbie hurriedly, "I wish you would go after the police and find out whether anything has been heard or seen of your father. I'm afraid to leave my sister. She's not herself. It looks to me as if all this misery had unhinged her brain. I'm going to try to get her down to the lodge and put her to bed."

Madge shook her head as if she did not believe it would be possible to accomplish that. Although philosophical in the midst of most upheavals, she was visibly shaken by the events of the night, and felt distinctly apprehensive regarding her father's safety.

For the moment Alison seemed to have forgotten her husband's disappearance; she was entirely concerned with what she imagined to be her own share in that night's crowning catastrophe.

"Dear, you must come away," said Tibbie firmly. "Can't you see that everything is nearly over? There is no use stopping. Come down to Garrett's cottage with me and let me get you something to eat or drink. Your hands are burning with a fever. Darling, you must come."

"My brain is on fire, but my heart is like ice," said Alison, as she suffered herself to be led away. "Oh, Tibbie, the misery of the world! How can God, if He knows and has any power, bear to have it so? There can't be a God. I've given up believing in Him."

Tibbie merely patted her arm, and tried to hasten her steps across the *débris* towards the clear spaces of the park.

Some premonition warned her that she had better get Alison into some safe shelter, where the further horror of the night could not touch her without warning. For it was not over yet.

She kept babbling as they walked of her own share

in the frightful cataclysm which had destroyed so much that men prize in this world.

"I blame myself, nobody but myself, Tibbie," she went on feverishly. "First of all I did wrong marrying him, when I did not care. Then he found out about Archie. He saw us together, and nothing could convince him that I was not regretting my marriage, and hating him. I have tried my best to make him think otherwise, but a man like Edmund trusts nothing but the evidence of his eyes, and he imagined that I cared for Archie Mackerrow still. It was not true, was it, Tibbie?" she added with a swift innocent glance as a child might have asked some simple question depending utterly on the wisdom of the person who would answer.

"Darling, you have dwelt too long morbidly on one idea," said Tibbie soothingly, though her voice shook with her effort to steady it.

"But you don't answer. You know me, don't you, Tib? I am not that kind of woman. If I married a man I would not think about another. I was not even thinking of Archie that day, when I met him, but ah, I could not convince Edmund. Then you see he got sullen and bitter, and all that was bad in him seemed to be roused. He would not believe anything I said, and his distrust of me made him hard to all the world outside, and prolonged the lock-out. I heard that last week they sent a deputation begging him to start the work again on his own terms, and he refused. He was not himself, he never has been himself since that ghastly day in Rochallan Woods. That's why I ask how God, if He has any power, and cares at all about human beings, can let such things happen. It was not fair. It was all so innocent, and just see what has come out of it! I wish I could lie down here and now and never wake any more."

Tibbie, still keeping firm hold of her arm, permitted her to wander on, realising that it was well her pent feelings should have vent. But this strange and

ruthless unveiling of her sister's heart filled her with a sadness which was never afterwards quite effaced. She, too, could have asked rebelliously why a woman like Alison, so fitted for the gracious and peaceful side of life, should have been called to pass through experience so poignant. She was glad when they reached the lodge where the cottage door stood open, and the woman of the house only too ready to minister to the need of her unhappy mistress. She had a ready kettle boiling, and some tea was quickly made, which Alison did not refuse to drink. All the time Tibbie was keeping an eye on the avenue, down which she expected some messenger perhaps to come. The dawn was now breaking, and presently in one of her pilgrimages to the door she saw Madge's flying figure across the park and ran to meet it.

"They've found father," she cried breathlessly, when they were within range of one another. "Right down near the lake. Yes, he's hurt. The inspector says he has been hit on the head, but he isn't dead, and they're bringing him here. I've sent one of the lads on a bicycle for Guy. He ought to be here, don't you think?"

"Yes, of course; but did you say they were bringing your father here, to the lodge?"

"Yes, it's the nearest house."

"But I don't think Alison is able for that. She has had enough," said Tibbie apprehensively.

But just here Madge had one of her rare flashes of inspiration.

"I think you're wrong there, Tibbie. I believe if she saw him actually needing her she'd be quite herself again. At least we must risk it, for here they come, and we haven't time to get her away."

Tibbie ran back wondering whether to prepare Alison for what was coming, but when she got to the door the words seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth and she simply stood dumbly until the little procession bearing the stretcher came in sight.

It was an awful moment for them all, when Alison, appearing on the threshold, fixed her eyes on the prostrate form on the stretcher which they were bearing across the sward.

Immediately the dazed look left her face, her features relaxed, her eyes became alert and watchful; Tibbie saw her draw herself up, as one might do, who wished to marshal all his forces for some insistent need.

Instinctively they stood aside, while Alison took possession of the situation, and once more became what nature had made her, a succourer of many. She directed them to the sitting-room of the cottage, stood by while they laid her husband on the sofa, then turned to her sister and said in a perfectly clear voice,

"See that Guy is fetched at once; now leave me."

They went out one by one, and the door was shut, while she was left kneeling by her husband's side.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

HIS HOUSE IN ORDER.

KYLE folk pride themselves upon the mildness of their winters, on the equable climate they enjoy all the year round. Certainly, as Alison Crewe opened the windows of her room to the sun one November morning, no one could have believed that it was but four weeks till Christmas. A slight haze lay across the placid sea, through it the sun was breaking with a gentle radiance which touched the frowning Heads of Ayr into an almost unearthly beauty. The long level stretches of the shore, upon which at that early hour no living creature walked, gave one a sense of wideness which was satisfying to the soul. Alison stood still a moment, looking out upon the scene with which she had been familiar since her babyhood, finding in it a new fairness each day. Her face, beautiful as it had never been even in her first youth, reflected somewhat the peace of the outer world, or rather the peace of her soul. Alison had come with her invalid husband, they being in the meantime homeless, to try what the air of Scotland would do for him. They were living in a large, roomy and pleasant furnished house on the shore, a few minutes' walk from Rochallan Manse. There were many who pitied Alison Crewe for all she had gone through, and more especially for the calamity of the past months, but no one looking at her face could believe other than that things were well with her. It was just eight o'clock, and as she put the finishing touches to her toilet she heard the short rat-tat of the

postman at the door. Immediately he had gone she rang the bell and asked that her letters might be brought up.

There were a goodly number, but from them she singled out the only two which in the meantime mattered. They were from Italy, and had been written by Stephen and Anne. The contents were satisfactory, and after a casual glance to see whether there was anything else demanding attention, she put them inside the flap of the bureau in the corner, and left the room.

Next to her, in a large light room, her husband spent his invalid days. He had never recovered that blow struck in the dark in the grounds of Birtley Old Hall, and which had never been brought home. At first surgeons had advised an operation, though they were more than doubtful of the result. Alison had declined it, and had trusted to nature's healing method. Her trust had been so far justified, because now at the end of three months, Mr. Crewe, though still an invalid, was able to take a sensible interest once more in outside affairs. Nay more, he had been able since coming to Rochallan to reorganise a part of his business, so that work had once more been resumed at Birtley. Nothing had been done towards the restoration of the Hall, its blackened walls still stood roofless and desolate to the heavens, proclaiming the folly and the evil passions of men. But the worst was over, and these last days were better to Alison Crewe than any of the former ones had been since she had taken the most momentous step in her life.

One nurse for night duty was still retained, Alison herself attending to his needs in the daytime. As she entered the room, the nurse, bidding her a pleasant good morning, immediately glided from the room. She was one of the best of her kind, she needed no hint or warning when to disappear, and had established the friendliest and most grateful relations with the whole household. Alison smiled as she approached

the bed where her husband was propped among his pillows waiting for his breakfast.

A change, a very great change, had come over the outward appearance of Mr. Crewe, and none who had only known him in his ruder health would have recognised him now. Perhaps those who had known him in his young manhood might have done, for all the gross flesh had disappeared, and his features were now touched with something of the nobility of an earlier time. His sunken eyes had a kindly, even a pathetic, expression in them, which never failed to touch his wife's heart.

Her devotion to him during the past three months had been transcendent and commented on by all who witnessed it. Often it moved Tibbie to tears. Tibbie came and went between Rochallan and London, very much a woman of affairs, and apparently the prey of an odd restlessness which nothing seemed to dissipate. But the furnished house occupied by Alison and her husband was her ostensible home.

"You have had a good night, nurse says," said Alison, as she bent over him and kissed his brow.

"Yes, so so; I didn't sleep, but at least *she* didn't know it," he answered with a smile. "How are you?"

"Oh fit, very fit."

"You look it."

There might have been some slight envy, at least Alison imagined it, in the gaze which enveloped her strong fine personality, and noted the health flush in her cheeks, the clear light in her beautiful and earnest eyes.

"I am fit, because I have good nights now, Edmund, being relieved of my immediate anxiety about you. You really are very much better since we came here, only you will not confess it. Nobody will ever convince me that men don't love being made a fuss of much more than women."

He smiled again and looked at the letters she held in her hand.

"Who writes?"

"Both Anne and Stephen, and they are starting to-morrow, but I feel that we are frauds, dear. I am certain that when they see you they will think with me that they need not have come till Christmas."

"Read what they say," he said quietly; and Alison sat down on the side of the bed, and read out the letters, which had been written with such cordial sympathy and readiness in the Italian city where Stephen was very happily pursuing his art and Anne her music, each company for the other.

"They start to-morrow, that was yesterday of course," said Mr. Crewe musingly. "If they come right through, when will they be here?"

"Saturday morning, if they travel all night from London, but I think that is not really necessary, Edmund. If they get here Saturday night it will be ample time."

"Perhaps so, and Madge?"

"Well, dear, to be quite frank, I've said nothing to Madge. It's the very middle of term, and she is very much engrossed."

"Write this morning and tell her to come for the week-end, that will probably do."

Alison regarded him with a puzzled air. Her eye, now fairly practised in the study of his looks, neither deceived nor alarmed her. She believed that he was steadily recovering, and the doctors and surgeons from Glasgow who, at the bidding of the old family practitioner in Seadon, had come to give their verdict, had not been at all alarmist, but on the whole reassuring. There was no reason, they had said, why Mr. Crewe should not be restored to comparative health. If there had been a slight emphasis laid on the adjective, perhaps Alison had not noticed it. With such care as he was receiving and total abstention from business cares, as well as from other things which had been detrimental to his health formerly, he might live for years. Alison as gladly accepted that verdict, and

in her own mind had eliminated the element of doubt from it. He would live for years; years that were going to be ripe and glorious and full of fine achievement. He had greatly changed, he seemed now only anxious to do all that lay in his power to atone for the sorrow of the past. Alison had met that mood with a quick joyousness, with a warm appreciation which had surprised herself, and though perhaps happiness could never come to the perfect flower between these two, so oddly mated, yet peace was theirs. And peace is no bad substitute for happiness, if indeed it is not its perfect counterfeit.

"And what are you going to do to-day?" he asked interestedly, as he watched her moving about the room with that slow, gracious step he loved.

"Oh, the usual. I must run down soon to see Edie. She was very sadly yesterday. I shall be glad when it is all over. I confess I'm a bit anxious about her, Edmund. She seems to have no stamina."

"Perhaps she'll buck up afterwards."

"I sincerely hope so," she said with a sigh. "Poor Pat can't do his work for his anxiety about her. It's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen."

"What is?"

"Why the way Pat has changed. When I lived with him he was rather a helpless sort of man, who could hardly find a shirt for himself. He never knew where anything was, and I even kept his engagement book for him."

"That was your fault, my dear. You kept him a boy long after he was a man."

"And so to keep the balance true, and make a man of him, it was necessary that he should marry a helpless wife. I wonder what kind of a wife would have suited you best, sir."

"The one I've got is the only one for me," he answered; and at that moment the nurse entered with the breakfast tray, a timely diversion for which Alison was thankful. There were moments when she

could hardly bear the strain of intimate talk, when her husband's dependence on her struck her with a full sense of pain.

He seemed to be pondering a good deal about his affairs, and in the afternoon, when she thought he was sleeping quietly, and when she had even contemplated taking a run down to the manse to see Edie, he suddenly looked up and spoke out clearly.

"There ought to be a letter from Birtley by one of these posts, Alison. I'll be glad when the whole business is put through, then I can really set my house in order."

The words, though she supposed them to be casually used, merely in reference to the final transfer of his business to a syndicate, struck her with a sort of chill.

"You are in a great hurry, surely, Edmund. Can it matter much about the details now everything has been satisfactorily arranged?"

"It matters only that until I know it is absolutely a settled thing I can't rest. What's that you're making?"

A little smile played about the corners of Alison's sweet mouth, as she held up a small square of fine flannel, upon which she was working something in white silk.

"It's a head flannel for the third Patrick Fleming, if you're any the wiser. I wish he would hurry up and get here to wear it."

"Well, put it down, and come here, and sit on the front of the bed like you do in the morning and at night, and talk to me with your whole heart and voice and eyes. The third Patrick Fleming will do well if he gets his Aunt Alison's attention when he has actually arrived on the scene."

Alison laughed, folded up the dainty piece of work, and came over to his side. It was very quiet in the house, and in the wide and pleasant room there was a cheery glow from the little wood fire which burned and crackled in the grate.

"It's my will I'm anxious about, Alison, the duplicate copy was to come to-day, and I want you to see it," he said. "Isn't there a post about two o'clock? Won't you go down and see whether it has come by it?"

"Yes, surely, but I'm not needing to read any wills to-day, thank you," she answered pleasantly, though she left the room at once to do his bidding. She knew that sick persons must be humoured in small things about which it is so easy for them to work themselves into a fever.

She returned in a minute's time, with the long blue official-looking envelope in her hand.

"I don't want it. Just sit down here where you were before," he said, in tones of satisfaction, "and read it over, so that I can watch your face."

"I don't know that I do want to read it. What does it matter any way, when you are going to live to make new wills; lots of them, perhaps."

"This will be the only one that matters," he answered, and again to please him, she broke the seal, smoothed out the brief lawyer-like document, and ran her eyes over it. He, watching intently, saw the gradual softening of her face, and when she looked up at a certain paragraph her eyes were full of tears.

"Edmund, this is very generous; but it is not a fair will to the children."

"In what is it unfair to them?"

"Well, you have left me too much. What on earth should I do with fifteen hundred a year of my own. Five would more than suffice."

"I think differently; besides, I think you'll find if you go thoroughly into it that the children have a clear thousand a year each. They don't want more. Even Stephen, though he never earns a penny of his own, will be able to live on that in any city or country he fancies."

"Yes, indeed he will," said Alison, and dropping the document on her lap she looked at him with a kind

of steady sadness. For a moment she found it difficult to speak.

"There's something else you don't like?" he said anxiously.

"I am only wondering why you should be so generous, Edmund; and, believe me, it was not necessary to put in that item about my remarriage. I should not be likely to avail myself of it."

"But you must be left free," he said quickly. "I've heard of men who hampered their wives like that. It's a mean advantage, besides, I should like you to have a little happiness yet—the happiness I wasn't able to give you."

She gulped down something in her throat, and, rising, walked across to the window, trying to command her feelings sufficiently to answer.

These were difficult moments, and of late they had become too frequent for her comfort. Her nature was reserved and undemonstrative; and the constant appeal to her feelings, made by her husband in his helplessness, disconcerted her.

"Come back here, Alison; are you angry with me?"

"No," she answered, wiping her eyes, "I am ashamed I have not deserved all this consideration. I have done nothing for you, or at least, very little."

"Your nursing saved my life, you know they told you so, and something else saved my soul."

She sat down beside him again, but no words came.

"Do you remember those days in Paris, Alison?"

"I shall never forget them," she answered low.

"Do you know what stands out in my memory of them most vividly of all?"

She shook her head.

"I see you there on your knees at your evening prayers. I was often ashamed before you then. I would slink out and be glad to stop away, but the vision never faded; even after we seemed to drift clean apart."

She made no answer. How could she? What words would be fitting to meet the case.

"We were very happy in Paris, Edmund; happier than we have been until we came here."

"You've been happy here, then?"

"Oh yes, absolutely; and when you get well, I shall be happier still."

"You really mean that, my dear?"

"I do."

"Then will you give me a kiss of your own accord. I haven't asked for one for a long time."

She reddened a little, but kissed him; then he turned on his pillow and fell asleep. Her face was very tender, as she sat watching for some minutes; then, assured that he slept soundly, she put away the copy of the will and, stealing softly from the room, ran along the shore to the back gate of Rochallan Manse. Two days later, in the evening, Anne and Stephen arrived, Madge having come on the previous day. Mr. Crewe had been very bright all day, and Madge had professed herself pleased with his looks; but she had seen him at intervals. Both Anne and Stephen received a great shock. When Mr. Crewe saw Stephen in the doorway, tall, lean, and brown, able to walk without a stick and looking well and fit, though very thin, his face assumed an expression of deep satisfaction.

"Come here, my boy, I can hardly believe it is Stephen; you're all right now?"

"Yes, father, quite all right, thank you," said Stephen, with an odd shyness, for there was nothing in this gaunt, kind-eyed invalid to remind him of the father he used to know. "I'm afraid you don't feel very well, sir."

"I'm quite all right; you can't stop now, Stephen, because you must get the dust of your journey washed off and something to eat, but you'll promise to come up after, so that we can have a little talk together."

"Yes, father, to be sure I'll come," said Stephen earnestly; and true to his promise he was back within

an hour. Alison came with him to the door to utter a warning note.

"I don't know that I ought to permit it, but as it is a very special occasion, I suppose I must. But only twenty minutes or half an hour, Stephen, dear, or we shall have your father so excited that he won't sleep a wink all night."

She smiled upon them a little unsteadily as she closed the door, and just on the landing before she went down to the girls paused to wipe her eyes. No one save Alison herself knew what it meant to have such peace in the house, to have a united family all under one roof. To see the understanding between his father and Stephen was the crowning touch. It did not occur to her that it was all her doing, she only thanked God quietly in her heart, and went downstairs.

"Sit down there, Stephen; it's your mother's seat," said Mr. Crewe, motioning to the foot of the bed.

"But first walk twice across the room, till I see whether the leg is really quite straight."

"It's nearly, father, and I feel ever so fit," said the boy, as he pushed his eager fingers through his hair. Professor Kellner happened to be in Milan this winter, and I met him by accident in the street, and he remembered me, by Jove he did, and stopped me at once. He was most awfully pleased. He says I shall never have any trouble with it in future. Isn't it fine?"

"It is fine, and you've been working hard, your mother tells me. She believes in you right through, lad. She's been the making of you, as well as of me. It is going to pan out, isn't it, the painting business, I mean?"

"I think so, dad."

"And at least it'll provide you with something to do; you will have enough to live on after I'm gone."

"Don't speak like that, dad, because of course you're getting well fast."

"Perhaps I am; yes, I'm getting well fast, my son."

So you're happier than you've been for a long time?"

"Yes, I am, but I was jolly glad to see her to-night, dad, you can't think; for, of course, if it hadn't been for her——"

"That's it, lad, that's it, and you'll never forget it, Stephen. You'll remember it to the last day of your life, who it was that made you, and saved your father, and lifted him up from the place where he was—the place of no hope."

"I won't forget it," said the lad soberly, but his eyes were troubled by the pathos of his father's words.

"That's all I want to say. I can leave her with you, I know. Now say good-night, boy. Sound sleep. We haven't been one family under one roof for a long time, have we?"

"No, we haven't, and isn't it jolly?" said Stephen, with something of boyish wistfulness in his tone once more. "It was ever so jolly downstairs, and she's so glad about it. It's just lovely."

"Stephen, we don't know one another very well, but we're going to, please God. Say this after me, 'Good-night, father, I forgive you.'"

"But I don't want to say that, dad; there isn't anything to forgive, don't you know?" said Stephen in distress.

"Say, 'Good-night, father, I love you,' instead then," and the lad's eyes suddenly overflowed.

"That's easier," he made answer, with the gay heaven-born smile of youth that bears no malice. "Good-night, father, I love you, and thank you very much for letting me stop at Milan and have such a ripping time. Now we're all going to be happy ever after, just like the story books."

His shy, boyish laugh rang out and with its echo in his ears, and at his heart the purest joy he had known in all his troubled life, Edmund Crewe fell on the sleep which knows no earthly waking.

* * * * *

Very delicate and complicated runs the web of human life.

At the very moment of Edmund Crewe's passing, a man-child was born in the manse of Rochallan, a great splendid boy with eyes like stars.

Having fulfilled her destiny and made a man of Patrick Fleming, and given him her son to complete the work, the little wind-flower bent her head, and not unwillingly went to bloom "in the better country—the land of morning and perpetual spring."

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE LAST STAND.

"AILIE," said Guy Fleming, in a broken, unsteady voice, as he came fast into his sister's temporary home on the afternoon of the wild and windy day on which the double burying had taken place in Rochallan kirkyard, "you must put on your bonnet and come to Pat. I can do nothing with him. My God! such grief unmans a man! Those who have seen it can never forget it to the very end of their days. Come!"

Alison rose up from her quiet room and followed him by the shore path to the back gate of Rochallan Manse. As they walked they spoke not at all. Like a blast of the whirlwind had death swooped down upon them, permitting nothing to stay him, sweeping aside human love and longing, human passion and effort, as if they had been naught.

Side by side they had laid these two, the sweet young mother and the man of the world, who had so strangely stepped for a little space into the quiet lives of Rochallan folk, and having done their appointed work had passed on elsewhere.

They had left their indelible memory behind.

"I left him raging up and down the study, crying that he must curse God and die. Yon's awful, Ailie!" said Guy as they passed within the house. "It makes a man afraid of life, of death, of everything."

Ailie smiled a little wintrily, and passing before him went towards the study door. Just as she entered, something came over her like a wave of the sea, and she

knew that she had come back to her own place, and that here for what remained of life her work would lie.

She did not know whether she was sad or glad, her heart being so bruised in her breast, only she felt that she had come home.

The door through which she had so often passed flew at her soft touch, and she stood just a moment on the threshold looking in. Janet Aiken, after the manner of her kind, deep-dyed with all the traditions and the grim panoply of death, had drawn down every blind in the manse, so that the minister sat in darkness. Alison, swift of foot, crossed the room, and with no uncertain hand touched the cord so that the blind flew up, and at the moment a feeble ray of wintry sun struggling from behind a bank of sullen cloud streamed in, and touched the fair hair of the man who sat before his desk with his head bowed low, and the absolute bitterness of death in his soul. The sister, who had so long mothered him, and whom he had never needed more than now, looked upon him for a moment with a mighty and encompassing pity and a trembling of the lip which betokened how her being was stirred.

Presently she was at his side, and her hand touched his ruddy hair, and her tender voice broke the dreary silence.

"Pat, look up," she said bravely. "Look up."

He flung himself to his feet, and his eyes dazed with their anguish smote her pitying face.

"It isn't fair, Ailie!" he cried, "it isn't fair! What have I done to be so punished? I have tried to live well, to do my duty, and—and to have her for such a little while, and then the darkness of hell! It's horrible! There is no God; there can't be! I will not believe in Him any more! I will join hands with those who have no use for Him."

"My dear! My dear!"

No more, and no less, could she say for a space, but

her voice had the crooning mother-note in it, that had been wont to soothe his fear-haunted boyhood.

"I don't forget that you are in the same boat, Ailie," he said confusedly. "But somehow it's different. Your man had, in a sense, lived his life. Ours was only beginning, and she was so sweet and fine a thing! Oh my God, and she is under the earth, and I am left! It isn't fair, it isn't fair!"

Alison, whom suffering had greatly taught, knew better than to attempt the stemming of the deluge. She let the storm work its will with him, hardly speaking herself at all; only listening, with now and then a word that had its work to do.

"Guy thought to comfort me by saying that if she had lived she must have been an invalid all her life. What mattered that to me? It would have been my joy to have waited on her, to fetch and carry, so that she might have a moment's ease. I never lived till she came to me, Ailie. What can I do now?"

"There is the bairn! It is all hers, Pat, hers and yours," said Alison at last, "I have nothing. You will have to care for him. She left him to you. I—I think she knew that she would not live after it, Pat."

"Why do you think that?" he asked in a fierce wonder.

"From what she said to me one day long, long ago, and again last Sunday when I came to sit with her while you went to the Bible Class. She spoke of the wind-flowers on the shore. She was fond of comparing herself to them, and I think she knew that she would be very little longer here than they. But she was very happy, Pat, and she loved you dearly. Your little year together was an idyll, for which you have to thank God, and then go on bravely to the end. It was all beautiful, and had no flaws or deeps in it as mine had."

Seeing that he was arrested by her words she went on steadily, hardly knowing herself what she said

only praying for the word from afar, that might be winged with hope and healing.

"After all, we don't belong here, Pat, and that's the whole meaning of life. It takes some of us a long time to realise it, and realisation can only come by the way of sorrow. This is only the beginning of things, the very beginning. The best is coming. It is Edie's now."

He seemed to be soothed, but sat down wearily as if his heart was tired.

"Alison!" he said suddenly, "you'll come back here. Edie loved you, and nobody else will bring up her bairn. Besides—I'm your bairn, more than ever I was. It is certain that if you don't come it'll all be up with me."

She promised, for what was there left to do? But a little later in the day her heart was torn betwixt two. As she sat with the family of her adoption in the drawing-room that evening, talking over their plans for the future, they spoke with one accord.

"You'll need to take a big house somewhere, a house that will hold us all, so that we can come and go as we like, and always know that it is home," said Anne, in quick business-like tones, to which Madge immediately said "Amen."

"And the door must be like heaven," continued Stephen whimsically, "not shut at all by night, for the moment that door is shut, something will happen to one, if not to all of us. It is only for you to decide where it is to be, England or Scotland; it is all the same to us, so that it is an open door."

Tibbie, overwhelmed and astonished that Alison could meet this wonderful demonstration of affection so calmly, burst into tears and fled from the room. Her tears were sweet, in spite of the pity of them. Never had life seemed so beautiful a thing. Ah, it is beautiful, and never more so than when the veil of tears is spread upon it, lighting up the diamond drops, illuminating the dark spaces of the heart,

and rendering rich and fertile all its arid corners. They who have not wept have never lived.

Great and widespread was the sympathy extended to the Flemings from every part of the country where their name was so well known and respected. It encompassed them like waves of the sea. It was several weeks before Pat was able to appear in his own pulpit, and when they saw him, there was not a dry eye left in the kirk.

His people stood about him, like a buttress upholding him by their sympathy and their prayers, so that in a shorter space of time than he had ever anticipated he emerged from the innermost blackness of the cloud, and once more lifted his head to the heaven of his dreams.

It was no more a strange place since Edie was there, but rather some region unfamiliar but beloved, to which his heart winged its way in every leisure moment, seeking commune with the immortals. A man who lives thus, and comes back strong and fine to the duties of his day, has a great work to do. Alison, much astonished at what had been wrought in the very fibre of her brother's being, seeing him grow great and strong and noble after having had the deeps roll over him, marvelled no more at the strange workings of destiny, but only bowed her head in mute worship before its unutterable wisdom.

After much family consultation an odd arrangement was come to. The house in which Mr. Crewe died was purchased by his widow, and converted into a home for his children. It was so near, its grounds adjoining the manse garden, that for all practical purposes it might be said to belong to the church property, and there Alison promised to be at their beck and call whenever it pleased them to come. Also she promised to, once a year, forgather with them there, and mother them all in the real sense, and to leave Janet Aiken to look after the manse bairn, the while.

That was a task neither beyond Janet's capability nor will. From the moment when it had been laid, a small, red, unpromising bundle in her arms, the starved heart of her had melted into all the tenderness of motherhood, and she had straightway sworn fealty and service to the third Patrick Fleming, till death should close her eyes. Janet was now bound by cords nothing else could break to the manse of Rochallan.

After Christmas Anne and Stephen returned to Milan to complete their winter's work. Madge went back to Cambridge, and Alison slipped into her old place in Rochallan Manse. It was astonishing how easy was the transition, how the gulf lessened and quickly disappeared.

The bairn undoubtedly was the saving of the situation, as well as lord of them all. Where the child is, there is Jesus in the midst!

Tibbie, after various consultations with herself, decided to accompany Anne and Stephen abroad again. She was still pursued by a strange restlessness, which only her work seemed to be able to quiet.

"Nobody needs me, Ailie, you least of all, and Pat's bairn doesn't want to be brought up by two aunts, let alone the fact that Janet Aiken doesn't think I'm fit to handle him even for five minutes in the day."

"But you'll not stop long away, Tib. We can't afford to be parted for long now. Life is all different, don't you think?"

"I'll tell you what I think, Ailie," said Tibbie, in a great outburst. "You are far too good for this world, and what I would like to see beyond everything would be one of the old tussles between you and Janet about the cleaning time. Oh, couldn't you arrange one for my benefit just to make me sure we are not all too near kingdom come."

Alison smiled.

"When I look back, Tib, I see myself nothing but a bairn—a big, tiresome, rather tyrannical bairn——"

"Just the same as little Pat," put in Tibbie wisely. "Don't I see you daily cutting a stick for your own back in your dealing with him?"

"A tyrant, a virtuous self-satisfied tyrant, seeking to legislate for everybody," continued Alison precisely, as if she had not heard. "And the cure had to be drastic. I hope I'm cured; do you think I am?" she added, with the sudden wistfulness of a child.

Tibbie's reply was to hug her close.

"Oh, you dear, blessed unforgettable and inimitable woman! You are just your own self, whom everybody needs. I feel mean and small and cheap, since in the wide world nobody needs me."

She spoke these words over her shoulder on the stairs, and when they reached the little hall place a large square letter lay on the table bearing an East Indian postmark. Then did the colour mount high in Tibbie's cheek, as she stretched out her hand almost shamefacedly, as if seeking to cover it from her sister's sight.

"That's Archie Mackerrow's writing, Tib," said Alison, in an odd voice.

Tibbie nodded.

"Oh yes," she answered casually, "I write to him sometimes."

"You write to him sometimes?" repeated Alison, in the same puzzled voice, but Tibbie had fled. Two minutes later she disappeared by way of the back gate to the shore, and it was dark of the noon before she came back. Patrick had gone to one of his numerous meetings in Seadoon, and the child had been bathed and put to bed for the night, and Alison sat alone by the small glowing fire in Edie's drawing-room, waiting and wondering about Tibbie, when she peeped in.

"Is Pat out, Alison?"

"Yes, till ten o'clock at least, at Seadoon. I've been wondering about you, Tib. What is it?"

She was conscious of some strain in the air, of something that was going to happen to stir the deeps afresh.

Tibbie came forward, and the expression on her face in a manner prepared Alison for part at least of what followed.

"I've come to confess, Ailie, and I'll just slide down here like I used to when I was a little bairn, and hide my face."

She slid down, and laid her head on the soft fold of Alison's widow's frock, and for the space of a few minutes silence reigned.

"I've got to go back a bit, to last August, when I was in London, before I came to you at the time of the fire," Tibbie began at length. "I met Archie Mackerrow there."

"By appointment or how?" asked Alison, in a puzzled voice, for the story was a little difficult to piece together, the distances seemed too wide to bridge.

"Oh no, quite by accident, and I don't know yet how he recognised me, for of course I was a girl in short frocks when he went away. It was easier for me. He was not so very much changed. It was at the Euston Hotel where I was seeking accommodation, and they had none, and he came to the rescue and I went to the Russell where he was staying. That was on the Wednesday, and I stopped over till Friday, and saw him off at Waterloo, and then he asked me to write to him sometimes, and that's all, at least until to-day."

Alison did not speak at all, and after another space Tibbie went on again.

"He was so dreadfully lonesome, Ailie, and he seemed to think he had a sort of right to me, don't you know, and I liked him to be like that, and I never was so happy in my life as those two days we were together. I don't know why I didn't tell you, I'm sure; I have often wanted to, but somehow it was all so difficult, through the late autumn."

"Well, and what is he saying to-day?"

"The same thing he said two months ago, he asked me to go out to Trinidad to him. He asked me that

st in November, and I didn't answer; then all the dreadful things happened, and I had to write and tell him that you were free. I had to do that Ailie, because," said Tibbie—and her voice became very low and tense—"because you see to me it was everything, as it is to women. It is only a bit of a man's life, even the best of them, but I—I couldn't afford to make any mistake."

"And now to-day what does he say?" repeated Alison, and her voice sounded very cold.

"He wants me to come, and he says, Ailie, that if I refuse he will go unmarried to his grave, and never set foot in Scotland again."

"Well, and what do you say to that?"

Tibbie turned round suddenly and her eyes were aglow.

"Oh, I want to go, Ailie. I want to go very much! I want it more than anything in the world!"

"But your career! The thing you have been so proud of, and in which you wanted to succeed."

"Oh that—that is what a woman fills up with when there's nothing else," she made answer in tones of profound and unassailable content. "It's only one of the make-believes, the other is the real thing. I want to be necessary to some man, Ailie, and I'm not ashamed to confess it, I want to bear his children, and make him a home, and if—and if—" here her vibrant voice broke—"if you'll let me, I'll go away to Archie Mackerrow to-morrow, and account myself a blessed woman."

A little shuddering sigh fluttered like a breath between Alison's parted lips.

"Oh, my Tib, my wee sister!" she said, and clasped her close, and nothing more was needed on either side.

She did not know when or how she was left alone, nor even noticed that the fire was fluttering low in the grate. She only knew that there in the red silence she had made the last stand, had given up all that was

THE LAST STAND

left of the dream of her youth. And when from the upstairs room, she heard the child's cry, she was ready to meet it.

"Only in dreams is a ladder thrown
From the weary earth to the sapphire walls;
But the dreams depart and the vision falls,
And the sleeper awakes on his pillow of stone.
Heaven is not reached at a single bound,
But we build the ladder by which we rise
From the lowly earth to the vaulted skies,
And we mount to its summit round by round."

THE END.

from the
was ready



