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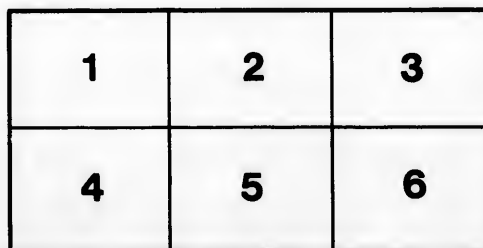
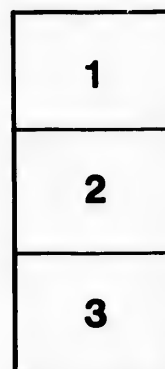
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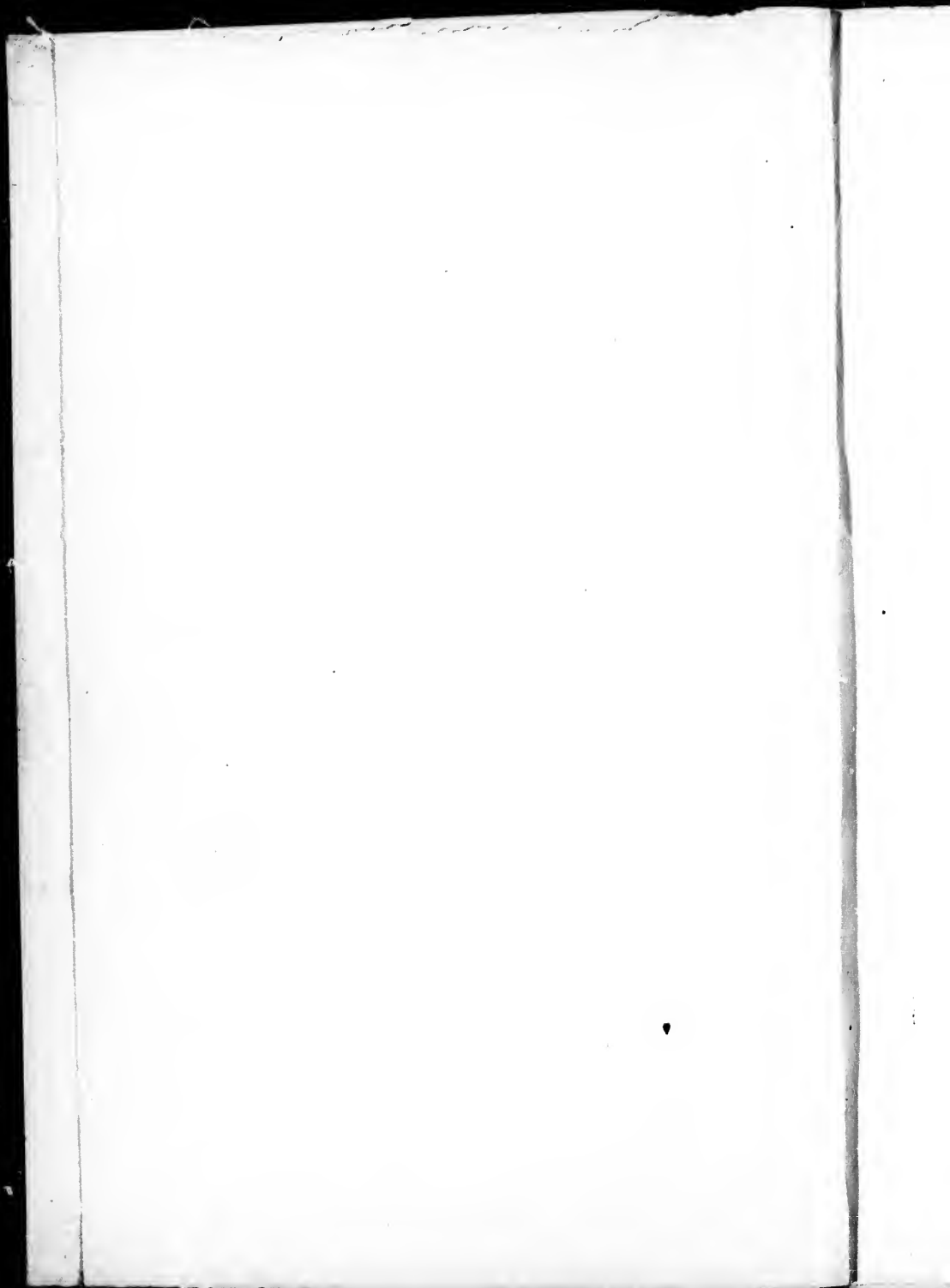
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MAITLAND OF LAURIESTON

MAITLAND OF LAURIESTON

A Family History

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN

(MRS. BURNETT-SMITH)

AUTHOR OF 'SHEILA,' 'GATES OF ELEN,' 'ALDERSTDE,'
'CARLOWRIE,' 'DORIS CHEYNE,' ETC. ETC.

Then I beheld all the work of God: . . . though a wise man think to know
it, yet shall he not be able to find it.—ECCLES. viii. 17.

'Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in no
wise enter therein.'—LUKE xviii. 17.

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TO
THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER.

'Her children arise up, and call her blessed.'



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MAITLAND OF LAURIESTON.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

'Her home lay in the shadow,
Mine lay in the sun.'

'**E**FFIE, go out into the field, dear, and ask father to come in and speak to me.'

'Yes, mother.'

The little maid, in her pink cotton gown and white pinafore, the pockets of which were filled with ripe gooseberries, darted off with that readiness which indicates that obedience is sweet.

The mother, with an open letter in her hand, followed the child out to the door, and watched her speeding down the garden path, between the rows of stately hollyhocks and the clumps of gillyflower and sweetwilliam, her snatch of song borne back like music on the gentle summer breeze. She was a tall, slender, graceful woman, with a fair, sweet, refined face, and sweet eyes which mirrored as sweet a soul. There was an air of ladyhood about her, though she wore a white cooking-apron, and though her well-shaped hands were neither white nor fine. A farmer's wife, and the busy mistress of Laurieston, Margaret Maitland

had remained true to her gentle rearing, and had carried all the refinement of her earlier years into the rougher sphere of her married life. She was a woman in her prime; and there were no grey hairs among the soft, golden-brown tresses, and scarcely a line on the smooth, fair face. Her life had, indeed, been singularly free from care, although there were, at times, faint shadows on her sky, as there must be in all lives, else we would forget that we have no continuing city here. She stood under the lintel of the old-fashioned door, and a trailing branch of the old rose-tree rested on her shoulder, until one white bloom touched her cheek. She shaded her eyes with her hand a moment, and looked away out upon the fair landscape, which was spread like a perpetual feast ever before her door. The house, an old-fashioned, rambling building, more like a small mansion than a farm-house, stood upon a gentle slope facing the sea, which shimmered and quivered beneath the celestial blue of the sky, whose counterpart it seemed. Its bosom was dotted with the brown sails of the fishing-boats and the white wings of the yachts, while here and there a line of smoke told where the merchant ships were traversing the highway of commerce from shore to shore. The opposite coast, with its clustering towns and low green hills, made a fair background for the picture,—as sweet and restful a picture as eyes could wish to see. But Margaret Maitland saw none of it that day, for her eyes were dim with tears. Beyond the wide garden there was a breadth of green pasture-land, where the cows were peacefully grazing, whisking their tails lazily in the sun. Beyond it again was the field of golden barley, among which the reapers were busy, their happy voices mingling with the other sweet sounds of the summer day.

It was a day when bird and bee and all living things should rejoice, and yet Margaret Maitland's heart was heavy and sore.

'Poor Ellen,' she said to herself in a whisper; and in the midst of her deep pity another feeling arose,—a passionate thanksgiving that she had not been called to bear a like cross with the friend of her youth. They had scoffed at her marriage with bluff Michael Maitland of Laurieston, and she herself, out of the passion of a wayward heart, had rebelled at her guardians'

choice of her destiny ; but now, through the wisdom and experience of years, she knew that in choosing Michael Maitland they had chosen wisely and well. Looking back upon that far-off stormy time, when the hot heart of youth had been full of restless rebellion, Margaret Maitland thanked God that summer day that she had *not* been left to choose her own lot in life. Presently she saw her husband vault the low hedge separating the harvest-field from the pasture, and come striding towards the house. He had left Effie behind,—the bairns all loved the stir of the harvest-field. Before he entered the garden, his wife went back to the parlour and sat down by the open window, from which she could see the tall, broad figure, in shirt-sleeves and slouching straw hat, come up the bordered garden path and across the grassy lawn. A purpose-like man was the Laird of Laurieston, a yeoman who had inherited strength of limb and will from a long line of yeoman forebears.

Maitland of Laurieston was an old name, and one much respected in the parish of Inveresk. Although the place was their own, they assumed nothing ; and had no ambition to rank above their neighbours in the adjoining farms,—a course of action which made them both beloved and esteemed.

‘Well, wife, what is’t?’ Laurieston asked, as he paused before the open window where his wife sat, and wiped the perspiration from his brow. Laurieston was aye with his work-people, not disclaiming to share their toil, though he was said to be one of the richest men in the country-side. He belonged to a race who had ever been close-handed, preferring substantial comfort to meretricious show. The furnishings of the house of Laurieston were very plain, though of the best and most substantial kind. Michael Maitland had been reared in a hard school,—indulgence of any kind had never formed a part of his early training. The creed he had been taught bound him to keep passion and emotion in curb, and to make duty and right take precedence always before what might be pleasant or easy in the way of life. A good man, and a just, who exacted from others only the dues he himself rigorously paid ; but not generous nor open-souled. A Christian man also, according to his light ; but a man who lacked the broader spirit of human

love and charity, and who had no quarter for the evil-doer or the unconsciously erring. These harsher attributes of an otherwise fine character were a perpetual grief to his wife, who was one of Heaven's messengers,—a woman whose lips dropped sweetness, and whose hands knew nothing but the gentlest ministry of love. Michael Maitland loved his wife with a strong, deep affection, which was part of his being. It would have cost him no effort to die for her; but to tell her of his love, or even to give such evidences of it as are more dear than words to a woman's heart, would have seemed to him both weak and wrong. They had four children, and though the household was on the whole a happy and united one, a shadow sometimes crept chilly to Margaret Maitland's heart. The children were growing up, and, seeing the lads beginning to chafe under their father's rigid rule, the gentle mother feared further trouble. Maitland reared his children after the pattern of his own rearing, which had not accorded the child any right of choice, but exacted implicit and silent obedience to parental rule. He wondered, as he stepped up to the window that afternoon, what had vexed his wife's usual sweet composure. There was even a touch of solicitude in his look as he repeated his question: 'Well, wife, what is't?'

'I have had a letter from Ellen Laurie, father,' she answered, holding out to him the open sheet.

'Is that a'? No' much to bring me frae the barley for,' he answered rather grimly. Nevertheless he sat down on the broad stone ledge of the window, and began to read.

'Ellen Laurie's never been out o' a peck o' troubles since she marriet that ill loon,' he grunted, before he had read many lines.

His wife never answered, but sat still, watching her husband's face as he continued to read. There was a certain anxiety in that look.

'She's a wise woman, Maggie. I've aye said she was not doin' right by the bairns, keepin' them in sight o' their father's misdoin'. I question if she may not suffer for it yet.'

'What am I to say to her, then, Michael?'

'She's no' blate, that's what I think, Maggie, askin' ither folks to tak' the responsibility of her bairns,' said the farmer bluntly.

'But you see what she says, Michael. She has means left to pay for their board and schooling,' said his wife, so eagerly that her fair cheek flushed. 'I can understand just how she feels. It must be dreadful for her to know that their father's example and companionship can do the children nothing but harm. She only asks that we will take them in while they are attending school in Edinburgh.'

"While I live I will never leave him myself," said Michael Maitland, slowly recurring to some of the written words which had struck him. 'She's a faithful soul, Ellen Laurie, and deserved a better nor Willie Laurie; but she would na' be guided. Eh, but women-folk are silly, silly, when it comes to takin' a man.'

His wife could scarcely smile, she was so tremulously anxious to have the question settled. 'Well, am I to write, Michael, and bid her send down the bairns?'

'If ye like to tak' the bother; two more will no mak' muckle steer. But though I say ay, I dinna go in wi't a'thegither, Maggie. They'll tak' after their ne'er-do-weel fa'her in some way, you may be sure; an' if they turn out ill, we'll get the blame o't. But if ye be willin' to tak' that on ye, I'll no say nay. Ye were aye vera soft aboot Ellen Laurie.'

'She was like my sister in the old time, Michael,' said Margaret Maitland with trembling lips. 'Thank you, my man.' And, to Laurieston's no small amazement and great discomfort, she leaned forward and kissed his cheek. His colour rose a little, and he hastily marched off down the garden path again, while—

'When ye're writing to Mrs. Laurie, Maggie,' he cried over his shoulder, 'ye can tell her that I think the best thing she could do wad be to come back to Scotland wi' the bairns hersel', and bide. Willie Laurie has never been anything but a wastrel all his days, and never will be noo. He's ane o' the deil's bairns; an' there's nae savin' for a reprobate like him.'

'Oh, Michael Maitland, what a hopeless doctrine!' cried his wife; but he was out of hearing. Then she sat down and re-read the letter, with wet eyes and trembling mouth. It had moved her soul to the depths. Well did she know that the

circumstances must have been extreme which warranted Ellen Laurie sending her two children from her side. Mingling with her deep, strong compassion for the sorrow of the friend of her youth, there swelled anew in Margaret Maitland's heart a passionate thanksgiving that she had not been left to her own guiding in the perilous days of youth. Looking back, she remembered the time when she would have given all the world for Ellen Rankine's chance; when she would have followed wild Will Laurie to earth's utmost end without a question. She had lived to distinguish gold from glitter, and in that hour of deep emotion she thanked God for her husband and her home. She thanked Him, too, for the green grave in the churchyard of Inveresk, where her two first-born slept. That little mound was a link betwixt earth and heaven. When her thoughts were composed a little, she sat down and wrote to her friend a letter whose every word breathed of compassion and undying love. She promised to be a mother to the two bairns when they should come to Laurieston, not knowing that in that promise she laid up for her and hers a bitter and a life-long sorrow.

She had finished her letter, and was brooding over it, when the bairn Effie came dancing in from the harvest-field with her pinafore full of poppies.

'Father sent me in, mother; for they are near finished with the field, and he says I'll get my legs cut off,' cried the child, her bright eyes dancing with wonder and excitement. She paused, silent a moment in the doorway, conscious, in a dim, childish way, that something was vexing 'mother.'

'Come here, Effie.' Margaret Maitland drew her rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed little daughter to her side, and with her firm, oft hand smoothed back the unruly black curls from her brow. 'Mother has something to tell you, dearie. There is a little sister coming to Effie, to live always at Laurieston.'

'A sister?' The child's eyes opened wider still with amazement.

'A little girl from England, Effie. Her name is Agnes Laurie; but we will call her Nannie, I think, for a pet name. Her brother is coming too; his name is Willie. He will be more a companion for John and Michael and Walter.'

'Oh ! when are they coming, mother ?'

'Soon, dear. Mother is writing about them just now. You will be very kind to poor little Agnes, Effie, for she will be very sad at leaving her mother. How would Effie like to leave mother ?'

'I won't,' replied the child decidedly. 'I'll give Agnes my new doll and the bonniest lamb, mother.'

'That's mother's little girl,' said Mrs. Maitland, with a kiss. She loved to see and to foster an unselfish spirit in her children. 'Now run and meet the boys,—they will be coming from the station ; and tell Jeanie in the kitchen to boil the kettle quickly.'

So Effie danced off, her head full of the 'little girl' who was coming from far-away England to be a sister to her ; and her mother still lingered over her writing, conscious of a curious feeling of depression she found it impossible to shake off.




CHAPTER II.

'We think and feel,
And feed upon the coming and the gone,
As much as on the now time.'

BELIEVE, Kaitrine, I could sit oot-by the day.
I wish ye wad bid Gracie carry oot a' my gear
under the big tree. It's the middle o' July, my
woman,—surely the east winds hae lost their ill
sting? What d'ye think, eh?'

'I dinna think onything, Miss Leesbeth. If ye want oot, wild horses will no' keep ye in,' Kaitrine replied, with extraordinary acidity, beginning, nevertheless, to roll up her stocking with the utmost despatch. Mistress and maid sat together in the old-fashioned parlour of the house of Hallcross on a sunny July afternoon; summer peace, the halo of summer glory, lay upon the old garden, where the still air was laden with the heavy scent of pinks and sweetwilliams and old-fashioned roses, among which the bees reaped their harvest all day long. It was a dreamy, slumbrous, old-world spot, the house of Hallcross, with its curious old gables and narrow windows, its sloping terraces and luxurious flower-beds almost shut in by the box hedges, which had grown out of all proportion. It was a whim of Miss Leesbeth's not to have the box pruned; year in, year out, it followed the bent of its own growing; and if the effect was a little odd, it was wildly picturesque and in keeping with the whole appearance of the place, which belonged to a bygone day, as did its mistress, whose garments were quaint and curiously fashioned, though not unbecoming to the gaunt yet stately figure, and the sweet, withered old face. Mistress



and maid were a curious pair, who, understanding and caring for each other, seldom agreed on any given point. Kaitrine, or Catherine, had been Miss Leesbeth's companion and waiting-woman for thirty-two years; therefore the tie between them was one of no ordinary kind. Miss Leesbeth Glover was a thorough gentlewoman, and, in spite of a certain gruff outspokenness, was winning in her ways. But Kaitrine was an awe-inspiring vision,—a hard-visaged, melancholy, sour-looking woman, past middle life; a woman of blunt, rude speech, and uncourteous ways, yet hiding beneath that unlovely exterior a heart of gold. Miss Leesbeth was an invalid, having been a sufferer from rheumatic gout for nearly fifty years. It had swollen and twisted her slender hands out of all shape, and taken from her limbs nearly all their power. She could not walk, save a few uncertain steps, supported on Kaitrine's strong, untiring arm. She had been a great sufferer; but, in spite of its seventy years, her face had something of the bloom and softness of youth upon it still, and her bright eyes had lost none of their keenness. It was a lovely old face,—one which, once seen, would long be remembered.

'Ye'd better gie's a' yer orders when ye're at it, ma'am,' said Kaitrine, still with extraordinary acidity. 'How many plaids d'ye want, an' whatten chairs an' stools! Just sit doon or they're cairried oot, see, an' dinna fash yer thoomb. It's no' the first time I've letten ye oot-by, is't?'

'No, Kaitrine; but I'm fain to be oot,' said the old lady meekly, looking with all a child's eager excitement through the half-open lattice to the smooth green lawn, all dotted with buttercup and daisy.

'Humph,' was Kaitrine's comment; but she went with haste out of the room, and nearly worried Gracie, the young kitchen-maid, out of her wits. In a few minutes all was in readiness under the chestnut-tree: the invalid chair, the cushions for back and feet, the big cotton umbrella to shade from the sun, and the little table, which was Kaitrine's own thought. She made up her mind that her mistress should have her four-o'clock cup of tea on the lawn for the first time that summer.

When the faithful waiting-woman had placed everything in

order for the comfort of her mistress, Miss Leesbeth, leaning on that strong willing arm, passed out with slow, trembling steps into the warm golden flood made by the summer sun. Her lips quivered and her eyes grew wet as she uplifted her face to the peaceful summer sky; and when they had placed her in her reclining chair under the grateful green shade of the chestnut-tree, she folded her hands and said, under her breath, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.' Then turning to Kaitrine, she laughed, a low, sweet, happy laugh, and added,—

'Eh, my woman, but this is a bonnie warld. Did ever ye see a bonnier spot than this auld garden this summer day?'

'It's weel eneuch, Miss Leesbeth, weel eneuch; but noo that ye are out, I hope ye'll gie Tammas Da'rymple a word for he'll tak' nane frae me. Jist look at these walks: it's a perfect sin to see the weeds; an' he's far ower late wi' his geraniums an' stocks: look at the puir jimpy things, wi' hardly a leaf on them, when they should hae been in flower. He was countin' on the east wind lestin', as I telt him, an' that ye wadna be oot. Sae I hope, ma'am, ye'll gie him a word. Nesty, thrawn auld body, he'll no dae nae way but his ain. Wha's this noo, comin' in by the gairden door? Anc o' thae Tho'burns, I'll be bound,—claverin', wanderin' craturs.'

'It's Mrs. Michael, Kaitrine,' said Miss Leesbeth joyfully, as her eye fell on the figure of the mistress of Laurieston. 'I'm fu' gled to see her. Go in and see that Gracie has her kettle bilin', an' mak' the tea guid, my woman. It's no' every day Mrs. Michael comes to Hallercross.'

'She wadna be here the day, I'm thinkin', if she didna want something,' quoth Kaitrine; 'there's trouble on *her* face the day, or I'm mista'en. I suppose I may gang my gate now.' Nevertheless, instead of disappearing into the house, Kaitrine went down the terrace steps and along between the box hedges to meet Mrs. Maitland.

'She's oot, ye see,' she said abruptly, pointing backwards to the lawn. 'She's just like a bairn, she was gettin' that fractious. There's nae wind the day to hurt a flee, onyway.'

'Oh no; it's as warm as possible, Kaitrine,' returned Mrs.

Maitland, with a smile, quite conscious of the affectionate anxiety underlying the prickly exterior. 'I have walked along the river-side, but found the insects a little troublesome.'

'Ay, the heat brings them. A' weel at Laurieston?'

'All well, thank you. Aunt Leesbeth looks well from here.'

'Oo ay, she's weel enouch,—as thrawn as ever. I have my ain to dae wi' her,' said Kaitrine grimly. 'Jist gang ower; I've something adae in the hoose. Ye'll can bide wi' her a wee?'

Mrs. Maitland nodded, and made her way rapidly to the little camping-ground under the chestnut-tree.

'Aunt Leesbeth, how you will enjoy being out this lovely day!' she exclaimed, as she shook hands with the old lady, and bent her sweet, tender eyes on the pathetic face. Aunt Leesbeth was Margaret Maitland's only living relative, and had long stood to her in the place of a mother.

'Ay, lassie; I was but sayin', wi' Daavie, "Bless the Lord, O my soul!" Are ye weel, an' Michael, an' the bairns?'

'All well, all well,' Margaret Maitland answered a little wearily; and, drawing off her gloves, she took off her bonnet and put her bare hands up to her temples as if to still their throbbing.

'Kaitrine thoct ye looked vexed, Maggie,' Miss Leesbeth said softly, but with anxiety in both face and voice.

'Kaitrine is a perfect witch, Aunt Leesbeth. Yes, I am vexed. I had a letter yesterday from Ellen.'

'Waur news than usual, Maggie? What new sorrow has the puir tried soul gotten noo?'

'Nothing new, Aunt Leesbeth. I brought the letter with me. I'll just read it to you, because I want your advice. I would have come last night, but Michael wanted me to drive to Tranent with him; and this was the churning-day, so it was after dinner-time before I had a minute to myself.'

So saying, Mrs. Maitland unfolded the letter, and without further remark read it to Miss Leesbeth, who listened in perfect silence, though with an occasional mournful shake of the head. It contained no complaint, and yet its pathos touched the heart of Miss Leesbeth with a keenness which was almost pain. Although Ellen Laurie was not kin to her, she

loved her almost as well as her own niece, for the two had been like sisters in that bright youth-time when the fair world was all before them.

'Ellen's heart is heavy, an' justly so, about the bairns, Maggie,' she said at length. 'What does Michael say?'

'Michael is willing. His heart is kind at bottom, Aunt Leesbeth, though you don't get on with him,' said Mrs. Maitland, with a faint smile.

'I have no fault to find wi' your man, Maggie lass, if ye are pleased; ye took him wi' yer een open, my doo,' said the old lady, with a slightly humorous smile. 'An' as to gettin' on, I dinna live wi' him; an' ye had aye a sweet temper. So he's willin', is he, to let the bairns come to Laurieston?'

'Quite. I wrote to Ellen last night.'

'Bidding her send the bairns?'

'Yes.'

'An' what advice d'ye want, then, Maggie, when the thing's a' settled?'

'I don't know. I have a foreboding; perhaps it is the sense of responsibility. I have four young souls in my charge already, Aunt Leesbeth, and I find them enough.'

'Ay, lassie, they *are* in your charge,' said Miss Leesbeth, with a touch of bitterness; 'an' blithe am I, and thankfu' to the Lord, that the Laurieston bairns hae sic a mother. If it's the God o' their mother they learn to love an' serve in their youth, I'll hae nae fears for them. If I were you, Maggie, I wadna let the bairns come. Is the letter awa'?'

'Not yet; but what is your objection?'

'It's a thankless job rearin' other folk's bairns, Maggie; but that's the maist selfish reason. Ye ken what their father is, an' ye hae your ain to think o'. They might learn ill frae them.'

'I'd rather believe my bairns would do them good, Aunt Leesbeth,' Mrs. Maitland answered, with motherly pride, which pleased the old lady well. She spoke only to try her.

'Weel, weel; it says muckle for you and Michael Maitland, that ye are willin' to tak' the charge oot o' Ellen's hands. Eh, lassie, ye hae a big heart. I mony a time wonder some folks

dinna tak' example by ye. But it's no' in them, an' they canna help it. Maybe the Lord makes queer folk for His ain ends. So the rent o' Hallercross is to pay the bairns' board! Sixty pounds a year,—it's little eneuch.'

'It will not be spent, of that I am sure; Michael will lay by the money for them, I know.'

'Maggie, ye hae made a man o' Michael Maitland,—he was but a stane afore.'

'Oh, Aunt Leesbeth! How dare you?'

'Daur! I daur say onything to you, Maggie; an' what for no'? Did I no' bring ye up, an' did ye no' marry Laurieston again' my will? A man that believed in sic a God couldna make any woman-body happy. But he hasna crushed ye yet.'

'Aunt Leesbeth, this is the one subject I will *not* discuss with you,' said Mrs. Maitland sharply, and with a touch of pride which her aunt loved to see in her, though she had roused it. 'I am very well content with my man. I know him, though you don't, and you never will, because you are prejudiced against him.'

'Weel, weel, dinna think I dislike to see you stand up for him, Maggie. There's nae accounting for some women,—they'll do anything for a man. I'm best off that's never been fashed. When are the puir bairns comin', did ye say?'

'Soon; at once, I suppose Ellen means. Aunt Leesbeth, I don't think she'll live; I should like to see her again.'

'So wad I, puir Ellen. That's a pitifu' letter, Maggie; but there's a thing in't I dinna like. She's resigned to her sorrows, but she speaks as if the Lord had sent them to her; when a'boddy kent, ay, an' telt her, that if she took Will Laurie she need look for naething else. Maggie, I hinna patience wi' folk; there's a kind that blame the deil, puir chiel', for a'thing, an' a kind that blame Providence for a' the ill they bring on themself's. Eh, if I could preach, I wadna be feared to speak. I'll no' say but that I'm sair vexed for Ellen; but when a lassie, wi' her een open, an' in the face o' sic tellins as she got, taks a bad man, what can she expect?'

'She loved him, Aunt Leesbeth,' Margaret Maitland said, in a low voice; and, looking away from her aunt, she watched the

gleaming of the river under the willows beyond the old garden.

'Or thoct she did. It passes me, lassie, to ken how a pure-minded true-hearted woman, such as Ellen Rankine was twenty years ago, could bear Willie Laurie in her company, let alone love him. It was a perfect infatuation. D'ye think I'm ower hard, Maggie?'

'I don't know; it is well not to judge, I think.'

'May be no'; but when I think o' Walter Maitland, in Leith, tied to that peengin' wife o' his, that he marrit for spite, though he wad hae laid down his life for Ellen, an' when I think what a pair they wad hae made, I hinna patience wi' folk.'

'But you are outside of it all, Aunt Leesbeth,' Mrs. Maitland said quietly. 'It is easier to judge looking on than to fight the battle; not that I don't admit the justice of what you say. Walter Maitland would have made Ellen happy; but I confess I find it better *not* to question too much into the affairs of life.'

'Maybe, maybe,' said the old lady, feeling somewhat rebuked. 'Maybe I set mysel' up as a judge, puir silly cratur that I am; but of one thing I'm certain, Maggie: the Lord means His creatures to be happy, an' gies them opportunities they pass by. But we'll let that alone.'

'Yes,' said Margaret Maitland dreamily; 'I should like to see her again.'

'So wad I, puir Ellen; hers has been a weary weird. Ye'll bring the bairns ower to see me when they come, Maggie?'

'Of course. I expect they will know you very well from their mother's talk, and they'll be anxious to see her old home. It is a sweet spot. When I come over, it looks to me as if the past twenty years were a dream. It looks exactly as it did when Ellen lived here with her mother.'

'Ay, puir lassie, she's been through the hards since then. It's a mistake, Maggie, for a woman to think she can mak' a guid man oot o' a bad by marryin' him. It is the man that moulds the wife to his pattern.'

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'Always, Aunt Leesbeth?'

'Well, no' in your case,' laughed Aunt Leesbeth. 'When are thae loons o' yours comin' ower to eat my strawberries? The birds are gettin' the best half o' them.'

'I'll send them over to-night. Here's Kaitrine with the tea-tray. Surely she is in a fine mood to-night!'

'She likes you, Maggie. You should hear her say, "I've a great respect for Mistress Michael."'

'Here's your tea,' said Kaitrine, marching forward with the tea-tray. 'Jist look at her,—she's like a pleased wean,' she added, with a comical glance at her mistress. 'Mercy me, it's surely the affairs o' the nation ye've been discussin'! Ye've been greetin', Mrs. Michael; has she been girnin' at ye? Never heed her. Sit up, see, Miss Leesbeth, or I sort ye pillies.'

'We've been discussing rather a serious matter, Kaitrine,' replied Mrs. Michael. 'What do you think of Mrs. Laurie's two bairns coming to bide at Laurieston?'

'To bide! What for?'

'To be educated and cared for.'

'I think weel o't—for the bairns,' admitted Kaitrine. 'It'll maybe save them frae destruction: their faither's an ill man,—I kenna what way he brocht bairns into the world ava. An' hoo's the puir cratur their mither,—aye livin' yet?'

'Yes; but I am afraid her health is very poor,' said Mrs. Michael, with a sigh.

'It couldna be onything else. Eh, the puir misguidet cratur, that micht hae mated wi' the best in the pairish,' said Kaitrine gruffly, but with a ring of real regret in her voice. 'Altho' I wadna say't afore a man-body, it maks me sick to see the silliness o' women. It gars me to think shame whiles that I'm a wummin mysel'. It's a pity the Lord didna gie women-folk mair gumption when He was at it. They hinna as muckle—that is, some o' them—as look efter their puir silly sel's.'



CHAPTER III.

'The dawn of human life doth green and verdant spring;
It doth little ween the strife the after years will bring.'

'**C**OME here, my son.'

'Yes, mother.'

'I want you to drive me up to the station to meet father and the bairns.'

'Oh, mother, I want to go down and see the Loretto match,' said the lad, his bright face clouding a little.

'It will not be by when we come back, John. It is nearly train-time now. Run and brush the dust off your boots and your jacket, and put Annie Laurie in the phaeton.'

'Annie Laurie, mother? she's awful with laziness. She'll never get to the station in that heat.'

'Oh yes, she will; run, like a man, and I'll tell you why I want Annie Laurie to pull us up.'

'All right; but father can't be bothered with her, she's so slow.'

'Father will walk, likely. There is only room for four, at any rate.'

Though disappointed of seeing the match start on the college field, John Maitland never thought of rebelling, but went off whistling to put the harness on Annie Laurie's fat sides. The Maitlands loved their mother intensely, and she had trained them to a most beautiful obedience. She never spoke harshly or ungently to them, and yet each was eager to anticipate her desire before it had found an utterance. The obedience they gave their father was not less prompt, but it had awe, not unmingled with

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fear, for its mainspring,—Michael Maitland brooked no second utterance of a wish ; his bairns as well as his work-people all knew that his spoken word was law. When Mrs. Maitland stepped out of the front door, and saw her tall manly son standing by the pony's head, her heart thrilled with motherly pride. Perhaps the first-born is ever the dearest ; it is certain that Margaret Maitland's life was bound up in her eldest son. He was, like other lads of his age, a trifle awkward and ungainly ; his figure had all the slackness of boyhood, even while it had almost attained manhood's proportions. He had a good square head, set not ungracefully on a sturdy neck ; and if his skin was swarthy, it was in keeping with the dark brown hair, and fine honest eyes, which had never yet feared to look the whole world in the face. There was character in the face, decision and manliness about the square brow and the well-set jaw, but there was sweetness as well as strength in the mouth. The mother hoped great things of her manly boy. I believe there was no achievement or high height to which she did not believe him capable of attaining. We live again in our children, and in their fair soil sow anew the seed which may not in our own lives have come to the full ear. Margaret Maitland had consecrated her boy's future, and was not in the meantime troubling herself, only waiting, with a kind of exquisite satisfaction, for the gradual unfolding of that bud of promise. As yet the waiting had no shadow of anxiety or fear in it.

'John, I want to speak to you about Agnes and Willie Laurie,' she said, as the fat old pony carried them lumberingly down the short avenue.

'What about them, mother ?'

'I'm going to give you a charge over them.'

John looked rather perplexed, and gave Annie Laurie a gentle whisk with the whip.

'You are grown so big, John, and you are so helpful, I am going to trust you with something I would not speak about to the others. Have you ever wondered that the Lauries should come here ?'

'I did wonder awfully. It seemed strange. Why, they are not even any relation.'

'Their mother was like my sister once, my son, and I feel almost as if the bairns were kin to me. They have not a good father, John, and their mother thinks it would be better for them to be away.'

'How not good?' asked the lad, with intense interest.

'Not a good man. He has not the grace of God in his heart, John, and he is not fit to have the upbringing of bairns or the care of a wife,' said Mrs. Maitland; and her colour rose a little in her fair cheek.

'I cannot tell you any more, my son. I have given you my confidence, because I want you to be very good and kind to Agnes and Willie. If they vex you, as they may sometimes, remember that they have not had your advantages, and be very gentle with them.'

'I'll try, mother.'

Margaret Maitland looked up at her tall son with a pleased light in her eyes. She saw him straighten himself, and knew that he was proud of the trust reposed in him.

'Of course I have not spoken to the others. They are too young, and Watty, at least, too wild to understand. You are different, John; you will be seventeen in October.'

'Yes, mother, I know.'

There was even a slight tremor in the lad's deep voice. It was a very precious thing that his bonnie mother should make a confidant of him. From that day John Maitland seemed to be more of a man than he had yet been.

'I suppose the little girl will be quite nice for Effie to play with?' he said, after a bit.

'I don't know. I rather think, from what her mother has told me in her letters, that she is old for her years. She is just Michael's age. They were both born in June, the time of the roses.'

'She's fourteen, then; no, fifteen. Why, mother, Michael's fifteen!'

'Yes; the laddies are beginning to make their mother an old woman. Take it easy, Annie Laurie, my woman, and remember you are not so young as you were, like me.'

'She's a stupid old thing. She hears the train coming; that's

what's exciting her. We're just in time. I'll mind what you said, mother.'

A look of love passed between mother and son, and Mrs. Maitland, stepping from the low phaeton, stood waiting by the little white gate of the station.

It was a busy station, though so small a place, Inveresk being on the main line of the East Coast route from the South.

But the children had travelled by the West Coast route to Edinburgh, where Michael Maitland had gone to meet them. They were the only passengers who stepped upon the platform; and when Mrs. Maitland saw her husband assisting a tall, womanly girl in a grey travelling cloak from the train, she gave a start of surprise. For in that first look it seemed as if the years rolled back, and the old days when Ellen Rankine and she had been bairns together were again with them.

'Look at the little girl who is to play with Effie, John,' she said, with a kind of quiet amusement; 'she is as tall as you.'

Before John could make any answer, the trio who had stepped from the train came forward to the gate,—the boy, boisterous and eager as was his wont, with his fair-skinned face flushed, and his yellow hair hanging all round his big grey eyes.

'That's Will Laurie's son,' Margaret Maitland said in her heart, as she held out her hands to welcome the bairns, drawing them both to her with that gesture of motherliness which was like sunshine to the heart of Agnes. She had tried to study the face of their new guardian during the short time she had been with him; but though he was quite kind, he had given them no cordial welcome, and his face had not been illumined by many smiles.

'Is this the place? Is that your pony, Mr. Maitland?' cried Willie, in his quick, rather forward way. 'What a beast! She's far too fat.'

Mrs. Maitland let him go, but she kept the hand of Agnes firm in hers, and their eyes met in a long look, of questioning first, then of absolute and satisfied trust.

'Come, dears. Are you to walk down, father? Very well. Just leave the trunks. Geordie will bring up the little cart for

them after tea. You knew them at once, didn't you, dear? Isn't Willie like his father?'

'Ay is he,' answered Laurieston, a trifle dryly. 'And there's Ellen Rankine as you and I kent her,' he said, pointing to Agnes. 'Well, I'll away down. What possessed you to bring Annie Laurie?'

'Where is Annie Laurie?' asked Agnes, with interest.

'The pony, my dear,' laughed Mrs. Maitland; 'I brought her because I thought she would seem like a friend to you. Did mamma not tell you of her?'

'No.'

'Come, then, and speak to John. This is my biggest son, Agnes. We are going to call you Nannie. How will you like your new name?'

'I would like any name you gave me,' returned the girl, with a peculiar pathetic uplifting of her eyes; then she extended her hand to John, who lifted his cap, and gave the slender fingers a hearty, boyish pressure which told his welcome. The shyness of youth of his age prevented him giving utterance to the kindly feelings in his heart. In a few minutes they were comfortably seated in the roomy phaeton, and Annie Laurie with a deep groan trudged off.

'What does she groan for? Are we hurting her?' asked Agnes, in concern.

'Oh no,' laughed John; 'it's her laziness. She's awful. You'll soon get to know her tricks. Mother, she gets far too much to eat.'

'Why don't you ride her every day till she gets thin?' asked Willie, with an assumption of knowledge which amused John intensely.

'Because she belongs to mother,' he answered; and Agnes looked across at him with a peculiar sweetness. She liked to hear him say 'mother' in that tender, reverent kind of way. John was quite conscious of that sweet, serious approval, and it made his heart glow, though he dropped his eyes rather shamefacedly.

'See, Nannie, there is the sea,' said Mrs. Maitland, suddenly laying her hand upon the girl's arm; 'just a peep, and we won't

see it again till we get to Laurieston. Are you very fond of the sea ?'

'I think I am ; I have never seen it right. Is *that* the sea ? Oh, how lovely !' Her lips parted, her colour came and went fitfully.

'It's only the Firth of Forth, Ag ; not of any importance beside the Mersey,' said Willie loftily. 'You should see the ships in our river. We have six miles of docks,' he added, looking at John.

'But that's at Liverpool, a great big city. This is the country,' John answered quietly.

'Are we near Hallcross, Mrs. Maitland ?'

'We pass by the gate, dear. See, yonder is the spire of Inveresk Church. You know it by name, don't you ?'

'Oh yes. Mamma did me some sketches from memory. I recognise it quite well, though there are so many trees. How pretty it is here !'

'Very ; but we think it a little shut in. There is Hallcross, Agnes,—that big ivy-covered house just within the high wall we are coming to. Of course you know my aunt lives in it now ?'

'Yes—Miss Elizabeth Glover,' said Agnes quickly.

'She is not used to that long title ; we call her Aunt Leesbeth,' said Mrs. Maitland. 'She is very anxious to see you. She was as much your mother's aunt as mine long ago.'

'It will be delightful to see her and Hallcross,' Agnes answered, with almost emotional seriousness. 'But how gloomy it looks from here,—quite different from what I expected.'

'Because it is the back, and is in the shadow. The garden lies in the sun all day long. But come, tell me about your journey. Was it very pleasant ?'

'Very comfortable, thank you. Willie wearied a little, I think.'

'It is poky enough being boxed up in a little railway carriage, I tell you,' said Willie promptly. 'I am glad to get here. Is it far from your place ?'

'No ; we shall be there presently. This is our turnip field ; and look, there is the house.'

'Is it a farm ?' asked Willie, with a curious expression on his face.

'Yes.'

'Dad said it was a gentleman's place,' returned the lad carelessly. 'In England farmers are not gentlemen.'

'You may be mistaken, my boy,' said Mrs. Maitland gently. 'Just look how Annie Laurie knows the way.'

'Why do you call her Annie Laurie?' Agnes asked.

'Because she was given to me when I was a girl. She came from Laurieston. Many a day have your mother and I ridden, turn-about, on her back about the lanes, and even away over the links yonder.'

'And where is Musselburgh, Mrs. Maitland? Mamma told me it was quite near.'

'So it is, only the trees hide it. You will soon know it all, my dear. See, yonder is Prestonpans pier, and the yellow sands at Aberlady.'

'It is all lovely. I have to go down to Musselburgh and see Dr. Moir soon, mamma said.'

'Yes, my love, I know; we will talk over it all soon. Here we are, and father before us. There's Effie too. I suppose the boys will be off to the match, John?'

Annie Laurie walked up the avenue in a very dignified way, and stopped of her own accord before the door. When the young girl alighted, and stood for a moment looking on the bonnie homelike place, and then away beyond the blue expanse of the shining sea, she grew quite pale.

'How it sinks into my heart,' she said simply, and then stooped to kiss Effie, who stood shyly before her, twisting her pinafore in her chubby fingers. There were only five years between them, but, beside the tall womanly girl, Effie looked even more childish than usual.

'Come up and I will show you your room. Willie is off to the stable with John, I suppose. He will soon be friendly with everybody. My dear, you look very tired,' said Margaret Maitland.

'I am not tired, thank you,' returned Agnes, as she followed her kind hostess up the wide stone stair, which looked so cool and clean, with its strip of bright matting up the centre.

'Effie and you will have this room, dear; it is quite large

enough for you both. And I hope you will be very happy with us all. I am to be your Aunt Margaret, and I am sure I shall love you very much. You are so like your mother.'

'Aunt Margaret, mamma told me how lovely you were, but she did not say half enough.'

'Oh, my lassie, hush.'

'It is true; and mamma said, too, Aunt Margaret, that I was to be very helpful and useful to you, because you were doing what some kin would not.'

'Hush, lassie, hush.' The tears welled up hot and bright in Margaret Maitland's eyes.

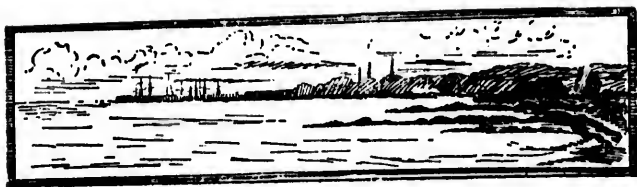
'I know it is true. I understand things better than I did. Mamma talked such a lot to me. You see, we had only each other.'

'My bairn, it must have been very hard to part.'

'I don't think dying could be so hard, Aunt Margaret,' returned the girl, and her very hands shook. Margaret Maitland did not like that firm, womanly self-control. It was too strong for one so young. She put her motherly arm about the slim shoulders, and drew the sweet pale face to her motherly breast.

'I cannot fill that place, my Nannie; but I know I shall love you. And you will be my big helpful daughter, won't you?'

'Oh, I will be, I will be!' In that earnest cry was hid the first vow of Agnes Laurie's heart.




CHAPTER IV.

'You think your heart the bravest,
And you call your creed divine.'

THERE was very little work done in the house of Laurieston on the Sabbath day. In Michael Maitland's youth the day of rest had not been a day of gladness, for the blinds were kept rigidly drawn over the windows to exclude the sun, and the children were not allowed out of doors except to walk to and from the church. In the case of his own children he was not disposed to relax the sternness of that rigid observance, but their mother interposed. She would not consent to the house being darkened, and she tried to show him that to look upon God's beautiful world on the Sabbath day could be no sin. So the bairns were allowed in the summer time to spend the long evening in the garden, after the two services and the Sabbath school. Mrs. Maitland thought that the observances of the day were too long and trying for the young children, but her gentle hinting had no effect.

'You would have the bairns grow up heathens, Margaret,' Laurieston said grimly, when she pleaded once that Effie might be spared the afternoon service at least. 'So long as they bide at Laurieston they shall observe the Lord's day, keep it as they like when they are awa'.'

As was to be expected, the two young strangers from Liverpool marvelled not a little at the solemnity of the Sabbath in Scotland. Poor young things, they had hitherto seen but small reverence paid to it by their own father, who had been wont to sleep half



the day in the house, and spend the evening at his club. They arrived at Laurieston on a Saturday, and next morning were awakened early, breakfast being at half-past seven. Before breakfast the 'books' were brought in, and the two maids and the ploughmen were always assembled; and when the bairns had all taken their seats, Mr. Maitland gave out the 103rd Psalm. Agnes thought he intended to read it; great was her surprise when Aunt Margaret presently began to sing. Then they all joined in,—Laurieston's own deep bass, and John's rich tenor, and the shrill, hearty notes of Wattie and Effie. Agnes thought she had never heard a more sweet and pleasant sound. The window and the door were open for the great heat, and she could see out to the pleasant garden, where the sun lay in a golden flood; she could even see where it kissed the sparkling wavelets on the shore. After the singing Laurieston read two chapters from the Proverbs, and then, closing the book, knelt down to pray. It was a prayer Agnes never forgot,—perhaps because it was the first she had ever heard in the house of Laurieston; or perhaps because of its after effects. She did not close her eyes, but kept them fixed on the face of Michael Maitland, wondering at its stern, unbending look. She had been taught by her mother that prayer meant speaking to the Lord as to a loving, tender Father, whose ear was ever open, as the Bible has it; but it seemed to her that her new guardian regarded God as a mighty and harsh judge, whom it was presumptuous for any creature to approach. There were some passages in the prayer, likewise, upon which she long pondered, for they were, to her, full of dark mystery. Thus did Michael Maitland pray:—

'Almighty and ever to be revered Jehovah, we the poor creatures of Thy providence, vile worms who do but cumber the ground, seek to approach Thy footstool once more, filled with wonder that we should be spared to see the light of another Sabbath day. We know not why we are spared, and not cut off in the midst of our fearful iniquities, which are so many and so black that we dare not ask to be forgiven. We offer Thee our gratitude, if gratitude from creatures so vile can be acceptable in Thy sight, for Thy goodness to us, each one,

and we humbly implore a continuance of that gracious bounty both for body and soul, if it be Thy will to grant it. But let the body suffer, O Lord, rather than the soul. If Thou seest that we need scourging for the cleansing of our corrupt hearts, scourge us, we beseech Thee, without stint. We would rejoice in Thy chastisement, because Thou hast said that Thou scourgest every son whom Thou receivest. We render devout thanks to Thee, O great God, for the mercies of the night, granted to us and ours. We thank Thee that no member of it was called away without warning, maybe to open his eyes in the place where Thou canst not be gracious any more. We ask Thee humbly to grant to the heads of this house wisdom to guide it, and grace to set a righteous example before both young and old within its walls. O Lord, if it be Thy holy will, let none of these young children before Thee be vessels of Thy eternal wrath. Take them away from this world rather than that they should become servants of the devil. If, in the unsearchable mysteries of Thy providence, any one of these now before Thee should become a castaway, teach us not to rebel, but to submit to Thy will. Bless the two who have come to sojourn with us awhile. Give them grace to fight the old man within, and let them know how good it is to serve the Creator in the days of their youth. Bless the men-servants and the maid-servants. Let them be none the worse for their service in this house. Help us all so to live that we shall not be able to cast stones at each other at the great and awful day of the Lord. We ask Thy blessing on the service of Thy holy house this day. Let there be no levity, no vain imaginings in the hearts of those who attend upon the solemn ordinances of the sanctuary. Give Thy servant the minister grace and unction to speak as a dying man to dying men. Let him not trifle with his awful responsibility. Again beseeching Thy pardoning grace for each one, we humbly leave ourselves on Thee. All our requests are in the name and for the sake of Thy Son. Amen.'

It was with a strange sense of relief that Agnes rose from her knees, and saw the yellow sunshine streaming in through the open door.

'Now to breakfast, bairns,' said Mrs. Maitland cheerily. 'Eh, it is a bonnie morning. The sun is like the Lord's smile.'

'Wheesht, mother,' said Michael Maitland reprovingly; but his wife smiled up into his face.

'It is, Michael dear. There is no irreverence in the thought.'

After breakfast the bairns were allowed out in the pleasant garden for a while, and, as was their wont, gathered in a cluster under the old thorn tree which stood in the middle of the grassy lawn.

Willie Laurie had been rather amazed by the proceedings of the morning, all so different from anything to which he had been accustomed. He had not been long enough at Laurieston to feel any restraint irksome; but he was a wayward, self-willed boy, and would not take kindly to the discipline maintained by Mr. Maitland.

'Do we drive to the church?' he asked, as he threw himself down on the grass. 'Isn't that the spire away over there among the trees? It seems a long way.'

'It isn't far; and even if it were double the distance, father wouldn't let us drive. He does not think it right to drive or ride on Sunday,' said Michael, looking up quietly from his book. Michael had always a book. He was a student and a scholar for love.

'Oh!' said Willie expressively, and sent a pebble rolling down the slope. 'What's the use of having horses, I say, if you can't get the use of them? What do you do with yourselves all day?'

'You'll soon see,' said Wattie, with a curious grin. 'At half-past ten we go away to church, and it's nearly one when we get back; then we have some milk and bread, and go again from two to half-past three; then Sunday school, and we come home to tea; then at night father gives us a lesson, and if we can't say our questions, we catch it.'

'But I won't do all that. I think I'll go down to the beach and bathe in the afternoon; it is so jolly warm,' said Willie carelessly.

'I don't expect you'll get leave,' said John, with a kind of

amused smile at the boy. 'Father will want you to keep Sunday as we do.'

'But I won't do it. Who's going to sit in church all day? Come on round to the stable, Wattie, and let's see the colt.'

So Wattie and he went off arm in arm. Watty needed little to persuade him to have a frolic of any kind. Sober John, looking after them, thought 'hat in all likelihood the two would be in many a scrape together. When they were out of sight, he looked up at the slender white-robed figure of Agnes as it leaned against the gnarled trunk of the old tree. She had no hat on, and her bright hair lay in waves on her pure broad brow. Her deep eyes, fixed upon the sea, had a far-away look in them. The lad, forgetting his shyness, looked at the sweet fair face with intense interest. She was so fair, so sweet, so dainty, so different in all ways from any girl he had ever seen.

'A penny for your thoughts,' he said suddenly; and she gave a little start, and the colour leaped in her cheek.

'They were hardly worth it, perhaps.'

'Because they were about Jock,' said Michael, looking up with his rare slow smile.

'Oh no, they were not. I was only thinking how lovely it is here,—and—and'—

There was a little tremor in her voice, and, suddenly stooping, she slid down beside the lads on the grassy slope. She sat just between them,—John at the one side, with his back against the stone column of the old sun-dial, and his red cricket-cap pushed far back on his shaggy brown hair; and Michael, very neat and tidy, his fair hair unruffled, and his cuffs showing white and stiff below his sleeves. There was a great contrast between the two, though they were inseparable chums,—Michael, the blue-eyed and gentle, nice and even dainty in his appearance and manners, though with nothing effeminate about him; and John, big, awkward, lumbering, never very tidy nor according well with his clothes, yet with a suggestion of manliness and power in all. So they sat with the fair pale girl between them, that sweet summer morning, with no foreboding of the troubled, pain-laden future to cast a shadow on their young hearts.

'I was wondering whether the sea of glass in heaven would be lovelier than that,' said Agnes dreamily, after a moment's pause.

John looked at her with a greater curiosity than before. Michael turned round on his elbow too, and lifted his dreamy blue eyes to her face. The young Maitlands, in spite of their strict observance of the Sabbath day, were not used to hearing sacred things spoken of in such a way. Not that Agnes spoke irreverently; it was because her tone and words were perfectly matter-of-fact.

'Do you believe there's a real sea in heaven?' John asked, in his slow, bashful way.

'Why, of course. Do you know what mamma says? That whatever we love to look at, or whatever is good and beautiful on earth, we shall find in heaven. Mamma and I used to have such long talks,—she knows everything.'

'But how do you know you'll ever get there?' asked John bluntly; and though Michael's eyes were on his books, he was eager to hear her answer.

'Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us,' she answered quite simply; and there was a long silence.

It was a curious subject for these three young people to discuss, but it was one quite familiar to the mind of Agnes Laurie. Her mother, who had found so little worth possessing on earth, had dwelt, perhaps, more than others on the rest and the joys of the other world. Her young daughter had almost from her infancy been her constant companion, and later her close friend, to whom she spoke freely on all subjects save one. But the girl's simple words sounded very extraordinary in the ears of the two lads beside her.

'I wonder what father would say to that,' said Michael musingly. 'He does not believe anybody can be sure of going to heaven. Didn't you hear him to-day about the castaways?'

'I thought I'd ask Aunt Margaret what it meant,' said Agnes; and again that slow, puzzled look came into her eyes.

'You should ask him,' put in John dryly, and even with a touch of bitterness.

Discords were arising in the relationship between Michael Maitland and his two elder sons. They were beginning to

think for themselves, and their father's creed did not commend itself to them. There was something in the constant merciless abasement of self, in the painful appeals for mercy from the stern judgment of the Unseen, against which their young souls were beginning to revolt. Michael Maitland, a good man, and a Christian according to his lights, had all his life misrepresented God to his children. They feared Him as a harsh and terrible Being, who delighted to punish the sinner. The mercy and the loving tenderness of an all-wise Father had never been presented to their minds. There were many questions on John Maitland's lips, but shyness kept him from asking them. Michael, however, shut his book, and, turning over on his back, fixed his big blue eyes full on the girl's face.

'I say, do you believe heaven is a real place, and all that? Would you like to go?'

'Why, of course. It is a far better place than this,' answered Agnes, with a mild, sweet surprise. 'Mamma often says this is just like a wayside inn, where travellers stay for a little before going on to the journey's end.'

'I say, do you feel well enough?' asked John, with a kind of rough solicitude. He was not used to such talk, and feared it meant that their new sister had not long to live. He could not imagine anybody in health speaking about things in such a way. In spite of some minor trials, the world was a lovely world in the eyes of these two lads. But life was all before them. It is when we come to look back that the light of the eyes seems changed and dim.

Just then Mrs. Maitland appeared at the door, and called Agnes in to the house.

'Queer, isn't she, Jock?' Michael said, when she was out of hearing.

'May be; but I'll tell you what,—I wish everybody thought like her; things would be different,' said John; and, picking himself up, he sauntered away down the garden path.

Margaret Maitland watched her eldest son that day with a tender and watchful interest, which had in it a touch of amusement. She saw that he was wholly taken up with Agnes, and that she was a complete revelation to him.

'It'll do the laddies good. It'll make them more tender with women-folk. She'll help to make men of them,' she said to herself.

At bed-time, looking out for a mouthful of fresh air, she found John on the doorstep, and so had a word with him.

'Mother, this has been a nice Sunday,' he said impetuously.

'I am glad to hear you say so, John; sometimes you weary a little on the Sabbath, I think?'

She raised her white, soft hand, and smoothed back his hair with a gentle touch. These little caresses were seldom bestowed when their father was by, and I suppose the bairns could not but notice it.

'It is long sometimes,' he admitted. 'Mother, did you ever see anybody like her?'

'Like who,—Nannie?'

'Yes.'

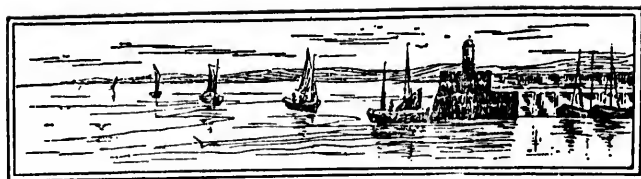
'In what way?'

'Every way. Do you think she'll live? She's like an angel.'

'Live? Oh ay! A very substantial angel,' returned the mother, with a sweet, low laugh at the boy's conceit. 'I'm glad you've taken to her, John. The boy will be a little troublesome.'

'Restless little beggar,' was John's comment. 'He and Wattie will keep the place lively. Mother, do you know, sometimes I feel so queer? Thoughts seem to flood upon me. I think about the world, and the life we live, and sometimes about the future, until I get uplifted. I wish I knew the meaning of it all.'

'My own son! God guide him,' Margaret Maitland said; and, leaning her soft hand on his tall shoulder, she looked deep into his honest eyes. It was one of those rare moments when mother and son came very near each other,—so near that all the world beside seemed to be shut out.



CHAPTER V.

'I have a heart to dare,
And spirit thews to work my daring out.'

N SHOULD like to take you over to Halleross to-night, Nannie, but I am too busy with my preserves. I wonder where John is?' 'There he is, Aunt Maggie, down in the harvest-field.'

'And there is Effie, as usual, among the gooseberries,' laughed Mrs. Maitland, as she caught a glimpse of a white pinafore bobbing up and down among the low green bushes at the other side of the lawn. 'It is a wonder to me that bairn is alive. Effie dear, run down and tell John I want him,' she called through the open window.

'But, Aunt Maggie, perhaps Uncle Michael wants John in the field?'

'Oh, 'deed no'; he's not much use, Nannie; besides, you have been working so hard all day, you want a little walk. You are my willing, helpful lassie, and I will tell mamma that when I write to her to-night.'

The girl's fair pale face flushed at the simple praise.

'I am so glad to be of use, Aunt Maggie; I will try more and more,' she said, with an earnestness which touched her listener's heart.

'Don't be too anxious, dear; you are so young yet. I want you to be happy among my bairns. My boys are big and rough, Nannie, but they would not hurt a fly; I hope you will take kindly to them.'

'Oh yes, I like them all very much. John is so kind, Aunt Maggie.'

'Ay, he has a man's thoughtfulness, Nannie; John will take care of you,' said the mother, with a pleased, proud smile. 'I am a little anxious about him just now, you know; he has just left school, and his father thinks he should not go back. But the lad's heart is set on his books; he does not care a button for the farm.'

'But if he is to be Laird of Laurieston, as Michael told me, he must like the farm,' said Agnes, with rather a perplexed look.

'I am afraid, my dear, that it will make a little trouble between him and his father. He will never make a farmer if his soul is bent on study. My sympathies are with him and his desires, for he has a fine intellect; sometimes, between them, I am sore divided and perplexed.'

Her expression was one of anxiety, and even of care. Margaret Maitland felt that the bairn-time was wearing past, and saw trouble ahead. As she said, her sympathies were wholly with John in his desire after the intellectual life. On his account she even felt, at times, a slight hardness against her husband, who scouted the very idea of giving John his own way in this. Michael Maitland's idea was that no man need wish for more than to write himself Maitland of Laurieston, and was indignant at the idea of his son's preferring any other position in life. There had not been, as yet, much serious talk about it,—Laurieston, indeed, believed the matter settled; but the mother had quietly resolved that John's desire should not be set aside without a strenuous effort on her part to obtain it for him. She was biding a favourable opportunity to broach the matter to her husband. Those busy days, when every nerve and sinew were strained to ingather the precious fruits of the earth, she was glad to let well alone. The busiest and most harassing time of the year was not the most opportune in which to thwart Michael Maitland in any cherished scheme. In the pride and complacency of his heart, he looked forward and saw his three sons filling the places in the world he had chosen for them: John, Laird of

Laurieston; Michael, a pillar and an ornament in the Church of Scotland; and Walter, a successful business man, probably a partner in the shipping firm in Leith of which his only brother was the head. He did not take into account that the lads might rebel, nor did he remember that it is not permitted human beings to be the arbiters of the destiny of others.

As his mother expected, John did not tarry long in the harvest-field after Effie gave him the message. He had been raking after the binders all the afternoon, and was quite glad to be relieved, though his father, from the other end of the field, did not look very well pleased when he saw him lay down the rake. He came whistling up the garden with Effie's small brown hand in his,—a stalwart, sun-browned, goodly figure, on which the mother's eyes dwelt with unhidden pride.

'Is it Annie Laurie you want, mother? Don't you see her over on the oat stubble? Wat and Willie have got her yoked to the horse-rake, and fine fun they're having.' Oh, Nannie, what have you been doing to your hands?' he asked, pointing to the girl's slender fingers, dyed purple with the blackberry juice.

'I only hope you have been as useful to father as Nannie has been to me,' said Mrs. Maitland. 'I want you to wash your face and put on another jacket, and take Nannie over to Hallcross. Aunt Leesbeth will be sure to think we should have been over sooner.'

'All right. She's an old brick, Aunt Leesbeth! Nannie, I bet you won't know a word she says.'

'Nannie doesn't bet. Off you go; and if she does not keep you too long, you can go up the river a bit. It is a pretty walk.'

'Oh, that'll be splendid! We'll just shake hands and say we're due elsewhere,' laughed John, as he ran upstairs to his room. A few minutes later Margaret Maitland watched the pair go out together by the garden gate,—Agnes looking very slender and sweet in her plain white gown and broad sun-hat. Her dresses, though very plain, were rather dainty for the rough life on a farm; but all the girl's ways were dainty,

Margaret Maitland was pleased to see, knowing she would be a refining influence among her boys.

It was a fine mellow evening, the close of the first day in August. The leafy trees had not yet taken on an autumnal tint, and the wild flowers made masses of bloom on every grassy bank. The air was very still and sweet, and laden with the rich fragrant odours of the ripened grain. The two young people walked on a little in silence, John feeling a trifle awkward and shy, though his companion was quite self-possessed.

'Why do we not say something?' she asked suddenly, with a laugh, which was very sweet, and her whole face lit up as she turned her mirthful eyes on John's brown face. Although her expression was apt to be too serious, there were depths of happy humour in her nature. It was quite a relief to John to hear her laugh.

'I suppose, because we are rather stupid,' he answered. 'Just wait a minute and you'll hear plenty of speaking. Aunt Leesbeth will ask you nine hundred and ninety-nine questions, and Kaitrine—that's her dragon—will ask the thousandth. Suppose we go down the lane and in by the garden door? Then we'll walk all through the garden,—it's a rare old garden.'

'You lead on, I must follow,' Agnes answered merrily.

'Oh, I say, though, it's locked! What a nuisance! No, I won't be beat; just you stand there and I'll open it for you in a jiffy.'

And before Agnes could demur, John had scrambled up the apparently unscalable wall and disappeared, leaving her outside the little low door, which was overhung with the drooping tendrils of the ivy. The next moment, however, she heard the bolts creak, and John's happy face looked out upon her through the open door.

'Come in; isn't it jolly? The dragon won't know how we got in. I like to horrify her,' he said; 'she and I are at daggers-drawn.'

'Who is the dragon?'

'Aunt Leesbeth's maid,—an awful creature. Wait till you see her. She'll stand up in front of you like a drill-sergeant, and

inspect you. I believe she knew your mother. She'll say she did, any way.'

Agnes laughed, and again John was struck by the sweetness of the sound.

'I say, let's go in this funny little summer-house and sit. I want to talk a bit. There's plenty of time for Aunt Leesbeth and the dragon.'

He swept aside the trailing branches of the honeysuckle which overhung the quaint rustic arbour, and Agnes stepped in. The bright clusters of the japonica and the yellow jessamine stars mingled with the fragrant honeysuckle blooms, and relieved the dark masses of the leaves.

'I say, isn't this a nice old place?' asked John.

Agnes thought so. It was like a picture or a dream, the far-spreading garden, with its sunny slopes and shadowy recesses, and the old house, all rose-coloured and ivy-clad, making the background to the picture. She fancied she could see her mother, in the early days of which she had so often spoken, roaming about the grassy walks or reading under the shady trees.

'Is it like what you thought?' John asked, with a sympathetic touch, as he saw she was moved.

'A little. How sweet it is! I have never seen any place like it. I think I like it better even than Laurieston.'

'I don't; it is too shut in, that's what I think. Don't you feel how close and warm it is in here. I like space and room to move about in, and bracing air to breathe. I think Laurieston about perfect.'

Agnes looked at him a moment. If such was his opinion of Laurieston, why did he wish to give it up?

'I want to speak to you, Nannie. This is just the kind of place to tell all kinds of stories in,' said John suddenly, and, sitting forward in his corner, he looked not without earnestness at the girl's fair tender face. 'Has mother said anything to you about—about me staying at home, now?'

'She was speaking about it to-day,' Agnes answered truthfully, but said no more.

'Well, I can't do it. Laurieston is all well enough to live at,

and a month in the fields is a splendid thing after a fellow's been grinding hard, but I must go back to Edinburgh.'

'What to do?'

'Study. If I don't get to the University, Agnes, I'll never do any good. I hate the farm. How do you suppose a fellow could remember to put in the right seeds, and attend to the rotation of crops, and all that, if his mind is constantly filled with other things?'

'What things?'

'Everything. I wish I could explain it to you, Agnes, but I can't. Michael knows some of it, but not much. I can't speak about it. I'll tell you what it's like,—a tumult in my mind, a big, wild sea all waves and trouble. I want to understand life. There's an awful lot of queer things in it, Nannie,—mysteries I'd like to know about. I want to know more about religion, too. It's not all like what we are taught. If there is no other religion than father's, I'll tell you what I think,—that people are better without it. It only makes him hard and stern.'

'Oh, hush, John,' said the girl, in a low voice, and put up her gentle hand as if to keep back the quick impetuous torrent of words.

'It's quite true. Michael thinks so too. But we'll inquire for ourselves. Do you think, Nannie, that God ever intended that some people should be lost, no matter how they live, and that some will be saved, in just the same way? And do you believe that God is always angry with us, and suspicious of everything we do? When I was a small boy, I used to be terrified in the dark, thinking about God.'

Agnes shivered a little, and shook her head. She did not know very well how to answer the lad, for, though she sympathized with him to the full, and understood very well his meaning, she must be loyal to Uncle Michael.

'I want to know more about that, for one thing. Do you know what I would like to be better than anything in the world, Nannie?'

'No; what?'

'A professor of philosophy.'

'What's philosophy?'

'I can hardly tell you myself, though I think I know what it means. It teaches all about the causes and existence of things. Do you ever wonder why we were born into this world, for instance?'

'To do our duty, to make others happy, and be happy ourselves if we can,' replied the young girl, with a half sigh. Just then life was not bright, many things were weighing on her heart. For some days her thoughts had been dwelling continually on her mother, away in distant London alone. Agnes knew she was alone, though their father was with her. The instinct of a great love had given the girl a glimpse into her mother's inner sanctuary. She knew the heart-hunger, the weight of care abiding constantly there.

'Perhaps some day, when you are a professor, you will not think then it is such a fine thing,' said the girl simply, not dreaming that there was anything prophetic in her words.

'It's not likely, if father keeps in the same mind,' the lad answered, with rather a bitter laugh. 'If he insists that I shall stay at home, and learn to sow and plough, and know the value of cattle and horses, Nannie, I believe I'll run away.'

'No, not for Aunt Maggie's sake,' Agnes said; and his face softened at once.

'If mother were father, it would be different. She understands everything,' he said quickly. 'But if you knew what it is to want something just with all your might, you would understand.'

'Do you think I have everything I want in the world?' she asked, with a slight, sad smile, which rebuked him at once.

'Oh no; I know you are often vexed, and that it must be horrid to be away here among strangers,' he said quickly. 'I'll tell you what I think, though, Nannie: it is easier for women and girls to be patient. They can bear things better than men, because they're made that way. Mother never gets angry, neither do you.'

Agnes laughed at the boyish reasoning.

'You need not laugh; it's quite true. Do you ever see mother angry? All the lickings we ever got were from father, and some rare ones I've had in my time. I might call the "wee

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'Why?'

'Oh, just because— But I say, we'd better go up; I believe the dragon has spied us. Besides, I believe Aunt Leesbeth goes to her bed about six or so.'

'So early?' asked Agnes, in surprise.

'Yes; she's ill, you know,—an invalid; but she's a jolly old soul; you'll be sure to like her. Well, shall we go up?'

Agnes rose and walked by John's side up the quaint, narrow walk between the high box hedges.

'It's like a maze. I never saw such a funny nice old garden,' she said delightedly, for the whole place pleased her. John liked to see her face light up with that pleased interest. She was a new revelation to him, and he felt so much at home with her that he could talk to her without restraint. To a lad of John's years and disposition, that means a great deal.

Gracie, the happy-faced, rosy maid-servant, answered John's knock, and announced that Miss Leesbeth was in the dining-room yet, waiting for Kaitrine to come back to put her to bed. Once a month Kaitrine went to visit her kinsfolk at Cockenzie, where she spent the whole afternoon. Miss Leesbeth was lying on her sofa in the dining-room, a pretty picture in her pink shawl and dainty lace cap, her white hands working slowly and somewhat painfully with the knitting-needles.

'Eh, John, my man, I'm fain to see ye,' she cried heartily, when she saw his face at the door. 'But wha's this fine young lady? Na, na, never Ellen Rankine's bairn! Is it really! Come here, my lamb, an' let me look at ye; I lo'ed your mither weel.'

The words and tone, the whole demeanour of the dear old lady, went to the girl's sensitive heart; she took a quick step forward, and, dropping on one knee, kissed the beautiful face with such a natural and perfect grace as to completely storm Aunt Leesbeth's heart.

'A braw lass, John, my man; d'ye no' think sae? So ye are Ellen's bairn? Eh me! eh me! To think the years should flee sae fast! An' whaur's the laddie?'

'He is like a colt, not easily caught,' said Agnes, smiling. 'I have never seen him to-day. It is all so new and delightful for him at the farm.'

'Ay, Laurieston's the place for bairns. An' hoo did ye leave yer mither, Agnes? I'll call ye Agnes to begin wi',—ye'll get nae Miss frae me.'

'Oh, I don't want it; nobody calls me Miss. Mamma was not very strong when we left Liverpool,' Agnes answered, and her fair face shadowed. 'I was very anxious at leaving her, for papa says they must go to London to live, soon, and I fear the worry and fatigue of the removal will tire her very much.'

'Ay, ay,' said Miss Leesbeth, wondering at the quiet, womanly girl, who spoke with the precision and forethought of a much older woman.

'I say, Aunt Leesbeth, she is perfectly enchanted with Hallcross,' said John, with a twinkle in his eye. 'I could hardly get her up from the summer-house. She had an eye to the strawberry-beds, too, but I restrained her on account of the dragon.'

'Just hear him; don't mind him, though, he is such a funny boy,' said Agnes, with quaint, delightful simplicity.

'Ay, I hear him, but I ken him, lassie,' said Miss Leesbeth, looking upon them both with sunshiny eyes. 'Ye are gaun to be great friends, I can see. An' what for should she no' like Hallcross? It was her mother's tocher, an' it's a cosy biggin', too.'

'What does that mean?' asked Agnes, in mild wonderment, which made John laugh outright.

'You should hear father and her, Aunt Leesbeth. It's as good as a play.'

'Ye arena ceevil to the lassie, John; ye should explain the Scotch to her. A tocher, my dear, means a dowry. Hallcross'll be your dowry some day, when you marry—maybe John there,' said the old lady, who loved a little joke; 'an' a cosy biggin' just means—what, John?—a desirable residence, eh?'

'Well, I don't think it very desirable; it's like a cage; I feel shut in here. I like a big, wide place to breathe in. I must have room—room. Aunt Leesbeth, if I lived here, my long arms swinging about would deal destruction to your old cheeny.'

As he spoke John gave himself a stretch, and the old lady

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looked at him with delight. She adored him. Of all the Laurieston bairns John was first and best in her eyes. It was true, John would need elbow-room all his days; his nature was open, generous, and strong, and could abide nothing that was mean, or narrow, or circumscribed.

Just then a tall figure went by the window, and without ceremony marched into the room, which was now enveloped in the kindly shadows of the gloaming.

'Eh, doctor,' cried Miss Leesbeth; 'come, man, I'm fain to see ye. An' who, think ye, I hae here, Dauvit man, but Ellen Rankine's bairn?'

A look of interest sprang into the doctor's fine face, and he took the girl's slim hand in his close, kindly clasp, and bent his speaking eyes on her face. 'So this is Ellen Rankine's daughter?' he said. 'Looking at her, we forget the passage of the years, Miss Leesbeth. Did you ever see a more striking likeness?'

'Never. It's just Ellen hersel'.

The doctor kept her hand in his, and Agnes loved the kindly glance of his speaking eye.

'Ye've heard of Dr. Moir, Agnes?' quoth Miss Leesbeth. 'My certy, ye'll hae to behave yoursel', or he'll put ye in a book.'

'Wheesht, Miss Leesbeth. This is a Maitland?' laughed the doctor, as he turned to John. 'These young folks soon grow out of all remembrance, and Laurieston is such a healthy place I never get a chance to renew my acquaintance. But ye were the biggest o' my bairns, I mind. I hope you'll be a good son to your mother.'

John blushed; in spite of his manly height, he was as shy as a school-girl.

'Weel, bairns, awa' hame or the doctor and me gets oor crack,' said Miss Leesbeth. 'Ellen Rankine's lassie will no' be a stranger to Hallcross, and she'll get a blithe welcome come when she likes.' So with these kindly words Miss Leesbeth dismissed them, and was then ready for a chat with her old friend, who came regularly to see her, though his skill was now of little avail.

'That's "Delta," Agnes,' said John, when they were outside;

'his name is always in *Blackwood*. Have you never seen *Blackwood*? I say, what a heathenish place Liverpool must be. Mother will be telling you some day soon about the poem he wrote on his little boy who died, *Casa Wappy*. She aye greets when she reads it. But you must read his *Mansie Wauch*; only you would not understand a word of it'—

'Suppose you teach me? It would be better than laughing at me,' suggested Agnes.

'Oh, so it would. That'll be fun. I say, I'm awfully glad you've come to Laurieston; I didn't think girls were half so jolly,—you see Effie's only a bairn.'

A pleased light filled the girl's sweet eyes, but she answered nothing. The day came when they could not speak to each other with such unvarnished candour. But in the meantime they found their new friendship a very satisfying and delightful thing.

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CHAPTER VI.

'Fair laughs the morn, and soft the zephyrs blow,
While, proudly rising o'er the azure realm,
In gallant trim the gilded vessel goes:
Youth in the prow.'

THAT'S your foot, father. Come here a minute and do this for me.' Mrs. Maitland was on the top of the house-steps, which were standing on the gravel walk at the east gable of the house. It was a quiet, sunny evening, after a forty-eight hours' storm, which had left the Forth a tossing, troubled sea, and done some damage to the grain still lying out in the late uplands.

'I say, wife, where's the laddies? That's no' for you ava,' said Michael Maitland, when he saw his wife on her perch.

'The laddies are away with their rods up the Esk, and Agnes with them. Just put up that high branch, and wait till I get my shawl. We'll take a turn the length of the stubble. It is fine to feel the fresh wind, after being two days in the house.'

Michael Maitland was not long in fastening up the trailing branch; and when he stood a moment waiting for his wife, and saw all the bare breadths of the stubble before him, and knew that there were many others to whom the storm meant serious damage, he felt grateful to God for His mercy.

'A lot o' rain has fa'n, Maggie,' he said, when she joined him. 'Up aboot Fala and Temple, the stooks 'll be as black as crows. I wadna farm up there though I got land for naething.'

'It's very thankless. We have many mercies, father,' she answered softly, as her eyes wandered across the clear sky from

which the sun had chased the clouds away to the far horizon dipping into the sea. 'There's nothing hurrying ye, father, is there? I want to speak to you about the laddies—about John.'

'What about him?'

'Michael goes to the University in a fortnight, father. Ye'll let the two go together? They've never been separated yet.'

Laurieston never spoke, but his wife saw him set his lips. 'I thought that was settled, Marget. What ails John at Laurieston?'

'Nothing ails him at the place, father,—he likes the place as well as any in the world; but he'll never make a farmer, and I believe that to thwart him in his heart's desire will be to sour him, and maybe to turn him from good to evil.'

'Its perfect nonsense, Maggie. What is't he wants to be? The only time I spoke till him about it, he seemed to me to be as bamboozled as I was. If he could gie the thing a name. If he wants to be a doctor, or a writer, or to gang wi' Michael to the Hall, let him say. I think mysel' he's lazy, an' disna want to be under my e'e at hame.'

'That's not fair, father; there's not a lazy bone in John's body,' said the mother rather hotly. 'I believe myself, that if you let him go on with his studies now, he'll be a professor yet.'

'A professor! What o'?'

'Something. He can't tell yet, father, exactly what branch of study he may exel in. There are more professors than in the law, or the kirk, or medicine.'

'Oh, may be,' was Laurieston's dry answer. 'If you have set your heart on it too, Maggie, I needna speak.' He did not speak quite kindly, perhaps, and his wife's sensitive mouth trembled.

'It's for you to say, father; I can only advise,' she said, in a low voice; but he answered never a word. His eyes were roaming over the wide fields which were his heritage, and would be his son's after him. He was a little disappointed, for John was a manly, sensible lad, and would make a goodly Laird of Laurieston.

'I'll no gie my consent, Maggie, or I see what the meanin'

o't is. It doesna do to let bairns get their ain way,—they maun be guided. For mysel', I kenna what man can desire mair than to bide at Laurieston a' his days, and ken he fills an honoured and responsible place in the world. I think, too, Marget, that there's too much education now-a-days; it does nae good that I can see, but to mak' the young discontented; and what's mair serious than that, it gars them hae an unco pryin' into things that should be handled reverently and with godly fear. I like not the way these young callants discuss Sabbath-day exercises and affairs. They forget to take the shoes from off their feet when they are upon holy ground. He was a wise man that said, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." It was a long speech for Maitland to make, but he deeply felt what he was saying.

'Young minds must open out and find truth for themselves,' his wife answered softly. 'It is needless for us to try an' keep them back. We can but pray for the bairns, Michael, and leave them in the hand of the Lord.' Maitland shook his head.

'We hae need to pray, my woman, that they may be kept frae presumptuous sin,' he said rather gloomily; but his wife smiled up into his face, and he felt the sunshine of that smile steal into his soul. There were times, though unconfessed, when Michael Maitland envied the sunny faith which was the mainspring of his wife's life. It is not too much to say that his view of religion was more a cross than a comfort to him.

'I have a plan, father,' she said, slipping her hand through his arm. 'I am determined, since this is my desire as well as John's, that his education shall not cost you anything. The profits of my ship shall pay the extra college expenses, and I will tell John it is only a loan from his mother.'

'It is not the money, Maggie; you ken that as well as me,' he replied shortly. He was grievously disappointed, having set his heart on seeing John Laird of Laurieston. He had anticipated having him at his right hand in the coming winter, to initiate him into the business of the markets as well as the work on the farm. Margaret Maitland knew all this, and understood how hard it was for a man of his temperament to

lay by such a cherished scheme. But she did think also that it would do him no harm to find that he could not always have his heart's desire. They stood for a moment at the gate opening from the stubble field into the pasture. After that pause, Maitland spoke slowly and with emphasis: 'I'll talk to John the night, Maggie; I'll lay my terms before him.'

'You'll let me hear them first,' she said with quick anxiety. 'Ye'll not be too hard on the laddie, father; he is a good son.'

'If he persists in his determination to go on with study, there must be no drawing back, I'll tell him; and he must give up his birthright.'

'What do you mean, Michael?'

'I mean that there shall never be a half-hearted Laird of Laurieston. The place shall not go to ruin while its maister is pottering about colleges and books. I'll let John go to Edinburgh if he agrees to give up his right to the place. I'll make Wattie the laird instead of sending him to Leith.'

'I don't think John will make any objection to that,' Mrs. Maitland answered, almost with relief. 'Ye'll give the other two a fair share of the money, though? If Wattie gets the place, he'll be the best off.'

'Ay will he; and if John gies up his birthright, I'll no' think muckle o' him; but they's the only terms I'll offer, and his college expenses must come off his portion, Maggie. I canna keep him daein' naething at the expense o' the rest.'

Mrs. Maitland's lip quivered, and she turned her head swiftly away. The point was practically gained; but oh, how little sympathy would John receive from his father for the next few years at least! She foresaw that his career would be watched, not with love and interest, but with jealous and suspicious care. That was a hard moment for the mother, who understood the nobler aspirations of the lad's soul.

'We maun go in, Maggie; the ground is damp for your feet,' her husband said presently, in a matter-of-fact voice, and utterly unconscious that he had said anything to hurt her feelings. She turned with him at once, but alluded no more to the subject of which they had been speaking.

There was a little room next the parlour, in which Mr. Maitland wrote his letters and saw people who called on business. Into this place John was summoned when he returned from his fishing. They were all in great glee, for the water had been in fine condition, and their basket was full of bonnie speckled trout. John was a keen fisher; indeed, he was enthusiastic and earnest in every pursuit he took in hand. It was not uncommon for Maitland to speak with the individual members of his family alone. Many a case of discipline had been tried in the 'wee room,' as the office was called; but John was now too old for the corporal punishment with which Laurieston had rigidly visited every misdemeanour in the bairns. On that subject alone had bitter words passed between Laurieston and his wife. She rebelled utterly when the rod was used, especially for trivial faults, and openly showed her sympathy with the bairns. To stand by and see them thrashed with that merciless grimness characteristic of the stern parent, who acted up to his idea of parental rule, was more than she could bear. There was no fear in John Maitland. Many a good thrashing he had received at his father's hands, without a murmur, too, even sometimes when he felt the punishment too great for the crime, which was usually only some breach of good behaviour, or some act of boyish thoughtlessness.

He entered the 'wee room' with serene composure, not being conscious of any recent transgression.

'I'm here, father; what is it?'

'Shut the door, see, and stand there,' said Laurieston grimly, as he turned his chair round from his desk. 'I want to speak to ye, my lad, upon a serious matter.'

'Yes, father.'

'Your mother has been speaking to me, John, and it seems—it seems that ye hae nae desire to fill your father's shoes; that is, to be Laird of Laurieston.'

John's face flushed all over. His father saw the eager light flashing in his eye, and felt that the boy's heart was stirred.

'I'd rather go to the University than be a farmer, father,' he answered quietly.

'Ay, so she says,' Maitland replied dryly. 'Well, if you maun go, ye maun, I suppose; so I'll lay doon my terms to ye, my man, and then it's for you to say whether or no.'

John nodded. He was too intensely interested — too agitated, indeed—to trust his voice.

'I am not a rich man, John, though the Almighty has blessed seedtime and harvest to me, and I have not now cares about money; but I canna afford to pay double college expenses, especially when, as ye have no definite aim, it's no' to be kent when yours will end. If you insist on gaun, John, ye maun gie up your birthright to Wattie, an' the place will go to him. What money I hae will be justly divided when I need it nae mair. But your college fees and your keep must be kept account o' and taen aff your portion, in fairness to the rest. It's different wi' Michael. I hae aye intended him for the kirk, an' we planned accordingly. D'ye understand me, my man?'

'Yes, quite well. I don't care what the terms are; and Wat will make a splendid laird,' John answered, without a moment's hesitation.

'Very well,' said his father, in the same dry tone; 'mind, ye'll hae to stand on your ain legs, an' when your portion's a' spent, like the prodigal's, ye needna look to me for mair. Ye'll hae to mak' a kirk or a mill o' the thing, whatever it be that ye are gaun to follow efter.'

'I'm not afraid, father; I'll be able to work for my bread,' said the lad proudly; and he drew himself up, and looked his father straight in the face with that fearless eye of his, which had never known what it was to flinch in shame.

It seemed to Maitland, as he looked, that John had grown into a giant all at once. He liked that fine bold carriage, and the fearless, manly determination set on every feature of his face. Though he did not approve the lad's choice, he believed he would succeed, and even felt a certain pride that his son, even in his youth, should be able to assert himself and set such a bold front to the untried world he was about to challenge. No word of encouragement, however, passed his grave lips. John only saw the immoveable countenance which so successfully veiled the inner man.

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'Vera weel, my man ; ye hae made your choice, an' ye'll abide by the consequences. That'll dae ; ye can gang an' gather them a' in, for it's on the chap o' nine, and time the books were on the table.'

When the two came out of the 'wee room,' Mrs. Maitland looked anxiously from one to the other ; but the look on John's face was enough,—she saw that he was so relieved and glad to have the main obstacle removed from his path, that he took no thought of any other. So it was settled. An involuntary sigh stole to the mother's lips ; and in the prayer her thoughts wandered from the form of her husband's petition, for her own heart was praying with an earnestness which had a touch of passion in it, that God would guide her two sons and open up for them an honourable and useful career. Margaret Maitland desired nothing more for her children than that they should be useful with that highest form of usefulness which is a benefit to human kind. It is a time of deep anxiety, even of brooding care, for a conscientious parent, when the time comes for the children of the home to seek and establish a way of life for themselves. Margaret Maitland felt it keenly ; so also did her husband, though in a different way. There was no opportunity for a word with John, for Laurieston presently ordered them all to bed. By and by, however, she stole up to the room the lads shared together, and was not surprised to find John sitting at the window with his head on his hand, while Michael was fast asleep, with his fair, delicate-looking face lying on his hand. She kissed the sleeping boy as she passed by the bed to John's side.

'Not in bed yet, John ?' she said softly, and her hand touched his shaggy head with that sweet touch like unto which there is no other on earth,—the touch of a mother's hand.

'No ; I couldn't sleep. Oh, mother, to think I'm to go !' The lad's voice was husky, for it had been a matter almost of life or death to him.

'I'm glad. Father has been quite fair about it. He has the rest to consider, you know,' the mother said quickly. These very words indicated a doubt in her own mind ; but John, in his new-found joy, did not notice it.

'I'll work hard, mother. I won't idle or waste a moment. Father will see I'm made of good stuff,' he said, eagerly lifting his young face, ardent with youth's inspiration and hope, to the kind eyes bent upon him in love.

'My laddie, do I not know? You have ever been an example to the rest. I look to you to be so still.'

'I'll try, mother, I'll try,' was the earnest answer. It was a solemn moment for the thoughtful lad; he felt, with a curious stirring of the heart, what mighty possibilities life held, and what a kingdom it was he was going forth to conquer.

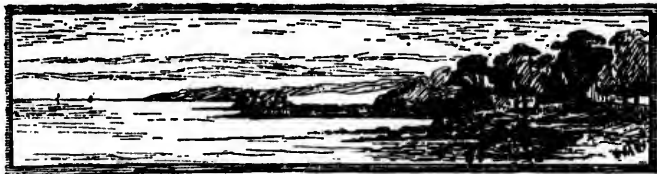
The fields of knowledge were all before him, and he was eager to be at work upon them,—to probe into the very heart of things,—to solve, if possible, the mysteries, and find the key to the problems of life, not knowing yet what the search would cost.



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CHAPTER VII.

'Bear through sorrow, wrong, and ruth,
In thy heart the dew of youth.'

AUNT MAGGIE, there's two ladies coming up the avenue.'

'Ladies! Oh ay, that's the two Miss Thorburns; I've told you about them, my dear,—good, true, useful gentlewomen, who will be fine friends for you. I've been wondering what's come over them. They've aye come about Laurieston, and their mother before them. Ring the bell, my dear, and tell Katie to set the kettle on the hob. We'll keep the ladies to tea, if they'll bide.'

It was the month of October now, and the bairns were all off to school again, leaving Laurieston a quiet house indeed. At home, Agnes was pursuing her studies quietly, with the help of her aunt. Mrs. Maitland had received an exceptional education for her station and years, and was indeed a cultivated, accomplished woman. It was as much a pleasure to her as a profit to Agnes to revive her old studies. Thus the helpful girl was always at work, and Mrs. Maitland found her companionship very precious. It seemed to her, indeed, at times, that the old days had come back, when Ellen and she had been sisters in heart if not in name. It was about three o'clock that afternoon when the 'two Miss Thorburns,' as everybody called them, stopped at the door of Laurieston.

They were maiden ladies, the sole survivors of one of the oldest Musselburgh families; lively, intelligent, cultivated women, whose society was sought by all, though their critical

tongues were rather feared by some. They were very outspoken concerning their neighbours; but as there was no malice, and a great deal of originality in their remarks, they made no enemies. They lived alone in a curious roomy cottage near the sea, and in which they were completely and comically tyrannized over by their domestic, Nancy Kilgour, a serving-woman of the old school.

'She keeps us in our bit,' Miss Jean would say, with a sigh, sometimes; 'we can't keep her in hers. But how could we do without her?'

'I like this place, Grace,' said Miss Thorburn, while they stood on the doorstep waiting admission; 'how beautifully it is kept. Mrs. Maitland's doing, of course,—Laurieston himself has no taste. What a man! Let us thank the Lord, Grace, that we've no men-folk to bother us.'

'Hold your peace, Jean; don't be speaking about men before the servant. Here she's coming. Well, Katie, is Mrs. Maitland at home?'

'Yes, ma'am; please come in;' and at that moment Mrs. Maitland herself came out of the parlour to give them a welcome.

'Come away; where have you been all these weeks? We've missed you at Laurieston. Has Nancy been worse than usual? There was a merry twinkle in Mrs. Maitland's eye as she asked the question; and Miss Thorburn shook her parasol at her as she stepped across the hall.

'Too bad, Mrs. Maitland, too bad. I've made up my mind to give Nancy her leave; but Grace hasn't, and until we agree we must just submit.'

'Nancy'll may be give you *your* leave,—ch, Miss Gracie?'

'That's about it, Mrs. Maitland,' assented the younger lady. 'Nancy's bark's worse than her bite. But we've been away north since we came home from London.—Oh, is this Miss Laurie?'

Agnes came forward somewhat shyly, but was put at her ease by the grace and heartiness of the Misses Thorburns' greeting. 'How do you do? Let me sit down beside you and speak to you,' said Miss Jean, who was the livelier of the two. 'My

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sister says I'm an awful talker,—that she thinks shame of me in other people's houses ; but never mind her, my dear. I've seen you in church, and you are so like an old miniature of your mother, which our mother left us among her treasures. I shall give it to you if you would like it, dear. How do you like living in Scotland ? Isn't Mrs. Maitland sweet ?—the loveliest woman I ever saw, or want to see. Oh, go on speaking, you two,' she said, with a merry laugh, across the room ; ' tell Mrs. Maitland Nancy's latest, Gracie, and let me speak to Miss Laurie in peace.'

'In peace !' said Miss Grace ; ' how can there be any peace where you are, Jane Thorburn ? I don't suppose Mrs. Maitland is dying to hear Nancy's latest. She has only turned me out of my bedroom because she thinks it would make a more convenient spare room. We found that done when we came back from Braemar.'

Mrs. Maitland laughed ; and while continuing the talk with Miss Grace, she was pleased to observe how animated and bright Agnes grew under the genial influence of Miss Thorburn's happy talk. She was so good-natured, so interested, so full of fun and nonsense, that it was impossible to resist her.

'I'll tell you what, Miss Laurie ; you must come and see us soon. Spend a long day, whenever Nancy gives permission, and we'll give you the pedigree of every person in Musselburgh. We are a very interesting study from a social point of view. We have thirty-five different degrees of society, and the lines are so finely drawn, that it is a fearful experience if the member of one degree should be obliged to recognise the other.'

Agnes laughed, though looking slightly puzzled.

'And where do you stand ?' she asked, with a kind of quaint shrewdness which highly amused Miss Thorburn.

'That's a problem. Do you hear that, Gracie ? Miss Laurie wants to know where we stand in Musselburgh society. It requires careful study. I'll pore over it at my leisure, and let you know the result the first time you call. I say, Mrs. Maitland, did I tell you that our Aunt Sophia, our mother's only sister, is so ill that she can't get better ? If it were not so far away, we ought to go and see her, for she is the only relative

we have. She has had such a sad life, and has always been so far away, that we have been of no use to her.' There were tears in Miss Thorburn's bright eyes, evidence that underneath the gay exterior there lay a warm and feeling heart.

'I am sorry to hear that, lassie. Yes, Ireland is a far journey for two women-folk to take, unless for desperation's sake. Though I never saw your mother's sister Sophia, very sure am I that she has grace to bear whatever may betide her in this world,' replied Mrs. Maitland sympathetically.

'Oh yes; she is one of the few. It seems to me, Mrs. Maitland,' said Miss Thorburn energetically, 'that the good suffer most. There is a good deal in this life to mystify one. I say to Grace Thorburn sometimes, it would be better to be like brute beasts, without the power to think or reason.'

'Wheesht, Miss Jean,' said Mrs. Maitland, in gentle reproof.

'Miss Laurie is looking at me with big round eyes,' said Miss Thorburn. 'My dear, I like to speak out what I think, and I mean what I say. We have had our own share of trouble, Grace and me; but it is not of that I complain. I'm quite willing to take my turn with the rest. What do you think of human suffering, and the way it is meted out in this life?'

'There is a great deal of it, I think,' Agnes answered somewhat painfully; 'but there is a great deal of happiness too.'

'That's my lassie. Hold up the sunny side,' quoth Mrs. Maitland heartily. 'We are getting into a doleful talk. Tell us something funny about your London trip.'

'Oh, it was all funny; perfectly comical throughout,' laughed Miss Thorburn. 'We took apartments, you know, out at Kensington, with two ladies who were perfect treats. Decayed gentlewomen they called themselves, and the conditions of their life were certainly in an advanced state of decay. They made a living by letting apartments, preferring to live in a big house than a small one. They seemed frightfully poor, and their dress,—oh, Jean Thorburn, tell Mrs. Maitland about the maroon curtains!'

'It is a shame to laugh at the poor ladies, Mrs. Maitland; but really, they did dress in an extraordinary fashion. The elder lady used to get herself up for dinner in an old strip of

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faded green maroon curtain, gathered round her like a shawl, and she had a whole hand-boxful of flowers in her head-dress. The younger one affected a classic style of raiment, and her skirts were decidedly skimpy. Poor things! We were sorry for them, for they were quite ladies, and had a very slight idea of housekeeping. They were quite at the mercy of their domestics. Grace and I did our best to give them some instruction. They were very kind to us, and, in spite of their eccentricities, we were quite sorry to part with them.'

'It is a fearful thing to be a reduced gentlewoman, Miss Laurie,' put in Miss Thorburn; 'I hope I may die before I ever come to it. So you like Scotland, of course? It's your mother's country, besides being the best land in the world.'

'Yes, that is true,' smiled Agnes, and the sweetness of her expression won Miss Thorburn's heart completely.

'And John is away to the University too, we were hearing?' she said, darting off at another tangent.

'What is he going to be, Mrs. Maitland?'

'He hardly knows yet, I fancy,' returned Mrs. Maitland. 'Make out the tea, Nannie, my dear. My new daughter is a great help to me, my dears.'

'So we see,' said Miss Jean appreciatively, as she watched the graceful figure of Agnes moving across to the tray.

'Her mother has lent her to us for a year only,' continued Mrs. Maitland. 'I grudge to think more than a fourth of the time has slipped away already.'

'How is Mrs. Laurie in health?' asked Miss Thorburn. 'We would have called when we were in London had we known she was there. Mamma and she were very friendly; that would have been sufficient introduction.'

'She is not very strong,—perhaps not strong enough to see even old friends,' Mrs. Maitland answered guardedly; and Miss Jean, watching the girl at her graceful task, saw her slender hands tremble as they touched the cups. Just then a shadow passed hastily by the parlour window, and Laurieston himself came striding into the room, with a hasty nod to the ladies. He asked his wife to come and speak to him for a moment. She was gone quite ten minutes, and the ladies were on their

feet to go when she returned to the room. She looked nervous and agitated, and bade them a hurried good-bye, promising to bring or send Agnes to the cottage at a very early day.

'I like those ladies, Aunt Maggie. How pleasant and kind they are! I just like to look and listen to them.'

'They are good girls and true friends, Nannie,' returned Mrs. Maitland, beginning to gather up the cups with a nervous haste not common to her.

'Let me do that, Aunt Maggie. Go and lie down. You have not had your rest this afternoon.'

'Never mind me. Oh, my lassie!' Greatly to the girl's amazement, she found herself suddenly gathered close to the warm-beating motherly breast. She began to tremble, apprehending evil,—she could not tell why.

'What is it, Auntie? Mamma?'

'Yes, my darling. It is well with her, for God has taken her to Himself.'

A sharp sudden cry broke from the girl's pale lips; then she became very still. Mrs. Maitland led her to the sofa, still keeping her arm closely round her. So they sat a long time in silence.

'I have been expecting it, Nannie. Mamma has always written very freely to me,' Mrs. Maitland said at length. 'But I think, if you will look back and remember her letters to you, she was trying to prepare you.'

'I know; I did not hope she would ever get well. It is not *that*, Aunt Maggie;—but oh, I ought never to have left her! Just think, she has had nobody with her to nurse her all these weary weeks. It has weighed upon me, Aunt Maggie, till sometimes I could not bear it.'

Mrs. Maitland knew it well. She had seen the perpetual shadow in the large serious eyes, and had guessed its meaning.

'My love, you could not help it. You had to obey mamma when she thought it best to send you away,' she replied soothingly. 'We need not dwell upon that now. In her dear letters to me, mamma told me what an unspeakable comfort and joy it was to her to know you were with me. Not that she did not miss her dear children, Nannie; but she felt that she

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was not able to give them the care they needed, and it comforted her to know that you were at home here. Think of that, and of the re-union by and by, rather than the pain the separation has given; and though she is within the veil, her spirit will often visit us here, not only because her darlings are here, but because she loved this place.'

The girl's sobbing ceased. Margaret Maitland's lips did indeed drop sweetness into that sore young heart.

'Will we not need to go up? Does papa say nothing about it?' she asked presently.

'No; the telegram says a letter will follow. It will be here to-morrow. We must just wait; but I do not think, my dear, that it would be necessary or wise for you to go.'

'Not even to look upon her face again?'

'Why, Agnes, that would be a very slight satisfaction, and would only grieve you. *She* is not there now, but in the Father's House. It is a terrible grief to let our loved ones go, Nannie; but the time soon comes when we would not wish them back. I have two little girlies in heaven, and I can bless God now that they are safe from the storms of life. Think of mamma's gain. You know how she regarded death,—you have told me of it so often,—the gate of life.'

'Yes, yes; but oh, Aunt Maggie, the emptiness to those who are left outside the gate, even for a little while!'

'Michael, what do you think of that letter?' Mrs. Maitland put the question to her husband in the wee room next morning, after he had read the brief communication with which William Laurie had favoured them. It contained no superfluous matter,—the briefest mention of his wife's death, and an expression of the hope that Mrs. Maitland, for old time's sake, would see her way to keep the children in the meantime, as his way of life was very uncertain.

'It's like Will Laurie, Maggie,' Maitland answered, as he put down the letter. 'But what d'ye say?'

'For Ellen's sake I would keep the bairns, Michael,' she answered at once.

'Weel, it's a question if we dinna get them to keep a'the-

gither. I like the lassie, Maggie,—she's a willin', helpfu' cratur; the lad will gie the trouble,—he's a thrawn, wild loon; but if he's to bide, I'll keep a ticht haud on him.'

'I have never been able to learn what Will's occupation is, father; he was trained to no trade or business?'

'No; that was auld Davie Laurie's mistake. Had he apprenticed Will, he micht ha' been a weel-to-do plumber in Fisherrow yet, instead o' the wastrel he is,' said Laurieston severely. 'It's nae guid trade he's after, you may be sure; if he maks a livin' ava, it'll be by easy means, whether they be richt or wrang. I doot he maks his money aff bettin' an' such like.'

'The bairns are better here, then,' said Margaret Maitland, with a sigh.

'Ay,' said Laurieston dryly; 'there'll be mair chance for their souls' salvation. If ye dinna mind the bother, let the bairns bide.'

Margaret Maitland did *not* mind the bother, so the bairns stayed; and she gave to them, out of her own motherly fulness, the same loving care which blessed her own.

And in that full and busy home time sped with wings which knew no weariness, till the day came when Margaret Maitland knew that her bairns were bairns no longer, but men and women, for whom life had a purpose and a message. Then, indeed, her gravest motherly anxiety was awakened, never to rest again.



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CHAPTER VIII.

'I asked myself what this great God might be
That fashioned me.'

IN the somewhat dingy sitting-room of a students' lodging in Edinburgh, two young men were sitting together in the shadowy grey twilight of a February afternoon. The fire had burned to ashes in the grate unheeded, for they were in earnest talk, and the faces of both wore an expression of deep interest. On the face of the man walking restlessly up and down the narrow floor there was more than interest,—there was anxiety and even care. He was a powerfully-built fellow, quite young, though there was great firmness in the setting of his square jaw, and fearless determination expressed in the well-marked mouth, and flashing in the earnest grey eye. Not a handsome youth, perhaps, in the accepted sense of the term; but there was a fine manliness in his whole bearing, a suggestion of strength and will which was very striking. A hard student, evidently, if deep-set eyes and well-lined brows are any gauge, and a student who would be no superficial sipper at the fount of knowledge.

The other occupant of the room, lying full length on the shabby horse-hair sofa, with his arms folded behind his head, was altogether of a different style. He also was tall, but slenderly, even sparsely built, and having a slight stoop in his shoulders, which, with the delicacy of his features, seemed to speak of inferior physical strength. He had a fine, even a noble face, exquisitely chiselled, every feature without a flaw:

the mouth nervously curved and with great sweetness of expression, the forehead high and smooth and white, with masses of wavy black hair carelessly pushed back from it, while beneath well-marked brows the eyes shone out like lamps,—liquid, lovely eyes, capable of a thousand varying lights and sparks. He was several years older than his companion; but they were close, dear friends, more deeply attached to each other, indeed, than many brothers. There had been a silence between them for a little time, following upon a heated discussion of a question in which both were deeply interested. The younger continued his restless walking, with his eyes on the ground, the older watching him through half-closed eyes with a curious mixture of affectionate interest and a touch of deep compassion.

‘You are just where I was two or three years ago, John,’ he said; but for a time John took no notice of the remark.

‘Then why won’t you help me, Phil,’ he said at length, almost savagely. ‘I’ve got to that standpoint where one must make a clear distinction between the knowable and the unknowable. I must have an indisputable point of view of some kind. Why won’t you discuss the probabilities with me?’

‘Perhaps we’ve discussed them too much already, John,’ returned the other, not without a touch of sadness. ‘Though I entertain certain ideas, and have accepted certain convictions as final, I am not bound to try and convert you to them.’

‘If you believed them to be justifiable and right, you would see it to be your duty to convert me,’ John Maitland said, still angrily.

‘I will willingly undermine no man’s faith, John Maitland,’ the elder man said. ‘I have fought my own battle, and you must fight yours, my man, as I did, unaided.’

‘A fine friend you are, Phil,’ John said, with bitterness; ‘if I didn’t know you so well, I’d call you a selfish prig.’

Philip Robertson smiled slightly, and looked through the dingy window away across to the misty belt of the Firth, where it lay in the sober light of the dying day.

He was thinking, not of his friend, but of his friend’s mother,—that saintly-faced woman who seemed to him the embodiment of a perfect womanhood. For her sake he had made his vow,

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that no word or direction of his should be an aid to John Maitland in his striving after truth. Poor John, of the earnest heart and seeking soul, his student-days had brought him, with all their rich satisfactions, many bitter hours! Failing to find strength and comfort in the religion his father had set before him in his youth, he had set out in solemn earnest to find the truth for himself,—a tedious, struggling seeking, which found him day after day in an agony of doubt and unrest. The wisdom of the Schools confused and irritated him, each philosopher so calmly setting forth as final a view of things earthly and eternal which he could not accept. Perhaps he had not been fortunate in his friend? A strong, faithful heart, whose conviction was unalterably built upon revelation and redemption, might have guided the tossing soul early to peace and comfort? But John had a long battle to fight, a struggle of which even these painful hours of student-life were but as the smoke of the battle from afar.

‘It seems to me, Phil,’ began John, in his quick, earnest way, ‘that men are subdued by fear. It is fear of the consequences that makes men religious. I’ll tell ye what it is, man: I’ve talked to dozens of the fellows we both know, and not one of them can give a reason for the faith that is in them. The most of them are terrified to study any views but those which will strengthen their own. What’s the use of a faith which can’t hold its own, and confute any false doctrine pitted against it? If it can’t tower above all other faiths, like Saul among the people, it’s a cowardly thing, and I won’t have it. Whatever I believe, I’ll be honest with it.’

Robertson rose from the sofa. His face was flushed, his eyes shone. He was in full sympathy with his friend, and could have grasped him by the hand, and told him so in heartiest words.

‘You will come out into the clear light by and by, as every honest soul does,’ he said, so quietly that any listener might have thought him indifferent. ‘Isn’t it about time Michael turned up? It will be dark before you get out to Laurieston if he is much longer.’

‘Upon my word, you are a cool beggar, Phil,’ said John, with

a slight laugh; 'a man lays bare his soul before you, and you turn him off with the veriest commonplaces. What on earth do you mean? You are not so indifferent about other things.'

'That's Michael's foot,' Robertson answered significantly; and truly at that moment the door-handle turned, and Michael marched in.

'“A dim, religious light,” in all conscience,’ he cried gaily. ‘I say, Jock, do you know it’s after five? Phil, I think you’d better take him as a permanent boarder. He only sleeps at our rooms.’ Robertson laughed.

‘We needn’t have a light if you are just going. I don’t mind if I walk a bit with you. Fine outside, isn’t it?’

‘Glorious; there’s a touch of spring in the air which makes one’s blood leap. Won’t you come out with us,—you know they’re always glad to see you? Ain’t they, Jock?’

‘Yes; but Phil and I are not agreeing to-night,’ John said, reaching over the table for his hat.

‘Never mind,—

“You’ll take the high road,
And we’ll take the low road.
And we’ll be at Laurieston afore ye,”

sang Michael. ‘Come on, Phil; never mind a bag,—mother can give you everything.’

‘Not to-night, thank you, Mike. How are you going,—by Portobello?’

‘Not likely; it’s a hideous road through those sewage meadows,’ said John gruffly. ‘Let’s take the ’bus out to Newington, and then have a decent walk when we’re at it.’

‘Why take the ’bus at all?’ queried Michael, in mild wonder. ‘Anything the matter with your legs, Jock?’

‘Nothing; you leave me alone, will you?’ was the irritable reply. Michael whistled, elevated his eyebrows, and discreetly retired to wait for his brother in the street.

‘There’s no use snapping poor Mike’s head off because you happen to be out of sorts,’ suggested Phil.

‘What do you know about it?’ John said rudely. ‘I know I’m a bear, Phil; but this sort of thing can’t go on.’

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sooner than you think,' said Robertson cheerily ; and, gripping his friend's hand fast in his, he looked him straight in the eyes. ' Man, can't you see how I feel for you, how entirely my heart is with you ; but I can't help you. After my own battle I swore I would have no hand in unsettling any man's faith,—you must find your own conviction, and abide by it. I tell you, John, nothing less will satisfy you, or any honest soul like you, besides'— He stopped then, and turned aside. Long after, John Maitland pondered on that interjection. It implied so much.

But Michael was calling to them again from the foot of the stair, so there was nothing more said.

Michael and Robertson monopolized the conversation as they climbed the steep incline from the north side of the town, and quickly approached Princes Street, John walking on in front with his eyes on the ground, and his arms swinging in pace with his long legs, which could cover the ground with such rapidity and ease.

Philip Robertson, although considerably older than the Maitlands, was intimate with both. John, however, was his special friend. Their meeting had been accidental, for Robertson had long graduated in the Arts, and had also obtained a Science degree. He was a botanist of rare skill, and was then assisting the professor of botany in his class lectures.

He was a man about thirty, of varied accomplishments and marked ability, although they said he dipped in too many sciences to be proficient in one. He was well known in Edinburgh University circles, although no one had any definite knowledge of his circumstances or antecedents. He did not appear to possess ample means, but supported himself by coaching dilatory students for the Art and Science examinations. If he had relatives, he never spoke of them, even to John Maitland, who was his intimate friend. He was a curious, reserved individual with strangers, and yet the charm of his personality was very great. Although made welcome to many social circles, he did not visit much, except in quarters of the city which are not considered the most select. He was well known and greatly beloved among the poor, who had proved him an abiding friend

That upper circle which was willing to admit him within its charmed boundary-line, heard of his good deed, and spoke of him as being eccentric, and as entertaining curious views about the relationship of man to man irrespective of station and wealth. They knew nothing of his work or of the motive which prompted it. Philip Robertson spoke of these to very few. Michael did not understand him very well, but got on amicably with him, as Michael did and must get on with even the churlish, because of his own extraordinary sweetness of disposition. Nobody had ever seen Michael Maitland the younger angry. John sometimes called him, with bantering affection, 'an Israelite without guile.'

'I wish you'd stop a moment, Phil,' said Michael, stopping a moment when they reached the level of George Street. He took his breath quickly, and his colour was heightened. Robertson paused immediately, and looked at the fair, flushed, womanish face with undisguised anxiety.

'I say, Mike, you'll need to be careful. That climb is too much for you.'

'Oh no; it's your long legs! Just look at John! He'll be at Laurieston an hour before me,' said Michael laughingly, though still panting a little. 'You might come out. Mother likes you, and all the rest are glad when you come.'

'All?' asked Robertson, with a short laugh.

'Ay, even Effie,' answered Michael slyly; 'though she teases you so unmercifully.'

'I can't possibly go out with you; but if I can get my work forward, I'll may be walk out to-morrow and stay till Sunday.'

'Do. I say, Phil, isn't John awfully down just now? What's bothering him, do you know?'

'I know partially, but I question if I can tell you,' answered Robertson truthfully. 'Has he never spoken to you about it?'

'Never; and I see it's bothering mother and Nannie. They think there never was such another as John, you know.'

'I see that; perhaps he'll tell you soon. Well, if I'm to come out to-morrow, I think I'd better go back to my work. The papers a coach has to go over are a dreary business, Mike, I can tell you. Just you come on quietly, and I'll catch up John and tell him.'

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It was a kindly impulse which made Robertson stride on for a quiet word with John. Before Michael came up he had time to tell him to go leisurely up the ascents for Michael's sake. Michael had never been very robust; so John, while attending to his friend's request, was not unduly alarmed by it. With a promise to meet on the morrow at a certain trysting-place midway between Edinburgh and Inveresk, the friends parted, and the two brothers walked slowly and in silence up the steep North Bridge and out towards Newington.

'I say, John, isn't Phil a splendid fellow?' asked Michael, at length tired of the silence. 'It's such a pity, I think, he holds such strange views.'

'What do you know about his views?' asked John, in that quick, irritable fashion which had grown on him of late. 'He doesn't air them on his sleeve, as a rule.'

'No; but I have an inkling of his ideas on theological questions. He gives philosophy the first place.'

'What do you mean by philosophy in that sense, then?'

'I mean that he places philosophy in the place of religion: he believes in "good conduct" as the end and aim of life. A poor enough end and aim for a man like Robertson, or for any man.'

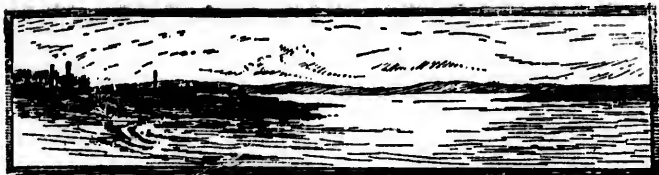
'How do you know? I believe he has got the right set of it. Compare him with so many canting hypocrites—you know them as well as I—who talk religion and live the opposite. You know Phil's life,—what a large, generous, unselfish thing it is. I tell you these contrasts shake a man's faith, if he has any. I'm tempted to throw the whole thing overboard, Mike, and try life minus superstition, for it seems to me that in these days people—the best minds, at least—regard revealed religion as a superstition.'

John Maitland spoke with a vehemence which showed how deeply he felt every word he uttered. Michael was silent a moment, looking away over the rich brown furrows of the ploughed field, in which the patient teams were busy at work. He was not greatly surprised or even horrified. He had suspected something like this. It is impossible for a man to be constantly mixing with the free, outspoken, and varied elements

of student-life, and not become familiar with almost every phase of thought concerning things human and divine. It is an ordeal, in some cases a crisis, in many young lives. Michael himself had had his doubts, though they had never reached such a vital crisis. He was by nature more trustful than his brother, and could accept as truth even what he could not fully comprehend. He was blessed in the heritage of faith his mother had transmitted to him. He was deeply and affectionately concerned for John, and walked on in silence by his side, pondering what manner of reply he should make to his passionate and sweeping assertions.



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CHAPTER IX.

‘Here
There is nor ground, nor light enough to live.’

IT was a fine mild afternoon, the close of one of those days of heavenly promise we have sometimes in the early year, when the earth begins to waken from its long sleep, and to quicken with newness of life. There were no leaves yet, but the catkins were downy on the willows, and the greenness lent by fresh young blades was on every grassy bank ; also the snowdrops were nodding whitely on their delicate stems, and in sheltered nooks the primroses showing early buds among their cool green leaves. The sky was as tender as a woman's smile, dappled with soft grey clouds, fringed with red and gold where the early sun had set ; the whole air was filled with the breathings of spring, an instinctive gladness of promise by which human hearts could not but be influenced. Michael Maitland lifted his face to the sunset sky, and took a long, deep breath. There was reverence in his eyes as they dwelt a moment on that eternal firmament, and he raised his hat from his head, while John looked at him wonderingly.

‘You and Robertson would serenely blot from my future, heaven and the life to come,’ Michael said quietly ; ‘but in the face of these things,’ he added, with a wide sweep of his hand, ‘I defy you to do it. Why, man, what would life in this world be worth without the hope of immortality ? The things of time appear poor enough when a man sets them against our eternal interests.’

'Now, that is just the narrow view theologians take of it, retorted John, eager for argument. 'The religion of philosophy'—for it is a religion, Mike, though it denies the First Cause as a Being to be blindly worshipped—gives men noble incentives to live worthy and useful lives. Look at Robertson, as I said before: he has a reverence for, and devotion to, everything virtuous and excellent, simply because it is virtuous and excellent. The old religion is full of selfishness: it is a demoralizing system of reward and punishment, and does not teach men to love good or seek truth for its own sake,—because it is a priceless possession for the soul.'

Robertson's arguments Michael knew these to be, and he lifted his mild eyes to his brother's dark, eager face, with a kind of wondering sadness.

'You think Robertson a profoundly happy man, then?' he asked quietly.

'He has a calm, serene mind, built upon a firm conviction. I would give ten years of my life for his peace,' was the vehement reply. 'I tell you, Mike, I envy him.'

'And when he dies, then I suppose he will be content to go down to the ground like the beasts that perish?'

'I don't know that. That is just where the unknowable line is drawn. He does not deny the possibility of a future state; he only holds that we have nothing to do with it here, and that our aim and end should be to spend our days in devotion to truth, and in seeking to do good to our fellow-men.'

'And where do these holy desires come from?'

'They are the fruits of the philosophy in which he believes.'

'It is a blind creed, John, and will no more satisfy his soul or yours, or the soul of any man, than a stone will satisfy a hungry child,' Michael made answer. 'There is a God-implanted craving in every human being, which nothing but belief in God will satisfy. We need a faith, just as the flowers need the showers of spring to make them live. Don't tell me that Robertson is satisfied, that he is entirely happy with his new-found philosophy. He will not lay bare his inmost heart even to you. Whether is it a nobler thing to walk by faith here,

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following the example the Lord has left us, and having the sure hope that there will be a continuation of life or a new one begun after death, or to walk blindly on till, at death, you find yourself before a blank stone-wall which shuts out hope? I know which I prefer.'

'Ay, so do I, if I could grasp it,' John admitted; 'but that is where the honest thinker comes to a standstill. I have read the Bible, never man more earnestly, and I have been touched by the story of the Crucifixion. It was a noble deed, humanly speaking; but not so noble for a Divine Being who prophesied and fore-ordained all, as we have been taught yonder,' he added, with a wave of his hand toward the eastern sea. 'There are men—I believe Robertson is one—who would sacrifice themselves for others, even though they could not see any immediate good to result from it.'

'You do not understand what you are talking of, John,' said Michael quietly; 'some day you will look at it in another light—the light of a new revelation.'

'I don't think so. That is just how the Church puts us off with vague generalities.'

'The love of Christ is not a vague generality,' Michael said, with flushing face, for these were sacred things to him, and he seldom spoke of them. 'I wish I could tell you what it is to me, John. There was a time when I had my doubts also, though I never went so far as you. It was father's teaching which troubled me. I hate to say it, but it is the narrowness of the creed he has accepted which brings odium on the Gospel. I have been enabled, by searching and prayer, to see it in a wider and fuller sense. I believe Christ died to save every man without limitation or distinction, and if ever I am spared to enter a pulpit, I will preach that doctrine and no other. John, did you ever pray to be guided?'

'Never. I vowed I would think the matter out, and fight honestly for myself. I'll tell you what, Michael: every Sunday when I am at home, that prayer we have to hear makes me writhe,—it is not praying, it's grovelling in the dirt. I won't do it, and I don't believe any man, even our own father, is sincere in such frightful abasement. If there is a God, do

you believe He made creatures so low? I tell you I'm heart-sick of the whole business, and I'll have it out with my father one of these days; and then he'll turn me out of the house, like a Christian!

'You are unjust. Like so many carpers, John, you blame the whole system because of the narrowness of some of its votaries. Our mother is a Christian. What do you think of her religion?' John Maitland's bosom heaved: *that* was a very precious, very tender spot.

'Our mother is an angel, and would be, Michael, though she had no religion at all; her womanhood is the divinest thing on earth.'

'And Agnes?' pursued Michael mercilessly. 'She has had a great deal to bear, and you know how she bears it. You also know what *her* religion is. She does not hesitate to speak of her faith, which is her life. Take away her hope, John, and what would be left to her?'

'I grant that it is useful to her,' John answered; 'she is not very self-reliant. It is her nature to attach herself strongly both to persons and creeds, and to lean upon them. If she had a wider view presented to her mind, she would grasp it, I believe, and find equal support in it.'

Michael's face grew white in the deepening night, and he turned upon his brother, roused for a minute out of his habitual gentleness of self-control. 'John Maitland, if you *dare* to unhinge her mind—if you *dare*—may God forgive you, for I never will.'

'Don't be afraid, Mike,' John answered, with a kind of curious sadness; 'I have not found such abounding happiness myself that I should be eager to impart it to others. I'll let women alone. If they can find all they need in their religion, I shall not seek to unsettle their convictions.'

'You have admitted your own weakness, John,' said Michael shrewdly; 'true philosophy teaches that it is imperative on the seeker after truth to impart it as he best can to his fellows. Look at a man who first sees the truth as it is in Christ. He finds his complete happiness in telling others of his treasure. Without that burning desire, John, the ministry

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even of the ablest will be utterly barren. The heart must go hand in hand with the intellect.'

'It is a curious thing, Mike, how many of our ablest men have thrown aside Christianity as an old superstition. It has not been able to stand the searching test of reason.'

'Has it not? How many creeds and dogmas and philosophies have had their day and passed into nothingness since the revelation of the Gospel was given to man? After all these centuries, the Bible still stands as firm and unassailable as of yore; its teaching is still the best we can get, even for the conduct of human affairs. As to the able men, much study has made them mad. This height of analysis to which modern thought has reached, causes men to doubt the very fact of their own being.

John smiled. 'How hot you are, Mike; it is not often we have an argument. I must set you and Phil on some night, and I'll listen and judge between you. I say, we're nearly home. How the time flies when one is interested! Are you tired?'

'No, not at all. After all, John, there's no place like home, is there? In spite of some drawbacks, Laurieston is a dear old place, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is; it's a picturesque old town this, Mike. I always think the river just from here looks fine, especially in a fine glamour light like this, which hides all its ugliness.'

They stood for a moment on the old Roman bridge which spans the Esk at the entrance to the old town of Musselburgh, and looked down towards the sea. The tide was full, and the wind, blowing in freshly from the shore, had a delicious salt flavour, which seemed to them the very elixir of life. The sky had grown clearer with the night, and the stars were peeping out, while a shy light from a young February moon made a mystic halo on the red roofs and spires of the town. They crossed over the river presently, and, skirting the avenue at the railway station, turned up the lane towards the kirkyard, their nearest way home. That God's acre on the hill was a peaceful, picturesque spot. It was approached by a long flight of shallow steps, worn into hollows by the feet of many worshippers and many mourners; and among the scattered graves the grey old

church kept watch, looking down serenely upon the sleepy town on the edge of the sea. The lads did not speak much as they climbed the steps, slowly for Michael's sake, and they passed silently through the city of the dead out into the familiar road which led them home. Home was still a dear word to these two, and they were glad, as each Friday night came round, to seek its rest and peace. Hearts beat faster and eyes grew brighter at their coming, for the student sons of the house of Laurieston were both greatly beloved.

They began to talk again of home affairs as they neared the gate. Some one watching there heard their voices long before they came in sight. They found the gate wide open, and 'mother' standing by it with a shawl about her dear head, and the sweet mother-smile of welcome in eyes and lips.

'My laddies, come away. I wearied and ran out. How are you both to-night?'

'Fine, mother; splendid. How are you?' they answered back in chorus; and John, with his usual fondness, had his arms round her in a moment, and his face close to hers. There was no doubt about it,—John was his mother's son. The love between them was exquisite in its sweetness and strength.

She often stole out to meet them. Sometimes the week seemed long, especially if they did not write. It was seldom, indeed, that John missed; but of late there was a restraint in these letters, ay, and in his demeanour, which his mother was quick to note. She needed no telling that John was troubled about something, nor Agnes either. There were two women who loved John Maitland better than anything on earth. In a sense Mrs. Maitland loved all her children equally well. She made no outward difference in her treatment of any one of them, but John had been the idol of her young mother heart, and was now the son of her hopes and prayers; also, perhaps, though unacknowledged, of her deepest motherly care. She had no fear for Michael, the sunny-hearted and true, the best boy that had ever lived, and who would do good in the sphere which he loved with his whole soul, though it had been chosen for him; but John, of the questioning, searching mind,—of the big, honest, earnest heart,—of the quick impulse and hasty

judgment, which was ignoble, nothing like it was worth her own prayer more to a woman first child who joy of motherhood knew well the pang, though Michael, in the divine love.

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judgment, who could brook nothing narrow or mean or ignoble, nothing which would not bear the full glare of light,—he it was who lay nearest to her heart, and for whose guiding her own prayers were constant. Perhaps the first-born is always more to a woman than the rest of her children, because it is the first child who reveals to her at once the agony and the high joy of motherhood. Michael, with his keen, sensitive intuition, knew well that John was the mother's favourite; but he felt no pang, though she entered the house leaning on his arm. Dear Michael, in that unselfish soul there was the sweetness of a divine love.

'And how's everybody?' John asked, throwing off the incubus which lay upon him. 'All the human beings first, then the ox and the ass, and the motherly hen with her chicks? Oh, is Will home to-night?'

'Not yet,' Mrs. Maitland answered quickly. 'He will come by the late train. I tell him he is too lazy. He might walk with you.'

'Catch him! Will will never walk if he can ride,' John answered, with a laugh.

'Hulloa, Effie!'

They were within the door now, and under the hall-lamp stood a slight, plump, rosy-cheeked young creature, in whose dancing brown eyes the sweet dews of maidenhood were fresh. Effie had shot up into young womanhood all at once, without any period of awkward girlhood between. Her figure was well formed and graceful, and she had all the airs of young ladyhood which has the desire to make itself attractive. Effie always wore the very daintiest of gowns, the most bewitching of ribbons and laces, and her rich black hair was always braided in the newest style. Without being vain, she was attentive to her attractive appearance, and thought no shame to admit that gowns and bonnets and dainty shoes and perfect gloves were very interesting items in her sight. She was a healthy, happy lassie, with a warm heart, a quick, impulsive temper, and a high, independent spirit; a great favourite with the boys, though at times self-willed enough to cause her mother some slight anxiety.

Michael, Effie adored. She was rather afraid of John, who, especially of late, had grown so solemn and reserved; and with Walter she was constantly bickering, he teased her so unmercifully. But Michael was always the same,—gentle, kind, and true, never laughing at her, but always ready to help her in every possible way. As yet Michael was Effie's hero and her ideal among mankind.

'Oh, boys, you are late! and Agnes' dainty morsel for supper may turn out stale, flat, and unprofitable. What have you brought me, Mike?'

'A needy divinity student can't bring bonnie lassies a fairing every week-end,' laughed Michael; nevertheless, a tiny paper parcel quickly changed hands, with many a nod behind mother's back. She was occupied with John, scanning his face with those searching mother-eyes of hers, which he somehow did not, just then, care to meet. The dining-room door opened immediately, and Wattie appeared, his brown face full of interest over his brothers' home-coming. Wattie was turning out a great comfort at Laurieston, and giving fair promise of becoming a prime agriculturist. In appearance he differed greatly from his two brothers. He was as tall as John; and though so much younger, his figure had attained both stature and strength, and he was like to be a goodly Laird of Laurieston.

'Hulloa, Wat!' John said, and looking beyond him into the warm, well-lit room as if seeking something else.

His mother followed that glance, and her eyes shone. She knew what it meant. She had seen it too often, now, to mistake it. Though she was his mother, there was no bitterness in the knowledge that, while John loved Laurieston and all it contained, there was one face there dearer to him than all the rest.



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CHAPTER X.

'Oh, they wander wide who roam
For the joys of life from home.'



MICHAEL MAITLAND the elder, hearing all the commotion, rose from his arm-chair too, and shook hands with both his sons. The years which had made so great a change upon the young folks, had dealt but gently with the old. There was little perceptible difference in Maitland,—a greyer tinge, perhaps, in beard and hair, a line or two more on the strong face, a slight rounding of the shoulders; that was all. A hale, hearty, powerful man yet, was the Laird of Laurieston, as like living as any of his sons.

'Weel, lads, ye've a fine night for your walk,' he said; 'ye are later than usual.'

'It was all Jock's blame, father,' cried Michael. 'Here, when it was time to go, had not I to take a pilgrimage down to Robertson's rooms and hunt him up? They were sitting there, discussing goodness knows what, just as if there was no eight-mile walk to be taken in time for supper. Where's Nannie?'

'You needn't ask,' laughed Effie; 'she's concocting some fearful and wonderful dainty for your delectation. All nonsense, I tell her. Begin with men-folk where you mean to end with them. If you spoil their stomachs for plain food in their youth, pity their old age, and yours. Don't shake your head; father, isn't it true?'

It was a study to see Effie and her father together. She took liberties with him which none of the boys would have

dared to take. She talked to him, and at him, with a sweet daring which was wholly irresistible; and Laurieston, far from being angered by it, just looked at her with a softness in his eye which nothing else could bring there. Effie's influence over her father was a source of the most complete satisfaction to her mother. She would smile quietly, sometimes, at the ease with which Effie could coax and wheedle him. He could refuse her nothing. She was the very apple of his eye.

John went back to the hall table to bring the newspaper to his father, and while he was there the kitchen door opened, and Agnes came out. He had pulled the dining-room door after him, so there was no one to witness their meeting. He turned to her eagerly, and his honest eyes betrayed all his heart as they dwelt upon her sweet face.

'Nannie, I thought you'd never come!' he said. Perhaps it was the stooping over the fire which had brought the rich glow to her face. She gave him her hand, but her eyes did not meet his. That stolen moment was dangerously sweet, and each knew it.

'It is you who are late,' Agnes said at length. 'Is Willie with you? Shall I tell Katie, I wonder, to bring in the supper?'

'Will isn't,' John said, but made no motion to return to the dining-room. He was looking her all over,—hungrily, passionately, as a man looks at his dearest treasure; and she, woman-like, feeling the intensity of his gaze, thrilled under it, and longed to fly. Agnes was a woman now,—a gracious, self-reliant, beautiful woman,—one of those whose ministry on earth is to bless every human being and everything which her sweet influence touches. A woman of few words, but of boundless deeds; but not one whose life was colourless, nor whose individuality was sunk in that of others. She had her own opinions, which she could strongly express in season; her own ways of working, which, though unobtrusive, were unmistakably felt,—a woman of quiet though almost limitless influence. Her place at Laurieston nobody else could fill. She was the elder daughter still, upon whom Margaret Maitland leaned with an intensity of which she herself had no idea. It

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was Agnes who now kept the domestic wheels smoothly working, in her loving, helpful way. She had somewhat set Mrs. Maitland aside. It is a beautiful thing, I think, to see the house-mother, who has borne the burden and heat of the day, resting at eventide, secure in the helpful love of the children whose lives she has blessed. It is an unspeakable sorrow, which has always a peculiar sting, when the mother, having fought the battle, has to lay down her armour just when the heat of the conflict is over,—when the children, for whom she has spent the best of her strength, are only beginning to realize the precious ministry, and to be a recompense to her. The Maitlands were spared that keen sorrow; and their mother was very content to be so set aside, while the young and willing hands did the work which had been hers.

‘Why does Willie never come with you, I wonder?’ Agnes said; and there was anxiety both in her voice and look when she spoke.

‘He likes better to ride than to walk,’ John answered lightly. ‘And perhaps Uncle Walter kept him later than usual in the office: they are very brisk in the shipping line this spring. Don’t you bother your head about Will, Agnes. He’ll be all right.’

Agnes smiled in response to these hearty, sympathetic words. Her face, apt to be sad and even severe in repose, was made lovely by that smile. It had the power to send the blood coursing through John’s veins. He had not long awakened to the meaning of these strange thrills, which only the sound of her voice—even the mere sense of her presence—could give. He knew now that he loved her as a man loves but once; but he was in no haste, having nothing to offer her. He had not even troubled himself yet to wonder whether she had any love to give in return. Meantime it was enough for him to be near her, to watch the changing lights which often made sunshine in her reposeful face, to hear her sweet, clear voice, to be conscious of her dear presence,—which to him was the sunshine of Laurieston.

Perhaps these student-days, in spite of some cares, were the happiest the house of Laurieston would ever know. They were

drawing near an end. Both the lads hoped to graduate in Arts at Easter; then they must go their separate ways. Even now there were some upheavings of the storms which were to shake the lives of these young people. At times the heart of Agnes Laurie was filled with a vague uneasiness of unrest. These sweet days of peace and homely joys could not last for ever, she knew. Her experience of life had already told her that these times of golden ease are ever but the preparation for the searching discipline of trial.

But the serene, unquestioning faith her mother had left her as a sacred legacy, was her mainstay. Clinging to it, Agnes Laurie could not be much shaken by the storm of life. Under pretence of giving Katie her order, Agnes went back to the kitchen. Why could she not enter the room with John? Perhaps, dear heart, she feared her eyes, too, might betray her. She came in by and by to greet Michael, and there was no embarrassment in her manner with him. To Michael, Agnes felt a sister indeed; and he—but we shall learn hereafter.

'And how goes the study this week, boys?' Mrs. Maitland asked, as they drew to their places at the table.

'Oh, famously! Mike will be a long way ahead of me, mother. He'll get all the honours.'

'Don't believe him, mother. You know to beware of Jock when he cries down himself. Effie, guess who's coming tomorrow?' he added, turning teasingly to his sister.

'Oh, that solemn-faced creature John adores,' Effie answered lightly. 'What do you see in him, for any sake?'

'Don't you think him a handsome fellow, now, Effie?' John asked.

'Handsome! Not at all. Do you, Nannie?'

'Yes, very handsome,' Agnes answered; 'he has a very clever, striking face. Don't you think so, Aunt Maggie?'

'Yes; but I never feel very sure of him: he seems to be always seeing so deep into one,' Mrs. Maitland answered.

'Is that Mr. Robertson ye are talking of?' asked Laurieston. 'He may be clever an' a' as he likes, but he is not a companion for ye, lads. I wad rather ye didna encourage him to come about.'

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'Why, father, you used to think no end of Phil!' said John hotly.

'He has a fine way, I dinna deny; but Mr. Semple, the minister of Newgordon, was telling me in the market on Wednesday that he's no sound.'

'Not sound! On what point?' asked Michael, with interest.

'On religious questions. He gangs till nae kirk, and naebody kens what he believes. I wish ye wad tak' up wi' godly young men, lads, for these are times o' sair temptation.'

'Phil is a thousand times better than any godly young man I know, father,' John made answer stoutly. 'I don't care what he believes, so long as I know what he is as a man. I tell you there's few like him, and I'd tell Mr. Semple that if I saw him.'

'John dear!' It was Mrs. Maitland who spoke. She saw the darkening of her husband's brows, and felt that John's tone and manner were not entirely respectful.

It was a consuming grief to her that there was so very little sympathy between the father and his eldest son. Each seemed to show the harsher side to the other, and so misjudged each other entirely. John's eyes fell under that gently-rebuking gaze. Maitland took a deep draught of his coffee, and then looked straight at his son:

'Yer manners havena improved under him, I'm thinking, lad,' he said dryly; and an uncomfortable silence ensued.

'I beg pardon if I spoke rudely, father,' John said, breaking the awkward pause by his clear, honest voice. 'I can't help feeling mad when I hear a man like Robertson so misjudged. If you only knew the good he does in Edinburgh,—doesn't he, Michael? He lives in the poorest way, just to help others. I could point out ever so many struggling fellows who owe their success to him. He coaches hours for nothing; and goes down to the Cowgate among the poor wretches there, trying to do them good.'

'But why has he given up all kirk ordinances?' asked Laurieston frigidly. 'May be he thinks himsel' a hantle better than the Lord's ordained servants?'

Michael looked warningly at John, remembering his threat to

have it out with his father. This was not the time nor the place; he hoped John would see the fitness of things. But John, impulsive and eager on all subjects to which he gave his thought, would have plunged into hot argument then and there, had not the entrance of Willie Laurie made a timely interruption. Willie Laurie was now nineteen, and manly for his years. He was a handsome young fellow; a trifle foppish in dress and ways, and a little inclined to put on the airs of a town-bred youth. He had taken Wat's place in the shipowner's office at Leith, but was giving scanty satisfaction to Mr. Walter Maitland. He was very smart and clever, but fond of company and easily led away. He boarded during the week, however, in Mr. Walter Maitland's house at Seafield, where the discipline enforced was of the strictest. The shipowner had no children, and his wife was an invalid, who required a great deal of attention. She only suffered Willie Laurie in the house, and her husband had to see that he gave as little trouble as possible. In spite of these conditions, however, Willie Laurie managed to enjoy life in Leith, and also to get a great deal of latitude which would not be approved of either at Seafield or Laurieston. He had a fine tongue, an innocent, winning smile, and careless ease of manner which carried him safely over many a piece of stony ground. He came laughing into the room that night, nodding to everybody in the most matter-of-fact way, though he knew very well he was too late, and that he might have been home two hours ago, even if he had walked along the shore from Seafield after the office closed. There was a certain anxiety in the eyes of Agnes as she rose to greet him; he was her constant care. Sometimes he had exhibited a selfish and masterful spirit, which reminded her too much of her father. It was the dread of her life lest Willie should grow like him in disposition, as he was like him in body. Often Maitland would say to his wife that Will Laurie was in their midst yet, his son so exactly resembled him. And Margaret Maitland would sigh, and hope in her heart that the resemblance might go no further than face and figure.

Effie sat very demurely at the table as Willie took his place. He gave her no special greeting except a glance from his blue

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eyes, which might mean a great deal, or nothing at all. It was well Margaret Maitland did not notice it; she had no misgivings as yet concerning her young daughter and her lovers.

'I'm famishing,' Willie said, as he drew in his chair. 'Did you fellows walk? I came on the 8.15. Oh, I say, Aunt Maggie, one of Ramsey's clerks was in the compartment with me, with another fellow going to Tranent. They were speaking about Halleross,—I don't fancy they knew me. Old Ramsey has been up making a new will for the old lady.'

Mrs. Maitland looked, as she felt, surprised. Though Miss Leesbeth had been very feeble all winter, none of them apprehended any immediate danger, and she had never spoken of making a will or of winding-up her affairs in any way.

'If it is true, Willie, the young man ought not to have been speaking of it in a railway carriage,' she answered quietly.

'Oh, he did not say anything about the contents of the will,—merely mentioned the fact. Has she much to leave, Aunt Maggie?' Willie Laurie's cool assurance in most matters was so striking as to be almost comical. He seemed utterly unconscious at any time of asking unbecoming questions.

'It's information Will wants, mother,' said John grimly.

'I can't give it,' answered Mrs. Maitland. 'I know very little of my Aunt's affairs.' Margaret Maitland had all her life taken the trouble to answer the questions put to her by the young people in her care; many wondered, when the bairns were young, that she would take so much trouble with them.

'The old lady is pretty close, I guess,' said Willie carelessly. 'Just look how she bought Halleross from dad, without letting on to anybody. She has the place to leave, anyway,—a decent bit for anybody.'

Agnes looked distressed; the tone of her brother's remarks, she knew, was offensive to all present.

'Is Uncle Walter busy just now with the North Sea ships?' asked Michael, stepping into the awkward breach with his kind and ready tact.

'Oh, frightfully; we sent off three steamers to the Baltic Sea this week. It's an early season; fancy, the ice broken up already,' returned Willie readily. 'Precious little skating

we've had this winter. There's been none since Christmas week.'

'How is Aunt Maitland to-day?' asked Effie, opening her lips for the first time since Willie came in.

'Oh, so so,' he answered, with a curious elevation of the eyebrows; 'her nerves were upset by that wind-storm on Tuesday, and since then--mum's the word.'

'My man, ye'd better speak wi' mair respect o' yer maister's wife,' said Laurieston sternly; he had listened with ill-repressed anger to the lad's flippant talk for the last few minutes.

'He's my guv., but not my master,' said Willie boldly; 'I'm a gentleman's son, sir.'

Mrs. Maitland, who had been keenly watching the young man since his entrance, troubled at the flushed face, bright eye, and somewhat braggart bearing, was convinced in a moment that some outside stimulant had given him unusual courage. It was his wont to be very quiet and respectful in the presence of the Laird.

'I think, bairns, if ye are a' done, we had better rise,' she said, rising herself, quite hastily for her. It was a timely movement, for a few more words might have raised the storm.

Agnes was thankful to escape. It was no surprise to see her brother thus, but only the confirmation of a fear which pursued her day and night.

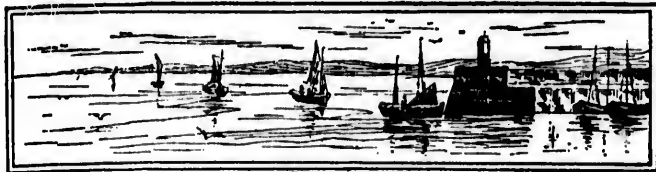


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CHAPTER XI.

'She did but look upon him, and his blood
Blushed deeper, even from his inmost heart.'



SAY, wife, do you think it'll be true Miss Leesbeth's been makin' a new will?' Laurieston asked, after the bairns were all upstairs.

'It'll be true enough, likely, Michael. I must say I think she's acted queerly all through about the place; she never even told me what she paid Will Laurie for it. I was very ill-pleased at the selling of it, I can tell you. Hallercross belongs by right to Nannie,—it was her mother's portion. I would like to know what he has done with the money, dear; we've seen little of it.'

'No, and we'll see less, wife. I question if we are daein' richt to fulfil his duties,' said Laurieston grimly. 'Will Laurie, according to the Scriptures, is worse than an infidel, because he hasna provided for his ain household. Not that I'm grumblin', Maggie; the lassie is worth her meat an' mair, though I'll no' say as muckle for the laddie. I could wish him awa' noo, for I likena the looks that pass between him an' Effie.'

Mrs. Maitland laughed; *that* did not at all concern her as yet. 'Oh, Michael, dinna meet trouble half-way; they are but bairns, an' there's nothing between them but bairnly nonsense.'

'That may be; but Effie is seventeen, Maggie, an' the lad is just the age his father was when he began to rin first between Hallercross and Fisherrow,' replied Laurieston significantly. 'I'm thinkin' ye wadna wish for our Effie a wifehood like Ellen's?'

'The Lord forbid, father,' was the fervent reply; 'I'd liefer see her in the kirkyard.'

'So would I,' said Laurieston, with a deep breath. 'I maun see if Walter canna get a berth for Willie at Hamburg or Rotterdam, wi' some o' his agents there. It wad do him good, any way, to be sent awa' for a while. What d'ye honestly think o' the laddie, Maggie?'

'Oh, father, I don't know. He is a pleasant lad, and gives little trouble, but there's a want of stability about him. When he is late, as he was to-night, I am always anxious and concerned; now our laddies might stay out all night without giving me a bit of concern in *that* way. There are few sons like John and Michael, father.'

'They are steady, very steady, and Michael's a very fine chap. Maggie, I do not think this college lore is to do muckle for John, except teach him presumption. I'm gawn to sound him one o' these days. I doot he's entered in at the wide gate that leads to destruction; and that Robertson, in spite o' his likeable ways, is not a good companion for him. Mr. Semple telt me on Wednesday that he's an Agnostic; and when I bid him explain, I find that that lang-nebbit word jist means that he believes in naething, no' even in the very Almichty that made him. Mr. Semple telt me a' the folk that ca' themsel's by that queer name dinna deny the Bible an' a' the sacred things,—they only say they dinna ken; but the line is ower finely drawn for me.'

'Michael, I know not what Philip Robertson's beliefs are; but I feel sure that one who lives so noble a life, beautified by such self-denial, cannot be very far from the kingdom,' said Margaret Maitland dreamily. She had a large heart and a sympathetic soul, filled with sweet tolerance for all creeds.

'Take care, Maggie; charity is good in its way, but a sin when extended to the wiles o' the devil,' said Laurieston, in quick, harsh tones. 'A man who says he does not know whether there is a God or no' cannot be near the kingdom, and never will be,—except the kingdom of darkness. I tell you, I will not have that young man coming here.'

'Is it Effie again you are feared for?' asked the mother,

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with a tender, sweet smile. 'I see he thinks the bairn very fair.'

'I will hae nae man lookin' at my bairn unless he be righteous and God-fearing,' Laurieston said, with a grimness to which the fatherly anxiety and care gave a touch of exquisite pathos.

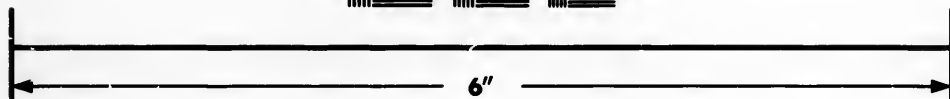
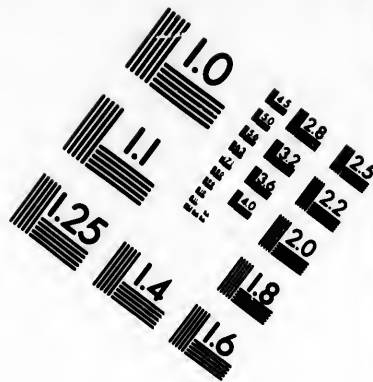
'Then you'll need to shut her up in a box, my man,' said Mrs. Maitland, with an amused smile. 'The bairn will choose her ain man, father. We cannot choose for her, but only pray that she may be guided. Come! it's time we were in bed; it's after eleven. These laddies turn the house tapsalteerie when they come home.'

There was no need now for Mrs. Maitland to come downstairs until breakfast was ready. Very soon after Agnes came to Laurieston, she took this duty from Aunt Maggie's shoulders. By six o'clock, summer and winter, she was downstairs, superintending the affairs of the house, and seeing that the maids had the dairy-work forward. By half-past seven breakfast was on the table, daintily spread, summer and winter; the old-fashioned silver-chased flower-stand had its morsel of bright bloom, freshly culled, for Agnes loved all these little niceties so dear to the heart of a refined and tasteful woman. Her own dress was always neat and becoming; her aprons, though of housewifely size and shape, redeemed from ugliness by a piece of coarse washing lace. Prim, even old-maidish in her ways, she had imparted some of her own individuality and precision to the house of Laurieston. Everything went on like clockwork; and in her quiet way Agnes completely managed the maids, and made them subservient to her will.

Effie, who, it must be confessed, was rather more ornamental than useful in the house, would run gaily down, five minutes before the breakfast-bell rang, all rosy and smiling, compliment Agnes on her housewifely accomplishments, and beg to be forgiven for being so lazy. Agnes would smile back at her, glad, nay thankful, to think that she was of some use, and that she could do a little to acknowledge the debt she owed to these kind friends.

When Agnes came down, a few minutes after six, that





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Saturday morning, she found the front door open, and knew some of the boys must be out.

She stepped out into the cool, still, grey morning, and took a long, deep breath of the fresh spring air. The day had scarcely dawned, though the east was red and golden with the glow of the coming daybreak. At the foot of the brown slopes of the ploughed fields the sea lay like a silvery tide, with the hush of the morning on its motionless breast. The sky overhead was breaking into dappled light as the night-clouds slowly rolled away. Agnes lifted up her eyes, and her heart also, in a morning thanksgiving to the Giver of good. As she stood enjoying the delicious coolness, loth to leave it, a firm step trod the gravel, and presently John appeared, lifting his cap, with a pleasant smile of greeting.

'Are you up already, Nannie? It's only six o'clock,' he exclaimed, in surprise.

'I rise at six every morning,' she answered lightly. 'It is my business to see that breakfast is ready in time.'

'And what does Effie do to help you?'

'She eats it,' Agnes laughed back, for her heart was as light as air. 'Isn't this a lovely morning? Spring is everywhere.'

'It's glorious! Just look down to the sea: that ugly old beach is transmogrified into a silver strand. I say, couldn't you come for a stroll down to the sea? We could be back by eight.'

'And what about the breakfast?'

'Aren't there two women in the kitchen? Let them do it; or go and pull Effie out of her bed, the lazy monkey, — she spends all her time curling her hair.'

'Oh no! hardly so bad. Effie does a good deal in a day. I'll go and ask Katie to be responsible for breakfast to-day. She'll do it, for she's a good girl. What fun to go for a walk before anybody else is up!'

To John it was something more than fun. Agnes was not many minutes in the house. She came running out presently, with her jacket on, and wearing a grey tweed cap, which was very becoming to her face.

'Isn't the air fresh and nice?' she asked, as she stepped across the threshold to John's side.

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'Yes, but its cool. Don't you want something on your neck ? he asked kindly ; 'and you've no gloves ?'

'Oh, gloves ! I never wear them if I can help it. They seem to confine one so. I wish the fashion would change.'

She stretched out her bare hands as she spoke, with one of those quick gestures peculiar to her. They were clear, busy, womanly hands, not so white and fine as Effie's, but perhaps of more use in the world. John thought of that as he looked at them, but did not say so. There were many sweet unspoken thoughts between these two. The eyes of Agnes were full of a serene and happy light ; there was a quiet cheerfulness in her whole demeanour, as she walked by John's side that spring morning. She felt at home with him ; there was a deep satisfaction to her in the very knowledge that he was in the house. She had never sought to analyse these feelings, nor was she conscious that love had found an abiding-place in her heart. They walked on in silence, John looking at the slender figure in grey at his side, thinking how graceful and dignified it was, and how sweet the outline of the fair, delicately-tinted face under the tweed cap. There was a kind of stateliness about her ; she was a woman who would be in the prime of her beauty when Effie's more childish charms had begun to fade. She was not vain, nor even conscious that she was so fair. No one had ever told her so yet ; she had a distant way with her which repelled any compliments or flattering speeches, such as were the wine of life to Effie. Many thought this reserve of manner pride. Outside of their own circle Agnes Laurie was not very popular.

Although they walked in silence, there was no embarrassment between them. They had known each other so long, their friendship was so perfect and so unexact, that the presence of each was sufficient for the other. They turned presently into a little narrow lane running between two stone walls,—a church road through the fields, called the Double Dykes. The dykes, however, were not high enough to confine the view : they could see away through the trees about Pinkie Burn right down to the sea.

'Did you hear what Willie said last night about Hallcross,

John!' Agnes asked, breaking the silence, in a somewhat grave, troubled voice.

John thought he had never heard a sweeter voice in the world than hers; and she had never lost the soft English accent, though Willie had entirely lost his.

'Yes, I heard. Don't let it trouble you, Agnes. Are you sorry the old place should pass away from the Lauries?'

'Yes; it would have grieved mamma,' she said quietly; 'and then I have always thought that there was Halleross for Willie, if he should need it.'

'And not for you?'

'I hardly know,' she answered, with a slight smile; 'I seem to feel that Willie may need it. I am very sorry papa has sold it. The—the money will soon go.' She uttered the last words with a slight hesitation, yet with relief. John felt her confidence sweet. He knew she was speaking about what she deeply felt.

'I am so glad I have you to speak to this morning, John,' she said simply, and turning upon him grave, sweet, trustful eyes. 'I cannot always speak out to Aunt Maggie, dearly as I love her. I think if papa does not write to me, I must write to him to ask if some of the money is not to be invested for us. I don't want it for myself, but—but payments ought to be made regularly to Uncle Michael.'

John saw the colour rise a little in her cheek; but he could think of nothing to say just then, at least nothing bearing on the point.

'What about that?' he said abruptly. 'How long is it since you heard from your father, Agnes?'

'Not since last year; and I know Uncle Michael has never heard either. Sometimes, John, I feel that unless there is a more definite understanding come to, I cannot stay.'

'Cannot stay! What do you mean? Would you leave Laurieston?'

'I have no claim upon it. Look how long Uncle and Aunt Maitland have kept us. Aunt Maggie will never tell me just how much money papa has sent. I must know. Lately, I suppose because I have grown older, I see the injustice of it all,

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Look at Willie. He only earns enough to buy his clothes, and I have been afraid to ask who pays his board. Uncle Michael, I suppose; but it can't go on.

'Agnes, has anybody been speaking to you about this,—any meddling outsider, for instance?'

'No; I know these things better than anybody can tell me.'

'Perhaps you are tired of us, then?'

'Perhaps I am.' She turned her head away, but he saw the proud sweet mouth tremble. The impulse came upon John Maitland to tell her then and there of his love. Never had she seemed so unspeakably dear to him as then.

'And though they have allowed us so long to call them Uncle and Aunt, you know they are not, and we have not even a shadow of claim upon them.'

'I'm glad we're not cousins, any way,' John said, with blunt candour, which made Agnes laugh even in her grave perplexity.

'You are complimentary; but I don't mind in the least what you say. Of course I know quite well I am a little use in the house; but I sometimes think, John, that even that is a doubtful good. It might be better for Effie if I were away,—she would learn to be more self-reliant. You understand me, I know. You know I love Effie as if she were my own sister.'

'I know what you mean; but what would mother—to say nothing of the rest of us—do without you?'

'I believe Aunt Maggie would miss me,' Agnes admitted, and her face grew radiant with love for the dear woman who had filled her mother's place. 'I believe I am talking a great deal of nonsense. I don't think I could leave Laurieston and live.'

John bit his lips again and kept silent, though he found it hard. When had man better opportunity to speak of his hope? But John was loyal; he would not utter a word, he told himself, or seek to bind her in any way until he had something worthy to lay at her feet. Although no human being knew it, John Maitland had long made up his mind that he would have Agnes Laurie to wife, or none.

'It is such a relief to get all these vexing things off one's

mind,' she said presently, more cheerfully. 'What *should* we do, I wonder, in this world without friends? Things one must bear alone and unspoken must be awful.' She uttered these words earnestly enough, applying them to the thought of the moment, without dreaming that they might be prophetic.

'It is a comfort to know that we have one Friend at least to whom we can carry even unspoken sorrows,' she added, with that peculiar sunshiny look which always came upon her face in moments of spiritual uplifting. John looked at her curiously, with a keenness of interest which was almost painful; but she was not conscious of it. He remembered Michael's warning, but thought that it would require more than his arguments to shake that sublime and unquestioning faith.

'There is not a creature on the links,' said Agnes presently, as they emerged upon the public road. 'It is a pity Mr. Robertson had not been here this morning with his clubs. You and he would have had the golf course all to yourselves.'

'He'll be out before dinner; so we'll have a round in the afternoon,' returned John absently. 'This is the best time of the day for a stroll,—down here, at least. We must come again, Agnes.'

'I should like to. How peaceful it is!' Agnes answered, feasting her eyes on the green breadth of the links and the silvery tide beyond. 'Shall we make a morning call on the Thorburns? Miss Grace's propriety would be shocked. I believe she would not think it proper for us to be down here at this time in the morning.'

'I don't think she would call it outrageous; but we'd better leave her to her peaceful slumbers,' answered John. 'It's a very high tide this morning. I like the look of it. It's a picture, Nannie. Don't you think so?'

'I do. Let us wait here just a minute or so, and not speak.' She sat down on the low wooden railing separating the links from the beach; and John stood by her, looking sometimes at her and sometimes away across the gleaming Firth, which was beginning to glitter in the first beams of the sun and to feel the stinging of the morning wind. A few fishing boats were putting out to sea, their brown sails filling lazily with the wind.

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The calm and peace of the whole scene was indescribably soothing.

'What are you thinking, Agnes?' John asked at length, somewhat awe-stricken by the rapt expression of his companion's face.

'I cannot tell you, John,' she said, with a sudden start; 'I think I was nearer heaven than earth. I felt almost as if mamma were standing by my side.'

She had entirely forgotten him then, though his heart was throbbing for her; his eyes filled with the love his lips dared not utter. But, when he did not speak, she turned her head slowly and looked up at him; then her colour sprang up, and she said, quite hurriedly for her, who was so serene and unruffled always in deed and word,—

'Let us go home. Surely we have stayed too long?'

John said nothing just then, and on the way home they tried to talk of common things in a common way; but each knew that the veil had been drawn aside, and the sanctuary of the heart revealed,—for weal or woe, who could tell?



CHAPTER XII.

'I feel these years
Have done sad office for me.'

EFFIE, as dainty as a rosebud, met them at the garden gate with gay banter, which Agnes, in her strange, new-found maidenly confusion, found hard to bear.

'Ten minutes past eight, you truants, and father has had his porridge; and I say, Nannie, there's a message from Hallcross. Aunt Leesbeth wants you over just this very minute. Did you ever know such a ridiculous old woman?' Between Effie and Miss Leesbeth there was small sympathy; Agnes was the favourite at Hallcross.

'I hope she is not worse,' Agnes said quickly, glad of something to divert her attention, and that of others, from herself.

'Oh, very likely; but I don't know. Mother got the message,' answered Effie flippantly.

'Oh, John, you sly old fellow, to entice Nannie away. Did you make it all up last night?'

'No; it was purely accidental,' John assured her, with so much unnecessary vehemence that Effie laughed merrily, and repeated after him, with provoking mimicry, 'Purely accidental!'

Agnes hurried on before them, and met Mrs. Maitland just within the hall door. 'Good-morning, Aunt Maggie. Anything wrong at Hallcross, that Miss Leesbeth has sent for me?'

'I think she feels not so well, perhaps; but we are too much used to Aunt Leesbeth's vagaries to be alarmed, my dear. Come in and have a good breakfast before you go. I'm sure you need it after your long walk,' returned Mrs. Maitland; and

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Agnes was so perfectly conscious of the scrutiny of her aunt's eyes that her face flushed again, and she ran upstairs to her own room and shut the door, and somehow in a moment found herself in tears. And why tears, dear heart? for the knowledge which had come to her that spring morning by the sea, the knowledge that she was the dearest to one true honest manly heart, could bring nothing to her but the deepest happiness earth can give. But she dared not linger to brood over the sweetness in her heart. Each moment made capital for Effie, the incorrigible, to turn to her own account. So, with a hurried dip of hands and face in cold spring water, she ran down and entered the dining-room her own composed, cheerful self. John was glad to see her so serene; it gave him courage to 'sit upon' Effie, as that young lady forcibly expressed it; and so it came to pass that not for many months had there been such a noisy, hearty, happy meal as that breakfast at Laurieston. Maitland sat longer than his wont; and though he did not speak much, his wife loved to see the soft light in his eye, and the pleasant curve about his grave, stern mouth, as he listened to the bairns' happy chatter. They remembered after, that he had not once reproved them, and had even, at some unusually brilliant sally of Effie's, burst out into a loud, deep laugh which made them stare, and then join in with all their might and main.

'Aren't they a happy crew, father?' Mrs. Maitland asked, as she went with him to the door.

'They are that, Maggie. I hope they are a ower licht in their behaviour; but the're young—they're young.'

She saw that his heart was in sympathy with their harmless mirth, though the conscience he had lashed into merciless and unrelenting sharpness was pricking him too.

'Oh, Michael, my man; God made all young things to rejoice. Just look at the lambs and the calves, and the very kitten there on the green chasing its tail for pure nonsense. I believe He listened to the bairns' happy nonsense this morning with as much joy as we did,' she said, laying her hand on his arm with that dear touch which would enforce her words.

'It's a pleasant doctrine, Maggie; but a' the ways o' the Ill

Ane are pleasant and to be guarded against. I wish I saw the bairns awaukin' to a sense o' their terrible responsibilities, an' to the burden o' black guilt that rests upon their souls. I canna laugh an' be merry, Maggie, when I think they'll maybe a' be castaways.'

Margaret Maitland shivered and turned away. There were times when her husband's spoken words repelled her, and made her even feel that she could not love him.

As she crossed the hall she saw through the half-open dining-room door a picture which brought a faint smile to her lips. The bairns were grouped about the fire, Michael in his father's easy-chair, and Effie on his knee, with her arm round his neck and her red cheek against his. Agnes kneeling on the hearthrug, looking up at John, who stood leaning against the mantelshelf, with his hands in his pockets and a pleasant smile on his lips. Willie and Wat had their heads together over a farm journal containing some woodcuts of famous hunting horses. Yes, it was a picture, a picture glorified by the love which had been fostered and perfected by that happy home-life. Castaways! these happy, innocent bairns, whose thoughts were as pure as the rays of the morning sun! 'God forbid!' said Margaret Maitland in her heart; 'God forbid.'

'I say, mother, is there any need for Nannie to fly over to Halleross this very minute?' cried Effie over Michael's shoulder, as she heard her mother's foot at the door.

'I think she had better go in a little, dear; she need not stay long.'

'It's a shame, just when we were planning a real jolly day,' cried Effie; 'a long walk, mother, along the sea road to Prestonpans, up by Preston Tower, and home by Fawside.'

'A good walk, bairn. But when does Mr. Robertson come?' Mrs. Maitland asked, looking at John.

'He was to start at nine. It's time Mike and I were off to meet him. Will you give us an early dinner, mother, so that we need not hurry home to tea?'

'Yes, my son,—twelve o'clock; well, if that's to be the way of it, up you get, Effie, and clear away the breakfast things, and then help Katie with the beds. Agnes, dear, I think you had

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better go over to Hallcross now, so as to be back before dinner. Willie, what are you to be after this morning ?'

'Oh, I'll go round the fields with Wat, Aunt Maggie; I'm never in want of occupation,' answered Willie readily. So the bairns scattered, and Agnes made haste over to Hallcross. The big gate was always locked, and, rather than wait for Gracie to open it, she ran down the lane to the door in the garden wall, a key of which she had in her pocket. There were green young shoots already all over Hallcross garden, and at the roots of the box hedges the snowdrops grew thick and white, with here and there a yellow bud, telling where the early primroses were awaking to life. It was in fine, trim order, not a weed on the smooth walks; and the lawn had a greenness on it which amazed Agnes, for the frost had not long gone. There were even some yellow stars on the jessamine climbing about the dining-room window, giving ground for Miss Leesbeth's boast that she had bloom at Hallcross all the year round. Agnes peered in at the low window as she passed by, but the room was empty, and there was no fire in the grate. The door stood wide open, and Agnes, without knocking, softly opened the glass door and stole into the dim, silent house. It was more still than usual, she thought, that February day. She hung her hat on the stand, laid down her wrap and gloves, and went directly up the narrow, winding, old-fashioned stair. Miss Leesbeth's well-preserved carpet was so thickly padded that even a heavy foot gave forth no sound. The light footfall of Agnes did not break the stillness at all, and she was glad, before she reached the drawing-room landing, to hear the shutting of a door, and Kaitrine's steps coming along the narrow corridor from Miss Leesbeth's room.

'Oh, ye've come!' said that worthy, in a loud whisper. 'She's waur, though she's up,—the thrawn body. I believe she'll no' even lie still to dee.'

Kaitrine spoke with even more than her usual gruffness; but Agnes saw that her eyes were wet with tears, wrung from a sore, silent heart.

'Oh, I am so sorry. Do you think her much worse, Kaitrine?' It was pretty to hear Agnes' soft tongue utter the quaint Scotch names,—nobody could pronounce them like her.

Kaitrine nodded. 'Ay, she's far through; but she'll no' let me send again for Dr. Moir. She daured him to come back a fortnicht syne. I'm glad ye've come. She's aye spierin' for ye. Try an' get her to be reasonable. She's gane clean beyont me.'

Agnes nodded and passed on. Opening softly the door of Miss Leesbeth's room, she stole in and over to the old lady's side before she was aware of her approach. Although very weak and spent, she had insisted on being lifted from her bed and placed on the couch, which stood in the warm corner of the large and pleasant room. She was lying still, with her eyes shut, absolutely exhausted, indeed, with the exertion of rising from her bed. Seeing this, Agnes sat down quietly by the fire, and, folding her hands, looked at the pale, worn, placid face of the old woman, who was so evidently nearing the confines of the other world.

A curious stillness seemed to pervade the room, and it so impressed Agnes that she felt afraid almost to breathe. On the dressing-table Miss Leesbeth's big gold watch ticked loudly, and occasionally a cinder fell upon the hearth; Agnes fancied she could even hear her own heart beat. Presently, and without stirring, Miss Leesbeth opened her bright, restless eyes, and fixed them directly on the girl's face. 'Oh, ye are there? I never heard ye come in; I suppose I was sleepin'. Hoo are they a' at Laurieston the day?'

'All well, Aunt Leesbeth.' Agnes rose and took a seat on the end of the invalid's couch.

'That's weel. I took a fancy to hae ye ower the day. Can ye bide a' day?'

'If you want me, Aunt Leesbeth.'

'If I didna, I wadna ask ye. Are the laddies a' oot?'

'Yes,' Agnes answered; and, try as she would, she could not keep back the tell-tale flush from her cheek. Miss Leesbeth noted it instantly; there was very little, indeed, escaped her keen vision.

'I've a heap o' things to speak aboot the day, Agnes Laurie, so ye needna be in a hurry. Ye saw Kaitrine doon the stair. What did she say aboot me?'

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'Poor Kaitrine! she seemed very vexed like.'

'Vexed! Humph, no' her! She'll hae me in my grave, thrawin' wi' me. She's been ower lang here, Agnes. She's a guid friend, but an ill maister. She wad keep me in my bed for ever. I'll no' be lang in my bed or anywhere else, I'm thinkin'. I've been makin' my wull ower aguin, Agnes; ye ken we are bidden set oor hoose in order?'

Agnes did not answer. She really loved Aunt Leesbeth, and she could not in a moment command her feelings sufficiently to speak.

'I've made my wull, Agnes; and it's a just wull. I've left my means to them that'll need them maist. I see what's in yer heart, bairn. Eh, ye've a fell love for this auld place! But I'll no' tell ye wha's to get it. It's ane that'll mak' guid use o't, an' hae a respect for the bits o' sticks in't for the sake o' them that's awa'.'

'Oh, Aunt Leesbeth, ye may get better yet. Let me go for the doctor to-day. Kaitrine says he has not been here for a fortnight.'

'No, I'll no' let ye gang for the doctor,' said Miss Leesbeth quite snappishly. 'Dauvit Moir may be thinks he kens a'thing because his sangs mak' folk's very hearts sair; but he'll no' keep me in my bed when I want to get up. Eh, lassie, hae ye seen his verses on puir wee Casa Wappy? They'll live, Agnes, after the doctor lies in Inveresk. He said them ower to me, an' I was greetin'. I mind nane o' it but four lines; but I believe they're the best:

"There chance and change are not; the soul
Quaffs bliss as from a sea,
And years through endless ages roll,
From sin and sorrow free."

If that be a true picture o' the land we're gaun to, we might a' be fain to see't. Ay, an' the laddies are a' oot? How are the students gettin' on?'

'Very well, I think, Aunt Leesbeth. Michael is sure to get honours, John says.'

'An' what about Jock hissel'? I hope he'll dae weel, puir lad, for his ain sake, an' to set him up in his faither's een. He's

the flower o' the Laurieston flock, that's what I think, though his faither thinks him the black sheep,' said the old lady, with delightful energy; then, with a sudden twinkle in her bright eye, she turned swiftly to Agnes: 'D'ye no' think sae? Ye'll no' cast cot wi' me, my lassie, aboot that.'

Agnes drooped her head, blushing as red as a rose in June. Then Aunt Leesbeth stretched out her kind old hand, and patted the girl's fingers with a caress which told that her heart was fresh and green, though she had left her own bright youth so far behind.



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CHAPTER XIII.

'Oh, I'm fain to be at rest,
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AGNES got a piece of work from Miss Leesbeth's basket, and sat by the old lady's side all forenoon. They did not talk much, for Miss Leesbeth was evidently exhausted. She lay for the most part with her eyes shut,—so motionless that more than once the girl paused in her work and looked at her fearfully.

'Dinna fash yoursel', my lamb,' Miss Leesbeth said gently, opening her eyes once and meeting the girl's anxious gaze; 'I'm aye leevin'. Eh, lassie, but ye are like your mither! When I see you, wi' your gowden head bent down like that, I just think I see Ellen Rankine afore me. But ye hae mair spunk. Nae man will trample on you, Agnes Laurie; I ken that. What's that Kaitrine aboot? She's ta'en the huff, I believe, because I like your company better than hers. She's a guid cratur, Aggie; but eh, she makes a noise in a room! Her very goon, sweepin' the flure an' the chair-legs, pits me aside mysel'. Whaur did you learn to be sae genty?'

'Mamma used to say that a woman's presence should be silently felt, Aunt Leesbeth. She taught me to move quietly, and do everything without noise.'

'It's a priceless gift, Aggie, as ye'll may be learn some day when ye have to bide in your bed. If ye wad like me to see the doctor again, you can rin doon Newbiggin' and bid him come up. Its near twelve, isn't it?'

'Yes, Aunt Leesbeth. I'll just run at once, though I had only a shawl about me to come over from Laurieston.'

'A bonnie face sets a'thing, an' naeboddy ever thinks what ye have on, my bairn. I tell Effie, if she thocht less aboot her claes, folk wad think mair o' her. She's a perfect peacock!'

'No, no. It is natural for Effie to like bright, pretty things; she is so bright and pretty herself,' said Agnes loyally. 'If the doctor isn't in, then, I'll leave a message for him to come whenever he returns.' Miss Leesbeth nodded, and Agnes stole out of the room. She met Kaitrine on the stairs, bringing up the invalid's beef-tea, and was glad to tell her Miss Leesbeth had given her permission to take a message to the doctor. After drinking her light nourishment, Miss Leesbeth turned her face round and fell asleep. Not many minutes after Agnes was gone, another visitor came to Hallcross,—young John Maitland, in a great hurry, to see what was keeping Agnes so long. His deep voice speaking to Gracie in the hall awoke Miss Leesbeth, and she rang her bell.

'That's John Maitland, Kaitrine. Bid him come up; I want to speak till him.'

So John was ushered up to the old lady's room; and when he entered it he was greatly shocked to see the change. Agnes and Michael and he had taken tea with her the previous Sunday afternoon, when she seemed as lively and well as she had been for years.

'Ye are lookin', lad,' she said, with a somewhat sad smile. 'I'm slippin' awa'. Sit doon! Agnes gaed doon to the doctor's for me. I see ye're e'en seekin' her. She'll no' be lang. Sit doon!'

'They're waiting dinner, Aunt Leesbeth. I'm very sorry to see you so poorly.'

'I'm no' sair vexed mysel', lad. I've bidden in a tumble-doon biggin' a guid while noo, and I'm fain to change it for the mansion yonder,' she said, looking at him with a curious, bright, steadfast expression, which made him wonder. He found no words just then to reply.

'Sit doon, sit doon; let them wait: Agnes'll no' be lang. Eh, lad, I see ye canna thole her lang oot o' your sicht!'

'That's true, Aunt Leesbeth,' John answered quite quietly.

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It never occurred to him to contradict her. He did not care though the whole world knew what he felt for Agnes.

'Weel, she's a dear lassie. Sit still, man, an' let me speak. This is a fine chance. I hae some things to settle wi' you anyway. I've been settin' my hoose in order, John, an' I hae some questions to ask you.' She raised herself a little, and fixed her keen, bright eyes on his face, while, with a little nervous gesture, she pushed her white hair back from her brow.

'I'll answer them as best I can, Aunt Leesbeth,' John replied simply.

'Weel, what are ye daein' at the College, lad?'

'I'm learning as much as I can. Michael and I both hope to take our degree this summer.'

'That's the M.A. degree, I suppose, though I dinna ken what it's guid for. Then Michael enters the Hall, I suppose? What are ye gaun to do?'

'I hardly know myself, Aunt Leesbeth. I shall have to teach, I suppose, to earn money to let me prosecute my studies in philosophy and metaphysics.'

'I dinna ken what these lang-nebbit words mean,' she said, with a little laugh. 'But I wad like to ken what ye want to be.'

'I can't just say what I want to be. If I succeed, I may end when I am old by being a professor of philosophy, Aunt Leesbeth,' John said, with a smile.

'An' so ye are gaun to grub along in Edinburgh, teaching for a livin', lad. Weel, ye are content to climb slowly; an' that's a guid sign. Is there a quicker road up?'

'Oh yes; if I were a rich man, for instance, I should go to Germany and study all the schools of thought. It's the home of philosophy, you know. I should gain knowledge quicker there, and so qualify myself for a post of some kind.'

'An' syne mairy Agnes?' said the old lady, with a little laugh. John flushed all over, and hastily rose to hide his confusion. Although he knew that was the hidden hope of his heart, it gave him a shock to hear another speak of it so calmly.

'That gars ye loup; but ye need think nae shame. Sit doon again, lad, or I speak mair to ye. Is't true you an' your faither dinna agree?' John's honest face clouded, and yet it

was a relief to speak to one who was outside the family circle altogether.

'Yes, it's true, Aunt Leesbeth; I try to get on with him, but I can't. He's awfully hard on us, and about everything. But it's his religion I can't stand. It—it has driven me to seek truth for myself, and I've landed myself in a sea of doubt, which is torment.'

The young man's breast heaved, his strong lips trembled. Miss Leesbeth saw the very hands shake as they were clasped before his face. She said nothing for a moment, but in that brief silence a prayer was said.

'Aunt Leesbeth, if it is true you are nearly done with life, tell me what you think of it all. What do you feel at the prospect of the change?'

'Feel, laddie! just as I suppose you felt when you got into the train last nicht to come hame; ye kent the hame was there, an' that your mither's welcome wadna fail. That's what the Lord has learned me through a long and weary life; blessed be His name.'

John's big, earnest eyes, glowing like two lamps, were fixed upon her as if they would read her very soul.

'I wish—I wish I could believe; I want to believe, but I can't. The critical, questioning mania has got a hold of me, and I know not where it will end.'

'Oh, fecht on; fecht it oot manfully, and dinna lose heart,' said the old woman cheerily. 'Efter ye see't, lad, and ken what the Saviour did for ye, ye'll hae a grip o' Him naething on earth will loose. I've never been a doubter mysel', but I'm no' ane that blames Thomas a'thegither. He was an honest chiel'; an' I believe, laddie, that the Lord has as muckle sympathy wi' the doubters noo as He had then. Haud at Him, John, my man, an' He'll show ye the print o' the nails, and syne ye'll cry, as Thomas did, "My Lord, and my God!"'

She spoke passionately, and with a glow of light upon her face which filled John Maitland with awe. To be so near one whose life trembled in the balance, and who could yet give forth such brave testimony, made him feel as if he stood on holy ground.

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'I bother mysel' about naething, John ; because I believe God has a purpose in a' the experiences we hae to pass through. Mind, I dinna believe, wi' your faither, that He has elected some to everlastin' life an' some to damnation. The very heathen couldna tak' that in.'

'That's it, Aunt Leesbeth. We have been taught at home that the millions of heathen, who had never heard of a Christ, are eternally lost. How could any sane man, with a sense of right or justice in his soul, reverence or love a Being who could do anything so monstrous? I'd rather worship matter than such a mind, any day.'

'The heathen are in God's hands, an' we may leave them there,' said Aunt Leesbeth dryly.

'Ay ; but that's what I can't do. I'm different from you, Aunt Leesbeth : I have none of that boundless faith which blindly trusts. I must *know*, as far as it can be known.'

'Ye wad trust Agnes, though,—ay, against a' the world,' said Miss Leesbeth suddenly. John held his peace a moment, rebuked to the heart. 'But ye canna trust the God that made Agnes,' continued Miss Leesbeth shrewdly.

'But she's here, Aunt Leesbeth,' said John hoarsely ; 'I can see her and touch her. It's this dreadful uncertainty that ruins me. There is too much required at the hands of faith.'

'I'm a puir ignorant auld wife, John, an' I canna argue ; but I ken that faith is the very backbone o' the world in temporal things as weel as spiritual,' said Miss Leesbeth, in a lower voice, for her slight strength was exhausted already.

'I think the time has come for us to have a new revelation, Aunt Leesbeth,' said John, speaking with more candour than he had ever done to a living soul.

'Is't a sign ye want, like the puir, ill-conditioned Pharisees? Ye mind what the Maister said to them : "There shall no sign be given unto this generation." If I could, John, I wad come back an' tell ye efter I'm awa. Promise me ae thing, lad : that ye'll no fash Agnes wi' your unbelief. When a lassie loves, she's easily influenced. I'd rather see her in her grave than your wife, John Maitland, dearly as I love ye baith, if the price was to be her soul's peril.

Be what ye like to her, but leave her that sweet faith which is the sunshine o' the bairn's life. Promise me that, John Maitland, afore the God that made ye, and wha's servant ye'll be some day, though the noo ye canna see His face.'

'I promise, Aunt Leesbeth,' John answered quietly, but with an earnest look which went to the dying woman's soul. She stretched out her pale frail hands to him, and he, taking them in his firm young clasp, set his lips upon them in seal of his vow.

'Laddie, I'm wae for ye, but no' hopeless,' she said, with a sweet pathetic smile. 'Ye hae opened your heart to me, an' I love ye as I never loved ye yet. Ye'll be a giant in the Lord's service yet, because your soul will be bound to Him by the ties of these agonies. God bless you, John Maitland, and your Agnes, for ever and ever.'

There were tears in the eyes of both; then, with a feeble motion for him to be seated, Miss Leesbeth began to speak again, with some slight difficulty, her strength being far spent.

'No, dinna ring yet; I've just a word mair to say. I bocht Halleross, John, because I saw weel enough Agnes wad never see her mother's portion if her father had it in his hands. It's hers noo, and he canna touch it unless she gies it till him, an' you'll see that *that* disna happen. It'll be a roof-tree for you an' Agnes an' your bairns to come to when ye are married, wi' your students in the toon,—that is, efter ye *are* a professor;' and the faint bright smile flushed her face again. 'An' the money—that is, efter Kaitrine's provided for—is yours, John. There'll be twa thoosand pounds, I daresay. It'll may be gie ye the German trip; ony way, it'll keep ye frae eatin' grudged meat at Laurieston, for I ken your faither thinks ye a wastrel. An' fecht you on, as I said. He'll show ye the nail prints ae day, may be when ye least expect it.'

The last words were uttered in a voiceless whisper; John was conscious of a strange change which came upon her face, he felt the relaxing touch of the frail hands he held, and the next moment knew that he stood in the majestic presence of the Angel of Death



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CHAPTER XIV.

'The day goeth down red darkling !
The morning waves dash out the light.'

UPON the Tuesday afternoon Miss Leesbeth was carried to her rest in the old kirkyard of Inveresk, and laid down beside her kinsfolk, the Betheridges, whose burying-place was close by that pertaining to the Maitlands of Laurieston. It was a sweet, quiet corner, on the brow of the little hillock overlooking the sea, and westward the Lion's Face on Arthur Seat and the hazy roof-tops of old Edinburgh. And so another link was forged to bind Laurieston hearts to that little God's acre ; for they knew, now that she was gone, how true a friend Miss Leesbeth had been to them all.

The young men came out from the city in time for the funeral, returning immediately after tea. It was the busiest part of the University session. John was very quiet that day ; he scarcely opened his lips in the house. The mystery of life and death was with him ; the 'sair battle,' of which Miss Leesbeth had so hopefully spoken, was still waging in his heart. The long mental strain was beginning to tell even on John's strong frame ; and as he stood by the open grave that cold, raw February day, he looked worn and weary, his heavy eyes betraying something of the spirit-anguish he endured. After the early tea John and Michael returned to town, Willie Laurie remaining all night at Laurieston. He was not at all affected by the solemn event which had taken place almost in their midst : he rather horrified Effie by saying he 'saw no

need for making such a fuss over an old woman.' Effie was very tolerant as a rule with Willie Laurie's curiosities of speech, and could listen to his feeble and often vulgar witticisms with a smile. She could forgive much because of the winning smile and caressing way which of late Willie had shown towards her, especially when they were alone. After the students left, in the gloaming Willie coaxed her out for a stroll by the river-side; so Agnes was left to keep Mrs. Maitland company in the house, while Wat and his father saw that everything was right about the steading for the night. The breath of spring had received an icy touch from a northerly wind, and the two women sitting in the dining-room were glad to creep close to the glowing fire, which made the pleasant family room seem very cheerful and inviting, contrasted with the 'snell' look of everything outside. The rose branches, which the early spring had surprised into bud, were tapping mournfully on the panes, and the wind was moaning through the trees; once or twice Agnes shivered, without knowing why. She was not fanciful, or given to anticipating trouble; but something more than the sorrow which had fallen upon their happy circle weighed upon her heart. They had been talking a little about Miss Leesbeth, talking with that tender, reverent regret which death has made his own attribute; but a silence fell on them at length, and Margaret Maitland, leaning back in her chair, closed her eyes and let her truant thoughts wander to the land of long ago.

They were disturbed presently by the loud ringing of a bell. This unusual sound, breaking in so suddenly upon the almost oppressive stillness of the house, caused both to start in surprise, which had a touch of alarm in it. They heard Katie's quick feet in the hall, the opening of the door, and then a man's voice. Agnes sprang up, her face blanching, her limbs trembling so violently that she could scarcely sustain her weight.

'Oh, Aunt Maggie, that is papa's voice!'

Then the dining-room door was thrown open, Katie said, 'A gentleman for Miss Agnes,' and William Laurie the elder stood in the room. It was a curious picture: the pleasant home-like room, lit by the ruddy fire-glow; the two women, who had both risen, surprise, which was certainly consternation too,

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expressed on their faces; and the tall, stout, over-dressed, but handsome man, who stood regarding them with a curious smile, as if rather enjoying the effect of his unexpected arrival.

'Is this my daughter?' he asked, fixing his restless eyes on the white face of Agnes. 'By Jove! ain't she's grown a stunner! Haven't you a kiss for me, Agnes? Well, Maggie,' he said, turning familiarly to Mrs. Maitland, 'not a word for an old admirer? I say, years and matrimony have made precious little havoc with you,—you look as young as ever. How do you do?'

In a moment Mrs. Maitland recovered herself, and, in pity for Agnes, who was still looking at her father with eyes dilated, she advanced with extended hand and bade him a courteous welcome to Laurieston. It was long before she forgot that look on the face of Agnes. She had never seen anything more expressive of absolute terror. It gave her, as nothing else could have done, some idea of the life Ellen Rankine must have led with Will Laurie.

'How do you do, Mr. Laurie? Have you just come from London?' she said courteously, but with coldness, which he was quick to note.

'It used to be Will long ago, Maggie,' he said reproachfully; and the proud, indignant colour flushed all over Margaret Maitland's face.

'We were both young then, Mr. Laurie. I am an old woman now, and there is a certain respect due to age,' she said coldly. 'But what of your journey?'

'Oh, I came down by the night-mail; heard in town you were to be eating funeral baked-meats to-day, and so postponed my arrival,' he said carelessly; then his somewhat uncertain glance lighted again on his daughter's sweet face with renewed interest and approval. 'So this is my girl? I'm much obliged to you for taking such care of her, Mrs. Maitland,' he added, with due emphasis on the 'Mistress.' 'She does you credit. Come and kiss your old dad, and say you're glad to see him.'

'But I'm not,' Agnes answered, in a strange, quavering voice. Margaret Maitland looked at her with amazement, wondering

that she had the courage to be so absolutely true. 'What have you come for, father?'

'Oh, indeed! so you're not glad at all?' he said sneeringly. 'Well, you're honest with it. Well, I've come for you, my girl; so you'll need to pack up your rags, and be ready to start in the morning. Where's the boy?'

'Agnes dear,' said Mrs. Maitland, with pitying thoughtfulness, 'I think you had better go upstairs for a little. I will see that your father has some refreshment, and you will be better able to talk with him after. Go, my dear, at once to my room, and I will come to you by and by.'

It was a timely suggestion. The shock to the girl's sensitive heart had been so great, that Margaret Maitland feared an outburst of some kind. She preferred that William Laurie should not be a witness to his daughter's weakness.

Agnes almost fled from the room, keeping her eyes averted from her father's face as if the sight of it were painful to her. Mrs. Maitland closed the door, and faced William Laurie, looking at him with cold, calm scrutiny, which made him slightly wince. He was a coward at heart, and though he had nerved himself with brandy for the rôle he had to play, his false courage could not stand before the clear, contemptuous overlooking of Margaret Maitland's eyes.

'Confound it, Maggie! what's all the fuss about?' he said, shifting uneasily from one foot to another. 'If I'd known you'd teach the kids to hate their own father, I'd have thrown cold water on Ellen's little scheme for getting rid of them.'

'I have never mentioned your name to the children since they came, William Laurie,' she answered quietly; 'any feeling which they have for you now is what memory has left them. You best know what these childish memories are.'

'Well, I'm not going to carry on heroics with you; I've come to relieve you of the kids. Agnes can be ready to-morrow morning. I'll go down to the "Arms" and stay all night; there used to be good accommodation there for man and beast.'

'It may not be agreeable for the children to go with you, Mr. Laurie, nor—nor,' she added firmly, 'for Mr. Maitland and me to allow them.'

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'That's a farce,' laughed Will Laurie rudely; 'they're under age, Maggie, and I'm their lawful guardian. You can't prevent them.'

'As you have left them unprovided for almost since their mother died, the law may have something to say to you on that head,' said Margaret Maitland, speaking more sharply than she had ever spoken in her life. 'But I will leave you just now; you are my guest, and I will see to your comfort. Michael will be in presently; you can settle it with him. Perhaps you will remember he is not one accustomed to mince matters, especially when it is a question of right or wrong.' So saying, Margaret Maitland retired from the room. She was greatly agitated, but did not wish to appear so before William Laurie. She stood a moment in the darkened hall with her hand to her heart, then, after one glance upstairs, she opened the kitchen door.

'Have you seen the master, Katie?' she asked quietly.

'He is speakin' to Tam, ma'am, at the stable door,' Katie answered.

Mrs. Maitland went out to the kitchen porch and beckoned to her husband, then went half across the stable-yard to meet him, and took him by the arm. There came a sense of unspeakable rest to her as she looked upon his powerful form, and grave, trustworthy face. She thanked God again that she was Michael Maitland's wife.

'Michael,' she said, in a short, quick gasp, 'William Laurie nas come. He is in the dining-room. He says he has come to take the bairns away. Let us walk round by the garden a minute, father. He has agitated me very much.'

Michael Maitland had seen that at one glance, even before he felt the trembling of his wife at his side.

'Never mind him, Maggie. He spoke nae ill words to you, I hope, or I'll hae something stronger than words for him.'

'I cannot tell you what he said. He is very strange and rude. He frightened poor Nannie away. I fear he has drink, father.'

'An' he wants the bairns, does he?'

'Yes; he says Agnes must be ready to go with him to-morrow mornin'. He says she is under age, and he can compel her to go.'

'That's perfect nonsense, Maggie; nae bairn, efter she is

twelve years of age, can be forced to live wi' anybody,—they are left free to choose. Dinna be so puttin' aboot, wife. It's no' like you.'

'It was a shock. Oh, Michael, I—I am so thankful to God that I am your wife.' She laid her face on his breast, and Maitland put his strong arm about her, stirred to the heart by her emotion.

'Ay, ay, wheesht noo, Maggie. It's a' richt,' he said, with a rough tenderness beautiful to see in the man of few words and fewer caresses. 'Come in, an' slip quietly up the stair. I'll settle wi' Will Laurie in the "wee room."'

Margaret Maitland was glad to leave the entire responsibility with her husband; and when they entered the house she went upstairs to her own room at once, only to find it empty. She crossed the landing then to the room occupied by Agnes and Effie, but no one was there. She called Agnes softly by name at the foot of the attic stair; but when there was no reply, she went quietly back to her own room and sat down to wait. She guessed that Agnes had gone to fight her battle outside.

Maitland hung up his hat and marched straight into the dining-room, the door of which he locked behind him. Katie had spread the cloth in readiness for supper, and lighted the lamp on the table. William Laurie had seated himself in the master's chair, and looked round with an easy smile when the door opened.

'Hulloa, Maitland!' he said, stretching out his hand in a familiar, easy way. 'How do?'

'Ye've come for the bairns, Will Laurie, my wife tells me,' returned Maitland, without noticing the off-hand greeting. 'We'll better settle this business without delay. What d'ye want the bairns for noo?'

'Because I'm tired of my lonely life, Maitland. It's my girl I want. Hang it, man, is a fellow to bring children into the world and get no good of them? If she had been taught her duty, she would have known where her place was long ago.'

'There's aulder folk that ken less aboot their duty than her,' said Maitland dryly, though his anger was kindled against the selfish, unnatural wretch before him. 'I suppose ye

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'I only heard it to-day,' said Will Laurie, not ruffled by the cutting sarcasm of Laurieston's words. He had had enough liquor to take the edge off his own evil temper, or a bitter quarrel between them must have ensued.

'Ye are aware, I suppose, that ye canna force them to gang wi' you?' said Laurieston calmly; 'the law allows them absolute choice.'

'No such thing; the kids are minors; I can control them till they are twenty-one. Scotch law can't control a man living in London.'

'Are ye no' aware that, as ye have contributed naething to their support for twa years back, but have left them dependent on me, ye hae forfeited a' claim on their duty or service?'

'Dependent on you, Michael Maitland!' sneered Will Laurie. I could bet my bottom dollar, as the Yankees say, that both the kids have earned their living here. You are not the man to give bite and sup for nothing. I knew you of yore, and so my conscience did not trouble me.'

Michael Maitland involuntarily clenched his hands. His face grew dark, the veins in his forehead became swollen, his fierce anger was hard to control; but because of his unspeakable contempt for the wicked man before him he would keep his self-control, and thus measure the insuperable distance between them. He could scarcely bear to look upon the reprobate sitting by his hearth, his very presence contaminating the air his wife and children had to breathe. There was not a spark of pity in his soul for the wreck of what had been a promising youth; his creed taught him nothing but merciless condemnation for the breaker of God's laws. Maitland was perfectly conscientious and righteous in his condemnation: he was but taking pattern from the God he feared but could not love.

'I have but few words to speak to you, William Laurie, for it demeans any man to converse wi' ye,' he said slowly. 'A' I have to say is, that Ellen's bairns shall not leave this house except of their own free will. Seek the law if ye like, it'll be

tee your ain hurt ; and you shall not leave this house this night or I get frae your hand some acknowledgment of what I have done for your bairns. I have my account made oot. It'll hae to be paid ; ye may make up your mind for that.'

'I came prepared, as I knew your greed,' said Will Laurie, with a laugh. 'Bring in your account and we'll square up.' He took a bulky pocket-book from his breast, and produced a thick roll of bank-notes and a cheque-book.

Michael Maitland stepped into the 'wee room,' and took a small account-book from his desk.

'It's twa hunder pound, at the rate o' fifty pound apiece for twa year,' he said when he returned ; 'it's that time since ye sent a penny afore. I've wipet oot the auld debt for the schoolin'. If ye look, ye'll find it a' correct.'

Will Laurie took the book carelessly, put up his eye-glass with unsteady hand, and ran his eye over the neatly-figured column—'To board for Agnes and William Laurie, at the rate of £1 a week.'

'All right ; pass me a pen and ink and I'll give you a cheque. It's exorbitant,—a perfect swindle, in fact ; but I knew what to expect. There you are.'

Michael Maitland took the cheque, examined it carefully, and placed it in his pocket-book.

'I'll send ye a receipt after I find oot whether it's genuine,' he said coolly ; but even that suspicion did not disturb Will Laurie's complacent equanimity. Then Laurieston unlocked the dining-room door and rang the bell, which Katie answered at once.

'Bid Miss Agnes and her brither come here, Kate.'

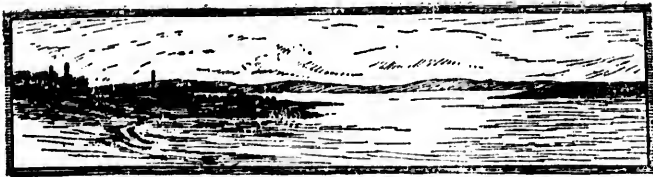
'Miss Agnes is oot, sir ; but I see Miss Effie an' Mr. Willie in the garden.'

'Bid him come in, then ; and ask the mistress to step doon the stairs.'

A curious scene was about to be enacted in the house of Laurieston.



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CHAPTER XV.

'But if, in thy narrow border
Many bitter herbs are set,
Use the bitter and the sweet
As thy med'cine and thy meat.'

WHEN Agnes Laurie was gently dismissed from the dining-room, she did not go upstairs. Catching up a shawl of her aunt's from the hall-stand, she opened the door and ran out into the night. It was quite dark,—a moonless, starless February night; the air made chill by the icy breath of the north-east wind. Agnes was not conscious of darkness or cold; a horror was upon her from which she was trying to flee. She wandered on in the darkness, keeping the shawl firmly about her with her stiff fingers, conscious of nothing but the desire to move on; her nerves were strung to the highest tension. The shock of her father's appearance, the object of his visit, his whole demeanour, had filled her with horror and fear. The dread of childhood had grown with the years, and it was harder to bear now because she understood it. Her moral nature shrank from the man who called her daughter, and he had come to take her away! The mad impulse which came to her as she fled from the house, was to put the breadth of miles between herself and him, and so settle the question of leaving Laurieston. But by and by, as she walked through the stillness of the night, and a calmer mood succeeded the chaos, the conviction was forced upon her that the question could not be so settled, but must have an answer given,—the answer not of inclination, but of duty. She found herself suddenly, in her restless walk, barred by the churchyard gates. The side-wicket

stood open, and she passed through it into the silent city of the dead. Her feet led her then, with unerring instinct, to the new-made grave which only a few hours ago had closed over her dear old friend. It was enclosed by a little railing, with stone pillars supporting it at each corner; upon one of these Agnes Laurie sat down, and, wrapping herself in the folds of the shawl, faced the ordeal which was indeed a crisis in her life. The touch of the kindly wool against her shivering frame was a comfort to her; it was Aunt Maggie's shawl, and seemed almost a part of her. Keen judge of human nature as she was, Agnes Laurie knew quite well that her father had come determined to take her away, and that he had some end in view. Remembering him of yore, she knew there was no use for her to combat that masterful will. It would be better for the dear ones at Laurieston that she should go quietly, and so spare them annoyance and shame. That was the very first thought which rose out of the chaos clearly before her mind. As she sat there in the dark stillness, with only the dead about her, another thought, which had long lain dormant in her heart, rose up strong, and clear, and unanswerable. It was self-reproach. Something whispered to her that she had loved the sweet ease and peace of Laurieston so well, that the sterner voice of duty had been stilled. She had forgotten that there was a duty she owed to her father; she had encouraged herself, any time when she had allowed her mind to dwell upon the relationship, to believe that, because he had failed in his paternal care, the responsibility was thus lifted from her. It was brought sharply home to her, that while she was living in a blessed home where only love abounded, her father was drifting further and further from good. She saw the change upon him, and, little though she knew the ways of the world, she could tell that his path of life was evil. Perhaps if she had gone to him in the desolation after her mother's death, when, if any softer elements remained in his heart, they would be uppermost, she might have rescued him and kept him in the better way. That was an hour of keen pain for Agnes Laurie; in the sensitiveness of her nature, the keenness of her conscience, she had no mercy upon herself. She moaned drearily, as she clasped her hands before her face, and rocked herself to and fro,

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unable to be still. She magnified what she had done, till to her distorted imagination it seemed to her that she had wronged her father beyond forgiveness, and whatever he had been, or was, her place should have been at his side. Oh, how little she had profited by the example of a saintly mother, and by the lessons taught her by the sweet mistress of Laurieston! The lesson of both lives was that the work of women upon the earth was the ministry of love and peace to the righteous and the erring alike. And she, who had set up in her own heart so divine an estimate of womanhood, had fallen so miserably short, that she had failed in what ought to have been the very first duty of her life! She slipped from her seat, and, stepping within the enclosure, knelt on the mound of the new-made grave, and prayed for forgiveness first, then for the strength and courage she would need for the sacrifice to-morrow would demand. She dared not allow herself to dwell, even for a moment, on all that sacrifice involved. When she rose to her feet and uplifted her eyes to the quiet sky, the divine had kindled her heart with great thoughts and high resolves. She would be so much to her father, she told herself, that for love of her he would learn to love the upright life. She saw stretching before her a path of life, less lovely, perhaps, than that of which she had lately allowed herself to dream, but a path in which she might achieve great things for her own soul and the souls of others. She thanked God, looking up to His firmament where His stars of promise shone, that had taken the scales from her eyes, and shown to her the work He had appointed her to do. There was a beautiful and steadfast light upon her face as she turned away, which told of a heart at peace, resting on the wisdom and goodness of a Higher Power. She had not the slightest doubt but that this was God's leading,—that her soul, resting at ease, needed a new discipline,—and she was ready to go forth, to follow where the Master led. She stooped down, plucked a handful of snowdrops from the adjoining grave, and turned away. She would keep them as mementoes of that strong, hopeful hour. As she turned away she heard voices and footsteps approaching,—familiar womanly voices she recognised at once, even before she saw the two Miss Thorburns coming by the church.

'Mercy me, Grace Thorburn, who's that in front?' quoth Miss Jean, looking a little aghast. 'I hope it isn't Miss Leesbeth's ghost. It looks uncanny enough to be anything.'

'Well, you would come through here at this time of night,' said Miss Grace serenely. 'You can't expect but to see ghosts in the kirkyard after dark. It's their legitimate business to wander among the tombs. But they won't harm us.'

'It's waiting for us, any way, at the gate. Shall we fly back, Grace?'

'Not likely; come on. Why, bless me, it's Nannie Laurie; and she hasn't a hat on. She's a queer bairn.'

'Good evening, Miss Thorburn,' the quiet voice of Agnes rang out clear and pleasant in the stillness, rather to the relief of Miss Thorburn, who could laugh now, though her fear had been quite real.

'Lassie, what are you doing here? Aren't you afraid to be in such a place all alone?' she said as she shook hands.

'Oh no,' said Agnes, almost brightly; 'I am never afraid. There is nothing to harm any one here.'

'Well, we are not silly cowards, as a rule, or we would hardly come through the kirkyard after dark. We've been at the Manse, and this was the nearest way to Laurieston. I hope Mrs. Maitland will forgive us for looking in to-night, but we're collecting for a treat to the Wallyford and Deantown bairns, and we're sure to get something from her.'

Agnes was silent a moment, scarcely knowing how to act or what to say. The Thorburns were true friends and thorough gentlewomen, who, though they dearly loved a bit of kindly gossip, knew also when to hold their tongues. She decided in a moment to trust them. It was curious how having decided upon one course of action brought out her self-reliance all at once.

'I think you had better wait till to-morrow, Miss Thorburn,' she said, in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice. 'My father has come down unexpectedly from London, and I am going back with him to-morrow.'

Both ladies stood still and stared at the girl in speechless amazement.

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'To stay. My father wishes me to make a home for him now.'

'And what on earth do you suppose Laurieston will do without you? It'll go to ruins,' said Miss Grace.

'It was not in ruins when I came,' laughed Agnes.

'No, but' — John's name was on Miss Grace's lips, but she kept it back.

Miss Janet seemed too dumbfounded to speak.

'Oh, if that's the case, of course we can't go in,' she managed to say at length. 'Going to London to stay, Agnes Laurie! It'll be a loss to the whole parish. It's incredible; we can't let you go.'

'I must, though.'

'So you ran up to say good-bye to the old church? I understand.' Well, are we to say good-bye to you here?'

'Yes; I am so glad I met you.'

'Will you give me a kiss, Agnes, before you go?' asked Miss Jean, and her eyes were wet.

Agnes kissed them both, and ran away, for her heart was full. It was the beginning of the partings which would rend her heart-strings.

'There's something behind all this, Grace Thorburn,' said Miss Jean, in a shaking voice, as they turned down the brae into Newbigging. 'Mark my words, there's more behind this than we know.'

'Well, she's trusted us, and we can shut up the lying mouths of Musselburgh when they throw out their dark hints,' said Miss Grace, with strong feeling. 'We can say we knew all about it. But I must say it's most extraordinary.'

'It'll take away my sleep from me this night, any way, Grace Thorburn,' said Miss Jane. 'Mrs. Maitland will never do in the world without Agnes. That Effie's of no use but making herself look pretty.'

'Do you think they have known of it for any time?' asked Miss Grace musingly.

'No; didn't Agnes say he had come unexpectedly? I wonder what John will say to it. Anybody can see he adores her. Laurieston will not be the same place to him, poor fellow, when she's away,' said Miss Thorburn sympathetically. There was nothing in the world more interesting to her than a love-story.

'It'll do him good,' said Miss Grace. 'If she had stayed here, his courting would have been too easy. It is good for men to be taught they can't have everything their own way.'

Meanwhile Agnes had reached the gate of Laurieston, and stood upon the wide doorstep, her courage faltering for the first time.

The wind had fallen, and now made but a faint stirring among the tree branches; the sky had cleared also, and many stars were shining. Away down on the shore she could see the white line of the ebbing tide, and even fancied she could hear its voice. These waves had spoken in many tones to her,—soon she would see and hear them in memory alone; a few hours, and perhaps she would have only memory to live upon. A sobbing breath parted her lips; she bent forward, kissed the panels of the door, and then stepped within. She knew if she lingered there she would have no courage left to face what must be done. As she entered the hall she heard the sound of excited voices in the dining-room, and, laying her shawl on the table, she listened for one brief moment before she went in. She recognised her father's voice, and knew that he spoke in anger.

'They shall not go, as I said, from this house, except of their free will,' Maitland said loudly. 'Then, when Agnes comes in, she'll settle it. There's no use for any mair ill-words in this hoose. Ye hae got the lad's answer. Let him be.'

Agnes took a step across to the dining-room; but just then Effie, who from her mother's room had heard the din, came flying downstairs, with surprise and distress on her pretty face.

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'I cannot tell you just now, darling. They are waiting for me. You will know it all soon. No, you must not follow me yet.'

She put the girl gently from her, opened the dining-room door, and went in. Effie, standing in the hall, was perfectly conscious of the silence which immediately fell upon those in the room. When Agnes entered, her father was speaking ; but, arrested perhaps by the expression on her face, he paused in the middle of his sentence and looked at her, as did all the rest. Maitland was standing before the fire, facing William Laurie, who stood by the table, at which his son sat, with a sullen expression on his handsome face. He had just refused point-blank to return to London with his parent, and couched his refusal in language which, though true, and perhaps in a sense justifiable, Maitland had sharply rebuked. Mrs. Maitland, very pale and distressed-looking, stood against the sideboard, wishing the miserable interview would end. She did not see how it would end, not dreaming of the action Agnes would take, not having any idea that she would take action at all. Agnes had always seemed passive rather than decided, but circumstances had not as yet called the stronger qualities of her mind into play. She looked lovely as she entered the room, her face flushed with the intensity of her excitement, her eyes brilliant, and yet suffused with a peculiar tender softness. Speaking to John about it afterwards, Margaret Maitland said she looked like an angel sent on a message of God. She looked neither to right nor left, but walked up to her father and knelt down before him, all eyes upon her in dumbfounded amazement.

'Father,' she said, and her voice thrilled the listeners through and through, 'I ask you to forgive me : I have been hard and selfish ; I have not done my duty to you. God has shown me to-night what is the duty of a child to a parent. I will go with you to-morrow, and do my utmost to atone for the past.'

For a moment there was a strange silence. The girl's action was so totally unexpected, and made the whole matter appear

in so different a light, that it was no marvel not one present could find a voice. William Laurie, although perhaps the most surprised of all, recovered himself first, and looked round upon the rest in triumph.

‘That’s a good girl! I knew you would be sensible, if you were left alone. Rise up, and we’ll let bygones be bygones.’

Margaret Maitland burst into weeping, and hurried from the room; and when Laurieston himself turned his gaze from the sweet upturned face of Agnes, his eyes were wet with unwonted tears.



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CHAPTER XVI.

'When thou art far awa'
Thou'lt dearer grow to me!'

WILLIAM LAURIE slept that night at the 'Musselburgh Arms,' although, for the sake of Agnes, Mrs. Maitland proffered him the hospitality of Laurieston. He declined it, with a haughty dignity which was wholly amusing; his daughter's course of action gave him a fresh courage and a new position, though the motive for that action he could neither understand nor appreciate. The interview was not prolonged. In a few minutes he left the house, and Agnes remained to spend her last night among those she loved. After the excitement of that scene a strange constraint fell upon the little circle. Wat and Effie came in, and though both were burning to learn what was the meaning of the unusual commotion, nobody vouchsafed any explanation. Katie brought in the coffee, but eating and drinking was simply a pretence. Mrs. Maitland did not appear at the table. She came downstairs, however, when she heard the bell ring for worship. It was Katie who rang the bell; but when she and her neighbour entered the dining-room, they were bidden clear the table and go to bed, as there would be no reading.

'I'm not in a fit frame of mind, wife,' was all Laurieston said; and, taking his candle, he said a brief good-night all round, and went upstairs.

'Oh, mother, what does it all mean?' Effie cried. 'What awful thing has happened? Father must feel very bad not to have the reading.'

'Your father is sore vexed, as we may all be, Effie, seeing we are to lose Nannie to-morrow,' said Mrs. Maitland, in a low voice, and not daring to look at Agnes, who sat near the fire, very white and sad of face.

'Lose Nannie! Why, where is she going?'

'She will tell you herself, bairn. I can't speak about it,' said Margaret Maitland, with a sob, and followed her husband upstairs.

'Agnes looks as if she were possessed,' said Willie, a trifle impatiently. 'You never know where you have her. Here our precious governor comes flying down when he thinks fit, and wants to bundle us away with him on a moment's notice, without a word of explanation or apology. That won't suit me, and I told him so in plain language. I know which side my bread's buttered on. Some folk have queer ideas of duty. My duty is here.'

He glanced round the room, and finally at Effie. He was speaking to Agnes; but she seemed unconscious of it, her mind being wholly filled with what was to come. She rose presently and glided out of the room, without a word or a look at anybody. She had no intention to be unkind or indifferent,—she was not herself. That had been a trying evening for her.

'Michael, my man, I don't know when I was so put about,' said Margaret Maitland, when she entered her own room, and found her husband sitting there, with his open Bible before him. He shut the book at her entrance, with evident relief.

'I'm that put about mysel', Maggie, that I canna read the Word,' he said grimly. 'I kenna, I'm sure, what way the Almighty permits sic a reprobate as him to cumber the ground. What did Agnes mean by a' yon? The lassie's surely far left to hersel'. She was like a daft body.'

Margaret Maitland had feared this. She understood Agnes, but knew how difficult it would be for her to explain the position the girl had taken up. She believed herself that Agnes was the victim of a mistaken idea of duty,—that the sacrifice she was about to make was wholly uncalled for; yet she admired the noble spirit and the high courage with which she seemed imbued.

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'Agnes sees it to be her duty apparently to abide by her father, and to try and do him what good she can, Michael. It is not for us to put her past that duty. May be God has put it into her heart. Through Agnes He may mean His grace to reach even that hardened heart.'

Laurieston shook his head. 'He's a lost soul, Maggie; I hinna a doubt. I question if it is richt for us to let the bairn go with him. It'll may be be her ruin.'

'Her ruin! nay, father; the soul of our Agnes is as pure as heaven. She will take no hurt,' said Margaret Maitland, with a quick, strange smile. 'As I said, so I believe, she may be the light in the dark place up in that great and evil city. If I did not believe God had a work for her to do, I could not bear it, father. My heart is set on the lassie more than I was aware of. Will you not be vexed to part with her?'

'I hinna said yet that I wull pairt frae her,' Laurieston answered; and his wife saw his strong under-lip quiver, and knew how deep was the hold the gentle, womanly girl had taken of his heart.

'I doubt we'll need to let her go. She is set upon it. She believes she has done wrong, and that she must atone for it. She means to devote herself to him, I can see. It is a noble choice; but, poor lassie, I fear she will find the reality of the life she has chosen fearfully disappointing. The first thing in the morning, George must ride in to tell John and Michael, so that they may be at the Waverley Station to bid her good-bye. I hardly know how John will take this, father.'

'He'll hae to thole, like the rest,' was all Laurieston said; and his wife saw that he was unaware of any special reason why it should concern John more nearly than anybody.

'John likes Agnes, father. They will be man and wife yet,' she said, as she began to take the pins from her hair. It fell about her shoulders in a graceful cloud,—soft, beautiful hair, hardly touched even yet with grey.

'D'ye say sae?'

'I know it,' she answered, looking through the veil of her hair with a sweet, tender smile.

'Weel, Maggie, I'm vexed to hear it. Although John is my ain son, and Agnes no sib to me ava, I wadna gie her to him or he mend his ways. He's gane aff the straicht, wife, in the matters pertaining to his soul's salvation. Unless the Lord has merey upon him, and lets His Holy Spirit strive at the last, or he be overcome, I wad rather see Agnes, or ony Christian lassie, in her grave than married to him.'

Sharp words to fall upon a mother's ear! She tossed back her hair, and looked at him full with large, bright, indignant eyes:

'Michael, we've had but few words since we were married, though, had I been so inclined, I could have picked many a righteous quarrel with you. Who made you a judge over your son, or the arbiter of God's dealings with him? You are too self-righteous. I believe that John, with all his doubts and questionings, is nearer the kingdom than you.'

'Aweel, Maggie, the day will declare it,' he answered quietly, beginning to undress. 'Oh, I say, wife, there's the money I got off Will Laurie. Ye can put it by for Agnes,' he added, handing her the cheque from his pocket-book.

'Two hundred pounds, Michael! How did you get it?' she exclaimed, in surprise. 'But will the cheque be all right?'

'Oh, like enough. He'll be flush yet,—it's no six months since he selt Halleross. If Agnes disna watch, the place 'll no' be long hers. I could lay long odds that that's what he's after.'

'Let us not be too hard, Michael. He did not know until he came down even that Aunt Leesbeth was dead.'

'Naeboddy kens. He's an awfu' leear, and aye was.'

Just then there came a low, hesitating knock at the door. Margaret Maitland drew her dressing-gown round her, and opened it at once.

'Aunt Maggie, may I speak to you?' It was the voice of Agnes,—very low and broken, and full of pathos.

'Surely, my dear lamb, surely,' replied Mrs. Maitland; and, stepping out into the corridor, she closed the bedroom door behind her, and took the slight figure close to her motherly breast.

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'My Nannie, you are doing what is very noble and unselfish. We will all pray that your efforts may be blessed,' she answered at once, and laid her hand in gentle benediction on the girl's bright head.

'I think it is my duty, or I could not do it. Aunt Maggie, it will be as bad to leave you as it was to leave mamma that time,—I love you so.'

'And I you, my Nannie; but we will all write often, and London is not so far away.'

Mrs. Maitland strove to speak with cheerfulness, though her heart was sore enough, because she saw the state of nervous distress into which Agnes had wrought herself.

'And you will not forget me? I could bear anything but that. If I thought I would be forgotten at Laurieston, I should die.'

'I can speak for two, Nannie: neither John nor his mother will forget'—Margaret Maitland replied; and then she added, in tones full of meaning—'my dear daughter.'

So the new bond was acknowledged between them; and though Agnes Laurie fell asleep with hot tears on her cheeks, her heart had its own sweetness too, which nothing could take away.

Dreary and chill dawned that March morning, with a heavy rain driving desolately before the sobbing wind, and a mist hanging low upon the sea. Agnes was up before the dawn, moving very softly about the room for fear of waking Effie, emptying the wardrobe and drawers to make ready for flitting. Effie awoke by and by, and, without stirring, lay and watched her at her task. The room was only lighted by a dim candle, which made curious shadows in the corners of the long old-fashioned room; and when the flickering gleam fell on the face of Agnes, Effie was struck both by its exceeding paleness and also by its expression. Agnes had always a thoughtful, serious look; but the occurrence of the previous evening seemed to have added something more,—a steadfast, earnest, wistful

expression, as of one who had had a life's work opened up before her.

Effie was hard put to it to restrain her own emotion, as she saw her adopted sister folding and refolding her garments with nice precision, and making all ready to leave them. But she did hold her peace, and at six o'clock Agnes rang the bell as usual for the maids, and then went down herself. She unlocked the front door and stepped out into the porch, to feel the chill, damp air catching her breath. The day was slowly breaking, but the light seemed reluctant to creep through the dreary folds of the mist. Agnes was not sorry to see the mourning aspect of nature,—weeping skies would be in harmony with the feelings of the heart that had to say good-bye to Laurieston.

I do not care to linger upon that last morning. They tried to keep up a semblance of cheerfulness, and to speak as if Agnes were but going to London on a short visit; but it was a pitiful pretence, for each heart was full, except perhaps Willie Laurie's, who was very philosophical always over unpleasant things.

'Agnes,' said Maitland, as they rose from the table, 'come into the "wee room." I want a word with ye.'

He closed the door after they were in, and turned his grave, kind eyes on her sweet, pale face. 'Agnes, it is no' for me to say whether or no' ye are daein' what's richt to go wi' your father; you ken as weel as I, that he is not what a man should be. But I ken ye mean weel; an' I just want to tell ye, my lassie, that sin ever ye came to Laurieston ye hae been a blessin' to this hoose. Ye hae given mair than ye hae gotten, so ye are not obliged to me or mine.'

'Oh yes, Uncle Michael,' Agnes said hurriedly. 'Obliged! well, perhaps not,—these things are not obligations. They are debts of the heart, which only the heart's love can pay, and I leave that at Laurieston.'

'Wheesht, lassie, wheesht!' Laurieston's voice was husky, his stern eyes dim.

'An' I want to say, further, that when ye get to London, if the way o' life there is no' to your mind, or such as a God-

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'Thank you, Uncle Michael.' The eyes of Agnes grew brighter at these precious words. They *were* precious, indeed, from the lips of Maitland, whose praise was given to very few.

'Fare ye weel, then; an' may the God of Abraham an' Isaac an' Jacob gang wi' ye, an' watch ower ye, an' preserve ye from all ill.'

He took her two hands in his firm, strong clasp, and so would have left her; but Agnes put by the hands, and clasped her arms round his neck for the first time in her life. The kiss she left on his cheek long remained with Maitland, and kept memory green for the white-faced lassie who had stolen into all their hearts.

It was well, perhaps, that there was little time left for the partings; for when Agnes came out of the 'wee room,' there was a cab at the door, in which her father had come to take her away. So the boxes were hastily roped and carried down, and Agnes walked out of the house, dry-eyed and composed, amidst the sobbing of Effie and the maids. Margaret Maitland, dry-eyed also, went out into the rain, and looked in at the cab window, fixing her eyes solemnly on William Laurie's face.

'May God deal with you, William Laurie, as you deal with Agnes,' were her words.

Whereat he laughed, and asked her if he was not fit to have the care of his own child. So Agnes Laurie left her girlhood behind her that March morning, and went forth to take up a woman's work in the world. Willie travelled to Portobello with them, where he got out to catch the Leith train. His father had nothing to say to him, remembering with displeasure his undutiful conduct of the previous night. It must be told that it was Effie's bright eyes that kept him at home; of late the 'bairnly nonsense' between these two had assumed a more serious aspect.

'Good-bye then, Nannie. Good luck to you in London.

Good-bye, dad. Don't look so glum. I was honest, any way, and honesty is the best policy,' Willie said gaily; and, lifting his cap, darted across the platform just in time to jump into the other train.

'Impudent young scamp!' was the comment of William Laurie, senior. 'I must say I expected better things from a lad brought up in the holy atmosphere of Laurieston. Well, now that we're clear away, Nan, just tell me if you're not glad to see the last of them, with their psalm-singing and prayers? All pretence, especially with the old boy. He can grab the guineas with uncommon speed.'

'It will be better, I think, papa, if we do not speak about Laurieston,' Agnes said, with quiet firmness, and looking clearly and unflinchingly at her father. 'We will never agree on that question, I am sure.'

'Oh, very well; very sensible suggestion, my dear,' replied her father, as he took out his cigar-case. 'No objections, I hope, to the fragrant weed? because there's plenty of it in the society you're going to. You're about to see life, Nan, and you'll have such good times that you'll wonder how you ever supported existence yonder. I expect you'll create a sensation. 'Pon my word, you're a handsome girl.'

Agnes could not even smile at his praise. There was something in it offensive to her; but, blaming herself for being too fastidious, she tried to look interested, and to speak cheerfully.

'I wish you would tell me something about yourself and your life, papa. I seem to know so little. Have you a house in London?'

'Not in the meantime. Half the families in London live in apartments. In the hope that I should bring you home with me, I took handsome rooms in Arundel Mansions, quite near the most fashionable and select neighbourhood. I have some friends in the same place,—well-bred and very exclusive people,—Agnes, who will take you up and introduce you to the best society.'

'I don't think I care a great deal for society, papa.'

'You can't be expected to, as you have never seen any.

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Why, my dear, before you've been a week in London, you'll look back with amazement and contempt on your past life.'

'I think not. I hope not, papa.'

'But you will. I know all about it. *You* know nothing. Why, is this Edinburgh already? We've just eight minutes to get the train. Who's that tall scarecrow bowing to you,—surely a son of Maitland's?'

'Yes, it is John Maitland. How glad I am to see him before I go!'

Something in his daughter's voice, and also in the expression on the young man's face as he came forward, revealed a secret to William Laurie; and while he smiled blandly over the introduction Agnes gave, he said to himself,—

'So, so, Mr. John Maitland, I'm in time to spoil *your* little game.'

He managed to make use of John to secure a ticket for Agnes, to put on the luggage, and did not give them a moment alone. But he could not control the language of the eyes, nor the tongue either; for, as the engine screamed and started, bold John, driven to desperation, indeed, said to Agnes, loud enough for her father to hear,—

'Good-bye, my darling; if you stay too long, I'll come and fetch you back to Laurieston.'



CHAPTER XVII

'Men love to live,
As if mere life were worth the living for.'



AGNES LAURIE did not see much of her father on that railway journey between Edinburgh and London. He preferred the company and the play in the smoking carriage, and only looked in occasionally to see that she was all right. She was not altogether sorry. These hours, if tedious and lonely, were useful too: they gave her time to collect all her thoughts, to arrange her ideas, and to face the new life to which she was speeding. It was but a vague resolving and planning at the most, as she was totally ignorant of what would be required of her in her new sphere. She had her mind made up, however, to do her duty to the utmost by her father, and leave nothing undone to win him to a better life. She feared, nay, she knew, by quick intuition, that her father's ways and her father's life could not be such as would commend themselves to her. Mingling with these somewhat anxious surmisings, were memories and thoughts of all she had given up. Hope was also in her heart, nestling with hidden sweetness side by side with love. One day, perhaps, after her work in London was done, she would return to Scotland to become, in a double sense, the daughter of the house she had left. She grew calm and cheerful, and there was a bright look in her face, when her father came to tell her they had reached London. He was kind and attentive to her in a somewhat rough-and-ready fashion, and Agnes was susceptible to the slightest kindness.

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'I expect everything will be ready for us, my dear; a bit of hot dinner to tempt your appetite, which I hope that meagre lunch at York only stimulated,' he said, as they drove out of the station. 'I telegraphed to the housekeeper, and to my friend Lady Culross, who has a suite of rooms in the same house.'

'Is it a hotel, papa?'

'No, my love; it will seem a little odd to you at first, but it is quite the thing for the very best people to board as we do. I want to interest you in Lady Culross, Agnes, because I expect you to be great friends. She is the widow of a Scotch baronet, and very well off indeed. She has only one son,—the heir to great estates, a fine young fellow,—Gilbert Culross; one of the eligibles of the season, my dear; and who knows who may carry off the prize?' he said facetiously; but his humour was quite lost upon Agnes, who was pondering in her mind by what means her father had managed to get himself on a social par with members of the aristocracy.

'Did mamma know these people of whom you speak?' she asked rather timidly, not knowing how her question might be received.

'No, my love.'

She detected in a moment the change in his voice.

'Your mother, Agnes, was an estimable woman, but she had no ambition. She was, if you will excuse me saying it, rather a clog upon me. I was sorry for her, for she had a kind heart; but she never got over the narrowness peculiar to the life of that wretched provincial town, which I hope I may never see again.'

'I—I think you are unjust, papa, and unkind,' Agnes said, with that quiet courage and outspokenness characteristic of her.

'My dear, you are young, and it is natural and right that you should respect your mother's memory. So do I profoundly respect it; but I also will be candid, Agnes, and say plainly that we had better taboo that subject, like a certain other one which shall be nameless.'

A dull, hopeless feeling stole into the heart of the girl at the very outset of her new pilgrimage, and she had nothing to

say. Her hope had been that the memory of her mother would be a bond between her father and herself; and lo! it was the reverse.

'You are inclined to be a little morbid, the natural result of your life for the last few years. Yes, I took a right step when I sold Hallcross, and determined to expend the proceeds in your settlement in life,' said William Laurie, with a magnanimous air. 'When you were all misjudging me over the border, I was quietly and unostentatiously doing my duty.'

'I did not misjudge you, father; but I thought you ought to have told us of your intention to sell mamma's property.'

'Well, my dear, it is, if you will excuse me saying it, not customary for a man to make his children arbiters of his actions,' he replied blandly. 'He is supposed to have their interests at heart. I think, before you have been many days beside me, you will admit that I *have* these interests at heart. You are a very candid young lady, Agnes; candour is a good thing, and prevents misunderstanding,—long may it continue to be a virtue with you. But to return to the subject of my friends. After that, ah! exceedingly disagreeable interview last night, which you wound up so prettily, I wrote to Lady Jane and told her the story, and asked her and Sir Gilbert to join us at our quiet dinner. I hope, my dear, that you have a decent frock in which you can appear?'

'My frocks are all decent, papa, but not grand. If my dress is not suitable for your friends, I need not appear.'

'Now, my love, don't show your teeth already. Don't begin to misunderstand me at the very beginning of things,' said William Laurie blandly. 'You will always look like a lady; and if your clothes had more style, you would be quite distinguished. Lady Culross will take you in hand. She has promised to do so. You need not be nervous at the prospect of meeting her. She is the best of kind souls.'

'I am not in the least nervous, papa, I assure you. Only I wish we could have had one quiet evening to ourselves.'

'So we shall be by ourselves. I consider the Culrosses almost as members of my family. We are very intimate.'

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'In business. I had some dealings with Sir Gilbert,' returned William Laurie, with a nice vagueness. 'He has had the benefit of my advice several times; and when Lady Culross asked me to a quiet dinner, in acknowledgment of my little kindness, of course I went; and so the intimacy ripened.'

Agnes did not reply. The whole affair seemed to her both extraordinary and unsatisfactory. She had a singularly clear perception, and a well-balanced judgment, which, combined with a lack of vanity or desire for grandeur, enabled her to arrive at a wonderfully correct estimate of her father's standing with these people, even before she had seen them.

There was no opportunity for further conversation, as the hansom drew up at the door of 38 Arundel Mansions, and Agnes found herself ushered into a very ornamental, and, to her unaccustomed eyes, rather imposing-looking abode.

'Our rooms are on the top floor, my dear. I like air and light. Ah! here comes our domestic gorgon. Mrs. Fairweather, I present to you my daughter, of whom I have so often spoken.'

Mrs. Fairweather was a stout and jovial-looking individual, who looked as if she enjoyed the good things of life. She spoke in rather a wheezy voice, with a broad cockney accent; but her manner was kind, if a little familiar, and somewhat reassured the sinking heart of the young girl, who felt so terribly alone. Mrs. Fairweather took her wraps from her, and signified her intention of showing her to her rooms.

'I suppose dinner will be ready at half-past seven, as usual, Mrs. Fairweather?' said Mr. Laurie blandly.

'At 'arf-past siving, sir. I seed her ladyship and Sir Gilbert a-comin' in from their houting about an hour ago. 'Ollins told me they 'ad a kettledrum in Baker Street this artemnoon.'

'Just so. Well, I leave Miss Laurie to you, Mrs. Fairweather. You will wait upon her a little until she sees about a maid. *Au revoir*, my love; see you in the drawing-room later. Mrs. Fairweather will show you the way. Be sure and come down ten minutes before the half-hour to receive your guests.'

'Very well, papa,' Agnes answered somewhat wearily, for

the duty imposed upon her was irksome to her, in her unsettled, anxious frame of mind.

'You are tired, miss; I'll unpack them things for you. Have you a thin gown? Is it needing airing?' asked Mrs. Fairweather sympathetically, as she looked at the wearied face of the girl, when she sank into a chair in the bedroom. It was a curious little box of a room with two storm-windows, fantastically and flimsily furnished in white enamelled wood, much hung with muslin, and bedecked with sad-coloured ribbons.

'Yes, I am tired. But I think I can manage, thank you. No, my things do not need any airing. They were only packed this morning.'

'But you've had a long journey, miss; and you are from the country, the master told me. This will be a pleasant change for you. There's lots of gay doin's in town this month. It's the very 'ight of the season.'

'Is it?'

The girl's voice was very listless, as she unbuttoned her gloves.

The kind soul looked at her compassionately, and with a touch of curious wonder. She could hardly believe that such a quiet, self-possessed, unaffected young lady could be the master's daughter.

'Yes, miss. You do look down; but you'll pick up wonderfully. Your dear par will keep you lively. I never saw a man with such a sperrit; and then there's Lady Jane. Bless you, you'll like Lady Jane himmensely; though she is a bit soft, like her son. But there, I'm forgetting my place. Excuse me, miss; I don't mean no harm. I wish you'd let me 'elp you to dress.'

'Oh no, thank you. I am used to wait on myself. If you could get me a cup of tea, I would be much obliged. I feel both thirsty and faint.'

'For sure, I'll do that, miss,' said Mrs. Fairweather, and hustled out of the room. Then Agnes rose, and, walking over to the storm-windows, looked out,—first upon the waving tree-tops in Hyde Park, and then away beyond to the vast expanse

of roofs, white against the starlit sky.

So this was the odd little room, with her lips. She How great a life! and what

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of roofs, which seemed scarcely spanned by the domes of the starlit sky.

So this was London, and this her home ! She glanced round the odd little room, and a slight hysterical laugh broke from her lips. She felt like an unreal being moving among shadows. How great a change had four-and-twenty hours wrought in her life ! and what would be the end of it all ?

Mrs. Fairweather, being concerned with the final touches to the little dinner, did not return herself, but sent a very grimy-looking little maid with the tea-tray. Agnes did not admit her, but took the tray from her hands at the door, with a gentle word of thanks, and then turned the key. She would secure herself a few moments' seclusion at least. The hot, fragrant tea revived her, and she began to dress with something like her own quick energy. She hung her gowns up in the cupboard,—all but her best, the new crape-trimmed dress she had got to wear for Miss Leesbeth. It was a sombre enough attire, but it set off the exquisite fairness of her skin, and the touch of white at throat and wrists relieved it. She had a string of lovely pearls, which her mother had given her long ago ; and, surmising her father would wish her to wear some ornament, she fastened it about her neck. Her hair, which had a lovely ripple and shine upon it, made a becoming frame for her sweet, serious face. She did indeed look distinguished ; and when her father came up at a quarter-past seven to fetch her down, he looked at her with critical approval.

'My dear, you are superb. Your figure is really fine. Your dress is a little sombre, and perhaps out of date ; but it will do to-night. To-morrow, I flatter myself, Lady Culross will take your wardrobe in hand. I have just seen Lady Culross, my love ; she is on the *qui vive* to meet you. She and Sir Gilbert will join us when we go down. Are you ready ?'

'Yes, papa. How very fine you are !' she said, with a slight smile, looking at her father's evening attire, at the expanse of glossy linen, the dainty patent shoes, and pink silk handkerchief. 'I never saw you dressed like this before.'

'No, my love ; I admit that I have risen in life since those grubby Liverpool days ! Ah, let us not speak of them ; the sun

is going to shine upon us now,' he said, as he took her hand on his arm. There was something most unreal and dramatic about William Laurie. His daughter, whose memory of the past time had not dimmed, could scarcely believe that the shabby, coarse, harsh-speaking being of those evil days, and the exquisitely-dressed and highly-polished gentleman before her, could be the same. The sense of unreality with her was painful in the extreme, and made her feel depressed and nervous as she accompanied him downstairs. The drawing-room, although larger, was after the same pattern as the little attic room,—got up in a cheap and meretricious style, with abundance of gilding, and muslin drapery, and untidy ribbon bows. It was also shabby; but the cheerful fire made it more home-like than usual, and the lamp-light had a somewhat softening effect on the gilding. Agnes had scarcely seated herself when the door was opened, and the guests announced.

'Lady Culross, Sir Gilbert Culross.' Agnes rose to her feet, blushing painfully; but her father smiled reassuringly upon her, and led her forward.

'Lady Culross, I present my shy little country girl, and commend her to your motherly care. Agnes, this is my dear and honoured friend, Lady Culross.'

Agnes saw before her a slight and girlish-looking figure, attired in a blue silk gown cut low at the throat, and revealing the poor scraggy old neck, a withered, aged face, with an extraordinary brilliant colour, at which Agnes marvelled, not knowing that, like all the rest, it was unreal. Her hair was bright golden, another mystery to the unsophisticated girl, who wondered to see the attributes of youth and age so curiously mingled. It was a somewhat attractive, if rather an empty face, and the faded, care-lined blue eyes had a kindly light in them as they dwelt on the face of the young girl before her. She was surprised also, though she did not say so.

'So this is your daughter, Mr. Laurie?' Lady Culross said, with an affected little laugh, and tapping him on the arm with her fan. 'Naughty man, not to tell us she was so handsome. How are you, my dear? Charmed to meet you. Charmed to welcome you to the city. I am afraid it will be a sad revelation

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to our stately Puritan,—ha, ha ! our stately Puritan !—doesn't that suit her ? Gilbert, come forward this moment and be introduced to Miss Laurie.'

Agnes then had to look from the mother to the son ; who, like an obedient child, came forward and made his bow to the young lady, though he never spoke. He was a tall, shambling young man, with a fair complexion and yellow hair, and a decidedly weak face.

There was even a kind of vacant look in the big blue eyes, which struck Agnes as being indescribably pathetic.

'Dinner waits, I think,' said William Laurie airily. 'Lady Culross, may I have the honour ? Sir Gilbert, pray give your arm to my daughter. Talk to him, Agnes, my love. Sir Gilbert is shy, but the best of good fellows. I expect you will be the best of friends. Eh, Lady Culross, is it not wise to leave young folks to cultivate each other's acquaintance ?'

'Certainly, certainly. Your charming daughter, I foresee, will captivate all hearts. Ah ! shame to leave her buried in the country so long.'

Agnes could not bear these personal remarks. She had never felt so wretched and uncomfortable in her life. The unhappy-looking young man, with whom she was to be the best of friends, kept his eyes fixed on her face with a persistence which robbed her of the slight self-possession left to her. At last, apparently divining what was required of him, he came forward with a smile, and offered his arm. There was nothing for Agnes but to lay her fingers on it and allow him to take her downstairs.

Sir Gilbert Culross only made one remark on the way to the dining-room :

'Isn't it beastly cold !'



CHAPTER XVIII.

'The weary thoughts came fast,
And life was but a bitterness, with all
Its vividness and beauty.'



COME here and sit by me, my dear. I have quite fallen in love with you,—indeed, I have.'

Lady Culross slipped her hand through Agnes Laurie's arm, and they entered the drawing-room together after dinner, leaving the gentlemen at the table.

'Now, you must tell me all about your dear self, without reserve. You have been living in great seclusion with friends in Scotland, I understand?'

'I have been with friends, Lady Culross; but in the midst of a large and happy family there is not much seclusion,' Agnes answered quietly.

'Oh, I did not know about the family. You were quite comfortable with them, I suppose, although it must have been such a trial to you to be parted from your dear father? My love, your father is one of the best and most generous of men.'

'Yes,' said Agnes vaguely, and with an uneasy flush, which, although Lady Culross saw, she was not sharp enough to comprehend.

'He is, indeed. What he has done for me and my son I could not tell you. My love, I am a lonely widow, and my son has been rather a wayward boy. I am going to place my confidence in you, Nessie. I made up my mind before you came that I should call you Nessie,' said Lady Jane, with one of her pretty, caressing gestures. 'I want you to understand us, so

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that you may learn to love us. Well, my dear, I was married when I was very young, or quite a girl, to Sir Gilbert Culross. He was a very old man, Nessie,—forty-five years older than I. Just think of that, my love,—he was quite old enough to be my grandfather; but I had no choice. His people were frightfully angry, and never acknowledged me, and of course it was very hard upon them when I brought an heir to Kilmeny. I was left a widow, my dear, when my baby was six months old, and I have had to rear him entirely unaided,—not an easy task, I assure you, for he is very headstrong.'

'Is he?' asked Agnes, almost in wonder; for her impression of Sir Gilbert was that his intellect was of the weakest order.

'Very headstrong, Nessie,' said Lady Culross, with a sigh and a shake of her golden head. 'As a boy he was frightful. He did just as he liked, or flew into such frightful passions that we were afraid of our lives. He ran away from three schools, and really is not well educated; but what could I do? He burned and tore up his books. He would do nothing but ride, and spend his time with the grooms and the stable-boys. His passion for the turf, which has been such an anxiety to me, grew with him from babyhood, I might say.'

'I am sorry you have had so much care, Lady Culross,' said Agnes, looking with real compassion on the poor painted face, which, with all its attempt at youth, looked so old and worn and sad.

'Thank you; you are a sweet child. I am so glad you have come to cheer my loneliness,' Lady Culross answered. 'But I was telling you the very worst, my dear. Gilbert has good points. He has such a kind heart, Nessie: he would give away his last farthing to any one in distress. If he had not been so soft-hearted, he would never have lost so much money. My dear, if we had not met your father, I believe we would have been penniless by this time, and Kilmeny mortgaged to the last farthing.'

'How did papa help you?' Agnes asked, with the most intense interest. She fain would have accepted the praises of her father, but she had an innate consciousness that there was something under the surface. Even in her large natural

charity she could not honestly believe her father had acted from purely disinterested motives.

'Well, my love, perhaps I cannot make it quite clear; but I will try. When Gilbert grew up he tired of Kilmeny, and insisted on coming to London; of course I came with him,—he has never been away from me. Well, you can imagine an innocent young boy like Gilbert let loose from a remote place like Kilmeny,—it is away among the wilds of Galloway. He was just prey for all the villains in this wicked city. His love of horses and racing and all that kind of thing led him into questionable company; and he was being led astray, and his money disappearing like water, when your dear father took him in hand.'

'How did they meet?'

'Quite accidentally,—though I say it was a providence,—when they were going in the train to the Doncaster race-meeting last year. Your father, like many independent gentlemen, amuses himself with a little safe speculation on the turf. Out of the kindness of his heart he looked after my boy that day, and prevented him, I believe, from being ruined. You see Gilbert has no evil in him, and believes all men honest. He is too ready to follow every one's advice. I bless the day, Nessie, he came under the influence of a man like your father.'

Agnes dropped her eyes and turned her face away. Lady Culross was perfectly sincere in what she was saying. Her credulity was very great. Agnes wished she could share it.

'So, my dear, when we became such close friends, and he told me about you and his desire to have you with him, it was a privilege and a joy to me to say I would do my utmost for you. He told me you were a plain little country girl, who had never had any advantages. He spoke so beautifully of your motherless condition that it quite touched my heart; so we laid our heads together, and made our little plans to take rooms in the same house, so that I could have you always with me. I know a number of nice people, although Gilbert has not yet taken the position he ought to take as Master of Kilmeny. I am hoping that he will awaken to his responsibility soon. Meanwhile, my heart is quite at rest about him, for your father

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is taking care of him. But to return to you, my love. A little country girl, indeed!—you look like a young princess. But of course your family, being a branch of the Lauries of Mearns Castle, is very old and pure. I prophesy you will create quite a *furor*; and we shall see about your frocks to-morrow. Just think how delightful for me to have a lady to shop with! My love, we will have a splendid time, won't we?'

Agnes was obliged to rise from her chair. She was sick at heart,—sick with sorrow and shame. Laurie of Mearns Castle! What would Lady Culross say, were she to learn now that William Laurie was only the son of a provincial tradesman, and his wife a farmer's daughter? It was a relief in one sense when the drawing-room door opened to admit the gentlemen.

'Well, ladies, got your little feminine gossip over, eh?' William Laurie asked, in a loud, cheery voice; nevertheless there was a furtive expression of anxiety in his eye as he looked at his daughter's face. It was very grave, and her eyes were troubled. But he had not yet learned to read her face, and Lady Culross's expression was quite reassuring.

'Oh yes, we have had the most delightful, cosy chat, and we are the best of friends already,' she said airily. 'It is perfectly delightful, Mr. Laurie, to have your charming daughter with us perfectly delightful, is it not, Gilbert?'

'Ya-as,' Sir Gilbert answered, with a slight yawn, and a glance of broad admiration at the slender figure and the sweet face of the girl at the piano.

A strange nervousness had come upon her, and, feeling Sir Gilbert's eyes following her, she had moved quickly over to the piano.

'It will be in tune, I suppose? May I play a little?'

'Delightful, delightful, is it not?' exclaimed Lady Culross.

'Now we shall be a perfect family party.'

William Laurie looked pleased also, taking it as a sign that Agnes desired at least to make herself agreeable. He had not the remotest knowledge of her powers or accomplishments, and was astonished to hear the sweet, full, tuneful melody which followed her fingers on the keys. Agnes found it a relief to have her hands in motion, though the touch of the strange

jingling keys did not comfort or soothe like the notes of the dear old instrument at Laurieston.

But anything was better than to be compelled to take part in the strained, unreal conversation in the room.

Sir Gilbert listened with evident pleasure to the music, and presently shambled over to the piano, and, leaning his elbow on it, looked down into the player's face.

Agnes played on, trying to feel unconscious of that slow, intent, admiring gaze; but feeling her colour rising, nevertheless, and the nervousness creeping to her very finger-tips.

'I say, you do it uncommonly well, don't you?' he asked, finding speech, a most unusual thing for him in the presence of ladies.

'No; I am playing very badly. I had better stop,' she said, with a nervous laugh.

'Oh, I say, don't; it's A1, you know; and I can stand here and look at you,' said Sir Gilbert, with a grin. Agnes looked up at him with a touch of compassion. She saw that in his slow, stupid way he was trying to make himself agreeable, and that he did not mean to be rude.

'I cannot remember anything more,' she said gently. 'But I have some music upstairs, and will play for you another time.'

'Come, then, and have a rubber at whist, you young folks,' cried William Laurie. 'Did they ever play at Laurieston, Agnes?'

'No; they had no cards in the house, papa,' Agnes answered, as she closed the piano.

'Do you hear that, Lady Culross? No cards in a house full of young folks, and in the nineteenth century! We shall have a job with our little Puritan; but I think she is going to be amenable. Come, Agnes, and Sir Gilbert will teach you. Lady Culross and I will do our utmost not to beat you.'

'I would rather not, papa.'

'I rather you would, my dear,' he answered dryly. 'The essence of good breeding, my love, is to sink one's own inclinations and consult those of others. But I am forestalling Lady Culross' lessons in etiquette. Come, Gilbert, and cut for the deal.'

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Agnes saw that for peace's sake she must give in. She took her place at the table, and, when the cards were dealt, tried to follow the instructions given her. If she were to win her father it must be by gentle means, not by thwarting his wishes at the very outset. But it was a profitless, uninteresting game, over which William Laurie lost his temper, in spite of his efforts to keep it.

'I say, I'm not going to play when Miss Laurie thinks it such a bore. There's the cards,' said Sir Gilbert, in the middle of the rubber, emptying his hand on the table. 'If it's good breeding to consult other people's inclinations, we had better consult hers. It must be awfully stupid for her.'

Agnes was grateful to him. He meant to be kind. A curious kind of smile dawned upon William Laurie's face, and with a laugh he threw down his hand, though Lady Culross looked rather put out. Whist was her hobby, and she could play well. But it was not her nature to show displeasure; and the next moment she was chattering on in her airy fashion, laying a thousand plans for the days to come. At ten o'clock they rose to go down to their own rooms, and her good-night to Agnes was of the most affectionate kind. Sir Gilbert shook hands with her, but, though he looked earnestly at her, apparently could not find a word to say.

'Sit down a moment, Agnes, unless you are very tired,' her father said. 'We may as well have a little chat the first night. Well, what do you think of my friends,—are they not charming people?'

'Lady Culross seems very kind, papa. I thought her a little odd at first, but I think she is kind,' answered Agnes wearily, longing to be free from the strain of that trying day.

'She is as good as gold. I consider myself very fortunate in having secured her interest in you. My dear, I assure you, if you only conduct yourself properly, your future is made.'

Agnes did not ask how. She felt too utterly disheartened even to wonder what he meant. She sat up suddenly, and looked straight in her father's face with those clear, questioning eyes of hers, which mirrored her truthful and beautiful soul.

'Papa, Lady Culross seems to be under misapprehension

about some things. What did she mean by saying I was a connection of the Lauries of Mearns Castle? Who can have told her such an absurd thing?'

William Laurie was silent a moment,—not conscience-stricken nor abashed at having his false pretences brought home to him; he was only wondering how best to deal with this remarkably candid and outspoken young woman, who had apparently outgrown her childish awe of him, and would accept nothing from him unchallenged.

She was looking steadily at him, and after a moment he allowed his eyes to meet hers.

'Well, my dear, I did.'

'But, papa, it is not true.'

'My dear Agnes,' said her father suavely, 'you are very unsophisticated. You are absolutely as ignorant as a babe unborn. You may believe me, that there are certain circumstances in which a slight deviation from the bald truth is justifiable. Lady Culross has her own pride,—a perfectly legitimate pride, I admit,—and it would not allow her to recognise me unless she believed I was a gentleman. I did not tell her a naked falsehood, Agnes; she inferred that we were of these Lauries, and I did not contradict her. You should be the very last to blame me for that, seeing that I had nothing but your advantage in view. I have given myself a great deal of trouble, my love, on your account, and I trust that I am to receive some recognition of it from you. I must say, you are not promising very hopefully.'

Agnes stood up. Her face was quite pale, her slight hands clasped before her, her bright steadfast eyes fixed upon his face. 'Papa, I want to understand on what footing I am here. Why should it be necessary for you to deviate from the truth for my sake? I came, glad and anxious to fill a daughter's place towards you,—to make a home for you. However humble and quiet a home it may be, papa, at least let it be unaffected and true,' she said, speaking with a strange, quiet sadness. 'This life—at least the glimpse of it I have had to-night—fills me with distrust and miserable forebodings. I do not understand it. Let us go away together, dear papa, and make a little home for

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There was an indescribable pathos in the girl's words and in her whole demeanour. She spoke from the heart, and yet her words did not strike home. They were received by her father with a cold, even a contemptuous smile.

'My love, you are reversing our positions, I think. You are giving advice, when you need to receive it. But I will forgive you. You are so ignorant, as I said, of all which at your age you should have known. If you are sincere in your desire to be a dutiful daughter to me, you must allow me to be the judge of what is best for you. I repeat it, I have your best interests at heart. Now go up to bed; you are tired and out of sorts. To-morrow I hope I shall see a different face opposite me at breakfast. My love, good-night. Be sure to ring for anything you may require for your comfort.'

He dismissed her with apparent gentleness, yet peremptorily, Agnes felt. She allowed him to kiss her, but her heart was as cold as ice. She felt no thrill of responsive affection go out to him. She was chilled, chilled to her inmost soul.

A sense of hopelessness, of utter desolation, overwhelmed her as she shut herself into the cold, strange, unfamiliar room.

The bright hopes and high resolves of the morning were lost in the darkness of the night. She could do nothing in that hour of utter weariness and sickness of heart, but put her hands before her face and helplessly weep.



CHAPTER XIX.

'Her daddy forbade, her minnie forbade—
Forbidden she wadna be;
She little thought the browst she brewed
Wad taste sae bitterly.'



ROUBLES seemed to be thickening about the house of Laurieston. After an early lunch that afternoon, Mr. Walter Maitland drove out from Leith to see his relatives concerning Willie Laurie. It had cleared up at mid-day, and the pale sun was struggling feebly through the grey pallor of the sky as he drove up the avenue to the house. He raised his hat to his sister-in-law, who sat with her work at the dining-room window. She rose at once, called to Katie to send the stable-boy to take Mr. Maitland's horse, and went out to the door-step.

'How do you do, Margaret? I hope I see you well?' said Walter Maitland, making his brother's wife a profound bow. His manners were a little formal: he prided himself upon his absolute precision in everything. His attire was immaculate; his words were always duly weighed before they were uttered, the impression given being that every word and act was studied for effect. He was very handsome, and carried his years well, facts of which he was perhaps too conscious. But he was an upright, staunch, conscientious man, whom all were bound to respect, although his little foibles were very apparent.

'I am quite well, thank you, Walter; a little saddened by the event of the day,' said Mrs. Maitland, with a slight smile. 'How did you leave Emma?'

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'As usual. She has been in the drawing-room these two afternoons. I hope Michael is at home?'

'He is on the farm, and can be got easily. Have you had dinner?'

'I lunched in town, thank you; we dine late, you know,' he said, and, as the lad appeared to take his trap, he followed Mrs. Maitland into the house. 'Yes, it would be rather a surprise to you to see Laurie *père* last night. What does the man mean?'

'Ah, if we knew that, Walter, our minds might be more at rest. Effie, it is Uncle Walter.'

'How do you do, Uncle Walter?' said Effie demurely, extending her soft plump hand, and looking as innocent as possible, though it was her habit in private to mimic his fastidious manner, and slow, precise, careful speech, so different from her father's blunt address. Walter Maitland's demeanour towards his brother's family was distinctly patronizing; and the young folks, being very high-spirited, resented it thoroughly. It had grown upon him without doubt since he married a fine-lady wife, and there was a gulf fixed between Seafield and Laurieston. Even the students, who might be supposed to have culture enough to satisfy their fastidious relatives, seldom went to Seafield.

'You are improving, Effie,' said Uncle Walter, looking critically at the dainty figure and fresh roseleaf face of his niece. 'Margaret, your young people are really beginning to be a great credit to you.'

'I have always thought them that, Walter,' she answered, with a quiet dignity which another man would have taken as a reproof. 'Shall I send for Michael at once? He comes in for a cup of tea with me generally about four. He will be sure to come to-day. He knows I am vexed.'

'Oh, there is no hurry. My horse must get a breath. You'll miss the girl. I admired the little I saw of her. She seemed very modest and unassuming. I wish the lad had gone with his father too, Margaret. That's my business to-day. I am afraid we can't retain him in the office any longer. He has grown very careless of late, and is not behaving himself at all.

No later than Monday night he had the impertinence to come into the house the worse of liquor. If Emma had seen him, or known of it, I am certain she would have put him out at once.'

Margaret Maitland was silent a moment. Effie made a sudden movement, but neither noticed just then the expression in her face.

'I am very sorry to hear this, Walter,' said Mrs. Maitland, and the shadow deepened on her brow. Ellen's children were a heavy care to her.

'I regret to have to complain,' said Mr. Walter Maitland, in his formal way. 'Personally, I might tolerate it a little longer; but it has been going on for some time,—latterly in the face of pointed warnings and rebukes,—and Mr. Grier's patience is exhausted, I can see.'

'Does he stay out late?'

'As late as he dare, our doors being locked before eleven. But he never spends an evening in the house, and his work is done in a very slipshod manner. His abilities are good; but I fear he is just his father's son.'

Margaret Maitland sighed. What could she say? Her fears were only being realized. For some time past her anxiety concerning the wayward boy had been very great. She happened to glance across at Effie, who sat by the fire, and she gave a great start; for the colour was all out of the girl's ruddy cheeks, and the tears were trembling on her eyelashes. It gave the mother a shock, but she strove to hide it from Walter Maitland.

'We must see what Michael thinks. He was saying only the other day he would ask you to get Willie a place with some of your agents in Holland. Effie, dear, just run out and see if father is about,' she said; and in a moment Effie was gone. Then the mother breathed more freely. 'Sometimes if a wayward boy is removed from all his old associations, he picks up, Walter. It might be so with him.'

'I am not hopeful, Margaret. He is too like his father. Inherited evil is not easily combated. I should not care to recommend him to any of our agents. Indeed, I could not conscientiously do it.'

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'Not recommend ; but you might lay the case before them. Surely one kind soul might be found to give him a fair chance?'

'So like a woman,' laughed Walter Maitland. 'Even the kindest souls require steadiness and integrity in those they employ. It is a great pity he did not go off to-day, too. Why did he not?'

'He refused ; and I was not sorry, Walter. I do not think William Laurie has improved. I cannot suffer the thought of the life to which he may introduce Agnes. His associates cannot be fit for her. She is a very pure-minded, high-souled woman, Walter. I have known none more so.'

Walter Maitland shrugged his shoulders.

'The fact is, Margaret, I warned you and Michael well when Ellen wrote first. It is always a risk undertaking the care of other people's children. I was amazed that Michael entertained the idea for a moment. It was most unlike his usual hard-headedness, and I told him so at the time.'

Margaret Maitland could find nothing to say. She had but little in common with this fine gentleman. His self-righteousness was much more offensive than Michael's, because it was less humble and more obtrusive. Walter Maitland always put her out of sorts. She looked anxiously at the clock, hoping her husband would soon come in, in case she should say something to give offence. She heard the heavy familiar foot presently, and, when Laurieston came striding into the room, his wife slipped out, under pretence of ordering tea,—in reality to see where Effie was. She gave Katie the order, and ran upstairs, to find, as she expected, the lassie crying her heart out in her own room. 'Effie, what is the matter? Nothing has happened to make you break your heart,' said the mother, with a sharpness born of her motherly pain and fear.

'Oh, that horrid Uncle Walter! I just hate him. He is so patronizing, and thinks himself so fine!' sobbed Effie. 'And I don't believe a word he says about Willie. It's all Aunt Emma, I believe.'

'Effie!'

'Well, I don't care. I will stand up for Willie. Everybody is down on him, and praising up Nannie. Of course I

like Nannie; but it's a shame. Willie has never had a chance. And I don't wonder he doesn't spend his evenings in Seafield. He would be dead if he did. It's worse than a prison.'

Mrs. Maitland took Effie by the shoulders and shook her.

'Effie, you are making a fool of yourself, and talking as you have no right to do about such worthy people as your Uncle Walter and Aunt Emma. I am very angry with you. Do you hear?'

'I don't care. Nobody understands me but Willie, and I like him better than anybody in the world; and I'll be his wife some day too, in spite of everybody, just to show that I don't believe the horrid lies people tell.'

Effie had wrought herself into such a hysterical state that she might be speaking at random; but the words fell like lead upon her mother's ear and heart. She relaxed her hold and sank into a chair.

'My poor, misguided, silly bairn! God help you!'

These low, broken words recalled Effie to a sense of what she owed her mother. When she saw the effect of her wild talk, the quick, warm heart of the bairn overflowed with penitent sorrow. She fell on her knees at her mother's side, and, clasping her arms round her waist, cried impulsively,—

'Dear, darling, lovely mother, forgive me. I'm a perfect wretch; but I got mad, and didn't know what I was saying. I didn't mean to vex you. I wouldn't do anything in the world to hurt you. Oh, tell me you forgive me.'

Margaret Maitland took the pretty tear-stained face in her dear hands, and looked into it with the pathos of motherhood in her eyes.

'Effie, tell me truly,—do you care for Willie in that way?'

'Oh, mother, I do, I do! I am so glad to tell you,' cried the impulsive creature, finding relief in pouring all her heart out. 'I will never like anybody in the world so well in that way.'

'And—and—is there any understanding between you?' she pursued calmly, though her heart was weighed down with pain.

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'Yes;—at least,' said Effie, with a lovely blush, 'he knows I—I—that I'll marry him some day.'

'Oh, my lassie, God guide you both!' said Margaret Maitland, with quivering lips. 'We will talk further about this again. I am glad you have given me your confidence at length, Effie; it will guide me how to act.'

'And you are not angry, dear mother? I ought not to have told,—it was Willie's secret too, mother,' cried Effie, clinging to her mother's skirts as she rose.

'I had hoped none of my bairns would ever need to keep a secret from me. No, I am not angry. Some day, when you have children of your own, Effie, you will understand, perhaps, what I feel. Let me go down now. Yes—yes—I will kiss you. There! there! my poor lassie!'

'Don't tell father yet, mother. I think he'll be angry.'

'Father must be told this very day. Effie, you forget what you are saying. I think, bairn, you need not fear. You are the very light of his eye. You will never get any one in the world to love you as your father loves you.'

'But he is so hard on anybody who—who— isn't just as good as he thinks right, and there's that horrid Uncle Walter telling him the most atrocious things at this very moment. Oh, mother, when you go down, stick up for Willie, for my sake!'

It was an irresistible appeal, because it was so utterly unreasonable, so like a woman in love. It made the mother smile.

'Effie, you are but a child, not eighteen yet; and to speak of marrying — bairn, bairn, you don't know what you are speaking about. But I must go down. You stay here, and let me settle it quietly.'

So saying, Margaret Maitland returned to the dining-room with a new care upon her heart.

The brothers were sitting opposite each other, talking gravely over the misdeeds of Will Laurie's son.

'This is an ill account o' the lad, Maggie,' said Laurieston, looking at his wife as she entered.

'Yes, Michael, it is,' she answered quietly, and, closing the

door, sat down between them. She looked hesitatingly a moment at Walter Maitland, wishing, with a touch of pride, perhaps, that she had not to ask a favour from him. But it must be done, for Effie's sake.

'I hope, Walter,' she said quietly, 'that you will give the laddie another chance. I think he has not been guilty yet of any very grave offence.'

'He is not steady, Margaret, and it is absolutely imperative that we should be able to trust all those in our employ. Our firm has always been able to boast of the integrity of its employees. I fear he must go.'

'I want to ask a favour from you, Walter,—the first, I think, I have ever asked,' she said hurriedly. 'Try to get him a place elsewhere,—in Glasgow or Aberdeen,—if you think there is no opening abroad.'

Walter Maitland shook his head.

'Both Michael and you will remember how disappointed I was at not getting your son, and how reluctant to take Laurie. I should be glad to oblige you again, but I really don't think I can in this instance.'

'It is a family matter, Walter,' Margaret said; and then she turned to her husband—'Michael, you must help me. Two things are of great importance,—that Willie should be sent away for a little, and given a chance to get on. Can't you guess why?'

'No; riddles are no' in my way. Speak plain, Maggie,' replied Laurieston abruptly.

'It is Effie, father. You were right, and I was wrong. There has been a talk between them. The silly bairns think they are in love, and Effie speaks about marrying as if it were taking her dinner,' she answered, with an uncertain smile. 'I hope it will come to nothing; but we must manage it very quietly and cautiously, without appearing to thwart them. Effie is very headstrong.'

'Ay; but she'll hae to take ay or no this time,' said Laurieston, with exceeding bitterness. 'Walter, you may thank Providence ye hae nae bairns. They are mair bother than they're a' worth.'

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'It certainly seems extraordinary that a love affair should have been carried so far and not been observed,' said Walter Maitland dryly. 'You don't approve of the match, then, Michael?'

'Approve!'

Michael Maitland brought his clenched fist down on his knee, and his brows grew black as night.

'I wad rather see Effie in her grave than wife to a Laurie. Never, while I live, shall she take him wi' my consent; never while I live.'



CHAPTER XX.

'Howe'er it came to thee,
Thine, pilgrim, is the last and heaviest loss.'

EFFIE appeared at the tea-table with very red eyes, and a rather defiant expression of countenance, which her mother was grieved to see. It boded ill for the satisfactory arrangement of this unpleasant affair. Contrary to his wont, her father never spoke to her, and it was a silent, uncomfortable meal. Wat, a discreet youth, saw that there was thunder in the domestic atmosphere, and held his peace.

'Effie,' Laurieston said, when they rose from the table, 'bide here; I have something to say to you. Wat, ye can look in to the stable; I hear the men in aboot.'

Effie sat down, trying to look careless and unconcerned. Her father's voice was very grave; displeasure sat upon his brow. Mrs. Maitland took up her sewing and put in a few random stitches. She remained to keep these two strong wills from clashing, and to pour the oil of her sweetness upon the troubled waters. But for the gentle spirit which continually dwelt with the mistress of Laurieston, it could not have been even as united a household as it was. She knew very well that her husband, with all his love for Effie, had not the slightest idea of her self-will, and even obstinacy of temper. As he had habitually indulged her, she had never shown it to him. Very often the mother had felt herself obliged to deal sharply and sternly with her only daughter, in justice to herself and the girl. As was his wont, Maitland went straight to the point at once.

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'Your Uncle Walter has been here, Effie, as ye ken, an' his complaint was aboot Willie Laurie. He is not a well-doing lad, an' they canna keep him.'

Effie bit her lip, and tore a little hole in the lace edging of her apron.

'I was not greatly surprised, for I have not thought a great deal of Willie for a while back. It seems ye have been thinkin' ower muckle aboot him; ye'll need to think less, my lassie. That's what I have to say to you.'

Over her sewing Mrs. Maitland had almost smiled. It was so like a man,—so like her husband,—to lay down his command, and look for instant obedience.

Effie never spoke, but her eyes hid rebellion in their sunny, blue depths.

'I may as weel tell ye, aince for a', that if sic a thing has ever been in your head, Effie, ye may put it oot for ever. If Willie Laurie should ever hae the presumption to ask me for you, my answer wad be—No. I'm sayin' it to you, aince an' for a'.'

Effie's eyes flashed, but she never spoke a word.

'Your uncle has promised to look oot for a place for Willie either in Aberdeen or Glasgow, or may be abroad, for a year at least. In the meantime, he'll no come back to Laurieston; an' there's to be nae writin' back an' forrit between you an' him. D'ye hear what I'm sayin'?''

'Yes, I hear,' Effie answered quietly enough; but the mother's anxious ear detected the sullen ring in it.

'Weel, see an' mind it, then,' Laurieston said, still sternly; for he had laid the thing sorely to heart, and was bitterly disappointed at Effie's folly. 'An' now that Agnes is awa', see that ye be of some use to your mother. That'll set ye better than speakin' silly nonsense to a wastrel like Willie Laurie. It's time enough for you to be thinkin' on a man five year efter this.'

Effie got up and ran out of the room, pulling the door after her with a bang. Mrs. Maitland laid down her sewing, and lifted her anxious eyes to her husband's face.

'May be you said too much, Michael,' she said gently. 'It might have been better to leave the thing alone.'

'No, no, Maggie; I dinna believe in lettin' things alone, especially wi' bairns. They maun be telt what's richt and wrang. I dinna think there'll be ony mair bot'ler wi' that. She didna seem very vexed like.'

Mrs. Maitland did not like to say that she feared Effie's silence was not perhaps the most hopeful sign. She was not herself less anxious than before.

'I dinna ken how it is, Maggie, but it seems as if the bairns we've tried to rear in the fear of the Lord are growin' up to be a heartbreak to us. I believe Walter is best off, efter a', that hasna nane.'

'Oh, father, you don't know what you are saying. What would Laurieston be without the bairns? And what a hard man you would have been! It's the bairns that have kept your heart green.'

'I like the bairns weel enough, but it's a terrible thing to see them gaun astray. They are a kind o' fearfu' joy, Maggie, at the best.'

Her heart was sore for him. She knew that, like Jacob of old, he wrestled in prayer for his children's souls.

'The bairns, Michael, have not yet given us much anxiety,' she maintained, with a smile. 'The sons are as steady as the Bass, and I hope—I hope this little waywardness of Effie's will pass away, and that we will see her married to some honest, God-fearing man yet.'

'Ay, ay, I hope so. There's less care, Maggie, when ye can skelp them an' put them to their beds for a faut,' he said, as he took up his cap. 'But I'm no feared for Effie. She kens when I say a thing I mean it. I canna have Willie Laurie comin' oot even for a nicht afore he gangs awa'. I fear I might say something to him neither him nor me wad forget. You can write to him and explain it to him in your ain way. I'm no' for nae mair ill words in this house. There's been ower mony this while.'

So saying, and having to his own satisfaction settled the whole question, Laurieston went off to the stable. His wife sat still in the shadowy gloaming, with her head leaning on her hand, her face wearing a look of deep, anxious thought. Care

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weighed upon her heart ; and in that still, quiet time she looked up to heaven, and asked that the bairns might be kept, and that she, their mother, might be guided how to guide them wherein they still required her motherly counsel. Margaret Maitland's faith was very perfect. She verily leaned upon the promises. Without the belief that God cared for her and hers, she could not have lived. She did not seek peace in vain. The assurance came to her that they *would* be kept and guided. She felt almost as if an angel had whispered to her the precious words of promise : ' All things work together for good to them that love God.'

Her silent and sweet communion with the Unseen was broken by the opening of the outer door, and a heavy foot in the hall. She rose up to ring for the lamp ; but just then the room door opened, and John came in. The sight of him was like wine to her heart.

' Oh, my laddie !'

Her motherly voice trembled, and John took her in his arms, and she felt sheltered in his strong clasp. There was almost an element of lover's love between these two.

' Did you know I was hungering for you, John ?'

' I don't know, mother ; I knew I wanted you badly. I couldn't stay after the classes. What does all this mean, and why is Nannie away ?'

She did not grudge the passionate lingering of his voice over that dear name, for to see Agnes Laurie John's wife was the greatest desire of her heart. She believed that each was necessary to the other, and that their union would be one more blessed than is common.

' Sit down, and I'll tell you all I know ; but oh, John, it is not much. Did you see her this morning, and Michael ?'

' I did, mother ; but Michael would not go. He is a queer chap, Mike, mother. He got quite white when the telegram came, and he would not go to the station.'

' That *was* curious, and him so fond of Agnes. Did he not say anything ?'

' Not a word ; but he did not turn up at any of the classes. I say, though, he has not taken her away for good, has he ?'

'Ah, that's what I don't know, John. I expect she'll stay there until you take her away,' said the mother, with a smile full of tender meaning.

'I will take her some day, mother,' John answered, as he began to walk up and down the room. 'I wish I knew what her father wants her now for. Do you think it is because of Halleross?'

'No, I don't think so. We must be just, my son, even when we find it easier to be harsh. But he has some motive. I am hoping that when Agnes writes, she will be able to make some things plain to us. But, John, there is another trouble with Willie and Effie. Did you know there was anything between them?'

'No!'

Complete surprise sat on John's face.

'The foolish bairns imagine themselves in love. There has even been a talk of marriage between them. Your Uncle Walter has been here to-day complaining of Willie, and that was how it came out. Father was very angry, and says Willie can't come back to Laurieston, even to say good-bye. Uncle Walter has promised to try and get him a situation out of Leith.'

'Why, mother, I never heard of such a thing. What can Effie see in Will?'

Margaret Maitland shook her head.

'That's what neither you nor I can know, John; but she sees something. She is very self-willed. I hope there will be no more trouble with her.'

'It is very disappointing. There's Phil Robertson, mother, would give his right hand for Effie, though she's so different from him. You would give her to Phil, wouldn't you, without any misgivings? He is a splendid fellow.'

'He is—I like him very much, John; but your father would never consent to that either, on account of his religious views, or rather his lack of them.'

'Well, I don't think it would be right to stand in the way for that,' said John gloomily. 'Father is very narrow. He expects every man to cut his creed after his prescribed pattern.'

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Men who have thought out the great problem of life for themselves will not be so bound down. Mother, do you think Robertson's ideal of life's purpose can be ignoble, when you see the results ?'

'I desire to judge no man, John ; but I think that love for Christ as his Saviour would put the crown to Robertson's character.'

John shook his head.

'That will never be. He admires the Christ as a man, a perfect example of a consecrated life ; but does not believe in His divine attributes.'

'Is it the new fashion to speak of *the* Christ, John ? It is not necessary. There is no other. Oh, my son, I hope you have not followed in Robertson's footsteps. He promised me last autumn, when he was here, that he would do nothing to undermine your faith.'

'He has kept that promise, then. He has maddened me often by refusing even to speak on these subjects. But, mother, I am not one to accept any man's convictions without question. I have thought about it all,—battled with it until my brain has been in a whirl ; and I *don't* see anything a man can lay hold on. There is nothing we can really know.'

'Oh, John, when you look around on the vast scheme of creation,—when you look in upon yourself, and think of the mystery and mercy of your being,—how can you doubt the existence of God ? What is it you want to know ? He reveals Himself to us everywhere.'

'You are satisfied with that, mother,' said John hopelessly ; 'I cannot be. I was reading a curious little poem the other day, about a band of pilgrims who had met to recount their losses and sorrows. After the rest had told their tale, one said,

"Said losses have ye met,
But mine is heavier yet ;
For the believing heart hath gone from me."

I am that pilgrim, mother.'

'No, no, my son ; the believing heart is only clouded by the mists of doubt,' the mother answered, trying to smile and to be calm. 'If a mother's prayers can avail, these mists will be chased

away soon by the shining of the strong Sun of Righteousness. You are very young yet, John, and have not felt the need of God. You have allowed yourself to drift with the tide of the philosophy you are studying. The ebb-tide will bring you back.'

'Mother, if father were to hear me, he would put me out of the house,' said the young man, with a fleeting melancholy smile. 'His religion isn't like yours,—it is without merey. But I am going to tell him. I will not come here under false pretences; and, feeling as I do, I can't listen to him at the reading, nor go to church. I won't be a hypocrite, even if it should mean coming home no more.'

'My son, you are hard upon your father. He has been a good father to you.'

'I am not complaining of that, and I try not to be hard. Michael is his favourite, and I don't wonder at it. I am a cross-grained beggar, and always was. Perhaps there would be more peace in the house on Sundays if I didn't come.'

'It would be no trial to you, then, not to come?'

John did not answer. He had paused, with his hands in his pockets at the darkened window, against which the rose branches were tapping eerily, being swayed by the cold night wind.

'Then another thing, mother,' he began, exactly as if he had not heard the question. 'The world is so full of misery and injustice. It is the good who suffer and the wicked who flourish. If there was a God of love and merey, He could not bear to have things in such a chaotic state. He has endowed us with reason, which revolts against the very ordering of our lives. I tell you a man can't face these things calmly and not rebel.'

'It is the waywardness of youth, John. I cannot argue with you; only I believe that through the discipline of life God will lead you back to Himself. Nothing but your own helplessness will make you feel your need. I could bear to see you suffer, my son, for that end.'

'Mother, I have vexed your heart, but it is such a relief to speak. There are so few one can speak to,' he said impulsively.

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'I thank God my son can speak to his mother from his heart,' Margaret Maitland answered, in full, tremulous tones; and then a silence fell upon them, and only the strong cadences of the wind filled their ears.

'Phil is going over to Leipsic at Easter, mother, and I have made up my mind to go with him. He is only going to utilise his holiday for perfecting himself in the language; but I'll likely stay all winter. Aunt Leesbeth bade me spend some of her money in going to Germany,' John said at length.

'Did she know anything about your state of mind?'

'Yes; we had a long talk that day she died.'

'Does Agnes know?'

'No, Agnes does not know,' John answered; and his mother saw his face change.

'Have you never thought that that might be a barrier between you?'

'I do not believe it would. Her charity is large enough,' John answered quickly. 'There is no narrowness about *her* creed.'

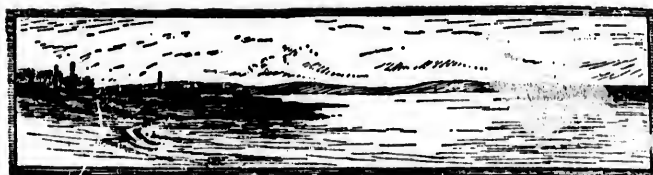
'No; but her faith is a great deal to her. It is her very life. Do you think for a moment, John, that a woman like Agnes could be happy with a husband who, while he did not openly ridicule or meddle with her religion, utterly denied it? That would be how you would stand towards each other.'

'I do not believe it would come between us,' John said passionately. 'We could be happy without that.'

'*You* might; I do not know. *She* would not. If she had to keep her inner sanctuary veiled from you, it would break her heart. She has high ideals, John. Marriage for her must be perfect oneness of soul, or nothing. Dearly as I love you both, and fervent as is my wish to see you husband and wife, I could not rejoice to see you married unless that obstacle were removed.'

John smiled. That, to him, seemed no obstacle. If Agnes loved him, as he hoped and believed, he would enter upon life's journey with her without a misgiving or a doubt. Youth claims freedom as its heritage, and deems its love omnipotent.

Experience, with large, wise eyes, looks on and prays.



CHAPTER XXI.

'I am so home-sick in this summer weather!
Where is my home upon this weary earth?'



LONG string of cabs, with a sprinkling of private carriages, stood before the door of 38 Arundel Mansions. Lady Culross was giving an 'At Home' in honour of her young friend, Miss Agnes Laurie. Her rooms, being on the first floor, were larger and more imposing than those occupied by the Lauries; nevertheless their capacity was strained to the utmost limit, and there was not an inch of available space. It was Lent week; and though Lady Culross explained to Agnes that all the best people were out of town, she had managed to gather together a large assemblage. Lady Culross was in her element, her *protégé* scarcely so. The crowd bewildered her; and there was something besides,—she felt that she was being introduced to people under false pretences. She repeatedly heard the words 'Mearns Castle,' and knew that Lady Culross, in all good faith, was airing what she believed to be true, that her young friend belonged to one of the best Scottish families. To a person of Agnes Laurie's strong principles and absolute truthfulness, such a thought was intolerable. It robbed her manner of its wonted ease and grace; it was evident even to the unthinking butterflies, who uttered their complimentary speeches, that she was either very awkward and shy, or very stiff and unpleasant.

Neither William Laurie nor Sir Gilbert were present at the earliest stage of this entertainment: there were, indeed, very few gentlemen, the set with which Lady Culross's son was most intimate not being, as a class, given to attending afternoon teas.

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Lady Culross had a wide acquaintance, though not in the best society. Her husband's people, well born and well connected, had absolutely and persistently ignored her since the day she entered their family. Not being of gentle birth herself, she had no friends within the magic pale of what the world calls 'society.' She had therefore been obliged to seek friends for herself; and these were not difficult to find. There were many to whom her title was dazzling, and who were glad to pay court to her in order to have the name of 'dear Lady Culross' on their visiting-list. Then she was so thoroughly amiable, that it was impossible not to be attracted by her. Even those who laughed at her little vanities respected her for her kindness of heart. She was the queen of the social circle in which she moved, and was perfectly happy in it, although it was several degrees removed from the high plane upon which the other branches of the Kilmeny family stood. As was to be expected, Lady Culross's crowd of admirers and sycophants were ready to fall at the feet of the aristocratic-looking young lady she had taken under her wing. It amused Agnes a little, but also wearied her. It was as hollow and unreal as the soap-bubbles the children blow away in the sunny air. About five o'clock the atmosphere of the rooms became very heated, even though the windows were wide open: the day was so close and sultry, that scarcely a breath of air was stirring. The musicians whom Lady Culross had hired to amuse her guests, had performed their last piece, greatly, it must be confessed, to their own and their listeners' relief. It was no easy task to sing or to listen in that noisy and close atmosphere. Talk was at its height, and the people seemed to be enjoying themselves best during the few minutes left before the entertainment broke up. Lady Culross, attired in a very gay, light-coloured silk, was the centre of an eager, admiring throng. Agnes was by her side,—a slim, girlish-looking figure in white, a silver girdle clasping her slender waist, and silver bracelets of the same exquisite workmanship on her round, white arms. Her golden-brown hair was gathered up behind with two massive silver pins; her whole appearance was winning and striking in the extreme. The ornaments were her chaperon's gift; but Agnes had chosen her own dress, and

it became her well. She had not much to say for herself in the midst of that gay throng; her face, even in the merry chatter going on about her, wore a far-off expression, and her eyes had depths in them which memory haunted. A close observer could have told at once that her heart was far away. So thought one, an uninvited guest, who slipped into the drawing-room a few minutes before five, and stood just behind the door, half-hidden by the tall, drooping leaves of a palm. No one paid any heed to him; and it was only when the guests began to leave that he felt himself observed. He walked forward then, right up the long room; and while Lady Culross was busy shaking hands with the parting guest, Agnes saw him. Then her listlessness vanished, the colour leaped to her cheek, the light to her eyes,—for it was one who could bring her news of home. She abruptly left the gentleman to whom she was speaking, and approached the stranger with outstretched hand.

‘Oh, Mr. Robertson, I am so very glad to see you! When did you come? How good of you to seek me out!’

Philip Robertson could not but smile. There was no mistaking the warmth of his welcome; no mistaking, either, the loyalty of Agnes Laurie’s heart. ‘I came this morning. It is our Easter recess, you know. I lost no time in coming to inquire for you. They assured me downstairs that Lady Culross would be delighted to see me if I was a friend of yours. As I am the uninvited guest, you must present me. Which is Lady Culross?’

‘She will be here presently. Of course she will be delighted to see you. Nobody could be kinder than she,’ said Agnes breathlessly. ‘Do come and sit down, and tell me everything about dear Laurieston. To think you saw it only yesterday!’

‘Not yesterday,’ he said gently, smiling down into the beautiful face, roused from its apathy into new and exquisite life. ‘I spent last Sunday at Laurieston, however. They do not know I am here. I ran up on a little business: I return by the mail to-night. Of course you know Jack and I are going off to Leipsic next week?’

‘Yes, I knew that. But how did the exams. come off? How have the boys done?’

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'Splendidly, as we expected. John is an honours man all round. Michael has done well, too.'

'Oh, how glad I am! Uncle Michael will be pleased.'

'He is certainly pleased with Michael's success.'

'And John's also, surely?' she said inquiringly. And Robertson, seeing she knew nothing of the breach between John and his father, only answered,—

'Well, yes, he must be. He is the most distinguished student of his year. But how are *you*? Well and happy, I trust? I should like to carry back a good account of you.'

'I am very well, and—and—yes, you may say I am happy, I suppose. I have everything I can desire. I should be ungrateful if I were discontented; but London is not Laurieston.'

'You are changed,' he said, with an abruptness of manner which surprised her.

'How? Not for the worse, I hope?' she asked, with a slight smile, which had not a touch of coquetry in it.

'No. I should not dare to say what I think, or you would read me one of your sweet, serious lectures. Those were pleasant Sunday afternoons under the hawthorn at Laurieston, Miss Agnes.'

Her soft eyes filled; the proud, sweet mouth quivered; and he saw he had touched a tender spot. He was perfectly satisfied for his friend's sake. The woman John loved was absolutely true.

'My love, where are you?' Lady Culross's chirruping voice broke the spell. 'Come, you must bid good-bye to the Tremaines. But, my dear, who is this? I beg pardon,—a stranger, I think?'

'Yes; a gentleman from Scotland, a very old friend of my dear friends there. May I present him to you? Mr. Robertson, Lady Culross.'

Lady Culross had her sweetest smile and her kindest word for the stranger from Scotland. But while she gave him her effusive greeting, the sharp eyes behind the double eye-glass were taking him in from top to toe; and her scrutiny being satisfactory to herself, her manner gained in cordiality.

'Mr. Robertson will stay, my love, and have a quiet cup of tea after the crowd has gone; then you can talk to your hearts'

content. Excuse me, Mr. Robertson, if I steal Miss Laurie for a moment. There are some friends, just leaving, dying to make an engagement for her to spend a long day at Henley. Pray find a seat, and we shall be back to you directly.'

Just as the last guests were departing, William Laurie and Sir Gilbert entered the room.

'We owe you a thousand apologies, Lady Culross,' said the former impressively. 'We hoped to be in time, but positively this boy would not hurry.'

'Not likely,' laughed Sir Gilbert. 'Kettledrums are not in my line, and the old lady knows it. But, I say, who is this?' he added, staring blankly at the dark stranger standing at one of the open windows.

'Oh, papa,' said Agnes quickly, 'this is Mr. Robertson, a student friend of Mr. Maitland's sons. He had only an hour or two to spare in London. It was so good of him to call for me.'

'Very good indeed,' said William Laurie dryly, and acknowledging the stranger by the slightest inclination of the head; 'and very good of Lady Culross to receive Mr. Robertson on so slight an introduction.'

Agnes flushed painfully. The tone and manner were even more offensive than the words.

'Lady Culross was good enough to assure me I did not intrude, Mr. Laurie,' said Philip Robertson, not in the least disconcerted by the rudeness of William Laurie's reception; 'but as I have satisfied myself that Miss Laurie is well, I can take back with me a good account to the friends at Laurieston.'

'I beg, sir, that you will do nothing of the kind,' retorted William Laurie sharply. 'These people, who were paid for their attention to my daughter, have no right to pry into her present circumstances. If they have sent you here for such a purpose, you can tell them so, with my compliments.'

The colour left the face of Agnes, and she grew quite white. A slight smile, full of meaning, curled Philip Robertson's lip; and, with a fine ease and indifference, he turned his back and addressed himself to Lady Culross, who had now entered the inner room, though not in time to hear either William Laurie's insulting speech or Robertson's reply.

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'So you have come from Scotland?' she said airily, and with a perfect cordiality, for she saw at once that Robertson was a gentleman. 'And what do you think of my sweet girl? Confess, now, that she has vastly improved? Agnes, my love, come and make tea for your friend. And where have you two naughty boys been all day? Shame not to honour my friends with your presence! I do not know which to scold most vigorously.'

Agnes moved to the tea-table with a swift step. But for the entreating look in her eyes, Robertson would have left her at once. He saw, moreover, that she was anxious to speak with him, and so, ignoring the scowl on William Laurie's face, he followed her to the other side of the room.

'I must apologise for my father, Philip,' she said, in a low voice, and he saw her hands tremble as she touched the tea-cup. 'Do not, I beg of you, say anything of it at home. I cannot think he means what he says. He may have been annoyed outside. I assure you I am very happy,—as happy as I can be away from Laurieston. You can see for yourself how kind a friend I have in Lady Culross.'

'Do not apologise, Miss Agnes; and you may trust me perfectly,' he said, with an earnest look which went to her heart. He was unspeakably touched by her whole demeanour. If not unhappy, she was at least out of her element. There could be nothing in common between her and the fashionable, somewhat dissipated-looking man she called father. Robertson had a singularly clear penetration, and in these few moments had accurately gauged the character of William Laurie. He felt towards Agnes as to a dear sister, and more,—she was the woman John loved. If he had never seen her till now, that alone singled her out among women for him.

'They are feeling a little at Laurieston that you do not write oftener,' he said, in a low voice.

'I know; but I cannot. Tell Aunt Maggie that I have so little to write about that she would care to hear, that I have not the heart. Surely she knows that I have not forgotten'—

Her voice broke, and there was a moment's painful silence. The sight of a familiar face, a hand stretched to her from the

old time, had robbed her of her self-control. Her father watching, hawk-like, from the other end of the room, where kind Lady Culross held him fast, saw that she was moved, and his anger was kindled. But he did not again interfere. He knew that to try Agnes too far was not wise. More than once already she had asserted herself fearlessly, to his total discomfiture. He was learning that his daughter, amenable to gentle leading, would not drive. Ambition and self-interest were making a wily plotter of William Laurie.

'Lady Culross is kindness itself, and I cannot but love her,' continued Agnes. 'Indeed, without her I could not live. But I am very desolate, Mr. Robertson. I feel that there is some purpose hidden in my father's heart concerning me. Heaven help me! I cannot trust him. I am beset continually with misgivings and fears.'

'Leave him, then, Agnes,' said Robertson impulsively. 'Return to those whose love you have proved.'

'Not yet,' she said, with a slight shake of her head. 'It is only at times my heart sinks. Sometimes I am happy, and believe that I am of use to my father. Tell Aunt Maggie that I have found duty harder than I anticipated, but that I hope a blessing follows me. Excuse me if I ask you to go now. I see that, for some reason or other, your presence is not welcome to papa. It has done me a great deal of good to see you. It is like a bit of home.'

She held out her hand. But for those present he would have raised it to his lips.

'John will meet me to-morrow morning; I intend to wire to-night. Have you any message?'

Her colour rose a little, but her eyes met his frankly.

'No special message. He knows—they all know—that I have never forgotten them, and that I am sustained in this unreal and trying life by the hope of coming back.'

'Good-bye. May all good attend you, and all your heart's desires be fulfilled,' he made answer, and, after a brief adieu to the other occupants of the room, took his leave.

But Philip Robertson's heart was very heavy concerning Agnes as he went his way.

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CHAPTER XXII.

'To me—a woman—bring
Sweet waters from affection's spring!'

NOW, Agnes, please to tell me who that fellow was. He had the cool assurance of a lord. What did he want here?'

The Lauries were in their own drawing-room, after the 'at home' was over.

'There is nothing more to tell, papa. He is simply a college friend of the Maitlands; and, passing through the city on business, was perfectly justified in coming to see me.'

'I don't think so. It was a confounded piece of impertinence for him to intrude himself, unasked, among Lady Culross's guests. Although she is the soul of good-nature, there is no reason why her kindness should be abused.'

Agnes made no answer.

She was sitting in a basket-chair at the open window. Beyond the wide street the green tree-tops in the park were waving in the gentle April wind. Spring had spread her benign mantle on the earth,—all things were lovely and full of promise. Some human hearts were sad, but there was no sadness in nature's happy face.

'It seems to me, after all my efforts,—after the unprecedented kindness of Lady Culross and Sir Gilbert,—you are so ungrateful that you prefer these Maitlands to us,' said William Laurie harshly.

'I thought we agreed, papa, that we should not speak of them,' Agnes said quietly, but without withdrawing her eyes

from the waving tree-tops, which seemed to touch the tender sky. These things comforted her. There is no reproach, no harshness in nature's moods. She has a benign and healing touch for those who love her,—a sympathy with humanity's care. The divine is hid in her breast. Through the winds and the waves, in the sun's strong shining, in the mercy of the rain, God speaks to His children. Happy are they to whom these voices are familiar, who in nature find nature's God. There was comfort, ay, and strength for the tired heart of Agnes Laurie in the gentle, rhythmical movement of these leafy boughs. William Laurie was disappointed in his daughter. She was not pliable. He could find no fault with her conduct towards him. It was perfect: so high was her ideal of duty, that she sank her own desires and inclinations, and knew no wish but to please him,—save when conscience bound her, and then she was impregnable as the fortress on Gibraltar Rock. She was gentle and quiet in her objections to go to certain places and do certain things he asked, but he had found her absolutely unchangeable. His nature, lowered and debased by evil associations, was inclined to tyrannize over the weak. He had the desire to coerce Agnes; but it is not easy in this nineteenth century to coerce a young woman whose physical and mental attributes are singularly strong. Then her high and beautiful character—her pure, proud soul—held him in awe. He did not understand her. She would not be bullied; she never overwhelmed him with tears and reproaches. She was habitually gentle and kind, solicitous for, and attentive to, his comfort, yet holding her own position with a perfect fearlessness. His object in bringing her to London was to marry her to Sir Gilbert Culross, and so secure for himself independence and ease. He had a hold upon the weak youth, and guided his dealings on the turf with advantage to them both; but he did not know how long such a hold might last. It was precarious, and Sir Gilbert was daily growing older both in years and experience. The idea had occurred to him, that to marry him to his daughter would be the best card he had ever played in his life. He had not taken into account any possibility of the girl declining the honour of such an alliance.

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He remembered her in her young girlhood,—a timid, reserved creature, who had little to say for herself. Her mother had been weak, submissive, and amenable always to his slightest whim. But, to his discomfiture, he found his daughter a different person to deal with. He was baffled. His only chance lay in her evident love for Lady Culross. He felt that his own influence over Agnes was of the slightest. Then Sir Gilbert himself was such a fool. He was without doubt attracted to Agnes, but had no idea how to set about winning her. The little graces and courtesies which so commend their possessor to the heart of a refined woman, were undreamed of by the weak master of Kilmeny. Such was the position of affairs when Agnes had been two months in London.

‘Well, I have kept my part of the bargain,—I have never spoken their name since you came; but when they obtrude themselves upon us, it is time to speak.’

‘Papa, why are you so unjust,—so hard?’ asked Agnes, turning her grave, sweet eyes on his face. He never could meet that clear gaze; it made a coward of his soul.

‘I am not. I am sure no parent could indulge a child more than I indulge you,’ he said, in rather an injured voice. ‘Do you not believe, after the experiences of the past two months, that I have only your best interests at heart?’

‘You have been most kind; but there is something unreal and unsatisfactory about our life. Do you never feel,’ she asked, looking him again straight in the face, ‘that in the midst of all this gaiety and pleasure-seeking we have no home, nor any true peace of mind?’

‘I confess it suits me very well, while it lasts,’ he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. ‘But it is a question how long it can last. Of course, you know I am not a rich man. The price of Hallcross can’t hold out for ever.’

‘Papa,’ said Agnes, and distress sat on her face, ‘that is what troubles me most of all. I know that you are not rich, and that you have not even a settled income, however small, to depend upon. It seems to me an awful thing that in such precarious circumstances we should be living as we do. After the money is all gone, what is to become of us?’

'Oh, something will turn up. I consider this expenditure in the meantime a safe investment. I have given you a position, Agnes, such as you could never have had if we had been content to grub along in a quiet way.'

Agnes said nothing for a moment, only wondered what that position was. As it depended entirely on Lady Culross, it was about as precarious as their means. She was very unhappy. The sordid cares of life, she felt, were weighing down her higher aspirations. She was perfectly conscious that the desire to know exactly whether they were living off honest money was now greater than any other. The fear lest, unknown to herself, she was eating bread and wearing apparel to which she had no right, was ever present with her like a nightmare. It was a curious and torturing experience through which she was passing. She sat up suddenly, and looked at her father again, as he leaned up against the cabinet with his hands in his pockets,—the picture of idle ease and indifference.

'I don't see, papa, what can be the end and aim of it all,' she said, with her steadfast, earnest look. 'Oh, will you not take a little house somewhere, in which we can live in a quiet way, and feel that we have a home? I am so willing to work, papa: I could teach, or paint, or something, to earn money to help. It would be no hardship to me, only the greatest happiness. I am very unhappy here. I had hoped so much that we would be so much to each other. It is all so different from what I expected. Think over it, dear papa; and let us go very soon. I cannot bear to think that we are spending precious money in this wasteful life, for which there is no need; I am quite sure,' she added hurriedly, for she saw her father's face harden, 'that Lady Culross would make no difference, and you would still have your friends.'

'It won't do,' he answered abruptly. 'You don't know what you are speaking about. You would be the very first to miss the luxuries and attractions of the society to which Lady Culross has introduced you. I repeat what I have often said: you must allow me to be the judge of what is best for myself and you.'

Agnes sank back in her chair, heart-sick and disappointed.

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She could not say that she did not trust him,—that her life was rendered intolerable by the harassing care of the present and fear of the future. In the brief silence which ensued, William Laurie tried to decide whether it would be wise to tell his daughter plainly, and at once, what was his intention and desire concerning her. He pictured to himself the flushing of that pale face, the indignant light in the honest eyes, the few but seathing words which might fall from her lips. He feared it would not be wise. It might precipitate matters, and hasten her, perhaps, to a decision which might dash all his hopes to the ground. No; he must wait, and trust to time and to Lady Culross.

‘Has Lady Culross said anything to you about going to Kilmeny with them next month?’

‘She is always speaking of it, papa,’ Agnes answered listlessly.

‘It will be a splendid holiday for us, Agnes; we couldn’t afford to leave London for a breath of country air. You will be charmed with Kilmeny. It is a veritable castle-by-the-sea, standing on a rocky headland jutting into the Irish Sea. I was down last year for a few days’ shooting on the moors.’

‘Then you have said we will go, papa?’ asked Agnes.

‘Of course. It is impossible that we can miss such an opportunity. Really you are a very unsatisfactory kind of being, Agnes. Most girls would go wild at the prospect.’

A fleeting smile dawned on the girl’s grave lips.

‘Perhaps I am different from other girls. I don’t know many, papa. But I do know I cannot bear to take so much from people. Lady Culross is always giving me. She loads me with favours, which I can never repay.’

‘You may be able to repay all her kindness one day, sooner than you think,’ William Laurie said enigmatically, and sauntered out of the room, leaving his daughter to try and unravel the riddle he had read her. She was not long left alone.

Lady Culross, depressed by the loneliness of her deserted rooms, came fluttering upstairs, seeking her favourite.

‘All alone, my love, and dreaming?’ she said, peeping round the door with all the coquettishness of a young girl; ‘but not, I hope, of the dark-eyed stranger from bonnie Scotland?’

Agnes laughed outright. It was impossible to resist that irrepressible flow of spirits. Lady Culross carried a kind of sunshine with her everywhere.

'Oh, how absurd! No, I was not dreaming at all. Did you meet papa? We have been having a very serious talk. That is all.'

'A serious talk! Never be serious, my love; it makes wrinkles,' said Lady Culross, as she threw herself on the couch. 'Do you know, I am positively fatigued. Did you not enjoy my afternoon, then?'

'After a fashion, yes; but, dear Lady Culross, I have been trying to convince papa that gaiety and I do not agree. But he will not grant my heart's desire, and take me away to some little cottage, where we can be happy together.'

'Very sensible of him, my love. Your father is a man of the world, and knows what is worth having. Why, Nessie, it is positively too bad of you to be hinting at such a thing, after the sensation you have made. Confess, now, that it pleases you to know how very much you are admired.'

'Indeed, Lady Culross, I care nothing at all for the opinion of the people I meet, so far as that is concerned. Every woman, of course, is glad if those she loves think her pleasant to look upon.'

'How beautifully you speak. I do think, my dear, that I never met any one like you. You fill me with amazement and admiration every day.'

Agnes smilingly shook her head.

'It is true,' repeated Lady Culross. 'Do you know, your manner is enchanting. It is perfect in its way. One would think you a princess, at least; you carry yourself with such pride.'

'Pride! I have little enough to be proud of,' said Agnes, with an unusual touch of bitterness.

'You have everything,—youth, beauty, and happy prospects. I cannot understand at all, Nessie, what makes you so *distrain* at times.'

'It is heart-hunger, and a miserable sense of uselessness. Oh, Lady Culross, these are wasted days, and I had hoped to

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do so much good. I came filled with such aspirations,' said Agnes passionately, finding relief in speech. Her heart was overcharged, and must have vent. Lady Culross put her elbows under her dainty head, and looked in quite a puzzled way at her young friend.

'Good, my dear? Why, what do you mean? You are so good that I am quite sure you could not be better.'

Agnes mournfully shook her head.

'Do you never feel what an empty, unsatisfying life this is, Lady Culross? Do you think God ever meant human beings to fritter away so thoughtlessly the precious time He has given them?'

'Oh, my love, you must positively be ill,' cried Lady Culross, in alarm. 'You are talking quite like a revival preacher. You make me quite sad and anxious about you.'

'I hope not, for there is nothing amiss with me except a miserable sense of duty undone and opportunity neglected,' Agnes answered. 'Lady Culross, you and I might do a great deal of good to others in the time we spend upon ourselves.'

'Do you mean, among the poorer classes? I give away a great deal, my love, to charities. I have denied myself a new dress even, to give money away,' said Lady Culross plaintively. 'You make me very uncomfortable, Agnes; but I do not think you mean to be unkind.'

'No, no. I was only judging myself, not you, Lady Culross,' said Agnes quickly. 'But do you never feel that we spend our days in a very purposeless, idle way?'

'We are never idle,' corrected Lady Culross. 'Every hour has something to do. Really, you have made me very uncomfortable, Agnes. I am sure God can't be very angry with me. I never hurt anybody, and I give away a great deal. I go to church regularly, too, and read the Prayer-book when I am not too late for breakfast. If He had meant me to be one of those dreadfully useful people, He ought not to have taken my husband away so soon, and left me to bring up a naughty boy.'

'There is another thing,' said Agnes half dreamily, as her eyes turned again to the tree-branches tossing in the gentle wind. 'In this busy city, among all the crowd and bustle and

hurrying to and fro, heaven seems very far away. I have not felt, since I came, that Jesus is the near and precious Friend He used to be to me, and that is a great sorrow.'

Lady Culross's face wore a mingled look of wonder and awe as she listened to what were to her strange words. A little silence ensued, and there gradually stole over the face of Agnes Laurie an indescribable expression of peace. It seemed to the frivolous woman opposite that she had forgot'en where she was, and entered into communion with the Unseen. A vague yearning stole into the heart of Lady Culross. For the first time in her life she was brought face to face with the emptiness of her existence, and realized that there were things of greater value than the baubles the world counts among its treasures. In a curious flash of memory the years rolled back, and Lady Culross saw herself, a happy-hearted child in a humble home, listening at her mother's knee to the story of the child Jesus. Her heart, long estranged from these holy memories, thrilled at the unwonted emotion. She stretched out her hands to the girl before her, and her trembling lips dropped words which were a prayer:

'Oh, Agnes, I am a miserable, sinful old woman. Teach me how to ask God for His forgiveness. I believe you are the angel He has sent me.'

So Agnes found the harvest ripe for the sickle. In her hour of deep despondency, when her heart and her faith had almost failed, He gave her His work to do.

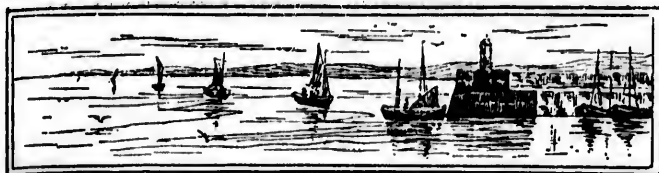


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CHAPTER XXIII

'Ask no more
Than to fulfil thy place!'



AGNES sprang up, all her listlessness gone. Oh, how blind she had been! She had mapped out a way for herself, and, finding it difficult to walk therein, had lost hope of usefulness; and, lo! here her work was lying to her hand. The woman who had given to her all the brightness of her new sphere, the woman whose heart—cruelled as it was by the frivolities and vanities of the world—was filled with loving-kindness and charity, and felt at times the need of something more earnest and satisfying than what the world can give, was asking her help. Her heart uplifted itself in passionate prayer, and, kneeling beside Lady Culross, she folded her hands on her knee and looked up into her face.

'Dear Lady Culross, you too have felt—you feel now—that there is something more required of us than to spend our days in idle pleasure-seeking? Oh, I am so glad we can talk now to each other of better things, and help each other to a better life.'

Lady Culross looked troubled. Her heart was not at rest, and yet she feared that she might be called upon to give up the things which had become necessary to her. There was a certain wistfulness, touching to see, in her manner when she spoke.

'I believe that we—at least I—fall short of my duty, Nessie. Since you came I have thought about things which never used to trouble me. I have thought lately a good deal

about my dear mother, who was not a lady, my dear,—but the best woman, I think, that ever lived. She died when I was quite young; but I can remember how she used to speak. I think, like you, she must have lived near heaven. You remind me of her. Your gentleness and sweetness, your courage to stand against what is wrong, are just like hers. I was left an orphan, Nessie, and I lived for some years with a very harsh aunt, who treated me unkindly. I was glad, in a sense, to marry Sir Gilbert, although he was not a man many young girls would have chosen. I have had a hard life, my dear, and it has not been easy for me to be good. I have had no one to show me the way. Do you think that God, who sees and knows everything, will be as hard upon us as the world is, Agnes?’

‘Oh, Lady Culross, He is not hard at all. He knows everything, and He pities and loves us all the time. If we did not know that, I think sometimes we could not bear to live.’

‘You really believe, then, that God is interested in us, and watches over us always? I wish I could believe that. It would make life easier. There are so many things in it difficult to understand.’

‘Dear Lady Culross, it is so easy to believe—so difficult *not* to believe, I think—when we know how we are cared for. If we wait, we always see the good and the end even of sorrow.’

‘So that is what gives you strength and courage, and that sweet patience which I have so often admired?’ said Lady Culross, looking fondly at the bright, radiant face. ‘My dear, though I have affected not to understand some things, my eyes have been open too. I know that there is a good deal in our life which jars upon you. I know, too, my love, that you are disappointed in your father. Yet he is a good man, as the world counts goodness. I feel very much for you. I do not see anything for you, with your high ideals, but disappointment and pain. It is a very ordinary world, Agnes, filled with very ordinary, selfish people. I fear you will need to accept that philosophically, sooner or later.’

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her manner which Agnes did not like. She had obtained a glimpse of the inner sanctuary, and knew that there beat beneath that frivolous exterior a hungry, yearning human heart, which only the love of God could satisfy.

'There are a great many good, true people too. I wish I could tell you about the best friend I have on earth,—the lady in Scotland, who was more than a mother to me. Oh, if she were only here to talk to you! You remember in the Bible how it says that Enoch walked with God? Mrs. Maitland, I think, walks with God. Oh, she is so good!'

'Is she not a very strange, uncomfortable kind of person to live with?' asked Lady Culross rather vaguely.

A low, sweet laugh broke from Agnes Laurie's lips.

'If you could only see her, Lady Culross. Her face is so sunshiny, and she is so full of fun and happy nonsense. It is she who plans all the enjoyments for the children; and yet she is always ready to help people in sickness and trouble. They come to her from far and near, asking advice and help.'

'She has a husband and grown-up sons! I think you said. They must adore her.'

'They do.'

Lady Culross saw that the girl's heart had fled back to those dear friends and that blessed home. A slight feeling of envy stole over her. She had so few who cared for her. She was jealous over the affection of the girl at her feet.

'I am afraid I am very selfish, Nessie,' she said, with a sigh. 'I had hoped, my love, that you were learning to care a little for me?'

'Oh, I do; I love you dearly,' Agnes answered quickly; and it was impossible to doubt her sincerity. Even Lady Culross was satisfied with the expression on her face.

'Well, you are all *my* sunshine, Agnes Laurie; I thank God for your love,' she said fervently. 'When we go down to Kilmeny, my love, you will help me to do a great deal there. There is so much to be done. If you saw our cottages, you would be horrified. The people are very poor; but, indeed, we are not rich ourselves, for though it is a large estate, there is so much moorland, which brings in no rent. Then Gilbert does



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not take any interest in improving the place. He cares for nothing but horses.'

'I think, Lady Culross,' said Agnes, with a slight hesitation, 'that it would be better for him to stay at Kilmeny.'

'Of course it would. If you would speak to him, Agnes, and try to interest him in other things, I am sure he would heed what you say. I notice he is always pleased when you speak to him. My poor Gilbert! He is not very attractive to young ladies, and he is afraid of being laughed at. That is why he will never join my friends. But you never laugh at him.'

'No, indeed. I could not be so unkind and rude; besides, he is always kind to me.'

'If he had had sisters, or even brothers, Agnes, he would have been different. Surely God will not judge him very harshly? He has not the capacities of others. He *does* lack something, my love. It is a great grief to me.'

Agnes felt deeply sorry for the anxious mother, who for the first time had laid bare her heart concerning her son.

'I hope a great deal from having you with us at Kilmeny. You will try to interest him, Agnes, will you not? Try to think of him as a brother, for my sake,' said Lady Culross anxiously. She had no idea of William Laurie's planning concerning her son. Vain, empty, frivolous woman of the world though she was, her sense of fitness and honour were finer than William Laurie's. She considered Agnes to be far above her son in every respect, and never coupled them even in thought. William Laurie had an inkling of her disposition, which had kept him from openly broaching the subject to her. He had to walk very warily, and to exercise the greatest self-denial and prudence. He hoped great things, moreover, from the sojourn at Kilmeny. He was growing tired of the slow progress his plans were making. It was irksome to him to restrain his impatience, and maintain a pleasant demeanour towards his daughter. Without being conscious of it, she was a continual reproach to him. He knew intuitively that she was distrustful of him, and that his hold upon her was of the slightest. The relations between them were of a strained nature. Both knew that these relations could not long continue. Each

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waited the development of circumstances. It was a very uncomfortable position, especially for Agnes, whose nature was open and candid. She felt that she had failed in her purpose and desire regarding her father. Failure, especially to youth, is hard. But she waited bravely, trying to do her part, following God's leading so far as she could see it, though at times her heart was heavy and hopeless. In her present life she found neither strength nor stimulus for her own soul. It was all battling against adverse circumstances and influences. She knew now how easy it was for those in a Christian home to keep their desires and aspirations holy. They have few temptations. They dwell continually under the shadow of the Rock. It is the burden and heat of the strong sun which tries the traveller. In London, Agnes had many temptations to impatience and resentment, and even anger, such as had never assailed her at Laurieston. Yet out of that sad experience grew a strength and firmness of purpose, which, though she knew it not, were the preparations for the real work of her life. The time came when, looking back, she saw the meaning of it all, and blessed God for these months of discipline.

Philip Robertson thought much of her during that night-journey back to Scotland. She had always interested him as a fine and uncommon type of womanhood. He believed that great possibilities were hid in her being; he had often speculated as to what influence she would ultimately have on the life of his friend. He knew that her religious views were very strong,—their frequent talks at Laurieston had revealed that to him; and he had admired her clear conception of the divine, her absolute faith in the wisdom and love of God, although his reason would not permit him to agree with her. The perfect consistency of her character had also struck him,—he feared, indeed, that the loftiness of her ideals would be a barrier in the way of her happiness with John, should she ever become his wife. John was changeable,—he had not yet come to the maturity of his judgment; he was hasty also, and even dogmatic on points which he would afterwards condemn. Agnes, on the contrary, arrived slowly at conclusions, and held to them. But she had a largeness and breadth of view not common in women, and from that

Robertson hoped much. He was given to analysis of character and motive,—it was a study of which he was passionately fond. No two human beings had ever given him more satisfaction than his friend and the woman he loved. It was a strange thing, that a man of Robertson's strong personality and well-balanced judgment should have been attracted in any degree by a butterfly like Effie Maitland. But the fact remained: he loved the bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked, vain little girl with the love of a life. As the train sped rapidly along the rugged East Coast in the sweet hours of the dawning day, the idea occurred to him that he might alight at Inveresk, and carry the news of Agnes to Laurieston. He had written to John to meet him at Edinburgh. But the chances were that John would be at Laurieston, and so would not receive the letter. He would reach the farm about six o'clock,—not too early for the household to be astir. Accordingly, when the train stopped for a second at the quiet little station, he leaped out, and strode away over the fields to Laurieston. It was a lovely morning, full of that soft, breathing life peculiar to April. The sea slept under a pearly sky; there seemed no motion even where the tide was ebbing. The dews were heavy on blade and leaf, and the air laden with the awakening odours of the spring. The lark's song came pouring from the invisible choristers in space, and the homelier songsters in hedge and tree were not voiceless. The new day was greeted by the full-throated melody of the grateful throng. Robertson took off his hat. The sweet refreshing air was balm after the heated atmosphere he had left. He was deeply sensible of nature's fair attributes, though they stirred in his soul no reverence or adoration for the Creating Hand. The beauties surrounding him were simply a part of a great system, each dependent on the other, and fitting in with amazing and perfect unity. He admired nature as we admire the delicate mysteries of a perfect piece of mechanism made by human hands. And because his eyes were holden, she withheld from him her inner sanctuary, and he knew nothing of that sweet communion which uplifts the soul from the sordid cares of earth and brings it into touch with the divine. He was not aware how much he had lost, nor how lavish is nature of her gifts and graces to the human soul.

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As he swung back the familiar garden gate, he heard John whistling to the dog. He whistled back, and the next moment they were clasping hands, John asking, in amazement, where he had come from at such an unearthly hour.

'Off the train,' answered Robertson. 'It dropped me at Inveresk.'

'Ay; but where did it come from?'

'London. I had to run up,' answered Robertson, smiling a little at the eager look on his friend's face. 'Have you anything to ask me?'

'Lots. But come into the house and get some breakfast. The maids are up.'

'Oh, it's too early. Let's sit down here for a few minutes. It's delicious out of doors this morning.'

'You're a queer beggar, Phil. You never said on Monday you were going, or I might have travelled with you.'

'I never thought of that; but I did not know myself. I have a prospect of an appointment in Leipsic, John. Professor M'Lelland is helping me. He telegraphed for me to come up to London to meet some members of the Leipsic council.'

'What kind of a place?'

'Lecturer in chemistry at the English Academy there. A good place, and will be worth five hundred a year; and then there's the other advantages.'

'You're lucky. I congratulate you, old fellow; but you deserve it. It's awfully good of old M'Lelland.'

'Yes, it is. I haven't got it yet, but I'm almost sure of it. They've only to send some particulars to Leipsic before they appoint me. I've to begin work at once, though, so there's no holiday. Will you go if I have to appear next week?'

'Yes; there's nothing to keep me at home.'

'I wish I had thought of asking you to go up with me on Tuesday; I never thought of it.'

'Why do you wish it so particularly?' Something in Robertson's face made him ask the question.

'Oh, because— I saw Miss Laurie, John.'

'Well?'

The word fell with strange abruptness from John's lips.

'There is not much to tell. She is quite well; but'—

'But what? Can't you speak out?' asked John savagely.
'You know how anxious we all are about her.'

'I don't think she is happy, and the sooner you take her away the better, John,' Robertson answered steadily.

John turned his head away, and neither spoke for a moment.

'How did she look? Did you have a chance of speaking to her?'

'Yes; I had a long talk with her. She looks— I'll tell you what, John: I never saw a more beautiful woman in my life than Agnes Laurie,' said Robertson candidly.

'Oh, I know all that. But does she look unhappy? Do you think that old villain ill-uses her?'

'Oh no; he is too politic for that. I'll tell you exactly what I think, Jack; for I think it's time for you to act. There's an idiot of a baronet there he wants to marry her to; and if I were you, I wouldn't give him even the chance to ask her.'

'It's easy for you to speak. What can I do? What can I offer her? There's Miss Glover's money, to be sure; but it isn't much, and I've nothing of my own. Hang it, man, a fellow must have something to offer a woman,—especially a woman like her. But she might come back to Laurieston.'

'She might,' Robertson answered; and was not surprised when John abruptly left him, and strode away through the fields towards the sea. He had been honest with his friend, because he believed that there was need for immediate action. He did not like what he had seen in Lady Culross's drawing-room the previous afternoon.

He sat still on the garden seat enjoying the freshness of the morning, in no hurry to disturb them indoors. A snatch of song sung in a familiar voice came floating through the open window of the dining-room by and by,—Effie singing over her morning work of attending to the breakfast-table. A curious change came over Robertson's face, and presently he rose and sauntered past the window. When Effie saw him she made a pretty gesture of surprise, and came over to the open window with a beaming smile. Effie was a born coquette, and she

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'Where have you come from? Have you been lodging, like the tramps, in the stable or the barn all night?'

'Scarcely. I have just come from London. It occurred to me, as we came to Berwick, that I should like to drop off here and tell you my news, so I got the guard to stop at Inveresk. I called to see Miss Agnes yesterday afternoon.'

'Oh, did you?' Instantly Effie was breathlessly interested. 'And how is she? Why does she write so seldom?'

'She is very well; only I do not think she likes London so well as Laurieston. I believe she will be back soon.'

'Do you really think so?' Effie leaned her dimpled arms, which were bare to the elbow, on the window-sill, and gave a pathetic little sigh. 'I can't conceive how she is not enchanted with London. When I read about her riding in the Row, and going to every kind of entertainment chaperoned by a real Lady Culross, I find it hard not to be filled with envy. It is slow at Laurieston, you know.'

'I thought there was a great deal of society here, Miss Effie,' laughed Robertson. 'That original, Miss Thorburn, told me once you had thirty-five different degrees of it in Musselburgh.'

'Oh, that is just like the Thorburns. They adore Musselburgh, though they are always laughing at it. Let any one else say a disparaging word, though, and they'll be down upon him. Haven't you seen John? I heard him go down before I left my room.'

'Yes, I saw him.'

'Aren't you famished? Breakfast will be ready directly. Mother is just ready. How awfully good of you to take the trouble to break your journey here!'

'Perhaps I had a selfish motive. I had not seen you for a whole week,' said Robertson daringly; for the sweet, fresh face and the brilliant eyes swept prudence to the winds. Effie blushed, and shook her fore-finger at him playfully.

'No fibs. I am afraid you are one of those very much learned gentlemen who think women have no capacity for anything but silly flattery. I am proof against it, sir, I do assure

you,' she said, sweeping him an absurd little curtsy. In spite of her remonstrances, however, such speeches were the very wine of life to Effie Maitland, and she had not received quite so many since Willie went away.

'It is not flattery, Effie. Perhaps it would be better for me if it were not such serious earnest,' Robertson said gravely, yet with a touch of passion which rather alarmed Effie. She did not want any serious love-making from Philip Robertson, though she liked his admiration well enough.

She was quite glad when her mother's entrance interrupted their talk, and in the little bustle of greeting she retired to her own room to adorn herself a little for her appearance at the table.

Margaret Maitland was not less anxious than John concerning Agnes, and, after Philip went away, she urged him to go up to London at once. She scarcely knew what she feared. John, however, had promised to meet Michael in Glasgow, on his return from visiting a college friend on the Clyde; and, after some talk, it was agreed that he should wait and accompany his friend the following week.

But when John made his call at Arundel Mansions, it was only to find that the Lauries had gone out of town and left no address.



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CHAPTER XXIV.

'We are sent long rounds to gather experience.'



ELL, my love, what are you thinking of? What is your opinion of Kilmeny, now that you see it by daylight?

'I was wondering, Lady Culross, how any one who has a home like this could bear to live in London, or could bear to leave it even for a day.'

'It is bleak and cold, Nessie, though very picturesque,' said Lady Culross, with a slight shiver. 'My memories of it are not conspicuously sweet. Perhaps that accounts for my lack of interest in it. Just look at these wild waves. Do they not make you nervous?'

Agnes smiled and shook her head.

'I love to watch them. Look at that grand monarch coming rolling in, as if he would sweep away the foundations. There is something strength-giving in a sea like that.'

'Look at the sunny gleams over yonder on the green Irish coast,' said Lady Culross, pointing across the angry sea. 'It is always so peaceful and sweet over there. I wonder why the sea frets so here, and why the sun shines upon Kilmeny so seldom.'

Agnes did not for a moment reply. She could not take her eyes from the troubled sea. It enchained both sight and thought. They had arrived late the previous night, and Agnes had no idea what manner of place she had come to, except that it was an ancient turreted castle, about which wind and wave seemed to thunder continually. She had

fallen asleep, lulled by the roar of the sea, although she only discovered by the morning light that the waves washed the castle rock. Kilmeny stood upon a rocky headland a few miles from Kirkmaiden. Its situation was wild and desolate, commanding an uninterrupted expanse of the Irish Sea, and the green outline of the low-lying Irish coast in the distance. It was a rugged and poverty-stricken heritage, for there was nothing but wild moorland immediately round it, the few rent-paying acres being farther inland, and hidden from sight. It was a somewhat lonely and desolate abode; although these very attributes commended it to Agnes Laurie, for whom the ways of cities had no charm. She had acquiesced reluctantly, and with serious misgiving, in the change, but had learned that for peace's sake she must obey her father. She had a strange, unreal feeling, as if she were an actor in some drama. She was waiting for further development—for some crisis which would change all. She knew very well that crisis was at hand. She saw her father's restrained impatience; he had grown more irritable and exacting, less kindly in his manner, towards her. She knew she had disappointed him, she also knew that their present mode of life could not go on. Yet she was calm, waiting with patience and courage for the work of time. She was very happy with Lady Culross, for there was now a perfect confidence between them. It was a strange and touching thing to see the dependence of the elder woman upon the younger. Even these few weeks had wrought a change upon the frivolous woman of the world. Very gradually she began to give evidence in outward things of her desire after something higher than had ever yet interested her. A softened and beautiful earnestness had superseded the old affected manner, and she began to lay aside many of the little artifices and devices with which she had tried to delude herself and the world. As she stood by the side of Agnes that grey May morning, her somewhat colourless face wore a look of peace, and her quiet and simple morning-gown, devoid of offensive display, and the soft lace cap, were infinitely more becoming than her former style of attire. Agnes's quick eye noted and approved these slight changes. She saw that her

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heart, awakened to what is true and earnest in life, shrank from what was false and pretentious. They were very little things, but they meant much to Lady Culross. Agnes knew that, and loved her for her strength of heart. They did not speak very much about the new bond between them; but it *was* a bond, and each felt it. Although so many years younger, Agnes Laurie had long experience of that bright, earnest Christian life, the desire for which was now uppermost in the mind of Lady Culross. So, while the girl had been hopeless and faint-hearted, the beauty of her example, rendered more powerful that it did not obtrude itself, and was never narrowed by bigotry or selfish persistence, had abundantly testified whose she was and whom she served. By conceding a little, which a less large-hearted, generous nature would have refused, she had gained much; she had won the heart of Lady Culross completely, and through that dear human love led her to the divine. I question if ever Agnes herself was conscious of the magnitude of her work. She was not self-seeking or obtrusive, and while firm and unyielding in matters of conscience, her large, sweet tolerance had made her profession a thing of beauty and winning grace. Such an example—not uncommon, thank God! even in this somewhat degenerate age—is priceless: the harvest of such rare souls is rich indeed.

‘There is the gong, Agnes; we must go down,’ said Lady Culross, breaking the silence, and laying her hand affectionately on the arm of the girl at her side. ‘I want to tell you, my love, what a joy it is to me to have you in my own house, and to know that you are glad to be here with me. You will not forget what you promised about Gilbert? If you stay long enough you may interest him thoroughly in the estate. He attends to what you say, Nessie. You will not forget?’

‘No, I will not forget,’ Agnes answered, with an unconscious and beautiful smile. ‘I will ask him this very morning to take me to the cottages you spoke of.’

‘He will do it, my dear; he will be delighted to do it. If you wrap up you can have a delightful drive. I think the sun will come out soon. He ought to shine on you.’

‘Oh, so he will, dear Lady Culross. Oh, there is Sir

Gilbert and papa,' she added, as they passed out into the corridor, from the window of which there was a view of the terrace and garden. 'Papa is looking very well just now.'

'He is very well preserved for his years,' answered Lady Culross; 'you see he has been temperate and careful all his life. That makes a great difference at fifty, my dear.'

'Agnes made no reply. Lady Culross was completely at fault concerning William Laurie. She really believed him to be one of the best of men. He had always shown her respect and kindness, and had been both useful and agreeable to her. He was an accomplished actor, and could assume any rôle to further his own ends. He had so long lived by his wits, that they had become very sharp. He had apparently solved the unsolvable problem of how to live on nothing a year. He certainly looked well and handsome, as he came sauntering up the terrace in a velvet jacket and a jaunty shooting-cap. His appearance and manner gave one the idea of independence and possession. He looked a fitter master of Kilmeny than the tall, loose figure at his side. Gilbert Culross looked up to the corridor window, saw the ladies, and his colour heightened as he gave them an awkward bow. William Laurie gaily kissed his finger-tips, and took Sir Gilbert familiarly by the arm as they turned towards the house.

'Now you have it all your own way here; and remember, my boy, that if you don't use your opportunities it is not my blame,' he said impressively. 'I have agreed to bury myself and my daughter here in the height of the season for your sake. Do you hear?'

'Yes. I'm going to do it,' said Sir Gilbert, with a kind of desperation almost comical. 'You're sure she won't say No, or laugh at me?'

'She won't laugh at you. She's a lady, Gilbert,' said William Laurie loftily. 'Only you must lead up to it gently, and not hurry her too much.'

'I believe she will say Yes. She always speaks so kindly to me,' said the young man, who was very simple and unsophisticated in the ordinary affairs of life. He would never have dared to think of marrying Agnes, had not William

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Laurie gently and gradually suggested it to him. But he was very much in earnest now. William Laurie knew that the matter rested entirely with Agnes; but he was unable, in spite of close watching, to divine the state of her feelings. It was satisfactory to him to know that no letters had passed between her and young Maitland since she left Scotland. That he knew for a fact, having means of ascertaining what letters were sent and received by his daughter. He fully intended, however, speaking on the subject of Sir Gilbert with her that very day.

The first breakfast at Kilmeny was a thoroughly enjoyable meal. It was laid in a small morning-room, which had a south window like the turret,—a quaint little chamber, panelled in black oak, and having a curiously-carved fireplace, with an ingle-nook on either side.

The party were all in good spirits, William Laurie apparently especially so, and many plans were laid for the enjoyment of the next few days.

'Agnes wants to see the cottages on the west side of the Rhynn, Gilbert,' said Lady Culross, when a pause occurred in the pleasant flow of talk. 'I promised you should take her. Is there anything to ride or drive in the stable?'

'Lots of beasts and traps too,' returned Sir Gilbert eagerly. 'But there isn't much to see at Port-na-Cree,—a lot of ruins. I'll take you to Kirkmaiden, if you like, or over to Luce Bay.'

His eyes were full of eager interest, as he looked over at the pleasant young face opposite him at the table.

'I am afraid it is the ruins I am interested specially in,' laughed Agnes. 'I don't feel as if I wanted to see Kirkmaiden again after last night. It looked so dreary in the rain.'

'It's a poky little hole. Well, I'll take you. I'll just go and see what kind of a trap I can get. Are we all going?'

'Oh dear, no,' cried Lady Culross, nodding and smiling. 'Isn't it best to leave young folks to themselves, Mr. Laurie? You and I old fogies will easily pass the time about the castle. I must see what the ruins are like, and all the rest. You will help me, Mr. Laurie?'

William Laurie was delighted. He thought Lady Culross knew how matters stood, and that she was doing her best to further them. His face beamed as he effusively assured her he would be charmed to be of use. This was an unexpected and delightful turn of affairs. With her for an ally, his cause was doubly strong. Never had Gilbert Culross looked so eager and interested over anything outside his stables. In half an hour he was at the door, with the smartest of dog-carts, to which he had harnessed the finest piece of horse-flesh in the stable. Leaving it to the groom, he attended to his own attire, and was ready waiting on the doorstep when Agnes came down. He looked at her admiringly,—the lissome figure in the perfect tailor-made gown, the fresh, sweet face under the dainty brown bonnet.

Yes, Sir Gilbert was very much in love ; and Agnes, perfectly unconscious of it, gave him her frank hand as he assisted her to her seat, and smiled at him, thinking how very much pleasanter and more gentlemanly he was out of London. Agnes looked back and waved her hand as they drove away, not knowing that she was going out to meet the crisis she thought inevitable, though she had certainly never connected it in any way with the Master of Kilmeny.

‘I say, are you all right,—quite warm, and all that?’ he asked kindly, as they faced the cool south wind. ‘There’s some more rugs. I made them put ’em in.’

‘I’m all right, thank you. Oh, what a lovely horse!’

‘Yes, Fan’s a regular beauty. Picked her myself. Say, I know a bit of horse-flesh, if I don’t know anything else. Just look at her action. Not often you see a high-stepper like that on these beastly roads.’

‘The roads are a little rough ; but there’s no need to call them beastly, is there?’ said Agnes, with a little laugh.

‘Well, I won’t, if you don’t like it. I say, it’s awfully jolly to have you down, and to be driving you out like this, isn’t it?’

‘I li’e it very much,’ Agnes answered frankly. ‘What a wild, beautiful country this is! I wonder you care to be away so much from Kilmeny?’

She shaded her eyes with her hand a moment ; for a strong

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gleam of sun shone out just then, and so suddenly and brilliantly that it dazzled her sight. They were driving along a rough hilly road which commanded a full view of the countryside for miles. It was a wild and barren landscape, — long stretches of moorland, brightened with yellow coltsfoot and pink-eyed daisy, with patches of vivid green in the marshy hollows, and glimpses of the grey sea here and there between the shoulders of the hills. Strong lights and shadows played on these rough hill-sides, and the sun lay warm and bright on the low grounds, where there were a few acres under cultivation. The oat fields looked green and fresh that May morning, and on the pasture-lands the lambs were frisking, enjoying the genial warmth of the sun. It had been a long, severe winter, and the spring had crept out tardily over that remote headland. Agnes looked upon the wide prospect with a keenness of enjoyment characteristic of her.

‘Isn’t it splendid?’ she said, taking a long, deep breath of the delicious air. ‘How gloriously bracing it is! It makes one feel intoxicated.’

‘Don’t you mind the wind?’ asked Sir Gilbert. ‘It’s blowing awfully hard on you. Won’t it blow your hat off?’

‘Oh no; it is firm and fast,’ laughed Agnes. ‘Oh, what a broken-down little village, and a funny old church, down in the cleft there between the rocks!’

‘That’s Port-na-Cree,—our place, you know,—the cottages you wanted to see.’

‘Oh, is it? Could we drive down? How do we get to it?’

‘It’s rather round-about. We go behind this hill, and then come in by a low road near the shore. Yes, it’s a miserable hole.’

‘How do the people live?’

‘Oh, they have land; and they fish, I believe. But I really don’t know.’

‘Are they not your tenants?’

‘Well, yes; but I don’t bother with them. MacVail—that’s my steward—sees after them. It’s an awful bore having to do with tenants. They’re always grumbling, and never pay.’

‘They can’t have much to pay if that’s their land,’ said

Agnes soberly, looking at the barren patches on the brow of the cliff, on which a few oat-blades and some stunted turnip-tops were visible.

'It looks poor enough; but I really don't know anything about them.'

'But you ought to know.'

'Do you think so?'

Sir Gilbert looked rather amazed at the suggestion.

'Of course I do. If these are your people, you ought to look after them. Just look at these hovels. Do you think it a right thing for human beings to live in such places?'

'Oh, well, I never thought about it at all.'

'But you ought. You are responsible, in a sense, for the welfare of these people. Don't you think shame for me to look at your Port-na-Cree?'

'Oh, well, I never thought about it. It is rather a disgraceful-looking place,' said Sir Gilbert, a trifle shamefacedly. 'But, you see, I never thought about it, and nobody told me I should do anything.'

Agnes smiled at the simplicity of his reply.

'Did your steward never speak about it?'

'Yes; he sometimes says the houses need to be repaired. But it takes such a beastly—I beg your pardon—such a confounded lot of money to build. But if you think I should do it, I will.'

'Don't you see for yourself?' asked Agnes, pointing to a great rent in the roof of the nearest cottage. 'Just think of that in a storm or in wet weather! How very little respect or affection these people can have for so hard a landlord.'

'I never thought of that. It doesn't matter much, any way, how they feel. But if you think I should repair Port-na-Cree, I'll do it. Tell me what you want.'

Agnes felt a trifle embarrassed by such a pointed application, but did not divine that anything lay behind it.

'Well, if I were you, I would come down here to-morrow, perhaps, and examine every house, and inquire into the circumstances of every person in the place. Then, when I had satisfied myself what was required, I would send workmen at once to repair the ruins. Why, it could be made such a

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picturesque little place! The situation is so unique. Who preaches in the church?

'Nobody now. It's only a mission-station, I believe; and it had to be given up, for the people wouldn't attend. My grandfather built it.'

'What a God-forsaken place it must be!' said Agnes, with a shiver; 'but I believe the people are in such a hopeless temporal state that they can't rise above it. Your blame, Sir Gilbert!'

'Well, I'll tell you what,—we'll just go down now, and you can tell me what should be done,' said Sir Gilbert, bending eagerly towards her. 'Then you can ask them everything. I can't speak to them, you know.'

The colour rose in the girl's sweet face. For the first time a vague sense of discomfort came into her mind. She did not look at him as she answered quickly, 'Oh, that would not do. I have no business with them. It is you who are concerned about them.'

'But you have.' A deep, dark flush overspread the ruddy face of Gilbert Culross, and his mouth quivered; the very hands touching the reins nervously shook. 'If you'll come and live at Kilmeny,—if you'll marry me, I mean,—I'll let you do everything,—build the whole place, if you like; we'll raise the money somehow. Do you hear? I want you to marry me.'

'No, no, I could not!' cried Agnes, almost in terror, for his passionate eagerness half frightened her. 'Never as long as I live, Sir Gilbert. I am so sorry; but I never could.'

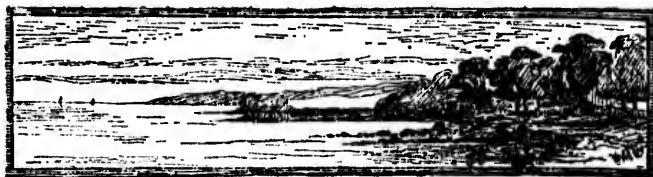
'I'd be awfully good to you!' he pleaded, with a touch of pathos. He was at his best in that moment. All that was manly and good in him was stirred in him, Agnes felt, and her heart was full of pain for him.

'No, no, never,' she said, sadly but firmly. 'It is better to be frank. I could never marry you, Sir Gilbert, though I thank you very much.'

'But Laurie said you would. He told me you were waiting for me to ask you,' he said, in rather a bewildered way.

Then Agnes drew herself up,—distant and haughty and cold:

'My father had no right so to speak; and he knew it, Sir Gilbert. Please to take me home?'



CHAPTER XXV.

‘A heart as dry as summer dust.’

WILL you kindly ask Miss Laurie to come out on the terrace? I wish to speak to her.’

Such was the suave message William Laurie sent by a servant about an hour after the dog-cart had returned to Kilmeny. He had just come from the stable-yard, where Sir Gilbert had poured upon him a bitter volume of invective for having deceived and misled him. Laurie himself, gathering from his passionate words that Agnes had refused him, was in a terrible passion. But he was completely master of himself, and exhibited no trace of anger as he slowly paced up and down the terrace, waiting for his daughter to come down. Lady Culross had driven to Kirkmaiden, and would only return in time for lunch at two o’clock. It was now only noon.

When Agnes received the message, she at once left her own room to obey her father’s summons. She was as angry as it was in her nature to be: her feelings were outraged; her heart filled with righteous indignation. Sir Gilbert’s declaration had made many things plain to her. Her father’s whole course of action was now laid bare; and she felt so bitterly towards him that she was afraid. Oh, this was a strange and bitter way of life, which fostered all that was hard and unlovely in the human heart! She felt this acutely as she went downstairs. But she was quite ready to meet her father. It would be a relief to say plainly what she felt. She stepped out of the wide doorway, and, observing him at the end of the terrace,

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walked forward without the slightest hesitation. She carried herself very proudly that morning: her face was pale, her sweet mouth very grave and resolute. Her father saw no sign of shrinking in her demeanour as she approached.

'Well, my lady, a pretty fool you have made this morning of yourself and me!'

Such was his greeting, and he positively glared at her as he uttered it. She glanced up at the castle windows, and then answered quietly,—

'We had better walk beyond the range of the windows. There is no occasion to give the servants material for talk.'

She walked quickly forward to the end of the terrace, which merged in a thick shrubbery intersected by many winding walks. She turned round then and stood still, lifting her large clear eyes unflinchingly to his face.

'Now we are not observed,' she said, still quietly, though she was inwardly much agitated. 'But you may spare me your blame, papa. It is I who ought to reproach you.'

'Reproach me!' William Laurie's anger overflowed. 'Girl, you are mad, positively mad. Do you know we have not a penny in the world,—not a penny, and I owe Gilbert Culross hundreds of pounds. Who do you suppose has kept us all the season but him? I took his money, as a man will take from his son-in-law. I never believed that your transcendent folly would really let you refuse him. You must go back to him, and eat humble pie. Tell him you will be thankful to marry him. There's nothing for you but Kilmeny or the workhouse,—do you hear?'

Her face blanched, and she laid her hand on the arm of a little garden-chair by which she stood.

'Yes, I hear. But I have the right to choose. Never while I live will I marry Sir Gilbert Culross. Although I am your daughter, you have no right to treat me—ay, and speak of me—as a thing for sale.'

She spoke with passionate bitterness. She felt appalled at her own dark thoughts; but he tried her sorely.

'Then you and I must part, my lady, and you can go back to the peasant, who is more to your liking than the peer,' he said,

with a sneer. 'I brought you to London to give you a brilliant position. I have spent money and time and trouble on you, which it would better have paid me to lavish on a dog. I have no further use for you. We must leave Kilmeny to-night, of course. That idiot can't take his rebuff like a man, and he will not suffer us here. For appearance' sake we can go together from the place, but at the railway station we part.'

So saying, he turned on his heel and went his way.

Agnes sank into the chair and leaned her head upon its arm, totally overcome. She shook from head to foot, like one who had received a great shock. The conflict had been short but sharp, and now it was all over, and she might bid farewell for ever to all her high hopes and bright dreams of usefulness where her father was concerned. He had cast her off. The memory of his words sent the hot blood stinging to her face. He had never loved her; he did not appear to have for her even the natural affection of a parent. He had simply regarded her as an instrument whereby he might further his own ends. And because she had thwarted him,—because she had claimed a woman's right to choose her own lot in life,—he had bidden her go.

In the midst of all her bitterness a sense of relief crept unconsciously, whispering that she was free. Her responsibility was ended, and she could leave the hateful, artificial, pretentious life, against which she had revolted since the day she was introduced to it. Free!—to return to the old home and the true hearts waiting for her there. She sat up, pushed her hair back from her hot temples, and, pressing her hands to her eyes, tried to keep back the tears. But they would flow, a healing stream, which relieved the surcharged heart.

Meanwhile William Laurie had turned away behind the castle, and was pacing to and fro under the trees in the park, trying to form some new plan of action. So Lady Culross found him when the carriage returned from Kirkmaiden. When he heard the roll of the wheels he sauntered out to the avenue, and, looking at the woman sitting in the carriage, a new thought struck him,—an idea which had never occurred to him before.

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'All alone, Mr. Laurie?' she cried gaily, as she lowered her sunshade. 'Have the truants not come back?'

'Oh yes, long since,' he answered, assuming a lightness of spirit he was far from feeling. 'I hope you have had a pleasant outing?'

'Oh, very; but I had to have the carriage closed, it was so windy. Where is Agnes?'

'About the grounds somewhere. It is near lunch-time, I suppose?'

'Not quite. It is only a little after one. Would you like to take a turn? If we could find Agnes, I should like to show you the dungeon and the underground passage close to the sea. A fearful place, I assure you, but very interesting.'

'I should like it of all things, Lady Culross. You will rob it of its terrors,' he answered gallantly.

'Oh, well, we can go now. Let me out, Hardress,' she said to the coachman; and in a moment William Laurie was at her side, waiting upon her with all that kind solicitude of manner he knew so well how to assume.

Lady Culross, accepting it all in good faith, led the way to the mysterious underground regions of the castle, leaning on his arm.

'I consider it to be my duty to tell you what has happened this morning, Lady Culross,' he said, with an admirable seriousness. 'Your son has asked my daughter to be his wife, and she has refused him.'

'Gilbert!'

There was something amusing in the intense amazement of Lady Culross.

'You are surprised, Lady Culross. I confess so was I. But I am deeply disappointed also. I have a great respect and an affection for Gilbert, and I would willingly have given my daughter to him.'

'Oh, Mr. Laurie, it would have been an unequal match. Agnes is far above my son. I admit it frankly, though he is my son; I am not blind to his faults. I cannot conceive how he dared to ask her.'

William Laurie laughed.

'The very weakest of men, Lady Culross, are bold in the office and affairs of love, and Gilbert is by no means weak. My daughter, I regret to say, is not dutiful,—not amenable to parental guidance. She has grievously disappointed me. You know what I have done for her, and how bound up I have been in her welfare and happiness. She has told me over and over again that she is unhappy with me. Not an hour ago she informed me calmly that she wished to return to Scotland. I shall permit her to do so. I wish no forced duty, Lady Culross. I have too much self-respect, even when deeply wounded, to accept it even from my own child.'

Lady Culross was silent, being indeed strangely perplexed. She was not a woman of strong discrimination, and William Laurie's quiet, kind manner was very convincing. She even for a moment felt inclined to blame Agnes, whom she loved and honoured beyond any human being. Perhaps she had been a little hard and unyielding for so kind a father. Such was Lady Culross, bent like the reed with every passing wind. Her companion gathered from the expression in her face what was passing in her mind, and hastened to follow up his advantage.

'Doubtless you are aware that she has left a lover in Scotland, a person in every way unfit for her; but she is very headstrong. I believe she will live to learn her mistake; but I feel that, since her heart has gone from us, her physical presence may go too,' he said, with a fine mingling of firmness and regret. 'I have tried to do my duty by her. The only thing I have to reproach myself with is, leaving her with these self-seeking people during the most impressionable years. I do not know whether you are aware that she lately came into a handsome property through her mother's relatives. She is therefore independent of me. Can you advise me, Lady Culross? I stand in need of the gentle advice of a woman like yourself.'

'Oh, Mr. Laurie, I am very sorry, very sorry indeed,' cried she, all sympathy at once. 'Dearly as I love Agnes, I feel that there is truth in what you say. But it seems terrible that she should prefer strangers to *you*.'

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'No, no,' cried Lady Culross impulsively, 'you have many friends, who will give you true friendship and love.'

'But *that* will not satisfy. The friendship of the crowd will not fill an empty heart, Lady Culross.'

They were standing at the quaint low postern door at the foot of a narrow flight of moss-grown, slippery steps, which gave entrance to the basement of the castle. It was a retired and lonely spot, at the remotest corner of the grounds,—a place so seldom visited by any, that the little path approaching to it was overgrown with grassy turf, in which the pink sea-daisies were coming into bloom. A curious nervousness crept over Lady Culross as she met the intent look in the dark eyes bent upon her. She took a step back, and said a little hurriedly,—

'I do not think I want to face the horrors of the dungeons to-day, Mr. Laurie. Let us go back. We can come again after lunch, or another day, when we have the young people with us.'

'Stay a moment. It is not often I have an opportunity of a quiet word with you,' said William Laurie, touching her arm with impressive fingers. 'I do not know in what words to express the feelings which overwhelm me. It is impossible, however, that you can be unaware what these feelings are.'

'What feelings?' asked Lady Culross timidly. There was something masterful in the man's whole demeanour, even while he spoke with humility and deference.

'My feelings towards yourself. I have tried to stifle them, believing myself unworthy of your regard. Lady Culross, it is but the remnant of a life I have to offer you. But I entreat you to believe that, if you will consent to share it, I will devote it to your happiness alone.'

She looked bewildered, not even yet comprehending the exact import of his words.

'I am aware that there is some disparity in our positions,' he said, with that assumption of respectful humility which some found so flattering, 'but that, I think, your generous friendship has bridged. I trust that I do not presume when I say,

it has long been the dream of my life to make you my honoured wife.' Then Lady Culross's bewilderment vanished, and she laughed,—yes, laughed outright in her suitor's face.

'Oh, Mr. Laurie, how absurd! You and I are too old for love-making, or for making fools of ourselves,' she said, tripping up the mossy steps. 'I would not marry again, not even if a duke were to ask me. I had enough of it in my husband's lifetime. You will not find a bird who has escaped the cage willingly enter it again. I am very much obliged to you all the same, and this will make no difference. I will just believe you were acting a little comedy for me. There is the luncheon bell, so we had better go back.'

So William Laurie's latest castle in the air toppled to the ground.



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CHAPTER XXVI.

'Late, late in the gloamin', Kilmeny can' hame.'



MICHAEL MAITLAND the younger was sitting under the thorn-tree on the lawn at Laurieston, with an open letter in his hand,—John's first letter written from Leipsic, full of glowing description of the quaint old university town. He had read it through, and was thinking over it as he looked away over the emerald fields to the blue sea, shimmering under the May-day sun. It was one of the brightest of May days, and, though the wind blew from the treacherous east, the sun tempered it, and Michael, lying on the soft warm turf, forgot that the east wind, even in its most seductive guise, was his natural enemy. His cap was off, and his fair hair lay on his high white brow, where the blue veins were perhaps too visible, their delicate tracing too clearly defined. Michael's face was thinner,—the winter's work had told upon him, and after the strain of the examination was over he was glad to be at home to rest. They were very indulgent to him. Effie carried his breakfast up to his room every morning, and sat on the bed carrying on her gay chatter. Nobody disturbed him when he lay down on the 'wee room' couch for an after-dinner nap; they did not seem to think that, even after a hard winter's work, a vigorous young man ought not to have been so thoroughly spent. Had they even compared him with John, whose work had been exactly the same, a touch of anxiety might have warned them. John was like a young lion, upon whom lack of sleep in close study had no effect. Perhaps they were used to Michael's more womanish

ways, and so did not alarm themselves at Laurieston; but there were some outside who shook their heads, and said they did not believe that Michael Maitland would ever live to be a licentiate, much less a placed minister, in the Church of Scotland.

'Poor old Jock,' said Michael to himself; and, turning back the page, read over again a paragraph which had specially interested him.

'You would enjoy this life immensely, Mike. We've got to know a lot of fellows already. They're a very free, unconventional set. Last night there were five or six of them in our room, and if you had heard the talk. It was a feast of reason and a flow of soul. The hair of the orthodox would stand on end if they could hear the freedom with which religious questions are dealt with here. It is curious experience, Mike, for one who has had certain matters represented to him as objects for faith, suddenly brought face to face with a freedom of thought like this. What we have been taught to believe as infallible and untouchable certainties, are here handled as if they were mere mathematical problems, soluble by the human understanding. Priestly's arguments, which deny the existence of the mind or soul in man, are in favour here; and indeed, old fellow, the multitudinous dogmas and philosophies are so confusing, that one is glad to hold on to anything, even the ascendancy of matter,—certainly it is only matter,—which is perceptible and impervious to doubt. I am trying to keep my mind open and unprejudiced. I did not take part in the discussion; only listened and tried to judge impartially. I feel, however, that my sojourn here will be of great mental and moral import to me. Either it will strengthen my doubt, —though I don't want to become a disciple of rationalism,—or it will make me dissatisfied with philosophy as a substitute for Christianity. I want to grasp something. This uncertain wavering state of mind is horrible. I want to be at the truth. If it should be *your* truth, Mike, I should be glad; only I must be convinced that it *is* truth. I am honest in my search after it. So far, I have comprehended the spirit of true philosophy.'

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words, so like John,—when his father came round the gable of the house and joined him on the lawn.

‘Get up, my man; the dew lies long under the thorn-tree,’ he said kindly, and his eyes softened as he looked upon the delicate, refined face of his second son. ‘Well, what hae ye? Is it a letter frae John?’

‘Yes, father.’

Michael raised himself on his elbow, and passed the letter over. He did not believe John intended that letter for his father’s eyes, but thought it best that there should be nothing hidden, and that his father should understand exactly how John stood in matters spiritual as well as temporal.

Michael felt the narrowness of his father’s creed, but it did not irritate and chafe him as it did John. His nature was not less enthusiastic, only it was tempered by a boundless loving-kindness and charity inherited from his mother. It was no task, but a pleasure for Michael to be unselfish and generously tolerant.

Laurieston read the letter from beginning to end, and passed it back without a word. Only, his face was more grave and stern than it had been before he began.

‘Isn’t it an interesting letter, father?’ asked Michael cheerfully. ‘John writes so vividly and naturally.’

‘It seems to me, lad, that if he could drift any further awa’ frae guid, he’s gane straight to the best place. Freedom o’ thocht, indeed! Upsettin’ haverils! I wonder the Almighty doesna send a judgment on them for their presumption.’

Michael’s sweet face clouded a little at the harshness of his father’s tone.

‘I don’t like to hear you say that John has drifted away from good. It is his very earnestness of desire after truth which blinds him. I am sure a better fellow than John does not live.’

‘It is fitting for ye to speak well o’ him, Michael. Ye hae been laddies thegither a’ your days. But I put it to you, trusting to your fair judgment: Is it no’ the height of presumption for miserable sinners like oorsel’s to question into the deep things of God?’

‘Father, I do not believe that God is angry with His

creatures, though they desire faith to stand in the light of reason. The very faculties they exercise in their inquiries He has given them; and if they search into religious questions with a prayerful earnestness, it cannot be sinful.'

Laurieston shook his head.

'I hope, I hope, that I winna live to see twa sons deny their Creator.'

Michael laughed—a genuine, hearty laugh—in the very face of his father's extreme solemnity, which showed that he did not dread him, or even stand in awe of him.

'You are quite morbid, dad,' he said carelessly, as he folded his arms under his head and uplifted his face to the sunny sky. 'I would as soon think of denying that the sun shone now, as denying my Creator. You need not fear for my faith, father; it is unshaken. But you misjudge and misunderstand John altogether. I'm glad we have this chance of speaking about him. There is not a more reverent soul on earth than his, and it is an agony to him that he *must* doubt. I am sorry for him just now; but I am just as sure that he will come out unscathed, as I am sure your fishing-boat, making for Morison's Haven, will get safely into port in half an hour.'

Laurieston looked incredulous.

'I like not the way he writes about it; and if he be truly seeking after righteousness, what for did he leave off all holy ordinances and become a Sabbath-breaker?'

'He was not a Sabbath-breaker, father,' retorted Michael hotly, for he felt that the old man was unjust. 'It was because he was so honest and straightforward that he left off going to church. I do not defend him for that. I only say it was quite in keeping with his thought. It is better, I think, to be an honest doubter, who has the courage of his opinions, than a religious hypocrite; and I fear there are plenty of them both in Inveresk and in other kirks.'

Laurieston had no chance against his son's quiet but telling words. He could only shake his head in silence, not at all convinced in his own mind that even Michael was orthodox.

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'You could never have kept Jock on the farm, father; and it would have been a shame for him not to get to the University. He has a splendid intellect, a massive understanding, old Professor McLelland told me,' said Michael, with a smile. 'You'll be proud of John yet, father,—may be after I'm forgotten.'

There was no special meaning in Michael's last sentence, nevertheless it sent a chill to his father's heart.'

'*You* forgotten! Na, na, my man. You'll be Moderator of the General Assembly yet.'

Michael shook his head.

'Unless I change my views, I'll never be a minister in the Established Church at all. Oh, I say, who is that at the gate? Why, bless me, dad, it's Agnes!'

In a moment Michael was on his feet. Laurieston rose also, and turned an astonished face to the garden gate, through which a slight woman's figure had just entered. She did not observe them just then. She was looking towards the house, and the expression on her face the two who saw it never forgot. Yes, it was Agnes; changed in some indefinable, indescribable way, and yet the same, sweet, gracious, dear woman whose place at Laurieston had never been filled. Michael saw his father's rugged face twitch, and he hung back himself when the old man took a step forward. Perhaps Michael himself did not care just then to meet Agnes, the woman who was enshrined in his heart in a deep, undying, but hopeless love. Hopeless, because she belonged to John, and because Michael believed they were made for each other. So he had buried his love, and rejoiced loyally in the beautiful development of their affection, not taking to himself any credit for his utter abnegation of himself. To have even shadowed their happiness by a hint of his pain, would have seemed to Michael unworthy and unkind. He saw the colour leap in the face of Agnes at sight of his father; and she held out both her hands, with a certain wistfulness in her sweet eyes which revealed much to Michael. He knew, even in that first look, that she had borne the cross since she went away.

'Uncle Michael, I have come back, as you bade me,' he heard her say. 'I have no other home in the world but Laurieston now.'

'Laurieston never spoke, but folded his arms about her and kissed her brow. Then he took her hand upon his arm, and led her towards the house. On the threshold he stood still and looked down into her eyes:

'Bairn, the sun has shone but seldom since ye gaed awa. Ye canna come in unless ye have come to bide.'

'I have come to bide,' she answered, with a trembling smile. 'Oh, there is Michael, dear Michael! How pleasant it—is it to see him again! You see I have not stayed very long away. Like the prodigal, I have come back to the father's house.'

She laid her hand in Michael's, but with the other clung fast to Laurieston himself. She seemed to find strength in the touch of his arm, assurance in the kindly eye, which was dim as it looked upon her face.

'I'm glad you have come to bide, as father says,' said Michael cheerily, for he saw that a cheery word was needed. 'Mother, mother, where are you? Here's a Wandering Jew for you.'

'Bless me, laddie, what a din!' Margaret Maitland cried from the dining-room, where she was looking over her milk accounts. 'If you would come in and run up my figures for me, my man, it would set you better than sleeping under the thorn all afternoon.'

Agnes let go her hold on Maitland's arm, and crossed the threshold of the house once more. None followed her as, with swift step, she crossed the hall and entered the room. Mrs. Maitland, sitting with her account-books at the table, thought the light foot was Effie's, and spoke without looking up:

'Just run your eye over this, Effie. I am tired with these weary figures. Agnes taught me a bad lesson when she was here. I have found all the things I used to do before she came irksome since she went away.'

'Aunt Maggie, I have come back, and'— But there was no more said, for Agnes was kneeling at her feet, with her head hidden on her knees, shaking from head to foot.

'Nannie, my bairn, is it really you? Where have you come from? My dear, dear bairn! Is it really you?'

Agnes never spoke, but clung to her as if she would never let her go. Then Margaret Maitland raised the slight figure in her tender arms, and, holding the dear face between her two hands, looked into it with loving, questioning gaze.

'Have you come back, my bairn, to be our bairn for good?' she asked.

'Yes, Aunt Maggie, if you will take me. I have nobody in the world but you,' she answered; and though her eyes were quite dry, there was a wistfulness and pathos in her whole demeanour, which told Margaret Maitland that Agnes had been through deep waters since she went away from Laurieston.

'I have nothing to ask, my darling. Nothing to say, except that we are blither to have you back than you can be to come. The place has not been like itself since you went away,' she answered; and the motherly smile and look of love completely satisfied Agnes Laurie's heart. The old love had undergone no change; her place in that dear home was waiting for her; her welcome was sweeter even than she had dared to hope for. Hope, which had been almost quenched, bloomed again in the girl's tried heart. Then they all trooped in, Effie flying downstairs with her boisterous greeting ready. There was nothing wanting to convince Agnes Laurie that she was welcome home. When she went upstairs to her old room, Mrs. Maitland followed her and closed the door.

'Could you sit down now, Aunt Maggie, and I will tell you in as few words as possible what has happened?' Agnes said, with something of her old self-possessed, serene manner.

'My lamb, it will agitate you too much, perhaps. Some day you may tell me; but in the meantime all you need to believe is, that we thank God that you have come home, whatever may have sent you.'

'I would rather tell you now, Aunt Maggie, and be done with it. I want you to know it all before I break bread again in Laurieston.'

'Very well, Nannie; if it will relieve your mind, speak on.'

Agnes sat down on a chair opposite, and, pushing back her

hat, played nervously with the lace scarf about her neck. Margaret Maitland remembered that nervous motion of the hands, characteristic of Agnes in moments of strong feeling. In a few brief but comprehensive sentences, she told all that Mrs. Maitland did not know. She passed as lightly as possible over her father's treatment, until she came to tell of the parting at Lockerbie. Then her voice shook, and her eyes filled with bitter tears.

'I hoped, Aunt Maggie, till the last, that he would relent, and let me go with him to London again. I would not have left him yet, had he not cast me off. You remember what hopes I had, and what fine resolves,' she added mournfully. 'Every one of them has been quenched. Perhaps it was my fault; but I do believe, Aunt Maggie, that instead of doing my father any good, I have done him harm. I seem to have irritated and annoyed him all along; and oh! I fear I have not the affection for him I ought to have. That is where I have wronged him most.'

'You have *not* wronged him at all, Agnes; and it will not be right for you to brood upon that. We are but human, and even the ties of kinship can be severed by harsh treatment. My dear, I know you have done your duty nobly, and you have nothing to reproach yourself with. I feared—I feared you were too hopeful. But perhaps, my dear, after you are away, some of your words may bear fruit. God works in ways we can not always follow or understand. I believe these weary days have had their uses. You have brightened life a little, I can see, for that dear Lady Culross. I love her for her goodness to you.'

'Yes, she is my friend,' said Agnes simply. 'She pressed me very much to stay at Kilmeny, but I could not,' she added, with a slight flush, 'on account of her son. I have promised to go to her some time when she is alone. Oh, Aunt Maggie, I am so thankful to come back.'

'And I to have you. You are my dear daughter now, never to leave us, until somebody else takes you away,—somebody to whom I won't grudge you.'

So Agnes slipped into her old place, and after that day the name of William Laurie was mentioned no more in the house of Laurieston.



PART II.

CHAPTER I

‘Through the mist and through the darkness,
Travels the great human soul.’

ON a sunny June morning John Maitland was pacing up and down the quay at Antwerp harbour, awaiting the arrival of the steamer from Leith. He had travelled in hot haste from Leipsic, to be in time, for Michael was the expected traveller. He had been advised to take a little trip to the Continent, to try the effect of sea breezes and sunny airs on the cough, which the greyer summer of the north had been powerless to banish.

The sea trip was a gift from Uncle Walter, who had offered him a return passage in one of his steamers, and the brothers had planned to have a little run through Belgium together. Michael was not very eager to travel,—he had not John’s impatient, restless disposition ; nevertheless, he had gladly accepted his uncle’s offer, though it was the prospect of meeting his brother which gave the keenest edge to his holiday trip. His heart yearned over him unspeakably ; the love between them passed the love of women, and they had never been parted before. When the steamer was far down the turbid Scheldt, John saw him standing at the vessel’s prow, with a plaid about his shoulders ; and *that* gave him a curious shock.

He felt the brilliant heat of the sunshine a trifle burdensome, and yet there was Michael, clad in a thick overcoat and wearing a plaid. Anxiety, which was keenest pain, robbed him at that moment of the joy of re-union. He was relieved, however, to observe, as the steamer drew nearer, that there was no visible change on Michael's outer man,—if anything, he looked rather better than just after the session closed. Michael singled him out presently, and waved his hat, with a bright flush on his face. A few minutes more, and they were clasping hands silently,—ay, and with wet eyes, both hearts being full.

'Mike, old boy!'

'Ay, Jock.'

Such was their greeting; then they linked arms and marched off, John clutching the portmanteau, and disdaining the outstretched arms and clamorous voices of the porters.

'You're not tired, Mike? I took rooms in the Hôtel de l'Europe. It's in the Place Vert,—not far. Can you walk?'

'Of course. I say, how jolly it is to see you again, and what a blessed thing this sunshine is! I feel it stealing into my very bones.'

'It's been awfully hot,—too hot even for comfort. It rather took my breath away when I saw you rolled up like a mummy. Was it cold?'

'Cold! I should think so. The North Sea airs just about did for me. We had an easterly breeze from Flamborough Head to Flushing, and I had to stay below all the time. When I saw the sun lying on Antwerp this morning, it was like a draught of generous wine to me. I say, what a quaint old place it is! Have you been in it long?'

'No; I only came last night. I thought it would be fine for us to do it together.'

'So it will. I was thankful to see you alone. I was rather afraid Phil might be with you. I like him very well, you know, but I wanted you all to myself this time.'

John laughed.

'Phil won't be free till the end of the month. He's to join on to us somewhere,—at Heidelberg, perhaps. Of course you are not in a hurry.'

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'Oh no. I can stay as long as the money lasts,' said Michael. 'Then I have my return ticket. I thought of going to Paris later on, and sailing from Dunkirk. One of Uncle Walter's boats sails from Dunkirk every week. It would save me coming back here.'

'So it would. But when your purse is empty we can draw on mine. I haven't spent much this summer, Mike. Leipsic is the place for needy students who want to improve the time. After we've seen the Rhine, we might go to Switzerland and have a little tramp, if you are equal to it.'

'Oh yes; at least I will be, after I've absorbed so many quarts of this sunshine into my system. *You* are looking splendid.'

'I feel splendid. How are they all at home?'

'All well, and sent the usual kind messages. You are very much missed at Laurieston, John.'

'Am I?'

There was nothing to be gathered from John's matter-of-fact questions, only Michael was not deceived. He knew the warm, true heart beating under that indifferent manner.

'How is mother?' he added, after a moment, during which he kept his eyes turned away.

'Mother is just herself. She has been very well this summer. Nannie relieves her of so much care.'

'Ay,' said John dryly. 'And what does Effie do for her meat?'

'Keeps us all lively,' said Michael, with a laugh. 'Though I think she is not quite herself. I know mother thinks she is fretting after Willie. Wasn't it a pity she wouldn't listen to Phil?'

'A pity for her,—not for him. Effie is very jolly, and all that, Mike, but she has not depth enough for Phil. She would not understand him.'

'It does not always seem to be necessary for a clever man to marry a clever woman. As a matter of fact, very few *do*, and they seem happy enough,' said Michael musingly. 'But, I say, how are *you* getting on? I want to hear everything. Your letters have been meagre enough, in all conscience.'

'A man can't always pour his soul out on paper,' said John briefly. 'Here's the Place Vert, and there's our hotel. That's Rubens's statue in the middle of the square, and there's the Cathedral. It's nothing to look at, outside,—it's spoiled by these ugly buildings which hem it in. After we've had a bit of lunch, we'll go over. You'll be tired after your journey. It's nice the Cathedral is so near. It's just the sort of place you could spend hours of silent rapture in.'

Michael looked again with searching keenness into John's face. The traces of hard study and agonizing thought had worn away from it, and he seemed to be in splendid health; and yet there was a hardness, a curious coldness of expression, which made Michael feel that all was not well with him.

It was only in his first letter from Leipsic that John had spoken at all freely. Since then, though writing regularly, he had confined himself strictly to commonplace topics and items of general interest, and his letters could be read in the family-circle without exciting any comment. Michael felt that he was shut out, as he had never before been, from the inner sanctuary of his brother's thought. But in the weeks of close intercourse in store, he hoped that all restraint would be swept away. The *salle à manger* of the hotel was very quiet at that hour; so at one of the little tables in a palm-shaded corner the brothers were as much alone as if they had been in one of the fields at home.

'Does Phil like Leipsic, then?' Michael asked, finding John so uncommunicative that he was obliged to question him if he wanted any information.

'Oh, I think so. He does not say. I have not seen a great deal of him. His work keeps him very busy, you know.'

'And how on earth have you managed to put in the time?'

'I?' John gave a short laugh. 'Oh, I've been sipping at the fount of knowledge. I haven't been idle. I never studied harder than I've done since I left home.'

'Or to better purpose, I hope?' said Michael significantly.

'Oh, well, that's a matter of opinion; I am quite satisfied. But don't let us talk such dry stuff just now,' said John, a trifle impatiently. 'Tell me all about home.'

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'I thought you did not seem much interested in home,' said Michael rather dryly. 'In fact, Joek, I don't know what to make of you. I don't think Leipsie has improved you.'

John gave a start.

'How not improved me? I feel splendidly.'

'Physically may be; but mentally you are out of joint. Why éan't you out with everything, and be the better for it?'

'Easier said than done. Besides, I don't know that I am out of joint. I'm only descending to *terra firma* after ascending to meet you. I was fearfully excited over it, I can tell you, in spite of my lack of interest in home,' said John, in rather an injured voice. 'Man, I wish you had been with me this summer. It would have done me a world of good. I tell you, I've got my ideas enlarged and the cobwebs swept out of my brain.'

'And you are a happier man for it?'

'I think so; yes, I am sure of it. You would revel in the society in the old city. Intellectually, Edinburgh is nowhere beside Leipsie.

'Renegade!' said Michael, with a smile. 'Go on. I needn't agree with you, you know, though I listen in silence.'

'It's a fact, though; Robertson will tell you the same. Thought is very far advanced in Germany, Mike. We have no idea of it at home.'

'Advanced in what direction?'

'Towards the light, I believe,—especially where what are called religious questions are concerned,' said John, as he dropped a piece of ice into his tumbler. 'I say, won't you have a bottle of Rhine wine? It's very light, and won't intoxicate, I promise you. Nobody comes to Rhineland, you know, without tasting the juice of its grape.'

It was unlike John to fly off at such a tangent. Michael discerned in his strange manner the restlessness of a soul even more unsettled than it had yet been. He seemed to be longing, and yet dreading, to enter into a discussion such as had so often taken place between them. But Michael held his peace, biding his time, feeling in no mood just then to wrestle with his brother in argument. It might have been

that his unwillingness indicated a vague shrinking from having John's vision made clear to him. He feared, nay, he was sure, that the last remnant of his mother's faith had gone from him.

'I thought you would have a thousand questions to ask about Nannie coming home,' he said, going far away from the subject. 'You have not even asked whether she sent you a message.'

'I know she did not,' said John quickly. 'I don't want to know anything but that she *is* home. So long as she is at Laurieston, and mother there, everything is right.'

He spoke quickly; but Michael loved to see the old tenderness creep to the grave, care-lined mouth, to hear it thrill in the deep tones of his voice. So long as he retained that sacred reverence for womanhood, John could not stray very far from the kingdom. Such was Michael's thought.

'Well, I say, if your inner man is satisfied, suppose we stroll over to the Cathedral? Did you study *Baedecker* on board the *Anglia* so conscientiously, that you will know exactly where to look for the "Descent from the Cross," and to give the dates of all Rubens's pictures? I went over to early mass this morning out of curiosity, and had a look round. The pictures are certainly good. Well, are you ready?'

'Yes.'

Michael answered only in a monosyllable, for his heart was again saddened by his brother's look and tone. In silence they left the hotel, and crossed the sunny square side by side. Michael smiled as a little milk-cart, drawn by two patient dogs, and attended by a woman in the quaint Flemish garb, rumbled lazily over the rough stones. As he uplifted his face gratefully to the cloudless sky, and felt the blessed radiance of the sun upon him, his heart grew less heavy, for it seemed to him as the smile of God.

'It is a quaint old place,' he repeated, as they entered the shadow of the little lane leading to the Cathedral door. John nodded, rang the bell for the *concièrge*, and paid the francs for admission, declining the offer of a guide. There was something inexpressibly soothing and solemn in the dim light and sweet

stillness of the place. A hush seemed to rest upon it, broken only by the rustle of a country-woman's skirts as she rose from her devotions before the altar steps, and again by the faint sound of a painter's brush in one of the transepts, where an ambitious artist was making a copy of Rubens's masterpiece.

Michael moved away from him, and stood before the picture with bared head and eyes uplifted, John watching him curiously, and with a half smile on his lips.

'Do you see this man,' he whispered presently at his elbow. 'He's making his twentieth copy. How much reverence do you suppose he has left for the original?'

'Hush!' said Michael sharply. 'Is there nothing there, then, John, to appeal to your highest feelings?'

'There is an appeal to the feelings, I admit; humanly speaking, it was a noble death, fit ending to an unselfish life. We deny nothing of that, Michael. We believe in the dignity of man, in the sublimity of his nature, and the holiness of his aspirations. In the contemplation of the ideal humanity there is sufficient to make life worth living. There is something grand in the thought of working out one's own destiny, and by force of mind and will making it as near perfection as it can be.'

Then Michael Maitland knew indeed that the last remnant of faith had gone from his brother's soul!



CHAPTER II

'Love set me up on high; when I grew vain
Of that my height, love brought me down again.'



HE edge was stolen from Michael's enjoyment of his trip. They stayed a few days in Antwerp, faithfully went over all the sights, and then continued their journey to Brussels. Nobody could be more kind and cheerful, more considerate and helpful, than John; nevertheless, there was a barrier between them, which each knew and felt. They never spoke again of religion or its beliefs, but confined their talk to the interests of their sight-seeing, interspersed with reminiscences of Edinburgh life. By the time they had seen Brussels, and walked out to spend a long day at Waterloo, Michael felt quite ready to go on to Cologne, where Robertson had promised to join them. He had proposed a walking expedition in the Ardennes, but Michael was anxious to see Switzerland.

'It may be my only chance, Jock,' he said, when they spoke of it; but John only laughed at him.

'Nonsense, man; even the poorest parish priest can afford an occasional holiday, and I don't think *you* will ever require the aid of the Smaller Livings Fund, unless you fall very far short of what I expect of you.'

Nevertheless Switzerland was agreed upon, and they pushed on in a somewhat leisurely fashion to meet their old friend. He did not turn up at Cologne, and, after lingering a few days in the quaint old city, they got on board the Rhine steamer one sunny morning, willing to endure the uninteresting

scenery on the lower reaches of the river, because of the delicious luxury of a long day of idleness. Michael especially was glad of the rest. He sat still in a sunny corner, with his plaid about his knees, enjoying the heat, and laughing because John assured him sundry ladies on board were eyeing him compassionately as an interesting invalid.

John, in his characteristic restlessness, wandered up and down watching the people, and occasionally coming up to his brother with a scornful comment on the poor scenery through which they were passing. The stoppages were always interesting; and when they touched at Coblenz, there was so great a crowd on the pier that they wondered how room was to be found for them on board.

'Come on, man, and let's watch them. We might see Phil. He turns up often unexpectedly,' said John, and, grasping Michael by the arm, led him forward. The tourists trooped over the gangway for several minutes, however, and every face was strange.

'There's the newly-married pair we saw at the Hôtel de l'Europe,' whispered John. 'They're doing the Rhine; and oh, I say, upon my word, there's Mr. Laurie, Nannie's father! Yes, upon my word it is!'

'Where?' asked Michael excitedly.

'There, look,—that big, florid man with the light suit, and the field-glass over his shoulder. What in the name of wonder is he doing here?'

'But are you sure it's he? He is not the least like Nannie.'

'I should say not; but it is he, all the same. I had too good a look of him that day at the Waverley to be mistaken. Let's get out of sight; I don't want to speak to him.'

'It's no good, John. He's seen us, and recognised you, evidently,' said Michael. 'But I don't think, after what has happened this summer, he'll want to speak to us.'

'If we move away he'll see we don't want to speak,' said John, as he turned away. 'What happened, Mike? You know I was never told anything.'

'Your own fault, entirely. You said you didn't want to know anything, except that she was safe at home.'

'That's true; but you might tell me what made her leave him in such a way? Things must have come to a climax of some kind.'

'There was a climax. I believe it had to do with that baronet, who wanted to marry her. Mother knows all about it, of course; but she did not tell us much, and Nannie herself will not willingly speak about the time she was away. She said, one day, she wanted to forget all about it.'

Before John could reply, some one slapped him on the shoulder with all the familiarity of an old acquaintance.

'Maitland of Laurieston's sons, or I am much mistaken,' said a loud, hearty voice. 'I see you remember me. We should not be strangers, if only for the sake of auld lang syne.'

He held out a hand to each, without waiting for any further formality; and what could the young men do but accept his salutation, though John's brow darkened, and his mouth took its sternest curve?

'Going far, eh? Hope I shall have your company as far as Biebrich. I'm going to Wiesbaden for a little change. I'm rather run-down at present, and find nothing like the German spas. You both look well. Having a little run, after hard study, eh?'

'My brother has been in Germany all the summer, Mr. Laurie,' said Michael, feeling obliged to say something, as John evidently did not intend to speak. 'I only came over to Antwerp last week.'

'Oh, indeed? All well at home? Laurieston is a charming place. See what an attraction it has for my daughter. I offered her this little trip, but she preferred Scotland,' said Mr. Laurie quite coolly, and with a shrug of his shoulders. 'I was very sorry. Continental travel does for a young lady what nothing else can,—gives her, as it were, a finishing touch. But I trust my daughter will join Lady Jane Culross abroad later on, when her ladyship has tired of Kilmeny.'

John turned away, and walked out of hearing. Michael raised his mild eyes to the smiling face of William Laurie in simple wonder. Although he did not know all, he was aware that

Agnes had, of her own free will, severed her connection with her father, and had no intention of resuming it again. To hear him speaking in this matter-of-fact, off-hand way, gave Michael something of a shock. Mr. Laurie saw the effect he had produced, and blandly smiled.

‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr.—Mr.’—

‘Michael Maitland,’ said Michael mechanically.

‘Mr. Michael; because I think you are—what shall I say—more courteous than your brother. He is after the true Maitland type,—not unlike the emblematical thistle. Tell him from me, will you, that, apart from any question of good breeding, it is, to say the least of it, highly impolite to be so boorish. It will stand in his way as he seeks to get on in life.’

‘You do not know my brother, Mr. Laurie,’ said Michael quietly.

‘Eh, well, perhaps not; nor do I wish to know him. It cannot be, I would fain hope, that so uncultured a youth is the attraction for my daughter in Scotland, eh?’

Michael coloured painfully under William Laurie’s searching glance.

‘I do not know; indeed, I only know she is like one of us, and we were all glad to have her back,’ he said, recovering himself the next moment.

Again William Laurie shrugged his shoulders.

‘She must have two sides, then, my amiable daughter. I did not find her all a daughter should be. Would you not consider it a daughter’s duty, now, Mr. Michael, to accompany a father who seeks restoration to health?’

‘It would depend on circumstances; besides,’ added Michael candidly, ‘you do not seem to be in an alarming state of health.’

William Laurie laughed. His good-nature was imperturbable.

‘Appearances cannot always be relied on. My system is down, I assure you. But to return to my daughter. She has proved to me most undutiful and ungrateful; but I am in hopes that, when she has had time to reflect, she will regret not only her treatment of me, but her folly in throwing away opportunities which may never come in her way again. Well, good morning. I will not detain you, as I see your amiable brother

declines my companionship. I see we are approaching Cappellan; and there is my friend Captain Stannard, of the Fusiliers, on the pier; so I am in luck. Good morning, Mr. Michael. Pray present my compliments to my daughter, and say I hope, on my return to Scotland, to find her in a better frame of mind.'

And with a beaming smile, and an airy flourish of his fingertips, Mr. Laurie took himself off. Michael looked after him in simple wonder.

The man was a study, and a curious one. Michael thought of Agnes,—of her pure and perfect womanhood,—and marvelled that there could be any tie of blood between her and that polished hypocrite,—that suave, vain man of the world.

'Well, what do you think of him?' asked John's voice at his elbow; and his face wore the expression Michael least liked to see upon it.

'I don't know what to think, John. Isn't he very unlike her?'

'I should think so. But I'll tell you, Mike,—Will is too like him. It is well, I think, that he is not within touch of Laurieston. He was speaking of me, I saw by his glance and the shrug of his shoulders. If he dislikes me, the feeling is thoroughly reciprocal.'

'Yet there must be a germ of goodness even there,' said Michael musingly.

'You have a boundless charity, my boy,' said John dryly.

'I wonder, though, where he gets the money for his travelling expenses,' pursued Michael. 'His get-up is faultless, and he speaks of the German spas as if he were a rheumatic millionaire.'

'I expect he belongs to the genus sponge,' answered John. 'Like the immortal Rawdon Crawley, he has solved the problem of living on nothing a year. Did he speak at all of Nannie?'

'Yes; he has not given up the idea of seeing her married to the baronet. He says he is going to Laurieston to see her after he returns to England.'

'Mike, do you think she was really unhappy while she was away?' asked John, in a low voice. 'Do you think he was unkind to her?'

'I do think so. She never willingly alludes to her English

experiences; and mother said to me once, that it was a fearful mistake to let her go, and that it would be years before the effect it had had on her wore away.'

'Then it shall never happen again, if I can help it,' said John; and his voice took a very resolute tone, as he leaned his arms on the rail, and looked deep down into the swift-flowing Rhine. There was a silence between them for a moment; and Michael, knowing what was coming, nerved himself for it. They were quite alone in that corner, for the passengers were trooping towards the gangway as the steamer approached another pier. The silence was broken by John at last, and he turned his honest eyes full on his brother's face as he spoke:

'I suppose you know what I feel about Agnes, Michael,—what is the dearest hope of my life?'

'I have an idea of it,' Michael made answer, and smiled a brave smile, though the sensitive colour dyed his cheek at the effort to hide his pain.

'I have always cared about her in that way, I think, since I saw her first, though, of course, I was too young to understand. Do you think I have any chance?'

'Who could have any chance beside *you*, John?' asked Michael affectionately, smiling still.

'She is so much better than I,' said John dreamily, while his grave, dark face became softened into a marvellous tenderness. 'She makes me feel my own littleness and unworthiness. All good women do; and she, like mother, is the best. But, as I live, if she will trust me, I will make her happiness my first and greatest care.'

'Would she wish that?' asked Michael gently, but unable to keep back the question. '*She* believes still in the old command, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me."'

John impatiently shook his head.

'That will be no barrier; I have a boundless faith in her tolerance. She is no bigot, nor am I. We can be happy together without that. It is an insult to manhood and womanhood to suppose anything else.'

Michael laid his hand on his brother's arm, and his blue eyes shone as he fixed them on the dark, passionate face:

'Before you ask her to pledge herself to you, John, you will bare your soul to her? You will keep nothing back? promise me that.'

'Why should I promise that? What right have you to ask it?' John asked almost roughly, as he shook off the brotherly hand.

'I have the right, because her happiness is dear to me too, and I would lay down my life willingly for you both.'

He grew pale as he spoke, and a great passion of pity and remorseful tenderness swept over John Maitland's soul. Michael had unconsciously revealed more than he intended in his impetuous words.

'Forgive me, Michael, best of brothers,' he exclaimed impulsively. 'You are worthier of her than I. I will stand aside, and, if you win, will think it best for her.'

'Nay,' said Michael, with a sunny smile; 'nay, John, for her heart is yours.'

They were silent again. Michael, with his arm leaning on the rail, watched the sunlight gilding the grey turrets of the Stolzenfels, where it kept watch on its woody height. The thoughts of each, however, were far away from the classic Rhine; another picture was vividly before their eyes.

'Tell me just what you mean to do, John,' Michael said. 'Now, don't look so reproachful and wretched. I am perfectly happy. I have known this so long, that the idea, like all familiar thoughts, has something pleasant in it. What do you mean to do?'

'My mind resolved itself into action during the few minutes in which you were engaged talking to Mr. Laurie. I shall go home with you, and look for something to do at once.'

'What kind of thing?'

'Anything. I shall not stick, I promise you. I'll go and see Wallace; he promised to do anything he could for me.'

'So he might, seeing you took all his prizes,' put in Michael.

'Phil was telling me he heard from Horsburgh that Professor Barnes, of Aberdeen, wanted an assistant. I would prefer Edinburgh, but will take anything gladly,' said John.

'Then you mean to devote your life to philosophy, John?'

'Yes; nothing else has any interest for me. I say, there's Phil actually on the pier. What's he doing at this outlandish place? He's waving something to us. It's a letter!'

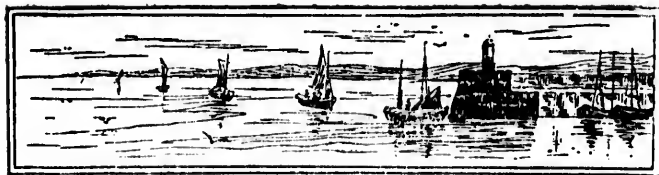
John sprang forward, and met Robertson as he stepped off the gangway to the deck.

'It's a home letter, Maitland, marked immediate. It came to me for you, so I started off. If you hadn't been here, I was going to take the down steamer, and wait at Coblenz. Well, Michael, old fellow, how are you?'

While Michael and Robertson were exchanging greetings, John tore open his letter.

'What's up?' asked Michael, in the utmost concern, as he saw John's face.

'Up! Something awful has happened, Mike. Effie has run away with Will Laurie. We are to go home at once.'



CHAPTER III.

'She was a strange and wayward child.'

'**O** H, Agnes, if the laddies would but come !'

'They will not be long, Aunt Maggie. They may be here to-morrow, or even to-day.'

'If they would but come before father comes home, Nannie ! I have a fear lying upon me, my dear. I should not have allowed him to go alone to the misguided bairns ; and yet I think I can trust to his love for her.'

'Yes, yes, Auntie. There is no one in the world Uncle Michael loves so well as Effie.'

'That is where it hurts, Nannie. She was so well-beloved, and she has made so poor a return.'

'Yes, Aunt Maggie.'

These words were wrung from Agnes. Her face was grey with the pain at her heart. Had the name of Laurie not been a curse to the house of Maitland ? Dearly as she loved Laurieston, she would have given her life almost that she had never looked upon it. A fearful blow had fallen on the proud old name. The only daughter of the house had stooped to dishonour and intrigue, and had stolen away to make a clandestine marriage with one quite unworthy to take a wife to share his name. And that he was her brother ; and such the return he had made for what the generous-handed Maitland of Laurieston had given to him ! It was such a blow, indeed, that it had taken the heart out of Margaret Maitland, and she could not for the moment rise above it to comfort Agnes, whose horror and shame had a peculiar sting. Four days had passed since Effie had

written from a London hotel announcing her marriage with Will Laurie,—a half-penitent, half-gleeful letter, which gave evidence that the child did not understand yet what she had done.

‘Aunt Maggie!’

Agnes stole to the elder woman’s feet, and knelt down, hiding her face, while the long red lines of the setting sun lay upon her bent head tenderly, with a glorifying touch.

‘Aunt Maggie, it is dreadful for you; but I suffer too. We have been a curse to this house.’

‘Hush, Nannie, hush!’ said Margaret Maitland sharply.

‘It is true. Even I, who have tried to be of use, and who love you all so truly, have helped to bring this about. It was the visit home to see me in June that did it, Aunt Maggie. If they had not met then, Effie might have forgotten. I saw a little then, but I feared to admit it; and oh! I never thought it would go so far.’

‘Agnes, listen to me!’

Margaret Maitland took the sweet, white face in her two motherly hands, and turned upon it her searching eyes.

‘Never, never, as long as you live, say again that you are a curse to this house, or that you wish you had never seen it. I would rather have you, my darling,—ay, though this should have happened twice over. You do not know what you are to me—to us all. I spoke out freely to you, because I thought you would understand. She is his wife, bairn; and when you are a mother yourself, you will know what I have to be thankful for in that.’

She kissed Agnes as she spoke, and smiled,—the first smile Agnes had seen for days.

‘Aunt Maggie, I do think you are an angel,’ was all Agnes Laurie could compose herself to say.

‘Nay, lassie, an erring, faulty human being, with a keen capacity for suffering,’ said Margaret Maitland, slightly shaking her head. ‘But, as I said, there is something to be thankful for; and it may steady Willie, that he has a wife to work for. Puir silly things; to see them in a house with family responsibilities upon them will be a weary sight.’

Her eyes filled as she spoke. Ay, the mother's heart was sorely wrung. Out of the fulness of her own experience of life, she foresaw many a rough bit on the highway for her bright, thoughtless Effie.

'Perhaps our pride needed this blow, Agnes; but it is hard to bear. If they had but been honest and open, and kept true to each other till they were a little older, I believe father would have given in. He could never deny the bairn anything.'

Agnes sighed.

'It was Willie's blame, Aunt Maggie. I am afraid it is his nature to hide things.'

'You must not altogether blame him, my dear. Effie has shown a deceitfulness which is very vexing,' said Margaret Maitland, who would be just, even if she had to blame her own.

'But what will they do, Aunt Maggie,—he cannot even earn enough to keep himself?' asked Agnes, with a painful flush.

'Father will think of and settle that, Nannie. I know he will do his best to make things straight, though I warn you he would speak with plainness to Willie when he saw them. May be he will bring them back with him.'

'Oh, Auntie, here they are,—John and Michael, I mean! Don't you hear their voices?'

Both sprang up; but before they had time to leave the room, the two tall, familiar figures passed by the window and strode into the house. They were tired and travel-stained after the voyage to Harwich, and the hurried railway journey north. A great sense of security and strength seemed to fall upon these two women the moment John entered the room.

'How are you, mother? We came as fast as we could,' he said, as he kissed her; and he had no word for Agnes,—but she needed none. The touch of his strong right hand, the glowing light in his honest eye, told her that she was still enshrined in his heart. In the midst of her grief and shame, that consciousness stole into her heart with a gleam of light.

'Tell us all about it before even we sit down. What did they mean? Couldn't they have done the thing respectably? Who was trying to separate them or throw any obstacle in the

way?' said John impulsively. 'I never heard anything so un-utterably stupid.'

Agnes stole out of the room, with a murmured excuse of seeing after tea. They breathed more freely when she was gone; in her absence they could speak without restraint.

'Tell us how it happened,' John repeated, in his quick fashion.

'There is not much to tell,' Margaret Maitland answered. 'Effie went away north to visit the Thorburns at Doune. She should have arrived on Monday afternoon. On Tuesday we heard from Jane Thorburn, asking why she had not come. The same afternoon the letter came from London.'

'A letter from Effie, or from him?' asked Michael.

'From Effie. She had actually gone no farther than Edinburgh, and he had met her there; and, after going through the poor ceremony of their marriage, had taken the evening train to London. They passed by Inveresk, Effie said, at a few minutes past six on Saturday night,' said Mrs. Maitland, with a slight, strange smile. 'Did you think, lads, that there could be so much guile in your sister?'

'I don't know; but I wonder where they got the money to pay for their trip,' said John, in his driest, most matter-of-fact tone.

'Father gave Effie five pounds on Saturday, and she had a bit of money by her. He was always giving her. I suppose that would help. He could have nothing,' returned Margaret Maitland, with a touch of sarcasm which might be forgiven.

'And what on earth is to become of them after that is spent?' asked John. 'Will Laurie has never been able to work for himself, let alone a wife. I hope it'll be many a long day before I see him,—the mean sneak. I couldn't promise to keep my hands off him.'

'That would not undo the evil,' put in Michael quietly.

'No; but it would relieve me, and give him a sore skin, which he stands in need of,' retorted John. 'He is a mean sneak, and no mistake. I suppose he knows that we will never see Effie starve, and that, for her sake, we'll keep up his position.'

'It would be better for us to think that he cared so much

for her that he could not live without her,' put in Michael again, in his gentle way. But John only laughed.

'Will Laurie is not capable of a disinterested affection. But, mother, what did father say?'

'He went away to London on Wednesday morning.'

'Did he? What to do?'

'I don't know. He never spoke a word to me, good or bad, John, but only rose up and went,' said Margaret Maitland, with a slight twitch of the lips. 'He did not even ask me to come, nor say what he was going to do.'

'He will, may be, give Will Laurie something he won't forget,' said John.

'I think not. He seemed to me to go more in sorrow than in anger. Effie does not know what she has done. You know your father, lads,—how all his dealings are as open as the day. That his own child should have been capable of such an underhand action, has cut him to the heart. I am more sorry for him than for any one; and he will not allow us to sympathise with him.'

'Has he not written since he went?'

'Not a line,—neither to announce his arrival, nor to say when he is coming home.'

'Queer; is it not, Mike?'

'Father must be feeling it acutely,' was all Michael said; and his mother looked up at him with a grateful smile. Michael understood his father, and gave him full credit for keen and tender feelings. With John it was not so. He was ever hard and even suspicious of his father's motives.

'Next to your father, Michael, I am sore vexed for Nannie. She blames herself for this too. She says if she had stayed away, Willie would not have been at Laurieston this summer.'

'That is surely foolish,' said John, still quickly, but with a change in his voice.

'May be, my son; but women sometimes are foolish, and Nannie has very keen feelings,' his mother answered, with a slight smile. John said nothing, but opened the door and walked out of the room.

'John seems very vexed about it, Michael,' said Margaret

Maitland, as she turned her eyes on the fair face of her second son. 'It is a great grief to us all.'

'It is ; but let us hope, mother, that it will be the making of Will,' said Michael cheerfully.

'We will hope so,—we must hope so now,' she answered. 'I think you look better, my son. And you were enjoying your holiday?'

'Not so much as I expected, mother.'

'Why? John would be glad to see you.'

'Oh yes,—dear old Jock ; he was not changed in that way. But, mother, I wish we were all bairns again, under the thorn-tree. I doubt, I doubt we have all grown up only to vex your heart.'

'It is with John as I feared, then, Michael?' said the mother, with paling lips.

'Yes. Do you not see a change in him? He is utterly miserable, without knowing why. His very temper, which used to be so generous and kind, if a little quick, is changed. He has grown so hard and uncharitable. He has no quarter for any evil-doer. We have lost John, mother. Only God knows whether we shall ever find him again.'

'We will. God will answer *that* prayer, Michael, else my heart would break,' said Margaret Maitland quickly, and as if a sudden strength had come to her. 'Has he gone to seek Agnes, do you think?'

'I believe it. He loves her, mother. She will be his wife some day.'

'I know that. She will restore him to us, Michael. The human love will lead him back to the divine.' Michael turned his mild eyes somewhat questioningly on his mother's face. He had a quick intuition. He knew that that admission must cost her something. A woman gives up much when she admits that she holds a second place in her son's heart. Abdication carries with it always its own peculiar pang.

'You are looking at me, Michael,' she said, understanding his unspoken thought. 'It has to come sooner or later to all mothers ; but Agnes is as dear to me as John, and so there is no sacrifice involved.'

'Mother, *I* will be your son always,' he said, with a touch of his brother's impulsiveness. 'I wish I could bear everything for you.'

'Ah! then you would take away from me my compensations. What we suffer for our children makes them doubly dear. I am not at present terribly concerned for John,—I know him so well. The husk of a gross materialism or ideal scepticism will not satisfy his great loving heart. He will come back to the Father's house, and I shall see it before I die. It is Effie that lies on my heart. Oh, these inherited tendencies! Scarcely the grace of God can conquer them;—and I fear, I fear Willie has not gotten much grace yet.'

Michael tried to cheer her again, by calling up the best traits in Willie Laurie's nature; and, while they were talking, John had found Agnes, away down at the foot of the sunny garden, standing among the lilac bushes, by the old arbour door. He came softly down the turf walk, and she did not hear his step. He saw the listlessness of her attitude, the white beautiful hand carelessly touching the caressing green boughs, the heavy eyes fixed with a vast wistfulness on the shining expanse of the sea. His whole heart went out to her; he forgot everything—father, mother, sister, home-sorrows, and spirit anguish—everything but his great love. She gave a start at length, being conscious, in her heart, of his approach. The colour leaped fitfully to her cheek, and, with her hand, she strove to hide it, as she gave him a faint smile of greeting.

'I ran down just to look at the sea. It is so peacefully lovely to-day. It is always a comfort, I think, when one is harassed and weary.'

'Why should you be harassed and weary, Agnes?' John asked, as he leaned against the tree, and fixed his eyes on her face. 'Mother says you blame yourself. That is surely foolish and wrong.'

'It may be, but I cannot help it. It is my brother who has brought this grief on your house. I cannot forget that.'

'It may turn out better than we think,' he said, trying to cheer her. 'They will probably rue it themselves, two or three times over; but it'll do them good. The very responsibility

they have incurred may sober them. Don't let us vex ourselves about it. This is not the meeting I have thought of and dreamed over all summer.'

'You are always so good; you say just the right thing at the right time. I have said to Aunt Maggie all along, that when you came it would all look brighter.'

She spoke without flattery, — in that simple, direct way peculiar to her. Her words thrilled John, though, perhaps, he could have wished her less frank.

'You are glad to see me, then?'

'Yes, very glad.'

The wavering colour leaped up again, and she turned slightly away from him, perhaps to hide what the deep, sweet eyes would fain reveal.

'I knew you had come home, but I did not ask any questions, Agnes, because I believed that one day, perhaps, you would tell me all without asking.'

She gave him no answer, and, after a moment's waiting, he stepped across the narrow path, and, standing directly in front of her, laid his two hands on her shoulders.

'Agnes, perhaps this is not a fitting time; but I must speak. I have loved you since the first day I saw you. I love you now, beyond anything on earth. Some day, will you be my wife?'

And she, with her clear eyes shining on his face, gave him, out of her true heart, the answer he craved:

'Yes, John. Some day, please God, I will.'



CHAPTER IV.

'I never heard of any true affection,
But 'twas nip't with care.'

THAT evening, after sundown, Michael Maitland the elder returned also to his home. His wife was waiting for him alone, of a set purpose, having sent the lads, with Agnes, for a stroll through the fields, in order that she might first hear what he had to tell. He had come to Inveresk station, for he passed by the dining-room window before he entered the house. The short field-path to the town station led through the stackyard and up to the back door. She did not see his face as he passed; and she sat still, even when she heard his familiar foot in the lobby, though her heart was beating wildly with excitement and apprehension. He came directly into the room, and, when she looked at him, she felt a deep sense of relief,—she could not tell why. He was tired and worn; but his face was neither harsh nor stern, though its expression was very grave.

'Weel, Maggie, I'm come hame,' he said, with a slight smile. She rose then, and, not seeing the hand he offered her in the grave Scotch fashion, put her arms round his neck. He felt her tremble, as she had done the night William Laurie had come to Laurieston. 'My puir lassie. I should have ta'en you wi' me. It was hard to leave you behind; but, Maggie, I didna ken vera weel what I was daein' that mornin', an' that's a fact.'

'It was perhaps better that I stayed. Tell me quickly, father,—did you see them? How did you find the bairn? It has been so fearful for me, waiting at home.'

'Ay, ay. Sit doon, Maggie, and I'll tell ye it a'.'

He placed her, with unwonted gentleness, back in her chair, sat down before her, and passed his hand across his brow.

'Yes, I saw the bairn,—a marrit wife, Maggie,—very happy like, puir lassie, no' kennin' yet what she has brocht upon herself'. I just went, Maggie, to make sure that there could be no mistake aboot the marriage, and syne I left them. They'll be hame by and by.'

'Did she seem distressed or penitent for the grief she has caused us, father?'

'She grat when she saw me; but she's ta'en up wi' her braw man, an' the auld father an' mother maun stand aside for a wee. Only for a wee, though. Unless I am mista'en, mother, we'll hae them baith to keep. May I be forgiven if I sin, but I believe I would rather hae laid Effie beside the rest in Inveresk, than see her wife to a Laurie.'

'Did you see anything by-ordinary to vex you in Willie, father?'

'I like not his way. It is defiant and upsettin' for his years. He did not show me a becomin' respect; but I'll pass that by, if he be kind to Effie. I spoke plainly to him, Maggie, praying all the time for strength to bridle my tongue. If he acts ill to my bairn, he kens what to expect. As he deals wi' her, I deal wi' him.'

Margaret Maitland saw the involuntary clenching of his strong right hand, the quick darkening of the brows, which told that the lower depths were stirred.

'I am vexed to hear he was not sorry or repentant for what he has done. Poor things, I think neither of them realize what they have taken on themselves.'

'No, they dinna, Maggie; but they will, yet. I fear for her, for he is as unstable as water. But we maun make the best o' him, noo that the bairn is his wife. He has robbed us of our only lassie, mother; but for her sake we maun try and gie him a lift. Now, I'll tell you my plans.'

Margaret Maitland looked at her husband with wondering, tender eyes, marvelling to see him so subdued, so gentle, where she had expected only the throes of an angry passion. The

great sorrow of the blow had subdued him, leaving little room for any other feeling.

'I laid it a' oot as I came down in the tra-- an' here it is. Nunraw is to let, an' I hear they hae but few offers. I ken I have but to say the word to Riddell, and it's mine. I'll tak' the place, Maggie, an' put them in it; an' Wat an' me between us will manage to look to it till Willie learns the difference atween a horse an' a stirk. If he can learn ava, it'll be a fair chance for him; an' we'll hae them under oor ain een, as it were; an' it'll shut folk's mouths, besides. What think ye o't, wife?'

Margaret Maitland put her hands before her face, and the tears fell between her fingers.

'God bless you, my man. You have taken a load from my heart. God bless you, and grant that the bairns' well-doing in Nunraw may be your reward.'

'I need nae reward. We maun see to our ain, Maggie, if we bena waur than infidels,' said Laurieston gently, though his eye softened yet more at sight of his wife's tears. 'I believe we could get into the hoose immediately. I'll gang up to the toon the morn and settle wi' Riddell before I leave. An' syne you and Agnes might gang up an' buy some bits o' furniture for them. I'll gie ye a cheque for a hunder,—that should gie them a plain beginnin'. And when they come hame, we'll try an' gie them a kindly welcome, so that they may hae heart to begin their life. But I confess, wife, that had it been Agnes instead of Effie, I wad hae mair hope o' makin' a man o' Will Laurie. I wonder greatly that the bairn should be so unlike her mother.'

It was a great deal for Michael Maitland to say. His wife knew that his disappointment in Effie was the shattering of an idol which would never again be restored to its pedestal. Forgiving, kindly, fatherly he might be now to his erring child, but she would never again be to him what she had been. It was the first great sorrow of his life. Even in the midst of her own sore pain, Margaret Maitland thanked God for the fruit it was bearing in her husband's heart. She had never seen him so forbearing and gentle, exhibiting such unselfish consideration, even for those of his own household,

'We will try and look forward to a length of useful days for the bairns in Nunraw, and pray that good may yet come out of what has seemed to us so evil,' she said, with quiet cheerfulness, as she laid her soft hand with a lingering caress on his. 'The laddies are both here, Michael. They set off to Harwich whenever they got the message, and just came in at tea-time.'

'Oh! It was a pity Michael's holiday should be broken. How is he, mother?'

'Both of them looking well. John does not intend to go abroad again, he says.'

'And what is he to do, then?'

'Seek a situation at once.'

'Aweel, I wish him weel,' said Laurieston, as he rose to his feet. 'They will baith be vexed at the end Effie has come to.'

'Oh, father, I hope it is not an end,' cried his wife, with a smile, for her heart was lightened of its immediate care. 'Let us say, rather, it may be a happy beginning for them both.'

'Aweel, so be it. Where are they a'?''

'I sent them out. I had an intuition that you would come to-night, and I wanted to hear the news first. How much shall we tell them, father?'

'You can tell them what you think fit, Maggie. I dinna want to hear any more speakin' about it. Here they are comin', or I'm mista'en,—I hear their tongues.'

He sauntered out to the front door, his wife following, and there were the two tall lads at the garden gate, with the slender form of Agnes between them. Margaret Maitland was quick to note how instant and searching was the look her husband cast on Michael's face, and how relieved he seemed to see its ruddy, sun-burnt hue. As they came forward to the house, Agnes slipped behind a little, with evident hesitation. But, after he had shaken hands with his sons, Maitland put his heavy hand on her slender shoulder, and looked down into her sweet, serious face with a peculiar kindliness.

'We hae but ae dochter noo, Nannie. See that ye dinna play us the same trick. If ye are to marry, let it be fair and above-board, my lamb; an' we'll set ye forth wi' a God-speed.'

'Thank you, Uncle Michael.'

The face of Agnes was as red as the June roses blushing on the porch, but her eyes met his unfalteringly, and with a happy light, for these words had told her that there was no bitterness in his heart towards her.

There was peace in the house of Laurieston that night,—an atmosphere of good fellowship and love which seemed to bless them all. Even to John, Michael Maitland was kind and cordial, asking him questions about his life abroad and about his friend Robertson, till John, impulsive and demonstrative, felt his heart go out to the old man in a new rush of filial affection. The anxious mother looked on with a relieved and happy heart. Long experience had taught her the boundless power of love's rule; and when she saw how quick the young hearts were to respond to the kindly side of their father's nature, she could not but regret more and more that it had not been earlier and more consistently shown to them. Had Laurieston but dealt more openly and gently with his children, much care, much sorrow, and much estrangement would have been prevented in the home.

There was a great and solemn earnestness in the 'reading' that night in the old house. Laurieston chose the fifth chapter of Ecclesiastes, and twice over read the verse, 'God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few,' with an impressive pause between. His prayer was short, and consisted only of a petition for guidance and strength in the sorrows of life. It was a direct request from an aching human heart feeling the need of the divine, and, being perfectly natural and sincere, found a response in the breasts of all present. Ay, even in the heart of John, the unbeliever, who, out of the pride of his high intellect and splendid reasoning powers, had cast this thing aside as unworthy the attention or devotion of a reasonable soul. Old memories, sweet home influences, ay, and the strong, close touch of a mother's heart, brooding over him in tender, prayerful love, held him in thrall. She knelt by his side at the sofa during the prayer; and in the midst of it she stretched forth her hand and laid it above his clasped hands, and so kept it till the end. That touch thrilled him, because of its significance. He knew what prayers were

in her heart, he felt that she was wrestling for him with the God in whom she believed. There was something solemn in the thought, something which impressed him with a vague awe and uncertainty. He was glad when it was over; and when the Amen was said, he rose and passed out of the room. She heard him go out of the house, and when they all went upstairs, one by one, she sat down by the smouldering fire to wait for his return.

'I want to speak to John, father. You are tired and need-
ing rest,' she said, as she followed her husband to the foot of
the stair. 'Just put out the candle, and I will slip up in the
dark. I will not be long.'

John Maitland saw his mother's shadow on the blind as he
restlessly paced up and down the lawn, and knew that she was
waiting for him. Her presence drew him like a magnet; and
before the lights were out in the upper rooms, he softly returned
to the house.

'I am waiting for you, my son; come away,' she said, smiling
upon him as he entered the room. 'It is a long time since
we had a talk.'

'I don't know that I am in the mood for talk to-night,' he
answered, as he leaned against the mantelpiece, and looked
down gravely into the dying fire. His brows were contracted,
his eyes shadowed, his mouth stern and sad.

'You have nothing to tell me, then, about your life abroad?'

'Nothing, at least, that you would care to hear; but some-
thing has happened since I returned to Laurieston to-day.
Agnes has promised to be my wife.'

She looked at him keenly. He scarcely looked like a happy
lover, and yet his eye shone as he spoke her dear name.

'That has been a dear wish of my life, my son; but I know
not whether I am glad or sorry to-day.'

'Why?'

'Because you are changed. I question, John, if you have it
in your power now to make her happy.'

'Why not now?'

He spoke with a certain irritation, though he betrayed no
surprise. Indeed, he felt none.

'You know why as well as I. Michael has told me what beliefs you have been able to accept. They are not hers. It may be that, when she knows all, she will withdraw her promise. She is very conscientious, and her faith is much to her. I suppose you have not told her?'

'I have not; but I do not believe it will make any difference to her. Why should it? I am happy in having emancipated myself from the thrall of an old superstition. I now see life apart from the mists of theology and doubt. I know it to contain the highest and grandest possibilities, and I believe in the power and goodness and strength of humanity. In its highest form it is even worthy of worship, certainly of reverence.'

'And your life henceforth is to be spent in the perfecting of your human nature?' said Margaret Maitland, with a slight, strange smile. 'My son, you undertake a superhuman task. Although you have turned away from God, you cannot rob Him of one tittle of His mercy in love. He will not cast you out when you return to Him, and He is still the hearer and answerer of my prayers. Good-night, my son.'

She laid her two gentle hands on his tall shoulders, and looked at him with a look half sad, half reproachful, but wholly tender.

'You are my divinity, mother,—you and Agnes,' he said impulsively. 'Surely to worship the highest womanhood is no sin. You have always been to me the embodiment of all perfection. I want no other religion.'

'Your love is very precious to me, my son, my first-born son; but, like Abraham of old, I believe I could have strength and courage to give you up to God,' she said solemnly. 'John, is there nothing revolting in the thought that this human nature you worship, with all its holy love, its high aspirations, its noble achievements, is to go down to the grave like the beasts that perish?'

'It may not. There may be another state, a further development. There is nothing in science or philosophy for or against. It is simply question and conjecture with all.'

'Nay, I will keep my certainties, if you please. My Lord has gone to prepare a place for me, of which none of the

world's cold creeds can rob me. Some day, looking back, you will recoil, as I do, from the husks with which you are *trying* to satisfy yourself. Perhaps God may use the coils of a wife's and a mother's love to draw you back to Himself.'

She kissed him then, as she had so often done, between the grave brows, and left him with a smile. But it was a smile which hid an anguished heart.

She stole into Agnes's room before going to her own. The light was out; but the blind being drawn up, admitted the full and radiant light of the midsummer moon. Agnes was asleep. She did not hear the light footfall, the soft rustle of a woman's dress, nor feel the deep yearning of the motherly eyes bent upon her in love. Only in the night she dreamed that an angel had knelt beside her bed, and left upon her a benison of peace.



CHAPTER V.

'This is my home again ; once more I hail
The dear old gables and the creaking vanes.'



UNT MAGGIE, here are the Thorburns coming.'

'To hear the news,' put in John, picking himself up from the sofa. 'I'll make myself scarce, mother, if you don't mind.'

'I mind, if Aunt Maggie doesn't,' said Agnes, with a laugh. 'To punish you for your idleness to-day, we shall keep you in to make yourself agreeable to the ladies.'

She stood against the closed door and shook her finger at him, with a play of happy humour lighting up every feature ; which made her look so lovely in the eyes of her big, honest lover, that he sat down again quite meekly.

'I see you are beginning as you mean to end, Nannie,' Mrs. Maitland said. 'That I should live to see my strong-minded John a henpecked man !'

Agnes blushed, and turned quickly to the window. It was the first direct allusion her aunt had made to the understanding between them : somehow there had been, for a few days, a curious avoidance of serious talk about the future. They had all been busy, of course, getting the house of Nunraw in order for the young pair, who were expected on the morrow. Both John and Michael had been intensely interested in the proceedings, although they could hardly realize that it was their own sister Effie who was to become the mistress of the newly-furnished house. When all the arrangements were made, and the business with the factor settled, Maitland wrote to his

son-in-law a brief, rather formal letter, intimating what had been done, and signifying to him that he expected them home at an early date. To this Willie Laurie replied courteously, thanking his father-in-law for the provision he had made for their future, and promising to do his best to make a good tenant of Nunraw. The letter was on the whole satisfactory, and the edge of their distress had worn off, and they found themselves even looking forward, in a sense, with interest to the settlement of the young pair so near. Nunraw was the adjoining farm,—only two fields' breadth from Laurieston; the cosy, flat-roofed house could be seen quite well from the dining-room window.

'Are you prepared for them, mother? They'll ask everything,' said John comically, as the familiar figures of the ladies passed the window.

'Hush, my son; you are too hard upon the ladies. They are gentlewomen, my dear, and never forget their breeding. We must be very kind to them, for I rather think they blame themselves a little. They pressed so hard for Effie to visit them at Doune, and so gave her an opportunity she could not have had otherwise.'

She could say no more, for Katie ushered the visitors in. They had returned somewhat hastily from the north, directly they had heard the news of Effie Maitland's flight; and they were visibly agitated when they entered the room, and appeared greatly relieved at the cordiality of the greeting they received.

'It is as good as sunshine to see your face, Mrs. Maitland,' said Miss Jane. 'How are you, Agnes? Dear me, John Maitland, when are you to stop growing? Yes, it is positive sunshine to see your face, dear Mrs. Maitland. We could not rest at Doune. I said to Grace, I was bound to know the worst at once.'

'In spite of Nancy Kilgour, who nearly snapped our heads off,' supplemented Miss Grace. 'She as good as told us to go back the road we had come.'

'And is it true the young couple are to take up house at Nunraw, Mrs. Maitland?' Miss Jane went on. 'Do you

know, after one gets used to the idea, it is perfectly delightful to get married like Effie. The surprise it gives everybody is worth anything. But such bairns! Why, it is no time since Effie used to spend her Saturdays with us in pinafores. But she has got a handsome husband. Nannie won't mind though we say he is the best-looking in the family.'

'You may say so, Jane,' put in Miss Grace. 'John and I reserve our opinions. And where have *you* been wandering to on the face of the earth, you great big fellow? I suppose I must begin to treat you with some respect now, on account of your great scholarship?'

'The sooner the better, Miss Grace,' said John, with his deep, sonorous laugh. 'Don't I inspire it?'

'I believe you do. You have no airs, any how, and that is a great deal to say of a young man of this generation. 'Isn't it, Agnes?'

Agnes looked up from her tea-tray with a smile and a nod. She saw that the bright, cheerful talk of her old friends was acting like a tonic on her aunt's spirits, and presently she heard her laugh at some sally of Miss Thorburn, who had always something original to say.

'It was a bright thought of Effie's, and she shall have the pick of our old china for it,' she rattled on; 'only we'll have to choose surreptitiously, or who knows what Nancy might do. When are they coming home?'

'To-morrow evening. We are all going over to Nunraw.'

'How lovely! We will be thinking of you. Don't forget to break the shortbread over the bride. I'll bake a cake in the morning and send it over. It'll give her the old maid's blessing.'

'Why would you break it over her?' asked Agnes, with interest.

'Oh, for luck, or to indicate that she'll aye have plenty,' returned Miss Thorburn. 'It'll be your turn next.'

'I hope so,' said John, in a low voice, as he took a cup of tea from the hand of Agnes. She shook her head at him, and, though they were in a corner of the room, Jane Thorburn's sharp eyes noted that little by-play, greatly to her own delight.

'Do you know what I said to Jane when I heard it, Mrs. Maitland?' asked Miss Grace. 'I just said it was not every one who was privileged to give the busybodies something to talk about. It is quite a distinction. It almost tempts one to follow Effie's example.'

'And pray, what unfortunate human being would you pounce upon to share your flight, Grace?' queried Miss Jane, with extraordinary sharpness.

'I suppose you think I would have a difficulty in finding somebody; but, whatever you may think, all the unmarried ladies in Musselburgh are not victims of necessity. Where's Michael? He proposed to me when he was aged nine, on account of the peculiar virtues of our preserves, and the riches of the plum-tree at the end of the house.'

'Michael is in town to-day with his father,' Mrs. Maitland answered, when the laugh at the old joke had subsided. 'You have done me good, lassies, with your happy talk.'

'I am indeed glad to hear you say so, dear Mrs. Maitland,' said Jane Thorburn quickly, and with a smile of genuine satisfaction. 'We talk a great deal of nonsense, but we mean well. How soon might we dare to call on young Mrs. Laurie at Nunraw? Will she begin with the new-fangled day "at home" our Musselburgh magnates delight in? It is a fine easy way of entertaining one's friends, giving them a cup of tea and a shred of buttered bread. She'll need to do it, though, if she's to be in the fashion.'

'I do not expect Effie will trouble her head about such things. She has too much to learn, Miss Jane,' returned Mrs. Maitland gravely. 'She'll need to turn her attention to the necessary branches of housekeeping first.'

'A daughter of Laurieston should be a good housekeeper,' said Miss Grace, as they rose to go. 'But I dare say I've heard you say, Miss Laurie was so good she gave nobody else a chance.'

'That is true,' Mrs. Maitland admitted, with a smile. 'You need not stand on ceremony with the young wife at Nunraw. She will be glad to see her old friends at any time.'

'Very well; thank you. We'll be easier in our minds after we ask her what she meant by treating us in such a manner. You should have seen the two of us tearing up and down to Doune Station to all the trains that day, and the agony of mind we endured when she never came. It was too bad. Good afternoon, then; and we have had a delightful visitation, as we always have at dear Laurieston. John, are you too big and learned to come to an old-fashioned tea-drinking at Sunnyside? You're not? Well, we'll see after Nancy is pacified. We're not going away again, whatever she may say or do. She must just clean the house when we are in it.'

'I don't know what will become of Nancy in the other world if there are no brushes and dusters,' said Miss Grace. 'Don't shake your head, Mrs. Maitland; it's a positive fact, she's never happy except "redding-up." Good-bye!'

'There'll be another wedding at Laurieston before long, Grace Thorburn,' said Miss Jane, as they went through the garden gate; 'and, mark my words, it won't be a runaway one.'

So they tripped away, happy and interested in everything, leaving, as they always did, a sunny atmosphere behind them. They were the first callers since Effie's flight; and now that Mrs. Maitland had heard it spoken of by outsiders, she had a feeling as if the worst was over.

Early next day Agnes went over to Nunraw, and was busy there all day. It was a pretty house, built in cottage style,—all on one floor, but roomy and commodious within. John and Michael had made the garden tidy, and of course it needed a great many finishing touches at the last, which necessitated John spending the best part of the day at Nunraw too, though the more engrossing part of his work seemed to be in helping Agnes to fasten up curtains and hang the few pictures straight on the walls. But though they were so much alone together that day, there was not much love-making, for Agnes had a shy, proud way with her sometimes, which kept him at arm's length. Once, when he came down the steps after hanging a picture on the sitting-

room wall, he leaned forward quickly and took her in his arms.

'My darling, my darling, why are you so hard with me?' he said, holding her there as if he would keep her there for ever.

'Am I hard? I do not mean to be,' she said, allowing her lovelit eyes to look into his; 'only we must not be silly.'

'It is not silly. It is wise,—the sweetest, best wisdom in the world; and you think so too,' said foolish John daringly; but she escaped from him, and ran out of the room, looking back to tell him laughingly he must go away to Laurieston, and see whether the provisions were ready for the home-coming feast. But instead of obeying her just at once, John sat down where she had left him, and covered his face with his hands, for his happiness seemed too much. The precious trust she had given him—the trust which gives all and asks no questions—seemed to him a thing so great and so wonderful that he could scarcely realize it. These few days had been days of utter and intense happiness, such as probably would never come to them any more. Because then each was sufficient to the other,—the sure fact of an offered and accepted love, the unspeakable joy of being together, was enough; no questions had been asked, no deeper things probed into, no conditions made, not even a future broached. The time came when, looking back, these days seemed like a golden dream; and yet darker days have their compensation too, and there are chains forged by fire which neither time nor death can break.

At seven o'clock that night, Michael Maitland himself drove the dog-cart over to Musselburgh station for the travellers. On a fine summer evening, and with the town full of visitors, there was quite a throng at the station, and he felt glad of it. He wanted to show that Effie was coming back to a kindly welcome, and that both she and her husband were to be received exactly as if they had gone forth after the ordinary way of a newly-married pair from the father's house. There may have been a touch of pride in all this; but there was also

a magnanimous and beautiful spirit in it, which had rejoiced his wife's heart. So at Nunraw they waited with a curious mingling of agitation and pleased expectancy for the home-coming of the bride. Just at sunset the dog-cart drove rapidly along the lane, and drew up at the door. Mrs. Maitland's courage failed her just then, and she withdrew into the inner room; but Agnes stood between the two boys, with Miss Thorburn's cake of shortbread in her hands, and a somewhat wavering smile on her lips, ready with her welcome. Almost before the high-stepping mare had been reined in at the door, Effie sprang from the trap, her bonnie face flushed and tearful, gave a hasty hand to the boys, a quick kiss to Agnes, and her lips formed her mother's name.

'Just a moment, dear, till I break Miss Thorburn's shortbread,—just for luck,' said Agnes, with a laugh; and in the midst of this ceremony Mrs. Maitland came out from the room, and Effie ran into her arms.

'Mother! mother *darling*! forgive me. I never meant to vex you,' she cried almost hysterically; but the loving arms folded round her with a close, clinging touch, and the two withdrew once more into the inner room.

Meanwhile the young bridegroom was standing rather shamefacedly by the mare's head; and when John gave him a slap on the shoulder, and cried to him cheerily, 'I wish you good luck, Will!' his face cleared, and he returned the honest, brotherly hand-clasp with a grip which even John's strong fingers felt. There was not one touch of reproach in the greetings he received; even Agnes, who had felt it all so deeply, gave him a sisterly kiss, and a word of well-wishing; and all this brought a flush of shame and self-reproach to his cheek, and fired his careless heart with the noblest resolve which had yet touched it.

'Go in and speak to Aunt Maggie, Will,' Agnes whispered; but just then Mrs. Maitland came out, and beckoned him to her.

'God guide you, my son,' was all she said; but she kissed him as she said it; and the tears rose in his eyes. Those who saw those bright drops thought them the dew of heavenly

promise. It might be, after all, that there was the making of a man in Willie Laurie. If so, these Christian souls had done their utmost to set him on the way with hope and comfort. And thus they obeyed the Master's own behest, and followed His divine leading.

There was a curious solemnity mingling with the agitated restraint present at the first meal eaten in the house of Nunraw. But for Agnes it could not have been enjoyed. As her busy hands had been first and best at arranging the house and the table, so her quick, exquisite tact now guided her to say the right thing, and keep the talk from even touching upon what was unpleasant or likely to jar. She talked a great deal to Effie, who sat demurely by her mother's side, scarcely daring to look up; and at last succeeded in rousing her interest in the house of which she was to be the mistress. After tea, the lads followed Mr. Maitland out to the garden and the steading; then Agnes showed Effie over her new domain, and tried to tease her merrily out of her unusual quiet. But the child's heart was full.

'I do not deserve it. Mother! mother! you are too good! I do not deserve it,' she said again and again.

Agnes saw that she was only now beginning to realize what a step she had taken, and what a care and anxiety she had laid upon the hearts of those who loved her.

It was about ten o'clock, and the harvest moon had risen, when they began to make ready to return to Laurieston. Effie stood by in the bedroom, while her mother and Agnes put on their bonnets, and her face was very white and weary; for she knew that now she was not one of the happy household,—that she had, with her own foolish, unthinking hands, severed the tie which bound her to that dear home. The mother caught sight of her face in the mirror as she tied her bonnet-strings, and her fingers trembled so that she turned hastily to Agnes for help.

'Me! Mother, let me do it!' cried Effie jealously; and Agnes stood aside with a quick-starting tear.

'Some of us will be over the morn, Effie,' Mrs. Maitland tried to say, with a matter-of-fact cheerfulness. 'And you and Willie will come over to tea in the afternoon,—that is, if you have time

out of your household duties. Be kind but firm with your little maid, Effie. She is very willing, but she needs looking after. Of course, if you are in a difficulty, run over; but I want you to be able to manage your own house. And now, my bairn, good night.'

'I—I can't bear to be left,' Effie faltered, clinging to her mother's hand.

'Nonsense, lassie, you have Willie; and a married wife mustn't be a mother's bairn. You'll be all right to-morrow. God bless you, my lamb, and give you happiness and peace in your own home.'

She kissed her hastily, and hurried downstairs. Her heart was full, too—ay, to bursting; for it was a strange and melancholy thought to have to leave her young daughter behind; but she would not break down. As she stepped out of the door, Willie came forward out of the darkness, and she saw her husband's tall figure at his side. Willie spoke first, in hurried, uncertain tones:

'I—I thank you for it all, after my meanness. I'll do my best, Mrs. Maitland,—indeed I will; and I'll be kind to Effie, and try and make up for'—

'If you are kind to Effie, my son, it'll make up for all the rest,' Margaret Maitland said, as she gave his hand a warm pressure. Then Laurieston laid his great hand on the young man's shoulder, and said solemnly,—

'The Lord bless ye baith, and gie ye grace, lad. Guid nicht. Whaur's the lads?'

'Away over the fields,' Agnes said quickly from behind.

'Come then, wife; up, Agnes! Say guid nicht to Effie for me, Will,' he said, with a tremor in his voice. Then they drove away. Willie Laurie followed the trap to the gate, closed it, and went back to the house, only to find his young wife crying her heart out, with her face buried in the cushions of the sofa; and though he took her in his arms and tried to comfort her, it was no easy task.

For Effie, beneath all the loving-kindness and forbearance which had been shown to them, knew that there was a difference, and that she had given up her place in Laurieston for ever. For

ever, and what remained? Much that ought to have pleased a young wife,—a dainty house, a well-plenished larder, broad acres waiting the tillage of their new master, and above all, a handsome young husband kneeling at her side. And yet these were the most bitter tears which had ever filled Effie Maitland's eyes.



CHAPTER VI.

'And you think your heart the bravest,
And you call your creed divine.'

ISAY, Mike, I'm tired of this idle life, aren't you?' 'Not I. I could lie here for ever and look at that sunny sea, and feel the breath of this west wind,' said Michael, stretching his arms out lazily. 'I've earned my rest, and I'm taking it without restriction. This is just splendid.'

He took another long deep breath, and lay back contentedly under the thorn-tree, against which John was leaning, whittling a stick away to nothing.

'Is your conscience pricking you, you restless fellow, that you want to be on the wing again? I say, if you leave all these chips on the lawn, Agnes will give it you.'

'Oh, I'll pick them up before she sees them. A fellow must do something. But seriously, Michael, I can't stay on here much longer. It's too much to have two idle men hanging about, though I must say father has been uncommonly good about it. I've got on better with him the last month than I ever did before.'

'What can you do but wait?' queried Michael.

'Unfortunately I do not possess the serene Micawber's faculty. If something doesn't turn up soon, I must turn out and look for it.'

'Oh, but something will; don't be in too great a hurry, John. Who knows when we may all be together as happy as we are? Don't you think, Jock, that Will is going to do in Nunraw?'

'He promises fairly in the meantime. Matrimony seems to

have sobered him. But the whole thing is too absurd. When I go over and see these infants playing at keeping house, it makes me feel weary. Won't it be mean of Phil if he never looks near in his holidays?'

'Perhaps if Nunraw were a little farther away he would come,' suggested Michael.

'Oh, I think Phil has sufficient stamina to master that. He is strong in determination. I'm wearying to see him. If nothing turns up I'm going to try and get an appointment at some of the Continental Universities.'

'I shouldn't. It's like admitting that you can't get on here. Whence all this haste?' asked Michael; and there was a slight suggestiveness in the look he cast at the green tree-tops down in the hollow, which shaded the white gables of Effie's home.

'I want to feel as if I had a start of some kind. I've been four months idle, and I'm tired of it,' John answered, as he threw the stick away and began to gather up the chips.

'John, old fellow.'

'Well?'

'You'll let Agnes stay with mother for a bit? She would miss her fearfully.'

The ruddy colour was quick to deepen in John's dark face. Bold, fearless, and determined though he was, he had a school-girl's shyness over his love. It had never been broached between the brothers since that day on the Rhine steamer, though Michael knew from his mother that they had come to a definite understanding.

'I see no prospect of being able to marry for years, if you mean that,' he answered abruptly. 'It's not likely I'm going to ask any woman to share a nobody's life, least of all *her*. She shall have the best or nothing. Of course it is that which makes me more anxious. But I did not think you knew.'

'Yes, mother told me.'

John looked at him keenly, trying to gather from his face what were his thoughts. He had not forgotten their talk that summer day on the Rhine. But there was nothing to be gathered from Michael's face. But presently he went straight to the point:

'Have you had any talk with her about what we spoke of that day?'

'No, none.'

'Then she knows nothing?'

'I can't say. I have never entered into any discussion with her, neither have I tried to hide anything. We have simply talked of other things.'

'I do not think it is fair or right,' Michael said, with a sudden passion.

'Do you not? Perhaps you think that before I said a word about what was in my heart for her, I should have laid before her an elaborate statement of my views on every subject?' said John dryly, and even with a touch of sarcasm. 'When the opportunity comes to a man to ask a woman that question, Michael, if he is in earnest he does not usually pause to weigh his words or to consider all conditions, as you may find one day yourself.'

Michael did not answer, and there was a brief, constrained silence.

'When a fit opportunity occurs, I will lay bare my soul, as you express it, to Agnes Laurie. After I have done so I shall leave her free to bid me go or stay,' continued John; and his tone was neither pleasant nor cordial.

'And in the meantime you will do your utmost to bind her to you in irrevocable bonds,' supplemented Michael passionately. 'That is not my ideal of a perfect love.'

John made no answer. There was truth in what his brother said, and he writhed under it, because he knew very well that the woman he loved had no idea of the state of his mind on these great questions, nor could he be certain what would be her verdict when it should be revealed to her. Although he loved her with an intense love, he had not yet sounded the depths of her nature. The new and gracious womanhood which had come to her of late, was even something of a revelation to him. Its dignity and still reticence held him in awe. There were times when he felt that he dared not touch her, though she had given him the right to a lover's touch. She was quite unconscious of this awe she inspired, nor did she miss anything in her lover.

She was a woman to whom the outward demonstrations of affection were not necessary. She believed implicitly in John Maitland,—her trust was as perfect as her love. So utterly did she believe in that love, that she did not require him to be repeating it to her; nay, there was to her a certain shrinking from it. And so she seemed cold and distant to him sometimes, when in reality she was far from feeling either cold or distant. I believe I am right in saying that Michael understood her better than John. His intuitions and perceptions were of the finest, and he was quick to recognise these exquisite attributes in the character of Agnes. To him she was a study of the most perfect womanhood,—in a word, she was his ideal. He was deeply and gravely concerned about the relationship between her and John, and felt impatiently that John had not been absolutely open with her. She deserved nothing but the very highest and most honourable confidence. In this he was unconsciously hard upon his brother, not knowing what agony there was for him in the mere doubt lest Agnes, knowing all, should send him from her side. Self-abnegation was easier for Michael by inheritance and habit. But the strong, proud heart of John craved its own, and feared to sacrifice anything. Thus they looked at the matter from a totally different standpoint.

‘I am not going to stay here any longer,’ said John, recurring to the old subject. ‘I am not of the stuff that makes idlers, any more than you. Why, at this moment, I feel able for anything; I feel even as if I could go forth and conquer the world.’

He laughed as he said it; but, as Michael looked at the magnificent proportions of his great figure—at the massive head and grave intellectual face, with the eye of fire and the jaw of iron—he acknowledged to himself that he looked not unlike a conqueror. There was a touch of mild envy in that proud glance, too, for manhood’s years and manhood’s stature had not brought strength to Michael, but rather the reverse. Of late a strange certainty had come home to him,—he believed that he would not live to be old, or even to reach middle life. It is one of the most exquisite provisions of our nature, that, after a time, we are able to accept such certainties not only with serenity, but even with cheerfulness. Already Michael felt as

if he stood a little outside of life, regarding it as a spectator might. And yet there was no apparent disease about him, nor even any symptom which might alarm himself or those who loved him. But it was certain that Michael felt himself, in a sense, being gradually weaned away from life.

'I believe you, dear fellow,' he said, with a quick return of his old affectionate manner, which was never long absent from him. 'There is nothing I do not believe you can achieve. Do you know you are only passing through the transition stages. Some day, not far distant, I hope, you will attain your full growth, and that will be worth the seeing for me, if I live.'

He uttered the last words in a half whisper, as if they slipped from him unawares. John heard them, but his attention was diverted at that moment by the vision of his beloved stepping from the door of the house. She stood there just a moment, her white gown showing against the leafy greenness of the rose-trees. She loved a white gown, which few women can wear with becomingness or grace. It suited her absolutely, and gave a certain stateliness to her slender figure, as well as a purity and sweetness to her whole appearance. Her dress was never obtrusive, but seemed a part of herself; the white marked her individuality, and was thus a fitting robe.

When she saw the two under the tree, she stepped lightly across the lawn. They both loved her, and looked at her with eyes which betrayed that love. But Michael looked away before she came near enough to read his glance.

'How utterly you two are given up to idleness!' she said gaily; 'John, I do not know whether you deserve that I should give you this.'

'A letter! Is it from Phil?'

'No, unless he is at Annan,' Agnes answered, as she handed him the envelope.

'Annan! Wallace has a place there,' cried John excitedly, and tore it open, while the other two waited with breathless interest.

'Yes, it's from Wallace, asking me to be his assistant this winter. Of all things in the earth, if I had been asked to choose, I would have chosen this. He is a perfect brick.'

His boyish delight was infectious. Michael and Agnes

laughed, as he tossed his cap in the air, as he used to do on breaking-up days when he was a schoolboy.

'I should not have thought, from your attitude a minute ago, that the idea of work would be so fascinating,' Agnes said teasingly.

'Did you not? my lady, just wait.'

The significance of this daring speech made the quick red flush sweep over her face, and she turned quickly to Michael, with a laughing remark about his attitude.

'Excuse me, Nannie; if not graceful, I am comfortable. I have often said I am a species of salamander, whatever that hybrid creature may be. Heat is as necessary to me as air, and I make the most of the sun while he condescends really to smile on us. He hides his head soon enough in our east-windy metropolis,' Michael answered lazily. 'I say, Nannie, he has just been growling and grunting and grumbling most disgracefully about being among the unemployed. He ought to do penance now, when his good luck has come.'

'Oh, you can tease as much as you like. I tell you, you don't know what this means for me,' said John, devouring his professor's brief, business-like letter again. 'He does not say anything about salary; but I can leave it with him. He's not a mean man.'

'It'll be about two hundred a-year, likely,' said Michael. 'That's what Phil had when he lectured at the Botanic. I say, where is he off to now?'

'To answer, of course, by return of post,' John looked back to say, as he darted into the house.

'Can you imagine Jock a grave, black-coated professor, maintaining strict discipline among his students; not allowing a solitary 'Miow' to issue from the back benches?' asked Michael, smiling, as he looked after him.

'Yes; he is rather imposing, sometimes, I think,' she answered, smiling too; and her sweet mouth seemed to Michael to take a sweeter, more tender curve.

'I'm afraid he shows you his best side,' said Michael unmercifully. 'There is a great deal of the boy about him yet, and I'm glad of it, dear old Jock!'

‘That is such an atrocious name, and Mike too. How can you call each other by such names?’

‘They may not be very elegant, but they have the music of the past in them, to put it sentimentally,’ returned Michael. ‘We have been Jock and Mike Maitland since we wore pinafores, and that is something worth treasuring.’

‘Yes, of course; I didn’t think of that. Isn’t this a choice day, Michael? It is as if God smiled on the whole world.’

‘Yes, I feel that. One seems to come nearer heaven on such a perfect day,’ Michael answered dreamily; and his face grew quite grave, for her words awoke anew the pain and fear in his heart for her. She accepted all from the hand of God with an unquestioning faith, finding in the blessing and mercy of each new day added proofs of His tender care. He marvelled that she had not ere this discovered how little sympathy there was on such themes between herself and John, and again blamed his brother. And yet he was glad, thankful that the shadow should be thus averted for a little while; that this dear woman should first taste love’s sweetness,—for oh, its bitterness for her would be cruel indeed!

‘Uncle Michael will be pleased,’ said Agnes, as her fingers touched caressingly the red rose in her belt. ‘I am not sure that I shall not triumph over him just a wee bit. Aunt Maggie will, I know. John will rush over to Nunraw immediately to tell her, you will see.’

‘Yes, mother will be glad. John has been most fortunate,—though, of course, it is not unusual for a professor to show such a signal mark of favour for his most distinguished student. It was a mere chance, however, that the place should be vacant just when he needs it.’

‘Would you say chance?’

‘No, I did not quite mean that. I understand you, of course; the way has been opened up.’

‘As it always will be, if we only wait. I seem to see that more and more. Michael, I have learned what Aunt Maggie means when she speaks of living from day to day. What an immense amount of suffering and care we would be spared if we learned it earlier.’

'God grant, my sister, that it may be always possible for you,' Michael said, with a fervour which made her look at him in surprise. It was the first time he had called her sister, and it touched her to the heart. But she did not ask him what had moved him, nor seek any explanation of his words. But long after, when living from day to day had become all that was possible for her, she remembered Michael's words.



CHAPTER VII.

'No thought of human littleness
Shall cross thy high, calm soul, shining and pure
As the gold gates of Heaven.'

THE remainder of that holiday time was long remembered by the Maitlands, as a time of tranquil happiness and peace. The two student sons remained at home all September,—John studying hard at his books in one of the attic rooms, or often under the thorn on the lawn, and Michael lounging about enjoying the mellow radiance of the autumnal sun, and drinking in the beauty of the autumnal tints and the harvest fulness. John had finally decided to lodge in Edinburgh all the winter, and it was, of course, understood that the brothers would be together under one roof while Michael was studying at the Hall. Michael heard them make all their arrangements, and Agnes was the only one who noticed how very little part he took in any talk about it. Many times she caught herself wondering what could be the meaning of a certain far-off look which was sometimes on his face. It made her heart heavy with a strange foreboding, although there was nothing to alarm in Michael's appearance; he had never seemed better, and roamed about the fields between Laurieston and Nunraw, lending a hand on both farms when the spirit moved him, and apparently enjoying life to the full. He was a great deal over at Nunraw beside Effie, who was developing amazing skill in housewifely art, and making a cosy home for her young husband; a home for which he ought, and indeed appeared, to be profoundly thankful. At least, he worked well on the farm, and won golden opinions

from Mr. Maitland during the busy time of the ingathering. The nine days' wonder over the romantic marriage had quite subsided, and Mrs. Laurie of Nunraw had taken her place among the matrons of the district as naturally as if she had looked forward to it for years. Outwardly they seemed a happy pair, and if Effie had any qualms of regret for the step she had taken, she had sense and pride enough to hide it. Nobody knew how often she looked over at Laurieston with dim, longing eyes, nor dreamed that she was grievously disappointed in the man for whom she had given up her happy girlish life and all the tender care of that dear home. Nobody—certainly least of all Agnes herself—dreamed how jealously Effie watched her, and even in a sense grudged her her place as the one daughter of Laurieston. But so it was. Many a storm-cloud, even in those early days, swept across the horizon of Effie Laurie's married life. They were standing at the garden gate of Nunraw one evening,—Michael, Agnes and Effie, just before parting after a long day together.

'Tell John I'm not friends with him. He never, never comes to Nunraw unless to take Nannie home,' said Effie jealously. 'Tell him Will and I will not speak to him the next time he comes.'

'You'd better not mention my name to his highness,' said Will, with a slight sneer. 'There never was much love lost between John and me. Since you've married me, Effie, you may make up your mind to do without John.'

'I suppose so,' said Effie quietly; but Agnes did not like her tone.

'John has been in Edinburgh all day, or he would have been over. He may not be home even yet,' she said gently.

'Oh, but he is not in town every day,' Effie retorted sharply. 'I can see him from my bedroom window lying for hours at a time under the thorn. But of course, if he doesn't want to come, we'll try not to break our hearts.'

'I'll report matters,' said Michael, with a genial smile. 'Hasn't this been a pleasant September?'

'In the daytime; but the nights are getting too confoundedly long again,' put in Will. 'I don't know what the two of us

will do, sitting like crows staring at each other over the fireplace every night through the winter. It'll be frightfully slow; and since they took off the late train, a fellow can't ever get an evening at the theatre.'

'Just as well it is off, then,' Agnes said, with more sharpness than she usually exhibited. 'I don't think Effie is particularly fond of the theatres, anyhow.'

'Seeing I never was in it, I don't know,' said Effie; at which Will laughed.

'Never mind them; I'll take you up, Effie, if we should stay all night in town. You'll enjoy it, I know. Good night then, Mike.'

'Good night, Nan.'

Effie stood at the garden gate and watched them till the belt of trees skirting the pasture hid them from sight, then turned away with an impatient sigh.

'I wish I could go over too. There's no place like Laurieston,' she said discontentedly, and her pretty face puckered into a frown.

'Go, then,' Will said promptly; 'I'm not forcing you to live here.'

What's the use of speaking like that, Will?' she asked quickly, feeling annoyed at his tone. 'We've got to live here, and to be thankful we have as good a place to call our own.'

'I suppose so; but, all the same, I wish we hadn't,' muttered Will thoughtlessly, and without any special significance, as he walked away. His wife caught the words, however, and her lip quivered as she turned towards the house. She was conscious of a growing restlessness in her husband, and it was making them both irritable and unhappy. Deep down in her heart there lurked the fear that she had built her house on a frail foundation. Her anxiety was not unshared by the two walking side by side across the bare stubble fields to Laurieston. But the subject was too delicate to be talked of between them, so they walked on in silence, though each was conscious of the other's unspoken thought.

'To-morrow is the first of October,' said Michael, as he helped her over the stile into the second field.

'Yes; and how fine the weather is still! We may have a kind of Indian summer in October this year.'

'It is a lovely time of the year. I do not feel any sadness in it, as I have heard some say. Just look at that bank, Nannie, with the dog-berries and the brambles, and the rich hues of the leaves! Isn't it fine?'

'Lovely; and the sea-line, how clear and bright and blue! I am quite sure, Michael, that whatever I may live to see, I shall never think any picture quite so fair as this.'

'Let us sit down here on the bank just for a few minutes before we go home. It is so dry and mild, and there is no dew falling. I want to speak to you, Nannie, very seriously.'

She looked at him in surprise. 'I am not sure if Aunt Maggie would like us to sit out of doors so late in the evening. But I think it *is* dry, and we may for a little while. What do you want to speak about, Michael dear?'

Sometimes, though not often, she would call him 'dear,' in her affectionate, sisterly way, not knowing that it was to him more a pain than a pleasure, because it drew so sharp a dividing line between him and John, whose name she seldom uttered, never when speaking directly to him.

'It is just about a fortnight till John begins his work. How enthusiastic he is over it!' said Michael, as they seated themselves on the grassy bank under a blaze of scarlet dog-berries. 'He will come to the front in everything he attempts. His enthusiasm will carry him over every difficulty.'

'Your belief in him, your devotion to him, is to me one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen,' Agnes said involuntarily, and with shining eyes.

'Who is to believe in him, if not you and I, Agnes?' Michael asked, with a slight smile. 'But it is not of John I am going to speak to-night, but of myself, Agnes.'

'Yes, your work begins too, very soon, does it not? Yet how quiet you have been about it! It is not often you speak about yourself, Michael.'

'I am not going to enter the Hall, Nannie,' said Michael slowly.

She turned upon him her startled eyes in quick questioning.

'Not enter the Hall! Michael dear, what do you mean?'

'What I am saying. I am not going to continue the theological course, because I shall never be a minister in the Established Church.'

Agnes was startled but not surprised. She had suspected something maturing in Michael's mind, although she did not know the nature or bent of his thought.

'It will be a fearful disappointment to Uncle Michael,' she said quite quietly at last.

'Yes.' A look of trouble settled on Michael's face. 'It will be in a sense the second downfall of my father's hopes. But I have looked at it from every point, and I cannot come to any other decision. I am not so brave as John, or I should have spoken out long since. I have a shrinking from unpleasant things; only a form of selfishness, after all.'

'You are never selfish,' she replied quickly. 'Will you tell me,' she added, with a slight hesitation, 'what are your reasons for this decision?'

'Yes, since you have not guessed it. My first and chief reason is that I do not believe I should live to finish it.'

'Not live—three years! Oh, Michael.' He smiled slightly at her distress, and touched her hand as it lay above a branch tinted with the brilliant hues of autumn.

'Agnes, I do not think that in your heart of hearts you are very much surprised,' he said almost quaintly. 'I have caught you looking at me sometimes, and if there was not anxiety, and even fear in that look, I cannot read human eyes. My strength has gone from me, and you know it. It is only this sweet idleness and the happiness of home which cherishes me. I know, as truly as I sit here, that one winter in Edinburgh lodgings would do for me.'

'And you will stay here, then, to be always with us, since Laurieston can keep you well!' she exclaimed; but he shook his head.

'That would be a poor use for the last handful of my days,' he said, smiling still. 'No, no. I have taken my ease and rest gladly, because I too have something to do; and this long, beautiful summer has fitted me for it.'

She hung upon his words with a breathless interest ; but it was a few moments before he continued :

‘ I have not spoken at random, Agnes ; I have had the best advice, and I know that I cannot have a long life,—that it may even be shorter than I anticipate. I am anxious to do something for my Master before I die.’

He spoke the last words slowly, as if weighing each one ere it left his lips.

‘ Knowing what I know of my own constitution, I do not think it would be right to spend my strength on study, which I should never live to apply. There are plenty of Christian workers required, besides those who preach in the pulpit. It is my intention, with God’s help, to number myself amongst those.’

‘ And will you work in Edinburgh, in connection with one of the Church missions ?’

‘ I have thought of that, but I confess it has not much attraction for me, and they have many willing workers there. I will tell you just what I mean,’ said Michael, leaning his elbow on his knees, and turning his face to her. ‘ You know Robertson is an Englishman. His father was a surgeon in a small mining town in the north of England. One night, long ago, when I was alone with Phil in his rooms, he began to speak of that place, Coldaire, and of his early days. You know Phil’s graphic style, how, in a word, he can bring a perfect picture before you. Well, just in a few sentences, he brought that whole parish and its mighty need before me that night,—its ignorance, its degradation, its drunkenness and sin. The miners are so rough that no minister will stay long in the place. There is a vicar, who lives at a watering-place, and leaves his work to his curate, who changes every few months. God-forsaken, Robertson called Coldaire ; and that is the sort of place I should like to spend my strength in. I believe I could do good.’

Agnes shivered.

‘ You would go there,’ she said, with difficulty, ‘ only to hasten the end.’

‘ And what of that, if in the interval any good work were accomplished ?’ he asked, with kindling eye.

'It is a noble idea, certainly, for any one but you. We cannot spare you, Michael. Aunt Maggie has had sorrow of late ; you must consider her.'

'I do ; I will. But I do not believe this will be a sorrow to my mother,' Michael said ; and his eyes shone with the great love of his heart.

'Not a sorrow, Michael ; and you so dear to her ! Could any mother let her son go forth to certain death without a pang ?'

Michael was silent, not hearing her, indeed, for he was recalling what his mother had said about 'compensations' on the night of their return from abroad.

'Does John know of this ?' Agnes asked ; and a quick shadow leaped at once to Michael's face.

'No,' he answered ; 'John would not understand. I have told no living soul but you as yet, Nannie. Only, to-night or to-morrow I will tell my father. Will you speak to mother ? or am I laying too heavy a task on you ?'

'Oh no ; I will tell her. I will do anything for you ; but oh, Michael, I cannot realize it. I cannot bear it.'

Her tears fell then, and they seemed to agitate him strangely. He rose and walked a few steps from her, and the expression on his face was that of a man who is putting a curb upon himself.

'Hush, hush ! I cannot bear to see you grieved, my sister. You must be my brave champion, and bid me God-speed, when I go forth on this new crusade.'

'Perhaps I may be able soon, but not yet,' she answered, trying to smile. 'I cannot but think of Uncle Michael and Aunt Margaret. No greater sorrow could ever fall upon Laurieston.'

Michael said nothing, only thought of the old saying, that a living sorrow is worse to bear than a dead one.

'Agnes, there is another reason which I do *not* intend to tell my father. I do not think that, even were I spared to finish my theological course, I could subscribe to the doctrines of our Church. I want a free gospel for my creed,—a gospel which admits that Christ died for all men. I could not, like some,

subscribe to a creed, and then ignore it in my preaching. There are too many restrictions in the dogmas of the Churches. Sometimes, I confess, I do not wonder that men's minds are bewildered among the doctrines of theory and practice. But I have no wish to enter into controversy with my father. Argument will never shake a strong man's convictions. Experience and necessity are the greatest factors in human life. Some day my father may feel the need of a wider creed. Meantime my gospel is Christ for every man, and, though I will not vex him with argument upon it, I shall not hide my beliefs.'

'I think you will be wise not to vex Uncle Michael too much,' said Agnes slowly, as she rose to her feet.

Looking towards the grey gables of the old house, she felt her heart sore within her. Was this but the beginning of sorrow for them all?

'We must go, I think, dear Michael. It is getting quite dark.'

'Yes, we will go. Thank you for listening so patiently to me, Agnes. Won't you wish me God-speed first here?'

'I do, I do,' she said, and stretched out her hands to him. 'I honour and reverence you more than I can tell.'

Michael took her hands, and, bending down, kissed her brow. Then he drew her arm within his, and they went home.

Mrs. Maitland was standing in the open door waiting for their coming.

'You are late, bairns,' she said. 'What has kept you? John has been out twenty times at the hedge, looking over the fields, and now he has gone off to Nunraw.'

'We were idling on the way, mother,' Michael answered gaily; but Agnes slipped past her aunt, and ran upstairs to her own room. She could not bear to see that smile of peace and motherly content on the dear lips, knowing of the sorrow looming in the distance. And yet, what need to vex herself? she asked, as she knelt by the open window, and looked across the peaceful fields to where the sea slept under a silvery veil.

Did not Michael's mother know where to go for strength in her hour of need?



CHAPTER VIII.

'My tree was thick with shade ; O blast ! thine office do,
And strip the foliage off, to let the heavens shine through.'



THINK John's improvin', wife. Whether it's Agnes or no', I dinna ken, but he's mair settled like. I'm better pleased wi' him than I was. May be years 'll gie him sense.'

Margaret Maitland smiled, but almost immediately her face grew graver. She had not dared to speak freely to her husband about John, believing that if he knew what views he entertained on religious questions, his righteous anger would be such that he would forbid him the house. It was certain that these weeks of companionship with Agnes had done much to soften and refine Je'm, and to rub down the blunt edges which the free and easy student life at Leipsic had made too prominent. At heart always thoughtful for others, he now showed it more in his outward demeanour, and so had favourably impressed his father. There were times, however, when Margaret Maitland felt as if she were treading on the edges of a volcano ; when she saw John's eye flash under his father's stern utterances concerning things spiritual, and she knew how great a curb he was putting on himself. There had been no talk whatever between Agnes and her concerning John's state of mind. She wondered sometimes whether Agnes had the remotest idea of it. She even felt herself, like Michael, a little impatient with John for what looked like concealment, and yet she felt but too thankful to let the tide of daily life flow in smooth channels as long as it could

'Is it not that you are less hard upon him, father?' she asked, with a quiet gleam of humour which lit up her face. 'Perhaps there is a change in you too?'

A slight smile touched Maitland's lips.

'I hope I was never less than just, Maggie. I suppose they winna be to marry for a while?'

'Oh no; I don't think either of them have thought of marriage,—at least for a long time. John has a great ambition, and he thinks nothing would be too good for Agnes. Confess now, father, that he has done very well for four-and-twenty, and without any encouragement.'

'Oh ay, he has done well. I never said but that he had brains, wife,' Laurieston admitted, with characteristic caution, which made her laugh.

'It's Michael I am anxious about noo, Maggie. Isn't it next week the studies begin? I never saw a lad show less interest in his work. I maun be at him. It'll be his turn may be to play truant.'

'I don't think he feels himself strong, father, though he makes no complaint,' the mother answered slowly.

'He looks weel. I'll see what he says the day.'

This talk occurred between Mr. and Mrs. Maitland on their way home from afternoon church the following Sabbath. Michael and Agnes were walking on in front, arm in arm, in true brotherly and sisterly fashion. Indeed, it was the belief in certain parts of the parish that it was Michael Agnes favoured, they were so much together.

'Michael and Nannie are aye very sib, Maggie. She doesna fash John wi' ower much o' her company. D'ye think she kens which she likes best?'

'I suppose she does. That is Nannie's way; and it suits John. He has a great reverence for her, and I hope they will be happy.'

'It'll be his fault if they're no', said Laurieston bluntly. 'Onybody could live wi' Agnes. Noo I wonder what way the twa frae Nunraw werena at the kirk the day? They are ower sune begun to bide at hame.'

Margaret Maitland was silent. She too had missed them,

and, knowing both were well, feared that it was Willie's old dislike to the church service which was keeping both at home. It was natural, of course, that Effie should not care to appear at church without her husband, and she but two months a wife.

'They'll be over to tea, likely, and we can see then what has kept them,' she answered. 'I never saw a finer October day, Michael. It is as mild as June.'

'Ay; but the robins are comin' in aboot. The snaw'll no' be lang, Maggie. Weel, lads, are the auld folk ower slow for ye?' he said, with a smile, as John and Wat strode past. John had attended church with exemplary regularity since he came home,—a mere form, but his mother saw that he wished to keep the peace.

That evening, just after the early tea, Michael voluntarily sought a talk with his father. The close of a mild, bright, tender October day is, to my thinking, one of the most beautiful things in this lovely world. If there is a touch of subdued melancholy in the aspect of nature when she stands on the edge of the winter storms, it gives to her an added charm, as the pensive look sometimes adds grace to a lovely face. The hard work of the autumn is over; the fields, lying fallow waiting for the useful grip of the frost; the trees bare and leafless, yet with a promise of spring in the shoots, which, though young and tender, are strong to withstand the rigour of the dark months of the year; the air is hushed, and sometimes heavy, as if with expectancy for the pure benediction of the snow; the sea has often then a deep silvery hue upon its placid breast, and its voice is stilled to beat in unison with the lowered pulse of nature. If the sun breaks through the tender gloom, it is with such a mild and chastened gleam that his past bold radiance seems like a dream. Such a day was that Sabbath at Laurieston,—the last before the family circle expected to be broken up for the winter.

'Will you take a turn, father?' Michael asked, joining him in the garden after tea. John and Agnes were already away for their evening walk by Hallercross up the river side, Wat and his mother making ready to go over to Nunraw to inquire what had happened to the young folks that their faces had not been seen all day.

'Your mother is gaun ower to Nunraw, Michael,' Laurieston answered. 'We can follow up, if ye like.'

'By and by, perhaps,' answered Michael. 'I want to have a long talk with you.'

His father looked at him keenly, and just then Mrs. Maitland and Wat came out of the door. 'We'll may be be over by and by, mother,' Laurieston said to his wife. 'Michael an' me want a crack.'

Mrs. Maitland nodded, thinking nothing. So absolutely did she rest upon the stability of her second son, that it never occurred to her that there might be anything special to crack about. She only bade him not stand too long on the moist lawn, and then turned away with Walter, concerned specially just then about Effie and Willie.

'As they are all out, let's go in, father. It gets cold when one stands long,' said Michael, when they were out of hearing. Laurieston turned without a word and led the way into the house. He felt the gravity of his son's manner, and wondered what he could be about to say.

Katie had cleared the table in the dining-room, and set the lamp ready to be lighted. The fire was burning cheerily, and the room, though filling with the evening shadows, was brightened by that ruddy glow from the hearth. Although it was not cold, they seated themselves near the fire, both conscious of that curious feeling of companionship and comfort given by a bright, well-warmed hearth.

'Are ye no' very weel, my man?' asked Michael Maitland the elder, as he saw Michael stretch out his hands to the cheerful blaze. His hands were long and white and thin, and presented a strong contrast to the sunburnt ones lying on his father's knee.

'Yes, I am quite well, father,—at least, well for me; but I am going to tell you something which I fear will be a great disappointment to you.'

'Ay,' said Laurieston, with no betrayal of curiosity except the keen fixed look of his penetrating eye.

'It is about my future. I have made up my mind that I am not going to the Hall next Monday.'

'Ay, and what for no?' There was increased dryness in the old man's voice as he asked that brief question.

'Father, look at me. Do you think I am a strong man, or likely to be a long-lived one?'

The father gave a great start, being wholly taken by surprise. But he never took his eyes from off his son's face, and in his heart of hearts, as he looked, he confessed that the outline of that fine face was too sharply defined, and its colour too delicate, to pertain to a strong man.

'What's the maitter wi' ye?' he asked, with that peculiar bluntness, or even harshness, which in a man of his strong nature is often assumed to hide the deepest love and pain.

'I don't know that I have anything special the matter with me at present,' Michael answered, with a slight smile. 'I thought it my duty some time ago, when I was feeling a little out of sorts, to seek some advice. I did this about a month ago, without telling any one, because I thought if there was nothing wrong it was needless to trouble mother or you. I have known since then that I have not many years to live.'

'Bless me!'

That short, sharp exclamation fell from the father's lips sharp with its surprise and pain.

'It is true. Simpson told me.'

'But can naething be dune?'

'No. Mine is not a case in which surgery can be of any avail. They can do a great deal, father, but they can't make a new man. I am organically weak, but I shall never be a great sufferer, and will just fall at last like an autumn leaf, without any fuss. That is a comfort, too. Don't let us linger on that. We are strong enough to accept it as the inevitable. What I want to speak about is my desire to make the most of what I have left. I want to crowd as much work as possible into the short space that remains to me.'

Maitland of Laurieston looked at his son in silence,—a strange silence, in which many deep thoughts were hid. Uppermost, however, was simple and absolute wonder to hear him thus calmly discuss his life and death. Michael broke the silence, and in his open, frank, generous way laid before his father his

plans for the future. He warmed to the theme, as he thought of that desolate, God-forsaken spot of which Robertson had so graphically spoken; and Maitland of Laurieston listened in utter silence, but never lifting his deep eyes for a moment from his son's face. Only God knew what was in his heart as he listened.

'I know it is a disappointment to you, father,' Michael concluded eagerly, bringing his eyes to meet his father's steadfast gaze; 'but don't you think I am right? It would be a waste of time and money to continue my University course, when I know I should not live to finish it. Think how much better to die in harness, in the midst of work so engrossing that there would be no time to think of one's self. Say you give your consent. Wish me God-speed, father. I could not go without your blessing.'

'Ye hae spoken a heap, my man; I doot I hae followed ye but purirly,' said Laurieston slowly, and passing his hand across his rugged brow. 'The first point is that ye winna be able to gang on wi' the college; the second, that ye hinna long to live. He paused there, and a distinct tremor shook his strong frame, as the wind of winter shakes the great boughs of the oak. 'The third, that ye want to gang awa to some outlandish place to preach the Word to English colliers. If ye maun preach, what ails ye at Wallyford and Deantoon and Cowpits. D'ye think they need nae preachin' there?'

'Yes, they need it; but they have it, father. Meetings are regularly held in all those places. Besides, a prophet has no honour in his own country;—and, and my heart is in Coldaire.'

'And in the meantime your mother an' me can thole as we like at hame.'

The old man rose to his feet and took a turn across the room. He walked slowly, as if his strength had gone from him.

The tears rose in Michael's blue eyes as he saw that hesitating gait, and for a moment he regretted the blow he had given. At last Maitland of Laurieston gathered himself together and returned to his position by the hearth. He leaned forward a little in his chair, and again fixed his penetrating eyes on his son's face.



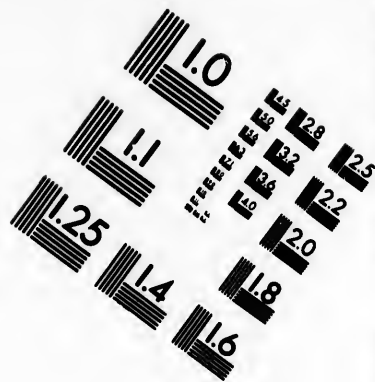
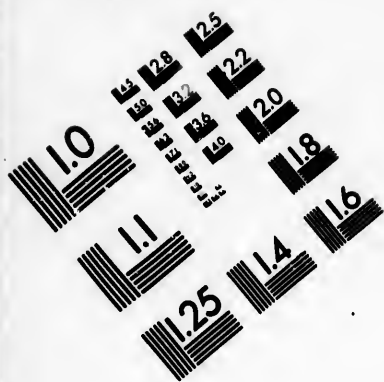
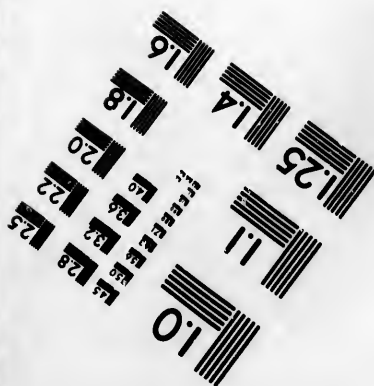
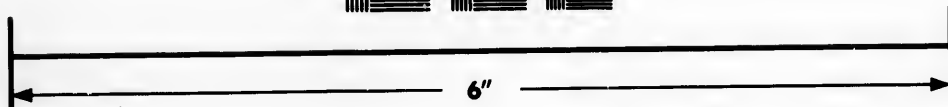
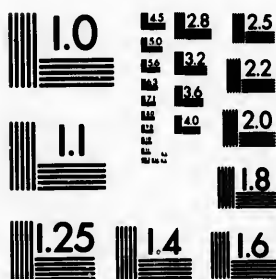


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'What d'ye think your mother will say to a' this, Michael? Does she ken?'

'No; but I believe she will bid me go.'

'I believe she wad gie her life's bluid for any one o' ye,' Laurieston answered hoarsely. 'Nevertheless, I canna see my way to bid ye go yet, an' ye mauna ask it. When I can believe that this is the Lord's dacin, I'll bow in submission, but that's no' yet.'

Michael knew that decisive tone of old. It brooked no contradiction, no argument on the part of a son. He bowed his head silently, and there was no bitterness in his heart, because he knew that in that moment the bitterness of death was in his father's soul. He wished that any hand but his had dealt that blow; but he had only spoken as conscience bade him.

Katie came in, lighted the lamp, and pulled down the blinds, wondering a little that the two sat in such silence by the hearth. When she had again left them, Maitland of Laurieston rose, still silently, and passed from the room. Then Michael bowed his face on his hands and prayed, craving anew guidance and help, for just then the way of life, which had to be fought for inch by inch as he went forward, seemed very hard. But his heart-struggle was nothing to that raging in his father's soul. The strong man went out into the darkness of the night, and, standing alone, away from all human eyes, he challenged the Lord for the hardness of His dealings with him and his. One by one his idols were being cast down, the temples of his own rearing laid in ruins at his feet, the desires of his heart and the hopes of his life destroyed ere they came to the full birth. For the first time in his life Michael Maitland rebelled against Heaven, and, clenching his strong hands in the darkness, looked up to the starless firmament, asking fiercely what he had done that he should be thus hardly dealt with. For a brief space he allowed the dark spirit to work his will with him, and a whirlwind of rebellious passion shook his soul. Strong in his self-righteousness, he arrayed his long list of good deeds before the Almighty, and held up his upright life in derision against the sorrows that had come upon his house. The sweat-drops stood upon his brow;

his strong mouth, which seldom responded to any of the inner emotions, shook with the tempest.

That Sabbath night under the starless sky was the Gethsemane in Maitland of Laurieston's life. They came back one by one to the pleasant family room, and, as the night wore on, wondered what had become of the head of the house. The hour for the books passed by, and still he did not come. Michael, with a strange wavering smile, bade his mother not be anxious, even while a consuming anxiety dwelt with him. By and by a heavy foot passed by the window, but none stirred to meet it at the outer door. He came directly into the room, and before all present approached Michael and laid a heavy hand upon his shoulder :

'It is the will of the Lord. His will be done. Let us pray.'



CHAPTER IX.

'Was it something said, something done,
Vexed him was it touch of hand, turn of head!'

IT was a surprise next day when Philip Robertson arrived at Laurieston. After the strong upheaval of deep feeling there was a kind of agitated atmosphere in the house, of which Robertson was conscious before he had been long under its roof. But the old kindly welcome was not lacking, even Maitland himself receiving him with marked cordiality. He arrived when they were at their early dinner, and a place was made for him instantly, without fuss, and so he felt at home.

'One question at a time, please,' he exclaimed laughingly, as John poured out his whys and wherefores in a continuous string.

'So you were anathematizing me? I only came over a fortnight ago, and I have been all the time with my sister at Coldaire.'

He wondered at the effect his words produced; every expression seemed to change.

'We did not know you had a sister, Philip,' Mrs. Maitland said quietly.

'No? Well, I believe I have not spoken of her very much. She has only recently returned to Coldaire since her husband's death. He was at one time a missionary in the place, but his health broke down under the strain, and he has been living an invalid at Bournemouth for about nine months. I do not wonder he died, the wonder would have been had he lived. I went to try and persuade Mary to leave the place, but she is

obstinate. She thinks she can do some good there, because the people loved David. I told her it was a fearful place to rear her boy in ; but my sister is a woman of great decision and force of character.'

Laurieston rose abruptly and left the table, although the meal was only half done.

Robertson looked uncomfortable, and turned questioningly to Mrs. Maitland.

'I trust I have not said anything to vex Mr. Maitland?'

'Oh no ; it is a long story, Philip. The boys will tell you it all, after,' she said, with a faint smile. 'You will understand then why Michael looked as if he admired your sister very much for her decision of character. She is quite young, I suppose?'

'Thirty-two ; her boy is five,—as fine a little chap as you ever saw. I wanted them both to come over and winter with me in Leipsic ; but, as I said, Mary is determined, to obstinacy,—but she is a dear little woman for all that.'

'I admire her. It is a fine idea to carry on her husband's work,' said Agnes, speaking for the first time.

'It is. They were devoted to each other ; but David, in spite of his high character, had a lack of tolerance. He considered me so much of a heathen, that he did not care to see me very often at Coldaire, consequently Mary and I have seen very little of each other since I came north. It was rather hard upon me, seeing we had no other kin in the world but each other.'

There was a slight bitterness in Robertson's tone and manner ; yet he commanded their sympathy, for it was evident that his love for his sister was very precious to him. He roused their deeper interest, because it was the first and only time that he had ever spoken of his family or friends. They understood now that he had keenly felt the estrangement which his brother-in-law, a good but somewhat narrow-minded man, had insisted upon, so long as Robertson was avowedly sceptical regarding all religious questions.

'There have been changes here too since I went away, Mrs. Maitland,' he said, turning from the subject. 'I hope Mrs. Laurie is very well?'

He spoke calmly and carelessly, evidently without an effort

As Mrs. Maitland answered him, she told herself he had entirely forgotten his old love for Effie. It was not so, only he had schooled himself in indifference, and had indeed come to Laurieston for the express purpose of seeing Effie in her new character, and thus curing himself entirely.

'We'll go over, if you like,' said John quickly. 'But, I say, how long can you stay?'

'Two days. Wallace has invited me to Annan from Saturday to Monday, to meet my old prof.'

'Has he? Why, I am going too,' exclaimed John delightedly. 'Could anything be jollier?'

'Nothing could,' answered Phil heartily; 'only it is a shame to leave Michael out in the cold.'

He laid his hand on Michael's slender shoulder with peculiar kindness, as if wondering that he should be so silent.

'Mike has gone back on his Alma Mater, Phil,' said John, as his mother rose. 'Come, let us go out for a stroll, and exchange news. Coming, Mike?'

Michael nodded, and the three left the house.

'It is like the old days come back to see those three together, Nannie,' said Mrs. Maitland, as she watched them saunter down the garden path.

'Aunt Maggie, we seem to have *lived* a great deal in the last few months,' Agnes said quickly; 'it seems years since last Christmas.'

'Yes, my dear. We had a long time of peace and happy monotony, if I may say it. I suppose through it all we were maturing for this. When life seems hardest, it is a blessed thing to think that God will never try us beyond our strength.'

'I hope, I pray, Aunt Maggie, that when I am as old as you I can say the same,' Agnes answered, out of the fulness of her heart.

'I am not afraid for you, Nannie; you have a strong heart, which will not quickly fail. And I believe, my dear, that God has a great work for you to do.'

She did not say what that work was, nor did Agnes ask.

The three old friends had a long walk by the seashore, and back across the windy uplands, and during that walk, all the

plans and hopes for the future were discussed, with the delightful candour and freedom which is the privilege of a tried friendship. Robertson did not say much when Michael's desire and purpose in the future was told to him. But he was more sympathetic than John, who thought it the most utter folly, and had said so to his brother in no measured terms.

'I believe, dear fellow, the work will be to your mind; and I like to think that you will meet Mary,' he said quietly. 'When you have come to some definite arrangement about going, I shall write to her. I believe she could take you in. She has a nice little house, which belonged to my father, and was left to her in his will.'

'There's Nunraw, Phil,' John interrupted, almost with a tone of impatience, for he could not bear the subject. 'No, not there; don't you see the white gables? Let's go down and ask Effie for a cup of tea.'

'I should like to pay my respects to the happy pair,' said Robertson; 'but Michael looks tired.'

'I'll go straight home,' said Michael. 'You two want your own crack, any way.'

And with a nod and a smile he left them. Robertson looked after him, with a curiously tender, half-sorrowful look.

'He is a nobler man, John, than either you or I,' he said at length.

'I admit it; but at the same time I think he is perfectly insane on this point,' said John almost angrily. 'He won't live six months in that wretched place. I can't for the life of me understand how my father and mother have ever given their consent.'

'It is hard upon your father, I see,' said Robertson briefly.

'It is. It has been the dearest hope of his life to see Mike a pillar in the Auld Kirk. Upon my word, Phil, I'm sorry for the old man. We have all disappointed him. This establishment was a sore blow to him,' he added, waving his hands towards the homestead they were approaching.

'It would be; but these disappointments have had a very different effect upon him from what I should have anticipated.

He is much more human, if you will excuse me saying it so plainly.'

'I excuse you anything, Phil. I'm so glad to see you and talk with you. You know there is not a soul yonder to sympathise with me.'

'And what of Miss Laurie?' asked Robertson dryly.

'Oh, you know what I mean,' retorted John quickly; but Robertson only smiled.

'I don't know whether to congratulate you or not. But Miss Laurie is certainly a lovely woman.'

John was silent, embarrassed as usual when any direct allusion was made to his love. Robertson admired him for his shyness, and forebore to tease him any further.

'I'll tell you what, John, there is something in this idea of Michael's which sets one thinking. He is a remarkably clear-minded and reasonable person, not given to being carried away by sickly sentimentality, either in things spiritual or temporal. There is something in it all, John, which makes us think whether we will or not.'

This speech brought them to the gate of Nunraw, and Effie herself, who had seen them approach, came running to the door, all blushes and smiles, to welcome them. There was a touch of mild coquetry in her nature, and she rather enjoyed the effect she imagined the sight of her wifely estate would have upon her old admirer. He betrayed nothing, however, except the ordinary courtesy of an old friend called upon to utter a congratulatory speech. It rather pained her to see that there were no interesting symptoms of sorrow or disappointment visible in his appearance or demeanour, and his gaze was perfectly frank, his manner perfectly unembarrassed and cordial, when he addressed her as Mrs. Laurie, and wished her every happiness in her married life.

'Mr. Laurie will be in presently,' she said, with an assumption of dignity which hugely amused John. 'Just take Mr Robertson into the dining-room while I see after tea.'

Effie actually dashed away a tear as she hurried across the little hall, for she had sustained a grievous disappointment, and it was suddenly brought home to her that Mrs. William

Laurie was of no account or interest to anybody in the world except to Mr. William Laurie. How different in the old days, when Effie Maitland had been an attraction which drew suitors to Laurieston like a magnet! How foolish she had been, to throw away her girlish sceptre so soon; how foolish to have chosen Will Laurie, when she might have married that grave, handsome, distinguished-looking man in the dining-room, who might one day have given her a great position! And he had loved her, or the past was only a dream. Foolish, foolish Effie, to open the door to such vain, unavailing regrets. Her endeavour now should be to make the best of the life she had chosen. While she was upstairs putting on a daintier gown, her husband entered the house. He was cross and out of sorts,—truth to tell, sick of the whole dreary business. He was not born to be a successful family man, and the restraint imposed upon him, not only by Effie, but by the thought of the watchful and, perhaps, not too kindly eyes at Laurieston, galled him inexpressibly. He magnified trifles, imagined slights where none were intended, and had altogether succeeded in convincing himself that he was an ill-used man. He had not a singularly pleasant expression on his face as he sauntered into the house, nor did it brighten when he entered the dining-room and saw the two visitors.

‘Hullo! Unexpected honour! How do, Robertson? Where’s Effie? Why isn’t tea in? It’s after five.’

‘She will be here presently. You might at least be civil, Will,’ John said quickly.

‘Who’s uncivil? I’m not going to affect a rapture I don’t feel, even in my own house. You students have a grand time of it,—holidays all the year round. If you had to trudge up and down a beastly potato field all day, you’d know what was what.’

‘You’ve a nice place here, Will,’ said Robertson. ‘Don’t you like the outdoor life?’

‘No, I don’t. I wasn’t cut out for the rôle of yokel,’ retorted Will. ‘Won’t you have a glass of wine, seeing there’s no appearance of tea?’ He opened the sideboard, took out the decanter and some glasses; and just then Effie appeared, looking as dainty and sweet as a rose in June,

'Oh, Will dear, don't be getting out that stuff just now. Mysie is just ready with tea,' she exclaimed, with a quick flush, and in a moment she had replaced the things in the sideboard and shut the doors, without heeding her husband's ominous frown; then she turned to Robertson with a smile so bright and radiant that it seemed wholly natural. 'When did you come? They were not expecting you at Laurieston, I think; at least, mother did not say anything about it on Sabbath night.'

'You are out of the running there now, Effie,' Will said promptly. He never missed an opportunity of reminding her that she was no longer an inmate of Laurieston.

'I came only to-day unexpectedly,' Robertson answered. 'My holiday has been curiously broken up this year. I meant to have a long time in Scotland, but have not managed it.'

'We are glad to see you even at the eleventh hour,' said Effie brightly. 'Come, sit in. How nice of you to come just at tea-time!'

They drew in their chairs, and, under the influence of Robertson's genial talk, Will recovered his good-humour, and even tried to make amends for his rudeness. But he had made a bad impression on Philip; and Effie also, in spite of her bright demeanour, felt sorely wounded. It was a natural and womanly pride which made her desire to show her old admirer that she had not made a foolish choice. Even while preserving a perfectly unruffled and careless demeanour, she inwardly resolved to speak with proper plainness to Will directly they were alone. The young men did not much prolong their stay after tea, but though it was not six o'clock, it was quite dark when they left the house.

'What's the matter with Will?' Robertson asked, as they passed through the garden gate. 'He seems frightfully out of sorts.'

'He'd be the better of a good hiding,' John answered, with the utmost energy, for he was vexed and ashamed at what had passed. 'The whole thing is a miserable farce. The pair of them are no more fit to be responsible heads of a house than that crow. They'll fall out to-night over it. I saw it in

Effie's eye. And did you see that little by-play at the sideboard. *That's* at the bottom of it, Phil, and nobody knows where it will end.'

'I am sorry for your sister,' Robertson said, in a low voice.

'So am I, though I can't but say she richly deserves it. When I think of what might have been'—

John said no more, for he saw that his friend had quickly turned his head away.

'It's the sins of the fathers, Phil,' said John at length, after they had crossed a field's breadth in silence. 'Poor Will has inherited evil to combat with, and so must be charitably judged. How thankful we ought to be that our parents have transmitted to us no vices, Phil. If for nothing else, we owe them a debt of honour and gratitude. *That* handicaps a man all his days, and makes the struggle after good, when he makes it, a struggle of which we have no idea.'



CHAPTER X.

*'As the wild rose bloweth, as runs the happy river,
Kindness freely floweth in the heart for ever.'*

EATHER, I am going to take a journey all by myself.'

'Ay, wife, an' am I no' to spier whaur ye are gaun?'

'I'll tell you, if you promise first not to prevent me going.'

Laurieston laughed a trifle grimly.

'Ye are the very woman, Maggie, to bide at hame when I bid ye,' he said, in mild scorn. 'Ye never thraw wi' me; but a' the same, ye take your ain way in a' things.'

'But it is a good way, Michael,' Margaret Maitland said, with a quaint smile. 'Confess that now.'

'Oh, weel, it's no' ill,' Laurieston admitted; adding immediately, 'but it wad be a' the same if it was ill. If ye be the weaker vessel, Maggie, ye dinna admit it.'

'I don't feel very weak, certainly,' she said, with a happy laugh. 'I've been able to think for myself all my days. Well, make a guess where I'm going.'

'Oh, on some gowk's errand, likely; but I couldna say whaur.'

'Now, Michael, that's too bad; but I know you won't say it's a gowk's errand. I am going away to-morrow or next day on a visit to Mrs. Gilbert—Philip's sister.'

A quick change passed over the face of Michael Maitland.

'That's to Coldaire?'

'Yes.'

'And what's the object o' the veesit?'

'Twofold. I want to see the place, and to ask Mrs. Gilbert to take Michael in if he goes.'

'I see.'

There was a moment's silence; but Margaret Maitland was not greatly surprised by her husband's next words. Indeed, she anticipated them in her own mind before they were uttered.

'Is't the morn ye are gaun?'

'Yes; or Wednesday. I intend to stay till Saturday, if Mrs. Gilbert will keep me.'

'Weel, I'll gang wi' ye.'

'I thought you would. I told Mrs. Gilbert she might look for us both.'

'Margaret Maitland, ye are a perfect conspirator.'

'No, no; only I make the way easy for you, and help you to make up your mind when you can't do it yourself,' she answered, with a slight smile. 'Didn't I see just what you were longing for,—the shadow of an excuse to take a journey to Coldaire. Only, I anticipated you this time. I made up my mind to be before you, and not be left as I was when you went to London. The bairns are my bairns too, Michael.'

'Ay, and weel for them that they are. Ye hae dune them a guid turn, Maggie. There's few wives and mithers like you, though I say it, that shouldna.'

She flushed all over like a girl at this unwonted praise. It was a constant wonder and a deep thanksgiving to Margaret Maitland to watch the gradual and sweet mellowing of her husband's fine character. It was a fine character, which strove for and acted up to the highest idea of duty, trampling down self on the stony way; its only fault the narrowness of its view and its lack of the more beautiful attributes of love. The love was there, only kept fearfully hidden in a dark corner, almost as if it were a thing accursed. Margaret Maitland thanked God for *any* agent which would open up the wells of that deep heart,—ay, even though it should dig the graves of her dearest earthly hopes.

On the last day of October, Mr. and Mrs. Maitland took their journey across the border. Michael had gone to town to

spend a few days with John in his rooms; and it was his mother's desire that he should not be told that they were away. There had been no further talk about his plans for the future; he waited, believing that in good time they would bid him go forth to the life-work he had chosen. In the meantime, he was willing to wait, and was enjoying to the full all the pleasant excitement of the first days of the session, when there is so little done and so much spoken about. The Maitlands had a large circle of acquaintances in Edinburgh, though, of course, the graduation ceremony in the summer had reduced the number considerably. John eschewed the student-garrisons on the south side of the Meadows, and took his rooms in Montague Street. From his study window he could see the grim ridge of Salisbury Crags,—a consideration which weighed much with him. Michael went up to hear his first words to the students; and though he was in a keenly critical mood that day, and disposed to cavil at trifles, he had not a fault to find. John had a quiet, dignified manner; a clear, impressive, pleasant voice; and, though not eloquent, contrived to make his matter interesting. The matter itself was good, and bore the stamp of originality. From an intellectual point of view, Michael was wholly pleased with the maiden speech.

The fine weather broke on the last day of October, and Mr. and Mrs. Maitland left Laurieston in a storm of wind and rain, which increased in violence as they travelled southwards. Margaret Maitland had never crossed the border in her life; and she was full of interest in the journey, though the rolling mists hid the landscapes from view. The storm seemed at its height among the wild solitudes of the Cheviots, and the wind swept over the hills and down the deep gorges with many a weird, uncanny sound. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and the early darkness was closing around them, when the train stopped at a bleak, exposed railway station, which seemed to have been planted down without meaning in the midst of a desolate moor. Though the buildings were insignificant, it seemed to be a place of some importance; for many lines converged, and the sidings were filled with trucks, which bore the name of the different coal companies to which they

belonged. The country was not hilly ; and it was lit up by the lurid gleam from the engine-houses at the various shafts. Few passengers alighted from the south-going train ; and there was ample room in the battered and melancholy 'bus, provided for the carriage of passengers from the station up to the little town. The depressed-looking white horses, standing with hanging heads and drooping ears, steaming in the moist atmosphere, pulled themselves together at the driver's harsh cry, and lumbered away over the heavy roads, making but slow progress, in spite of the loud cracking of the whip and the constant shouts of the driver, whose temper a thorough soaking had not improved. It was a somewhat chilly reception ; and Margaret Maitland felt sorry for it on her husband's account. But she was not without hopes that a warmer welcome yet awaited them, and that the glow of Mary Gilbert's hospitable fire and the gleam of her happy eye would speedily atone for all the discomforts of their journey. Fifteen minutes' rough jolting brought them to the Cheviot Ram Inn, an old-fashioned hostelry in the High Street of Colklair, which was both starting and arriving point for the station 'buses, as it was indeed the centre of life in the place. The High Street was long and narrow and irregular, its carriage-way a sea of black mud, and its broken footpaths a series of dangerous puddles. A few gas-lamps twinkled dimly in the folds of the heavy mist, and the shop windows shone with a curious yellow glare, while the rain-drops wept on every pane. Laurieston and his wife stepped from the 'bus, and looked about them, almost in dismay.

'Supper, sir ?' said the genial host of the Ram, appearing at his doorstep in shirt-sleeves and an ample apron. 'Rooms, sir, for lady and self? best accommodation in town,—in fact, sir, only accommodation fit for man or beast.'

'No, thank you, my man,' said Michael Maitland courteously. 'We are going further on, I suppose. Can you direct us to The Knowe, the residence of Mrs. Gilbert ?'

'The Knowe ? Nothing easier. Keep up the street, and turn to your left, right down past the church and the parsonage, and you'll see a little yellow house standing in a big lawn,

—that's The Knowe. Friends of Mrs. Gilbert's, sir? A lady we all respect, sir.'

'Yes, thank you; good night.'

Laurieston offered his arm to his wife, and they trudged up the muddy street.

'We're having an adventure, father. Fancy you and me, at our time of life, setting out on a voyage of discovery,' said Margaret Maitland, with a little laugh.

'Ye may say it. She's expectin' us, I think ye said? Are ye sure?'

It was eminently a Scotch question. The dread of intruding, or of arriving unexpectedly or unasked at any house, is a bug-bear to every Scotchman. He wants to be sure of every step of the way before he trusts himself to it.

'Yes, of course; but even if we were not expected, I should have no hesitation in knocking at Mrs. Gilbert's door, after her letters,' said Mrs. Maitland stoutly; and there, somehow, their talk came to an end.

There is a kind of depressing feeling in arriving at a strange place on a dark, wet night, especially if there be any uncertainty about the reception likely to be accorded at the end. But in a few minutes all uncertainty was at an end; for, directly they turned the parsonage corner, the yellow house came in sight, its bright windows sending forth gleams of cheerful light across the wide lawn. The door was open, too; and before they reached the garden gate, they saw a woman's figure cross the little hall, and peer anxiously out into the night.

'There she is! She's like Philip. She's looking for us, Michael,' said Mrs. Maitland quickly. When the garden gate clicked, the tall, slight figure ran down the gravelled path.

'Mrs. Maitland, come away. How are you both such a dreary day? and such a welcome! I didn't dare to come to the station, because I have a cold, and I am so easily laid up. How glad I am to see you both. Come in, come in.'

Her voice was rich in tone, but clear and sweet as a bell; and when, presently, they were all within the cosy, well-lighted house, they saw how beautiful was her face. Not with the beauty of feature or colouring, for Mary Gilbert had neither

of these. She was a woman whom many called plain, though many more thought her beautiful. She had the same dark, grave, somewhat sad face, which was familiar to the Maitlands in Philip, but her smile was bright and radiant, her eyes shone with goodwill and peace. Her figure was tall and slender, and the sombre black gown fitted it like a glove. Although her face was youthful, the hair under the widow's cap was quite grey. A graceful and gracious woman was Mary Gilbert, and her guests felt the charm of her personality steal into their hearts.

'I know you both so well from Phil,' she said, as with her own hands she helped Michael Maitland off with his coat. 'Arthur dear, where are you? This is my son, dear friends,—a very wild little boy, I am afraid, but as good as gold.'

The small boy referred to appeared in the dining-room door, with a very ugly terrier in his arms, and a very roguish look in his eye.

'I couldn't come out sooner cos Crony was growling awful, an' I have to hold him, see, or he'll be at you. Isn't he a beauty? I got him from Uncle Phil,' he said, and, as if attracted by something in Michael Maitland's face, he went up to him, slipped his hand in his, and with the other gripped the original-looking Crony to keep him in order. Crony did not look conspicuously vicious,—he only blinked his round black eyes in a very knowing way, as if he had already taken an estimate of the new arrivals.

'Take Mr. Maitland into the dining-room, Arthur, and ask Elsie to bring in tea,' said Mrs. Gilbert. 'Come then, Mrs. Maitland, and I shall help you.'

Upstairs there was sufficient warmth and light and comfort to do a tired traveller good. The room was large and wide and low-ceiled,—an old-fashioned room, all curious angles and corners, and a funny wide window with a low-cushioned seat all round it. A big fire blazed cheerily in the dog grate, and two easy-chairs stood temptingly on either side of the hearth. The bed was almost hidden in one of the curious angles, and the room looked more like a delightful boudoir than anything else.

'What a lovely room!' Mrs. Maitland exclaimed, as she stepped across the threshold.

'It is very cosy. May I look at you, Mrs. Maitland? You are my brother's ideal of a perfect mother, and your sons worship you. I want you to tell me your secret.'

'Oh, hush, Mrs. Gilbert,' Margaret Maitland answered quickly, and her tears rose. 'I have no secret. My bairns love me because I love them. It is very good of you to allow us to come here, and to be so kind to us, who are almost strangers.'

'Nay. My brother speaks of Laurieston as home; and are we not all children of the King?' Mary Gilbert asked, as her quick fingers unfastened her visitor's wraps. 'We have a great deal in common, even setting aside the object of your visit, which is to me, of course, intensely interesting.'

'Yes. I was not favourably impressed with the place as I came through it to-night; but of course I saw it at a disadvantage.'

'Yes, you did; but at its best the place is not inviting. I am bound to be frank with you, it does not belie its name; but we are going to look at the bright side, and in the meantime the inner man must be refreshed. Just hear that child's tongue going, downstairs. Is your husband fond of children, Mrs. Maitland? You have no little grandchildren yet? They will come by and by. Are you quite ready? You do look sweet and lovely! Don't mind me. I am English, you know, and Phil has told me the Scotch do not express themselves so frankly. But I mean it. I think you are lovelier even than I expected.'

Margaret Maitland put her hands over her ears and ran out of the room. When they reached the pleasant family room downstairs, where the tempting table was spread, and the urn hissing on the tray, they found Arthur snugly ensconced between Mr. Maitland's knees, his chattering tongue busy recounting the various excellences and beauties of the inimitable Crony. He was a kind of nondescript beast, called by courtesy a Scotch terrier, with brindled coat, short thick legs, a long thin body, and a black face, surmounted by a pair of enormous ears. But, as we say of the human face sometimes, Crony was redeemed from plainness by the extraordinary brilliance and intelligence of his round black eyes.

'Mr. Maitland has two dogs in Scotland, mamma,' Arthur said, in his shrill, sweet childish tones. 'One is called Help and one Turk. Aren't they funny names, mamma? But they are such clever dogs; they can bring all the sheep in all by themselves. Mr. Maitland says I must come and see them. Could I go with him when he goes away?'

'That would be pleasant, if his dear mother would come too,' said Mrs. Maitland, as she laid her hand on the boy's sunny head. But Mrs. Gilbert only smiled.

'Some day, perhaps, you and I may see Scotland, Arthur, but not yet. Come then, Mr. Maitland, and do justice to our English fare, and then Arthur must go to bed.'



CHAPTER XI.

'Sow with a generous hand,
Pause not for toil or pain.'

I AM so glad you thought of coming to see Coldaire for yourselves, my friends. To-morrow, if it is dry, we will walk over the place, then you will have an idea of the work your son wishes to take up,—but only an idea.'

They had drawn their chairs close about the hearth after tea, Arthur had gone obediently to bed, and there was no sound to be heard outside but the wind, and the beating of the rain-drops on the panes.

'Is it so hard, ma'am?' asked Laurieston bluntly, struck by the repetition of the last words.

'Yes, it will be hard, very hard, and often most discouraging. I made up my mind to be quite frank with you. The people among whom my husband spent his strength are diamonds in the rough, that is, if they are diamonds at all, which I sometimes doubt.'

'This is no' very encouraging, wife,' said Michael Maitland briefly.

'It is true,' nodded Mary Gilbert. 'I don't know whether you know anything about miners,—with us, at least, they are very rough,—and this place has been frightfully neglected. It is a disgrace to the land. Until Mr. Gilbert was sent to open a station here, there were no church ordinances for them except the parish church, which is left entirely to the care of a curate. The vicar comes on a Sunday morning about once in two

months, and preaches the morning sermon. He lives at Alnmouth. And there is nothing else for the people, no innocent recreation or healthful amusement, nothing but the public-house.'

'Is there a minister now in your late husband's place?' asked Margaret Maitland quickly.

'No. The authorities did not feel themselves justified in continuing it as a mission station. It had made so little progress. My husband's work was done chiefly out of church, and he was making headway slowly but surely when he was laid aside.'

'It maun be an ill place,' put in Michael Maitland slowly.

'There are good hearts in it too, and among the miners good honest souls who preserve one's faith in human kind. They labour under fearful disadvantages. It is not easy for them to be good or even decent, I sometimes think. When you see their poor, squalid homes to-morrow, you will understand what I mean. I have a mothers' meeting; if you saw these poor, depressed, untidy women, Mrs. Maitland, your heart would ache for them. Early and improvident marriages are the curse of the place. You will see boys and girls of seventeen and eighteen setting up such meagre house-keeping, and then they have so many little babies; ten and twelve in a family is quite a common number. Then there is the drink.'

Mary Gilbert paused there, and her fair brow was knit in troubled thought.

'Perhaps that is the worst we have to contend with. It so debases a nature which is perhaps not inherently very exalted. What views has your son on this question?'

'I dinna ken. We are not teetotallers, ma'am; but there never was a Maitland the waur o' it,' said Laurieston, not without pride.

'That may be; but it is absolutely necessary to take one side or other here. David and I were of your mind when we came, but we had to join the temperance ranks for example's sake. Papa used to say Coldaire was a mine of wealth to the drink-seller as well as to the coal-owner. You know papa was a surgeon here for five-and-twenty years before he went to the

hospital in Manchester, so he was competent to speak. Philip and I were both born in this house.'

'Then you have only come home again?' said Mrs. Maitland, with a smile.

Mary Gilbert nodded.

'What could I do? Bournemouth had no attraction for me, nor Manchester, for we never felt at home there. Phil did not need me, the vagabond; he has grown a perfect Bohemian. Coldaire was the place for Arthur and me, so we came; and I believe I'm making my influence felt,' she said gleefully. 'Would you believe it, some of these great rough men are actually afraid of me. I can talk to them! You would think me a perfect virago. I heard of a cock-fight on Friday, and I just marched straight to the men who I knew were at the bottom of it; and didn't I give it to them! If I showed the least little bit of nervousness, you know, I should have no chance. They don't take offence at what I say, because they know I mean well, and that I am kind to the wives and children. But we want a man with a head to plan, and hand and heart to carry out strong, good work. When I read in Phil's letter about your son, I felt that it was a direct answer to prayer.'

Margaret Maitland met her husband's eye, but she could not read the expression in his face. But her own heart glowed at the thought of the wide field around them waiting for the toiler's hand. After a brief silence, Michael Maitland turned round and looked straight into Mary Gilbert's face.

'As ye may have guessed, ma'am, it was hardly wi' my liking that my son has chosen a life like this. I had other plans, which the Almighty, out of His wisdom, willed to set aside. The lad thinks himsel' that he hasna lang to live. He askit me to gie him the portion which would have been required to let him finish his time in Edinburgh, and let him spend it here. You are an honest woman, ye hae keepit back nothing. I confess the need is great, and if my son can do a hand's turn here, it'll be for the glory o' his Maker. I'll let him come, and pray day by day for a blessin' on his work. I've said my say; it's the wife's turn noo.'

There was a smile on his lips as he turned to his wife. Mary Gilbert gathered from it, more than from the words he had spoken, how great was the sacrifice the father's heart had made!

'My say will be short. It is only to ask whether you will give Michael a shelter under your roof. If we can arrange that before we go, my heart will be entirely at rest.'

Mary Gilbert nodded again; that curious, quick motion of the head, accompanied by a bright glance of the eye, was characteristic of her.

'I should have proposed it had you not spoken. He shall have the room upstairs you admire so much. It was the old nursery where Phil and I used to play, and sometimes quarrel. And I shall take as good care of him as you possibly could. He is so much younger than I, that I shall treat him just like Arthur's big brother.'

Margaret Maitland smiled as she thought of her tall son, her six feet Michael, acting the part of big brother to sunny-haired Arthur. He would do it to perfection, and would feel at home under that pleasant roof. Care took to itself wings. Once more Margaret Maitland's heart was at rest.

They sat long over the cheerful fire, talking as old friends talk, though a few hours ago they had been strangers to each other. Then, after Maitland had taken 'the books,' as he termed it, they parted for the night.

'That's a guid woman, Maggie, though she be English,' was the only remark Maitland made before he went to sleep. He awoke in the grey dawn of the morning, and, when he drew aside the blind, he saw that the rain had ceased, and that the sky was breaking overhead. The atmosphere was clear and sharp, he could see far across the flat country, which was still weirdly lit by the glow of many pit-fires. Beyond the one substantial street of the town, there stretched rows and rows of little brick cottages, each with a strip of ground enclosed by a wooden paling. There was a dreary monotony in these interminable lines; he tried to count them, but his eye soon grew confused. In these melancholy dwellings abode the people Michael had chosen; there lay his life-work, the vineyard it was his home to till for the Master. He wondered, as

he looked, how often Michael might yet look from that very window, and with what conflicting emotions in his soul ! His heart was stirred within him, and he prayed again voicelessly that the Lord would bless his beloved son, and give him souls for his hire.

They spent the day out of doors, and before they returned to the house Michael Maitland and his wife had a tolerable idea of the work waiting for Michael.

Mary Gilbert, being perfectly at home in every house, took them to the rows, and introduced them to some of the women. Then she carried them to the nearest pit, and made the manager take them down below. Then they walked through the town, which looked even more grimy and uninviting in the clear light of day, and pointed out to them the number of taverns and pawnshops,—a number incredible in so small a place.

‘We want reading-rooms and libraries and recreation rooms to supplant *these*,’ said energetic Mary Gilbert ; ‘and we’ll get them, too, when our new missionary comes.’

They visited the church also, a fine grey old church, large enough to accommodate all the people in the parish ; but many of them had never set foot across its threshold. It was reserved for the respectable and the well dressed, and when the vicar made his monthly pilgrimage from Alnmouth, a line of carriages blocked the road ; on other days the lean curate read the lessons to the vergers and the pew-openers, and the old women from the Manor almshouses. In such a state of affairs the religious life of the place was worse than dead, and the influence of the church was *nil*, or less : it was a laughing-stock to the sceptical and the ribald, and a scandal to the place.

Next day the travellers journeyed back to Scotland, arriving at Laurieston late in the afternoon.

‘I am so glad you have come,’ cried Agnes, meeting them at the door. ‘Michael came in about an hour ago, and I didn’t know what to say to him. Didn’t you see him ? He is away to Nunraw to try and wring the secret out of Effie.’

‘How are you, dear ? He will know in good time. Oh, father, isn’t it pleasant to be at home,’ said Margaret Maitland,

as she sat down in her own chair at the fireside and looked round the room, hallowed by so many undying memories.

'It can't be half so nice for you to come, as for me to see you,' Agnes said quickly. 'Uncle Michael, if you ever lived for two days here, and saw *that* chair empty, you would think a great many things,' she added, as she laid her hand on Laurieston's arm. He understood her, and looked quickly towards his wife. Ay, what Agnes said was true. God forbid that *that* chair should ever be empty while he lived, —such was the passionate prayer of his heart.

'Ay, lassie, God grant she may lang sit there,' he answered aloud. 'Ay, an' Michael's ower seekin' the news frae Effie. She was aye a haverel. But he's wrang, for tae disna ken. It'll dae him guid to wait. Is a' weel?'

'Yes, everything. Walter is away to Morison's Haven, to see if the ship for the potatoes has come in. He is quite disappointed not to have had her loaded and sent away before you came home.'

'Did Michael say anything about John, Nannie? Has he met the students yet?'

'Oh yes; he has delivered his first lecture. A gigantic success, Michael calls it,' she answered, blushing under Laurieston's comical gaze.

'John'll no' be ill aff ior a trumpeter as long as Michael lives,' he said dryly. 'But ye are no' speerin', Nannie, what luck we've had.'

'Good luck, I think; at least, you seem happy,' she answered quickly. 'Let me take your things upstairs, Aunt Maggie. Why, there's Michael. A little bird must have whispered to him that you have come home.'

Mrs. Maitland rose up as her son entered the room. As she looked on his face she was struck by its peculiar delicacy, and by the *strange* sweetness of its expression. Something came over her, the agony of the mother at the certain knowledge that she must give him up; but she tried to smile as she greeted him.

'I will go up with you, Nannie. I had better change my gown, any way.—Father will tell you where we have been, dear, and on what errand.'

Michael turned inquiringly to his father.

'It was nothing connected with Nannie or Will, father? No more trouble, I hope?'

'Na, lad. We've been efter your ferlie this time. We've been seein' your parish.'

Michael grew pale, though the great heartiness of his father's tone entirely reassured him.

'It's lyin' waitin' for ye, yonder,—an' stany ground it is,' continued Laurieston slowly. 'I dinna say but what it's work a man might enter into wi' a his heart. We've been twa days wi' that fine woman, Mrs. Gilbert, an' it is a' settlet that ye are to bide wi' her.'

'Father, you are too good!'

Michael spoke impulsively, and a strange dimness came before his eyes. His father looked at him steadily for a moment, as if weighing something in his mind.

'I'm thinkin', my son, that there's a heap mair in the world than I ken o'. This is a goodly heritage, an' it has come to me without my seekin' or my wark. I was puffed up wi' pride, forgettin' that it was but in the mercy o' the Lord I was allowed to cumber the ground. Ye dinna ken o' yer blessin's or ye gang oot into the world. I'm an auld man, lad, an' I thocht I kent a'thing. I ken naething ava. You woman made me feel but a bairn. She's served the Lord a' her days, an' dune mair in a day than I hae dune in twenty year. It's a marvel to me that the Almichty has spared me sae lang. When ye gang yonder, Michael, ye needna think shame to tak' a lesson frae her. She's learnt me a lesson, an' I'm sixty-twa come the fifteenth o' the month.'

'Then am I to go soon?' Michael asked eagerly, after a moment. Somehow he could find no words to reply to his father's long speech.

'When ye like! When ye like! Your mither's blessin' an' mine gang wi' ye, an' the best blessin' o' a' will be on your wark,—if it be dune for His glory.'



CHAPTER XII.

'I am for myself. I measure everything
By what it is to me.'

MR. WILLIAM LAURIE, Senior, found Wiesbaden so much to his liking that he remained there all the winter. He varied the monotony by taking little trips to Homburg and Baden, finding at each place congenial company and amusement to while away the time. Mr. Laurie lived like a man of independent means,—lacking for nothing; appeared to have abundant pocket-money, and not a care in the world. His last card had, to use his own expression, proved a trump, and he found the trade of professional gambler very lucrative for a time.

In the spring the famous Spa began to pall upon him, or perhaps he discovered that he was winning an unenviable and unprofitable reputation, and so, in the month of April, when the season was at its height, he drifted southwards to Monte Carlo. And the first evening he smoked his cigar on the verandah of the Hôtel de Raoul he saw his old friend, Sir Gilbert Culross, arrive by the evening train. He judiciously withdrew into the background until he was safely within the hotel, not having yet decided upon a course of action regarding him. He was not displeased to see him, although their acquaintance was supposed to be at an end. William Laurie, however, had neither forgotten nor forgiven the treatment he had received from the Master of Kilmeny.

He had long counted it among the old scores which he intended to settle some day. The young man was alone, which

set William Laurie thinking. Where was Lady Culross? It was very seldom indeed she trusted her feeble-minded son so far away from her side. To see him alone at Monte Carlo, of all places, was a thing to be pondered over and marvelled at. Laurie felt that it required explanation, and decided to wait and see. Here, if anywhere, he might have his revenge on the Master of Kilmeny.

He turned into the *salle-à-manger* at eight o'clock to partake of his dainty dinner, and when he saw Gilbert Culross sitting apart at one of the little tables, he purposely walked round so that he might pass him. When the baronet's pale blue eyes lighted on the handsome face of his sometime friend, he gave a perceptible start. William Laurie, without the slightest symptom of surprise, bowed slightly, and passed on. He seated himself at the side of his own table where he could have a glimpse of the new-comer, and it did not take his practised eye long to see that the young man speedily began to feel embarrassed and lonely in the midst of that gay scene. Mr. Laurie was trifling with his dessert, when he suddenly saw Sir Gilbert rise and make his way awkwardly across the room.

'How do you do, Laurie? Come and have a drink with me. It's so confoundedly lonely for a fellow who knows nobody in a place like this.'

Mr. Laurie took the extended hand with a paternal smile, which seemed to forget and forgive everything.

'Charmed. I would have spoken, Gilbert, but I did not wish to intrude. A man who has had the worst of it doesn't usually care to make the next move, and I had the worst of it at Kilmeny; but perhaps I deserved it.'

'I was awfully mad at the time, and perhaps I said too much,' said Sir Gilbert, with a slight blush. 'Let bygones be bygones, and come and have a drink.'

'Tell your fellow to bring the needful here. It's a quiet nook this alcove. We can see without being seen, and there's room for two.'

In a few seconds the two were comfortably ensconced at Mr. Laurie's favourite corner, as if no shadow had ever come between them.

'And now,' said William Laurie, when he had dramatically drunk oblivion to past misunderstanding and luck to their future good fellowship, 'tell me, my boy, what wind has blown you here, and where is my esteemed friend, Lady Culross? not here, I think, or you would not have felt the need of any other companionship.'

'I don't know; a fellow gets tired of being tied to a woman's apron-string; but I thought you would have known my mother is paying a visit to your friends,—the Maitlands of Laurieston.'

'What!'

For once in his life William Laurie betrayed unmitigated surprise.

'Fact,' said Sir Gilbert, with a nod. 'And I'm supposed to be salmon-fishing in Ross-shire with Macnab. You remember Macnab?'

'Perfectly; a long-nosed youth of irreproachable family and pronounced piety, who I thought would condemn salmon-fishing as an irreligious sport. And why, my dear young fellow, are you *not* in Ross-shire with Macnab?'

'Because I preferred to have a look at the world and enjoy myself. I've wanted to come to Monte Carlo for a long time, but my mother would not let me.'

'So you stole a march on her? Too bad! Too bad! But they'll pray for you at Laurieston, and so you'll get absolution for committed sin,' said William Laurie flippantly. 'Don't you know you've come to the very stronghold of Satan?'

'I don't care. A fellow must see life; and if it is a stronghold of Satan it's the prettiest place I ever saw in my life, and it seems to be very lively too,' he said, with an expressive glance round the saloon, which was thronged with handsome men and beautiful women in gay attire.

'Oh, it's lively enough, but you'll maybe get your feathers singed, Gilbert. Many a promising youth has left the contents of his pockets here.'

'Oh, but I'm not going to play. I've only come to see the place and the life. Always heard of it as being jolly gay, you know; but I can take care of myself,' said Sir Gilbert, with a self-confidence which hugely amused his friend.

'You are going to exhibit unparalleled strength of mind, eh?' he said jocularly. 'If you don't intend to play, I'd advise you not to stay here. It's in the very air. You can no more resist it than you can fly.'

'Oh, stuff and nonsense!' retorted the baronet, taking another draught to fortify his resolution.

'Well, well; forewarned is forearmed, they say, and I'm charmed to see you exhibit such firmness of character,' said William Laurie airily. 'Shall we stroll over to the Casino just to see how it's done? It's rather interesting to watch, even though you have no stake. And now, as we go, tell me more about your charming mother. How has it transpired that she is a visitor at Laurieston?'

'Oh, quite naturally; she has been writing constantly to Miss Laurie, and then Mrs. Maitland wrote and invited her to go to Scotland. I believe there is an arrangement for Miss Laurie to return to Kilmeny with Lady Culross, but I don't intend to be there to play the host, after what has passed.'

'No, my friend, it will be better not. It pains me to think of my daughter's ingratitude, and it amazes me that Lady Culross should stoop to communicate with these people, who, for the sake of my poor girl's fortune, have got her completely in their power.'

'I didn't know Miss Laurie had a fortune,' put in Sir Gilbert, as he lit his cigar and handed his case to William Laurie.

'Oh, well, it is hardly a fortune regarded from your standpoint,' the latter answered. 'A little property merely, which brings in a modest income; but to these grasping Scotch folks it is a great deal. Of course, they will marry her to their eldest son,—a great hulking fellow, fit for the plough. I met the pair of them on the Rhine last summer. The second son is certainly preferable; at least, he has the manners of a gentleman.'

'Don't you feel quite old now that you are a grandfather?'

'A what?'

'A grandfather! Didn't you hear your son has become a father?'

'What in the name of wonder do you mean?' asked William Laurie, stopping short in the middle of the promenade, careless of the stare he provoked in the lookers-on.

'It is funny I should be the bearer of the family news. Your daughter-in-law has a little girl. The way I know, my mother's visit was postponed for a week till Mrs. Maitland had returned to Laurieston. She was staying at their place for a time.'

'You don't mean to say that the young fool has taken a wife?' cried William Laurie, in blank amazement.

'Why, yes; it's an old story. I believe a runaway match,—regular Gretna Green affair.'

'But who is she?'

'Mr. Maitland's daughter.'

'Oh!'

William Laurie kept silence for a moment.

'Well, they're dividing my heritage among them. I wish both parties joy. We won't go in yet, Gilbert, unless you are particularly anxious,' he said, as they approached the magnificent steps at the Casino entrance; 'I want to gather myself together. A pretty respect my family show to me, you see, when all this has happened out of my knowledge.'

'Well, but if you don't pay any attention to them, nor let them know where you are, even, how can they let you know anything?' queried Gilbert Culross, not without shrewdness. 'Where *have* you been all winter?'

'At Wiesbaden chiefly, seeking relief for certain rheumatic twinges, which remind me occasionally that I am an old man,' said William Laurie. 'But a grandfather, fugh!'

Extreme disgust was visible on Mr. Laurie's florid face, and he energetically tossed away the burnt end of his cigar.

'You spoke of their place. What place is it? The imp when I last heard of him was not earning his bread and butter.'

'I can't tell you anything about it. They must have a house of some kind, I suppose,' said Sir Gilbert, with a yawn and a backward glance at the brilliant lights they had left behind.

He did not find the events in William Laurie's family history conspicuously interesting, and felt almost like regretting that he had met him. He had an idea that, in spite of what

had passed, William Laurie would not relax his old espionage ; and, having been free from its thrall for a while, the young man had no wish to renew it. He was perfectly right in his conjecture. Having again got hold of the baronet, William Laurie had no intention of letting him go again so long as he proved useful, especially as he had no longer the mother to consider and cajole. He told himself that Gilbert Culross would be a very profitable investment, and determined that, if he played, as was certain, it should be with him. But the tide of the adventurer's fortune had turned, and was now on the ebb. Gilbert Culross played a great deal. As was to be expected, he had not the power which stronger men and women lacked to resist the horrible fascination of the roulette tables, nor did he seek to resist. Fortune favoured him, and in a week his winnings were the talk of the place. William Laurie found a change in his *protégé*, and felt himself quietly but effectually set aside. His advice, freely given, was never taken. Gilbert played recklessly, and when he won laughed in Laurie's face. So the mad game went on, until one fatal day, when the foolish young man's luck turned, as they have it, and his winnings and more were swept into the insatiable coffers of the Casino Bank. There was a spark of honour, ay, and of sense in the wayward youth, for he stopped in the midst of his reverses, and, having paid his debts, took flight from the evil place a trifle poorer than he entered it. He said nothing of his plans to William Laurie, and when that worthy found that beyond a doubt his *protégé* had left without a hint of his destination, or a word of farewell, his rage knew no bounds. For his luck had deserted him at Monte Carlo, and he found himself at the end of the second week without the wherewithal to pay the large bills he had incurred at the Hôtel de Raoul. He managed, however, to borrow the amount, and at the beginning of May turned his face home to England ; and, after a day or two in London, where he managed to gather a few more pounds, he took train for the north.

His one hope was to forestall Gilbert, and be beforehand with a story for Lady Culross. If she were at Laurieston, all

would be well, unless he should find her also greatly changed. If she were gone, then he must appeal to his daughter's generosity. Money he must have by some means immediately, for he was beginning to feel that his palmy days were over, and that he was less able than of yore to support life on nothing a year. He was beginning to be known, too, and his credit was gone. He was filled with a virtuous pity for himself as he reviewed his past life during the journey to Scotland. He was fifty-seven years old, and for the past quarter of a century he had lived, and lived well, without any visible means of subsistence. He acknowledged with pride that he had performed a task impossible to most men. His conscience, being dead, did not trouble him concerning the honesty or honour of his past life. He felt himself entirely justified in the errand he had undertaken. If his children were in good circumstances, and earning a fair income, they were in duty bound to support him. He was not sure but that the law demanded it; certainly the moral law did. By a curious perversion of judgment, William Laurie provided for his children a code of morals and obligations he did not himself acknowledge in any of the relations of life. He grew quite pathetic in thought over the hardness and loneliness of his own lot. He told himself he would not mind settling down now quietly with Agnes in the old house of Halleross, where he had wooed and won his wife, and spending the remainder of his days in peace. Ways and means did not greatly trouble him. A precarious existence had so long been familiar that it occasioned him no anxiety.

So he fortified himself for his second onslaught on the peace of Michael Maitland's household, and arrived at the familiar old town in the sweet spring dusk, feeling himself a righteous man seeking justice at the hands of his own.



CHAPTER XIII.

'His presence there
Fell like a shower of winter rain.'



KATIE, the housemaid, was an institution at Laurieston. She was the daughter of the grieve, or farm bailiff, and had entered the service of the mistress at fifteen. Having been trained under that careful supervision, she was a thorough servant, trustworthy and competent in every particular. Of course she had her little way, like all good servants. Her temper was quick, and she had a great idea of her own importance in the house. Occasionally there were bickerings in the kitchen, when she asserted her superiority over the cook and the dairymaid. She had a contempt for these damsels because they were 'ootlins,' or, in other words, strangers to the place, whereas Katie's forebears had been about Laurieston almost as long as the Maitlands themselves; of whom Katie always spoke as the Laird's folk. Michael Maitland had no ambition to assume the title of Laird, and was wont to say that he wished for nothing but to be a farmer, and one worthy of the name. Katie took a deep and abiding interest in all the affairs of the house, and all the domestic interests of the family; but she never stooped to discuss them with the 'ootlins' aforesaid. She had thus won the entire confidence of the household, and there was very little hid from her. Having had a small battle with her comrades at tea over the naming of the Nunraw baby, she had carried herself off in dudgeon to the dining-room window with her sewing (the family being all out),

and was there sitting when a knock came to the outer door.

The stranger had not come in by the avenue gate, else he must have been seen by Katie before he reached the door. When she answered the knock, and saw the gentleman on the step, she instantly donned her most aggressive air. In such a mood nothing on earth was to be got out of Katie Steel. She recognised him instantly, and remembering the deep trouble his last visit had caused, she felt inclined to show him but little courtesy.

'Mr. Maitland at home, my good girl?' asked William Laurie, bestowing a winning smile on Katie's well-favoured face.

'No, he's no'. They're a' oot, sir,' she answered, getting out the 'sir' with great difficulty. She only remembered her manners, because she knew it would displease the mistress to know she had lacked in respect to any caller at the house.

'All out! When will they be back, do you think?'

'I dinna ken; no' till late, likely. They're at a party, sir.'

'A party! Where, may I ask?'

'Ower there,' replied Katie briefly, pointing to the neighbouring homestead.'

'Ah, what place is that? I was once familiar with the district; but I have forgotten much of it now.'

'That's Nunraw, sir.'

'Of course it is; and who tenants it? It used to be an old man, I think. Barclay was the name.'

'Yes. It's Mr. Will that's in it now, sir,' said Katie, with a jerk, as if somebody behind were pushing the words out of her.

'Oh, I see—I comprehend; and there's a party, is there? Family party, eh?'

'The bairn's to be christened the nicht, at half-past six, by Mr. Rankine. Will you come in an' wait or they come back, or will ye go over?'

'I'll go over, I thirk. It will be a pleasant stroll. Take

in my portmanteau, my good girl; I intend to remain a few days,' said Mr. Laurie; and with a bland smile he set his bag on the doorstep, and turned away.

Katie took in the bag, let it drop on the hall floor, and in a deep breath uttered these enigmatical words,—

'Well, I never!' As she had received no orders concerning Mr. Laurie or his portmanteau, she pushed it with her foot under the hall table, and there let it lie. That action indicated the state of her mind towards the unexpected guest. To ordinary visitors nobody could be more considerate or attentive than Katie. She went back to her sewing, and after a time said loud out, with great energy,—

'If the young maister lets her awa' again, he's a fule.'

Meanwhile William Laurie picked his way daintily across the pleasant field-paths to Nunraw. The month of May had come, as I said, and in its loveliest mood. Spring had been lavish of her bounty, and had flung a mantle of snow-bloom on every hedge and hawthorn tree; the orchards were pink and white, too, the whole air laden with their rich odours. The grass was emerald-green, and studded with the yellow buttercup and the star-eyed daisy, while the banks under the hedgerows had their rich mosaic of pink harebell and blue speed-well. All the world was glad in the first blush of her loveliest summer, hope and promise seemed to reign beneficently everywhere, the birds in their wild glad songs bade a truce to gloom or care; and yet even in such glad days humanity has its cross to bear. William Laurie was conscious of the pleasantness surrounding him; it gratified his eye to look upon the fair landscape which fringed the blue sea-line, but no higher emotion stirred his heart. There was a curious smile on his lips as he drew near the comfortable-looking house with the white gables, where Will and his wife had begun life. He rather enjoyed the thought of the consternation his appearance would cause. He paused for a moment at the door, and surveyed the trim garden, with its little lawn and gay flower-beds, all giving evidence of taste and care. He could hear the merry sound of voices and the clatter of cups within,—the pleasant din of the christening feast. He knew that he would be unwelcome, that he would cast a shadow

over the happy gathering, and again he felt himself aggrieved. Why should he be left out in the cold, while his own children enjoyed such good cheer? With this question rising to his lips, he gave the knocker a sharp double-knock. Walter Laurie came instantly to the door, and his honest, sun-browned face looked blank enough at sight of the uninvited guest.

'Well! never seen me before, young man?' Mr. Laurie said good-humouredly, and pushing past him he hung up his hat, and marched directly into the room from which the sounds of feasting came. They were all gathered about the table, Effie at her mother's side looking somewhat pale and thin, but with a happy light in her eyes, born of the hope that her baby, like many another blessed child, would be a messenger of peace and love in her home. In a moment, and as if a thunderbolt had fallen in their midst, the happy chatter ceased, and involuntarily they rose to their feet. For a moment there was not a word spoken, then Michael Maitland the elder went round to where Agnes stood, and in sight of all present put his arm about her waist. That action said as plainly as words could have done, that there he intended her to remain.

'Am I a spectre like the Ancient Mariner, dealing death and destruction all around?' said William Laurie, with outward gaiety, though inwardly he chafed at his reception. 'Is there not a cup or a plate for me at my son's table, nor a word of welcome to his house? How do, Will? Wish you joy, though I don't think you're likely to have much. May I kiss my new daughter, or does Scots law forbid?'

Effie visibly shrank from him, though she did not refuse her hand in greeting.

It was felt to be a relief when Maitland himself spoke. Agnes had hidden her face for a moment on his shoulder, but when she heard his voice it seemed to give her strength, for she withdrew herself from his clasp, and, steadying herself at the table, looked at her father with great questioning, indignant eyes. Oh, how that false smile brought back the flood-tide of painful memory, and made the flush of shame rise to her cheek! It is a fearful thing when the relationship between parent and child is thus poisoned on either side. It has no compensation

this side of the grave, for it is nature's inexorable law that, however that sacred tie be desecrated, it yet remains a thing which cannot be rooted out of the heart, any more than it can be severed by the law. God help the parent whose fatherhood or motherhood brings nothing but the agony of shame. God help the child for whom the name father and mother is synonymous with sorrow and fear. Life holds no more searching grief than that for any human heart.

'Ye hae earned your ain welcome, William Laurie,' said Michael Maitland firmly. 'Before we go any further it'll be better to come to an understanding. What are ye here for? The bairns are men and women noo, an' there is nae need to send them awa' afore we discuss family matters.'

'You are very fond of holding a court of inquiry, Maitland,' was the light reply. 'But this is not the time nor the place, even if I admitted your right so to question me. However, I will satisfy you. I have come only to see my children this time, not to rob you of them. I heard of this happy alliance,' he added, with a gallant bow to Effie, 'a little late in the day. But directly I heard of it I hurried home to pay my respects. I congratulate you, Will; you have a charming wife, and, of course, the child is a nonpareil. Now, may I presume to ask for a slight refreshment? The baptismal feast looks inviting to a traveller who lunched but meagrely at York seven hours ago.'

During all this speech, and indeed since he had entered the room, he had taken not the slightest notice of Agnes. She was under the ban of his deep displeasure, and he intended her to feel it. It made no impression upon her. Where there is no respect or esteem, a reproof cannot be felt. But she did feel her heart bursting with its old weight of wounded pride and bitter indignation. Her own nature, sensitive to a fault, weighed down by the burden of her own and her brother's obligations to Maitland of Laurieston, revolted against the cold, calm selfishness of the man she called father. When she turned about and quickly left the room, nobody followed her. Indeed, it was a relief to all when she went. Margaret Maitland knew how utterly antagonistic were the natures of

father and daughter, and rejoiced that their wills had not clashed there and then. She felt glad of time to think and plan. Another crisis had come. She wondered how William Laurie was to be dealt with this time, and what was the object of his visit. She had an idea, too, brought suddenly home to her, that the action would probably be taken out of their hands. In whatsoever concerned Agnes now, John had the first voice. He was not present with them that night, which was not to be regretted. A passage-at-arms between hot-headed John and William Laurie was not likely to further the ends of peace. Effie, roused to a sense of her housewifely responsibility, at length did the best to be courteous and hospitable to her husband's father. He partook of a hearty meal, talking blandly all the while; which was well, or the silence must have been felt. When the meal was over, Effie, with her mother, went upstairs to the nursery; peace-loving Wat retired to smoke a pipe out-of-doors; and in the dining-room remained William Laurie and his son alone with Maitland of Laurieston.

'How did it come about that I find you so comfortably settled, Will?' asked the interloper, in his cool way. 'You seem to have fallen on your feet!'

Will had sense enough to hold his peace, for very shame.

'I'll tell ye without mincing matters, if ye want to ken,' put in Laurieston abruptly. 'He stole away my daughter, though I admit she went willingly enough; and what could I dae but gie them a roof-tree abune their heids, for her sake an' her mother's? Although the lad there is a married man, an' the heid o' a hoose, he has a way to make, and kens brawly that I'll never be satisfied or he sits an independent man in Nunraw. It's no' the money, William Laurie, as ye ken brawly; but I hope for his ain sake an' for Effie's that he'll be man enough to feel his ain obligations.'

'Upon my word, you have him fast in the toils!' said William Laurie, with a slight sneer. 'After a man is inveigled into an imprudent marriage, it is only natural to expect the lady's people to do something for him; why'—

He paused abruptly, arrested indeed by the terrific anger in the face of Michael Maitland. For the first and only time in

his life, an oath passed the lips of Maitland of Laurieston. The man before him, with his false, smiling face and suave manner, roused in him the deepest, darkest passions of his nature.

'If ye utter another word in that strain,' said Michael Maitland, raising his voice, 'I'll fell ye to the ground!'

Will Laurie the younger, like a beaten hound, turned and slunk out of the room. Then, because only for Effie's sake he had spared her husband, Maitland turned upon the father, and smote him with the two-edged sword of a tongue which righteous anger sharpened.

There is something fearful and awe-inspiring in the great anger of a strong nature righteously aroused; and it made the polished scoundrel quail.

'Come, come,' he said jocularly; 'don't swallow me, Maitland; of course, it was only my little joke. Don't you think I'm sensible of your generous kindness to my motherless children? Don't be so hard on me, old friend. I'm going down the hill, like yourself, and it is but natural that I should have a craving after the old familiar faces. I am not in good health, and fortune has rather frowned upon me of late. Who is to show me a kindness, if not my own flesh and blood?'

This affected humility and sentimentality were as offensive as his former bravado, and sickened Michael Maitland beyond endurance.

I can speak nae mair to ye this nicht, William Laurie,' he said briefly. 'There are things a man canna stand. I canna stand *you*.'

With which plain statement he turned upon his heel and went away home.



CHAPTER XIV.

'A broken bond—a fine indifference
That starved and killed the love which forged it.'



WILLIAM LAURIE remained that night at Nunraw. In the course of next day, hearing nothing from Laurieston, he sauntered leisurely across the fields. Agnes, whose eyes had turned very often toward Nunraw during the day, saw him come, and went out to meet him. Margaret Maitland had pitied her all day, though she had not dared to speak about the subject which was in all their minds. It was too delicate, one of those painful family matters we never discuss except under extreme compulsion. Little did Mrs. Maitland know what was to be the result of that long day's thought to Agnes. Father and daughter met by a curious coincidence almost at the spot where Michael and Agnes had had their memorable talk nearly six months before. What had been then spoken of as a mere and distant possibility had now become an accomplished fact, and Michael was in the fourth month of his missionary labours at Coldaire. She thought of that evening, even when her mind was full of other things, as she advanced to meet her father.

They met without kiss or any greeting. Agnes was too conscientious to simulate an affection she did not feel. William Laurie was simply indifferent.

'Ah, good evening, *ma belle*,' he said, with that airy gallantry always characteristic of him, and which had been intensified by his residence abroad; 'I am very glad you had the good sense to come out. I want to talk with you on purely business matters.'

'Well,' said Agnes quietly, 'what have you to say to me, papa?'

He looked at her critically. She was very handsome. He admired her pale, proud face,—her tall, slim, graceful carriage. He said to himself inwardly that she might have done wonders with such a face and figure, had she not lacked ambition. But he wisely made no comment of this kind. His past endeavours to convince her of the market value of such charms as hers had not been crowned by success.

'I wish you to look at me, Agnes, and tell me what you think of me—of my appearance, I mean,' he began. 'I am out of health. Do you think I look well?'

'You are thinner, and do not look so well as you did,' she answered slowly.

'I am *not* well, and I am in difficulties, my dear. You did not anticipate all the consequences of your conduct at Kilmeny,' he said. 'I have been living on my wits abroad, but when a man is out of health, as I am, his wits are apt to become a little blunt. I am forced to admit that I am not the man I was. I have not troubled you much, my dear, and I will be quite honest with you now. I have come to see whether you can oblige me with a little money.'

'I have not very much money, papa, but what I have I will gladly give you,' she answered at once. Pity for him was quick to spring in her breast. It was impossible for Agnes to resist any appeal to her generosity or kindness of heart. It *was* a pitiful thing, too, that a father should require to make such an appeal to his own child.

'Is the place let just now?' he asked, as he threw himself on the grassy bank. She understood him at once.

'Yes, papa, it has been let since November. The rent is due on the twenty-third of this month, that is next Tuesday.'

'Ah, what is the amount?'

'Fifty pounds. Mr. Maitland let it to an old friend of his own who had returned from India. He took it, furniture and all, on a lease.'

'At a hundred a year?'

'Yes; it is a good rent, for the house is old, and has no

modern conveniences, but Mr. Fordyce seems to like it as it is.'

'And what does our friend yonder,' said William Laurie, nodding towards Laurieston, 'take for his commission?—a good round sum, I'll be bound.'

Tears of indignation sprang to the eyes of Agnes, and it was a moment before she could speak.

'Papa, how can you be so unjust? If Mr. Maitland were to take it all, it would not pay a tithe of what we owe to him.'

'My dear, you hold perverted ideas on this subject,' said William Laurie serenely. 'Our friend Maitland, like the canny Scot he is, knows how many bawbees make a shilling. He has had seven or eight years' work out of you for nothing. Don't contradict me,—I know what you do in the house.'

'But think of Willie, papa!' cried Agnes rebelliously. 'How shamefully he repaid them for their goodness. It was a positive crime for him to steal Effie away.'

'He could not steal her, my love, unless she was willing to go,' put in her father dryly. 'The time has gone for a young woman to be carried off against her will. Be just, my dear; be just on one side as well as the other.'

'Well, granting Effie went willingly, papa. Will had nothing. The chairs they sit on, the very food they eat, belongs to Mr. Maitland. I implored him to consider Hallcross as his, as part payment of what we owe. I offered to make it over to him, but he would not listen to me. There is not on this earth a more generous and noble-minded man than Mr. Maitland.'

'Forgive me for reminding you that you had no right to make any such offer without first consulting me.'

'I had every right. I am of age, and the property is absolutely mine,' was the quiet answer. 'Besides, you have forgotten that it was through the Maitlands even *that* came to me. Miss Glover was Mrs. Maitland's aunt.'

'Don't trouble to instruct me in any family history in this parish, Agnes; it is all familiar to me,' retorted her father carelessly. 'Let me tell you how I look upon this matter. We will leave you out of the question; it is proved that you have

given value for your maintenance at Laurieston. As to Will, I suppose if they had left him alone he would have provided a home for his wife. That establishment over there is merely a monument to the Maitland family pride, for which they are entitled to pay. The question I wish to discuss with you is the vexed question of your duty to me. Have you not regretted your conduct at Kilmeny ?'

Agnes reddened and then grew pale. The proud straightening of her figure, her absolute silence, were her sole answer. He saw that it would not be wise to pursue that theme very far.

'I think it was utter folly : but I will pass it over, though in throwing away your own prospects in life you blighted mine. You have had Lady Culross here, I am told. When did she leave ?'

'Only on Monday,' Agnes answered briefly.

'You have got the right side of her, evidently, when you persuaded her to stoop to visit here,' said William Laurie. 'Do you intend to follow up your advantage ? There are other eligible parties in the world besides Sir Gilbert. Through Lady Culross you might make an excellent match.'

Agnes's lip curled.

'I am not for sale,' she said curtly,—a speech which made her father laugh.

'Well, well, we will not fall out about that. I have a proposal to make to you. I am tired of this wandering Bohemian life. What would you say to sell Hallcross and let us two live quietly on the proceeds ? It should be worth two thousand, at least. That properly invested would bring in a modest little income, on which we might enjoy life in a quiet way.'

Agnes stood for a moment in silence looking at her father, picturing to herself what such a life would be.

'I—I will think about it, papa,' she said, almost in a whisper. Again the old question of duty was before her, though this time with a less imperative voice.

'How soon can you let me know ? because I don't particularly enjoy living here. The atmosphere is too rarefied for me. Will, poor boy, is tied hand and foot, or he would be good for some amusement.'

'I will let you know to-morrow, papa, without fail. I will think it over seriously,—and, and prayerfully.'

'But you won't ask advice from the Maitlands? or it's all up with me, and you may say No at once.'

'I will not, papa. This is a matter I must and will decide for myself. It involves a great sacrifice, but I shall try to do my duty,' she answered quietly; and her voice had a weary ring in it, as if the very thought of the struggle tired her. William Laurie picked himself up from the bank, and shook the fallen hawthorn bloom from his coat.

'It was a fearful mistake I made in allowing your mother to send you here. Had I kept you with me, I flatter myself you would have been occupying a very different position to-day. It is not too late, perhaps, to retrieve that error, if you would only be guided.'

'I will think it over, papa, and try to do right, but'—

'But what?'

'I cannot go against my better judgment, even in a matter of this kind. I have tried the experiment. I went to you before in all good faith, and God knows that if ever woman tried to do her duty in any sphere of life, I tried to do mine. The experiment was not successful, papa. We have nothing in common. I fear we could not be happy together.'

'That is because you are so confoundedly puritanical in your ideas. The human mind, especially the female mind, should be capable of expansion and direction. For one so young, you are, to say the least of it, very obstinate, and for a woman your judgments are too pronounced.'

'Only on matters of conscience, I trust,' said Agnes quietly.

'Oh, well, if conscience is your God, so be it. It is curious how elastic this fine conscience of yours can be when inclination points a different way. Take this hint into consideration while you are trying to make up your mind. Are you going, then? No, I am not going in. It was you I wished to see. Our good Maitland politely informed me last night he couldn't stand me. I can return the compliment with interest. Good evening.'

'Good evening, papa. I shall come over to Nauraw in the morning and see you. I trust God will aid me in my decision. There is nothing in the world I want so much as to do right. I will try not to be selfish. I do admit that I feel more at home here than I do with you ; but perhaps after a time I might understand you better.'

He saw that she was unhappy. It was impossible not to look at her grave face and troubled eyes without knowing that the thing weighed on her heart. As he strolled back the way he had come, he felt uncomfortable. Those eyes haunted him. A long life of absolute selfishness, a life in which every thought and aim and act had had self in view, had made his heart hard as the nether millstone. He was not by nature endowed with a great capacity for affection, and his way of life had diminished that small store. Do you think the picture unnatural? Which of us do not know a William Laurie, though in some instances he may hide his selfishness under a thin disguise? whereas the William Laurie of this history possessed the virtue of an outspoken candour, if in his case it could be called a virtue.

It was Friday night, and there being no lectures at the University on Saturday, it was customary for John to come out to Laurieston, though sometimes it was late in the evening. He liked to finish up his work in town, and enjoy his Saturday freely at home. Between nine and ten o'clock that night he came whistling up the avenue. But before he had reached the dining-room window, Agnes came up the garden path to meet him. They were a curious pair of lovers. Agnes still exercised over him that strange awe which made him fear to follow all the impulses of his heart. She permitted his caresses but rarely, and yet he never doubted that she loved him. She was not a demonstrative woman, yet there were times when she revealed to John something of her heart. But he did not dream even yet how much he was to her, nor how her whole nature turned to him,—how she clung to him with all the might of a great love.

She came over to him swiftly, her wrap falling from her head as she stretched out her hands to him. There was an

appeal in that gesture which he did not understand, though he saw that something had agitated her deeply.

‘John! John! I am so thankful you have come! Keep me close to your side. I want to feel that here I can be safe.’

John let his books fall on the gravelled path, and put both his arms round her, and bent his face, dark with his passionate joy, until it touched hers. She had never so given herself to him; for the moment he did not care to ask what had moved her.

‘My darling! my darling! he repeated again and again, as his strong arms held her close, and he felt his whole being thrill when her white hands met round his neck and her eyes looked straight into his. They were standing in the dark shadow of the trees, and there was no one to witness their meeting.

‘I have been watching for you, John, and my heart sank when I feared it was too late. I am so thankful you have come. Do you love me as much as ever? Am I dearer to you than any other on earth?’

It was so unusual for her to ask such questions, or to make any allusion to their love, that he felt almost bewildered for a moment. But only for a moment. Then he gave her such assurances as are beyond price to the heart of the woman who loves.

‘I am going to ask you to make a great sacrifice, John,—one which you will only be able to make if you love me very much,’ she said, and her voice, with its tender wavering cadence, was almost lost on his breast. Yet he caught her words. ‘You are quite sure you will not misunderstand nor think less of me for what I am going to do?—but I will not so doubt your love. My father is here, and he wishes me to go to him again. I have thought it over. I have tortured myself about it, and I cannot see my way. I—I—so shrink from the life I saw before. I cannot think it would be right to go. I did no good before, but evil, I think. I am tired of thinking out things for myself, John. Will you take me just as I am, and let me have you always to rest upon?’

‘My Agnes, I—I—do not understand you, I fear,’ said John hoarsely, for he dared not believe the thought dawning upon him.

'I could be content with little, John. Anything would be riches with you,' she said, looking at him straight, with eyes which did not falter. 'I will be your wife, if you will take me—now.'

So Agnes Laurie chose her lot in life; and, throwing aside for a moment the veil of her womanly reserve, showed John Maitland her heart. If ever man loved and honoured—nay, worshipped—woman, John did then, and with his arms about her, his honest eyes, dim with his great happiness, looking into hers, took upon himself a solemn vow for the future.

If human love alone could suffice for the need of the human soul, then John Maitland's wife would be blessed indeed.

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CHAPTER XV.

'There took my station and degrees,
So grew my own small life complete.'

NEXT morning John Maitland walked over to Nunraw. William Laurie the elder was sitting with his feet on the fender, enjoying a cigar and the morning paper. He had made himself eminently at home in his son's house; in fact, his calm assumption of his right to make use of all it contained somewhat disconcerted Effie. For the first time her pretty dining-room reeked of cigar smoke, and when she went up to air the chamber her father-in-law had occupied all night, she was glad to throw the windows open in a hurry, as it had evidently been used for a smoking-room as well as a sleeping apartment. It was about ten o'clock when John arrived. Will was in the fields, Effie busy about her household affairs, so he made his way into the house, and found Mr. Laurie comfortably lounging in the easy-chair at the dining-room fire. The May mornings were chilly yet, though John in his splendid health wondered to see the man stooping over the fire, when the sun lay like a golden flood out of doors. 'Good morning, sir,' he said courteously, as he stepped into the room.

Mr. Laurie looked round lazily, touched his smoking-cap with his finger-tip, and answered blandly, 'Good morning.'

'I am fortunate in finding you alone, Mr Laurie,' said straightforward John, going to the point at once, as was his wont, 'as I wish the privilege of a few words with you.'

William Laurie scented business in the calm tones of the

young man's voice, and, pushing back his chair, looked at him inquiringly. It could hardly be, he told himself, that his daughter should have dared to send this insolently complacent youth to take her place in the interview she had promised.

'I am at your service, my young friend,' he said, still suavely. It had been his policy all his life to present a smooth front until he was sure of his ground. 'Have a cigar? They are good ones, I promise you; no Brummagem stuff for me.'

'No, thank you; I don't smoke in the house,' said John quietly. 'I have come this morning, sir, with your daughter's knowledge and at her request, to tell you that she has considered the question you discussed yesterday, and that her decision remains unaltered.'

'What decision? I was not aware that she had come to any.'

'Miss Laurie has promised to be my wife, sir, and we are to be married in the summer.'

'Indeed?'

'William Laurie spoke quite quietly, but his nostrils dilated curiously, and his mouth drooped at the corners of the lips.

'And when, may I ask, was this charming arrangement come to?'

'Miss Laurie has been my promised wife for nearly a year, sir,' answered John. 'It was only last night, when she had to choose between two paths, that she gave her consent to an early marriage.'

Poor John, to whom the thought was yet so new and bewildering, had scarcely schooled himself to absolute control.

'Of two evils, then, she has chosen the least, in her own estimation,' said William Laurie contemptuously. 'And what if I withhold my consent, if I absolutely forbid the marriage?'

John was silent for a moment; not that this empty threat disconcerted him in the smallest degree, only he sought for words which would be least offensive to the man before him. He had promised Agnes to be courteous and kind.

'We shall be very sorry, Mr. Laurie, if you withhold your consent,' he replied, 'but it will make no difference.'

'Does your religion not teach the doctrine of filial duty? I

do not pretend to be *au fait* with Bible reading, but I surely remember a passage which reads something like this: "Children, obey your parents."

'There is; but after a certain point obedience ceases to be obligatory,' John replied steadily. 'Your daughter, sir, may be supposed to have some right of choice. She is not under age, and is very capable of judging between right and wrong.'

'You are the right, and I am the wrong;—very prettily put,' said William Laurie, with keen sarcasm. 'I suppose you are desperately afraid the little property which my daughter is unfortunate enough to possess, should slip through your fingers?'

John coloured and bit his lip; these words were hard to bear, and he put yet a tighter curb on himself.

'I am here this morning, sir, at your daughter's request, as I said, to acquaint you with our plans; and I have also a proposal to make to you. Although I am not a rich man, I can afford to keep my wife in comfort; some day I hope to be able to give her a position to which she is entitled. My income from professional sources is fair, and likely, nay certain, to increase; then I have the legacy I received from Miss Glover,—two thousand pounds, which I propose to settle absolutely on my wife. She has asked me to say to you that she wishes you to draw the rent of Halleross; although she cannot make up her mind to sell it at present.'

William Laurie's temper rose, and he shot a dark, angry glance at John Maitland's face.

'You can tell my daughter, with my compliments, that in sending you with any such message to me, I consider that she has grossly insulted me. I decline to have any further conversation with you, or to recognise that you have any right whatsoever to meddle with what concerns her or me. I wish you good morning.'

A slight smile touched John's grave lips. The assumption of injured paternal innocence in such a man could be nothing but amusing. In a moment, however, he was perfectly grave again, and spoke with courtesy and a touch of beautiful kindness which was lost on his listener.

'I wish to say, Mr. Laurie, that while I feel that I am in a

sense, nay, in every way, unworthy of Agnes, my love for her is such that I believe I can make her happy. That happiness, sir, will be the chief aim of my life. It will grieve and sadden her if you do not wish us well. May I assure you that it shall be my desire to carry out every wish of hers which concerns you.'

Mr. Laurie here forgot his manners entirely, and, pointing towards the door, uttered these two words: 'Get out!'

That night there was another strange scene enacted in the house of Laurieston—a scene which justified Katie Steel's conviction that the uninvited guest brought nothing but trouble in his train. After having pondered the substance of John Maitland's message all day, and not being mollified by reflection, William Laurie betook himself to Laurieston in the afternoon, arriving just at the tea hour, when all were assembled. For an hour the storm raged in the pleasant family room; and the 'ill man,' as Katie called him, revealed himself, and poured the vials of his wrath upon the assembled family. There is no anger more noisy and obtrusive than the anger which has no ground or justification, but we are told that 'the curse causeless shall not come.'

Maitland of Laurieston, exasperated beyond endurance, at last took the intruder by the shoulders, and with one swing of his great arm put him out of the door. And from that night William Laurie was seen at Laurieston no more.

In the gloaming John took Agnes up by the river-side. She was pale and worn with the strife of the day, and her heart was sore within her. Although conscience had no sting, there was a natural feeling of remorse and grief.

'I have chosen my path, John,' she said, as she clung to his arm, with a visible dependence upon him which roused the deepest and most chivalrous tenderness of his great heart; 'I have no fear but that I shall be happy in the life we will share together, but this will *always* be a shadow on my heart.'

'Dearest, I hope not. Everything has been done. I try to be gentle with him for your sake, my Agnes; but I fear there is no hope that he will ever be roused to a sense of what he ought to be.'

A slight shiver passed over her, and he saw her eyes fill.

'I hope not. I cannot believe that any human soul will be allowed so to drift to the darkness. May I tell you it was not so much the shrinking from the life he leads which helped me to decide, but the fear for my own soul. John, those weeks I was in London, I cannot tell you what they were. I seemed to drift away from everything. I lost trust in myself, and felt my nature being changed and hardened. I do not think I could face such an ordeal again.'

'I trust, my darling, you will never need to face it,' he answered huskily, and yet with a curious hesitation; for of a sudden, the thought came to him, that perhaps she was about to face a graver ordeal. Where love and principle are in conflict, it is the Gethsemane of the soul.

'It is a fearful thing, one which I cannot understand, how a tie so close as that which binds father and daughter together, should be nothing but a source of pain. Do you think, John, that it can be right for me to choose what is pleasant and easy? It might be my duty to go to my father even yet.'

He saw that the idea of duty wilfully passed by was a torture to her even yet.

'My darling, perhaps I am not a fit judge; I am so immeasurably the gainer by your decision. Your father sent you away before, washed his hands of you for all time coming, as you told me. I cannot see that you are bound to consider him first now. If—if you had nothing, Agnes, I believe we should never have seen his face at this time.'

'I have tried to salve my conscience by the gift of the place which I know he will take by and by,' said Agnes, with a faint, sad smile, for she too had been able to gauge the depth of her father's motive; 'but I do not feel quite at rest. I have been reading "*Romola*" again, John. Do you remember how you and Michael and I enjoyed it together last Easter? Do you remember Savonarola's advice to poor *Romola*,—"Every bond of your life is a debt: the right lies in the payment of that debt." I cannot forget those words.'

'That was entirely different, Agnes; Tito was her husband,' said John quickly.

'I suppose it is different,' Agnes answered almost absently, as if she were weighing the thing in her mind; then suddenly she looked up at him with one of those strange, swift, earnest glances which seemed to reveal all her heart.

'Are you not afraid, John, that I may fail in my duty to you? I think I am weak just here. My leanings are towards all that is easy and pleasant.'

'Does that imply that I am likely to be a cross to you?' asked John lightly, although he was deeply moved.

'You! You are my tower of strength,' she made answer, and laid her fair face contentedly against his shoulder, loving to be near him, to show him how utterly she had given herself to him. 'And because I am so weak and wavering in many things, where you are so brave and strong, I want you to be very firm with me always, so as to keep me from drifting into the path of pleasant ease.'

'Agnes!' John stood still in the narrow way and looked straight into her face, while his own grew deadly pale. 'You torture me. I have not been honest with you. Let me be so now. Do you know how far I have drifted from the right way? Do you know that in the midst of all my seeking after what is good and true, I have missed my footing, and lost hold of the anchor of the soul. I do not say I do not believe in your God, Agnes, only I cannot be certain of anything. I cannot profess a belief which I have not proved. I know I have been a coward; and if, even now, you send me from you, it will but be what I deserve.'

'I have known for some time that you have been doubting, John,' she answered quietly; and there was no shrinking from him, as he had feared, no visible horror on her face. Nay, its sweetness of expression never changed.

'Then you do not brand me as a wicked man, Agnes? nor even blame me bitterly, as my mother and Michael have done?'

'I blame you! I can remember how the Master treated Thomas the doubter, John. So in His good time He will treat you.'

They were utterly alone in that quiet spot amid the solemn shadows of the great trees, with no sound to disturb them but

the soft murmur of the river as it rushed between its green banks. They could see its silvery gleaming through the fringe of its drooping willows. A strange solemn awe came over John; a feeling akin to that he had experienced in Miss Leesbeth's room the day she died. Strange that Agnes should have used her very words.

'What is it, John? What do you see?' she asked, in a whisper.

'Nothing. I was only wondering what I had done to deserve such happiness and such trust.'

'By and by you will clearly see, John; perhaps, please God, I may be able to help you,' she whispered. 'But I do not think you are far from the Kingdom.'

So, with her love, she swept away his last misgiving. He even felt a certain triumph in the thought that she had acted as he had predicted. The others, even while they loved her, believed her not less narrow than themselves. So he told himself, and looked forward with all the intoxication of young manhood to the realization of his manhood's dream.



CHAPTER XVI.

We walk not with the jewelled great,
Where love's dear name is sold ;
Yet we have wealth we would not give
For all their world of gold.'

AGNES LAURIE stood on the door-step at Laurieston very early on a summer morning, and looked with tender, yearning eyes over the wide sweep of lovely country, with the blue, sunny sea in the distance, fringing its broad belt of yellow sands. It was the morning of her wedding-day. The roses were in perfect bloom about the door: she touched them with a caressing finger, and smiled to see the dewdrops fall like a shower of diamonds to the ground. It was a fair day for a bridal; and she lifted her eyes to the cloudless sky with gratitude. She, who loved the sunshine and all things bright and beautiful, felt glad that nature did not wear a sombre look that day. She was standing by the door, when she heard a foot in the hall behind, heavier than Katie Steel's; and she hardly dared to look round, for her fair face flushed redly at the thought that before many hours were over the lover would be merged in the husband. But it was not John's foot; and Agnes turned immediately with a bright smile, when presently Michael laid a hand on her shoulder; and Michael's voice said cheerily,—

'A penny for your thoughts! You see I am a true prophet, after all. If the sun would not grace this marriage, he might hide his diminished head for ever.'

Agnes laughed, and looked into Michael's face with friendliest

affection, thinking what a fine, winning face it was, and how constantly it had shone upon her with a radiance which no doubt or cloud had ever marred.

'I have stolen a march on Jock, and I'm glad of it. He's as sound as a top yet,' said Michael. 'You must take your last walk with me. I hear mother moving upstairs: let us go, or you will be appropriated immediately.'

'Not my last walk, I hope,' Agnes said, as she took his arm and turned down the familiar garden path.

'In a sense, yes. Next time I walk like this it will be with Mrs. John Maitland,' said Michael teasingly. 'I think we are going to have quite a gay bridal. And what do you think? The folk are to light a bonfire on the hill behind Nunraw,—on that waste patch Will is always talking of reclaiming. John and you should see it as you steam down the Forth to-night. The steamer is not likely to sail before nine o'clock. You will have a delightful trip: John knows all the ground, and he speaks the language like a native; and that is an advantage, I tell you.'

'It is so good of Uncle Walter to give us tickets for his new steamer. He says I shall han'sel her, and bring good luck for ever after.'

'Uncle Walter is quite right; but I hardly give him credit for such an admirable and appropriate idea. I want you to look at Aunt Emily to-day, Nannie; she'll have on her most imposing mien, to say nothing of her clothes, all for the benefit of Lady Culross. She was rather put out that we did not have her at Laurieston when she was here before. Mother has her bit of pride too. She said if Aunt Emily could not come to see Laurieston except when there were great folks under its roof, she could bide at home.'

'How different she is from your mother, Michael!' Agnes said musingly.

'I should say so,' put in Michael, quite loftily for him. 'Well, don't you think it will be quite a gay bridal?'

'Quite; and I am glad of it,' Agnes answered, with a smile. 'John is so different. He is absurdly nervous. I just hope he will behave himself to-day, and that Mr. Rankine will not be

unduly long-winded. If only I could have been married in the kirk of Inveresk, I should have been happy.'

'That would have created an earthquake in the parish, I believe,' said Michael, with a smile of quiet enjoyment. 'But we'll marry you safe and sound in the old drawing-room; and it'll be more home-like. Empty enough the old house will be when and you and Jock are away.'

'But we are not away for ever, Michael. We have promised to come home as often as John did,' said Agnes quickly.

'I hope you will, for mother's sake. There's only Wat left; and I doubt, Nannie, if Nunraw will long hold Will and Effie.'

A shadow fell on the fair face by Michael's side.

'I cannot bear to think of it; but I fear you are right, Michael. Will has got it in his head he would like to emigrate. Effie told me about it one day, in great distress. I hope for everybody's sake he will go no further.'

'Well, don't let it vex you. If he does go, Effie must just make up her mind to take all the vicissitudes of life as they come,' said Michael quickly. 'Two months you are to be away; and then what fun getting you settled in Edinburgh! I am glad your house is on the north side of the town. There is a dignity about those fine old houses which I like. I'm glad you didn't go in for one of the matchbox villas on the south side.'

'Why, Michael, I didn't know you had any ideas on such frivolous questions.'

'Are they frivolous, my dear? I don't think so. Among the new theories, that of environment is considered to be an important factor in the formation or development of character. After my experience at Coldaire, I believe it. I shall love to picture you moving about these quaint, substantial old rooms, giving the necessary light and beauty to their sombre hues.'

'O Michael dear, how poetical you have grown!' laughed Agnes. 'I hope you will not only picture us there, but come and see us in the bodily presence. Next to Uncle Michael and Aunt Maggie, the seat of honour at our table and our hearth will be for our dear brother Michael.'

Agnes wondered to see him turn away his head quite swiftly. She would have wondered still more had she seen the expression which flitted across his face. Although he had schooled himself to regard her as a sister, as his brother's wife, there were times when manhood's cross seemed too heavy to Michael to be borne. This was one. But of all days and times, on this day at least, that shadow must not fall on the gentle heart by his side. He thanked God that she had not the slightest idea of what was in his heart for her.

'I may come sometimes, but it will not be often,' he said gently. 'My work has become very engrossing, and I shall not care to leave my post.'

'And your health, Michael? I think it is not less robust than it was,' she said anxiously.

'I am not worse. I have strength given me for the work I have chosen. I believe God will allow me to do a certain amount,—that He will even allow me to see some fruits. I only ask to be granted the privilege of establishing the work on a sure foundation; then some one else can carry it on. I am more glad than I can say, that Mrs. Gilbert has been able to come to-day. She is a noble woman.'

Agnes could not speak. There were times when she rebelled, as Laurieston had done, against the ruling of Michael's life. He was so eminently fitted to shine in any sphere, it seemed hard that he should bury his talents in that obscure and desolate region, where there was no appreciation, scarcely tolerance of his work. And yet, who shall judge of these things? In the eye of God, Michael Maitland might be a greater hero than any who have gloriously suffered for the cause by fire or sword.

'I am glad, too,' she said at length. 'But one thing I think I shall never forgive, and that is that you have given up your post at John's side to-day. I have no objection to Phil, of course, but he ought only to have been an ordinary guest. It is a shame of you not to take the groomsmen's duties, as you ought.'

'John understands, and did not press it. Some day, perhaps, he will tell you my reason.'

'You owe it to me to confess it now,' she said, with a curious little smile; but Michael never spoke.

'When I am tired after a long winter day's work at Coldaire,' he said, after a time, 'I shall sit by the fire and picture you and John in your beautiful home.'

'How do you know it will be beautiful?' she asked archly.

'Because it is your blessed privilege to be able to beautify whatever you touch,' he answered simply. 'I hope great things in the future for you two. I like to think that the students will find a pleasant welcome at your fireside.'

'I have it all planned,' said Agnes; and there was a look of deep satisfaction in her face. 'I intend to have an evening at home every week, for them, if they will come; and Sunday afternoons as well. John has told me of so many who have nowhere to go, and whose lodgings are so poor and unattractive. I hope—I hope I shall be able to help him a great deal in this way. Of course he must draw them first, and I think he will. I have gathered that he has won their confidence and affection.'

'Yes, they adore him,' said Michael briefly.

'And so between us we may be able to do a little good. If only we make life less lonely to any homesick boy, it would be worth the trial; and with such a friend as John they will learn to long for the attainment of life's highest ideal.'

Agnes revealed the innermost desires of her heart to the brother she loved. As he listened, his heart swelled with a strange and bitter envy, which made him afraid. For a moment he was tempted to rebel. Why should John have all—even the love of this dear woman, for whom Michael would have laid down his life? The struggle was only for a moment; then the sunny unselfishness of his heart crushed down all unworthy thoughts.

'God bless you, my sister, and give you the fullest realisation of your hopes!' he said, laying his hands, as if in benediction, on her shoulders. 'Now I must take you in. You belong to no special person for this one day, until John takes you away.'

Those who were privileged to witness the first wedding that had taken place at Laurieston, long remembered it as a very sweet and delightful occasion, in which there was not a jarring note. The only guests outside the family circle were Lady Culross and the two Miss Thorburns, who invited themselves. Lady Culross was greatly mystified by the whole affair, and thought it passing strange that any marriage could hold unless celebrated within the walls of a church; and yet the short service in the drawing-room at Laurieston was not without its own peculiar solemnity, which impressed her deeply. The blinds had to be drawn down to soften the brilliant sunlight; but, by some strange freak, a ray managed to steal in, and fall sunnily upon the dear head of the bride, as she stood with her hand in John's when Mr. Rankine was pronouncing the final words. She made a very lovely bride, in her rich white silk gown and costly veil,—Lady Culross's gift,—a costume which Mrs. Walter Maitland had not been slow to pronounce much too grand for the wife of a poor assistant to a professor. She had also been horrified at the purchase of the house in Great King Street, and only hoped there would not be a crash soon. But she held her peace in the house on the marriage day, and tried to make herself amiable, though the attempt was not a striking success.

It was a very happy marriage. There was no fuss or hurry, or uncomfortable incident to mar its harmony; and in the golden glory of the summer afternoon John took his wife away.

They all gathered on the lawn to see them go, and when Agnes came downstairs in her travelling garb, and saw all the familiar, kindly faces beaming upon her, her composure was shaken for the first time. They saw she had no strength for individual leave-takings, and so did not crowd about her as she went towards the carriage-door. When she had taken her seat, she leaned forward with both hands outstretched to Mrs. Maitland.

'Kiss me, mother,—*my* mother now, as well as John's.'

These were her last words, and she smiled sunnily as the carriage drove away. The Miss Thorburns said after, how

pretty it was to see how she laid her hand on John's just then, as if to seek strength to bear up in the parting.

'I missed Michael at the last, dear,' she said, turning to John, as the carriage swept out at the avenue gates. 'Where could he be? It is so unlike him not to be ready with his kind word and smile.'

'He would not be very far away,' John answered, and a slight shadow crossed his face at the thought of what this day must be to Michael.

'What have I done that I should be so blessed?' he asked passionately, as he bent to look into the sweet eyes of his wife.

'Nothing; but you are going to do a great deal,' she answered, with her sunny smile. 'I am going to be very, very exacting, John; so you may tremble. What may satisfy your ambition may not satisfy your wife's ambition for you.'

'Don't build your hopes too high, dearest,' he said, in a low voice; but she laughed his seriousness away.

'I will have no solemnity to-day, John. This is to be our holiday—our real holiday, and we are not to think about a solitary thing, but how we can best enjoy ourselves. We shall work all the better for it after.'

So they set out upon the new life, and, as they stood on the deck of the Antwerp boat that night as it steamed down the Forth, they saw the moonlight lying white and tender on the old home; and higher up the red gleam and glow of the bonfire which willing hands had lighted in their honour. These things were like another message from the dear hearts who loved them, and Agnes Maitland, laying her head on her husband's breast, thanked God for all the precious things of life, and asked that she might be made worthy of her happy lot.



CHAPTER XVII

'How perplex, grows belief!'—*Browning.*



It was a gusty November afternoon; a day of surprises to many pedestrians, especially at street corners, where the wind would catch them up all of a sudden, and, having stolen a hat, or turned an umbrella inside out, would tear away again with a shriek of delight at its own savage merriment. A day on which nervous old gentlemen and fidgety ladies are best indoors; a day, indeed, on which a cosy room, lit by a glowing fire, seems the most desirable place in the world. It was particularly gusty and aggressive on the north side of the town, where the wind swept up free and boisterous from the grey expanse of the sea, which tossed and tumbled, and showed its white teeth viciously in response to the rude caress of the easterly gale. At the window of her inner drawing-room, John Maitland's wife was sitting with her work, to which she was paying but little heed; there was something which satisfied her in the wild, grand picture of the angry sea, tossing under the lowering sky. That was her favourite window, her favourite seat. The drawing-room, which ran the whole breadth of the house, had three long windows to the street; and the inner room, shut off by folding doors, had a curious old-fashioned square window, with a seat all round it, and a little stand of plants, which were always green and delightful to look upon, though they were but hardy ferns and common shrubs, which had struck their first roots in Laurieston soil, and for that reason were cherished with affectionate care by her who loved Laurieston so well. The folding-doors were not

quite closed, for it was Mrs. Maitland's 'at home' day, and later, when the students began to flock in, the large room would be nearly full. It was very cosy and home-like in the inner room, however, with the cheerful fire glowing on the hearth, and making lovely lights on the dainty appointments of the tea-table in the corner. Dinner was not long over, and John was in his study, where a pile of work always waited for him. Presently, however, he would be up for his cup of tea, which he made an excuse for spending many a half-hour in that cosy corner. Scarcely yet had John in any sense got used to the idea that Agnes belonged absolutely to him; there was more of the lover than the husband in all his thoughts of her, although they had lived four months of married life together. There was a curious look on the face of the young wife, as she sat there in the deepening twilight, with the faint touch of the setting sun touching her head and making a yellow shaft athwart the bodice of her velvet gown. It was a brown velvet, rich in texture, hanging in straight, beautiful folds, and with its slight train, giving a certain stateliness to her figure. It was made with close sleeves and a high collar, and she wore no ornament, except a big yellow chrysanthemum in her button-hole; not even a ring, but the plain wedding circlet on her finger.

She was evidently thinking, and her face wore an expression of the deepest gravity, while her eyes, as she scanned the billowy sea, looked dark in the shadow. It was not exactly an expression of pain or of anxiety; but rather a half-wondering, half-puzzled look, as if she were trying vainly to solve a problem. Her thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the door, and the servant's voice announcing a name,—

'Mr. Christie!'

'Dear me, Harry, you are quite early,' she said, as she laid her work on the window-seat, and came smiling to meet a tall, slim, fair-haired lad, evidently not long out of his teens. 'I am glad to see you. You are just in time. Mr. Maitland will be up presently for his cup of tea. Isn't it cold? Have this chair—doesn't it look inviting?'

It was a gracious, kindly welcome, which made the lad's fair face flush, and he looked at her with a reverent, adoring look, as

if she were a being of some superior order. John sometimes teased her about her complete conquest of the students, although not often. It was too sacred and beautiful a thing to him to see the influence she had with them, an influence he would never hope to equal.

'Thank you. I hope I have not come too early?' he said, a trifle awkwardly. 'You said I might come any afternoon.'

'Why, of course; don't say another word about it,' she said brightly. 'When I say a thing I mean it. What news from the old manse of Durris, then? Is the mother to come for Christmas?'

'I haven't heard lately. My sister Annie has not been very well, and it may be too cold for them to come.'

'If not, then you will go north for the holidays, I suppose?'

'I don't know. I don't feel much like going,' he said, with a hesitation which made her look at him keenly.

'Why not, Harry? You are out of sorts. I am your mother-confessor just now. Tell me what is troubling you. If you were not so good a boy, I should say conscience was awakened.'

'I'm not good at all, Mrs. Maitland,' he cried impulsively. 'I'm as bad as I can be, and as miserable. I never was so miserable in all my life!'

'Why, what about?' she asked, in extreme surprise and concern, for this was one of her favourites,—a happy, spirited, good-hearted, honest lad,—the only son of a widowed mother, who had reason to be proud of him.

'Oh, I'm all wrong every way. I haven't been at church for weeks and weeks, and I have such thoughts,' he said, with a shudder. 'I believe I shall never be able to enter a church again.'

'Why? Tell me everything, Harry,' she said, sitting down before him, and fixing her beautiful eyes full on his face.

'Because I don't believe as I used. I can't see through things. I don't think University life is good for a fellow in that way. It shakes his faith in everything. There is so much confusion in what we hear. It isn't easy, Mrs. Maitland, to know what to believe.'

'That may be, Harry; but everything is easy if we keep a firm

hold on the Friend who sticketh closer than a brother. If you ask Him, He will guide you through all these troubles.'

'But the worst of it all is, I don't think I believe even in *that*,' cried the lad impulsively. 'I have heard and read so much about Christ being only a good man, whose example is worthy of imitation. They deny His divinity, some of them even His very existence.'

'Who does?' asked Agnes; and her voice had a hard, dry ring in it, as if the words were wrung from her.

'Oh, a lot of the fellows; and then the arguments in books are so convincing. Besides, I don't believe some of the professors believe anything themselves, and they know.'

'Does Mr. Maitland know anything about your state of mind, Harry?'

'Yes,' he answered, in a low voice, but did not look at her. 'He is always so kind; he tells us to be sure and ask him anything we are not sure about. I asked him something one day, and he told me to speak to you. I wonder why he did not answer himself.'

Agnes Maitland rose, for she did not care just then that the lad before her should see her face.

'You know Thriepland Mrs. Maitland?' pursued the young man, all unconscious how deeply he was probing. 'He has gone over to the new Agnosticism, and he told me yesterday that Mr. Maitland does not believe in Christianity. I just told him to shut up, that he did not know what he was talking about. Then he said, any fellow who had brains could tell that from his lectures. Isn't it abominable what fellows will say?'

Agnes Maitland was silent still. What, indeed, could she say? A weight of intolerable pain lay upon her heart, and every word the student spoke cut like a knife.

'I was awfully disappointed when I spoke to Mr. Maitland,' he went on, finding unspeakable relief in pouring all his trouble out. 'It took me a long time to gather up my courage to do it.'

'And what did you ask him, Harry? Tell me exactly what passed.'

'Well, you see, one night I was in Thriepland's rooms. Gow was there. Do you know Gow? he's the Adonis of our year,—

an awfully good-hearted fellow, too; but he is a materialist. Thriepland and he got in discussion, and between them they did for the Christian religion,' said the lad, with a boyish freedom of expression which on any other subject would have amused his listener. 'Gow went the farthest. He said nobody with any intellect even pretended to believe in that old superstition, which had exploded, like other superstitions which held thrall in the days of intellectual darkness and ignorance. He instanced Huxley and Tyndall, of course, and all those known men. Then Thriepland said we needn't go any further than our junior Professor in Moral Philosophy. Then I got mad, and said he was a Christian man. Thriepland laughed at me, and asked if I followed the lectures closely, and if I did, had I ever heard him place anything higher than philosophy itself? He kind of staggered me, Mrs. Maitland, and I didn't know what to say.'

'Was that before or after you spoke to Mr. Maitland?'

'Oh, before. I told them I would ask him whether Christianity or philosophy was the best guide for human life; and when I did ask him he did not answer for himself, but told me to speak to you.'

It had grown almost dark in the room, and there was a kind of solemnity in the silence which followed on the boy's last words. Agnes Maitland was in a strange dilemma. She felt that the young heart which had so leaned upon the strong soul and sound judgment of the best beloved of his mental teachers, had met with a grievous disappointment, which had hurt and saddened him. She also felt that he was waiting for her to answer satisfactorily, not only for herself but for her husband. What a mockery, in that instant of pain, seemed the influence of which her husband had so often spoken! She knew that in comparison with his, it was absolutely as nothing.

'I can have but one answer to make, Harry,' she said at length. 'There is nothing which will stand the test of time and sorrow and temptation except the religion of our blessed Lord. I speak to you out of the fulness of my own experience. Do not let go your hold upon the Christianity you were taught at your mother's knee, my boy. Shut your ears to the false

teaching which would seek to set it aside. Above all, pray, and I will pray for you too, that the believing heart may not altogether go from you, for there is no sorrow on earth like to that sorrow.'

As she passed by his chair to ring the bell, feeling that she could not bear further talk on that subject, she laid her hand lightly on his sunny head, and that touch seemed like a benediction to the lad. She felt him tremble under it.

'I will try! I will, indeed! I will not listen to them,' he cried earnestly. 'When I know you believe it all, it will help me not to doubt again.'

He was very earnest in what he was saying, but the words did not much relieve the heart of Agnes Maitland. She knew very well that on the morrow he would be assailed again by the old doubts, and that the very evasion of his questioning by the one whom love had elected as his chief mental guide, had done more than anything to undermine his wavering faith. I ask you if the heart of a loving woman and a Christian wife could be probed with any keener pain than that? Just as her hand was on the bell-rope, the door opened and John entered, his tall figure filling up the doorway, and his face wearing that look of placid and unutterable content which the presence of his wife never failed to bring.

'All in the dark? Who have we here?' he asked pleasantly. 'Oh, it is you, Harry? What dark conspiracy are you and Mrs. Maitland concocting in this weird light?'

'Nothing, sir. We were only talking,' said the lad, rising to his feet. 'I am afraid I have taken up a great deal of Mrs. Maitland's time.'

'I give up this day to you and your chums, Harry,' Agnes answered, so quietly and cheerily that John noticed nothing amiss; 'and I am not sure but that it is the best spent of all my days.'

With lights and tea came another unexpected visitor. Agnes was standing at the tea-table with her back to the door, when she heard the sound of the voice she loved next best to her husband's:

'Well, bairns, here am I come for myself to see Agnes among

the laddies. Isn't this a pleasure I have promised myself for weeks?'

'Why, mother!'

Agnes turned swiftly, passed by John, and threw herself on his mother's breast. It seemed to her that she had come in direct answer to that unspoken prayer, the yearning of an aching heart. Margaret Maitland felt that there was a peculiar pathetic clinging in that embrace, but she forebore to notice it, and came forward into the room bright and cheerful and happy, bringing the sunshine with her.

'Oh, you have a stranger?' she said, at sight of the tall lad sitting by the hearth.

'Not a stranger, mother, only one of the laddies,' Agnes made answer. 'Harry Christie, this is Mr. Maitland's mother; and this, mother, is the son of the late minister of Durriss, in Aberdeenshire. He comes a great deal about us, and is one of our favourites.'

Mrs. Maitland had a kindly word of greeting for the lad, and then Agnes untied her bonnet-strings and unfastened her sealskin cloak, and, placing her in the cosiest chair, bade John bring her a cup of tea to drink before she could go upstairs.

Margaret Maitland accepted these little attentions with a smile of motherly content; and, leaning back in her chair, with the soft light on her face, she looked the sweetest mother in the world.

'Why didn't father come too?' asked John, with his broad, pleasant smile.

'Father!' Mrs. Maitland laughed softly. 'He'll not sleep a night out of Laurieston if he can help it. He said he would drive in for me if I would be ready to leave at nine o'clock. But I just laughed, and said, "No, thank you. I'm not to have my pleasures cut down like a bairn, who is sent to bed at nine." And are you both well?'

'If you will excuse me, Mrs. Maitland, I will go now,' said Harry Christie. 'Yes, thank you, I will come in later on. There's a poor chap living in Cumberland Street; he is a gardener to his trade, and works in the summer to pay for his classes in winter. May I bring him round? His name is Laidlaw'

'Surely; and bring him straight to me when he comes in, and I shall be kind to him, Harry,' Agnes replied at once; and with a parting smile she let him go.

'It just does me good, bairns, to come here, and to see you, Nannio, looking so grand, and yet so sweet and simple. Isn't she a success, John, and aren't you thankful for your mercies?'

'I am, indeed,' John answered, and he laid his hand on his wife's shoulder. She turned her head a little, and let her cheek rest upon it, and her mouth trembled. She loved him with a love which sometimes made her afraid lest she was making an idol of her husband. At other times she felt no such qualm, remembering the gracious limit set by Him who gave Himself for us,—*'Even as I have loved you.'*

Is there not enough in that to satisfy even the most passionate of human hearts?



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CHAPTER XVIII.

'Seeds burst not their dark cells without a throe ;
All birth is effort ; shall not love's be so ?'



ABOUT seven o'clock the folding-doors were thrown back, the lights turned up, and the guests began to arrive. From the first, Agnes had tried to arrange that there should always be ladies at these informal gatherings, having heard both John and Michael say that the social advantages offered to students were too often a one-sided affair, at which they were supposed to entertain each other. She had heard them comically describe students' parties, where there was not a single lady present.

'As if we didn't see enough of each other in the day-time ! The fellows don't want to be herded together, and kept isolated, as if they were questionable company,' he said to her once. 'If the ladies won't come, leave the lads alone.'

But the ladies were very willing to come, and Mrs. Maitland's Friday evenings were always enjoyed.

But it was Agnes herself who was the moving spirit of these pleasant gatherings. John's mother found a cosy corner beside a tall palm, and there sat, looking on with delighted interest. She was not left entirely in peace, however, for Agnes had many introductions to make, and there was always some special favourite being brought to her side. Between thirty and forty guests 'dropped in' that night, and the room was pleasantly full. In the inner recess, a large table was spread with tea and coffee and light refreshments, and Mrs. Maitland was delighted to see that the lads were not bashful about

helping themselves. There were many gentlemanly, refined-looking fellows, who it was easy to see had been reared in cultured homes; but there were others, such as Laidlaw, whom Harry Christie introduced, who were climbing the hill of knowledge under many difficulties and disadvantages. To such, who had come from poor homes, and had seen but little of social life, John's wife was specially kind.

As Margaret Maitland watched her gliding about among them, perfectly at her ease, laughing and talking with them all, she felt a great glow of motherly pride in her heart, and a great gratitude to God that her son should be so blessed in his wife. The evening, however, was not quite given up to talk. There was plenty of singing and playing of different sorts, both on the piano and the violin, and even the flute. Agnes was a good, if not a great musician, and she was able to accompany all the songs, and even sang herself, though her voice was not very strong. She was willing to do anything to make the time pass pleasantly; and it was good to see her skill in drawing out the best that was in some of the shy, awkward lads, who, on their first entrance, looked about as uncomfortable as it was possible for them to look. John himself was invaluable as a host. He was perfectly at home among the students, by reason of his own youth, and his sympathy with all the aims and desires of young manhood. As Mrs. Maitland the elder looked on that stirring scene, and saw the undoubted hold both had on those present, she felt what great opportunities were theirs, and a passionate prayer rose from her heart, that God would guide them to use that influence for the highest and holiest ends.

'John,' she said once, when he came to her side, 'what do you think when you look at Agnes? Is that not a great work she is doing?'

'It is greater than you or I, mother, have any idea of,' he answered, in a low voice; and his full eye, as it rested on the fair face of his wife, where she stood the centre of a little throng at the far end of the room, told something of what was passing in his heart.

'She is a blessing to them, as she has been to us, my son,'

the mother said. 'God grant that her reward be not denied her here and hereafter.'

Never had Mrs. Maitland's 'at home' passed off so pleasantly, and with so little effort. Never had she seemed so happy and bright, never had her laugh resounded more frequently through the room. She made conundrums for them, teased them with puzzling rhymes and nonsense verses, though a quiet word of counsel and sympathy often came in between, and when they broke up it was with expressed regret from all. It is often thus, I think, when the spirit is weighed down, and an effort is demanded of it,—it seems to soar higher than its wont. In the midst of all her apparent gaiety, a shadow dwelt with Agnes Maitland, a haunting fear which was taking shape in her heart. When the last guest had gone, they closed the folding-doors, and gathered about the hearth in the cosy inner room, to have a cosy, homely chat. John said he had work to do which would keep him up in the study till the early morning; nevertheless he did not seem in a hurry to go, but stood leaning against the mantelpiece listening to his mother and Agnes talking of Laurieston and home affairs, and occasionally asking a question himself. Agnes was sitting on a stool at the mother's feet, her white hands crossed on the soft folds of the mother's gown. To see those two women, the dearest to him on earth, mother and daughter in heart if not in name, was a great joy to John Maitland.

'We don't seem to have heard anything of Mike for a long time, mother?' he said, after they had discussed the immediate concerns of the home nest.

'He writes every week, dear, and is very well,' Mrs. Maitland answered. 'He is in the midst of great preparations for Christmas. They are going to have unheard-of treats for both old and young. Mrs. Gilbert has asked father and me to go up. I believe, bairns, that father has it in his heart to go; then we would come back, Michael and all, for New Year at home.'

'Dear Michael,' Agnes said; and there was a peculiarly tender smile on her lips as she spoke these words.

'I am just a little anxious about Willie just now,' said Mrs.

Maitland presently. 'Effie says he *will* be off to America in the spring. He has quite taken the craze which has robbed us of so many of our young men.'

'It will be terrible for you if he takes Effie away, mother,' said Agnes.

'It will be a bit of a trial; but I have great hopes of Effie. She is developing, Nannie, in quite a wonderful way. The Thorburns were telling us of a distant connection of theirs who went out to take up land in the north-west, but he left his wife behind till he had made a home. Effie spoke of that, and said she would never stay behind. I liked the way she said it. It showed that she has a firm and wholesome sense of a wife's duty. It is only in extreme or exceptional cases she is justified in quitting her husband's side.'

'Do you really think, then, that they *will* go?' asked John, in surprise.

'I do; and we will not seek to hinder them. It may be that a new start on his own responsibility will make a man of Will. He is very discontented, and discontent leads the way to other things.'

'Nothing but changes! Well, I must be off. We had a class exam. to-day, and I have half a hundred papers to look over before I sleep. Good night, mother. You'll look in before you go upstairs, wife?' he added, with a downward look at his wife. 'This is the sworn foe to hard work, mother. I have to bar the study door against her whiles.'

Mrs. Maitland laughed and shook her head. It did her good to see their perfect happiness; it was a rest to her after the somewhat unsatisfactory domestic relations between the young couple at Nunraw. She had not told all that was vexing there, knowing how keenly Agnes felt her brother's shortcomings.

But though Agnes said nothing, she knew very well that there was a good deal involved in what Mrs. Maitland had said.

'How lovely it is to have you here,' she said, nestling her bright head contentedly against the motherly knee. 'It makes home more home-like to see you sitting just there, with that dear smile on your face.'

'My bairns spoil me in my old age,' said Margaret Maitland, touching the golden hair with caressing fingers. 'And don't you think it is a joy to me to be here, Nannie? Some day, when you have big sons of your own, you will understand just how I feel to-night. When I saw you moving about among the young men to-night, and knew what a beautiful ideal of womanhood you were giving to them, I just prayed that my son would be worthy of the blessing God had given him, and that he would learn to thank God for all the mercies of his life.'

Agnes said nothing, and just then the mother could not see her face.

'You are happy and content, my bairn? It is not outward seeming?' she said inquiringly.

'Yes, I am happy. I did not think, mother, there could be such happiness on earth,' she answered, in a low voice. 'I don't need to say anything to you about John. You know him; but I do think there is not in his whole nature one alloy of self.'

'He has not had much to try him yet, my dear. Life has been all plain sailing for him,' replied Mrs. Maitland. 'Don't spoil him, Nannie. The best of men can be spoiled.'

'Not by too much love, I think,' said Agnes, with a musing smile; then her face grew quite grave again, and a touch of sadness even crept about her lips. Margaret Maitland's quick perception saw that sadness, and divined its meaning just as clearly as if it had been explained to her in words. She knew that the woman kneeling at her feet, while giving to her the confidence of a child, had also her inner sanctuary into which no stranger could enter. She had herself taught her son's wife that the first and most binding duty of married life is to preserve its sacred privacy and allow no alien hand, however loved, to lift that veil. The woman, who had a long experience of life, knew that there was a cloud on the happiness of Agnes Maitland's heart; but she loved and honoured her for the unswerving loyalty which sealed her lips. Some day, perhaps, it might be right and fitting that Agnes should reveal to her something of her first experiences; in the

meantime she could only wait and pray. Surely if the prayers of the righteous avail, the shadow would not long darken that happy home. They sat until the fire faded into dying embers, and the clock in the adjoining room gave forth the first stroke of midnight. Then Agnes sprang up. 'That is twelve o'clock, mother; such hours! How have you kept your eyes open? Come and I will take you to your room; then I will run down to see what John is about, before I go to sleep.'

A few minutes later, Agnes went to her own room, took off her gown, and, throwing a warm wrap round her, ran down to the study. As she had expected, the fire was nearly out, and her husband absorbed in his work.

'My dear, the room is quite chilly. Didn't you promise me to mind the fire if I allowed you to sit up?'

He pushed back his chair, gave the papers a great shove with his arm, and before she could escape caught her in his arms.

'My darling, I have scarcely seen you to-day, and now you are as tired and white as possible,' he said, with unspeakable tenderness, and he took her face in his hands and looked down into it, his eyes luminous with the great passion of his heart.

'Now, John, let me mend the fire, and then I will sit with you fifteen minutes,' she said, and her face flushed under that deep gaze just as it used to do in the old Laurieston days. She was even yet a little reticent and distant with him, permitting his caresses rather than sharing them, though there were times when she lavished upon him the outward demonstration of her own abiding love.

'Is mother away to bed?'

'Yes; isn't she sweet and dear, John? Nobody ever had a mother like yours'

'Nor a wife,' he added. 'I ought to be a good man.'

She slipped down on the hearthrug at his feet, and, folding her hands on his knee, looked up with big, earnest eyes into his face.

'You are a good man, John,' she said slowly. 'But although you are so good and love me so much, I am at the same time a happy and an unhappy woman.'

He gave a slight start at the grave import of her words, but did not ask a single question, because he knew too well what she meant.

'John, I think it is no use for me to have the students here either on week-days or Sundays. No doubt they think it pleasant to come, but I shall never do them any good.'

'Why?' There was a slight harshness in that brief monosyllable.

'Because your influence over them is ten times greater than mine, and one word of yours can undo all I can utter in a year.'

'That is a strange way to speak, Agnes,' he said, with difficulty. 'You speak as if we were utterly antagonistic to each other,—as if, indeed, I exerted an evil influence over these lads. Are you not a little hard upon me?'

'Oh no! God knows I am not,' she cried, with swift and sudden passion. 'I—I—give you more than your due. John, you promised me not to lead any seeking mind astray. You said that though you could not see certain things for yourself, you would not seek to influence others. Have you kept your promise?'

'That foolish boy Harry Christie has been tormenting you,' said John, almost gloomily. 'The very fact of his speaking to you at my request, might convince you that I have kept my promise.'

'In the letter, perhaps; but in the spirit, John, have you been faithful? He says your lectures teach that philosophy is the very highest. Oh, John, think what fearful responsibility rests upon you. You know how these lads love you and hang upon your words. I entreat you to be careful. In a sense, the welfare of these immortal souls is in your care.'

'Really, my dear, you are, to say the least of it, unreasonable,' he replied, with the first touch of irritability she had seen since their wedding day. 'If you knew anything of the study of philosophy, you would know that, above all things, it aims at fair and open and just judgment. These young men must face whatever temptations to unbelief their studies present, and

conquer them, or let themselves be conquered, as the case may be. I can conscientiously say that I have never advanced any theory regarding religious questions, or laid down any law of belief. But, of course, it is an impossibility that I can be a hypocrite. I am as careful as I can be; but, at the same time, I owe it to myself to be honest in my teaching. If it is considered to be injurious to the students, it is for the authorities to dispense with my services. As yet there has not even been a hint of complaint.'

The tone of these words indicated to Agnes that she had vexed her husband, that he was in a sense even angry with her. But she did not flinch.

'Holding such beliefs,' she said steadily, 'I question if it is right for you to be a teacher of youth.'

'Perhaps not, looking at it from your point of view,' he said quietly. 'But so long as my conscience does not trouble me, I cannot be expected to resign a position such as I may never have the chance of again. I hate that you should be troubled, dearest,' he added passionately; 'but, indeed, it will be better for us both if we agree to let this vexed question rest. We must have a distinct understanding, or it will continually jar upon us. I have given up something already,—a great deal, if you only knew it,—when I attend church with you. Even that slight action is more a pain than a pleasure, because I am not honest in it.'

'If that is the case, John, I would much rather you stayed away.'

Agnes rose as she said these words, and her face was very pale.

'I have hurt you, Agnes. My darling, don't look at me so strangely. As I stand before you, I am a man honestly trying to do my duty, and to give out the truth, as it appears to me to be the truth. If I were a coward or a poltroon, I might disguise my convictions and affect a delight in religious ordinances; but I cannot, even to please you.'

'I do not ask it, John. I thank God that you are honest and straightforward, at least,' she said, with an indescribable mingling of pathos and pain. 'I confess I did not foresee all

this. Perhaps we were hasty ; and I did not quite understand how firm and rooted were your convictions.'

'My wife, what do those words mean? Not that you regret having married me?' said John hoarsely.

Her answer was to throw herself on his breast, to clasp her arms close about his neck, and lay her cheek against his.

'No, no ; whatever happens, I thank God I am your wife. I would rather be your wife, my husband, than fill any other place in the world. I will try not to vex myself, and perhaps, after a time, this little cloud will pass away.'



CHAPTER XIX.

'Yet calm thy fears,
For thou canst gain, even from the bitterest part,
A stronger heart.'



FROM that day a barrier grew up between John Maitland and his wife. It seemed but a slight thing, a difference of opinion regarding creed, and yet it was sufficient to poison the happiness of both. John thought her unreasonable because she regarded it so seriously, and felt a slight disappointment that after all she could be both narrow and hard in her judgment. But his disappointment was as nothing to hers. She was a woman of keen, even morbid sensitiveness; her idea of duty and responsibility was very high and imperative, and it was a positive agony to her at that time to dwell on her husband's position and influence. She wished, with passionate regret, that Michael Maitland had insisted upon John becoming simply the young Laird of Laurieston; there, at least, his opinions regarding religious or other matters could have done only a limited harm. But in Edinburgh, in the very heart of its busy, questioning student life, coming in contact daily with dozens of inquiring minds, she told herself that he was doing a great and irreparable wrong. Although she accepted his assurance that he never sought to lay down any law of belief, she felt that his silence was an evasion of the whole question, which was more convincing than any passion of oratory.

She tried to go on in the old way, to take an interest in the young men, and to make her home attractive and pleasant; but she was very unhappy, and John knew it. The early months

of the new year presented a keen contrast to the closing months of the old, and under the strain the wife's health began to give way. There was a curious reticence between them. After that night the subject was never again mentioned. It must not be supposed, however, that they lived in silence or estrangement. But for that one thing the relationship of their married life had been quite perfect. If possible, John was yet more tender and thoughtful and considerate, and she accepted these evidences of his love gratefully, and gave him her own in return. But each was conscious of the strange, indefinable something which stood between, shutting out each from the other's innermost heart. Perhaps there was a touch of pride on both sides, a tendency to hold fast by conviction, a shrinking from even the semblance of yielding. John no longer spoke of his University work, or alluded to the subject of his lectures. Agnes no longer asked a single question regarding it. It is not for me to judge wherein each erred. I have simply to chronicle events as they happened. Marriage, the closest and most delicate of all the relations of life, cannot long stand such a strain. The very nature and obligations of its union forbid it. Therefore, though the world saw nothing amiss, though the dear ones at Laurieston suspected nothing, the barrier grew, the breach widened, and these two, who loved each other beyond anything on earth, walked separate ways and led a separate life, so far as matters of conscience were concerned. It was impossible, therefore, that either could be happy. Amid these curious conditions of life the days sped, and the session drew to its close. Agnes was in the drawing-room one afternoon in April, watching from her favourite window the tender hues of the April sky. Spring had tarried in her coming, the new year had brought nothing but frost and snow and scathing easterly winds; and, after a royal tempest, during which March tore out like the proverbial lion,—lo, a great change! the air became soft and balmy, the sun shed mild, glorious beams everywhere, the hard outline and lowering cloud-banks in the sky were melted into that dappled loveliness characteristic of the spring. Winter was over and gone, the birds took heart of grace, and sang their gayest songs;—in a word, earth seemed to have been granted a new lease of

life. Agnes had always loved the spring. At Laurieston she had found the earliest leaf and bud. She had known the haunt of the primrose and the daffodil, and had watched the sweet unfolding of the catkins on the river bank with a tender eye. She seemed to have lost that interest. Perhaps in the city there is no spring to look for; and yet, what more exquisite than the tender outline of the sky above the clustering roofs and spires, what more beautiful than the reflected tints on the placid sea? A sense of rest stole into her heart as her eyes dwelt on the familiar and yet ever-changing scene. There was a great change in her. Her face was not less sweet, but it was more grave, and there was a hard line about the mouth, which told something. She looked out of health; and more,—she did not look like a happy woman.

‘There is a gentleman in the study, ma’am. I could not tell him when the master would be in,’ said the servant, following up her knock at the drawing-room door.

‘At half-past four, Mary. Ask his name. If he has come any distance he had better wait,’ responded the mistress, without looking round.

The servant withdrew, and shortly there was a heavier foot on the stairs, and the door opened.

‘When I heard you were in I made bold to come up, Nannie,’ said a familiar voice, and Michael strode into the room.

Agnes sprang up.

‘Oh, Michael; dear, dear Michael. How glad I am to see you!’

She gave him both her hands, and he bent down and kissed her,—not saying what he thought, that she was greatly changed.

‘When did you come? Are you at Laurieston? We never heard that you were expected.’

‘Nor am I. I felt fagged, and came off for a rest. I have just come in from Carlisle with the 3.10 at Caledonian, and bethought myself of the half-way house.’

‘John will be so glad to see you. He will be in in half an hour. We dine at half-past four. My new housemaid is a little forgetful. She only came yesterday, so does not know our

visitors, nor the rules of the house. Yes, you looked fagged, dear Michael. You must have a long, long rest.'

She drew a chair to the hearth for him, though it was not cold; and when he seated himself, she took a chair opposite to him, and looked at him with affectionate sisterly eyes.

'And how are you both? Do you think you deserve to be spoken to? I have had one miserable scrawl from Jock, and nothing from you, since I went back to Coldaire on the 8th of January. Pretty behaviour that to your dear brother!' he said, in mild sarcasm.

Her eyes filled suddenly; and these tears gave Michael a great shock. What could they mean?

'The days seem to fly,' she said, a little constrainedly, as she turned her head away. 'But you hear so constantly from mother, that you can dispense with letters from any other quarter.'

'Well, yes. Perhaps I am too exacting, and I know you lead busy lives. When does the session close?'

'Next Friday.'

'Of course you are going out to Laurieston?'

'For a day or two only.'

'Why? Hasn't John a month?'

'Yes; but we like home best. We are selfish, are we not?' she asked, with a faint smile, which did not in the least deceive Michael. In a moment his unerring perception told him that they had something to hide from the eyes of the Laurieston household.

'I can't say you have improved in the atmosphere of Auld Reekie, Nannie,' he said gravely; 'you look positively ill. I must be at John to take you away somewhere for a complete change.'

'We shall not be leaving home for any length of time, Michael. Has John told you about the book he is writing?'

'No. The last letter I had from him he wrote in the University Library on the 14th of January,—just a scrap answering a question I asked about a book I wanted him to get for me. Is he writing a book?'

'I believe so.'

That answer made Michael positively sore in his mind.

'Don't you know all about it, Nannie? I thought John and you were one in everything.'

'No; we are two in some things. I don't approve of the book, so, of course, he doesn't speak to me about it. But there is his key turning in the hall door, so you can hear all about it,' she said, a little recklessly. 'I must run and deck myself a little in your honour. Won't you go down and surprise him in the hall?'

Michael nodded, but obeyed her somewhat slowly. She left the room first, and, as he rose to follow her, he passed his hand across his brow in an anxious, perplexed way. One thing was clear, that something had come between John and his wife already. Michael shook his head as he went downstairs, but for an instant he forgot his anxiety in the joy of clasping hands with his brother. There was no mistaking the heartiness of John's welcome; his eyes were full as he gripped Michael's two hands, and he threw his arm round his shoulder in the old fashion of their boyhood, and so led him into the study.

'Dear old chap! when did you come? Have you seen Agnes?'

'Yes, I have seen her. She is not looking well, John.'

'I know that.'

Michael saw his brow contract and his strong mouth quiver, familiar signs to him of his brother's deep emotion.

'She will be better by and by, I hope. Why, there is the dinner-bell already. Is Agnes in the drawing-room?'

'No; she went upstairs, I think.'

'I hear her foot,' said John quickly. 'We'd better adjourn to the dining-room. You'll be ready for dinner after your journey.'

John went out before him into the hall, and just then Agnes came down the staircase. He met her on the last step, and, putting his hands on her shoulders, kissed her, and then touched her head with his hand.

'My wife,' Michael heard him say, and the deep tenderness of their meeting only deepened the mystery to Michael's mind. Dinner passed off pleasantly enough, and, though Michael was keenly observant, he detected nothing amiss in the demeanour of husband and wife towards each other. If there was a difference,

it was not of the commonplace kind, which betrays itself in an altered manner. The cause, whatever it was, lay too deep for the chance observer to detect it.

'I know you have volumes to say to each other,' Agnes said, when they rose from the table. 'I shall have my rest, and then you can come to tea with me at six. See that John doesn't let the study fire quite out, Mike.'

'How have you been to-day, Agnes?' John asked, detaining her a moment at the foot of the stairs. Her eyes filled at the searching and deep tenderness of his look.

'Quite well; but I am afraid I am very weak-minded, John. When you look at me like that I do nothing but cry. I never used to be a weeper, as you used to call it.'

He put his arm about her and led her upstairs to her dressing-room, where he laid her down for her afternoon rest, which had of late become a necessity.

'Michael will ask you a great many questions, dear,' she said, looking up at him as he bent over her. 'Tell him everything. It will relieve your mind, and he always understands.'

'Dearest, it is intolerable to me that there should be anything to tell,' he said passionately. 'Why will this thing stand between us? Is it to be the skeleton on our hearth for ever?'

'I fear, until one or other of us yields,' she said sadly. 'How can two walk together except they be agreed?'

He gave her no answer except with his eyes, and they spoke nothing but love. When the door closed upon him, Agnes turned her face to the wall, and a sob came from between her white lips. She was weak and weary, body and spirit alike had sunk under the strain of the bitter cloud which had overshadowed her happiness. John went downstairs but slowly. He knew very well that Michael would not wait a moment, that he would probe to the quick. Nothing could long be hid from those deep blue eyes. In a sense he felt glad of it. The longing for sympathy was sometimes intolerable. Without an outlet, the human heart is like to be consumed by its own passions. He was perfectly conscious of the keenness of his brother's look when he turned to him as he entered the study, but he did not

seek to avoid it. The brothers' eyes met for an instant, then John sat down and covered his face with his hands.

'It will do you good to speak, old fellow,' said Michael at length. 'You know me of yore; I can be as silent as the grave.'

It was some minutes, however, before John uttered a word.

'You see a change in Agnes,' he said, lifting up his head and looking inquiringly at his brother.

'She looks thinner, and a little harassed; a change from the city will do her good.'

'We cannot travel far in the meantime. We shall only go to Laurieston for a few days. I cannot risk her far away from the best medical skill in the meantime. Of course you know what we expect next month?'

'I did not until to-day,' Michael answered. 'I understand your anxiety. Cheer up, old fellow. After it is all over these anxieties will be at an end, and there will be another precious life to live for.'

John shook his head, and his bosom heaved. He rose hurriedly, and took a great stride to and fro the room.

'She is not well in health, Mike, and the mental strain she has undergone is the worst possible for her just now. What maddens me is that I can't relieve it, although I am the cause of it. Of course you know we are not at one on religious questions. I told her fairly before our marriage how I stood, and left her to choose. Her own faith is so unassailable that she could not comprehend how far I had drifted, I suppose. She tortures herself now with thinking I am leading my students on to destruction. What creatures women are, Michael! They are all conscience and heart. I believe my wife has passed through the very agonies of martyrdom during the last few months.'

'She has an intense nature, I know, and her capabilities for loving and suffering are very large.'

'I have proved that. Dear as she is to me, and you cannot know *how* dear, there are times when I could regret the step we took. I cannot see how it is to end. It would be easy for me, in one sense, to assume what I do not believe. I might be able even to satisfy her. But my soul revolts from it. A

man without the courage of his convictions is a poor creature, Mike.'

'You could not so insult her, John. A woman like your wife deserves the highest tribute of respect, and this is absolute truth and candour on your part. If I know her at all, I can say she would rather know your innermost heart, whatever it may be, than be deceived with a false seeming.'

'We were so happy before this barrier grew up; so happy, that I used sometimes to be afraid that it could not last,' said John, with a groan which rent Michael's heart. 'I suppose the conditions of mortal life forbid such perfect happiness can last.'

'John, in the midst of all this conflict, is there no emptiness, no desire for that which alone can satisfy human need? You have proved that even the sweetest and purest of human love is sometimes only an instrument of suffering.'

John shook his head. 'I do not know what I believe, Michael,' he said, with strange and sudden passion. 'Only I know that sometimes I wish I had never been born.'



CHAPTER XX.

'Blending his soul's sublimest need
With tasks of every day.'

MICHAEL was bitterly disappointed, though perhaps scarcely surprised. He had feared this, knowing the absolute conscientiousness of both husband and wife. While sympathising perhaps most deeply with Agnes, yet his disappointment specially concerned her. He understood fully the peculiar nature of her grief, and yet he wished she had borne it in a different spirit. He had great hopes that when her physical trial was over, and she should be fully restored to health and the new sweet interests of life, that her old sunny-heartedness and courage would return to her. In the meantime, he saw that she was crushed under the blow. He was concerned for her, and concerned for John, who was so borne down by his domestic affairs that his public usefulness was likely to be marred. Michael discerned in him but a languid interest in the work upon which, before, his heart had been so passionately set. He believed that if he took the trouble to inquire outside, he would in all probability hear a good deal of dissatisfaction expressed with the junior professor. The trouble was so very real to John, that it absorbed his best energy; he had not yet risen above it nor obtained strength to keep it in the background. It was inexpressibly touching to see the way in which John poured out his heart, and hung upon the words of his younger brother.

They were still talking when the tea-bell summoned them to the drawing-room. They found Agnes there looking very

sweet and fair in her comfortable tea-gown, waiting for them with a brighter look on her face.

'I think you have had a good rest to-day, Nannie,' John said, looking at her with satisfaction.

'Yes, dear, and a good dream,' she answered. 'I fell asleep in a few minutes, soothed by the hum of your voices. Well, have you turned everybody inside out, as Jean Thorburn used to say, and thrashed them well?'

There was a little twinkle in her eye as she handed Michael his tea, which provoked an answering smile in his. She was more like herself than her husband had seen her for weeks.

'Oh, don't tell me you haven't gossiped,' she said gaily. 'John is a fearful gossip. You should hear the tales he brings me home sometimes. The grandmothers' old theory that the male mind is above gossip is exploded, sir, long ago. And now, am I not to share in it? Have you no exciting experiences to bring us from Coldaire?'

'A great many, if you have patience to listen to them,' Michael answered. 'I am seriously thinking of writing a book.'

'Oh, that would be fine; and don't forget to introduce Arthur and that comical Crony. Do you remember his solemn look and his big ears on our wedding day, John?'

'No. I don't think I saw anything that day but your face, my lady,' John made answer gaily.

'Just listen! and I am expected to believe that, Michael!' said Agnes. 'And are you going to give yourself a long holiday just now?'

'A few weeks; but I was fully expecting that you would both be at Laurieston for a fortnight at least.'

'So we may yet,' said Agnes soberly. 'We have not dared to tell mother that our visit will be very short. Have you heard that small Madgie Laurie is walking?'

'Madgie Laurie! Oh, Effie's baby?' laughed Michael. 'No; I don't think mother mentioned that item, although it is one of great importance.'

'So you have found sufficient encouragement in Coldaire to make you desire to continue the work?' said John, after a moment.

‘Yes. I wish both of you would come through and see for yourselves. It has been very uphill, and we have had a great deal to discourage us too; but we have got a fair start, and the people are getting interested. They regarded me suspiciously as a kind of harmless lunatic at first, but that is all past.’

‘And have you no opposition from the regular clergy of the place?’ asked Agnes.

‘There is no regular clergy except the vicar, who lives at Alnmouth. He holds me in such measureless contempt that he never takes any notice of me, though I have met him twice at dinner and once on a public platform. There is a curate; poor fellow, I’m sorry for him.’

‘Does he live in Coldaire?’

‘Yes; and he was well disposed towards me, and we were working beautifully together, when the vicar swooped down upon him, and forbade him to have anything to do with me. Of course he had to obey; but it is rather hard on him, for his heart is in the work.’

‘Tell us about it, Michael. Isn’t it interesting, John?’ asked Agnes quickly.

‘Uncommonly; but I must go. I have a meeting at seven, but I’ll only be an hour away. You won’t miss me when you have Michael to talk to you.’

So saying, John hurried away.

‘He leads a busy life,’ said Agnes, as the door closed. ‘I often wonder that he keeps his splendid health. He never has an ache, and he gets through so much. I think he does more than he need, he is so conscientious and obliging.’

‘He was always that, even in our school days. When home work was optional, John always did it. Dear fellow, he’ll make his mark yet. Don’t look grave, Nannie. I do think you vex yourself needlessly. All will come right.’

‘But you don’t know, Michael. If you did!’

‘What do I not know? I knew everything before you were married. John did not hide his soul from me. He has told me a great deal to-night.’

‘And yet you say I vex myself needlessly, Michael,—you!’ exclaimed Agnes, with wide-open eyes. ‘Do you think it is

nothing that he is helping younger men than himself along the path of unbelief ?'

'I think you exaggerate. Are you positive that John is an unbeliever ? I think myself, that at the bottom he is a servant of God. I have never been hopeless about him. I believe I shall live to see him make a grand atonement for his brief swerving from his post.'

The wife's face flushed. She looked at Michael's face with eyes which sought to read his very soul.

'Michael, if I could believe that, God knows what it would be to me,' she said, in a painful whisper. 'If you knew what I have suffered.'

'I know ; it is written on your face,' said Michael, with that infinite tenderness which made him at times almost womanly. 'Agnes, don't you think your own faith has lacked something ? In so utterly giving way to despondency, have you given testimony in favour of Him with whom all things are possible ?'

'I never thought of that'—

She spoke these words very slowly, and he saw that they had awakened a wonder of thought in her mind ; then suddenly bending forward in her chair, she looked at him with a wistfulness which he never forgot.

'Tell me what to do,' she said, as simply as a child.

Michael was deeply moved.

'Who am I that I should advise you, Agnes ?' he said at length. 'But since you ask me, I will speak. My only qualification is the deep love I bear you both. Perhaps, too, because I stand in a sense on the outside, I can form a better judgment. I do not think, my sister, that this grievous depression of soul is what God requires of you just now.'

'It has laid hold of me. Oh, Michael, I have been so sinful. I have even prayed for death ; and the awful thing was that I could not speak of it to John. If you knew how I have been torn between two desires,—the desire to live for him, and the desire to be at rest.'

'God requires you in the meantime, Agnes, to live for him, and to show him in your own life such a bright example of Christ's service that John will be constrained to follow it,' said

Michael, with kindling eye. 'Do you not see how your unhappiness is sapping his interest in life? Forgive me if I speak so plainly. It is what you wish, I know, and yet I feel ashamed that I should dare so to speak to *you*.'

'Who could speak so well, dear Michael, as you, who have given up so much for the Lord? He sent you to speak to me to-night, just when I needed you most.'

He saw that she had taken courage, that a new idea of duty had arisen in her soul. The thought that he had helped her in an hour of need was one of peculiar sweetness to him.

'I have not been just to John, and he is so good, Michael. He has often put me to shame,' she said, swift and relentless in her own self-condemnation. 'If he, professing nothing, walks so unselfishly, what poor honour I, who profess much, have been doing to the Master! My eyes have been opened to-night, dear Michael. God has sent you to me.'

She began to pace to and fro, with her hands clasped before her. Her cheeks were softly flushed, her eyes shining with a steadfast light. Once more hope and high expectation for these two filled Michael's heart. For them he saw the realization of a dream which one day might have been fulfilled in his own life. Although there was no apparent change for the worse in his health, Michael still believed that he would not be long-lived. Sometimes we have such intuitions, and they are seldom without foundation. Michael lived from day to day, setting his house in order every hour, so that when the Son of Man came He should find him watching. For such, death has no sting. There was nothing morbid or gloomy about him; his interest in the daily concerns of life, in the happiness and welfare or sorrow of others, was keen and lively; his laugh had lost none of its frequency or mirth; his smile was ready; his gay, bantering way unchanged. Long after, when these things became a memory to those who loved him, they marvelled over them; though, while he was with them, they paid no heed.

'I am very selfish, Michael, talking so much of myself and my own troubles,' Agnes said presently; and, returning to her own chair, she looked at him with a calm, smiling face, which told that peace had returned to her soul. 'Only one thing

more, and then we will talk of you. You heard me say to John that I had a good dream when I was lying down upstairs. I am not fanciful about dreams ; but may I tell you this one ?

‘I should like to hear it,’ he answered at once.

‘I felt very sad when John left me ; and my heart was so heavy, that I was surprised when sleep came to me so easily and sweetly. I heard you speaking downstairs ; and after a little the hum of your voices seemed to be lost in a great volume of sound which came from a great throng of people gathered on a mountain-side. It was a very steep hill, and the only path to its summit was very rough and stony. It was most difficult to get a footing on it. The people were pressing and thronging upwards ; and yet there was nothing to be seen but a thick veil of mist, which hid the summit, and even rolled down the hill and obscured the light. I thought I had come very late to begin the ascent, and that, as I looked up and saw the long, toilsome road, my courage failed me,—especially as I saw sorrow, and even despair, on so many of the faces round me. I had nothing to help me up, and seemed to slip back at every step. At last it grew quite dark, and the mist rolled down so closely that it even hid the faces of those nearest to me. I felt very forlorn, and was about to give up, when suddenly the mist rolled back,—just like a curtain, Michael, it seemed so near and real,—and I saw, amidst a soft, shining light, a face looking out. It was the face of my own mother, Michael, and she beckoned to me. And just then I looked round, and John was with me, and I held fast by his arm, and began to climb again. And then I awoke.’

‘And so it will be in the future, please God,’ said Michael, with a bright smile. ‘If you lose heart after that direct message, Agnes, I shall lose heart for you.’

Then they began to talk of other things,—of Michael’s work in Coldaire, of the prospects of Will and Effie, and of the sweetheart Wat had found. And so in the midst of the dear home gossip the evening sped ; and when John returned at nine o’clock, he heard the echo of their laughter as he opened the hall door.

There had been no such happy evening in that house since Christmas-day ; and, when they parted for the night, it was with

the feeling that the days of youth had not gone from them for ever.

'Mike looks well, doesn't he, Nannie?' John said, when they were alone.

'Very well. Perhaps after all he may live to be an old man, and even to fill a great position.'

'It is possible. There are few positions he would not grace. He has a ripeness and soundness of judgment such as I shall never attain, though I live to be a hundred.'

'Perhaps I think otherwise,' laughed Agnes. 'I love Michael dearly; but at the same time, in my eyes, there is no comparison between you.'

It was good to see the light which leaped into his eyes at these words.

'Then, after all, you don't quite regret having thrown yourself away, wife?' he said half lightly, and yet with a touch of wistfulness which betrayed that the thought had troubled him. For answer she laid her slender hands on his tall shoulders, and looked straight into his eyes.

'What do you think?' she asked, in a curious, quiet voice.

'There have been moments, dearest, when I have been tortured with the thought that, instead of the happiness I promised you, I have only given you a cross,' he said passionately.

'It is because I have failed so miserably in wifely duty, John,' she said. 'I will try, I will indeed, to be a better wife to you,—to show my gratitude for your love. I did not think that there could be such love as yours in this world.'

Her assurances were as the wine of life to him. In his misery he had been merciless with himself, depreciating every effort, every motive of his own, even the most unselfish. Agnes read it all in his face, and hid her own in shame, for indeed, when he had asked for bread she had given him a stone. In that instant Agnes Maitland renewed her marriage vow, and prayed for strength to show in her daily life,—above all, in her relations with her husband,—whose she was and whom she served. They sat down together by the dying fire, and for the first time for many months opened their hearts to each other. The forbidden subject, which had been as bitter as gall to them,

was freely spoken of ; and before the nobility and absolute truthfulness of her husband's soul, Agnes felt herself shrink into nothingness.

While they were talking of these sacred things, she with her face lying on his breast, Michael slept upstairs the fresh and dreamless sleep of a guileless heart. How little either of them dreamed that his work was done, and that his last obedience to the Master's behest, was to hold the cup of cold water to the lips of his brother's wife !



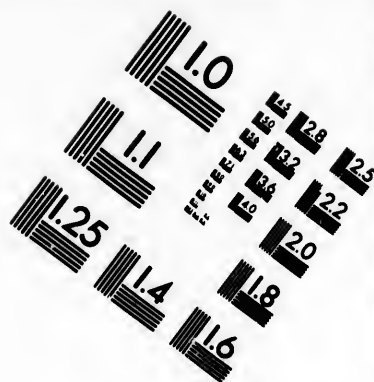
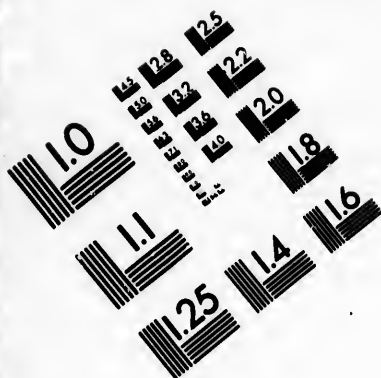
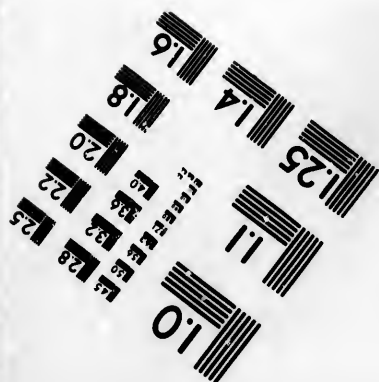
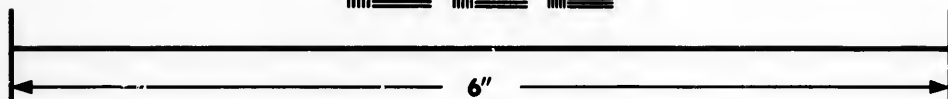
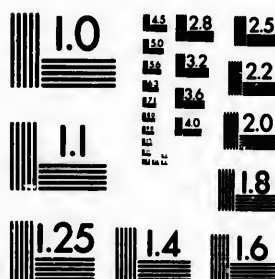


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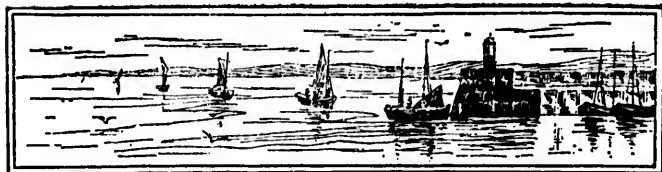


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CHAPTER XXI

'Home of our childhood! how affection clings
And hovers round thee with her seraph wings!'

'**H**AVE an idea that I should like to walk out to Laurieston to-day,' Michael said at breakfast next morning.

'You could not have a better day for it, if you are able,' said John. 'I have had my turn down to the Botanic and back already. Do you know, I have a warm heart to the Botanic; it is full of Phil, somehow. Do you remember how we used to rush down to be in time for his lecture at eight o'clock in the summer mornings? Good old days, eh, Mike?'

'Fine old days,' Michael answered, with a sparkle in his eye. 'Student life is very jolly. Don't you mind, Nannie, how we used to come home on Friday nights, and the pancakes you used to make surreptitiously for Jock? Does he get pancakes on Friday nights yet?'

'Not he. There are no impromptu feeds now,' laughed Agnes. 'Everything is done decently and in order. Sometimes I think it is a little monotonous. Clockwork regularity is very comfortable in a way, but there is no novelty about it. Now at Laurieston one never knew what was to happen, and there were the most delightful meals at all sorts of unheard-of hours.'

'Ah, but Laurieston is the country, my dear, and you are bound now to conform to the usages of polite society,' said Michael, with gentle banter. 'Looking forward, I see you and Jock full-fledged members of our grave, decorous, professional

aristocracy; dispensing a perfectly immaculate but slightly heavy hospitality; growing more and more conservative year by year; and fully convinced that there never was, and never will be, a more glorious and important institution than the hoary University of Edinburgh.'

'You radical, to go back so completely on your Alma Maret,' put in John, laughing too at the picture Michael drew.

'At bottom, perhaps, I love the old institution as well as you, though I believe she'll need to make a great stride one of these days, or there'll be an earthquake which will shake her foundations. I say, isn't this Friday? Is there anything to hinder you walking with me? I can wait an hour or two; the days are long now.'

'Do go, dear,' said Agnes, meeting her husband's eye. 'It will do you all the good in the world. He misses his walks, Michael, and the old wife, never a great pedestrian, has not improved.'

'Well, I think I will. I can be ready at twelve, Michael. I'll just walk out, shake hands with them all, and catch the three o'clock train at Inveresk, which will bring me home in time for dinner. I haven't been that old road since one day you and Phil and I tramped out two years ago.'

It was high noon when they turned their faces southwards from the city. As they passed by the University gate, nothing would satisfy Michael but that he should enter in and take a walk round the quadrangle. John was quite struck at the affectionate, even tender interest with which his brother viewed the familiar precincts; he seemed to find a peculiar delight in recalling all the memories with which the grey old walls were fraught. It was an exquisite spring day, just such another as that memorable one on which they had walked the same way, and discussed a matter of vital interest to both. There was nothing of the kind broached that afternoon. Their talk was all of home and home affairs, only interrupted at times when Michael would stand still before some wayside blossom, or point out to John a nest hidden snugly in the thicket of the high hawthorn hedge. He was a boy still in his enjoyment of these simple things. John marvelled at

him that day, feeling glad to see him so bright and interested and well.

'I say, do you ever hear from Phil?' he asked, as they came near the Old Town.

'Never. We've lost touch of each other somehow,' John answered. 'Does not Mrs. Gilbert hear sometimes from him?'

'Occasionally. He is a queer beggar, Phil,' said Michael musingly. 'I believe I can prognosticate his future. He'll live on in that old Leipsic till he becomes fossilized into a regular German *savant*, who knows nothing and cares for nothing outside the musty covers of his books. I wish he'd waken up;—that is no life for a young man of his capabilities and energies.'

'He says he's absorbing in the meantime,' John replied, with a laugh. 'He has an insatiable thirst for knowledge.'

'The mistake is to go on selfishly absorbing without giving anything out. After a time the desire to impart what he knows will depart, and then the fossilizing process will be complete. I'm disappointed in him.'

'Well, I suppose he gives out to a certain extent as a master of pupils,' said John; but Michael shook his head.

'That is merely mechanical; I could gather that from what he said last summer.'

'If he had married Effie, he would have been a different man,' said John quietly. 'He would have had something substantial to live and work upon, then.'

'Hear the wise old Benedict,' laughed Michael. 'Well, perhaps you are right. A man is the better for an earthly incentive of some kind. So here is the grey old burgh again. Isn't it queer, Jock, that however old we grow, and whatever ties we may make elsewhere, the bairn's hame is aye the dearest, at least, as long as the mother is in it. What a blessed mother we have had,—and have still, thank God! It is something to have lived, if only for that.'

John did not answer. Michael's words required none. On that point, at least, the brothers were entirely agreed.

Verily, Margaret Maitland's bairns had arisen to call her blessed, and so motherhood gave her its incomparable recompense.

It was some minutes before Michael spoke again, and then his words surprised John, and made the colour rise in his cheek :

'If the child is a son, Jock, will you call him Michael?'

'I don't know. It will be Nannie's prerogative to name the child.'

'I hardly think she will call him after her own father; but she may. I should like him to be called Michael, and I should like to think, too, that he would be a minister of Christ some day. Will you tell her that, John?'

'What do you mean, speaking like that, Mike?' John asked, almost roughly, for the words chilled him to the heart. They were passing through the churchyard just then, and, without making answer at the moment, Michael left his brother's side and crossed the green sward to the family burying ground of the Maitlands.

'There has been no record added to this stone for a great many years, John. Six-and-twenty years since our elder brother died,' Michael said quietly, when he returned. John made no answer, nor was any further word spoken between them until they broke the silence when their mother met them at the door.

'My sons, to see you both together o' the door-stane,' she said, with a visible trembling; 'it is as if the years rolled back, and the lads had come again. Come in, come in!'

'He would walk, the thrawn carle, mother,' said John gaily. 'So I came to bring him safe home, and to get a look at you. I have to be home to dinner at half-past four.'

'Oh, that's awhile. Katie shall set on the kettle, and bring a cup of tea for Mr. John; and send somebody for the laird. And how is my Agnes this day?'

'My Agnes is very well,' said John, with his pleasant smile. 'See how they take my wife from me, Mike. We are coming next Friday, mother, so you will have all the bairns to make din by the fireside again.'

'Thank the Lord,' Margaret Maitland said, under her breath. Only God knows what it is for the mother to be left by a childless hearth, after the little ones for whom she has spent her strength, have gone forth to fill their own places in the world. Laurieston, though not quite childless, was nearly so, Wat's marriage being near at hand. It was with unspeakable satisfaction that her eyes dwelt on the face of her second son. There was nothing there to alarm, or to give the motherly heart a single pang. Michael had never looked better, or liker long life. When she heard he had come for a long holiday, her spirits rose, and she bustled about as happy and as eager as a girl. The years had dealt gently, very gently, with sweet Margaret Maitland. She scarce looked the mother of these tall sons, especially of six-foot John, with his grave, bearded face, who seemed almost like her younger brother. It was good to see the deep satisfaction on the face of Maitland of Laurieston, when he came into the room and saw his two sons. He had a warm fatherly greeting for both, though doubtless it was upon Michael's face that his eyes dwelt with most tender anxiety.

'Hae ye run awa'?' he asked comically.

'Yes, deserted, positively deserted,' cried Michael honestly. 'Mother, I will be honest, even at the risk of flattering you too much. I was so homesick that I couldn't live. I tried battling with it for a few days, but it was no good. I was cowardly enough to be grateful to Mrs. Gilbert when she brought down a packed portmanteau on Tuesday morning, and told me the train left at half-past twelve.'

'Hoo's Agnes?' asked Laurieston, turning to John. 'Could she no' come the day?'

'We've walked,' answered John. 'We are coming next week, when the session ends.'

'Walked! and is Michael no' clean done?'

'No; I'm as lively as a cricket, father. I begin to be ashamed of myself for trying to salve my conscience with the belief that I needed a change. I never remember feeling so much like a baby before. I couldn't crush down the desire to rush home.'

'There was nae reason what way ye should crush it down, laddie,' said his father; 'ye hae earned a holiday. An' are the pit folk a' weel?'

'Oh no; a lot of them are not well. Our latest endeavour for the public good is the building of a cottage hospital in Coldaire. Do you know Carlisle is the nearest, and sometimes, especially in the case of accidents, the time which elapses between the injury and the surgical treatment has caused death. We've got nearly all the funds raised, and a plan drawn out. The Squire gave us the site, and promised us all the timber. We'll have it ready before winter. After my holiday, I'll push the thing on as hardly as it can be pushed. Hullon, there's Effie!'

It was Effie, looking very bonnie, and as girlish as ever, though she was leading her small daughter by the hand. Michael pounced on the child at once, and tossed her to the ceiling till she screamed with delight. Effie had her cares, caused by a somewhat indifferent and grumbling husband, who gave her no little anxiety; but she was learning to bear them nobly, and was utterly loyal to him, not complaining even to her mother. The reality of life was making a woman out of Effie, and the deep responsibility she felt regarding the child, whose upbringing would depend almost entirely upon herself, had made her both thoughtful and conscientious. Although her mother was not without her anxiety concerning her, she could not altogether regret the circumstances which were doing so much to mould the thoughtless girl into a thoughtful and unselfish woman.

John enjoyed that little peep at the old home. It refreshed him like the breath of the wind from the sea. When he went away, Michael walked with him to the avenue gate, and there detained him, heedless that the signal had gone down for the train.

'We had a fine walk to-day, old fellow, and there is no barrier between us,' Michael said; and the strangeness of his words did not strike John at the time. 'There is always such peace where mother is. No strife can exist in her presence. Give my love to Nannie, and tell her'—

'What?' asked John quickly. 'Don't you see the signal down? You can give her all the messages yourself next Friday.'

'Tell her the dream is coming true. God bless you, brother. You have been the best of brothers to me.'

Even in his haste John paused to look with startled questioning into Michael's face. But it was sunny and serene, and he gave a little laugh as he gave Michael's hand the last grip.

'You do say out-of-the-way things, Mike; one never knows where to have you. Good-bye, old chap. We'll thrash everything out next Friday. There she comes: it's neck or nothing for me.'

So saying, John gave a nod and ran off, his long legs easily keeping pace with the train, already slowing up to the station. Michael watched him dash over the field, vault the hedge, and then lost sight of him as he ran down the railway embankment. Then slowly he retraced his steps to the house. Effie's little girl came toddling to meet him, but the young mother was not far away.

'I declare, Effie, I can't believe this atom belongs to you,' said Michael; 'it seems no time since you were like her.'

'Are you so much older than me that you feel quite fatherly?' asked Effie, with a smile.

'Sometimes I feel very old. And how runs life at Nunraw? Is Will well?'

'Will is very well. He has not been saying very much lately about going to America. I hope he will be put past it,' said Effie gravely.

'Father says the place is doing well enough, and that he will soon be a free man in it.'

'Yes, it is right enough for that. But I think, Michael,—in fact, I am sure,—that Will has to send money to his father,' said Effie shamefacedly. 'I always know when a letter comes from London. He is so moody and miserable after it. I believe that is at the bottom of it. He thinks if he were away across the sea that claims would not be made on him.'

'But the father can't be in want, Effie. He draws the rent of Hallcross.'

'It is only a hundred pounds, and I suppose that is nothing

to a man like Mr. Laurie,' said Effie, a little despondently. 'I am so sorry for Will. He tries to do right, but it is not so easy for him as for you or John. His nature is so different. Sometimes I get very miserable, Michael, and don't know what to do.'

'Is little Madgie not a comfort to him?'

'Oh yes!' the mother's face brightened. 'He is very fond of her, and she likes him, I believe, better than me. I think if Will felt that he owed nothing to father, and could call the place his own, he would be different. But it is so difficult to save when there is that drain on us.'

'I question, Effie, if it is right that you should allow that drain to exist. Mr. Laurie is an able-bodied man, and I don't see that his children have any right to keep him in idle luxury.'

'I think that too, but I daren't say anything to Will, he is so touchy on that point. I know he feels bad about it. Will you speak to him, Michael? Somehow you can deal with the most delicate matters, and nobody takes offence.'

'I'll try, Effie,' said Michael cheerily; 'and don't you bother yourself too much. After all, that is only a minor trial, and it will pass away.'



CHAPTER XXII.

‘Death answers many a prayer;
Bright day, shine on! be glad! days brighter far
Are stretched before mine eyes than those of mortals are.’

THE weeks passed very rapidly, and on Thursday, when they parted for the night, it was with the happy thought that the morrow would bring John and Agnes to Laurieston, and then the family circle would be complete. Michael complained of being a little tired, and went early to bed. Before Mrs. Maitland went to her own room, she looked in to him as usual. When they were boys she had always taken a look at them after they had gone to bed, and since Michael returned this time they had had many a chat in the familiar room. He was sound asleep when she went in that night, though the lamp was burning brightly on the table, and the open Bible beside it. She bent over the bed, kissed him lightly on the brow, and then went to put out the lamp. As she did so, her eyes fell on the psalm Michael had been reading, the second verse of which was deeply underlined: ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul; and forget not all His benefits.’ ‘Amen,’ the mother said to herself, as she slipped out of the room. She could re-echo that song of praise. Just then life seemed a very full and blessed heritage to Margaret Maitland.

‘I don’t know when I felt so contented, father,’ she said, when she entered her own room. ‘We are blessed in the bairns, are we not? The Lord has led them so wonderfully, and removed all our anxieties. I think we may live to see Michael even a middle-aged man, eh, father?’

‘It looks like it, Maggie. The lad never seemed in better

health, and his spirits are wonderful. He's as wild as a loon.'

'He has surprised me, I confess, this time. He will not be solemn about anything. I wonder what has made him so happy.'

'He feels himself strong an' weel, I dinna doot, and his work is prosperin' in his hand, and that is heartenin' to a man,' said Laurieston. 'We are blessed in the bairns, Maggie, an' the troubles that were sair upon us have turned into blessings.'

"Bless the Lord, O my soul; and forget not all His benefits," she repeated softly, and with that thought in her heart fell into a deep, refreshing sleep.

They gathered as usual in the breakfast-room about seven o'clock, and, though Michael did not appear, there was no comment made: he often rested in the morning, and Katie Steele would make breakfast for him at any hour, though she sometimes made a disturbance if other members of the family kept the meals 'hingin' on,' as she expressed it. Mrs. Maitland busied herself with some trifling duties after the men-folk had gone out to the field, where the sowers were busy; but when it rang nine o'clock she slipped upstairs to Michael's room.

'Laddie, ye will sleep yourself' stupid,' she cried gaily. 'Who was to sow a breadth of the oat-field the day, eh? The sun is putting you to fair shame, Michael, this bonnie morning!'

She opened the door and went into the room. The blind was up, and the sun shone in full and brilliantly across the bed and on Michael's face. She wondered that he could bear that dazzling light.

'Ye needna pretend ye are sound, my man, as you used to do whiles on the school mornings,' she said, in gentle banter; and, stretching out her hand, she put it over his eyes.

Then a strange and terrible cry rang through the old house of Laurieston, a cry which made Katie Steele's faithful heart almost stand still. In a moment she came flying upstairs, and straight to Michael's room. And there was the mother kneeling by the bed, the clothes flung back, and her trembling hands laid upon her boy's heart.

'Katie, Katie, get the master, quick! I fear this is death.'

After that one awful cry wrung from her in her agony, the mother recovered her self-control, and remembered what should be done before the doctor came, if life indeed still lingered in that seemingly lifeless form. It was all in vain. Life was ended here for Michael Maitland. Death had stolen in un-awares on this sunny morning, and with gentlest fingers beckoned him away. It was such a death as we might ask for our dearest, -- simply a closing of the eyes on earth, and an awakening in heaven. 'So He giveth His beloved sleep.'

When Maitland of Laurieston entered the house, they passed out one by one from the room, and left him with his dead. Ay, even the mother herself stole away. She felt like a woman in a dream. There was no thought of tears, or of rebellious and noisy grief in her heart. She felt dumb, passionless, wondering that the boy she had kissed a few hours before, and for whom she had predicted a length of useful days, should be already beyond her touch, beyond her ken; but not, thank God, so far away that her faith could not follow him. She sat down in the pleasant family room, folded her hands, and watched the slanting rays of the sunshine broaden on the walls and floor; and so sat in utter silence until she heard a movement upstairs. Then she thought of her desolate husband, and stole away up again to the chamber where Michael slept. In the arm-chair, close by the bed, his father sat motionless, with his arms folded across his breast. Sorrow was doing its silent work with the strong heart of Maitland of Laurieston. Again he wrestled with the rebelliousness of a bitter questioning; again the darker passions of the man's soul sought to hold him in thrall. When his wife entered, he rose to his feet in evident relief.

'It is death, Maggie. He is away. We needna bide here. I'll go out of doors, I think. There is mair room, and the sun is kindly.'

He spoke with difficulty, and the heart of his wife bled for him.

'Not yet, father. Let us pray together. Let us thank the Lord for his safe and beautiful home-going,' she said, with a

touch of her kindly hand on his arm. But he only shook his head.

'It's ower sudden. There was nae preparation.'

'What for? Did Michael need any preparation? He often spoke of his two homes. Need we grudge him to the other home; when we have had him five-and-twenty years—five-and-twenty years,' she repeated, with an indescribable pathos of tenderness. 'I am his mother. I suffered for him, Michael, and I can praise the Lord. If we had had to witness weeks and months of weariness and pain, that would have been harder. Didn't we give him up when we let him away last year? We hardly dared hope then for anything so comforting as this; and I—I know he dreaded physical suffering.'

Michael Maitland's face twitched. It was amazing that strength was given to the bereft mother to administer these crumbs of comfort to the heart which could feel nothing but the blackness of a bitter loss. She folded her hands upon his arm, led him to the bed where Michael slept, and, kneeling by him, prayed aloud before her husband for the first time. There are times when we stand awed before the grandeur of womanhood, times when a woman's hand seems to draw aside the portals of the Unseen. Such a moment was that to Maitland of Laurieston. He knelt by her side meekly, feeling that she was guiding him, and that God's hand was in that guiding. For the second time Michael Maitland passed through a fierce baptism of pain, and for the second time laid his precious things on the altar, like Abraham of old, obeying the Lord's call.

So passed that strange, sad morning for the house of Laurieston; and before noon another unlooked-for summons came. Michael Maitland was making ready to go to town to acquaint John with what had happened, and to see about other things, when a telegram was handed to his wife.

'It's from John, father. Agnes is laid up,' she said quickly.

'What is to be done?'

'Ye canna weel gang, mother.'

'I must go, dear, lest we may have to let two of the bairns go. A shock might be certain death to Agnes to-day. I promised to be with her, and she will not understand my absence.'

'An' will ye bide?' he asked; and at the question, the first tears she had shed that day welled up hot and bright in her eyes. It was the manner of the question, the wistful, pathetic look which accompanied it, which overcame her.

'I will not leave you longer than I can help. I think we had better drive in, and I can see how Nannie is. Unless it is very serious, I will not stay. I can tell her that Michael needs me,' she added, with a faint, sad smile.

So the reply to John's telegram was the stopping of the Laurieston dog-cart at the house in Great King Street. When John heard it, he came hurrying downstairs from the drawing-room, where he was passing as best he might the hours of the fiercest anxiety he had ever experienced in his life. It was an inexpressible relief to him when he saw his mother's face.

'How is she?' was her first question.

'Very ill, mother; I can't bear it much longer,' he said hoarsely.

'Hush! it will be soon over,' she said, with a quiet cheerfulness. 'Is the doctor upstairs?'

'Yes; he has been here since morning.'

'I will go up presently. Ask one of the maids to bring me a cup of tea,' said his mother, putting up her veil. 'John, this is a day of searching for our house. The Lord has taken Michael away.'

'Taken Michael away,' repeated John, pausing with his hand on the bell-rope, and looking with open eyes at his mother. 'What do you mean?'

'He is dead,' she answered, in a whisper; and, sitting down, covered her eyes with her hand.

'Dead! Michael dead! Why, I saw him in the market with Wat on Wednesday, and of the two he looked the healthier.'

'He is away, John,' his mother answered. 'When I went up this morning, thinking him long in rising, I found that his sleep was sounder than I knew of. It must have happened early in the morning. I heard him moving just at sunrise. He must have thrown up the blind then. It was a beautiful and painless end, I do not doubt. But—but'—

She stopped quickly, for one deep, bursting sob forced itself between John's lips, and she saw him shaking as if with a sudden ague. For a time there was nothing said.

'And you came to me, mother, in the midst of it?' John said at last. 'A mother's love is past comprehension.'

'I can do nothing for our dear Michael. He has more than even my love could give him. But I can do something here, and I knew Agnes would need me,' she said, in a low voice. 'There is no cause for unusual anxiety upstairs, is there?'

'I don't think so. But it is so frightfully prolonged,' he said passionately. 'It is more than I can bear.'

'I think you should go out. Father got out of the gig at the Register. You can guess where he has gone. I see George Paton is waiting at the door, John. Just put on your hat and drive down with him to the stables, and find your father. You can help him with the—the arrangements, as we don't need you here.'

She even smiled slightly upon him, as she put off her bonnet and lifted the teacup to her lips.

'I never knew until to-day what a woman's strength is, mother. You put me to shame.'

He obeyed her implicitly. In a sense he was glad to be told what to do. In a few moments he was beside George on the front seat of the dog-cart, and handling the reins himself. There was relief in the very idea of rapid action. For the first time in his life he felt glad to leave his own house.

The torture of suspense he had endured, knowing that his wife suffered, and uncertain as to the issue, was a fearful trial to him.

The very thought of his mother's presence in the house brought strength and comfort. But, as he drove rapidly through the busy streets, he marvelled yet more and more at her perfect control, at her beautiful setting aside of self. Again and again he blessed her in his heart, with a reverent and tender blessing.

Margaret Maitland did not hurry upstairs. She wanted to be perfectly calm, to carry with her a demeanour which would cause no flutter of sorrow or anxiety, but rather give a sense of rest and strength. She took off her bonnet, put on her dainty

lace cap, her soft house-shoes, and then slipped quietly up. She met the nurse on the stairs, a pleasant, refined woman, whom she had known for some time. 'How is Mrs. Maitland?'

'Wearying for you, ma'am. She heard the carriage come. The doctor thinks her all right.'

Margaret Maitland nodded and smiled, passed on and entered the room, where she was a pillar of strength to Agnes in her hour of need.

At sunset that day, another Michael Maitland came to fill the place of him who had gone away.



CHAPTER XXIII.

'Sour was the fruit upon that withered tree.'

WILLIAM LAURIE, Senior, led a life of indolent ease in London. He was not a rich man, but the little income from his daughter's estate was assured, and an occasional cheque from his son—which the threat of a personal visit never failed to bring—kept him from suffering anxiety concerning at least the necessities of life. He still indulged in a little play, though cautiously, and patronised the turf moderately. Long experience had rendered him shrewd and far-seeing, so that he seldom made a bad venture. He was not now able to afford the luxury of West-End rooms, but contented himself with a modest suite in that quiet and unostentatious thoroughfare, Norfolk Street. He still enjoyed a little society of a kind, although he had fallen a little from his former estate, and no longer counted any member of the British aristocracy among his friends. Gilbert Culross had spoken out so plainly in London concerning his sometime adviser, that that worthy had felt himself obliged to threaten his former *protégé* with an action for defamation of character. This threat silenced Sir Gilbert. Nevertheless, William Laurie found himself shunned in certain quarters, and so was obliged to hunt for pastures new. He had a new scheme in hand, which, if successful, would place him in a position of affluence for life. But it was a scheme which would require the utmost delicacy and caution to bring it to a successful issue. It also required money, and one cold March morning he felt himself constrained to indulge in some strong language when the

postman came without an expected letter from the north. Sitting there in the clear, searching morning light, a change was visible on the face of William Laurie. His toilet was not yet carefully made, and in his dressing-gown his figure had a slouching stoop, his face was grey and even haggard, his eyes dim and clouded, and his grizzled whiskers and somewhat unkempt hair gave him rather a vagabond look.

It was only eight o'clock,—early for Mr. Laurie to appear downstairs; but he was in a fever of expectation about the letter which did not come. In lieu of the important missive, however, a visitor arrived in Norfolk Street before Mr. Laurie had quite finished his morning meal. And that visitor, greatly to our worthy's amazement, was his own son. He was surprised, but he was careful not to show it. He rose to greet him as if he had merely dropped in from the next street.

'Ah, good morning, Will. Hope I see you well? Wife and family well? Two in the family,—am I correct? Sweet chernubs, no doubt; but I would warn you against a large offspring. It is highly improvident unless you are a millionaire. Have a cup of coffee?'

'I'll take a substantial breakfast, if you have no objection,' answered Will bluntly; 'I've been travelling all night.'

'Another thing I would warn you against,' said William Laurie, as he rang the bell. 'Always make a point of sleeping in a Christian bed, and make long journeys in the daytime. It is an erroneous idea that to spend the night in a railway train without sleep is a saving of time; and, as we are on that subject, may I ask *why* you travelled all night? A country gentleman,' he added, with a slightly ironical emphasis, 'cannot be greatly pressed for time?'

'Perhaps you have forgotten that it is customary to put in the seed in spring,' said Will, almost rudely, for his father's coolness irritated him. 'If it were possible I should return this morning, but there is too little time, so I must wait till the night mail.'

'Well?' said Mr. Laurie inquiringly; but just then the maid entered to receive her orders. When she had left the room again, Will looked straight at his father, and spoke out candidly:

'I've come to tell you that I can't send you any more money.'

I knew it would be no good to write it, and that it would be worth the trouble and expense of the journey if I could convince you that you needn't ask me for any more.'

'A dutiful speech, truly, my son. Perhaps one day you will find by sad experience how much sharper than a serpent's tooth it is, etc.'

'As to being a thankless child,' put in Will quickly, 'I don't know that you ever gave us any reason to be thankful to you. You spoke about it being improvident a minute ago to have a large family. I don't know what *we* were born for, or what good you ever did for us. We have been nothing but paupers all our days.'

William Laurie looked keenly at his son, and perceived that beneath his evident anger there dwelt also a firm determination. Although he had made no remark concerning it, he had been struck at once by the change in Will's outward appearance. The boyish look was gone, the full roundness of youth had given place to the harder lines of manhood in his face, and there was an air of decision and responsibility in his whole demeanour which came with a shock of unpleasant surprise to the father. He felt that with Will his day was over.

'You are, to say the least of it, a trifle aggressive,' he said, with perfect mildness. 'I do not think that I have been exorbitant in my demands. You are well aware what a meagre pittance I can count upon as a fixed income. If I asked a little aid from my own son, who is in affluent circumstances, it is hard to be insulted and to have my poverty cast in my teeth, especially as I am in infirm health, and growing old.'

'You are only fifty-eight, father; and you know you are as strong as I am,' said the plain-spoken Will. 'What I want to know is, why you don't seek for a light job of some kind which would bring you in something every week?'

A sickly smile came on William Laurie's face, but he refrained from making any comment on this awful suggestion.

'And as to my circumstances,' continued Will, with the utmost dryness, 'I have not at this blessed moment a penny I can call my own. Although you know it all just as well as I can tell you, I had better tell it to you again. My wife's father put me

in the farm, and the stock and plenishing cost two thousand pounds. That is four years ago. I have paid him back fourteen hundred pounds of that money, so that I am still six hundred in his debt. I ask you how you suppose a man so hampered has money to give away. I tell you what I have sent to you already was simply stolen from Maitland, and when your letter came yesterday I felt like throwing myself in the sea.

William Laurie sat down during this passionate speech, and, putting his finger-tips together, he looked over them at his son's indignant face with the most unutterable coolness.

'I don't know where you and your sister have got all your puritanical notions. I'm not greatly surprised at her, because she was always a prude like her mother; but I confess I expected you to turn out better. And so you actually intend to pay back every farthing of that two thousand? And pray what dowry did you get with your wife?'

Will's face flushed.

'No dowry,—except the house furnishings. I wanted none. If I live I shall pay back that money to the uttermost farthing. I know very well that they were disappointed in her marriage. I hope to show them yet that there may be something good, even in a Laurie.

'So, so. And I am to be sacrificed on the altar of your pride?'

'There is no sacrifice,' retorted Will hotly, and then paused for a moment, partly ashamed of himself. He had come with so different an intention, fortified by his wife's good wishes; but it was indeed difficult to keep his temper under the half-contemptuous tone of his father's voice. There was a slight silence, and then Will spoke again, more quietly, having subdued his anger, and feeling strengthened by the memory of Effie's last words, which had bidden him be gentle and kind.

'I have said my say a little roughly, perhaps, father,' he said honestly; 'I will speak for Effie now. She bade me say that if you would leave London and make your home at Nunraw, she would do her utmost to make you happy. It would be much better than living in London lodgings, and I know she meant what she said.'

‘And you?’ said William Laurie, with slightly elevated brows.

‘I can do no less than re-echo her invitation,’ Will replied sincerely. ‘If you will come I shall try and remember my duty. You would find it both a pleasant and an active life.’

‘Yes; I might feed the cattle and the pigs,’ replied William Laurie, with a cheerful smile; ‘only I fear the rôle would not altogether suit me. Pray present my compliments and thanks to my charming daughter-in-law, and say that I regret that circumstances over which I have no control prevent me accepting her hospitality.’

‘I wish you would speak out honestly, and without all that nonsense, father,’ cried Will. ‘Won’t you admit that I am in an awkward position, and that I am doing right?’

‘Life is too short to enter into abstruse questions regarding moral obligations; but, since you ask me plainly, I think that the Maitlands owe you something for having saddled you with their daughter, and that, as she is their only daughter, she is entitled to a handful of old Closefist’s bawbees. But if they have converted you, far be it from me to seek to lead you astray. Have you given up the emigration craze?’

‘I had made up my mind that if I could not get out of paying away more money, I should throw it all up,’ Will replied honestly.

‘Well, you may relieve your mind after the singularly delicate way in which you have conveyed to me your decision; I am not likely to forget myself so far as to ask you. Here is your breakfast. While you eat you may bestow on me some further crumbs of domestic news. Is Agnes well?’

‘Quite well. They are at Laurieston just now for the Easter recess.’

‘How many children has she?’

‘Only one, of course. He is just beginning to walk. He is the finest little chap you ever saw.’

‘It is magnanimous of you to admit that, when you are the father of two cherubs. And is Agnes deliriously happy with her loutish Professor?’

‘They appear to be satisfied with each other,’ said Will, answering with difficulty, for his father’s tone made him writhe.

‘And what do they call my first grandson?’

'Michael.'

'Oh, of course, they could not pass over grandpapa number one.'

'I rather think he was called after his uncle who died,' put in Will.

'Ay,—sudden death that,—remember it at the time. He was a likely young fellow, a perfect gentleman beside his brother. I met him on the Rhine once.'

'There are not many Michael Maitlands in the world,' said Will soberly, and with a curious look in his face, which only the mention of Michael could bring there. Effie knew what that meant. From the day of Michael's death Will had been a better husband to her,—ay, and a nobler man. So that Michael, though so sadly missed and mourned, had not died in vain.

'I suppose our Professor has a fair income?'

'Oh yes; they live in good style. He is not a professor yet, though he hopes to be one some day. But he makes a great deal privately, and he has written a book which has a good sale.'

'Ah, what kind of a book?'

'A treatise on Moral Philosophy; but I can't tell you anything about it, as it is not the kind of reading I care about. There is never much said about the book. The very mention of it at Laurieston makes a dryness in the atmosphere.'

'Too advanced for the old boy, eh? So you think your sister is quite satisfied with her life?'

'I have no reason to think otherwise. She was always a quiet, reserved woman; she is that still,' said Will guardedly.

'And are you quite satisfied with your lot in life? You are young to settle down to a bucolic existence?'

'My lot in life is good enough for me, if I could feel myself an honest, independent man,' said Will bluntly. 'I've got some common sense lately, and I know my own failings.'

'And those of others, particularly of your parent,' said the elder man blandly. 'I admire the charitable spirit of Christians; it makes me glad I'm not one. So you actually went to the expense of a railway ticket to London to tell me all this?'

'I wanted to see for myself how you are, and to have a talk with you,' answered Will. 'Now you know how I stand, you can comprehend and excuse my refusal to send you any more money. It is not as if you were in need. You seem to me to be very comfortable here,' he added, glancing round the snug, well-furnished room.

'I do not complain. I trust the day is at hand when I shall be quite independent of my children. Let no man think that, because he is a father, he has provided a haven of shelter for his necessity or age. It is a vain delusion, the product of a sickly sentimentality which has no foundation in fact.'

'You may believe that if you were in need we should not forget our duty,' said Will quietly. 'What on earth is the use of going on like that?'

'You are not respectful to me, William; but I do not expect it. Maitland of Laurieston has repaid my trust by holding me up as a reprobate and an object of ridicule before the eyes of my own children. Perhaps he may live to regret it.'

Will pushed back his chair somewhat impatiently, and rose to his feet. He could not have patience with his father's grandiloquent style of talk; but he wished to be respectful and kind to him. It is not easy, however, to assume a respect which does not exist; and it may be admitted that William Laurie, sen., had not given to his children much ground upon which to build their respect or esteem. Father and son spent the day together, but it was not one of conspicuous enjoyment for either, and Will felt glad when the train sped him away from the great city, out into the purer air of the open country. He was indeed trying to redeem the past, to look at life from an honest, healthy standpoint; and the hours spent with his father were not calculated to act as aids to the higher life. After having tested life in many different phases, William Laurie affected cynicism in his declining years, and sneered at everything, casting doubt on every good intention or motive. His companionship was not at all healthy for a young man like his son, who was but feebly striving after good. Under

the influence of his father's unhealthy conversation, Will had felt the old rebellious grumblings rise within him, doubts of the goodwill and faith of his fellow men, suspicious even of his dearest. And from these he was glad to flee. He reached his home early in the afternoon of the following day, and when he passed through his own garden gate, his little daughter, playing at gardening with the faithful collie at her heels, shouted with delight and toddled to meet him, her little hands outstretched, her dimpled face radiant with love. He caught her to his heart, pressed his cheek to hers, and felt his eyes grow dim. They were not dry when he reached the door, where Effie stood to welcome him. He was conscious of the anxiety of her look, and somehow his heart smote him. He put his other arm about her, and looked down into her sweet face, his own softened with a great tenderness.

'I am so glad to see you, Will. It is like weeks since you went away. You have no idea how Madgie has fretted, and even baby has missed you.'

'I only know now what blessings I possess, and how lightly I have prized them, Effie,' Will said, with a tightening clasp of his arm.

Effie asked no more. Her heart was at rest.



CHAPTER XXIV.

'The heart hath many sorrows besides love;
Yea, many as the veins which visit it.'



AGNES, that's a beautiful bairn.'

So said Margaret Maitland, as they sat under the old thorn on a sunny April morning, enjoying the beneficent radiance of the spring sunshine.

Agnes smiled; and watched in silence for a moment the tiny figure, toddling somewhat unsteadily across the lawn, filling its chubby hands with the daisies which lay like a white carpet on the sward. It was a beautiful sight to see that mother and child together, a sight of which those to whom both were dear never tired. Motherhood had given the last gracious touch to Agnes Maitland's character and life. There was one who thought her perfect, and who deemed it no sin to lay at her feet a love which had in it all the elements of reverent worship.

'You think him beautiful, mother, because he has sunny hair and blue eyes, and because his name is Michael,' she answered at length. 'He has not filled the old Michael's place, but only made it seem less empty, and for that John and I are glad.'

'Agnes, my lamb, there is a thing I want to speak about, though I hardly know how to put it. There is a look on your face whiles I dinna like to see. Not long ago I looked out by the window, and I saw tears in your eyes while you held the bairn on your knee. What ails you? Is it anything which it would ease your heart to tell? If I am

anything, I am your mother in love, Nannie, though not in name.'

A slight tremor passed over Agnes Maitland, and the delicate colour faded away from her face.

'Sometimes my heart is heavy, mother. The boy is growing, and the day coming when I shall have to guide him. It is an awful thing to think that he cannot learn from his father to look up to his Maker.'

She spoke in a low voice, shamefacedly, as if such confession was more a pain than a relief.

'Then he still stands aloof from the faith I taught him, Agnes? Tell me, has it ever made any estrangement between you?'

'It did at first. I think you did not guess. Michael knew. Do you remember when he waited with us a night on his way home? We had a long talk then. He showed me where I was wrong, and since then we have been much happier,—so happy, that sometimes I tremble when I think how light a shadow that other thing casts upon me. Mother, what is it that holds John back from belief? He is so noble and good, so utterly unselfish. His spirit is more Christlike than mine, for, with all his gentleness, he is unflinching and courageous when wrong-doing is concerned. That is where I am weak. I pass over things rather than face unpleasantness.'

'Tell me, my dear, have you never seen anything which would lead you to believe that he is beginning to think differently of these things?'

'Never. We never speak of it. I go my way in this, and he goes his. Our opinions do not clash, because we never compare them. Is that not cowardice on my part? And yet, and yet, when did talking over do good? I cannot argue. I cannot give logical reasons for my belief in a risen Saviour and a merciful God. Only I know it is more than life to me.'

'And you live it, my daughter. Oh, I have watched you, and have marvelled that the Lord's answer to the unspoken prayer of your daily life has been so long withheld. You can trust Him yet?'

'To the uttermost,' Agnes answered simply. 'Sometimes, mother, I am oppressed with a sickening apprehension of some fearful evil. It is my nature to make idols of those I love. Sometimes, when I search my heart about the child there, I feel afraid. Is it wrong, do you think, to love so much?'

'My lamb, why will you torment yourself? There is no limit set, so long as we do not put our earthly idols before Him. It is not the overflowing of love which saddens the earth, but the dearth of it. I have lived longer than you, my Nannie, and I have seen a great deal of God's dealings with folk. And I have never yet seen one of His children tried beyond their strength; and that is a great comfort.'

'You have suffered greatly too, mother. Three graves! Sometimes, when I look at them, I wonder how I should feel if I had to lay *my* darling away out of sight beside them. Pray to God, mother, that He will not require that of me. Anything but that.'

She ran and caught the child from the lawn, and clasped him close in her tender arms, while her face, glorified with the passion of motherhood, pressed itself against his golden head. It was a sweet picture: the gracious young mother in her white clinging gown, tall and lissom and lovely; the child a model of infant beauty, with skin like alabaster, and cheeks like the blush of a summer rose. He would not long be still; he struggled to the ground again, and toddled off with his sweet, uncertain step to meet his father, who stood within the portals of the door. In a moment he came triumphantly leading the tall figure, his round eyes lifted adoringly to the grave, kind face bent upon him in love. His baby chatter, unintelligible to any ear but his mother's, rang out clear and shrill on the quiet air,—dearest music on earth to his mother's heart!

'This is an imperious master, and no mistake. What am I to do, you tyrant?' asked John laughingly. 'Kiss mamma? I wish I never had a less irksome task.'

He bent down, touched her hair with a lingering touch, and raised her white hand to his lips.

'This is the new allegiance, mother. I never kiss my lady's

lips except when she gives me leave,' he said, in happy banter. 'Am I not a much ruled man? Six feet two, and can't call my soul my own,—nor my shirt-collar. Oh, you rogue!'

The child's shrill, sweet laughter rang out again as the chubby fingers found their way round his father's neck, the signal for a wild frolic, in which the little one delighted.

'He ought to have a cap on, dear. The sun is mild, but the wind has a chilly touch,' John said presently.

'He had a cap. I expect it will be on some of the bushes where he was chasing a butterfly,' said Agnes, rising. 'He never ails, mother, so we are not altogether careful, sometimes.'

'Oh, he is hardy enough. I don't believe in coddling bairns. Sit down, lassie, and leave the twosome to their play. I don't know which is the bigger bairn.'

'Father thinks Mr. Fordyce is likely to return to India next month. Do you know what John proposes?—that we should let our house for the summer months, if anybody will take it, and come down to Hallcross?' said Agnes.

'That would be fine for us all. Don't you think it a good proposal?'

'Oh, very. I would fill the house, mother, all summer.'

'Who with?'

'All sorts and conditions. Our particular students, of course, are all away; but there are one or two I should ask to stay with us. Harry is in town yet; and that lad Laidlaw I told you of has begun his medical course this summer. I don't know where the money for it is to come from, but he seems determined to succeed. We must help him all we can. If we come down I think I'll ask him to give up his lodgings, and come to us for the remainder of the session. He can have the little room off the drawing-room, and one of the attics for a study.'

'It would be a boon to the young man, I don't doubt,' Mrs. Maitland answered.

'Then there are two young girls I got to know quite accidentally, by hearing one of them play at an evening party. They are minister's daughters, mother; and they have a widowed mother and an invalid brother whom they support. They teach

music and drawing in several schools, and go out in the evenings to play at parties. Just think of that for refined, well brought-up girls ! But they have a noble courage, and are sustained by the knowledge that they are keeping the home together. John thinks I should ask them down too. Wouldn't they enjoy Hallercross ?

'Ay, they would,' Mrs. Maitland answered, with a curiously tender smile. 'But if you don't let Hallercross again, what of the money for London ?'

'We have thought of that,—at least John has,' said Agnes, with a slight flush. 'It will be sent just the same. God has blessed us, mother ; we have no anxiety about money matters.'

'The book has been a success, you see,' said Mrs. Maitland.

'When I count our income, mother, I leave out the profits of the book. John knows I would not touch that money. He has it laid away.'

'And what is to be done with it ?'

'John will tell you that himself,—I don't know,' she answered ; and the quickened tone of her voice indicated that that was a sore subject.

'It is such a small book, and so uninteresting to the ordinary reader, Agnes, that I question if it could do the harm you imagine.'

'Of course it is only a students' handbook ; but don't you see, mother, it does harm just where it might have done good. It is the students who are inquiring into these things, and they are the men who will be the guides of another generation,' said Agnes, with a slight touch of passion. 'Do you know Harry Christie is prosecuting his studies for the Church, and he doesn't know what he believes, or whether he believes anything at all. That was one whom John might have guided easily, at a critical time.'

'But when the time comes for him to take vows, Agnes, he will have to know what he believes.'

Agnes shook her head. 'I believe that that is why there are so many barren ministries. Those who occupy the pulpit do not teach others out of the fulness of their own belief. I have

learned a great deal, mother, since I came so much in contact with the students.'

'These are searching times, Agnes, I don't doubt; but the very questioning shows an interest in religious things, which is healthy and hopeful,' said Mrs. Maitland cheerily. 'Well, shall we go over to tea with the Misses Thorburn, this afternoon, and take the bairn? He will divert them.'

Agnes nodded and laughed. Somehow at Laurieston, the shadow which lay upon her life seemed less dark. It might be because that at home she had to battle alone, a prey to her own anxieties and fears, while, amid the cheerful, loving companionship of the happy circle at Laurieston, there seemed no time for harassing thought.

The arrangements concerning Hallcross were carried out. The tenant left in May, and the first days of a sunny June saw the old house filled with a new and delightful element. Among the young people she had gathered about her Agnes was in her element. In the dispensing of her gracious hospitality her husband was her able helpmeet; and to many that brief summer at Hallcross remained one of the brightest memories of their lives. It was shadowed, however, ere it closed, by a dark and terrible tragedy.

Agnes was sitting in a lounging-chair on the lawn one afternoon with her sewing, and the child playing about her feet. It was one of the loveliest of June days,—a day when even the summer zephyr slept, and there was no stir in the slumbrous, odorous air. The roses hung heavy on their slender stems, and made great masses of pink and white and deep red among the green. The daisies were white on the smooth lawn, and the gay butterflies flitted across the sunshine, and the bees droned lazily from the hearts of the fragrant, old-fashioned flowers; but there was scarcely the twitter of a bird in that leafy old garden. Agnes missed the accustomed melody of song, but, in talking to her little son, she told him that the little birds were tired with the heat, and had gone to sleep in the shade. This seemed to mystify and exercise him greatly, and he forthwith began a pilgrimage round the shrubbery to find the sleeping songsters.

Agnes watched the tiny figure in white, grown very straight and sturdy on his sun-browned legs, and when she saw the clear, red glow on his upturned face, she thought what a blessing Hallercross had been to him.

He spent the livelong day in the old garden, and sometimes they would find him asleep under the spreading beech-tree, tired out with his play. It was his very life; and often his mother thought of the dear old lady who had foreseen the day when they should occupy the old house, and their children make music in its rooms.

Her reverie was broken by the announcement that a visitor was in the drawing-room.

'Who is it, Mary?'

'Miss Thorburn. She came to the back gate and in by the back door, ma'am.'

Agnes rose, cast a look at the child who was wandering among the trees, and then entered the house. She felt no anxiety about him. He was often left for hours at a time.

'You'll have to do away with the back gate, Mrs. Maitland, if you don't want surreptitious callers,' cried Miss Thorburn, in her gayest mood. 'How are you this lovely day? Grace has a cold,—positively a cold in weather like this. But it serves her right; she will stay half an hour in the sea instead of ten minutes, as she ought.'

'I hope she is not very bad?'

'Bad enough; and she is so amusing over it. She said last night, "I'm going to be ill. I feel it; but I won't—I'm determined I won't. Who's going to waste time being ill?" And she sent me out this afternoon, because she said my tongue deceived her. And now, after all this palaver, where's little Maitland? His dear grandmother says he is growing in length and breadth at an alarming rate.'

'He is as well as possible. He lives in the garden. What a delight it all is to him! I am so glad we thought of coming out this summer. But, Miss Jean, why do you call him little Maitland?' asked Agnes, with a smile.

'I never will call him anything else,' said Miss Jean, with rather a curious look. 'I can't just yet speak of any Michael

but one. Besides, he will be Maitland of Laurieston some day, won't he ?'

'Ah ! I don't know that,' said Agnes quickly.

'Well, I hope not for many a long year. I must say his grandfather looks as young as any of his sons. So Walter is to take to himself a wife in spring ?'

'Yes, and leave us. He is going away to America in August with Mr. Liddell's son, who has bought a farm on the Red River, and if there is a suitable place for sale father wishes him to buy.'

'Dear me, is that all settled ? Well, Walter will make a splendid colonist, and there is no nonsense about Bessie Rankine. She can put her hand to anything, though she is a minister's daughter. Don't you think it is far better than if he stayed at home ? There is really no need for him at Laurieston.'

'No ; and if we are to people the new country, Miss Jean, it is good to send them our best,' replied Agnes. 'Won't you take off your bonnet and stay to tea ? My household will be home presently. They come down in a body at four o'clock.'

'Yes, I will ; thank you.'

'I am so glad to get back to the old-fashioned, substantial teas, Miss Jean,' said Agnes, as she led the way to a bedroom. 'In town I always tell John I feel that we are cheated of a meal, and I do so enjoy mother's teas when I go out to Laurieston. But won't you keep on your hat and let us go out to the garden for a bit ?'

'In a little. I want to cool down, and this house is always so deliciously cool,' said Miss Jean, as she sat down on Miss Leesbeth's couch. The old lady's room was the guest chamber of the house, and was exactly as she had left it. They lingered for a little while, talking, as old friends talk, of matters interesting to both ; and when at last they leisurely descended the stairs, Miss Jean remarked that she had never seen Agnes in better spirits.

'I have so many mercies, Miss Jean,' Agnes answered, with a shining eye. 'Would it not be a shame if I were to look gloomy or sad ?'

They passed out into the pleasant garden ; and though the child was nowhere visible, his mother thought nothing amiss.

‘He hides sometimes,’ she said, with a laugh. ‘The little rogue! he is just as full of frolic as he can be, and his father carries him on. I sometimes say I don’t know which is the bigger baby.’

They crossed the velvet lawn and turned into the path behind the box-hedges; and all at once in the midst of her happy talk Agnes stood still, for the garden gate which opened on the river bank was ajar, and the child nowhere to be seen.



CHAPTER XXV.

'Thou weepest, childless mother!
He was thy first-born son,
Thy first, thine only one!'

IT was never known how it had happened, nor who was responsible for undoing the bolts of the garden gate. For the child's sake, that gate had been kept rigorously locked since they came down to Hall-cross; because just without the wall the river-bank was steep and sudden,—the flow of the water very deep and treacherous and swift. A great cluster of wild roses was entwined about the willows just opposite the gate; and as it was a mass of pink bloom, they supposed the child, in trying to gather of its treasures, had slipped down the bank,—and then all was over.

When the mother ran out of the gate, and her eyes took one wild sweep of the bank without seeing anything, she turned, with the unerring instinct of love, and followed the current of the river. Jean Thorburn followed her as best she might. They were fearful moments for these two women, but they were not long prolonged. A few hundred yards down the stream the water was diverted into a mill-lade, across which was a wooden sluice which also served as a foot-bridge.

And there the baby, in his white, floating dress, was found. Agnes stooped down quite quietly, caught the dripping skirts, and, lifting the motionless figure, clasped it to her heart, and turned away home. She passed by Jean Thorburn on the grassy path without an uttered word, or even a look; and so they returned to the house. As they passed through the open door a sound of happy laughter reached them, and then the

deep tones of John's familiar voice. Then Agnes shuddered, and turned to her friend: 'Go to him, Jean, tell him,—and keep the rest away.'

Miss Thorburn nodded, and flew up the box hedge path, waving frantically to John. He waved his hat gaily to her; but the next moment, seeing something was amiss, took a long stride towards her.

'Something has happened to the baby. Agnes is there,' she gasped, and then ran on, and sent Harry Christie away for the doctor.

'My God, Agnes, what is this?' John said hoarsely. 'He is not dead?'

'Yes—it happened in a moment—I left him—the gate was open. Take him! Take him!'

He was just in time to catch mother and child in his arms; but a great strength came to him, and he was able to carry both into the house, feeling their burden no more than a feather's-weight. Very shortly the doctor came, and nothing was left untried; but the little life was gone, quenched in a single moment; the sweet eyes out of which the sun had shone but an hour ago, had closed for ever on the fair scenes of earth.

They had given up their efforts; and Agnes, with her own hands, and in a strangely calm, steadfast kind of way, had begun to dress the little limbs for their last sleep, when the grandmother came in.

'Agnes! Agnes! it can't be true. God hasna taken the bairn! You are too quick with your dressing. Let me look at him.'

'God has taken him, mother, and I live,' Agnes answered, in that still, quiet way; and the mother shuddered to see with what calm dexterity she put the lace robe on the child, and then smoothed away the golden curls from the brow. 'I suppose I needed a punishment. I know I made him an idol; but I think, were I God, I would not make mothers' hearts so fearfully clinging, and then torture them like this. It is not fair, nor right, nor just. He cannot expect us to love Him when He so treats us.'

'Wheesht, lassie, wheesht!' said Maitland of Laurieston, who had entered the room, and heard her words. 'I hae

passed through it a',—ay, three times ower; an' noo, I dinna ken that I am mair grateful for the bairns on earth than the bairns in heaven.'

'You have some left. He was my all. Look at him. What mercy or good could there be in taking him away? I never asked him from God. I would rather have had no child, than that I should just have him a moment and then see him snatched from my arms. My baby! my baby!'

She knelt down by the bed and hid her face. Laurieston touched his wife's arm, and bade her come away.

'She'll be better hersel'. Let's look for John. I've never seen his face.'

They closed the door behind them, and left mother and child together alone. She was where they could not help her, where the hand of God Himself alone could touch her with a healing touch. John was not far away. When the doctor left, he just sat him down on the window-seat in the dining-room, and, with his hand over his eyes, sat still.

'John, my son, I think Agnes needs you,' his mother said. 'She is alone in there with her lamb that God has taken to Himself.'

'If that is what you believe, mother, I am glad I have no God to believe in,' John made answer, looking up quietly. 'Please not to speak like that. When I think that, through somebody's carelessness, the door was left open, and he wandered to the river-bank, and that a natural consequence followed,—I can bear it. But when you say that God took the child,—deliberately cut short that lovely life by a cruel and sudden death,—I cannot bear it. Spare me the comfort of your religion, I beg of you, lest I curse my birth.'

Father and mother looked at each other a moment in silence. It was the first direct avowal which had fallen from his lips; and though to Maitland of Laurieston it appeared blasphemy, he held his peace. He had himself passed through these deeps; he knew by the agony of experience what it is for a human soul to battle with the Almighty.

'Do you think that Agnes will speak like that?' John asked presently, in the same quiet, strange voice. 'Because if you think so I will not go in. I might say something to hurt her.'

You are looking at me ; but I know what I say. My child has been taken from me ; his death has resulted from a natural cause. I am strong enough to bear that ; but the other, I will have none of it, even from her.'

He was suffering from the keenest anguish. They saw it in the twitching of his face and the dim clouding of his eyes. But his words nearly broke his mother's heart.

'Agnes is the mother of your child, John,' she said sternly. 'If you have a heart, go to her now, and I will pray to God here that you may be kept from hurting her.'

After a moment, and without another word spoken, he rose up, and went away to the upper room to his wife and child.

They heard the door open and shut, his heavy footfall cross the floor, and then a deep silence.

'We cannot understand God's dealings with us and ours, whiles, Michael,' Margaret Maitland said. 'Let us kneel down here and pray for more faith.'

When her husband entered the room, Agnes rose to her feet and turned to him with a pitiful wistfulness, which awoke in him a new passion of tenderest love.

'My darling ! my own poor wife !'

He clasped her close to his heart ; and she hid her face, trembling and clinging to him as if she had never felt so needful of his care.

'Isn't it fearful, John, to think that an hour ago we had a child, and now we have none ? Do you think I shall be able to bear it and live ?'

'We must—we will help each other,' he answered, in a low voice, and with difficulty ; for the sweet face of the child on the pillow, looking so life-like and so lovely, was like to unman him.

'Oh, isn't life hard ? There is a great deal to bear which is not easy. I wish—I wish I understood. It is so hard to have faith.'

She forgot the lack of sympathy which had so long existed between them on such themes, she remembered nothing but that he was her best-beloved, and that the child who had gone from her was his child, and that he had loved it.

'I have been asking God to make it plain to me, to give me

a crumb of comfort ; but it has not come yet. Oh, isn't the sunshine cruel ? I drew the blinds quite close to shut it out ; and do you hear that blackbird ? There has not been a note all day. It is like a song of triumph. Do you think I shall ever be able to go out of doors again ?'

'Yes, yes ; after a time we will grow accustomed, I suppose,' he said, in a hard, dry tone.

'Accustomed to what—to being without our darling !' she said quickly. 'I hope not. That would be the hardest of all. If I could keep him lying there, I think I should not feel it to be so awful. But—but very soon they will take him away.'

He had no word to say. He only gathered her yet more closely to him, and so held her in utter silence ; but she felt his touch comforting.

'I suppose we have loved him too much,' she said, after a time, drawing a little away from him, and touching with her hand the hem of the child's white robe. 'Not too much, in one sense, perhaps, because you know there is no limit set ; but perhaps we have built too much upon him, and thought too little of other things. But I can't speak about it ; it is so hard not to think it all so cruel.'

Her breast heaved, a great sob broke from her lips, and then there came a passion of tears. John envied her these tears. His eyes were dry and burning, his lips felt parched, his heart hardened. He could scarcely command himself to speak tenderly and comfortingly to her ; and yet, God knew, he had never loved her more than then.

When they went downstairs at last, leaving their darling to his quiet rest, the face of Agnes was serene again,—the fearful drawn look had gone from it, the staring, stony look from her eyes. She entered the dining-room with her hand through her husband's arm ; and, looking at his mother, she said, with a faint, sad smile,—

'I am learning, mother, as I go step by step with you. Soon I shall be as rich in experience as you.'

Margaret Maitland was unable to speak ; but she knew her prayer for the bereaved mother had been already answered.

So that sad day closed.

Fearful as had been the struggle, Agnes had given the child up, and could even, in the early hours of her bitter sorrow, follow him with the eye of faith to that brighter clime whither he had gone. For her the words, 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven,' had obtained a new and most precious significance; but with her husband it was different. For him the child's death was a black and bitter anguish, which had no assuagement. The dumb despair in his eyes haunted his wife in sleeping and waking hours. In the night she heard him rise and walk across the corridors to the room where the child lay, and there he remained till the sweet morning broke. Though she lay listening with strained ear, she could hear nothing, not even a footfall on the floor. He was dumb and silent in the anguish of his pain. What these night hours were to John Maitland, was never told. But they left their mark upon him, and when Agnes saw him in the clear morning light his hair had grown grey. Then she knew that his sorrow was more awful to bear than hers, because he had no hope. She was very tender, very gentle, very wifely towards him; but she did not put a single question, nor allude to what was uppermost in her mind. She wondered what were his thoughts now concerning the unknown, whither the pure soul of his son had fled. She could not bear yet that a doubt should be cast upon that future; if it had grieved her before, it was an intolerable thought now. So she held her peace; and when her heart failed her, she would steal up to the sunny upper room where the baby slept, and beside him find peace. But the day came—ay, too soon—when that comfort was denied her; when they bore another Michael Maitland to his rest in the old burying-ground on the hill overlooking the sunny sea. It was a great burying for so young a child. Although no invitations were sent, they came from far and near, as they had done when the family burying-ground had been opened for Maitland's second son. The name was respected in the parish, and the parents of the child greatly beloved. Then the circumstances of the child's death were such as to call forth the liveliest sympathy in every heart. So a great crowd passed through the churchyard gates that sober June day, and grouped about the open grave. It was a grey, pensive day, with

a soft mist veiling sky and earth and sea, and a peculiar soundlessness in the air, which caused that dread sound, the earth falling on the coffin-lid, to fall with startling distinctness on the ears of the assembled throng. At the first thud they saw a visible shudder pass over the father's strong figure, then without a word spoken he turned about and strode away. Although it was so unusual, none sought to follow him. They were astonished likewise at the unwonted emotion exhibited by Maitland of Laurieston. He had borne the ordeal of his own son's burial without flinching; but his sorrow for his little grandson seemed greater than he could control. Before they turned to go, he tried to thank them for their courtesy and respect shown to him and his; but, after a few words spoken, he broke down, and, leaning on Will Laurie's arm, turned away home. Many a voice spoke kindly and sympathetically of the Maitlands that night, and many a compassionate thought was directed towards the childless house of Hallcross. Agnes had need of all the sympathy which could be bestowed. Their father and mother pleaded with them to come over to Laurieston, at least for the night; but Agnes shook her head, while a wan, wavering smile touched her lips.

'You know, mother. Could you have left Laurieston when it was newly hallowed?' she asked; and after that Margaret Maitland had not a word to say.

By their childless hearth that night John Maitland and his wife sat together. The strangers who had been within their gates had returned to town, believing that in their sorrow they were better alone. And it was so. The night had come softly down, the gentle rain was weeping outside, and the grey, soft mist lay heavy on the land. They heard the pattering drops on the leaves of the red rose-trees, and sometimes a drop would fall into the fire with a hissing sound, which almost startled them. The fire had been the mother's thought. She knew that in its ruddy glow there was a mysterious kind of companionship which might be of use. And though it was not cold, they crept close to it, as if trying to warm their desolate hearts. They had sat in utter silence for a time, Agnes with her pale hands folded above her black gown, and a far-off look in her eyes. Only a few days ago these hands had known no idleness. It had been her pride

to ply the needle constantly for her darling, and now,—there seemed to be nothing to do in the house. Perhaps it was but a little life; a child seems of no importance outside the walls of the home which it fills with light and music and laughter; but it was, of all the lives in the great world, the most precious and most necessary to these two.

‘Are you tired, Agnes?’

With these words, uttered in a tone of peculiar significant tenderness, John broke the silence.

‘Tired? Oh, I don’t think so,’ she answered, with a slight start. ‘If I am, it is with doing nothing.’

‘You look pale and worn. Come and sit by me, will you not? We must be more to each other now.’

She rose up, stepped across the hearth, and before she sat down passed her hand through his dark hair.

‘It has grown grey, John, these few days. I have an old man for my husband the rest of my days,’ she said, smiling down upon him,—that smile which was verily the light of his life.

He caught the folds of her dress and hid his face in them, while her hand still lay on his bent head.

‘What a comfort you are to me, dearest. You are more necessary to me than I am to you.’

‘Do you think so? You will always doubt me, John. Some day I must try and tell you how I love you; but it is so difficult to find words. But it is here.’

She touched her heart lightly, and then slid down at his feet and laid her head on his knee, as she often used to do in the early days of their married life.

‘Do you know what I have been thinking all day, John?’ she said dreamily. ‘Of the meeting there. How strange it would be for them both!’

‘What meeting?’

‘Between our darling and his Uncle Michael. How glad Michael would be to see him! It would be like a message from us.’

She spoke quite quietly and naturally, and as he listened John was conscious of a strange sense of awe. After a little, Agnes felt his silence, and, turning her head, looked up at him suddenly with wide, questioning eyes.

'John, has it not made any difference? Surely now that baby is in heaven, it will be a real place to you!'

With those open, yearning eyes upon him, he dared not answer.

'John.' She turned round to him and leaned her arm on his knee. 'Look at me quite straight, so that I may read your soul. Our little child, whom God gave us, has gone away from us. Where do you think he has gone? Do you not believe that there is a heaven, where we shall find him again when our life is ended?'

He put up his hand to shade his eyes, but she grasped it and kept it back.

'Look at me, John, and tell me,' she cried, in a voice which pain made sharp and shrill, 'did you lay him in the grave to-day, believing *that* was all?'

'Agnes, you torture yourself and me,' he said hoarsely. 'I cannot lie to you. I do not know what I believe; but this I must say, that I can't grasp what your faith makes so plain to you. Where the child has gone, I know not; and whether I shall see him again, I know not. There is nothing before my mental vision but a chaos of all that is miserable and confusing.'

A low cry fell from the lips of Agnes Maitland. Then she rose up silently and left him alone.



CHAPTER XXVI.

'I am not what I was.'



WILL LAURIE'S visit to London proved effectual. His father troubled him no more for money. He had a new project in hand, which he hoped would render him independent of his children. But the issue was uncertain,—a woman being in the question. It was a matter in which William Laurie believed Agnes would be useful to him, and as he felt a real desire to see her for her own sake, he wrote and asked her to come to London. He was not at all sanguine about the response she would make to his appeal; it was therefore a surprise to him when he received a telegram the second evening after he had written, saying she would be with him by the evening train of that day. He was still in his rooms in Norfolk Street, though they had of late proved rather expensive for his means. He was already in debt to his landlady for a considerable sum, with the natural consequence that she had become careless of his comfort. There was something pitiful in the broken-down man, aged before his time, living amidst such discomfort and uncertainty. Things were certainly at a low ebb with the gay Mr. Laurie. But it is sometimes the darkest hour before the dawn.

He announced to the landlady that his daughter was coming, and managed to impress even that incredulous female with a certain idea of Mrs. Maitland's dignity and grandeur. He did not go to the station to meet her, although he spent a greater part of the day out of doors. He had appealed to her

as an invalid, and must therefore sustain the part he had to play. It was about seven o'clock, and rainy darkness had set in, when the cab rattled up to the door. The landlady herself was in the hall when the bell rang, to receive Mrs. Maitland. When she saw the tall figure with its graceful carriage, and the sweet, calm, beautiful face behind the veil, she breathed a sigh of relief, feeling that for once her lodger had not deceived her. Her manner underwent an immediate change, and it was with the utmost respect and attention that she showed Mrs. Maitland into the sitting-room. A cheerful fire burned there, and the table was laid for tea. William Laurie, in dressing-gown and slippers, rose somewhat languidly from his easy-chair, and advanced to meet her with a certain furtive look of anxiety in his worn eyes.

'I am so glad to see you up, papa,' Agnes said, and kissed him, not without affection, for his haggard, aged appearance touched her inexpressibly.

'Oh, I am not quite so bad as that,' he answered sincerely, though he had intended to make the most of his ailments. 'Now that I see you, I almost regret that I sent for you so hurriedly. You do not look particularly well. It was very good of you to come.'

'I am quite well, and I was very glad to come, papa,' Agnes answered quickly. 'I felt the need of something to do. Your summons was very welcome.'

He looked at her for a moment in keen silence. There was something in that beautiful, serene face which made him wonder. It was a suggestion of sadness, of endurance, a something indescribable, which he felt in his inmost soul. He saw that Agnes had gone through much since they had last met.

'Your husband was quite willing for you to come, I hope?' he said, almost humbly for him. 'I should not like to vex him.'

'He is abroad at present, at Berlin, with his old friend Mr. Robertson. I wrote to him before I came. Don't look so concerned, papa. John lets me do just as I like. Don't think I have married a domestic tyrant.'

'I am glad to hear it. Well, will you go upstairs and take off your bonnet? I hope Mrs. Briggs will attend to you. You will not find here the comforts to which you are accustomed, but the place is a good place as lodgings go.'

'Oh, I shall be all right, never fear. I shall not be many minutes upstairs, for I shall be glad of a cup of tea.'

Mr. Laurie rang the bell, and when Agnes left the room she found the attentive Mrs. Briggs waiting to show her upstairs. Agnes had a peculiarly winning and gracious manner, which always impressed strangers, and won for her their kind offices. She had no reason to complain of the landlady, who of her own accord had rushed up and kindled a fire in the room the lady from Scotland was to occupy. The few courteous words of thanks with which that thoughtful act was acknowledged, were sufficient reward to Mrs. Briggs for her extra trouble.

When Agnes returned to the sitting-room, robed in her soft mourning gown, with a touch of white at the throat, her father looked at her in open admiration.

'My dear, you have greatly improved. You are very handsome. Matrimony has given you a new dignity and grace which is most becoming. I am very proud of you.'

Agnes smiled.

'You can talk nonsense yet, papa. Come and let us have tea and talk. Tell me what is the matter with you.'

'I have no special complaint. I am out of sorts generally. I suppose I am getting old. I am afraid I misled you in my letter. Did you expect to find me seriously ill?'

'I did not know. You look ill enough to require some attention, and I shall be very glad to give it. Suppose we go out of London for a while, and take a little change to some sea-side place?'

The kind solicitude of her look and manner smote him with a sense of his own unworthiness. Agnes wondered to see him look so disconcerted.

'I wrote to John last night, and I told him if you were able we might take such a little change. If we decide upon it, I shall write to him from here, and then he might join us and take me home.'

'You are very kind. You have a good husband, I think?'

'I have. The best that lives,' she answered, in a low voice, and he saw her mouth tremble.

'And you lost your little son? I was very sorry for you when I knew of it, though I did not write. One cannot express sympathy in a letter. It is mostly best to leave people alone when they are in trouble.'

Agnes inclined her head and bent over her teacup. For a few minutes there was nothing said.

'You did not think of going abroad with your husband? It would have done you good.'

'In a sense, yes. But I wished him to go alone. It is not always a wife's duty to follow everywhere. Robertson and he are old friends, and they will enjoy a few weeks together. It is often a mistake women make, I think, trying to sever these old friendships between men. A woman cannot be, even to her husband, quite what a tried friend of his own sex can be.'

'I never heard finer words of wisdom from a woman's lips, Agnes. Your husband ought to be a happy man. I hope he appreciates the treasure he has won?'

'We understand each other, papa, so far as such things are concerned, and that is much,' Agnes answered quietly.

'And have you been living at Laurieston since he went away?'

'I have divided the time between Hallcross and Laurieston, and spent a part with Will and Effie. How happy they are, papa! It would do you good to see them. I was very much afraid for Will at one time, but he has quite changed.'

'I admire his wife very much,—a sensible, independent little woman. I am glad to hear they are getting on so well. Of course you knew she offered me a home with them?'

'Yes, I knew; but I was quite glad that you decided not to go. Young people are best alone, especially untried, inexperienced folks like Will and Effie.'

'I had an atom of common sense left, and I knew that;

but there are times when I am oppressed with a sense of my own desolation and homelessness.'

Agnes was silent. She could not remind him how careless he had been of opportunities in the past, and how he had set aside what had been offered him in good faith. He perfectly understood, however, her unspoken thoughts.

'I am going to be perfectly honest with you, Agnes, whatever the consequences of that honesty may be. I had another reason than my poor health for wishing to see you.'

'I am ready to hear it, papa,' Agnes answered, without surprise.

'Would it astonish you very much to hear that I am contemplating a second marriage?'

Agnes started.

'It is a surprise to me, I confess, at the present time, though in the past I seemed to be constantly expecting to hear of it,' she answered. 'If it is a suitable marriage, I shall be very glad, for your sake.'

He looked relieved, and answered buoyantly,—

'Your profound common sense, Agnes, amazes me more and more. It is common for grown-up daughters to resent a second marriage, though why it should be any of their business I don't know. The lady whom I hope and expect to marry is very rich, and it would be a very satisfactory escape from the worries of my present life.'

Agnes looked at him keenly. 'Papa, I hope that is not *all*. It would be a mean and despicable marriage, if selfish comfort is its only aim. I must speak plainly, because I feel so strongly on these subjects.'

'My dear, I wish you to be perfectly candid, and I expected it. I will admit that at first, when I began to contemplate such a change, that *was* my idea. But whether you believe me or not, I have since learned to esteem and regard the lady very highly, and even to think, Agnes, that poverty with her would be preferable to poverty endured alone. She is a very fine, woman, generous, sympathetic, kind-hearted. I prophesy you will like her.'

Agnes felt that her father was sincere. She liked the expression on his face even more than his words.

'Who is she, papa?' she asked. 'Tell me all about her.'

'Her name is Mrs. Rathbone. She is the widow of a gentleman who made his fortune in the manufacture of the useful and indispensable match. I do not know that it is a large fortune, but it is certainly a competency. She lives at a charming place on the Thames, near Brentford. May I hope that you will consent to call upon her there?'

'It will be my duty to do so, papa, if there has been any talk of marriage between you.'

'Thank you, my dear. You are very kind. I believe that the sight of you would be the turning-point in my favour. Mrs. Rathbone is at present in a state of hesitation. I believe you would decide her.'

'I hope you have been quite honest with her, as you have been with me, papa?' Agnes said quietly. 'If she is such a woman as you describe, she deserves the very highest confidence.'

'My dear, I have hid nothing from her. I even exploded the old fallacy about the Lauries of Mearns Castle when she asked me about it. I believed at one time it was expedient to resort to such mild frauds on society. I know now that I was wrong and you were right. Honesty is the best policy, after all. She also knows that I have nothing; but I do not think that that weighs with her at all. We seem to suit each other. I confess that, when I am in her society, I feel myself to be a better man, and I regret the hypocrisy and the sin of my past life as I have never regretted it before.'

Agnes looked with deep interest on the handsome, worn face, and her heart filled with a strange compassion. How true it is that a wasted life brings nothing to its possessor but a harvest of undying regrets! But the very fact that the capability for regret remains is a hopeful sign.

'She is not in the accepted sense a religious woman,' he continued, half absently, and evidently absorbed in his theme. 'That is, she does not speak much about it. But she is a good woman, a healthy-minded, free-spoken, straight down sort of

person, who hates humbug and affectation. Perhaps she is not very refined, I don't know ; but I do know that she is as good as gold.'

'I should like to see her very much. Does she know I am here ?' Agnes asked.

'She knew you were coming,—at least, that I had asked you. I told her, Agnes, the whole of that miserable story about Gilbert Culross. She is the sort of woman you can confess your sins to and feel the better for it. Her interest in you is awakened. She thinks you must be a lovely character. I can write to-night, I suppose, and say we shall come and see her ?'

'I am quite willing,' said Agnes. 'I feel deeply interested in her. If you should make her your wife, papa, you will see that she does not regret it, I believe.'

'I shall do my best. I have grown more humble of late, and see things differently. I suppose it will not be possible for me to attain to any great height of goodness, but I shall do my best. And should she do me the honour to marry me, I shall not be likely to forget how much I am the gainer. The wonder to me has been that she tolerates me at all.'

They sat talking far into the night, and, for the first time in her life, Agnes parted from her father feeling towards him somewhat as a daughter should. She saw that in him was awakened at least a transient desire after a better life, and she blessed the woman whose influence had wrought even so slight a change. There was still the old satisfaction and pride of self, the unreal way of talk, the pomposity of manner which used to jar so harshly upon her ; but they were modified greatly, and the certainty that he was for once in his life perfectly sincere and honest was a great satisfaction to her. She felt glad, as she lay down to sleep, that she had obeyed her first impulse, and come to him at once. It was long before she slept. The hum of the city was not yet stilled, and, though distance softened it to a low continuous murmur, it was sufficient, after the utter stillness of Laurieston, to keep her awake. She thought of many things as she lay in that unfamiliar bed, but at length her heart's interest centred upon one theme, the husband from whom she had parted, not in anger, but with a strange feeling

of relief. A baby's grave, so often the most precious tie of all which can bind human hearts together, had severed them. It stood like a barrier between them, a barrier which not even a deep and fervent love could bridge. The world knew nothing of that slight estrangement, nor did those who loved them dream of it. Perhaps they had wondered a little that husband and wife should part at such a time,—that Agnes should not care to share with her husband the change of scene. But so jealously did they guard their inner sanctuary, that the bitterness was not dreamed of, and so was not made the subject of comment among any.

And that was well.



CHAPTER XXVII.

'A word in season touched
The slumbering heart to earnest deed.'

NEXT morning's post brought a note from Mrs. Rathbone containing an informal invitation to dinner that evening. She would be quite alone, she said, and would be very pleased to have an opportunity of making Mrs. Maitland's acquaintance. They decided at once to go and despatch a message to that effect. Agnes spent the morning in writing a long letter to her husband. He had only been absent for a week, but she felt the separation intolerable. Her only comfort was to write to him every day. What these letters were to John, giving evidence as they did of a passionate and unaltered love, it is not possible for me to say. He was in a state of mind which required comfort; but of this more anon. They decided to sail up to Kew, and got on board a river steamer at Westminster Bridge. It was a lovely afternoon, soft and sunny; the heat grateful, but not too oppressive, being tempered by the gentlest of south winds. They did not talk very much during the short, lazy voyage. Agnes saw that her father was a trifle restless and preoccupied. She admired him as she saw him striding up and down the narrow deck. He looked more like himself in his careful attire. They had laughed at the idea of him being out of doors in mid-afternoon in evening dress, but the long travelling coat did duty as a wrap; while Agnes herself had a dust-cloak over her black silk gown. Mrs. Rathbone dined early, and they arrived at Linden Lodge at a

quarter before six. It was a pretty house, standing on a sunny slope facing the river, but with plenty of greenery about it, and even a little wooded park behind. Agnes was shown up to a dressing-room, and before she had removed her gloves the door opened and some one came in. Agnes turned round quickly. She did not remember ever feeling so curiously interested before. A lady entered the room, a tall, handsome figure, rather stout, but not ungraceful, well dressed and with taste, in a black satin gown with a sweeping train, and a cap of exquisite lace, which was most becoming to her open, cheerful, ruddy face. She was past middle age, evidently, for her plentiful hair was quite grey, and her face had a wrinkle here and there. But her whole presence was comfortable and cheerful and pleasant to look upon.

Agnes advanced with a smile. 'Mrs. Rathbone?'

'Yes. I came to you at once. It is an odd, strange feeling entering a house where you don't even know the mistress,' said Mrs. Rathbone, clasping her guest's slender hand in her own ample palms. 'I am very glad to see you. It was so nice of you to come at once, without any ceremony.'

While she was speaking, Agnes was quite conscious of her keen scrutiny, and her colour slightly rose under it, though it was so good-natured and kindly.

'How very pretty it is here!' she said, with a little nervous smile, as she tried to withdraw her hand. Mrs. Rathbone smiled too, and with a sudden gesture bent forward and kissed her cheek before she released her. In that caress to William Laurie's daughter, William Laurie himself was accepted. It is not too much to say that the aristocratic-looking and beautiful Mrs. Maitland had taken the widow's heart by storm. They relapsed into a natural and cheerful talk presently, and Agnes felt herself perfectly at home. She liked to feel the kindly hands of Mrs. Rathbone about her, and the somewhat loud but very musical tone of her voice sounded both friendly and pleasant to her. She believed every word her father had said about her, and more. She felt herself that this was a good woman, and a motherly, who could be trusted in everything. William Laurie looked relieved when the two ladies entered the drawing-

room together, but there was a diffidence in his manner which entirely astonished Agnes, who had never seen him other than self-satisfied and calmly at ease. She liked to see it, however ; it indicated to her that he had a profound respect for the company in which he found himself. The dinner was perfect, though not elaborate. Agnes, a keen judge and critic of household management, was filled with admiration for the whole arrangements for their comfort. It was also a most enjoyable meal, for Mrs. Rathbone had a fund of cheerful talk, and she did her utmost to be agreeable. That evening, for the first time in her life, Agnes saw her father at his best. As she listened to his clever and interesting talk, she no longer wondered at the fascination he exercised over those with whom he came in contact.

They went out into the pleasant garden after dinner, and watched the sun setting on the placid river. Agnes thought it one of the prettiest pictures she had ever seen, and said so in her heartiest manner. Mrs. Rathbone was evidently pleased with her admiration of the place ; and so, in the midst of pleasant, uninterrupted talk, the evening sped so rapidly, that all were surprised when the early darkness fell, and it was time for them to part. Again Mrs. Rathbone accompanied her guest upstairs, and, while Agnes was buttoning on her boots, she looked down at her with a curious air of hesitation.

‘Am I to see you again, Mrs. Maitland, before you leave London?’

‘Oh, I hope so. We were thinking of going out of town together, papa and I, for a little change. I shall stay likely until Mr. Maitland comes to fetch me. I should like you to meet my husband, Mrs. Rathbone.’

‘I should be afraid of him, I think ; he is so very clever, Mr. Laurie tells me. Is it not correct to call him Professor Maitland?’

‘Oh, not yet,’ Agnes answered, with a laugh. ‘Some day, perhaps very soon, he may attain to that dignity. I have had a very delightful evening here, Mrs. Rathbone.’

The widow’s pleasant face flushed with gratification.

‘I am very glad indeed,—very glad,’ she said, with fervour ;

then she looked at Agnes with a certain wistfulness, which, however, presently lost itself in a broad smile.

'My dear, I suppose you know—I hope you do, at least—what has been in the wind lately?' she said quickly. 'What would you think if two old folks like your father and I should think of spending the rest of our lives together?'

Agnes fastened the last button on her boot, and then rose somewhat hastily.

'I should think, dear Mrs. Rathbone, that my father has great good fortune; and my constant prayer would be that he should be worthy of his happiness,' she said, looking straight in her simple, candid way into the face of the woman before her. 'And I would say, too, that if there is anything I can do to be useful and kind, I shall do it with all my heart; and I know I can speak for my husband too.'

Mrs. Rathbone sat down suddenly; and it was evident that she was unusually affected.

'It is just this, Mrs. Maitland: I am frightfully lonely; I have not a relation in the world. Of course I have plenty of friends and acquaintances, plenty of them; and I may tell you that I have been asked to marry several times since Mr. Rathbone died. But I never could think of it, until your father asked me. He thinks very little of himself; he says he is not good enough for me. I will not deny either, my dear, since we are speaking candidly to each other, that some people have tried to poison my mind against him. But for all that, I am willing to try the experiment; because, in fact, I like him, my dear, that's all, and we seem to suit each other.'

Agnes was too much touched by the simple sincerity of Mrs. Rathbone's words to smile.

'I can only say that I believe my father is sincere in his regard for you, and that there is no reason why you should not be happy,' she answered; and then hesitated a moment before she continued: 'There is no doubt, Mrs. Rathbone, that if the marriage should take place, he will be immeasurably the gainer. He is perfectly conscious that he has very little to offer you in return for all you would confer on him.'

'If you mean the money, or the house, what is that to a

woman, unless she has somebody she cares about to share it with her?' replied the widow quickly. 'I know Mr. Laurie's circumstances. Believe me, he has kept nothing from me; and forgive me if I say that these are matters with which nobody has any business to meddle. I don't mean you, of course. I know what the world will say; but if we are to mind the biting of venomous tongues, the sooner we lie down quietly in our graves the better.'

Agnes smiled, and, laying her two hands on Mrs. Rathbone's shoulders, kissed her twice.

'I believe you will allow me to be your true friend?' she said affectionately, which speech caused the widow's kind eyes to overflow.

Meanwhile in the drawing-room William Laurie was pacing up and down, tormenting himself as to the meaning and issue of the prolonged interview being carried on upstairs.

'We are treating you shamefully, Mr. Laurie,' the pleasant voice of his hostess said at last, as the door opened from without. 'You must blame your dear daughter. We have been making up a friendship which I trust will last a lifetime.'

'I hope so, indeed,' William Laurie answered; and though other words were on his lips, he could not find the courage to utter them. He was more shy and diffident over this middle-aged love affair than he had ever been in the days when he had courted Ellen Rankine at Hallcross. But, before they parted, Mrs. Rathbone contrived to let him know that her decision was finally made.

'I am very grateful to you, Agnes, for your great kindness to me at this time,' he said, as the cab drove away from the door of Linden Lodge. 'I feel that I have not deserved it at your hands. I hope I shall never forget it.'

'I have done nothing out of the common, papa; it has been a pleasure to myself to meet Mrs. Rathbone,' Agnes replied, a little wearily. Somehow all at once the sad past, with its weight of bitter memory, was with her. She remembered only the sordid misery of the old Liverpool days, and the obscure grave in the city to which they were hastening, where her mother's broken heart had found peace. Although we are

bidden suffer long, and not quench the bruised reed, there are times when memory has so fierce a sting that it takes all the grace God can give us to follow the example He has set us. Agnes did not grudge her father his good fortune; nay, she was honestly, sincerely glad of it; only she could not quite forget. He had a quick intuition, and, divining the nature of her thoughts, kept silent. He felt that to express regret or contrition for the past just then would be out of place. They made the railway journey back to town almost without a word, and, when they reached Norfolk Street, Agnes went to her own room at once. She closed the door, and, before taking off her cloak, knelt down before the bed and burst into tears. She felt glad that she had been able to restrain them until she was out of her father's sight. She was unselfish enough to refrain from casting any shadow on his happiness. She left him with God. She believed that, if not then, the day would come when the thought of the wife of his youth would cost him bitter and penitential tears. Even out of the largeness of her heart, Agnes could not admit that he had been faithful or kind to her mother, and she may be forgiven for the bitterness of the tears she shed that night. They met next morning with cheerfulness, however, and pleasantly discussed the quiet enjoyment of the previous evening. After breakfast Agnes went out alone. She did not say where she was going, nor ask her father to accompany her; but he knew that she had gone to visit her mother's grave. She drove to the cemetery, and back into the city, dismissing the cab in Oxford Street. She was leisurely looking in at a shop window, when a lady came out of the establishment, and at sight of her uttered an exclamation, which caused Agnes to look round with a start.

'My dear darling Agnes, is it really you?'

'Why, dear Lady Culross!'

Agnes could say no more; but they clasped hands in silence, which was more eloquent than words.

'What are you doing in London? when did you come? and how are you?' Lady Culross managed to say at last.

'I came to see my father, who is not well. I only came the day before yesterday. I had no idea you were in town.'

‘I am shopping, my dear, for the wedding. My daughter-in-law elect is in town to-day too, and is to take tea with me at four o’clock. I am going back to lunch now, at the Langham, where I am staying. Will you come? This is my cab.’

‘Yes, I will come,’ said Agnes at once.

‘Is the Professor with you?’ Lady Culross invariably called John the Professor, and when reproved for it, as she had been jokingly at Laurieston, had quaintly replied that she was merely taking time by the forelock, and that it would save learning the new name by and by.

‘No; John is abroad.’

‘Abroad, and alone, so soon after—after’—here Lady Culross came to a significant pause.

‘Let us go, Lady Culross; I want to talk a great long talk with you,’ Agnes answered hurriedly, and the next moment their cab was rattling along the street.

‘And your father is out of health? I have heard nothing about him for a long time,’ said Lady Culross. ‘Is he very ill?’

Agnes slightly smiled.

‘Not very. His system seems to be run down. We think of going down to Broadstairs for ten days or so. Would it surprise you very much to hear that he is going to marry again?’

Lady Culross laughed as she replied,—

‘My dear, I am never surprised at anything. I hope for your sake it is a suitable marriage.’

‘It is suitable so far as the lady is concerned,’ said Agnes, with a sigh. ‘What I fear is that my father may not be able to make her happy. He has so long had no one to consider but himself.’

‘Or at least he *has* considered no one but himself,’ put in Lady Culross, with good-humoured shrewdness.

‘Well, it *is* so,’ Agnes admitted. ‘He appears to be moved to better things just now; but I confess I cannot be quite sanguine. But it can never be my duty, dear friend, to expose my father’s faults and weaknesses, even to the woman he is going to marry.’

'Most certainly not.'

'Besides, I think he has been very frank with her, and I must hope for the best. When does Sir Gilbert's marriage take place?'

'In October; and I think, my dear, the sensible girl he has won is going to make a man of him,' said Lady Culross gaily. 'Here we are. I have a cosy private room, where lunch will be ready, and where we can talk undisturbed. I confess I want to know how so devoted a wife has allowed her husband to go abroad, while she follows the bent of her own sweet will in London.'

Agnes made no reply until they were alone together at the lunch table, and Lady Culross looked at her with affectionate and questioning eyes.

'My darling, your sorrow has aged you very much, and yet I never thought you more beautiful,' she said significantly. 'You look as if you had the sweetest consolation in your bereavement.'

'If I look so, it is no guarantee that I feel so, Lady Culross,' Agnes answered, in a low voice. 'I am not consoled, nor resigned, nor happy, and my husband and I have parted because we feel differently on these subjects, and are miserable together.'

'Who suggested the parting? I do not think, Agnes, that it would be Mr. Maitland?'

'No; I suggested it. He has gone to Berlin to join Mr. Robertson.'

'Did he not ask you to go?'

'He said something, but he knew that I—why should I hesitate to say it?—he knew that I wished him to leave me for a little.'

'You don't know what you are doing, Agnes. Take care how you pierce that true heart. It is a possible thing that God may have taken away your child to teach you your duty to your husband. Take care that you do not pass that message by.'

It was Lady Culross's opportunity to utter a word in season, and though Agnes answered nothing, she hid and pondered it in her heart.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

'Oh, I remember, and will ne'er forget
Our meeting-spots, our chosen, sacred hours,
Our burning words that uttered all the soul.'



HULLOA, old fellow, how are you ?'

'Can't complain. How are you? Why, you look years older.'

These words of greeting, uttered in the quick, eager fashion, and accompanied by that fervent handclasp which indicates emotion, passed between John Maitland and his friend Robertson at the Central Station in Berlin, on the evening of a fine August day.

'I can hardly believe that it is you,' said Robertson, with his old pleasant smile. 'Yes, you look older; why, there are even some grey hairs there, untimely at your age. Have you much luggage? It could be sent up if you would care to walk home with me. It is a glorious night for a walk.'

'Yes, of course I can walk. This is all I have,' said John, making a motion with the portmanteau in his hand. 'We can carry it between us. It is fine to see you again, but I felt sorry not to look you up at Leipsic. I stopped a night, just for auld lang syne. How do you like your new quarters?'

'They are not new now, you forget. I have been half a year here. I was just thinking of gathering together, and taking a lazy journey home to Mary, when the letter came that you were coming.'

'But why didn't you write and tell me so? Mrs. Gilbert will be disappointed.'

'Not she, for she didn't know I had any such thing in contemplation. Write and put you off, indeed!' said Phil loftily. 'I see you don't know what it is to me to see you again, to have you in the flesh here, without let or hindrance. What did Mrs. Maitland say to this bachelor exploit?'

'She highly approved,' John answered quietly. 'That's fine, Phil, very fine. I never saw a more striking prospect.'

He alluded to the magnificent stretch of Friedrich-Strasse, with its thousands of gleaming lights, which dazzle the eye of the traveller as he enters it from the Central Station.

'Ay, it is fine; I never tire of it. It struck Heine oddly once. He said it reminded him of eternity, though I confess I do not see the analogy. You will like Berlin, I prophesy. It is a city of magnificence, not only of things material, but from an intellectual standpoint. Leipsic, my dear fellow, is a stagnant marsh pool in comparison. I shall show you the new city of my adoption with no small pride, I promise you.'

'Have you sold your birthright, Phil, and bought with it a mess of continental pottage?' laughed John. 'Can no good now come out of Edinburgh, for instance, of which you used to be so proud?'

'Edinburgh, my dear fellow, is a queen of cities so far as her natural graces go; for aught else—' a very expressive shrug finished the sentence. 'But let us not begin to argue these vexed questions. Can't you see I am as a thirsty traveller in the wilderness, longing for news of home? How is Laurieston looking in these long summer days? Are there as many rose-blooms and buds on that south gable yet? And when did the snow disappear from the thorn-tree, where we used to hold such delightful *vereins* in the old days? You see I have forgotten nothing.'

'Everything looks just as it did then. There is no change on the outward face of the old home.'

'Changes there must be within. It is the inexorable law of time,' added Robertson. 'I trust you left your wife well?'

There was a note of tender sympathy in Robertson's voice, which John felt and understood.

'She is well in bodily health, but she has suffered sorely

since her marriage, Phil. There have been times when I feared that it has been all a mistake.'

'Heaven forbid,' was the fervent reply. 'So far as I could judge, I thought there never was a fairer promise of wedded happiness than yours.'

'We can speak of that again. I came to give you my confidence, Phil. That is my selfish errand openly confessed,' John replied. 'My wife and my mother sent their kindest messages, and Effie has sent you a picture of Effie number two. My father did not forget you either. He bade me bring you back with me if I could.'

'We will think of it. Your wife is at Laurieston, then?'

'Yes; but our house of Hallcross is not shut up. I expect she will divide the time. She does not shrink from the place, Phil, though to me it seems the darkest spot on earth. She does not know, of course, the agony it is to me to see the treacherous gleam of that dark river which robbed us of the child. You are well, Robertson, not to bind about yourself such awful ties. When they are riven, the torture would satisfy even the most exacting believers in a real hell. At least, that has been my experience. But there, I did not mean to open out so soon,' he added quickly. 'Tell me about yourself. I don't know that I am very clear about your occupation here.'

'It is not very obscure. I am simply a *privat docent* at the University here, and anthropology is my subject. You know I was grinding it up at Leipsic, and found it more to my mind than chemistry. Fact is, John, I have dabbled too long and too much in many things, and I'm trying to concentrate my dissipated faculties now on one. But I am doing nothing just now.'

'I guessed that. I am glad you find your work congenial. I must say there is more energy in your appearance than I expected. You have disappointed Michael's prophecy. In the very last talk we had that day we walked out to Laurieston together he predicted that you would degenerate into a mere savant, dead to everything outside of books.'

'Michael was not far wrong. I was on the fair road for it. But here the intensity of life is so stirring and soul-absorbing,

that stagnation is impossible. Of course, you know, thought is in the very farthest state of advance here.'

'I suppose it is,' John assented, with but a languid interest.

'For instance, we have Ardmeyer, my greatest friend here, lecturing on the nervous system, and explaining even the highest and holiest emotions as a mere form of energy on the part of the molecules of the brain; and my own science explains or explodes much of the old dogma. There is no doubt that religion's day is over, John. The strongest and greatest minds of the age are agreed on that point.'

'So be it,' John answered, still listlessly; and Robertson perceived that he had not in these questions the eager, burning interest of yore.

Their talk was interrupted, however, by their arrival at the house where Robertson lived, where a substantial dinner awaited them; and when they had enjoyed it, they strolled out of doors again, loath to miss the beauty of the summer night. It was quite dark as they strolled along the magnificent Unter den Linden towards the Brandenburg Gate. The avenues were thronged with citizens and strangers, enjoying the pleasant air and the beauty of the scene. They passed at length through the famous gateway into the Thiergarten, which also presented a lively scene. The moon had now risen, and made a fantastic play of light and shadow through the network of the trees.

'I think we have walked far enough,' said Robertson. 'To-morrow we must come back and see the Schloss yonder, where the king shows himself to the people at the window. Let us sit down here where it is quiet, and talk.'

They chose a bench under a spreading tree, a little removed from the thoroughfare, and there remained undisturbed. John was ready to talk now, and, turning round to his friend, he looked him straight in the face:

'I infer, Phil, from what you said a while ago, that your ideas on religious questions have undergone no change?' he said abruptly.

'Well, that is hardly correct. When I left Scotland I was

in a kind of negative state of mind, open to conviction from any quarter. But I confess my study of the questions since I have been abroad has not conduced to my acceptance of any religious faith. Reason counts for so much here, there is no encouragement whatever given to the cultivation of faith as a virtue.'

'So you have gone over to the other side entirely?'

'Well, yes, I suppose I must say so. I study all the *isms*, and their name is legion. It is a little bewildering at first to find of how very little account Christianity is here. It is simply one subject among many others more or less interesting and engrossing. To men reared as we were in strict orthodoxy, it is, as I say, bewildering. But it is astonishing how very soon one gets used to it. I confess I am strengthened in the conviction that religion is not a necessity to the soul of man.'

'But have you ever been face to face with the fearful realities of life, Phil? It is these things which stagger a man. When I looked on Michael's face in death, I had some curious thoughts. Can they, with all their wisdom, explain away that mystery, or the despair of human hearts over an eternal parting?' asked John, with a kind of quiet passion which betrayed something of his inner emotions.

'They explain it to their own satisfaction, I suppose,' said Robertson, with a slight hesitation, for he detected the perturbed state of his friend's mind, and knew very well that though he spoke of Michael he was thinking of a more recent loss. 'When a man resolves in his own mind that this life is all, his philosophy aids him to endure the sorrows which nature, in her ordinary course of development, must entail upon all humanity.'

'That is not possible for me,' John made answer, and, rising to his feet, took some hurried steps across the sward. 'Phil,—I am the most miserable of men. I would give twenty years, nay, all my life, to be able to believe as Agnes does that we shall find the child in another and a better world. You know nothing of the storms which have shaken our home to its very foundations. The difference of opinion regarding these matters

has estranged from me my wife, whom I love better than my own soul. She hates me because she thinks I deny to the little one we have lost, any right to a future life. If that were all, perhaps I might be able to bear it, that is, if I had the strength of assured conviction to fall back upon. But I have not even that. There is in my heart an intolerable horror at the very thought of that young life, full of promise, having gone down to the grave for ever. The soul revolts from it. Do you mean to say that a being endowed with such exquisite faculties—he was no common child, Phil, although he was my own—should simply be quenched in utter darkness after such a short and fitful gleam of life. To my mind, that cannot stand to reason. I have got the length of believing that there is further development, that life is continued somehow and somewhere beyond; but I want the connecting link, and, God helping me, I shall not rest until it is revealed to me.'

Robertson held his peace. He had no words wherewith to answer the passionate outburst from John's lips. 'I should think,' he said, after a long pause, and speaking slowly,—'I should think that at such a point your wife should be an invaluable aid. To one searching after faith, the experience and wise counsel of one whose faith has always been steadfast should be a great help.'

'I see you do not understand,' John answered, with a visible touch of impatience. 'Mrs. Maitland's faith is so unassailable that she has no patience with me. She cannot understand why any human soul *should* doubt. I wish—I wish my brother Michael had lived.'

Had Agnes heard these words, her eyes would have been opened. A good woman, unselfish and conscientious beyond the average, she had yet, through some strange perversion of ideas, neglected and passed by her first and most precious duty. In these dark days, she had not been to her husband all she might,—all she had in the earlier days so ardently hoped to be.

'Your mother'—began Robertson; but John shook his head.

'I do not have the confidential talks I used to have with my mother. I could not well talk with her on these subjects without letting her know how my wife and I are divided upon them. So I have kept silence, because I know it is my wife's desire that that should not be known, even to my mother, who loves us both so well. It is different with you, and the time has come when I must speak to some one. Although I said nothing to Agnes, she divined my object in coming here. We have lived a miserable life since the thirteenth of June.'

Robertson remembered that was the date of little Michael's death.

'She said to me, Phil, on the day we buried him, that she hoped she would have no more children. I knew what she meant, but they were sharp words for me to hear. I think she did not quite know *how* they hurt. Even the best of women can be strangely cruel at times. I don't suppose it entered into her head that her suffering in comparison with mine was *nil*.'

'I wish I could help you, from the bottom of my heart I do,' said Robertson fervently.

'You *are* helping me, letting me pour out my soul to you. Oh, man, it is a relief! I have been pent up, at home, till life became intolerable to me. I have even understood, Phil, what was before a mystery to me, how men might be tempted to end it all in a coward's grave.'

Robertson reached out his hand and touched his friend's arm, and a slight smile came on John's lips. The moonlight lay clear and broad and white upon him where he stood. He seemed to feel the tenderness of its touch, and, taking off his hat, uplifted his face to the clear and starlit sky.

'You have done me good already, Phil. Let us not talk any more about me and my woes to-night. Come and let us follow the throng, and try to forget that there is such a thing as sorrow in the world.'

'I am sorry, in a sense, that you have come in holiday time, for all my students and the most of my friends are out of town. Had you come a month earlier, we should have held a *kneipe* in your honour,' said Robertson. 'Do you remember

that night at Leipsic long ago, when the discussion got so hot that we were glad to escape, in case the combatants came to blows ?'

'Yes, I remember it well. But Leipsic is very orthodox and respectable, I am told, in comparison with Heidelberg or Bonn. You have heard me speak of Harry Christie, one of my own students, studying for the Church. He is at Heidelberg just now, and writes thrilling accounts of the life to Mrs. Maitland. He was in horror the other week over the first duel he had seen. What a brutal practice it is !'

'Very ; but it seems a concomitant of continental university life. Taking it all round, though, it is a pleasanter, freer, more generous life than what we shared at our Alma Mater. For instance, the professors here, even the most learned and famous, address their hearers as fellow-students, and at once put themselves on a footing with them. There is a fine fitness in it, John ; for, after all, what are the best and most accomplished but students, seeking to drink deeper at the fount of knowledge ? Still, can you imagine our dignified profs. in Edinburgh so unbending themselves ? The line between teacher and taught is too harshly drawn, and so a measure of influence is lost. Why, man, such class-room rows as we used to see and often assist in are utterly unknown here. There is a sympathy and an affection in the relation between the professor and the student which has amazed and touched me profoundly.'

'That is encouraging. I like to hear it,' answered John. 'There is no doubt that the influence of personality is great. It is important that the bond of humanity and brotherhood should always be kept to the front.'

'I hope that when you mount the professorial chair, John, you will be a bright and shining light,' said Robertson, with a kind of affectionate banter. 'See how we have wandered from the throng already. This is the Philosophers' Alley, John, so called because Hegel and Schelling used to walk here daily. Can you fancy the feast of reason and the flow of soul to which only the birds and the stirring leaves were listeners during these walks ?'

'Perhaps they sometimes improved the time by strict silence,' John answered, a trifle absently. 'The solitude of this place and the solemnity of the night impresses me deeply. I feel as if I did not want to talk even to you.'

'I understand you. Our friendship is of sufficient "grit" to bear silence,' Robertson answered, with a smile, and it was almost in unbroken silence that they retraced their steps to the city.



CHAPTER XXIX.

'Think, when our one soul understands
The great Word which makes all things new,
When earth breaks up, and Heaven expands,
How will the change strike me and you
In the house not made with hands?'

DURING the days of close intercourse which followed, Robertson was enabled perfectly to discern the bent of John Maitland's mind. He was entirely weaned away from the old themes which had once been of such surpassing interest. He no longer cared to discuss with fervour and eagerness the various theories which sought to set at naught faith in revealed religion. Formerly, it had been a triumph and a delight to him to find any new and convincing argument against Christianity, as it had been taught to him; but it was evident now that his desire was reversed. He was eager in pursuit of all that would go to confirm the supremacy and power of Christianity. He loved to seek evidences of the Divine attributes of the Lord Jesus. Robertson, standing aside, while not sharing in these desires, had yet a kind of warm and wide sympathy with them. Although a lonely man, with few ties of love or kindred, he understood that in his friend's case it was the heart of the man and the father crying out for something to fill the aching void which death had made.

Because the child of his love had gone beyond his ken, he wished—nay, passionately longed—for the power of simple faith to pierce the mystic veil which separates the seen from the unseen.

Robertson's heart was filled with a profound compassion for

him. He even hoped that belief might become possible to him, though none knew better than he how difficult—nay, how well-nigh impossible—it is for the doubting heart to come back to the old standpoint. They had many long talks. There was nothing in the philosophy of human life they did not discuss; and though Robertson, of course, steadfast in his own Agnosticism, could not give his friend any impetus heavenward, still his companionship was a distinct benefit to John Maitland. It was not only a fresh companionship, but the friendship he had proved was in itself a very satisfying and comforting thing. They were like brothers during the weeks spent in the German capital; and in the third week of September they left it together. During his residence abroad John had received constant letters from his wife, and he knew her movements up to the last. She had been at Broadstairs with her father for a fortnight, and left London for Scotland on the day they left Berlin. John was surprised at the last intimation, the first arrangement being that she should wait in London till he came to take her home. Her letters, while they had been very precious to him, revealing as they did without reserve the deep love she bore him, had sometimes puzzled him. She seemed to have something on her mind; to be constantly reproaching herself with duty undone, especially with her shortcomings in her relations with him. In his letters he had striven to reassure her; but his tender assurance of love and unspeakable trust seemed only to distress her. He gathered from her letters that she was finding the separation from him hard to bear; and though it had been intolerable to him, he could not regret it, since it had shown to each the other's heart. The news that Agnes had already returned to Scotland changed their plan of travel. They parted at Paris; Robertson to reach London by Calais and Dover, John to get his uncle's steamer at Dunkirk for Leith. He did not send any intimation of his home-coming. He had a strange desire to meet his wife unawares, and he believed he should find her at Hallcross.

It was a misty, raw afternoon when the steamer anchored in her dock at Leith. John felt glad that his uncle was not there to see her come in, and hurried away, not caring to see or speak

with any. He took train from Leith to Portobello, and from thence walked home. The rain cleared off as he walked, and the sky broke overhead, showing sweet glimpses of blue, whereby and by the stars began to glimmer with a kind of shy, uncertain brightness. The tide was in, and the sea so calm and motionless, that the waves breaking on the sandy shore had scarcely a murmur to impart to the night. It was a quiet and lonely road, dark and dreary enough on a moonless autumn night; but the very darkness and stillness were unspeakably soothing to the heart of the man who had so often walked that familiar way. He did not hasten; and though his mind seemed overflowing with many thoughts, yet none seemed to have a definite shape. He felt strangely removed from the busy life of men, with its fever of unrest and struggling, almost like one standing upon some lonely shore waiting—for what, he could not tell. He seemed to have been in that state of dreamy waiting for days. On board the steamer in the North Sea he had paced the deck for many hours, looking over the tossing expanse of wave and foam, thinking much, and yet oppressed by that strange sense of unnatural calm. It was the reaction after the fierce heat of the battle, but he did not know what it might forebode. He knew that within an hour his wife's head would be on his breast,—that he should hold to his heart what was dearest to him on earth; but the thought did not quicken his pulse nor send any unwonted thrill to his heart. Once or twice he looked up to the sky, watching the gradual, exquisite brightening of the stars, and the rain-clouds rolling swiftly towards the sea.

Soon the familiar lights of the little town began to gleam in the near distance; and just as he crossed the High Street, keeping the spire of the church in view, the town clock rang seven. Once more he strode up the Loan, and reached the way-worn steps which led to the kirkyard, the gates of which were never closed. He did not keep the straight course through it, but turned aside, as was natural, to the burying-ground of the Maitlands. It was evident that no rain had fallen on the hill, for the short, smooth turf was dry, and not a drop glittered on tree or flower. Two white rose-trees, planted by a Maitland a

generation before, were still covered by a mass of white bloom, and hung low over the headstones, almost hiding the lettering on one. But at the other side the branches had been fastened back while the sculptor had chiselled a new name, and so had been left. The cloud had rolled away from the moon's face, and a broad white light bathed the old kirkyard in its radiant flood. By that mystic and solemn light John Maitland read for the first time the new name upon the stone,—with surprise, it must be confessed, not knowing that any order had been given regarding it :

Here also sleeps

MICHAEL RANKINE,

BELOVED AND ONLY CHILD OF JOHN AND AGNES MAITLAND,

*Who died on the 13th June 18—, aged one year
and three months.*

'FORBID THEM NOT, FOR OF SUCH IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.'

A slight shudder shook the strong man as he bent his face upon his hands. 'Forbid them not.' The words were a direct reproach to him. He read in them the secret anguish of a mother's soul,—a protest against the creed which had sought to rob her child of his inheritance, and her heart of its immortal and sustaining hope. An intolerable agony of desire took possession of his soul. He took off his hat and uplifted his haggard face to the sweet heavens which smiled placidly upon him. There was prayer—nay, imploring entreaty—in that upward and steadfast look. It was as if he sought to penetrate the heavens, to demand that their secret should be revealed to him. After a time his head lowered on his breast, and he knelt down until his forehead touched the letters of his son's name. These words broke the deep stillness of the night :—

'Lord, I believe ! Help Thou mine unbelief !'

Agnes had spent the greater part of that day at Laurieston. The servants had been left in charge of Hallcross during her absence in London, and, though she returned unexpectedly, she

found everything in good order, for they were faithful girls, who gave the service of love. She found the time hang heavily, and yet did not care to be long, or far away from the house, lest her husband should return to find it empty. She expected him to come by the London train, and did not dream that day, when she watched from the window at Laurieston the Dunkirk boat steaming up the Firth, who was standing at the bow.

They knew all Uncle Walter's boats by the colour of their funnels. As children, they had loved to watch them come and go upon the sea. It was a very quiet house at Laurieston now, except when Effie's two wee girles came over, and made in the old rooms something of the music of yore. Their grandfather made much of them, and allowed them to tease and wheedle him in a way which made his wife sometimes wonder. It is a curious and a beautiful thing to see the love and forbearance of the grandparents towards the third generation. Children's children seem to have some wonderful and potent charm; or perhaps it is that the old come back very gently and beautifully to understand the child-life, and even to participate in the child-like spirit. It ever seems to me like a preparation for that kingdom of which it is written that, except ye become as little children, ye cannot enter therein. Maitland of Laurieston had certainly changed. The old rugged, bristling points in his character had been so gently mellowed by the hand of circumstance and time, that scarcely a trace remained. The fine spirit of charity had entered into the man and changed his whole life. Blessed are they on whom sorrow has such a sweet influence.

Although he was fond of his two little grand-daughters, the untimely end of his son's son had been a great blow. His pride in that noble boy had been a pride of no ordinary kind. In him he seemed to see blossom anew the hope of his youth. He had even looked forward into the far years, and pictured him Maitland of Laurieston. There had been no talk for a long time about Wat's succession to the place, and in the spring he was to leave with his young wife for the new world. It was understood, therefore, in a tacit, unacknowledged way, that John's birthright, which he had given up for the higher dream of his youth, was to be restored to him. Michael Maitland had

changed his opinion on many points, and now saw nothing incongruous in the idea of a college professor being also Laird of Laurieston.

His deep sorrow for the loss of little Michael made him peculiarly tender with his son's wife. Sometimes, even yet, Effie would experience a jealous pang, when she saw the two together, Agnes with her arm through his, and often her head touching his shoulder, as they walked. But Margaret Maitland loved to see them thus. She could not forget that in the old days, when his own children had harshly judged him, Agnes had remained loyal and loving to Maitland of Laurieston. She alone, indeed, of all the household, had given him his due.

Agnes walked half-way with Effie across the moonlit fields after tea that evening, and then took the shortest path back to Hallcross. In spite of all their teasing, she would not sleep a night out of her own home, and that day she seemed in a fever to be back. The blinds were not down in the dining-room windows, and, as she glanced through the jessamine sprays, she thought what a bright and homely picture it was. The ruddy firelight cast its glow all over the pretty room, lending to the crimson tints of carpet and hangings a warmer and more brilliant hue. The tea-tray was on the table still, very daintily set with the delicate china and rare silver in which the housewifely soul of the mistress of Hallcross delighted. A bowl of late roses stood on the sideboard, and the delicate greenery of the treasured plants and ferns added the finishing touch. But Agnes sighed as she stepped hastily into the room and shut the door. What were these things, though pleasing to the eye, in comparison with the living presence which is the light of the home? She stood by the hearth a moment and rested her left hand on the mantelpiece, while her cloak fell partially from her shoulders. When John passed by the window presently, that was the picture which met his eye. He noted the listlessness of her attitude, the downcast and wistful look on the sweet face, and when presently he saw her bend her head and touch with her lips the plain band of her wedding ring, his eyes grew strangely dim. That simple and unconscious act was an earnest of his welcome home.

She heard the opening of the door, and gave a great start, though she did not move a step. But when he came into the room she ran to him, with all the passion of her love glowing in her face, and clasped her arms about his neck.

'John! John! Thank God! My husband. I think I could not have borne it another day.'

'My wife!'

These two words expressed all that was in his heart. The joy of that reunion was greater than either had anticipated. It seemed to fill their hearts to overflowing.

'John, forgive me; I have been so poor a wife. I have been so wicked and selfish, dear, and have given you so little for the love you have lavished on me. I shall never forgive myself. But if you will help me, I will be a better wife. Never again, never while I live, shall I forget what you have been and are. It only needed this separation to let me know it; and so, though it has been so hard, it has been a blessed thing for me.'

She would not let him speak. She put her hand on his lips, and looked into his eyes, her own luminous as he had never yet seen them.

'God has used it to show me the hardness of my heart. Before you say the words of love for which my heart has been hungering, tell me you forgive me for all I said when we buried baby.'

'Hush, my darling, hush!'

He spoke with an infinite tenderness, and held her closer to him, for she was trembling from head to foot.

'No; I must speak. There is so much to say. Let me say it all at once. There is more to forgive even than you know,' she said, with a break in her voice; 'I had the name put on when you were away, and it has some words on it which will grieve you. Perhaps others may not know,—but I meant them to make you feel hurt. I shall be ashamed for you to read them, but I must tell you, so that you may forgive me.'

'My dearest, I read them; and God made them His message to me.'

She raised her head and looked at him, with parted lips and eyes full of mute and intense questioning.

'He has been slowly leading me, my Agnes, by a way I knew not. The agency of parting with the child made my soul begin to question whither he had gone, and after a fearful struggling I have obtained a glimpse of light. I feel even as if your faith might become possible for me.'

'John!'

He never forgot the breathless and broken utterance of his name, nor the look which accompanied it.

'It will be but a weary and painful stumbling towards the goal you have so long reached,' he said, with a strange touch of sadness. 'I have followed the path of the unbeliever at my own painful cost. I do not suppose that the peace of full assurance will ever be mine. It is impossible to return without a scar after such a battle as mine has been.'

'With God all things are possible,' said Agnes, and her whole face shone.

'Yes; and your prayers with and for me will help me on,' he said, with a look of peculiar and significant tenderness. 'I feel the selfishness of my desire. Human love would not consent to an eternal parting. It prompted me continually to seek for some more satisfying solution of the mystery of death. But God will be merciful to me, wife. He will not judge us for the very feelings He has given us. But the way will be toilsome for me. Pray that what has been revealed to me to-night by Michael's grave be but an earnest of better days to come.'

He put his arm about her, and they knelt down together. In that long silence many deep thoughts were hid,—ay, and many prayers, which were heard in Heaven and answered in peace.

THE END.

