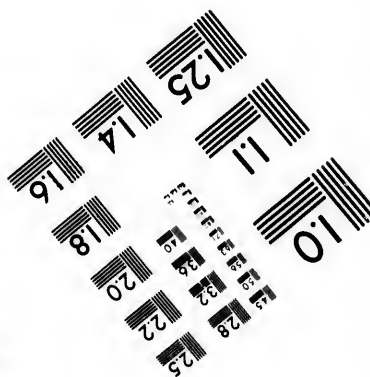
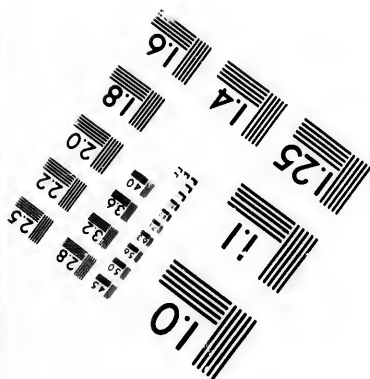
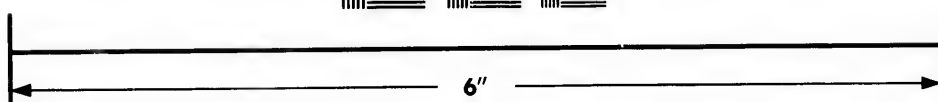
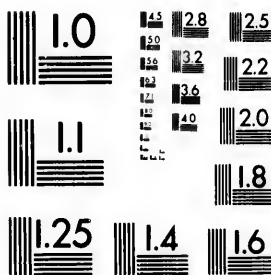


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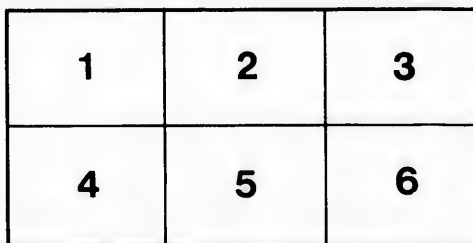
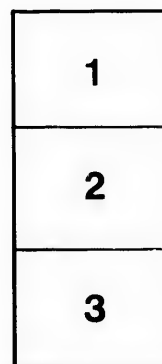
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# A STRANGE MESSAGE

BY

DORA RUSSELL

AUTHOR OF "FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW," "BENEATH THE WAVE,"  
ETC., ETC.

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# A STRANGE MESSAGE.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE MESSAGE.

It came neither by the post nor the telegraph wires ; it was lying on the toilet-table of a handsome young woman when she went up to dress for dinner, before entertaining a party of her friends and neighbors, and this strange communication concerned one of these guests.

It was an ordinary enough looking letter that Leonora Stewart lifted so carelessly and opened with indifference. She thought it was some account, and yet the envelope was thicker and the writing different to what is common on tradesmen's bills. It contained only a few lines, but as Miss Stewart read these her face first flushed deeply, and then grew extremely pale. The words that caused this emotion were very brief :

"If you have any regard for your future happiness and reputation, have nothing further to do with James Biddulph."

The girl read and re-read this message with a beating, troubled heart. "Who could have written it ? Who could dare to write it ?" she asked herself again and again. She thought of the people staying in the house—Maud and Alice Lee ; of her dead father's cousin, Mrs. Conway-Hope ; but they had scarcely seen Mr. Biddulph, certainly could know nothing of his life.

Then she rang the bell sharply, and her maid appeared.

"Palmer," she asked, pointing to the letter on the dressing-table, "did you put that letter there."

"Yes, miss, I did," answered Palmer : "Alfred gave it to me, and, as you were having tea, I thought I would not disturb you, so I laid it there."

"Where did Alfred get it ? Go down and ask him, please."

Miss Stewart read the disquieting words again in the absence of her maid, and when Palmer appeared she looked eagerly round.

"Well?" she asked.

"Alfred says, miss, that a lady rang at the hall door, and desired him to give it to you at once."

"A lady? What sort of lady? Ask Alfred what the lady was like."

In a short time Palmer once more returned.

"He says, miss, she was quite the lady—a youngish lady."

"And—did he know her by sight? Was she one of the people about here?"

"No, miss, he says not; she spoke like a South-Country lady."

Leonora Stewart asked no more questions.

"Help me to dress," she said; "I am afraid I am late."

But before she descended to the drawing-room to receive her guests, she carefully locked away the mysterious letter, taking care that her maid did not see where she placed it.

Then (also after Palmer left the room) she went to the looking-glass, and stood for a few moments examining her own face. A handsome woman, with her white skin and dark hair and eyes, in which there was a certain nobleness of expression that betokened a lofty soul. There was, indeed, nothing small nor mean about this young English-woman, who had but recently inherited the Scottish home in which we find her. She was the daughter and only child of the late Anthony Cust, a well-known London lawyer, and his Scotch wife, Janet Stewart; and it was from her mother's relations that Leonora Stewart had come into possession of the small estate and large house of Rossmore, which stands on the very verge of one of the most beautiful lochs in the Western Highlands.

But there was a condition attached to this bequest, which came from her late mother's brother—the last owner of Rossmore—Leonora was to become a Stewart also if she inherited the old laird's scanty acres, and the girl was quite ready to do this. She knew well the beautiful and romantic home that was to become hers; for each year, when the yellow corn was ripening on the braes, Mrs. Cust had taken her only child to visit the old house, where she herself had been born. And these visits had filled Leonora's young heart with an almost passionate

love for the blue lochs and wild mountains of her mother's land.

Thus she became Miss Stewart of Rossmore when she was a girl of about twenty-two, and Mr. Cust had also left her a moderate fortune. She was not rich, but still very far from poor. Her father's cousin, Mrs. Conway-Hope, a widow of small means, had proposed to live with her when she came into the Scotch property, but Leonora had declined.

"I shall always be pleased to see you, to stay with me, Cousin Margaret," she had answered with a smile, "but as a visitor."

"But the world, Nora ;" said Mrs. Conway-Hope, with much gravity, for she was disappointed at not securing a permanent home.

"So I do consider it."

"Then, are you not too young, dear, not to have a chaperon constantly living under your roof?"

"I shall always have friends with me."

"Yes ; but mere friends are not to be depended on, Nora. I never knew, until poor Conway left me, how sad and dreary it is to have no one to love and cling to. We could be so happy together, I am sure."

Nevertheless, Leonora did not accept her relation's proposal ; but Mrs. Conway-Hope was a frequent visitor both at Rossmore and Leonora's small house in town. And she was staying at Rossmore when Miss Stewart received the strange message that had so greatly disturbed her. But Leonora did not make a confidante of her father's cousin on the subject.

And as she entered her drawing-room to receive her expected guests, she found Mrs. Conway-Hope already seated there.

A gaunt, gray woman this, with a tall shapeless form, and a manner that jarred on your nerves somehow like a discordant sound.

"Well, dear," she said, rising as Leonora appeared, and looking at her scrutinizingly with her short-sighted eyes, "and are you ready? So you've got on your new red plush. Well, it's a handsome material, but I am afraid the color does not quite become you. It makes you look so pale."

"I am sorry you don't like it, Cousin Margaret," answered Leonora, feeling as we all do when we are told that we are not looking well.

"I like the *dress*, dear, but I don't think it suits you. No, Nora, it does not," she added, with decision.

Nora felt annoyed. She had particularly wished to look well this evening, and, in truth, the deep rich hue of her gown became admirably her fair skin and dark hair. But when we are told a thing as a fact, our minds naturally veer toward believing that there must be something in it; and therefore Mrs. Conway-Hope, having succeeded in making Nora regard her new plush with disfavor, resumed her seat, feeling that she had made the kindest possible remarks to her young relation.

But this lady had a natural aptitude to be disagreeable, and probably could not help it, for she esteemed herself one of the saints of earth. She also esteemed herself a master, or rather a mistress, of the art of conversation; and as Nora Stewart's guests began to assemble, she placed herself near first one shrinking man and then the other, and at last succeeded in driving the good-tempered, jovial-faced clergyman of the parish into a convenient corner, where she firmly kept him until dinner was announced.

Nora's party consisted almost entirely of young people. Two pretty English girls—Maud and Alice Lee—were staying in the house, and were in love for the time being with everything Scotch, including young Malcolm Fraser, one of Nora Stewart's neighbors. This young Highlander, and his pretty sister Minnie Fraser, were among the first to arrive.

"And where are Mr. and Mrs. Fraser?" asked Nora.

"My mother sent her love," answered Minnie, whose hair was of such pale gold color as to look almost white, "and she could not leave my father to-night; his rheumatism is so bad."

"What poor women have to come to, you see," said Maud Lee coquettishly to young Fraser, after hearing this explanation.

As the young girl said this, "Mr. Biddulph," was announced, and a tall, grave-faced, distinguished-looking man walked rather slowly into the room; and as he did so, a brighter light stole into Nora Stewart's dark eyes, and a flush came on her fair cheeks, which had been so pale before.

"I am afraid I am late," said Mr. Biddulph, courteously, as he shook hands with his young hostess; "but the loch is so rough to-night we had to tack a bit before we could cross."

"I saw it was rough before it got dark," answered Miss Stewart.

"It's very antallizing, isn't it? I can see Rossmore so plainly from my place, and yet I have been more than half an hour in getting here to-night;" and he looked at his watch.

"You are my nearest neighbor, as the crow flies, you know."

"I wish I were a crow, then; no, I don't think I do—the sable-winged bird has so many bad qualities."

"Oh, the poor crows!" laughed Leonora.

"They are a noisy, quarrelsome set; bad neighbors to my mind—bad to eat—and bad for the wheat."

"I must confess I like to hear them caw, and see them veering about in their mysterious fashion among the old trees."

"That is because you are young and romantic," said Mr. Biddulph, smiling, and looking admiringly at Leonora's face with his gray eyes, in which there was much thought and some sadness. "And do you still like your wild eyrie up here?" he added.

"I love Rossmore—I have always loved it. I used to come here, you know, when I was a little child, with my mother. I remember Colonel Biddulph so well, though we seldom saw him."

"I scarcely knew my uncle; but he was a grim old man."

"He was rather a misanthrope, was he not? Yet he must have been very kind to think of me as he did."

"He hated the world and its crooked ways, or the world hated him. We are apt to become sour when we are disappointed, don't you think?"

"I have not been disappointed yet."

"No; it's a bitter draught—bitterest of all to be disappointed in one's self."

Leonard looked up with interest in Mr. Biddulph's face, but his eyes were cast down.

"I intended you," said Leonora, a moment later, with that soft blush of hers which made her so lovely, "to take my cousin, after the Scotch fashion—Mrs. Fraser, of Airdlinn—in to dinner this evening; but only the young people are here. Therefore——"

"May I take my neighbor and hostess?"

"If you like."

"I more than like. Being the oldest man in the room, except the parson, I have been indulging in certain grue-



some visions of having to escort the lady in black—I forget her name—whom I had the honor of sitting next to the last time I dined here."

"You mean my father's cousin, Mrs. Conway-Hope," laughed Leonora. "Well, I fully enter into your feelings. Just before you came, she threw a whole bucket of cold water over my self-conceit; she told me my new gown did not become me."

"It would be presumption, I suppose, to say what I think of the new gown?"

"Indeed, no; my ruffled vanity wants a little smoothing down."

But the implied compliment was never paid. Dinner was announced, and Leonora was forced to think of her guests. The Rev. Andrew Macdonald was carried off in triumph by Mrs. Conway-Hope, and Malcolm Fraser was obliged to offer his arm, with a somewhat lowering brow, to one of the pretty English girls. But there was suppressed wrath in the young Highlander's blue eyes, and anger and jealousy in his heart, when he saw Nora Stewart (as the Fraser family always called her) select Mr. Biddulph to take her in to dinner. In point of etiquette, Leonora was quite right, for Mr. Biddulph was the greatest stranger present; but this did not make the matter any better to the young man, who was certainly in love.

Leonora was a good hostess, for a bright, clever woman ever is one. Still, the unhappy Rev. Andrew Macdonald did not enjoy his dinner. He was taken to task during the soup on various occult and theoretical subjects, on which it must be admitted the poor Scotch minister was not conversant; his tormentor, for that matter, being nearly equally at sea. But Mrs. Conway-Hope was one of those women who make a few terms try to pass for knowledge, and the Rev. Andrew had not presence of mind to perceive this. His rosy face grew hot, his stalwart form shrunk visibly away from the searching eyes fixed on him, and the continuous questions poured upon his unwilling ears.

"Poor fellow!" said Mr. Biddulph in a low tone to Leonora, looking with sincere pity at the distressed clergyman; "I really must try to help him. Mrs. Conway-Hope," he said, raising his voice and addressing that lady, who turned swiftly round, "what do you think of the last new materialist idea?"

The conversation that followed was satisfactory to them both. Mrs. Conway-Hope rushed delightedly into the

fray, and Mr. Biddulph had the pleasure of exposing her ignorance without her perceiving it, and perhaps also of airing his own opinions; and the relief to the Scotch minister, as it were, was great. But it was greater still when the ladies rose to leave the table; then the Rev. Macdonald actually breathed a sigh.

"What an extraordinary woman!" he said pensively to Mr. Biddulph, to whom he felt very grateful.

"Truly awful," replied Mr. Biddulph, with a laugh.

In the meanwhile Mrs. Conway-Hope was giving her opinion of the two gentlemen in the drawing-room.

"There is nothing in that poor Scotch clergyman," she said; "but Mr. Biddulph is a clever man."

The "clever man," however, avoided the snare she laid to entrap him again into conversation when he returned to the drawing-room. The moon had risen, and was shining on the gray towers of Rossmore, and on the dusky steps below.

"Come out on the terrace, Miss Stewart," he said, approaching Leonora, and feeling sure that in October Mrs. Conway-Hope must have rheumatism in some part of her angular form. "You love the moonlight, I am quite sure."

"And how are you sure?" asked Leonora, smiling.

"By certain signs and tokens; by that wondrous sympathy which makes some natures open to us, while others are a blank, dull page."

They went out together, and stood there in the silvered darkness of the night. At first both were almost silent. The great stillness around, the weird white shadows where the moonbeams crept through the tall dark firs, the thoughts in their own hearts, perhaps, made their lips grow dumb.

Leonora was thinking, "Shall I tell him, tell him he has an enemy close at hand trying to do him harm." And Mr. Biddulph was thinking, "This is the sweetest woman. If I were but free!" And he gave an impatient sigh.

Leonora heard that sigh, and glanced up at her companion's pale, grave face, on which at this moment a glinting moonbeam shone. But the other young people had now followed the example of their hostess, and appeared on the terrace. Malcolm Fraser was hiding his injured feelings by an animated conversation with Miss Maud Lee; the Rev. Andrew Macdonald, in his mild way, was devoting himself to the younger sister; and Mrs. Conway-Hope,

mentally thinking how very ill-bred it was of Nora to leave her alone, had taken refuge in a novel.

And while her guests are thus amusing themselves, we may as well learn something more of this James Biddulph, whom Leonora Stewart had just been so mysteriously warned not to put her trust in.

Across the broad blue waters of the loch, which lap round three sides of the jutting headland on which stands the house of Rossmore, a gray substantial stone mansion is to be seen, which some twenty-five years ago was built by a certain Colonel Biddulph, an Englishman, who lived and died there.

A gloomy, disappointed man this, who, it was said, chose this lonely but lovely spot to end his days in, far away from the friends of his youth and manhood. And he sought no new ones. He buried himself here alone, with his books, and perhaps vague dreams and theories, which satisfied his peculiar mind better than the passing pleasures of the world. A man must have something to hope and live for, and maybe this grim old hermit had fixed his hopes on a higher standard than those with whom he used to live. At all events he sought no fellowship with his kind, and an accident only introduced him to his neighbor, Mr. Stewart of Rossmore.

It was in the bitter winter weather, and the loch was rough and dangerous, but this did not deter Colonel Biddulph from crossing the water whenever it suited his convenience to do so. And one dark December afternoon, as he was returning to Dunbaan—so his property was named—a squall struck his light boat, and the old man and his boatman were in imminent danger of their lives as they struggled in the rough and icy surge.

The accident was seen from the windows of Rossmore, and the gallant laird lost no time in hurrying to the assistance of his ungenial neighbor. Risking his own life by doing so, Stewart had a boat launched, and, with one of his keepers, put off to endeavor to save the almost exhausted men in the water; and it was only after desperate efforts they were able to do this, and Colonel Biddulph was carried into the house of Rossmore in an entirely unconscious condition.

When he recovered, his cold stoicism melted before the natural gratitude of his heart, and from that day Stewart of Rossmore was a welcome guest under his roof. And occasionally, also, he would cross the loch, and talk to the

laird in that hard, stern fashion of his, in which he ever put the worst coloring on the motives of his fellow-men. Thus Leonora had seen Colonel Biddulph, and the colonel knew it was his friend's intention to leave his ancestral acres to his sister's child.

As years wore on Mr. Stewart died, and Leonora came into possession of Rossmore; and a year later, far away from kith and kin, the stern old man who lived at Dunbaan also passed away from a world in which some blight had evidently fallen on the years of his earlier manhood.

After he was gone, every one who had lived around him wondered who would be his successor. His elder brother, General Biddulph, was dead also, and had left a widow but no children. There was, however, a third Biddulph, a lawyer, and a shrewd man, who had amassed a considerable fortune, and who lived still, and was naturally supposed to be his brother's heir.

But he was not. Dunbaan and a large sum of money were left to the son of this lawyer, James Biddulph, a barrister, and a man of some thirty years; and after a little while, about two months before Leonora Stewart received a strange message about her neighbor, the new owner had come to stay at Dunbaan.

He made Leonora's acquaintance by bringing over to Rossmore a bequest which his uncle had left to the niece of his old friend. This bequest consisted of a valuable diamond necklace. The colonel had never been married, and Leonora's neighbors wondered where the old man had picked up this splendid heirloom, which he now had left to a stranger, probably out of gratitude to the laird.

Be this as it may, the old man's gift drew the two young people into a sudden intimacy. This was but natural. It was a bond between them, and between them also was a strong mutual attraction.

Nevertheless, when James Biddulph descended the steep road which led from Leonora's house, after her party was over, and her guests had begun to separate, on his way to the boat, which had to convey him across the loch, there was a frown upon his brow, and an angry, dissatisfied feeling in his heart.

"When a man," he was thinking, impatiently cutting at a tall bracken with his walking-stick, "has hung a rope round his neck, he may as well hang himself."

There was a silver track upon the waters of the loch, and the whole scene was one of grand and serene beauty,

but James Biddulph scarcely noticed this. He was thinking of the fair woman he had left behind, and of the light in her dark eyes as he had clasped her hand in parting.

"But it cannot be, I suppose," he muttered gloomily; and in no happy mood he at length reached the gray old mansion, standing amid the dark trees, that his uncle had left him.

As he passed up the avenue there glided from behind one of these trees the figure of a woman, whose face was thickly veiled. This woman had watched his boat cross the silver moon-track on the loch; had watched and waited long hours to see him pass, and now slowly followed him unseen.

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## CHAPTER II.

MRS. JOCK FRASER.

Mr. Biddulph was Leonora Stewart's nearest neighbor at Rossmore; but from the lofty headland where she lived she also could plainly see the Frasers' house at Airdlinn, which was situated on the same side of the loch as Dunbaan, though a considerable distance lay between them.

On the morning after her "young people" had dined with Leonora, about eleven o'clock, Mrs. Fraser of Airdlinn, entered the breakfast-room of her house, dressed for walking. A tall woman, with rosy cheeks and bright blue eyes, and a full form, and a stalwart step. She was dressed in homespun, and wore a black hat, and carried a stout stick, and looked strong alike in body and in mind.

Her husband, Jock Fraser of Airdlinn, as he was commonly called, was crouching over the fire, unhappy man! with a black woollen comforter wrapped round his head, and a racking pain in his swollen, stiffened jaws.

"Jock, I am going out," began Mrs. Jock, approaching him. "I must see about getting that poor helpless woman's pigs sold, and I mean to go round and ask all the neighbors to take one."

"Well, my dear," answered Jock meekly, lifting his brown and usually humorous eyes to his wife's good-looking face. His expression at this moment, however, was anything but humorous; there was endurance in it, and nothing more.

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"And I think," continued Mrs. Jock, "that there would be no possible harm in my calling on that young Biddulph? The young people met him last night at Nora Stewart's, and Minnie tells me he is a fine-looking man. I think I shall call. What do you say, Jock?"

Jock, who was past jealousy, and all other feelings of humanity but his toothache, assented with a groan.

"Then I shall cross the loch and go on to Nora Stewart's, and from Rossmore to your brother Alick's."

"That will do no good," groaned Jock.

"Well, I shall try."

"You may *try*;" and for the first time a grim smile stole round Mr. Fraser's lips, which, however, was instantly suppressed by a sharp pang of agony.

"Poor old man!" said Mrs. Fraser, commiseratingly, and affectionately patting her husband's broad shoulders. "I am afraid the pain is very bad."

Jock found no words to reply; and Mrs. Fraser, having seen after his comforts (though, indeed, he found none), and after doing everything she could for him—for she was a good wife—strode away on her errand of mercy, and the unhappy Jock was left by his fireside.

And now let us follow Mrs. Jock, trudging along with steady, equal steps through a drizzling mist on her way to her new neighbor's at Dunbaan. The path was rough, and the air so thick with moisture that on each blade and leaf hung a trembling drop of dew, and before, around her, and behind her, all was shadow-land. The mist wrapped everything as in a garment, but Mrs. Jock, nothing dismayed, walked on by the loch-side, and guided herself with unerring footsteps, until she arrived at the gray mansion (which she could not now distinctly see), where old Colonel Biddulph had dwelt so long.

She found her way up the avenue, through the dripping trees, and rang at the house-door bell, and asked if Mr. Biddulph were at home.

The gray-haired old man-servant, who had lived with the colonel, answered that he was.

"Can I see him?" said Mrs. Jock, producing her card-case.

"Perhaps, madam, you would walk this way," said the old servant; "I will tell Mr. Biddulph you have called."

He ushered Mrs. Fraser into the unused drawing-room of the house. Here was a room where a lady's footstep had never fallen before! A stiff, uncomfortable room,

without grace or pleasantness ; a room without a fire, or a flower, or a little table. Had the grim old man, who had furnished it to his taste, no memories left of the time when he must have played by his mother's knee ? Or of the days when, perhaps, he had sighed in vain at some fairer shrine ? Seemingly none. Not the ghost of a woman's touch was here—not the shadow of a "vanished hand."

As Mrs. Fraser looked round somewhat disconsolately, the door opened, and a tall, good-looking man entered the room.

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Fraser," he said courteously, "that Donald has shown you into this miserable room. Will you come into my den, where at least I have a good fire ?"

"Have I the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Biddulph ?" asked Mrs. Jock, favorably regarding her new neighbor.

"I am Mr. Biddulph," he answered, with a pleasant smile, leading the way as he spoke to the library, where he had been sitting.

This was a very comfortable room ; the walls lined with books of every description, from grave to gay ; the curtains thick, heavy, and red ; the furniture massive, and a Turkey carpet on the floor.

"I am afraid the smell of smoke will annoy you," said Mr. Biddulph, as he placed a chair for his visitor.

"Not in the least," answered Mrs. Jock ; "a woman who has a husband and son is used to the smell of smoke ; and speaking of my husband, Mr. Biddulph, reminds me to apologize to you that he has not called on you yet, but he is suffering terribly from toothache."

"I am extremely sorry."

"Well, the truth is, he should have two out ; but you know what men are !"

Mrs. Jock said the last few words without the least semblance of coquetry, and Mr. Biddulph quickly perceived this.

"You mean," he said, smiling, "that we are an obstinate, bad-to-manage race ; and I believe you are right."

Mrs. Jock smiled also, but still without coquetry.

"I have come to beg," she said, somewhat abruptly.

Mr. Biddulph's face did not lengthen.

"The truth is," she went on, "that a poor man about our place fell from the hayloft last week, and broke his neck, and he has left a widow and four small children behind



him, and nothing of any value except five little pigs, and I'm going to try to sell them among the neighbors, so as to raise a small sum for the widow."

"It's very kind of you, Mrs. Fraser."

"I want a pound a-piece for them; will you take one?"

"I shall be charmed to become the possessor of a little pig," answered Mr. Biddulph, smiling again: "but please allow the value of my pig to be two pounds."

"You are very good, but I won't refuse. This will help me on a good bit," added Mrs. Jock, as she placed Mr. Biddulph's two sovereigns in her substantial leather bag. "I am going next to Nora Stewart's; you dined there last night, didn't you? My young people told me they had met you."

"Yes, I noticed your daughter and son."

"Nora Stewart is a fine girl, is she not? Her mother and my husband were half-cousins, so I look upon her as a child of my own. Do you think her handsome?"

"I think there can be only one opinion about Miss Stewart's looks."

"Yes, her mother was handsome, too. She has got an awful old woman staying with her, and two English girls, and I shall be obliged to ask them to dinner soon. Will you come to meet them, Mr. Biddulph?"

"I shall be delighted."

"No time like the present, then; let us fix a day. Can you come next Tuesday, at half-past seven sharp?"

"It is very kind of you to ask me, and I shall be very pleased."

"That is settled, then; and now I think I must go."

"But how are you going to cross the loch?"

"There will be a boat at the little pier below your house, I expect."

"Take my boat, and allow me to escort you to the pier." And Mrs. Jock did not refuse this offer, and, as Mr. Biddulph walked by her side, she returned to the subject of her pigs.

"I will send one of the men over with yours this evening," she said; "and I shall see you have the best one."

Biddulph laughed.

"Oh, don't mind the pig," he said; "let the four small children eat it."

"That is nonsense," answered Mrs. Jock, gravely; "you have paid for it, and you shall have it—and the best, too."

Again Biddulph laughed. This lady, so straightforward,



so robust, greatly amused him, and he looked with a certain amount of admiration at her fresh face and clear blue eyes, and at the fair hair touched with gray, on which the mist had left tiny drops of moisture without destroying the strong natural ripple.

He offered to escort her across the loch, but Mrs. Jock declined; but just as the boat was about to put off, he placed something in her hand.

"That was a very sad story, you know," he said, "about the poor fellow breaking his neck. Will you give this to the widow, without saying who sent it?" And when Mrs. Jock looked at her hand, she found it contained a five-pound note.

"This is too much," she said.

"Indeed, no. Good-by. I shall see you on Tuesday; good-by again until then."

He assisted her into the boat, and helped to push it off, and then took off his cap and stood bareheaded for a moment, and Mrs. Jock, with a sigh, admitted to herself that she had never seen a handsomer man.

"My poor boy won't have much chance, I am afraid, if *he* goes in for Nora Stewart," thought the fond mother, "though Malcolm is a handsome lad."

Meanwhile Mr. Biddulph had turned away from the little pier, and walked slowly home through the mist, thinking of Nora Stewart as he went.

As he passed up the avenue something white caught his eye on the trunk of one of the trees, and Mr. Biddulph frowned when he saw it was some name or words freshly cut in the bark. He thought some of the servants or some passer-by had done this, and he went out of his way a few steps more closely to examine the injury done to his tree.

When he was quite near to it, he stood as if transfixed, and his face grew deadly pale. There, staring at him on the freshly cut bark, was a name he hated to think of, still more to see—a name that no one knew here; that he had tried to forget, and tried in vain.

"NATALIE,  
COMMONLY  
NATT."

These words stood out distinct and clear. Mr. Biddulph rubbed his eyes; then felt the letters with his trembling hands. But there was no mistake. Some one must have

done this, he told himself with parched, pale lips—some one who knew the secret of his life.

### CHAPTER III.

ALICK FRASER.

Mrs. Jock Fraser, having crossed the misty loch in safety, arrived at Rossmore, and was warmly welcomed by Leonora, who liked this stalwart, sterling dame.

"And where do you think I have been, my dear?" asked Mrs. Jock, after she had kissed Leonora on both cheeks, shaken hands in a somewhat cool fashion with Mrs. Conway-Hope, and nodded to the two young girls, whom she had interrupted practising a duet at the piano.

"Indeed, I can never tell where you have been," smiled Leonora.

"I have been calling on your neighbor, Mr. Biddulph;" and Mrs. Jock was quite quick enough to note the deep blush that spread over Leonora's face at the unexpected mention of Mr. Biddulph's name.

"And did you see him?" she asked, a little nervously.

"I saw him, and I got him to buy a pig, and I have invited him to dinner next Tuesday."

"A whole host of business, then."

"And, moreover, I like him," continued Mrs. Jock; "he is good-looking and gentlemanly. I wonder if any one knows anything about him before he came here?"

"I think," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, who hated to be left long out of a conversation, and had not forgiven Mr. Biddulph, nor Nora either, for preferring the moonlight to her society, "that Mr. Biddulph looks like a man who has a past."

"We all have a past, Mrs. Conway-Hope," replied Mrs. Jock, "only a good deal depends on how we have spent it."

"Yes, indeed!" And Mrs. Conway-Hope looked down and sighed, thinking with satisfaction of the exemplary nature of her own life.

"However, there he is, as we find him," continued Mrs. Jock, in her downright way, "a pleasant, good-looking man—an addition to the neighborhood; and I want all you good people to come and meet him at dinner next Tuesday. What do you say, Nora, my dear?"

"I shall be very pleased, for one," answered Nora.

"And you, Mrs. Conway-Hope?"

"I have just one question to ask," answered that lady, with a curious little snorting sound, which she deemed a laugh: "how are we to get there?"

"By boat, to be sure!" said Nora.

"It will be dark. Nora, my dear, I am sure Mrs. Fraser will not think it rude of me to advise you, but I do advise you *not* to go."

"I am sorry I can't take your advice," answered Nora, with a smile. "I mean to go."

"Then you will leave one of your guests at home," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, sinking back in her chair; "but it is no matter."

"If you young people come, it will be all right," said Mrs. Jock unfeelingly. "And now, Nora, my dear, will you buy one of my pigs?"

Then Mrs. Jock repeated the sad story she had told Mr. Biddulph, and Leonora listened with quick sympathy.

"Oh, how dreadful, Mrs. Fraser!" she said. "Of course I will buy one of them; but what else can I do for the poor woman?"

"We must think of that afterward, my dear; at present I want just a nice little sum to help the poor creature in the first brunt of her trouble. I am going to Alick Fraser's after I leave you, though Jock does not believe I shall screw a sixpence out of him; but I mean to try."

Leonora laughed. "You must have lunch first, at any rate," she said; and Mrs. Jock was nothing loth, for the mountain air had whetted her appetite.

But she was soon ready to start again on her travels, and, after an affectionate parting with Leonora, and a friendly one with her young half-cousin's three guests, Mrs. Jock left Rossmore, having, however, wounded Mrs. Conway-Hope's susceptible vanity by not asking her again to dine at Airdinn on the following Tuesday, though Mrs. Conway-Hope had already declined to do so.

"She is very nice, isn't she?" said Leonora, as she re-entered the room, after seeing Mrs. Jock safely away from the hall door.

"Yes, she is nice," answered Mrs. Conway-Hope, her tone contradicting her words; "but don't you think she is rather loud, my dear?"

"Loud? Not in the least; she is a good, warm-hearted,

motherly woman. How can she be called loud?" replied Leonora indignantly.

"She struck me as being so, but I may be mistaken."

"I really think you are mistaken," said Leonora; and Mrs. Conway-Hope gave a little pensive movement of her head. She was thinking what a pity it was that dear Nora's temper was so quick.

A moment later Leonora left the room, and went upstairs to her own bedroom, and stood looking out over the misty loch. She was thinking of what Mrs. Jock Fraser had told her of Mr. Biddulph; for Mrs. Jock had half-whispered to her, as they left the dining-room together, of Mr. Biddulph's generous gift to the poor bereaved woman at Airdlinn. And she was thinking, too, of that conversation relating to his past life, wondering about the mysterious warning that yesternight had reached her hand.

What could it mean? Again Leonora read and re-read the strange message that had come to disturb the dawning days of a new sweet hope. And suddenly a blush, a tide of color, dyed the fair and clear skin of Leonora's face. She had thought last night, when they had stood together in the moonlight, of telling Mr. Biddulph of this secret enemy that had been so swift to stab his reputation in the dark. But now, looking again at these mysterious words, she remembered that she could never do this, for they implied what did not really exist, except in the deep hidden feelings of her own heart.

Therefore she was tongue-tied; she must meet Mr. Biddulph as though this thing had not been; she had best try to forget it. But Leonora knew this was all but impossible. Still she must try, and having decided to do this, she presently rejoined her guests, though her mind wandered away again and again to the new owner of Dunbaan, who was at this moment in a terrible state of mind, in which perplexity, rage, and bitter anger at his own conduct by turns held sway.

For James Biddulph knew well as he read those freshly carved letters on the tree, that the mad folly of his youth must be known to the hand that cut the bark. And he had hoped to escape the consequences of this folly; to hide himself away in this lonely Highland home, where everything was new to him. But here was that hateful name, the old familiar, long-hated name—"Natalie, commonly Natt"—again before him, with its grim significance, its shameful memories and disgrace!

And as he looked at it, a sudden passion, an uncontrollable fury, as it were, seized on this ordinarily calm, collected man. Snatching his penknife from his coat pocket, he began hastily, with muttered curses on his writhing lips, to destroy the letters, to render the name illegible; and long after he had done this he hacked and cut at the tree, as though physical labor were some relief to his perturbed and angry heart.

In the meanwhile Mrs. Jock was arriving at the house of her brother-in-law, Mr. Alick Fraser, who was the rich man of the family, and as such was naturally regarded with consideration.

When old Mr. Fraser of Airdlinn died, he left two sons, Jock and Alexander; Jock, the elder son, inheriting the family estate, and Alexander a modest portion of two thousand pounds. But during the thirty-three years which had elapsed since their father's death, a great change had taken place in the fortunes of the two brothers. Jock, the laird, had shot on the hills and fished in the streams; had married, and his children had grown up around him, but he had got poorer every year. But Alexander, the younger son, had carried his two thousand pounds to Glasgow, had become a shipbuilder there, and gradually had amassed a large fortune, and now, finally, had become a laird, too; at least, he had bought an estate on the opposite side of the loch to Airdlinn, and had built himself a bran-new house there, double and more the size of the gray old roof under which he had been born.

He was walking up and down on the terrace of his new house, smoking and mentally calculating the profits of his last investment, when his sister-in-law, Mrs. Jock, appeared through the mist.

"Ah, Jeanie, is that you?" said Alick Fraser, in a loud cheery voice, going forward to meet her. "And how is Jock? And where have you sprung from this misty morning?"

"I've been wandering over hill and dale, on business bent," answered Mrs. Jock, with her ready laugh.

"And what's up? What have you been about?"

"Let me go into the house, and I will tell you;" and Alick Fraser led the way into his well-furnished house, where everything was new and everything was good.

And the master of the house was good to look on also. A tall, stalwart, clear-skinned man of some fifty-three

years was Alick Fraser, with a shrewd, well-featured face, and humorous dark eyes, like his brother Jock's. But there was this difference in the expression of their eyes: in Jock's the humor was kindly, in Alick's it was hard. All the same, Alick was the best-looking of the two, and had also a cheery manner, a long head, and a close hand.

"I've just come from Nora Stewart's," said Mrs. Jock, as she seated herself in one of Alick's comfortable arm-chairs.

"Ah, fine girl that—very fine girl!"

"And as good as she's bonny, I believe. She, and two young girls that are staying with her, and our new neighbor, young Biddulph, are going to dine with us next Tuesday, Alick," continued Mrs. Jock, diplomatically. "Will you come too?"

"Next Tuesday? Don't know anything to prevent me. So you've made young Biddulph's acquaintance, then?"

"Yes; I called on him this morning—called on him about a little business. Malcolm and Minnie met him last night at Nora Stewart's, and he's a gentlemanly man—yes, certainly a gentlemanly man."

"That's all right, then."

"I went to see him because we've had a sad business at Airdlinn, Alick," said Mrs. Jock, cautiously approaching the real object of her visit. "Jock would have been to see you about it before, but he's laid up with a frightful toothache."

"Should have 'em out."

"That's what I tell him, but I can't persuade him to go through the wrench. But to go back to what I was saying. Poor Nichols—you remember the red-haired stableman?—fell from the hay-loft last Wednesday morning and broke his neck. He was killed on the spot, poor fellow, and he's left a widow and four small children, and nothing worth speaking of besides except a litter of five little pigs."

"There was no pity in Alick's eyes.

"They must eat the pigs," he said, with his hard smile.

"That would not feed them long. No, Alick; I am trying to sell these pigs to the neighbors round. I have sold one to young Biddulph, one to Nora Stewart, and now I have come to you."

"It's a pity you gave yourself the trouble, Jeanie; I've a splendid litter of pigs—black pigs."

"Yes; but then this is for charity, Alick. I want a



pound a-piece for them, to make up a little sum for the poor widow. Young Biddulph gave me two pounds for his."

"A fool and his money are soon parted, my dear."

"Ah, but, Alick, do buy one," pleaded Mrs. Jock, quite earnestly. She wanted the money for one thing, and she wanted the triumph for another; for Jock had told her she would fail. But Alick only laughed, and shook his head.

"It's no good, Jeanie," he said; "*I never* throw away money, and I won't to please you or anyone else. And this is throwing it away. Suppose you collect a few pounds, it won't keep the woman and her children. They must go to the place the law provides for them, and which we all help to support; and the sooner they go the better for them and you."

Mrs. Jock did not speak. She was a kind-hearted woman, and she felt her anger rise hot within her; but she was prudent withal. Alick Fraser had much in his power. He was unmarried, and she had children, and for their sakes she suppressed her wrath.

"Then you won't give anything?" she said.

"Not a sixpence, my dear," answered Alick, cheerfully.

"At all events, you'll come to dine on Tuesday?"

"Yes, if you'll promise not to name your interesting litter of pigs," said Alick, with a laugh. "There's a good woman, don't let us hear anything more of them."

"Very well," said Mrs. Jock; and she rose with a smile, and held out her hand to her brother-in-law. "I won't come begging any more to you, Alick."

"Not if you are wise," he said, with some significance; and then they parted in friendly fashion, and Mrs. Jock returned to her poor husband, who looked up from his armchair and his woollen comforter with some interest as she entered the room.

"Well," he said, "and did you get anything out of Alick?"

Mrs. Jock shook her head.

"He was too much for me," she answered; and she could not resist a laugh at her own defeat.

"I told you so," answered Jock, subsiding back into his comforter with some satisfaction. "My firm belief is, when Alick departs from this life, he'll contrive somehow to carry his money along with him, or he'll bury it. No one will ever benefit a penny by it."

## CHAPTER IV.

## MRS. JOCK'S DINNER-PARTY.

No one would have ever thought that the calm, rather haughty-looking gentleman who entered Mrs. Fraser's drawing-room on the evening of her dinner-party was the same James Biddulph who, with pale lips and a countenance distorted with rage and shame, had stood hacking at the tree in his avenue, long after the name, which for him possessed such hateful recollections, had been utterly erased from the bark.

Yet it was so. We change our moods like our garments, and one day put on our best, and another our worst. And it had been a bitter day for James Biddulph, yon dreary misty one, when he had been suddenly confronted by a past he would fain have forgotten, and all the evil of his nature had for the time held possession of his soul.

But his brow was smooth now, and his smile as ready as if no secret weighed upon his heart. He had a natural grace of manner, and Jock Fraser, whose face by this time had once more assumed its ordinary proportions, as he advanced to meet his guest, was struck (as his wife had been) by Mr. Biddulph's remarkable good looks.

"Glad to see you," said the kindly Jock, warmly shaking his hand. "Your poor uncle was a great stranger among us, but I hope you mean to be a good neighbor."

"You are all very kind to receive me as you do," answered Biddulph, "and I hope to be a good neighbor;" and he smiled.

"You know my wife," continued the master of the house, in his pleasant way, as Mr. Biddulph was shaking hands with Mrs. Jock and her daughter; and this is my brother, Alick Fraser, and my boy, Malcolm."

The uncle and nephew—the good-looking man of fifty and the handsome young man of twenty-one—now both exchanged greetings with the new owner of Dunbaan. Alick Fraser fixed his keen observing eyes for a moment on Biddulph's face.

"Glad to make your acquaintance," he said; and then he looked at Biddulph again. It struck him he had seen him before, though at the moment he could not remember where.



"And do you mean to take up your abode among us?" continued Alick, still eying the stranger.

"For some months in the year, at all events, I hope," replied Biddulph.

"Ah, not a true Scot," said Alick. "The mists will drive you away;" and he laughed aloud.

But as he did so there was a little stir at the door of the room, and Nora Stewart and her two girl friends, the Lees, appeared. Nora entered first, and the eyes of every man present unconsciously followed her. For one thing, she was handsome; for another, she was a landowner, and a little heiress in her way; and this last consideration, no doubt, materially added to her charms.

"How are you my dear?" said Jock Fraser, kindly shaking her hand.

"Well, young lady, and how are you getting on?" asked Alick.

"Nora, how late you are?" said Malcolm Fraser, with his blue eyes fixed on Nora's face.

Only Mr. Biddulph said nothing; these two shook hands in silence and during the dinner which followed were placed far apart; Jock Fraser taking in Nora, and Mr. Biddulph Mrs. Jock; and somehow Nora found it very hard to keep her attention fixed on the laird's jokes and pleasant homely talk.

"She is a fine girl, and the land joins," Alick Fraser sat thinking, as he ate his dinner with appetite and satisfaction.

"She is beautiful," sighed poor Malcolm, who did not feel as hungry as usual, and did not see why Miss Maud Lee should always expect him to amuse her.

And he felt also a strange dislike growing within him to the good-looking man at the head of the table, who was talking so agreeably to his mother with his fluent tongue. This young Highlander, with his stalwart length of limb and breadth of muscle, his straight features and blue eyes and bright, crisp, curling chestnut hair, had been on pretty good terms with himself until the last few weeks, when Mr. Biddulph had arrived at Dunbaan to disturb his equanimity. But now with that subtle knowledge which comes to us unsought, which tells us grim truth against our vanity, our hopes, Malcolm Fraser knew that this stranger was preferred before him, and that Nora Stewart's dark eyes now seldom met his own.

And the young man's natural sunny nature had grown

changed. He had become more silent, sometimes sullen, and only his fond mother's eyes guessed the cause. She was looking at him now—her handsome boy—and Mrs. Jock gave a little sigh, and Mr. Biddulph heard it, and, glancing at her face, wondered what cross this seemingly prosperous, happy woman could have on her path of life.

"And you mean to live here?" she said, looking at Biddulph curiously, in the interest of her son.

"How can I tell, Mrs. Fraser? We are driven hither and thither by opposing currents in the stream of life, and know not where they will land us. Six months ago Dunbaan was but a name to me, and my poor uncle never entered my mind. Now, you see, I sit by his hearthstone, and his friends have become mine."

"Poor man, he sought few friends."

"Yet I believe for Mr. Stewart of Rossmore—Miss Stewart's uncle—he had a very strong regard."

"Rossmore saved his life; you know. Nora showed me the magnificent necklace he left to her; it was a strange thought of the old man. I wonder where he got it? Perhaps there is some romance connected with it?" and Mrs. Fraser laughed.

"I believe in every man's life, who is worthy of the name, there is some romance. I sometimes think, as I sit alone at Dunbaan, of the grim old colonel, shut away there, as it were, from communion with his kind. No doubt he had his romance—some lost love—to keep company with his memory in his lonely hours."

"And *you* must find it lonely, Mr. Biddulph?"

"In a way; but I am used to be alone, and I am writing a book."

"Indeed! This is interesting. May I ask what sort of book?"

"On men and manners," answered Biddulph, with a laugh. "It serves to amuse me, if it will not amuse the world."

"I expect you will put us all in. What do you say, now, to my brother-in-law, Alick Fraser, for a good character?"

Biddulph turned his gray eyes in the direction of Alick Fraser, and looked for a moment or two steadily in his face.

"There are all the indications there," he said, thoughtfully, "of a successful man."

"Well, he is one, you know."

"No inconvenient softness of heart; no opposing sen-

timents or sensations; one absorbing idea—the main chance. He was sure to succeed.”

“That’s just about his character. All the same”—Mrs. Jock was thinking of her children—“I should not like him to know I think so.”

“I do not suppose he would be offended. I believe, by the expression of his face, he respects his own character and despises the weakness and folly of those around him. He has a keen head, and not a big heart. A happy man, I call him;” and Biddulph laughed softly.

Leonora Stewart, at the other end of the table, heard that laugh, and her dark eyes met Biddulph’s, and she smiled.

“And how do you like your new neighbor, Nora?” the next moment asked Jock Fraser at her side.

“Mr. Biddulph? What I have seen of him I like very much.”

“A remarkably good-looking fellow, isn’t he?”

“I think he is good-looking.”

“Ah, ah, Miss Nora!” and the kindly laird shook his head; “you only think, do you? I call it suspicious when a handsome young lady speaks with such reserve of a handsome young man.”

Nora laughed.

“You always have your joke, Mr. Fraser,” she said, good-naturedly.

“What is his joke about?” asked Alick Fraser from the opposite side of the table, who had been trying to hear what his brother and Nora were talking of.

“Never you mind, Alick,” said Jock, with a twinkle in his merry dark eyes; “it’s about a young man, and so can have nothing to do with old fogies like you or I.”

There was a general laugh, in which Alick joined, though it was plain by his expression he did not like it.

“All right, old boy,” he said; but there was a resentful look in his eyes as he glanced at his brother’s face.

And when the dinner was over, and the men rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, the idea of his age was still actually rankling in Alick Fraser’s mind.

“So my brother Jock had a stupid joke at my expense at dinner?” he said, addressing Nora with his hard smile.

“But the fellow forgets he is ten years my senior and more.”

If for ten Alick had said two, he would have been much nearer the truth.

"It is Mr. Fraser's fun," smiled Nora.

"Rather bad fun for me, though," answered Alick, now trying to hide his discomfiture.

"I have never had a word with you the whole evening," the next moment said Mr. Biddulph's voice; and Nora turned round with a blush and a smile, and forgot in an instant that such a person as Alick Fraser existed.

"I am going to ask a favor," continued Biddulph.

"Shall I say politely it is granted before I know what it is?"

"Please say it is granted."

"Very well; it is granted."

"Then, it is that I shall be permitted to take you safely across the loch in my boat. It is moonlight, and it is lovely, and I want something to soothe me, for I feel awfully irritable to-night."

"Why don't you take to smoking?" said Nora with a little laugh.

"Smoking is all very well when one can get nothing better, but to-night I hope I can. I want you to take my mind away from myself, Miss Stewart; away from worries and troubles, and all evil things."

"And have you many worries and troubles?" asked Nora, softly, looking at him as she spoke.

"My share; perhaps my deserts."

"I suppose there is no life without them?"

"None," said Biddulph, abruptly, almost passionately; "our evil deeds, and their black train, come back to us as surely as we live."

"And our good deeds?"

"I have none."

"Ah! I do not believe that;" and again Nora glanced at Biddulph's handsome face, which at this moment looked gloomy enough.

But they had no time for any further private conversation. Mrs. Fraser insisted upon their joining a round game which the young people were getting up, and again Biddulph found himself separated from Nora. It was not until the party was breaking up, and hats and wraps were being called for, that Biddulph rather pointedly joined her as they quitted the house at Airdlinn, though on her other side young Malcolm Fraser was walking with his stalwart steps.

They were not five minutes' walk from the loch, and, as they quitted the sombre shade of the trees in the avenue,

a scene of wondrous beauty was spread out before them. The moon was at the full, and the great mass of water, the huge mountain range beyond, the steep overhanging rocks on either side, were all alight with the white shining beams, which showed them as plainly as the sun.

"Are you an artist, Miss Stewart?" asked Biddulph, in rather a low tone.

"No. Nature is too beautiful; I cannot portray it."

"You mean," said Biddulph, smiling, "you have tried and failed."

"That is about the truth," answered Nora, smiling also.

"No one can portray nature as it is," said Biddulph, slowly; "just as no author can give a perfect picture of a human heart. We catch the salient points; this man's strong characteristic; the dip of yon mountain or yon hill. But the million hidden things; the changing shadows of the earth and sky; the teeming, changing thoughts of each human soul, were never written in ink or painted on canvas."

"You think that no mind, then, can perfectly understand the other?"

"I am sure of it. Are we not mysterious to ourselves?"

"Perhaps——"

But now they had reached the pebbly marge, on which the boatmen and the boats were waiting to convey them across the moonlit water.

"I claim your promise," said Biddulph, taking Nora's hand and leading her toward his boat.

And as Malcolm Fraser saw this action, a flush came to his cheeks and a frown to his brow.

"Are you not going with us, Nora?" he said. "Mr. Biddulph does not cross the loch, you know."

"But Mr. Biddulph *does*," answered Biddulph, with a light laugh, as Nora paused a moment. "I mean to see Miss Stewart safely to Rossmore."

"Then," said Malcolm, almost rudely, "our boat need not go too; there is plenty of room for the three ladies in one."

Yet the moment after he had made this speech he repented it, for he had shortened the time he could be near Nora by his own rashness.

"Very well," said Mr. Biddulph, quietly; "I shall take charge of the three ladies. If you will help us to push off, Mr. Fraser, that is all we shall require."

Poor Malcolm! He stood there in the moonlight, and watched them glide away with a burning, aching heart. He heard the dip of the oars, and the soft laughter of the girls; and then the snatch of a song came floating on the night wind, but it had no sweetness nor music to the young man's ears. He was angry, he was jealous, and the pleasant things of earth were all as gall and bitterness to his soul.

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## CHAPTER V.

### AN UNWELCOME GUEST.

An hour later, still in the gleaming moonlight, Mr. Biddulph landed at the little pier at Dunbaan. He had seen Miss Stewart and her friends safely home, and then had returned across the loch, and, having quitted his boat, walked on alone toward the house.

As he entered the avenue he frowned when he saw the disfigured tree where his own hand had so rudely cut and hacked the bark. The moonlight showed this very plainly, for it lit each fading leaf and bough, the shadows of the trees falling with extraordinary distinctness on the mossy, soddened sward.

He frowned, and his thoughts went from the sweet woman he had just quitted, from gay words and mirth, to a woman who was sweet no longer, and whose memory was baneful to his heart.

He gave an impatient gesture and a sigh, and then a sudden start. Good heavens! was he mad? On this tree, on that tree, on seemingly half a dozen trees, the same name that he had erased the other day was now freshly carved!

"NATALIE,  
COMMONLY  
NATT."

The letters seemed to swim before his eyes; the weird shadows to shift and change, as he stood there staring blankly before him. But he did not draw out his pen-knife this time. With a muttered curse he walked straight and quickly on to the house, and rang the door-bell violently when he reached it.



The old serving-man, who had lived with his uncle, quickly opened it.

"Donald, who has been destroying the trees in the avenue during my absence?" he asked, in a loud, angry voice.

"Destroying the trees, sir?" repeated Donald, in utter astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing."

"Some one has," went on Biddulph, sternly—"carving some tomfoolery or other on half a dozen of them. Unloose the deerhounds; I'll make an end of this."

The old man hesitated for a moment.

"Nero is very savage, sir," he said; "but still——"

As he spoke, his master's angry eyes fell, and some shame came into his face.

"I forgot they are savage," he muttered. "No, don't loose the dogs; I will see about it to-morrow," and he turned away.

But hour after hour, when all the rest of the household were asleep, Mr. Biddulph was walking up and down the library, his heart full of anger, and bitter, bitter pain.

"I will make an end of this," at last he decided. "I will see Nora again, and then I will go away; I am best away."

Two days later, about twelve o'clock, to the surprise of the ladies at Rossmore, Mr. Biddulph was announced.

"I was wishing I could telegraph to you," said Nora, rising to welcome him with her charming blush and smile.

"We have been talking about you all the morning," cried Maud Lee, with her shrill laugh.

"After such pretty speeches, you may be sure they have a favor to ask you, Mr. Biddulph," said Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"I only hope you have," answered Mr. Biddulph, looking at Nora.

"We really have. We expect you will think us all mad, though; but we want to get up a picnic—a picnic in October!"

"I do not think you mad, but I think you rash," said Biddulph, still looking at Nora.

"We know we are," she replied, brightly. "But the truth is, Mr. Biddulph, that my two friends here, Maud and Alice, declare they have not seen half enough of our lovely loch, and they leave Scotland, to my great regret,

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the end of this week ; so we want to sail up the loch, land on some lovely bit of scenery or other, have our lunch, and then go home again.

"After taking influenza, sore throat, or even consumption," suggested Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"Oh, Cousin Margaret, do not be so horrid!" said Nora.

"If you said 'sensible' instead of 'horrid,' my dear Nora, it would be more to the point," suggested Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"Then, please, Cousin Margaret, do not be so sensible." Mrs. Conway-Hope severely resumed her knitting.

"And to return to the picnic," continued Nora, once more addressing Mr. Biddulph, "we want your company for one thing, and to borrow your two boats for another."

"My boats and everything I have are entirely at your command ; but I called at this unreasonable hour to say good-by."

"Good-by !" repeated Nora, blankly.

"Yes ; I intend to return to town."

"Not until after the picnic, Mr. Biddulph," said Maud Lee. "Indeed we shall not hear of it. Nora, tell him he *must* stay ; we can't lose one of our best men in this frivolous way ;" and again Miss Lee gave her curious little laugh.

"I wish you would stay," said Nora, rather in a low tone.

Biddulph hesitated.

"I should like to stay," he said, "but——"

"We shall listen to no 'buts,'" said Maud Lee ; "it is settled. Nora, dear, put Mr. Biddulph down on your list."

"And his two boats," smiled Mrs. Conway-Hope, raising her eyes from her knitting.

"Shall I?" asked Nora, almost shyly, looking at Biddulph.

"Very well." he answered, smiling.

"I want to ask all the neighbors," said Nora ; "the Frasers, of course, poor Mr. Macdonald, and Lord Glendoyne, whose father, curiously enough, used to be a client of my father's."

"Glendoyne?" said Biddulph. "Is that the man who has the shooting-lodge at the head of the loch?"

"Yes, it's the same man. I knew him slightly before, and he called yesterday," answered Nora.



"I think the picnic has been thought of since his visit," remarked Mrs. Conway-Hope, vigorously going on with her knitting.

Nora looked annoyed.

"You are quite mistaken," she said, rather sharply. "Maud and I were absolutely talking of it when Lord Glendoyne arrived."

"And we asked him and he is coming," said Maud Lee, triumphantly. "And now, when we have secured Mr. Biddulph, we shall have some delightful men."

"You do not give them much chance of escape, Miss Lee," suggested Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"One of them, at all events, does not wish to escape, Miss Lee," smiled Biddulph. "It is settled, then; but you have not told me the day."

"We thought of the day after to-morrow," answered Nora.

They discussed the details of the picnic after this, and presently Biddulph left Rossmore.

"I shall say good-by at the picnic," he thought, sadly enough, as he parted with Nora.

He returned straight home, and as he entered the hall at Dunbaan, old Donald met him, with a curious expression on his wrinkled, time-seared face.

"There is a lady waiting to see you, sir," he said, mysteriously.

"A lady?" repeated Biddulph; and he bit his lips, and grew a little pale. "Where is she?"

"She is in the library, sir; she said the drawing-room was so cold."

Then Biddulph crossed the hall and opened the library door, and, as he did so, a little woman who was standing before the fire turned sharply round.

"Well," she said, addressing him rather in a mocking tone, "you did not expect to see me here?"

"I certainly did not," answered Biddulph, sternly.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### A HARD BARGAIN.

The little woman standing by the fireplace laughed defiantly at Biddulph's words.

"I thought I should surprise you," she said.

"Nothing you could do would surprise me," he answered, coldly. "But may I ask what is your motive for coming here?"

Again the woman laughed.

"I came to look at your new property," she said.

She was not young; she was not handsome. She was dark, sallow, and rather stout, with bright, glittering, smiling dark eyes, when she was in good temper. Just now she was not in a good temper, and the expression of her eyes was not smiling, but scornful and dangerous.

"You have nothing to do with my new property," said Biddulph; "you regularly receive your income. What do you want more?"

"I want an increase of income for holding my tongue."

"Then you won't get it."

"Oh, yes, I shall! It is but just. Your income has increased, so should mine."

"Your income is perfectly adequate."

"You may think so, but I don't. A husband and wife should be more on an equality, you know, my dear;" and once more the woman laughed, while Biddulph stood gazing at her with gloomy eyes.

"So it was you, then, I suppose," he said, bitterly, "who injured my trees?"

"If you call carving the old beloved name an injury," she answered, scoffingly, "I did it."

"I might again ask your motive, but it is wasting my breath."

"I shall tell you without asking, then. I wished to remind you of my existence; my little elfish playfulness was intended as a small moral tap on your back. When a married man goes boating with a handsome young lady by moonlight it is quite time he had some such reminder."

"Woman!" said Biddulph, passionately, his face flushing strangely, "if you go on like this you will tempt me to strike you dead!"

"Oh no, I won't! If you were to strike me dead you would be hanged, and you are too self-indulgent to like to be hanged."

Biddulph muttered a curse between his teeth, and turned away and went to the window of the room, and stood looking out on the fair picture beyond without seeing it.

"You have a nice place here, but a detestable climate," presently said the lady at the fireplace.

Then Biddulph turned round.

"Natalie——" he began.

"Not the old familiar Natt, then?" mocked the woman.

"Natalie or Natt, whichever you like, will you listen to reason for a moment, and speak reasonably?"

"I shall be delighted; I am all attention."

"Reproaches between us are useless; allusions to a miserable past are useless, too. What do you want to go away from here for ever—to haunt me no more?"

"What do I want? Well, to tell you the truth, a good many things. I lost a pot of money last winter at Monte Carlo, and I'm pretty fairly dipped in town; and just as I was thinking what on earth I was to do, I heard of your windfall, and hastened to Scotland on the wings of love."

"I cannot pay your gambling debts."

"It's not my gambling debts—it's my tradesmen's bills I want paid; and I have a right as your wife to expect you to pay them."

"Please do not allude to that right," said Biddulph, coldly and repressively; "you know well the miserable circumstances under which you acquired it."

"Yes; you found you had to deal with a clever woman instead of a fool."

"We will not discuss it. How much money do you want to go quietly away?"

"Well, let me see. For one thing, I want my income doubled. A paltry sum like four hundred a year won't keep me; I can't really make it do. And then, I want two thousand pounds down."

"A modest request, truly! I cannot afford it. Eight hundred a year, and two thousand pounds! I've not the money to give you."

"Oh, yes, you have. I've been making inquiries, and I hear the old colonel, who left you this place, left a pretty tidy sum of money as well; therefore you can perfectly afford it. Come, Jim, you'll have to pay, so you may as well do it with a good grace; it's better than my going to Miss Stewart at Rossmore."

Biddulph started as if she had struck him.

"Oh, you don't like that!" cried the woman, tauntingly. "You don't want this last love of yours to hear that your love of long ago, that *your wife* is still in existence, while you pass yourself off as an unmarried man. But she

*shall* hear, if you don't give me what I want ; I have given her a slight warning as it is."

"What do you mean?" asked Biddulph, growing pale to the very lips.

"Just a hint—a little message to disturb her love-dream. Don't look so white; pray don't faint! Miss Stewart knows nothing *yet* about me."

"I pray Heaven she never may!"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"Hard words won't break me, my dear," she said, contemptuously. "I came for money, and if I get what I want I will go away."

Biddulph made no answer. He began slowly walking up and down the room, with a bitter, angry heart; and as he did so, the woman's eyes followed him, and a softer look stole over her face.

"You are very good-looking," she said after a while; "better-looking than the boy I married ten years ago."

Biddulph looked up with a grim smile.

"Your admiration might flatter me," he said, "except for your errand."

"I don't want to flatter you. It is impossible now that we could ever be friends."

"Perfectly impossible."

"But you are a good-looking man. I have got older looking, I suppose you think?"

"You have the advantage of being many years my senior."

"Not so very many, after all; but, as you say, we need not discuss it."

"No, it is a delicate subject," said Biddulph, darkly. "I was a boy, as you say, when an act of madness gave you this power. But I am a man now—a man whose life you have spoilt."

"You seem to have a pretty jolly life, I think."

"The air will be clearer when you are gone. Will you take one thousand instead of two, and I will agree to double your income?"

"No; I must have two."

"I cannot give you a sum like that at once, without exciting remarks that I certainly wish to avoid. Let the other thousand at least stand over until next year?"

"I want it this year. But I tell you what I will do. If you will give me a written acknowledgment that you will pay the second thousand in three months, I will take it and go away, and—hold my tongue."

Again Biddulph did not reply for a few minutes. Again he began walking slowly up and down the room, with his eyes cast upon the floor; and the woman kept fugitively watching him, while she affected to be warming her feet at the fire.

"If I agree to this," said Biddulph at length, "will you faithfully promise never again to set your foot in Scotland—never by letter, or word, or deed, hint to *any one* of the unhappy tie between us?"

The woman laughed aloud.

"You mean, never tell Miss Stewart of Rossmore."

"Don't you question what I mean. And don't bring the name of this lady into any conversation between us. I repeat, to *any one*. That is sufficient."

"You are very high and mighty."

"Will you simply answer my question—yes, or no?"

"All right; I promise, for the sake of double my present income and two thousand down. You keep your bargain, and I will keep mine."

"There is no fear that I shall not keep to my bargain. And now, when will you leave this place?"

"To-day, if you like. I want to be off to the sunny South."

"To the gambling tables at Monte Carlo, I presume?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear," she said, "you do not permit me to be domesticated; what can I do?"

"Anything you like," he answered, contemptuously; and then he sat down at the writing-table, and proceeded to draw a check for the money he had promised.

After he had done this, he rose and went toward her.

"There," he said, "will that satisfy you?" And the woman laughed, glanced at the amount, and put the check into a small plush bag she carried in her hand.

"For the present," she said. "And now I will be going. Good-by." And she held out her hand.

But Biddulph did not take it.

"This is but a mockery," he said.

"What! won't you shake hands? Come, don't be so surly." And again she held out her hand.

"It is no matter." And Biddulph did now stretch out his hand. But, as his cold frigid fingers touched hers, the woman flung them scornfully back.

"Thank you for small mercies!" she cried. "I can live without you or your hand-clasp!"

And the next moment she was gone, and Biddulph sank down on a chair by the table, and covered his face with his hands.

"I would rather be dead than this," he was thinking, with intense bitterness. "Would that either she or I were dead!"

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## CHAPTER VII.

### AN OCTOBER PICNIC.

The sun and the sky alike smiled upon Leonora Stewart on the morning of her picnic, and the blue loch lay in summer blueness, though the mighty mountain beyond, whose shadow slept upon its breast, was crowned with snow.

Leonora awoke in the early morning, when the pink cloudlets of dawn still streaked the eastern sky. She went to the window, and looked out from her "wild eyrie," as Biddulph had called Rossmore, upon a scene more beautiful than the dreams of a true poet's heart. How dull our pens are, how cold and flat our paint, to picture the grand realities of the Maker's hand! Leonora stood there rapt, almost awestruck, at the vastness, the sublimity, of these everlasting hills, which seemed merging in the sky.

The girl had that intense, passionate love of nature which is almost pain, for are not all deep feelings akin to it? We grow sad, or at least thoughtful, at the wondrous sights unfolded to us when we behold them for the first time or after long absence. Who has not felt this on the shores of the deep sea, or looking upward on a starlit night at yon luminous vault above?

And as Leonora stood gazing into the blue distance, or on the dark storm-rent firs, which grew thick and strong up the steep sides of the tall headland on which Rossmore stands, there curiously and subtly stole into her heart another feeling, another thought, which also was deep and strong, and which seemed to mingle, as in a dream, with her love for the mountains and the braes of her mother's land.

She began thinking of James Biddulph. She could plainly see, across the loch, the trees and gray roof of the house at Dunbaan, for every object stood out distinct in



the clear air. And she would see him to-day. This was a sweet thought, and made her sigh softly, and a pink wave steal to her white skin.

But there was a haunting shadow still. Nora could never quite forget the strange words that had warned her not to trust in the man to whom she was so strongly attracted. This message might mean nothing, and might mean so much. It had left a vague uneasiness in her mind, and she now began wondering if to-day would cast any light on this unsolved enigma.

And across the water at Dunbaan, the master at this moment was tossing restlessly, thinking of this same question. Biddulph felt he had no right any longer to deceive Leonora as to his true position. He was trying to find courage to nip in the bud what was so sweet to him; to lay what might have been the best hopes of his manhood low.

But how could he tell her this shameful, degrading story? How say, "When a boy, I was tricked and deceived into a marriage with a woman I blush to name?" Such words could not be spoken easily, and Biddulph at last decided to leave them to chance.

"I shall go away," he told himself, "and she will forget me;" and this idea did not make him feel happier.

And when, some hours later, he met her again, his task seemed no lighter. Leonora, fair and gracious, dressed in white serge and otter, with a little fur cap to match, beneath which her bright hair curled round her smooth brow, was standing at the hall door when Biddulph arrived at Rossmore, smiling and talking to her guests.

Mrs. Jock Fraser was here, attired (sensible woman) in warm, striped homespun, while her pretty daughter Minnie wore a blue and white boating-dress, and her tall handsome Malcolm his Highland garb. Alick Fraser had also arrived, and was joking with the young people after his usual fashion, when Mr. Biddulph walked in among them, and Alick's brown eyes followed him when he went up to exchange greeting with their young hostess.

And other eyes besides Alick Fraser's did this also. Malcolm's blue eyes, and even the Rev. Andrew Macdonald's neutral-tinted ones, looked with no benign expression on the tall stranger.

"I have brought the boats," said Biddulph, smiling, as he shook hands with Nora.

"It is so good of you," she answered.

She looked very bright. The day was beautiful, for one thing; for another, an undescrivable feeling of pleasure and excitement filled her heart.

"The weather is perfect, isn't it?" she said to Biddulph.

"It looks good all round," he answered; and his eyes rested on her face as he spoke.

"Miss Nora Stewart has bribed the clerk of the weather-office to give us one good day, I believe," said Alick Fraser, with his hard smile.

"How have I bribed him, Mr. Fraser?" said Nora, laughing.

"Perhaps you smiled at him," answered Alick; "and, unless he was a hard-hearted fellow, he could not resist that."

"I did not know you ever said pretty things," said Nora, gayly.

"When I find any one pretty enough to say them to, you see I do."

"There, my dear!" cried Jock Fraser, who had been an amused listener to his brother's compliments; "after that you must make Alick come out of his shell a bit. Come, Alick, what do you say to giving the young ladies a dance in your bran new house?"

But Alick only smiled. It was one thing to make pretty speeches which cost nothing, and another to give dances which might cost a good deal.

But just at this last moment the last guest that Nora expected drove up in a dog-cart to the hall-door and a tall, very slender young man, with a dark pale face—an unmistakable Anglo-Indian—appeared.

This was Lord Glendoyne, the impoverished heir of a long line, who had been out in India in the Civil Service for many years. He was a graceful man, with a languid manner and smile, and large, wearied-looking, rather pathetic dark eyes.

"I am afraid I have kept you waiting," he said to Nora.

"I was just wondering whether you had forgotten all about our picnic," she answered, brightly.

"Oh, no! but—shall I confess?—I am a frightfully lazy man, and it was all I could do to get here so early."

"I am very pleased to see you. Allow me to introduce you to some of your neighbors;" and Nora presented Lord Glendoyne to Mrs. Jock Fraser and her husband, to Mr. Biddulph and Alick Fraser.



"I have had some correspondence with you already, my lord, I think?" said Alick Fraser.

"Ah—are you the—ah—gentleman from Glasgow who bought Inismore?" said Lord Glendoyne, fixing his languid dark eyes on the man who had purchased the old ancestral acres of his house.

"I am," answered Alick with some pride.

"Ah—I knew it was some one from Glasgow," said Glendoyne; and he turned indifferently away; and Alick felt injured, for had not many of his hard-earned thousands gone into this man's pocket?

"I think we had better go down to the boats now," proposed Nora; and unconsciously she looked at Biddulph as she said this, who at once came to her side.

"Allow me, then," he said, "to carry your shawl, and see you safely down the hill."

"Deuced cool fellow, I must say that," muttered Alick Fraser.

"A gentlemanly man," thought Glendoyne, now turning his languid gaze on Biddulph's face.

But the next moment his eyes rested on Minnie Fraser, whose extreme fairness and beauty of complexion at once attracted his attention.

"Who is that fair girl?" he asked of Nora.

"That is my half-cousin, Minnie Fraser. Shall I introduce you to her?"

"Thanks; I shall be very pleased."

It must be admitted that this was rather cruel of Nora, as her friend, Maud Lee, had intended to monopolize Lord Glendoyne, and had also openly announced her intention. But Lord Glendoyne had seen many Maud Lees out in India, and this fair Highland flower was more to his taste.

He attached himself, therefore, to Minnie's side, and the young girl was naturally flattered by his attentions. And Maud Lee knew the world too well to show any annoyance at this; and even when, later on in the day, Mrs. Conway-Hope—who, after all, had declined to be left at home—took the opportunity of whispering in Maud's ear that Lord Glendoyne seemed evidently to admire Minnie Fraser, Maud answered gayly:

"Yes; isn't it sad when I hoped he would admire me!" and she laughed, and Mrs. Conway-Hope felt disappointed that the clever girl did not show any disappointment.

In the meanwhile Biddulph was walking by Leonora's

side, down the steep avenue which led to the house at Rossmore, beneath the falling leaves.

"How fast they are coming down!" said Leonora, glancing up at her trees.

"I fancy the touch of frost in the air last night has sent them more quickly to their mossy graves," answered Biddulph.

"Poor little leaves! It's sad to die on a bright day like this."

"And would you rather die in gloom and darkness?—linger on and see your friends fall one by one—which must be the fate of the last leaf on the tree, you know?"

Leonora laughed softly.

"I cannot make up my mind," she said. "Which would you rather do?"

"Do you mean live a long sad life alone, or a short one full of joy and love?"

"Yes;" and Leonora's dark eyes fell, and Biddulph saw a wave of color steal to her fair cheeks.

"My choice is quickly made," answered Biddulph—"a brief life of love. But," he added, as if a sudden thought had struck him, "we cannot choose; the thread of our destiny is mostly warped for us, before we realize the bitter truth."

Nora did not speak, and the next minute Biddulph changed the conversation.

"At a picnic we are permitted, and expected, are we not," he said, turning to Nora with a smile, "each to bring some small contribution to the feast?"

"Oh! no; I never thought of such a thing!" she answered, smiling also.

"Well, I have brought myself and my boats——"

"Your boats were invited," said Nora, amused.

"And uninvited I presumed to bring some flowers which I telegraphed for yesterday, and some fruit; and also some green and yellow Chartreuse, which Donald, my uncle's old servitor, assured 'the colonel used to set great store on.'"

"It is extremely kind of you."

"It is very good of you not to be angry. But here we are. There is quite a little flotilla of boats."

They had now nearly reached the side of the loch, and beneath the small wooden pier which served as a landing-place a little cluster of boats lay floating on the blue water, and one of Biddulph's boats was gay with flowers.

He beckoned to the boatman to row in, and then took out a basket containing a quantity of most beautiful flowers, and presented it to Nora, who received it with a vivid blush of pleasure.

"Oh, how lovely they are !" she said. "How can I thank you ?"

"Shall I tell you how ?"

"Oh, yes."

"Come in my boat ; I want to enjoy myself to-day."

"I will gladly go."

The other guests were all round them now, and the girls eagerly admired the flowers, which the men regarded with jealous, affected indifference, except the genial Jock Fraser and Lord Glendoyne.

"Mr. Biddulph's the man to invite to a picnic," said Jock, in his hearty way. "Nora, you must give me one of your posies, and I'll make all the young fellows jealous."

With a bright look, Nora picked out a rose and pinned it to the laird's coat.

"There !" she said ; "you are smart ;" and then she offered all the ladies present some of her flowers, who eagerly accepted them.

"Will you have one, Malcolm ?" she said, kindly, to her young half-cousin.

"No, thank you," he answered. "I want none of Mr. Biddulph's flowers."

"I shall be pleased to take the rejected gift, Miss Stewart," said Glendoyne, in his languid fashion. "I am not too proud to accept Mr. Biddulph's flowers."

"I am very pleased to give it to you," said Nora, smiling, and thinking what a stupid, jealous boy poor Malcolm Fraser was.

But presently they were all afloat, and Mrs. Jock, Nora, Minnie Fraser, and Lord Glendoyne fell to Biddulph's share.

"I am glad," said Glendoyne to Minnie, "that the man from Glasgow has not come in this boat."

"Why ?" asked Minnie, glancing with a shy smile at her mother's amused face.

"He looks heavy, for one thing," answered Glendoyne ; "for another, he reminds me of my poverty."

"We must look out for the prettiest spot where to land and have lunch," said Nora, quickly, trying to change the conversation.

"There used to be a lovely little bit of scenery high up

the loch on Inismore, and I suppose it is there still ; why should we not lunch there, Miss Stewart ?" asked Glendoyne.

"Perhaps," hesitated Nora, thinking of Alick Fraser, "you would not care to go now."

"On account of being reminded of my poverty," smiled Glendoyne. "The presence of a man from Glasgow renders forgetfulness impossible."

"He is my brother-in-law," said Mrs. Jock Fraser, quickly, thinking it was quite time Lord Glendoyne should know.

"He is my uncle," gasped poor Minnie, with a burning blush.

Lord Glendoyne looked from one to the other, and ever so faint a color stole beneath his dusky skin.

"I wish he was my uncle," he said, sententiously ; and every one laughed at this, for Mrs. Jock could always enjoy a joke at the expense of her brother-in-law.

They had now reached the very centre of the loch, on either side of which huge overhanging rocks ascended high, their enormous shadows falling on the blue water, and reproducing there each rift and fissure in the gray granite masses, as well as the green patches of verdure which here and there dotted the mountain sides.

"This is beautiful," said Biddulph in a low tone to Nora ; and she answered more by her expression than her words.

"When I was in India," said Glendoyne, "I sometimes used to shut my eyes and try to fancy myself here, or, rather, to see Inismore as a picture in my brain, and it used to make me feel very strange."

"I am afraid it would make you feel sad ?" said Nora, gently.

"I don't know. What is sadness ?"

"Can you define it, Mr. Biddulph ?" smiled Nora.

"It is regret, but not bitter regret, isn't it ? The sharp sting is gone. When we are sad we are resigned ; but there are some things to which we never become resigned," answered Biddulph ; and he cast his eyes down gloomily as he spoke.

"I suppose, then, it made me sad," said Glendoyne, "to think of Inismore, for I was resigned to part with it, because I could not help myself."

"But you kept the shooting-lodge, did you not ?" asked Biddulph.

"Yes ; I have still a hillside or two, and a few black-

cocks. The man from—— I mean Mr. Fraser purchased the rest."

"There is my brother-in law's house," said Mrs. Jock, pointing out Alick Fraser's grand new mansion ; and Lord Glendoyne looked at the house languidly for a moment and then dropped his eyes.

"It looks too new, somehow, among the grand old hills," said Biddulph.

"It suits the new master, then," smiled Glendoyne.

But this injured Mrs. Jock's family pride, and her rosy cheeks took a deeper hue.

"Alick Fraser comes of a good old stock, though," she said quickly. He has bought a new property, certainly ; but he can see from it Airdlinn, where his people have lived for generations."

"That must be very gratifying," answered Glendoyne, with an unmoved countenance ; and Mrs. Jock turned redder still, for she thought he was amusing himself at her expense.

Nora, however, adroitly changed the conversation, and the rest of their row up the loch was spent very pleasantly. Then they landed near a picturesque spot, where a mossy bank of turf was broken up by huge fragments of gray granite, which Biddulph suggested would serve as seats for the party.

Hampers were now produced, and there were jests and mirth ; and Biddulph ordered the cushions from his boat to be brought on shore, and, having piled them into a comfortable seat, and placed a fur carriage-rug over them, he turned to seek Nora Stewart, for whom he intended this place of honor.

She was a few steps apart from him, and just as he opened his lips to address her, to his intense disgust Mrs. Conway-Hope espied his seat, and instantly deposited her angular form upon it.

"What a delightful seat ! I shall secure it at once," she said to Biddulph ; and he was too gentlemanly to ask her to rise. All the same, he admitted to Nora, a few moments later, that he bitterly regretted Mrs. Conway-Hope was a woman.

But Nora was quite content to sit on one of the granite blocks, on which Biddulph had placed a plaid. He sat at her feet, and looked sometimes up into her bright smiling face with his gray sombre eyes.

"That fellow pays Nora Stewart great attention," said

Alick Fraser to his sister-in-law, Mrs. Jock, over his venison and aspic jelly.

"I think he admires her," answered Mrs. Jock.

Alick said nothing more. He ate his lunch and drank his champagne, and tasted both the green and yellow Chartreuse critically; but all the while he was thinking of Nora Stewart, and the land that lay next his own with such tempting advantage.

And by-and-by he saw Nora and Biddulph wander away together up some of the steep, craggy, rising ground behind where they had been sitting, and then the rest of the party also dispersed. The men began to smoke, except Biddulph and Glendoyne, who went away in another direction with pretty, blushing Minnie Fraser, and the rest of the young people amused themselves as best they could.

But now let us follow Biddulph and Nora in their steep ascent up the craggy mountain-side. A wild and somewhat dangerous walk this, for there were rifts in the rock through which the winter torrents poured down with tremendous force, rendering the path in places certainly unsafe.

But Biddulph, with his strong, firm hand, was near to assist Nora, and she was not afraid. They stopped at length to breathe and rest, and the scene below, above, and around them was magnificently beautiful and wild.

But presently Biddulph pointed to the highest peak of the mountain range.

"See," he said, "the mist is gathering round the monarch's brow, and shortly will come stealing upon us. I think we had better go down."

"Let us stay a little longer," she answered; "I never saw the world so beautiful before."

Almost as she spoke she quitted his side. Going a few steps apart, and never thinking of danger, she mounted on what she deemed to be a jutting, storm-beaten block of solid rock. But in an instant, as her light weight rested on it, this crag, which had probably rolled down the mountain-side during some winter torrent, and been stayed on its way by a slight impediment, now received a fresh impetus, and, before Nora could spring back from it, commenced again its downward course, carrying the poor girl along with it.

It was well that Biddulph had a cool head and a firm hand. He heard the rumble behind him, and Nora's



shriek, and in one moment had sprung forward, seizing the skirt of her gown as she was hurled past him, and dragging her back by main force.

She fell heavily. It was a hair-breadth escape, for Biddulph had only caught the very edge of her white serge gown, and when he lifted her up, she uttered a sharp and sudden cry of pain.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, anxiously.

"I—I cannot stand," gasped Nora, leaning back on Biddulph, trembling, and very pale.

Then with great gentleness he placed her on a little patch of sward near them.

"It—it was so dreadful," said Nora, in a broken voice; "in—another moment——" And she closed her eyes, and shuddered.

"The other moment was not permitted to do any harm, you see," answered Biddulph, kindly, and speaking reassuringly. He thought she was only frightened, and nothing more.

"You—you saved my life."

"Then I thank God," said Biddulph, almost solemnly. But," he added, a moment later, bending over her, "you feel better now, don't you? Will you take my arm, and let us try to get down the hill? I shall take care you make no more false steps;" and he smiled.

He tried to raise her again as he spoke, but no sooner had he done so, than Nora sank down once more with an exclamation of great agony.

"I cannot bear it," she said; "I am in dreadful pain. I cannot stand."

Biddulph now saw that there was something seriously wrong.

"I am afraid you have sprained your ankle; let me feel if I can find out where it is."

He took one small dainty foot in his hand after the other, and Nora moaned with pain as he did so. Both ankles were terribly injured by her sudden fall on the hard rock. Her feet must have struck first, and the shock had displaced, if not broken, some of the bones.

"There is no more walking for you to-day," said Biddulph, trying to speak cheerfully, though he now fully realized the severe nature of the accident. "The question is, what shall we do? I have luckily a dog-whistle in my pocket; perhaps they may hear it below. You have got a bad sprain."

He rose and whistled loudly ; but already the falling crag, which had plunged in its headlong career from one rocky step to the other, had attracted the attention of the party below.

Alick Fraser, indeed, who had come armed with a new field-glass strapped across his shoulder, had never in reality lost sight of the two climbing up the mountain-side, and had sat smoking, and reflecting grimly that he would like to find out something about this new man, who seemed so favored by a lady whose acres marched with his own.

Then, when the crag fell tumbling into some abyss below, and Biddulph's whistle was faintly heard, Alick at once unstrapped his new glass.

"Something has happened," he said, the next minute. "Nora Stewart is lying on the ground, and that fellow Biddulph standing whistling beside her. We had best go up to them, Jock, as fast as we can, and sec."

It took a very few minutes for the two sturdy Highlanders, who had been born among the hills, to reach the spot where Nora lay ; and still fewer for Biddulph to explain how the accident had happened. Then they held a consultation, and it was agreed that Nora must at once be carried down the hill.

"My dear girl!" said the kindly Jock, with a sort of moisture stealing into his brown eyes, as he knelt down and took Nora's hand.

"An awkward affair," remarked Alick, in his brusque way.

By this time Mrs. Jock, and actually Mrs. Conway-Hope, had succeeded in reaching the group on the hill-side.

"My dear Nora, this is very sad," said Mrs. Conway-Hope ; "but I knew something would happen. You know I told you so, don't you remember, dear ? And perhaps it might have been worse."

But Nora, suppressing the moans that rose on her white lips, scarcely thought it could have been.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### WHAT HE CALLED FATE.

They carried Nora down the steep hill, on one of the cushions brought from the boats, Jock Fraser, Alick, and Biddulph alone being her bearers. Young Malcolm, who



had now arrived on the scene, in a pitiable state of emotion and excitement, would fain have assisted. But his father saw he was at once too much agitated to be of any real service.

"No, my lad," he said, laying his brown, bony hand on his son's broad shoulder; "the way you can help Nora most is to make the best use you can of your young legs, and run down by the loch-side to Balla, and tell Dr. Alexander to go on at once to Rossmore, so that we shall find him there when we reach the little pier. You had best go at once, Malcolm;" and the young man, after one more distracted glance at Nora's white face, obeyed his father, and started off at headlong speed down the hill.

Then poor Nora was carefully lifted on the cushion, Biddulph holding fast the trembling little hand.

"You stay close to me," she whispered, lifting her dark eyes a moment to his face.

He grew a little paler, and his lips moved, but neither Jock nor his wife, who also were bending over Nora, heard any word. But he took his place by her side, and no one disputed it. He and Jock Fraser carried the end of the cushion on which Nora's head rested, and Alick Fraser the other end. It was a somewhat perilous descent; but Alick, strong and sturdy and good cragsman, never placed his foot down without testing the ground. They reached the boats, therefore, without further accident, and poor Nora, still on her cushion, was lifted in; and almost as they started on their homeward journey, the mist, as Biddulph had prophesied, came creeping down the mountain-side, and began stealing over the darkening water of the loch, producing an indescribable chilliness and change of atmosphere, and a little shiver passed through Nora's frame.

"You are cold," said Biddulph; and he asked for the fur carriage-rug, and wrapped it carefully round her, and doubled a cushion, on which he lifted her head.

Mrs. Conway-Hope was looking after her own comforts, and Mrs. Jock after her Minnie, who had disappeared somewhere in the mist, with Lord Glendoyne by her side. Jock and Alick were helping to push off the boats, but Biddulph never left Nora. He sat on one of the cross seats, where he could support her and hold her in her place; and he held her hand all the way as they were rowed down the loch, until the little palm grew warm under the fur rug, and Nora's heart was beating fast.

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"Is the pain any less now?" he asked, with unconscious tenderness in his voice, bending over her a little more closely.

"Yes, it is not so bad."

"I shall never forgive myself for taking you up there."

"But it was I who wanted to go; and—and I owe you my——"

She could not complete the sentence. Tears rushed into her eyes, and a choking sob rose in her throat. She owed him this best gift, then—her life, and Nora knew it would have been less sweet from any other.

He did not speak; he clasped her hand tighter and turned away his head, and Jock Fraser, whose honest eyes happened at this moment to be resting on Biddulph, wondered what caused the great look of pain that passed over the man's face.

It was almost dark when they reached the little pier at Rossmore, but through the mist they could discern that there were figures waiting for them. The doctor was there—a tall, gaunt Scotchman—and Malcolm Fraser, pale, and still half breathless, as he had run the whole way to Balla at utmost speed. He was waiting to pull in the boats now—or rather the boat where poor Nora lay, for he saw, or at least heeded, no other.

He helped to lift Nora on the pier, and took his Uncle Allick's place in carrying her up the hill to the house at Rossmore. It was a melancholy home-coming. She had gone forth so gay and full of joyous expectation and excitement, and was now returning pale, exhausted, almost in a fainting condition; and as soon as they reached the hall at Rossmore, the doctor stepped to the front.

"Now, Mrs. Jock," he said, in his broad Scotch accent, to Mrs. Fraser, whose children he had attended since their first appearance in the world, "ye'll please, ma'am, to turn every one out of the room but yerself and me. The young leedy must not be worried, and ye're a sensible woman, and I can trust ye."

"All right, doctor," answered Mrs. Jock; and she stood by Nora's bedside when her injuries were examined, and the stockings cut from the small, slender, white feet.

The doctor looked very grave when he saw the condition of the right foot.

"We'll not ha' ye dancing any reels this winter, anyhow, Miss Stewart," he said; "eh, my poor lassie, you must ha' had a fearsome fall."

"Shall I ever be able to walk again, doctor?" asked Nora, in a low tone.

"Walk again? To be sure ye will--ay, and dance, too; but ye'll ha' to bide a wee; we ha' a broken bane or two to deal with."

Nora's right foot was, in truth, so terribly injured that, after doing all he could, Dr. Alexander drew Mrs. Jock aside.

"If ye don't mind, Mrs. Jock," he said, "and as the young leedy can weel afford it, I should like further advice from Edinbro'. Ye see, the right foot is sare displaced, and my hand is not quite what it used to be, nor my sight either, for that matter."

People said, indeed, that the poor doctor, during his long weary rides across brae and stream to the outlying hamlets in the neighborhood, was too fond of stopping to refresh himself with the "mountain dew" of his native land; and that on one occasion found, to his extreme surprise, a rosy babe nestling in the mother's arms, when he was quite unconscious of having assisted in placing it there on the previous evening.

"What bairn is this?" he asked, when the mother proudly showed the little head.

"Why, doctor?" cried the woman, in the utmost astonishment.

"Ay, ay, to be sure," said the doctor, who was shrewd, and began to understand; "I needn't ask whose bairn. It's the living image of ye, and a bonnier bairn I never saw;" and the woman sank back with a gratified smile.

But, in spite of this weakness, the man was clever, well-read, and had a kindly heart.

"One gets a bit down, ye know, Mrs. Jock," he used sometimes to say to his friend and neighbor at Airdlinn; and Mrs. Jock was always ready with her good word for the doctor.

"If you had to ride twenty or thirty miles in a drizzling mist or a snow-storm, Alick, and most likely not get paid for your day's work," she once said to her brother-in-law, "how would you like it? And even if the poor doctor does take a drop of whiskey too much, it's hard to blame him."

"Well, he'll be found in a snow-drift some day, Jeanie," answered Alick, with his cold smile; but Mrs. Jock sighed, and was ready to forgive an over-worked, conscientious, and clever man his one failing.

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And she went downstairs to the drawing-room, where Nora's guests were waiting to hear the doctor's opinion, with a very grave face. She beckoned to her husband as she entered the room, and he at once went toward her.

"Jock," she said, "I'll not leave Rossmore until Nora Stewart can leave her room."

"Well, my dear," he answered, resignedly, though he knew he would be very uncomfortable without her.

"How is she, Jeanie?" asked Alick Fraser, now advancing.

"Very bad, I am afraid, Alick; Dr. Alexander wants a telegram sent first thing in the morning to Edinburgh for a doctor."

"That looks serious," said Alick.

Mr. Biddulph heard this conversation, and a moment later approached Mrs. Jock.

"What doctor does he want, Mrs. Fraser?" he said, speaking sharply and quickly to hide his feelings. "I will ride to the station in the morning and meet the first train, if Dr. Alexander will name the doctor he would like."

"It is very kind of you," said Mrs. Jock, who felt somewhat resentful toward Biddulph, as she thought he must have led Nora into danger; "but some of us—some of her own people, I think—had better send the telegram."

Biddulph bit his lips, and stood silent.

"I'll send a groom to meet the first train with a telegram," said Alick Fraser. "I'll go now and see Alexander, and consult what doctor to telegraph for."

He quitted the room as he spoke, and again Mrs. Jock turned to her husband.

"Now, Jock, my dear," she suggested, "don't you think you and the young people should be going home? The quieter the house is kept the better for Nora. I mean, of course, to stay."

"But, my dear Mrs. Fraser, do not inconvenience yourself by doing so," said Mrs. Conway-Hope. "I shall be quite able to manage without further assistance until Nora is well."

"Nora wishes me to stay," replied Mrs. Jock, firmly.

"Oh, in that case——"

"We have settled it all upstairs," said Mrs. Jock; "and now I am going back to her, and wish you all good-night."

She looked round for Biddulph, but he had disappeared.

Lord Glendoyne, however, advanced and held out his hand.

"Will you tell Miss Stewart from me, Mrs. Fraser," he said, in his slow, graceful way, "how deeply I regret that such an unfortunate accident should have occurred, on what otherwise would have been a most delightful day."

"I will tell her, Lord Glendoyne; and I hope you will look us up at Airdlinn."

"I have already asked permission to do so. I shall certainly give myself that pleasure."

"My husband, I am sure, will be pleased to see you. I mean to remain here for the present, with Miss Stewart. Good-night."

She shook hands with him, and then returned to Nora's bedside, who looked up with interest as she entered.

"I hope they are having tea, and everything downstairs that they require?" asked poor Nora, who was very hospitable.

"My dear, I've sent them all away, Jock and the children among the rest."

"Oh, Mrs. Fraser! And—Lord Glendoyne and Mr. Biddulph?"

"Lord Glendoyne was just going as I came upstairs, and Mr. Biddulph had disappeared, so I suppose he is gone, too. And now, my dear child, you must try to get to sleep, and not worry yourself about any of them."

But Nora could not sleep; the pain was too great, and the shock to her nerves too recent. And presently the doctor came in to have another look at her, and then went out to smoke his pipe on the terrace in the misty atmosphere, for he meant to stay all night with his young patient at Rossmore.

As he walked up and down, his tall, gaunt figure, visible only when he passed the lighted windows, another figure emerged from the shade of the dark firs, and a moment later Mr. Biddulph had joined him.

"I must introduce myself to you, Dr. Alexander," he said, raising his cap with that grave courtesy of manner which always distinguished him. "I am Mr. Biddulph, of Dunbaan."

"Ay; the old colonel's nephew. I heard ye were in these parts."

"I have waited to see you. I particularly wish to know what you think of Miss Stewart, as the accident happened while she was with me."

"Ay, but she told me she owed her life to ye, Mr. Biddulph, and the tears were in her bonny dark eyes when she was telling the story. What do I think of her? Weel, I'm sare afraid it's a bad job."

"Is she so injured?"

"Badly hurt. It will be many a lang day before she can put her foot to the ground."

Biddulph did not speak; but he was so visibly moved that the kindly doctor had a word of consolation to add.

"And it might ha' been a deal worse but for ye; the poor lassie might ha' been lying deed amang the crags."

"Will you tell her," began Biddulph, in a husky voice, "that I—feel this most deeply; that I trust and hope soon——"

He could not end the sentence; but the doctor, with the fine delicacy of feeling which was part of his nature, hidden in so rough a garb, understood.

"I'll tell her, Mr. Biddulph. Eh, now," he added, with a smile stealing over his large features, as he turned his shrewd eyes on Biddulph's face, "ye'd like to bear the pain for her, wouldn't ye? And so would I at your age, but not now;" and the poor doctor gave rather a rueful laugh.

"Bear the pain?" repeated Biddulph, quickly. "I would bear a hundred thousand times the pain to spare her one pang. But what folly to talk thus! Any man would do the same."

"Not they," answered the doctor, who was a bit of a philosopher; "man is a selfish animal, as a rule, Mr. Biddulph, and doesn't like to put his limbs, or anything that affects his personal ease, in jeopardy. Now, there's Miss Stewart, with a fine, sensitive physical frame, yet she's lying quieter than many a lang-legged loon would do, if his foot was twisted as badly as hers."

"She has a noble nature—you can see it on her face—and all noble natures can endure."

"To a certain point, yes; they can bear the big troubles of life, though, better than the small ones. But it's a weary life, after all, Mr. Biddulph," and the doctor sighed.

"Often a very bitter one," answered Biddulph. And the doctor wondered what bitterness had come to the lot of this apparently fortunate man.

They parted on friendly terms a few minutes later, and Biddulph went home with a disturbed and heavy heart.

"I meant to have said good-by to-day," he told himself gloomily, as he strained his eyes through the mist to watch



the twinkling lights of the house at Rossmore, as his men rowed him across the loch ; "but now it cannot be. Blind, irresistible fate holds me fast, and the end is hidden from my sight."

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## CHAPTER IX.

### ALICK'S CLERK.

Alick Fraser despatched two telegrams early the next morning. One to the surgeon in Edinburgh, that Dr. Alexander wished to meet ; and the other to his own clerk at Glasgow, who was named Mr. Sandford Hill.

When Alick Fraser retired from the firm of ship-builders, of which he was then the head, he did not invest all the large fortune he had acquired in the somewhat unprofitable Highland acres that it had been his life-long ambition to possess.

He bought Lord Glendoyne's property, which was then in the market ; but the bulk of his money was left in the busy city where he had made it. He was the owner of houses, railway shares, canal shares, and steamers. In fact, he was rich ; and, though he assumed the laird at Inismore, in Glasgow he was still a shrewd, clever man of business ; and Mr. Sandford Hill, at a humble distance, followed in his footsteps.

Alick, in his telegram, had summoned Mr. Hill to Inismore, and on the following day Mr. Hill had arrived. A little dapper man this, with a round face, fresh complexion, and eager, greenish-blue eyes. He had light, short, sandy hair and was universally in Glasgow called Sandy Hill. He had never before been invited to Inismore, and was pleased and proud to receive this token of his employer's favor.

"Well, Sandy," said Alick, who was sitting writing, looking round when "Mr. Hill" was announced, but not rising. Then he held out his hard, strong hand, which was clasped with respectful fervor by his clerk. "And what do you think of the place?" asked Alick, now moving his chair, so as to have a fuller view of Mr. Hill.

"Princely," replied Mr. Hill, almost in a tone of awe, glancing round Alick's well-furnished room, and finally



fixing his round eyes on the decorated ceiling ; " no other word would do, sir—*princely* ! "

" It's not bad," said Alick, with suppressed pride.

" Not bad ? Ha, ha, ha ! " laughed Mr. Hill, unable to control his delight. " That is like you, sir—always a joke ; not bad, not bad, indeed ! "

" And yonder is my brother's place," continued Alick, rising and proudly pointing across the loch to Airdlinn ; " there is the old roof tree under which I was born. "

Sandy's face became instantly grave.

" It's inspiring, sir," he said ; " I call it absolutely inspiring. The ancient family home in view of the princely residence raised by—energy, sir, genius, sir, industry, sir ; you have 'em all. "

" Well, I've not worked for nothing, Sandy, eh ? " smiled Alick.

" You've only got your due, sir ; a head like yours must win—a marvellous head ! "

" One requires a long head. "

" Yes, yes ; one requires it—a shrewd, long head and a mind, sir. The mind must be there. "

" I want you to use yours then, Sandy, at the present moment. I have sent for you on a little business. "

" I hoped so, sir," answered Sandy, doing his best not to betray his disappointment. He had hoped that Alick had intended to pay him a compliment by inviting him to Inismore, though he knew this was not Alick's way.

" There is a man who has lately arrived here," continued Alick, beginning to pace the room with his stalwart steps ; " a new man, whose past history I want to find out. He is called Biddulph ; and his uncle, the late Colonel Biddulph, left him a place across the loch named Dunbaan ; and I have a motive for finding out all about him. Do you understand ? "

" Perfectly," said Sandy, who had been listening with profound attention.

" I want you to stay on here, then, for a few days ; to mix familiarly with the keepers and others, and learn all you can. "

But Sandy's face had changed color at the word " keepers. "

" I would do anything for you, as you know, sir," he said, shifting uneasily first one foot and then the other ; " but as regards fire-arms, I'll admit, sir, I am nervous. "

Alick laughed his loud laugh.

"I forgot you are a bit of a coward," he said. "Mix with the maids then, man, if you like it better; only find out about Biddulph, and report it to me."

"Do you wish the report to be favorable or otherwise, sir?" said Sandy, resuming his business habits.

Again Alick laughed.

"Well, I'm not particularly fond of him," he said.

"I understand," answered Sandy; "Mr. Biddulph's private life and character to be inquired into. Inquiries, of course, on the quiet?"

"Of course. And, Sandy, as these things cost money, there is ten pounds to begin with;" and Alick drew out from his open desk ten sovereigns, which Sandy respectfully pocketed.

"And I've been thinking," went on Alick, who never allowed any fine feelings to stand in his way, "that it wouldn't do about here for you to be known to be in my direct employment. People would not be so open with you as I wish them to be. You must assume another character, Sandy; be a painter, or a house decorator—anything."

Sandy was not quite unaccustomed to carry on private inquiries. More than once he had ferreted out information that had been of great assistance to Alick Fraser; but to be requested to assume a new character was rather startling. However, after considering a few moments, he had a suggestion to offer.

"I've a brother, sir," he said, "in a small way as an upholsterer."

"The very thing!" cried Alick. "Be your brother for the next few days. Some of the upper bedrooms are not furnished yet; pretend to be taking an inventory of what is wanted. This will throw you with the women about the house, and you'll hear all their gossip. Not that I want to hear it, though," he added, "except as regards Biddulph."

"Only as regards Biddulph," repeated Sandy.

"And now, I dare say you want something to eat. I'll ring for my housekeeper, Mrs. Ker, and introduce her to Mr. Hill, the upholsterer, and tell her you are a most respectable man, quite to be trusted;" and once more Alick Fraser laughed his loud laugh.

He carried this programme out. Mrs. Ker, a comely, middle-aged widow, presently received her master's commands to treat Mr. Hill, the upholsterer from Glasgow, well and show him the rooms that wanted furnishing, and anything about the place that was worth seeing.

"Don't be frightened of him, Mrs. Ker," said Alick, with his peculiar smile; "he's a very respectable man."

Mrs. Ker smiled, bridled, and blushed.

"Mr. Fraser always has his joke, you know," she said to Sandy, as she led the way to her own comfortable sitting-room, and there proceeded to refresh Sandy with Highland mutton and whiskey, to say nothing of oatcake and delicious butter.

"This is a charming place, madam," said Sandy, pausing for one moment in his repast.

"The scenery's fine, but it's dull," answered Mrs. Ker, who had once been in Edinburgh, and loved the ways of towns.

"But you'll have neighbors," said Sandy, with his mouth full.

"Few and far between, as the saying is," replied Mrs. Ker. "Mr. Fraser's brother lives across the loch, and a new gentleman has come to that side lately, Mr. Biddulph; but our nearest neighbor is Miss Stewart, of Rossmore."

"A young lady?" asked Sandy.

"Oh, quite a young lady, and considered handsome, though she's too pale for my taste."

"Perhaps she and Mr. Fraser will be making a match of it," said Sandy, helping himself a second time to oatcake and butter.

"Oh dear, no! She's too young for Mr. Fraser, though he's a fine man. They do say she and Mr. Biddulph are sweethearts; only they've got up some sad stories about him lately;" and Mrs. Ker cast down her eyes.

"Another lady in the case?" asked Sandy, facetiously.

"So they say. But, Mr. Hill, you must take a little more whiskey after your long journey."

"Not unless you'll join me, madam," said Sandy, gallantly; and Mrs. Ker having been persuaded to do so, became very communicative, and Sandy heard all he wanted to hear, and a good deal more.

Mrs. Ker's late husband's sister was upper housemaid at Dunbaan, and this young woman had spent the afternoon of the previous day with her sister-in-law, and told Mrs. Ker all about the mysterious lady who had arrived at Dunbaan; and the trees in the avenue which had been felled by the master's orders because "a queer, outlandish woman's name" had been cut in the bark.

"They do say, indeed," Mrs. Ker went on, waxing confidential, "that old Donald, the man-servant over there,

heard this lady say she was his wedded wife, though she was nothing particular to look at, I'm told ; and Donald said high words passed between them. At all events, he got rid of her pretty sharp, and Janet says he has never been the same man to look at since—so down-hearted and low."

"And what is he like, this gay young party?" asked Sandy, whose spirits the whiskey had now raised to jocoseness.

"As fine a man as I ever saw," replied Mrs. Ker, who spoke with authority, "with a noble look about his face, and carries himself well ; and they say he has an open hand. It will be a great pity if he has let this person get some hold upon him."

"Such things are, Mrs. Ker," answered Sandy, rather insinuating that he had been the victim of female wiles.

"Yes, indeed," sighed Mrs. Ker.

But enough of this conversation. Sandy felt he had not wasted his time, and when, during the evening, he had a quiet talk with Alick Fraser outside the house, so that no listening ear might have the benefit of his words, Alick was quite content with the information he had acquired.

"This is enough to settle the fellow's pretensions," he thought grimly. "I'll go to Rossmore to-morrow, and have a talk with Mrs. Jock."

In the meanwhile, Leonora Stewart was enduring, as bravely as she could, the severe pain that at times seemed almost too great to be borne. The doctor from Edinburgh, as well as Dr. Alexander, had looked very grave when he was examining her right foot, and candidly admitted to Mrs. Jock afterward that he feared "the poor young lady might be slightly lame for life." And when Mrs. Jock repeated this to Mr. Biddulph, who had called shortly after the doctor left, she noticed he grew very pale.

This touched Mrs. Jock's kindly heart.

"At all events," she said, "but for you the accident might have been much worse. Nora has told me exactly how it happened—how you were urging her to leave the hill-side, when, without speaking, she foolishly quitted your side and mounted on the loose boulder, that she expected was solid rock. She speaks very highly of your presence of mind in such a sudden emergency."

"Yet I always feel as if I had injured her," said Biddulph.

"Injury is better than death, at all events, Mr. Biddulph."

"That is so. I am glad at least you are able to remain with her."

"Oh, my good Jock is getting on very well without me!" laughed Mrs. Fraser; but she was pleased. What woman, or man indeed, is not pleased to receive a veiled compliment?

Yet, later on in the day, Mrs. Jock's kindly feeling toward Mr. Biddulph again veered round; for her brother-in-law, Alick, arrived at Rossmore, armed with his story against their new neighbor.

After inquiring about "Nora Stewart," as he called her, and having heard the doctor's opinion, and also that Mr. Biddulph had called, Alick imparted his news.

"I say, Jeanie," he said, "you should give her a hint about that fellow. There's a very ugly story going the round of the countryside about him."

"About Mr. Biddulph?" asked Mrs. Jock.

"About Mr. Biddulph, no less. Folks say Mr. Biddulph is married or that he ought to be, and that a lady has been to Dunbaan and kicked up a tremendous row, and that Biddulph had to buy her silence."

"Is this true, Alick?" said Mrs. Jock, gravely.

"Quite true, I'm told. Nora Stewart had best have as little to say to him as possible. I never liked the fellow."

"If he is a married man, he has no right to pay Nora Stewart so much attention. I shall certainly tell her what you have told me."

"It's only fair she should know. Good-by, Jeanie; love to Jock and Minnie when you see them."

Mrs. Jock walked thoughtfully upstairs after her brother-in-law had left Rossmore. She was not a scandalous woman, but, on the other hand, she was a rigidly moral one, and had not much forgiveness nor pity for those who strayed from the right path. Yet she felt this was an awkward story to repeat to an unmarried girl; there might be some truth in it, but it might not be entirely true.

But could she have looked into Nora's heart at this moment, she would not long have hesitated in doing what she would have considered her duty. Lying there in great pain, what had given Nora courage heroically to endure it, and power to force back the moans which rose on her pale lips? A sweet, subtle, soul-pervading thought—a knowledge that he who had saved her loved her, that he

would gladly have borne this pain for her, and that his anxiety about her was very great.

Dr. Alexander had told her, in his homely, kindly fashion, about his talk with Biddulph on the night of the accident.

"Eh, but young leedy, ye must soon get weel, or the poor fellow will go dement," he had said, remembering, perhaps, the days when he, too, as a raw young Scotch lad, had sighed and loved.

The poor fellow had indeed been unfortunate all the days of his life. The son of a farmer, he had fallen in love during his studious youth with the pretty daughter of one of the small lairds in his neighborhood, and, though he had never spoken to the young lady, his admiration for her had influenced his life. He had risen early and worked late; for her sake he meant to become great, and started for London with twenty pounds in his pocket, determined to laboriously climb the steep ladder of fame.

Instead of which he very nearly starved. He struggled on four or five years; he learned his Janet (the laird's pretty daughter) was married, and he gave the fight up. He returned to the Highland hills where he had been born, no richer than when he went away. But he had, of course, acquired knowledge, and he became a badly paid country doctor, instead of a highly feed London physician, which he had aspired to be.

And he took a sombre, but still a kindly, view of the world in which he had failed to gain success.

"Every man cannot win," he used to say, sadly enough, speaking very good English generally when he philosophized, though relapsing into broad Scotch in ordinary conversation.

And there was something in Biddulph's face which had taken the fancy of this clever, yet unfortunate man. He had read there indications of a loftier train of thought than he found among those with whom he commonly associated. How strange it is! Even the words of a letter show signs of the human being that penned the lines. We cannot quite disguise our nature, just as we cannot turn ugliness to beauty by spurious art. We can make ourselves look better; we can hide as best we can this fault or the other, and would have the world believe it is not there. But it peeps out; the mean man is mean still, in spite of some ostentatious gift, and the noble heart noble

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still, though evil times may have clouded some of its high hopes. And the Scotch doctor, with those small shrewd eyes of his, saw further than most men. In a pithy sentence he had once estimated very justly the character of the two Frasers.

"Jock's heart is good, and Alick's head," he had dryly remarked of his neighbors; and in Biddulph's gray eyes he had seen a glimpse, it might be of an erring, but still a lofty soul.

He had soon an opportunity of further judging of his character, for a day or two after Nora's accident, as the doctor sat smoking after his mid-day meal, and fortifying himself with a glass of toddy before starting on a long ride through the drizzling rain, Mr. Biddulph was announced, and the doctor rose, and stretched out his lean hand.

"Glad to see ye, sir, though this is but a dreary day."

"I have come to place myself under your care, doctor," said Biddulph, a dusky blush stealing to his usually pale skin.

"Eh, and what is wrang now?" asked the doctor, putting on his professional air, and eying the healthful countenance before him.

"I suppose it's the climate," answered Biddulph, "but I've got—well, a pain in my shoulder."

"Bad?" inquired the doctor, laconically.

"Well, not very bad," answered Biddulph, moving uneasily beneath the shrewd eyes fixed upon him.

The doctor went through the usual formalities; the patient's tongue was red, his pulse strong and steady.

"These attacks are vera' subtle," said the doctor, with just a twinkle of humor in his small eyes. "However, I'll gi' ye something to rub on yer shoulder, Mr. Biddulph, and send the lad across the loch with it before nightfall."

"Oh, I'll call for it to-morrow; that will do," answered Biddulph, with assumed carelessness. "And how is your other patient this morning—Miss Stewart?"

"Miss Leonora Stewart," answered the doctor, with imperturbable gravity of tone, though that touch of humor still lurked in his eyes, "is doing as weel as we can hope. I must tell her ye're a fellow-sufferer."

Biddulph then proceeded to ask various questions about Nora, and then, just as he was going away, he said:

"You'll not forget to have that stuff ready in the morn-



ing, then? I'll call for it about this time, and hope I'll find you at home."

"Then ye're na' in a hurry for it?"

"Oh, to-morrow will do. Good by, doctor." And they shook hands and parted, and as Biddulph turned away, a grim smile stole over Dr. Alexander's face.

"De'il a bit of a pain he has," he muttered to himself, as he finished his whiskey, "unless it's under his left ribs. Eh, but," he added, after a moment's thought, his mind wandering back to his own early love-mischance, "maybe that's the worst pain of a';" and the poor doctor heaved a heavy sigh.

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## CHAPTER X.

### A BLOW.

Nora Stewart grew very impatient after a week's confinement to her room, to leave it, and finally persuaded Dr. Alexander to allow her to be carried on a couch into the drawing-room, just ten days after the eventful picnic, when she had so nearly lost her life.

In the meanwhile, Biddulph had been a most exemplary patient to the doctor, going regularly every day for the embrocation for his shoulder, and using actually marvellous quantities of it.

"What! more to-day!" the doctor said once, in affected surprise. "Eh, mon, ye must rub yersel' weel?"

"Not a drop left," answered Biddulph, suppressing a smile; which in truth there was not, as he had emptied the bottle into the loch as he crossed.

The doctor discreetly never asked to look at the afflicted shoulder, as he knew no skin could possibly be left on it if half his bottles had been applied. And thus Biddulph heard every day how Nora was going on; heard the day she was to be carried into the drawing-room, and sent a message by the doctor that he hoped to be one of her earliest visitors.

And it chanced that he found her alone. Two days after Nora's accident, Mrs. Conway-Hope, who had secretly resented Mrs. Jock having been invited to stay at Rossmore, went up to Nora's room, and said, with suppressed bitterness:

"My dear Nora, since Mrs. Fraser has taken up her quarters here, and since you seem to prefer her society in your sick-room to mine, I have taken the opportunity of writing to my poor dear husband's cousins, the Dalrimples, to tell them I shall have pleasure in going to them for a short visit."

"Very well, Cousin Margaret," answered Leonora, quietly.

Thus, Mrs. Conway-Hope having disposed of herself, and the two young girls, Maud and Alice Lee, having also left Rossmore and returned to England, Mrs. Jock and Nora had been left alone during the past week; and on the very day when Nora had wrung from the doctor leave to be carried into the drawing-room, a note arrived from Jock Fraser for his wife, asking her to go over to Airdlinn during the afternoon, as poor Minnie had already got the household accounts into a terrible muddle.

The pretty Minnie, indeed, had been thinking of other things besides household accounts during her mother's absence. Lord Glendoyne had called one day at Airdlinn, and found Jock Fraser and Malcolm were both away on the hills. Glendoyne, however, paid a long visit, and before he left he and Minnie had fixed to meet again. Thus, economic cares had been forgotten, and the giving out of sugar, candles, and soap had become a burden, and Minnie had handed over her mother's sacred store-closet key to the cook, and Jock Fraser was disturbed in his mind considering sundry good things which sensible Mrs. Jock always kept locked away.

Thus he recalled his wife, for a few hours at least, to look after her household treasures, and Mrs. Jock found herself constrained to go. She, however, urged on Nora not to attempt to be moved into the drawing-room until her return. But Nora displayed an extraordinary amount of determination, she thought (obstinacy, Mrs. Jock secretly reflected), upon the subject. No, she would not be persuaded; she would be carried into the drawing-room immediately after lunch, and nothing Mrs. Jock could say had the least effect upon her. And carried in she was. Her couch was placed near a glowing fire, and a new novel put into her hands, and then kindly Mrs. Jock was forced to leave her.

"Now, my dear, if anyone but the doctor calls, I should not see them," was Mrs. Jock's parting advice.

"Indeed, I shall, though, answered Nora, smiling ; "it will be quite a delightful change."

Mrs. Jock shrugged her broad shoulders.

"Thank you, my dear !"

"Oh, you dear, good darling, you know I don't mean you !" cried Nora from her couch, holding out her hand ; and Mrs. Jock went up to her and kissed her pale, sweet face.

"No, I don't think you did, Nora. Well, then, good-by, my dear, until I come back."

So Mrs. Jock went away, and Nora was left alone with her novel and her *thoughts*. The poor novel had no chance. The characters might have lived in the writer's brain, or only been faintly sketched there—so faintly they took no real semblance to the reader's mind, and it was quite the same to Leonora Stewart, as she lay there with fast-beating heart, listening for the footsteps of the man to whom she believed she owed her life.

The doctor, like a man of honor, felt he must do some service for his new patient, in return for the five-pound note that Mr. Biddulph had thrust into his hand in payment for the numerous embrocations he had received ; therefore, as before related, he had informed Biddulph of the day, nay, even the hour, on which once more Miss Stewart would be visible to her friends.

"Mr. Biddulph asked me to tell ye, Miss Stewart," he had quietly informed Nora, when Mrs. Jock happened to be out of the way, "that he hopes to pay his respects to ye to-morrow—that is, of course," he added, slyly, "if his rheumatics will permit."

"Has he been ill ?" inquired Nora, with a blush.

A grim smile stole over the doctor's rough though kindly face.

"Weel, he's na' in danger," he answered ; "though," he added humorously, "he's unco' fond o' medical advice. I've had him daily, Miss Stewart since yer illness ; he fashes a deal o'er that shoulder o' his."

Again Nora blushed ; and blushed more deeply still when, early in the afternoon of her first appearance in the drawing-room, the rheumatic patient himself was announced.

But Biddulph looked very pale. He went up to her couch and took her hand almost without a word.

"Are—you better ?" faltered Nora, vaguely remembering in her confusion that Dr. Alexander had said he had been ill.

Then Biddulph smiled, still looking at her with those deep gray eyes of his, which always softened when they rested on her face.

"So the doctor has been telling you," he said, smiling. "I fear he was too acute for me; I do not think he believed in my rheumatism."

They both laughed, and Biddulph went a step nearer Nora's couch.

"I wanted to hear how you were every day. I had to make some excuse, you know."

"Yes; it was very kind of you."

"And how are you, now, when I see you face to face?" said Biddulph, slowly. "I have heard of you every day, as I have told you—heard of your heroic endurance of the cruellest pain."

"I am afraid the doctor has exaggerated. I really bear pain very badly."

"You have the sensitive organization which feels it acutely; but we won't talk of it. Has our good friend, Mrs. Jock, left you?"

"Only for a few hours. It seems," added Nora, with a smile, "that the pretty Minnie is not such a good house-keeper as her mother, so my cousin Jock sent for his wife to look after her."

"I like both your cousin Jock and his wife, but not Alick Fraser, if he is a cousin, too."

"Oh, I don't regard Alick Fraser as a cousin."

"I am glad of that. How is it, now, I have an instinctive dislike to that man, yet he has done me no harm?"

"Our likes and dislikes are unaccountable things."

"But are they?" said Biddulph, looking fixedly at Nora. "Perhaps there are laws in these things like the laws of storms, whose effects we feel, though we cannot see them. Our dislikes may be sent as warnings to avoid the people who cause them in our minds. There is a look in Alick Fraser's hard brown eyes I absolutely hate!"

"I never think of him enough to hate him," laughed Nora.

"Yet I believe he thinks very often of you. I notice he watches you."

"Oh, no; I believe he thinks of nothing but his money-bags."

"Oh, yes, but he does; he's a money grubber, no doubt, but he is also ambitious. I expect he wishes to become a very great man, indeed; to found a family to whom to be-

queath his ancestral acres at Inismore ;" and Biddulph laughed.

Nora laughed, too, and blushed a little.

"He will leave his money to Malcolm and Minnie, I should think. Why, he is quite an old man. But talking of Inismore reminds me of Lord Glendoyne ; how do you like him ?"

"Very well. He is a very gentlemanly man in manner."

"In manner ?" said Nora, looking up smilingly.

"I mean I am not quite sure whether—— But first tell me your definition of a gentleman ?"

"I think it should mean one who is gentle and true in word and deed," answered Nora, looking at Biddulph with her large dark eyes, and his fell as she did so.

"It's a hard title to rightly win, then," he said, in a low tone.

Nora moved uneasily, and her face flushed. It crossed her mind again at that moment, the strange warning she had received not to trust in Biddulph.

"Some day," he said, the next minute, "I will tell you a story, and you must tell me if the hero has any right to be called a gentleman still."

"Very well."

"But not to-day. What were we talking of ? Oh yes— Glendoyne."

"Yes ; you said he had a good manner."

"And a good appearance altogether ; but now I am going to make you laugh ; to point out a truer gentleman to my mind than Glendoyne. Guess who it is."

"Jock Fraser ?"

"No. The worthy Jock is an excellent fellow ; a gentleman according to your definition also, for I dare say he is gentle and true in word and deed. But the lines have fallen for Jock in pleasant places. He married a good woman in his youth ; the good woman is by his side still to cheer and comfort him, and help him over life's stony places. Jock Fraser has been a lucky man, and never been tried in the cruel crucible of a spoilt life. The man I mean has, and come out of it sad, but not sour. What do you say to your rough Scotch doctor ?"

"You mean Dr. Alexander ?" said Nora, thoughtfully.

"I mean Dr. Alexander, with his ugly face and his lingo of mixed English and Scotch, and his whiskey ! I like the man. He is humorous, but never coarse. He would share his last penny, or his last bawbee, as in his genial hours he

would no doubt call it, with a friend. And I do not suppose he has one in the wide world. I mean a friend whose mind is close akin to his—one whom no time can change."

"And you think there are such?" said Nora, her white eyelids, with their long thick lashes, dropping over her dark eyes.

"Yes, but few and far between; a man makes but *one* in a lifetime."

Nora did not speak for a moment or two; her breath came a little quicker. Then she said, softly, still without looking up:

"I have never thanked you for saving my life. That should be a strong bond of friendship between us."

Biddulph bit his lips under his brown moustache, and forced back some words he knew he had no right to speak.

"Did it need this bond?" he said in a low tone, after a little pause. "A Highland gillie would have done what I did as well, and better."

"But there was no Highland gillie there. I shudder still when I think of that awful moment."

"I too shudder when I think of it; but, Miss Stewart, if you will permit this to be a bond between us——"

At this moment the drawing-room door opened, and "Mr. Malcolm Fraser" was announced.

And the young man's brown face grew absolutely pale with anger as his eyes fell on Biddulph. He shook hands with Nora, but only acknowledged Biddulph's salutation with a haughty, distant bow. It was impossible, indeed, to mistake his manner, and Biddulph drew himself up and looked steadily in Malcolm's face, whose blue eyes were glaring with defiance.

"My mother told me I could see you, Nora," said Malcolm.

"Yes; I am very pleased to see my friends again," she answered, with ready tact.

"My mother will be here shortly," continued Malcolm, pointedly, neither looking at, nor speaking to, Biddulph.

"She told me she would not be long away. And how have you been getting on without her, Malcolm? It is so good of her to stay with me."

"She was sure to stay with you; and you are really better, Nora!"

"Yes, much better. I have just been thanking Mr. Biddulph here, Malcolm, for saving my life."



"It was not a very difficult feat to seize hold of a woman's dress and throw her down."

The extreme rudeness of this speech was so great that Nora's fair face flushed angrily.

"You are quite right, Mr. Fraser," said Biddulph, coolly; "it was no feat."

"Your presence of mind and courage saved my life, at least," said Nora, quickly, looking gratefully at Biddulph, who quickly changed the conversation by taking up Nora's novel and asking her if she had read it.

"I was trying to read it," she answered, smiling, "when you came."

They talked about the book a little while, and Malcolm Fraser stood, turning first red, and then pale, deservedly shut out of the conversation. Then he bade Nora good-by with scant ceremony, and, without a word to Biddulph, stalked out of the room.

"What is the matter with that very good-looking young Scot?" asked Biddulph, with a smile, as Malcolm disappeared.

"I cannot imagine what has come over Malcolm," answered Nora, who, perhaps, really had her suspicions what ailed her young kinsman; "he used to be a nice youth."

Biddulph laughed.

"He evidently does not think I am 'nice,' at all events," said Biddulph, rising. "I shall go now, Miss Stewart, as I don't wish to tire you. May I come again?"

"Indeed you may."

"I shall tell you the promised story, perhaps, next time, and ask your opinion of the hero."

"Very well; good-by, then. Come soon; I am curious to hear the story."

They shook hands and parted, and, as Biddulph went down the steep avenue at Rossmore, to his surprise, near the end of it he found Malcolm Fraser, who was evidently waiting for him, and who raised his cap punctiliously as he approached.

"I want a word with you, Mr. Biddulph," he said.

"Certainly," replied Biddulph.

"I am Miss Nora Stewart's near kinsman," continued Malcolm, growing pale with excitement, "and as such, have a right to ask why you, a married man, pay my cousin such marked attention."



It was now Biddulph's turn to grow pale, but his eyes and voice were alike steady as he answered the young Highlander.

"You have no right either to ask such a question or to make such an assertion," he said.

"I shall find a right," answered Malcolm, haughtily; "and can you deny my assertion?"

"I deny your right to speak to me in such a tone, or to ask me any questions whatever; and I do not mean to answer you. Good-morning."

Biddulph would have walked on, but, with a fierce exclamation, Malcolm sprang to his side.

"Look, Mr. Biddulph, this won't serve you! You *shall* answer. Nora Stewart's name shall not be dragged to the dust by you!"

"Boy!" said Biddulph, "are you mad? Miss Nora Stewart's name is as sacred to me as my own mother's."

"I know nothing about your mother," said Malcolm, insolently; "but I do know Miss Stewart is my cousin, and unless you cease your attentions to her——"

Biddulph's only reply was to commence walking on, while Malcolm fiercely dogged his footsteps.

"Will you answer me?" he almost shouted.

Biddulph neither looked round nor made any reply.

"You won't speak?" cried Malcolm, beside himself with rage. "Then you are a coward—a sneaking coward! Do you hear?"

"Say that again!" said Biddulph, sternly, now stopping.

"I do say it," answered the jealous, maddened young man; "and I strike you as I would a dog!"

He struck out his clinched hand as he spoke, and dealt a heavy blow right on Biddulph's face, who, completely taken by surprise, reeled back for the moment. But the next he recovered himself. He had been a practised athlete in his earlier days, and now, with all his passions roused by the insult he had received, he attacked Malcolm with such strength and science combined, that the young Scot found it was all he could do to defend himself from the well-directed, iron-like blows of the man whose fury he had provoked.

Malcolm began to step backward down the steep hill, and presently a heavy thud on his chest sent him sprawling on the ground.

"Have you had enough?" cried Biddulph.

"No!" shouted Malcolm, fiercely, springing once more to his feet.

Again they closed in battle; but Malcolm, blind and mad with passion, never looked where he was going, and, his foot catching in a rut—for the ground was very uneven—he fell heavily, his head striking against a small block of granite in the rough grass, which cut his forehead.

When he struggled to his knees the blood was streaming down his face, and he grew faint and dizzy.

"Are you hurt?" asked Biddulph, approaching him. But Malcolm answered him with a curse, and the victor, seeing he was in no danger, felt a thrill of "stern joy."

"The next time you make an assertion," said Biddulph, as a parting shot, "I advise you to be sure of your facts;" and with a harsh laugh he turned away, leaving poor Malcolm to gather himself together as best he could.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### NOT FIT TO BE SEEN.

Biddulph returned to Dunbaan with a galling sense of rage in his heart, for he knew this hot-blooded boy must have had something to go upon, or he dare not have spoken as he had done.

This was very bitter to a man who was proud and sensitive alike. He did not wish Nora Stewart to hear from other lips than his own the story of the miserable blight which had fallen on his life. He meant to be honest; to go to her and say, "I seem a free man, but I am not one; in my rash youth I hung a chain round my neck which binds me still." He would tell her this, he had told himself a hundred times, and then he would go away and leave the sweet woman who had won his love, and only they two would know why they had parted.

But to be openly taunted with this abhorred secret was quite another thing. Someone must have betrayed it, Biddulph reflected; this woman must have broken the bond for which he had paid so heavily, and he was bitterly angry with her for having done so.

And he was more angry still when he went up to dress

for dinner, and saw his own reflection in the looking-glass. Under his left eye, which was much swollen, was a huge red mark, which he knew by his boyish experiences would be black in the morning, and green and discolored for many mornings to come. He stared at it; he bathed it without avail. He had got what is called in common parlance "a black eye," and the undignified injury filled his soul with rage.

At last he summoned up resolution to send for his friend Dr. Alexander, who held up his hands and relapsed into his broadest Scotch when his eyes fell on Biddulph's visage.

"Eh, mon, what's this? Wha's been putten' their knuckles too near ye?"

"An ass of a boy," answered Biddulph, in a rage, "attacked me without the least provocation. But he got a good punishment for his pains."

"The laddie Malcolm Fraser got home in a sare condition this e'en," said the doctor, dryly, who began to understand the situation.

"Serve him right," said Biddulph, savagely, whose temper was not quite what it ought to be; "he flew at me like a tiger-cat."

"Weel, Mr. Biddulph, all I can say is, if he's not improved yer appearance, ye've certainly got the best o' it. Malcolm, wi' bruises and rage, is in a very bad strait."

"And did he tell how it happened?" asked Biddulph.

"Na, na. Jock Fraser sent for me, and told me the laddie had had a bad fall and cut his face. But I thought the story a bit lame, and Malcolm seemed sare in mind as well as body."

"What could have been his motive?" said Biddulph, beginning to walk up and down the room, almost forgetting his black eye.

"The same as most men's motives, I fancy, Mr. Biddulph; the laddie has let a pair of bonnie dark eyes turn his head."

Biddulph bit his lips, and was silent.

"His mother will be in a sare way about him," continued the doctor.

"I am sorry for that. I like Mrs. Fraser—she is so straightforward and honest; but I must say she has brought up her son very badly."

The doctor shook his head.

"The mother's na' to blame, Mr. Biddulph. The lad

has a fever which must run its course—a fever bad to bear, and ill to get rid of, and I suppose we've all had it ;” and the doctor sighed.

“I suppose you mean he is in love ?” said Biddulph, with a grim smile.

“Ay ; wi’ one who does not care a bawbee for him. I have noticed it coming on a long while now. Poor Malcolm !”

“Well, I wish ‘poor Malcolm’ had kept his love and his fists to himself, then ! See if you can do anything for me, doctor ; I am not fit to be seen.”

“Weel, ye’ll just ha’ to bide in the house a day or two. I’ll tell my patient across the water yer rheumatics are fearsome ;” and the doctor laughed.

But Biddulph could not laugh.

“For heaven’s sake,” he said, “keep all this a secret from Miss Stewart !”

“To be sure, to be sure ; and ye’ll soon be a’ right. Poor Malcolm has got something worse than a black eye.”

Yet, when Biddulph saw himself the next morning, he was inclined to think nothing could be worse. He was ashamed for his servants to see him, and noticed the ancient Donald’s expression when he waited at breakfast with hidden indignation, for there was an odd twinkle in the old man’s eyes which was doubtless aggravating.

And scarcely was the meal over, when he sat down to pen an indignant and angry letter to the woman who had spoilt his life. In harsh and biting terms he told her that, as he had paid so heavily to purchase her silence on the subject of the degrading folly of his youth, he would at once reduce her allowance to what it used formerly to be if another whisper of this secret reached his ears. “I know,” he added, “you will do anything for money ; I advise you, therefore, to keep silent, or you shall certainly lose it.”

And, strange, at the very moment when Biddulph was writing this scathing sentence at Dunbaan, across the loch at Rossmore Mrs. Jock Fraser was talking to Nora Stewart of the very person to whom Biddulph’s letter was addressed.

There is no doubt that Mrs. Jock was not a scandalous nor evil-tongued woman, and she had hitherto shrank from telling Nora her brother-in-law Alick Fraser’s news about Mr. Biddulph. But when she returned, the night before, to Rossmore, she had found Nora still in the drawing-room,

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with a flush on her handsome face, and a bright, glad light in her dark eyes.

"Well, my dear," she said, after she had kissed her, "and did Malcolm come?"

"Yes; he came when Mr. Biddulph was here," answered Nora; and the color on her cheeks suddenly deepened.

Mrs. Jock was a shrewd woman, and she saw the blush, but she did not speak without consideration. She said nothing about Mr. Biddulph during the evening, but after a night's reflection she thought it only right to tell Nora what she had heard. Even her good-natured Jock at home had urged her to do this, for Alick Fraser, we may be sure, had carried Sandy Hill's story to Airdlinn.

Therefore Mrs. Jock, after Nora's breakfast was over, began in her usual honest, downright way.

"I have got something to say to you, Nora, my dear," she said, approaching the invalid's bed with her stalwart steps.

"And what have you got to say?" smiled Nora.

"There is a strange story going the round of the country-side, I am told, about Mr. Biddulph. They say now that he is a married man, and that his wife has been down here and made a tremendous fuss."

Every particle of color faded from Nora's face as she listened to these words: she grew so pale, in fact, Mrs. Jock thought she was going to faint.

"It may not be true, of course," said Mrs. Jock.

"It's utterly untrue!" said Nora, lifting her dark eyes indignantly—"invented by people who are jealous of him; who—who dislike him because he is superior to them all."

Mrs. Jock drew herself up.

"The person who told me I do not think could be jealous of him, Nora; and certainly I do not see that Mr. Biddulph is any way superior to the other gentlemen about here."

"I simply do not believe it," began Nora; and then, as the words escaped her lips, with a sharp and sudden pang she remembered the strange message she had received on the evening when Mr. Biddulph was going to dine at Rossmore, and also words of his own which indicated that a shadow lay athwart his life.

"We know nothing of him, you know, Nora," continued Mrs. Jock, "therefore why should this story not be true?"

At all events, it is true that a woman went to Dunbaan, and had a very stormy interview with him, and that he gave her a large sum to go away ; and it is said she called herself his legal wife, and he did not deny it."

"And who told all this—the servants?"

"That I cannot tell you, but it is known to Jock and Alick, and all the rest ; so I thought it but right to tell you, as you have seen more of him than most of us."

"I owe my life to him," said Nora, her eyes filling in her excitement, with sudden tears, "and I shall not listen to nor believe in anything against him. He would do nothing, I am sure, that was not noble and true ; it is written on his face."

"Well, he has got a warm partisan in you, at all events, Nora," said Mrs. Jock, turning away and leaving the room on some slight excuse, feeling some satisfaction also that a disagreeable conversation was over.

And after she was gone, an almost overwhelming rush of emotion swept through Nora's heart. What if this were true? The thought was like a hot and burning pain. There had often been a look in Biddulph's eyes—a look which had puzzled the woman he loved, and told her by some subtle instinct that he was not happy. Could this dark shadow be the knowledge of some secret and unwelcome chain? Nora tossed on her bed, and grew so feverish and unhappy that, when the doctor came, his shrewd eyes instantly detected that something was wrong.

He told her that she must not be carried into the drawing-room again to-day ; but Nora insisted upon going. To lie there racked with her doubts and fears would be impossible, she told herself. But she got little comfort for her trouble, for during the afternoon the Rev. Andrew Macdonald was announced, and the good man, after a little preparatory conversation, commenced on the subject just then foremost in his thoughts.

A young woman with a good fortune always has many lovers, for money is a universal want, and to get it without working for it is highly agreeable to many men. And it is astonishing, also, how many men believe in their own chances to win a fortune by marriage. Here was a rosy, stout, middle-aged person, good-looking enough in his way, but without much manner or mind, yet who had actually thought of a beautiful, attractive girl like Leonora

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Stewart as his wife. He, too, had been jealous of the handsome stranger at Dunbaan, and had heard with great satisfaction the story that Alick Fraser had spread about Biddulph.

"I hear," he said, not looking directly at Nora, "that our new neighbor, Mr. Biddulph, is really a married man."

Nora was conscious that her ordinarily pale complexion colored violently.

"And have you heard this?" she said, trying to speak indifferently.

"I am told it is an absolute fact; and I hear the lady has been here," answered Mr. Macdonald.

"I never listen to the gossip of servants," said Nora; "and Mr. Biddulph is quite able to manage his own affairs without our interference. By the by, Mr. Macdonald, about that poor woman who lost her husband at Airdlinn—I should like to pay for her eldest boy going to the village school."

Mr. Macdonald, having been thus recalled to provincial affairs, shortly afterward took his leave, feeling vaguely that he had not advanced himself in Miss Leonora Stewart's estimation. But he left her with a fresh pang in her heart. There must be something in this, she began to think, and the thought was full of bitter pain.

She did not improve as the doctor expected during the next few days, and her general health, for the first time since her accident, suddenly gave way. Dr. Alexander had been as good as his word, and had told her that Mr. Biddulph was ill also. But Nora's sensitive ear caught a change in the kindly doctor's tone as he mentioned his patient at Dunbaan. The truth was, the doctor had heard also that Biddulph was a married man, and guessed pretty closely why young Malcolm Fraser had attacked him. The doctor personally liked Biddulph, and the story made him very sad.

And during the next few days, Biddulph, who was still ashamed to show his face, received two letters—one was from the fiery, jealous young Highlander who had disfigured him; and the other from the woman who had caused, as he bitterly told himself, all the troubles of his life.

Malcolm Fraser wrote thus:

"SIR: After what has passed between us, I demand, as my right, that you appoint a time when we can have a hos-



tile meeting in France, as the absurd laws of this country forbid a man to avenge his own honor.

"MALCOLM FRASER."

To this Biddulph replied :

"SIR: I decline to stain my hands with your young blood, or allow you to commit murder. You interfered where you had no right to interfere, and you must take the consequences.  
JAMES BIDDULPH."

But it was the other letter, the letter from the woman, that filled Biddulph's heart with the bitterest rage.

"DEAR JAMES (she wrote):

"You see I always address you in a proper and wife-like manner, in spite of your little shortcomings as a husband. But to return to the point. I got your letter, and when you receive this I shall be on my way to Scotland, as I want to find out who has been playing me false. It is quite true that I think more of money, at least from you, than anything else, and I am not going to risk it for the honor of being called by your name. We must make a fresh bargain. I shall put up at my old quarters at the village of Balla. Send a line to me there to tell me when it will be convenient to you to see me at Dunbaan.

"Yours ever,  
"NATALIE."

## CHAPTER XII.

### IN THE GLEN.

A fierce storm of passion swept over Biddulph's heart after he had read this letter. He knew this woman's daring, defiant nature too well not to believe she would do as she had written. She was on her way, then, once more to disgrace him—to bring scorn and scoffs upon his name. With bitten lips and muttered curses he looked at the date of her letter, and saw, as he did so, that Natalie (Madame de Beranger, as she called herself) would probably at this moment be in the little village of Balla, naturally exciting gossip and comment there.

And his anticipations were fully verified. Before the

evening was over an especial messenger from the small hostelry at Balla arrived at Dunbaan, and a letter was handed to Biddulph, the handwriting of which he knew only too well.

"DEAR JAMES" (he read with suppressed fury): "Here I am again. Send an answer with the unkempt bearer of my love-letter when it will please you to see your beloved wife once more at Dunbaan. Do not be long in deciding, for your climate is killing. Yours ever, NATALIE."

First Biddulph flung this letter on the floor, and swore he would neither answer it nor see the writer. But after a while wiser and more prudent thoughts prevailed. As she was here, he was convinced she would not go away again unless she was bribed to do so. With intense disgust in his heart, therefore, he sat down to appoint an interview. But not here. Some listener, he knew well, some spy in his household, must have spread the story of this unhappy connection in the neighborhood, or how had that wretched boy heard of the report?

And he too (for he was observing) had noticed a change in the kind Scotch doctor's manner—a change in the tone of his voice only, perhaps—and how he had become suddenly reticent on the subject of Miss Stewart, of Rossmore.

And he guessed aright. Jock Fraser and Mrs. Jock had both talked to their friend the doctor about Mr. Biddulph's supposed marriage, and young Malcolm's brow was black as night whenever his name was mentioned.

"It's an unco' pity if it is so," the doctor had answered, "for he's a vera fine fellow." But even the doctor was forced to admit that no man is justified in passing himself off as unmarried, if he already possessed a wife.

"And there is no doubt he pays great attention to Nora Stewart," said Mrs. Jock, "and she will hear nothing against him."

"Well, my dear," replied Jock, philosophically, "Nora Stewart may know more about this story than we do; Biddulph may have told her himself. My advice, now, is to leave the matter alone. Nora is not a girl to make a fool of herself with a married man."

When "the French woman," therefore, as they called her, returned to the village inn at Balla, her reappearance there excited the greatest interest among the gossips of the neighborhood. The doctor had already heard that "Mr.

Biddulph's wife "was "back again," when Biddulph himself by her own letter became aware of the fact. At last, pale and frowning, he wrote a few words in reply.

"Do not, I entreat you, come here. I will meet you to-morrow afternoon in a secluded spot among the hills close to Balla, called the Glen, to which any one in the neighborhood can direct you. If you go there at three o'clock alone, I shall be waiting for you. J. B."

He despatched this note, and then stood looking gloomily out on the dark waters of the loch. His thoughts were very bitter ones, for it seemed to him this endless worry of his life would never cease. Then he tried to raise his mind above the brief joys and sorrows of the world, telling himself as he lifted his eyes from the dark waters to the dark sky, that in a little while it would be all the same, disappointment or success, blame or praise—the woman he loved and the woman he hated, both be as dim shadows when the end drew near.

But with a restless sigh Biddulph knew that now this was not so. It needs, in truth, the chill touch of age to make a true philosopher. Through Biddulph's being the warm currents of youth still ran strong and vigorous, and Nora Stewart's sweet face rose before him at this moment, filling his heart with passionate regret.

The next day he went to keep the appointment he had made with absolute aversion. To see this woman again, to be asked for more money by her scoffing tongue, was gall and bitterness to Biddulph's soul. Yet he must do it, and so he went, crossing the loch on a gray and dark-some October afternoon, in a mood as gloomy as the sky.

The Glen of Balla is one of the wildest and most romantic spots of this romantic land. It is, in truth, a mountain-pass, on either side of which the granite masses rear their shaggy crests amid the waving birchwood and the dark pines. A narrow pathway runs the whole length of the glen, and here, even amid the summer heat, the sunbeams seldom find their way, so dense is the shadow cast by the towering peaks and huge crags which block the golden rays.

Biddulph had chosen this silent and secluded spot because he wished, if possible, no one to witness a meeting fraught for him with bitterest pain. And at this season

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the probability was that, unless some passing tourist was straying amid the damp, moss-girt rocks, only the wild game would fix their bright inquiring eyes on the two whose love had grown so cold.

And as Biddulph walked along the narrow way, this expectation seemed fulfilled. Not a sound was to be heard, and he went to the extreme end of the glen without encountering a living thing. "Was she going to play him false?" he thought, angrily, glancing at his watch, as he turned to retrace his steps. It was half-past three o'clock now; but then, she might have missed her way, he presently reflected.

A moment he stood still, looking upward at the narrow line of gray sky overhead, visible between the steep crags. He sighed impatiently, and some of the vague questioning doubts which pass and repass through our minds when the shadows lie athwart our path of life, and the web seems tangled or broken, stole into Biddulph's heart.

"Why should this be?" he thought, moodily; as we all, perhaps, have thought when some heavy blow falls, and its weight seems too great to bear. He felt oppressed and downcast; the dark, frowning mountain's side, the gloomy heavens, the murky air, and, maybe, the strange warning instinct that tells the birds of the approaching storm, alike seemed to fill Biddulph's mind at this moment with a strong sense of impending ill.

And suddenly, sharp and distinct, as he stood, there sounded in his ears the crack of a rifle, and a swift messenger of death passed him, grazing his shoulder, and went on. He started, turned, and the next instant a wild shriek, a scream of terror and fear, seemed to rend the air.

"What is it?" cried Biddulph loudly; and his voice echoed through the glen.

Another shriek, prolonged and agonized, was the reply—a woman's shriek. And Biddulph, quickly recovering himself, now ran forward.

A jutting block of granite in front, near the spot where he had been standing when the shot passed him, here partly hid the pathway behind it; but in a moment Biddulph had passed this obstruction, and on the other side of it a woman was half kneeling, waving her arms frantically, and, as Biddulph approached her, she rose and came tottering forward, and he saw who it was!

"Wretch, wretch, you have murdered me!" she cried in gasps, and then again fell forward, the blood gushing in torrents from her side.

"I swear I have *not*!" said Biddulph, running toward her, and lifting her in his arms.

The woman's face was ghastly—the *face of Natalie*—and her breast was heaving in the throes of death.

"Who has done this?" asked Biddulph, bending over her, and trying to stanch the red tide.

She tried to speak, her dark eyes rolled in her head, each breath grew a sob, but no words came from her white lips. Then she flung back her head, her arms fell down, a shiver passed through her frame, and she died—died on Biddulph's breast, the woman he had wedded long ago.

Inexpressibly shocked and horror-stricken, he laid her gently down on the sward, and, leaving her for a moment, hurried to a little gushing streamlet amid the rocks, and, having filled his cap with water, returned to her side. But as he knelt down he saw it was no use. Death had laid its gray, rigid finger on the once familiar features, and the strange change had come which marks the soulless clay. He rose; he stood gazing at her, and his memory went back to his boyish love, and the long years of annoyance and shame it had brought upon his head. And this was the end! A stray shot (for he saw in a moment what had killed her), the rifle-ball which had just missed him—which had, indeed, grazed and slightly wounded his shoulder, though, in the excitement, he never felt the pain—had pierced her side, and probably touched her heart, as her death had occurred a few moments after she was wounded.

As he stood looking at her, the idea darted into Biddulph's mind that the man who had fired the fatal shot would probably be near, and he therefore commenced shouting loudly for assistance. But no answer came except the echo of his own voice ringing among the crags. Then for the first time it occurred to Biddulph the position he was in. A dead woman lay at his feet—a woman he had asked to meet him in this lonely spot, and it behooved him, therefore, at once to call witnesses to prove his innocence of her tragic end.

He remembered the doctor, and no sooner had this thought struck him than he acted on it. One backward glance he gave, half in pity, at the dead Natalie, and then,

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as fast as he could go, he hurried out of the glen on to the straggling village of Balla.

As he ran panting up the steep hill that leads from the glen to the village, he perceived the doctor himself, starting on his usual afternoon round, mounted on his shaggy Highland pony.

He waved his cap to attract his attention, and called, and the doctor looked round and saw him—saw a blood-stained figure, for Biddulph's own slight wound was now bleeding fast, and Natalie had died in his arms.

"Mr. Biddulph!" cried the doctor, in the utmost astonishment.

"An accident has happened in the glen!" panted Biddulph. "A woman is lying there shot—I believe, dead. Come at once, doctor, though I fear there is no hope."

"A woman?" repeated the doctor; and his expression changed.

"Yes, a woman. A ball whistled past me, just touched my shoulder as it went;" and he put his hand to his shoulder as he spoke, and for the first time perceived he was wounded, for his coat was torn, and the blood trickling down the sleeve.

The doctor by this time had dismounted from his pony, and, approaching Biddulph, proceeded to examine his injury.

It was a slight flesh-wound, the rifle ball having torn the coat and the skin as it passed on its fatal errand; and the doctor, having looked at it, was about to commence stanching the blood, when Biddulph stopped him.

"Don't mind me," he said, "it is nothing; but the woman, I fear, is fatally hit."

"I'll tie my handkerchief round it, anyhow," answered the doctor, producing a large red handkerchief from his pocket. "It's a near shave; why, mon, another inch, and your shoulder-bane had been in splinters."

"Make haste, make haste," said Biddulph, impatiently; and the doctor, having hastily bound the wound, followed Biddulph into the Glen, and in a few minutes they came to the spot where the dead woman lay on the ground.

The doctor knelt down, lifted her hand, looked at her white face, and his own weather-beaten countenance grew very pale as he did so.

Then he slowly raised his eyes and looked at Biddulph.

"Mr. Biddulph," he said, almost sternly, "is this murder?"



"If you mean," answered Biddulph, indignantly, a sudden flush dyeing his face at the mere suspicion that the doctor's words implied, "did I raise my hand against her life, I certainly did not."

"Yet this is the leedy, is it not, that they said——"

"This lady was known to me," interrupted Biddulph, haughtily; "and I asked her to meet me here to arrange some business pending between us, rather than create more gossip by seeing her at Dunbaan. I was waiting for her; we had not met when the shot passed me that grazed my shoulder, and, I believe, killed her, for a moment later her death-shrieks filled the air."

The doctor listened, rose from his knees, and grasped Biddulph's hand.

"God be thanked!" he said; "and His chief mercy is, the ball scratched ye a bit as it passed. The world is full of evil tongues, Mr. Biddulph, but a mon can't vera weel shoot himself in the back, and, therefore, what can they say? Ay, poor soul," he added, looking down again at the rigid face lying on the ground, "she's been shot by mistake, na doubt, by one of Alick Fraser's new keepers; but we must find the loon."

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### BIDDULPH'S STORY.

Half an hour later the poor lifeless form was carried into the little village of Balla, and Biddulph noticed that people looked at him with lowering glances, and shrank away from him, as he followed the bearers of the dead.

But the doctor walked manfully by his side, and ostentatiously took him into his surgery to dress his wounds.

"It's a vera bad business," he said to one of the bystanders, "but it might ha' been worse, for the same shot that killed the leedy just missed killing Mr. Biddulph as weel."

The man he addressed, with characteristic Scotch caution, made no reply. He was the keeper of the little hostelry where the dead woman had lodged, and where only the night before she had boasted, under the influence of repeated glasses of whiskey, that she could make Mr. Bid-

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dulph of Dunbaan give her any amount of money she chose to ask him for.

And now she lay cold and stark, with a bullet in her breast, after meeting this same Mr. Biddulph in the Glen. It had an ugly look, at all events, the Highland innkeeper reflected; and his thoughts were shared by the weird old women who crept out of their smoke-filled cabins to see the "dead leedy" carried past. Almost the whole of the inhabitants of the village, indeed, turned out to see the sad sight. The doctor had decently covered her face, but the blood-stains on her gown and cloak were only too visible. And now the question arose, where was she to be taken?

The innkeeper objected to receive the dead body, on the score of his customers' feelings. But the doctor, with his larger intelligence, was ready to take it under his roof-tree.

"Ah, poor soul, she'll na hurt ye," he said; and he bade the men carry the dead woman into his house, and lay her in the best parlor.

"The kitchen will serve me weel enough on a pinch," he remarked. "Now, come along, Mr. Biddulph; I must ha' a look at yer shoulder."

When he was dressing it, Biddulph, who was very pale, said, with some agitation of manner:

"I believe they think I shot the poor woman, doctor. I shall offer a reward of two hundred pounds to discover the man who did."

The doctor did not speak for a moment; then he said slowly:

"Ye are a rich man, are ye not, Mr. Biddulph?"

"At least, I am not a poor one."

"Then offer three hundred; it's worth the money to clear yer name of a foul stain."

"Very well; I offer three hundred, then; and—let everything be done decently and well."

"Ye mean about the burial? Ay, ay; but that won't be yet. The poor creature's death will ha' to be inquired into, and the evidence taken. But don't fash about it to-night; ha' some whiskey, and then I'll walk down to the loch wi' ye, and see ye again in the morn; and I'll tell the folks round about the reward."

The doctor was as good as his word, and Biddulph was presently rowed across the misty loch in a state of strange and mixed emotion. He could scarcely, indeed, realize

the great change that had come to his life during the last two hours. He was a free man now, and yet something in his heart—the dead woman's last awful looks and dying cries—forbade him to rejoice. And the knowledge, too, that the circumstances of her death might cast a suspicion on himself was not an agreeable reflection.

"But it is impossible that anyone could really believe this," he consoled himself by thinking, at the very moment when half the neighbors at least were saying what a dreadful thing it was about Mr. Biddulph shooting his wife!

One of the first to say this was Alick Fraser. Riding home through Balla, he heard the story from the inn-keeper, and, after considering a minute or two, turned his horse's head and rode straight to Rossmore. He felt some satisfaction in the idea that he should be the person to tell Nora Stewart the dreadful news.

"I wonder what she will say now?" he grimly reflected, as he proceeded up the steep avenue; and he was pleased also when he was admitted and ushered into the drawing-room, where he found Nora alone.

He had never seen her since the day of the accident on the hills, and, looking at her now with his keen brown eyes, he noticed a change in the expression of her face—a subtle sadness, a weariness, which was not there before.

He went up to her couch and shook hands with her warmly, telling her how pleased he was to see her again.

"I've heard from Jeanie constantly about you, you know, but I did not like to intrude until I thought you were really well enough to see me. Well, the hero of that day when you sprained your foot is likely to come to a fine end."

"What do you mean?" asked Nora, with whitening lips.

"You have not heard the last sensation in the neighborhood, then?" went on Alick, with hard relish, when a softer-hearted man would have shrunk from inflicting pain. "Biddulph shot his wife this afternoon in the Glen, and is as likely as not to be tried for murder, as the police have been communicated with."

Nora did not speak; she tried to utter some commonplace words, but her voice was dumb.

"I never liked the fellow; I don't know how it was," proceeded Alick, still enjoying the situation. "An honest man has no right to pass himself off as unmarried to young ladies, when he has already a wife;" and he smiled.

"And did he do this?" asked Nora, in a strange, altered voice.

"So I understood. Why, Jeanie told me you would not believe he *was* married, Miss Nora; but he was, sure enough."

"Nor do I believe," said Nora, lifting her head and fixing her dark eyes on Alick Fraser's face, her voice broken and vibrating with emotion, "that he would wilfully lift his hand to injure any woman. I believe this story is false: that it is invented by people who hate him."

"Well, young lady, if that is your opinion, I think you will find yourself mistaken," said Alick, disagreeably. "But, as this tragedy happened on my property, I must be off to look into it. I know the sheriff very well. Mr. Biddulph shall find to his cost that he cannot indulge in any little private shooting matches in Scotland."

He approached her, and would have taken her hand in his strong grasp, but Nora's cold fingers scarcely touched his own. And hardly was he gone, when a sudden resolution came into her mind. She would warn Biddulph of his danger; she would, woman-like, have him do what, under the circumstances, would be the most foolish thing possible.

She stretched out her hand and rang a small hand-bell that stood on a table near her; and when her young footman, Alfred, replied to her summons, she desired him to tell her maid to come to her.

A minute or two later a smart, black-eyed girl made her appearance, and Nora beckoned her to her side.

"Palmer," she said, speaking quickly and nervously, "would you be afraid to let Alfred row you across the loch?"

"This evening, miss?" asked Palmer, in surprise.

"Yes, now. I am going to trust you; I only want Alfred to know. I—I—want a letter taken quickly and quietly to Mr. Biddulph, at Dunbaan."

Palmer cast down her black eyes for a moment contemplatively. In the servants' hall already the subject had been discussed of Mr. Biddulph's supposed crime.

"I will do anything you wish, miss," she said, the next instant; "and Alfred will do anything I ask him," she added, with a smile. "They have been talking downstairs——"

"Never mind what they have been talking about," interrupted Nora, hastily. "Get on your hat as quickly as you

can, and tell Alfred to go down to the loch at once and have the boat ready for you. Don't tell anyone where you are going ; say I am sending you with a message, if you are asked. And reach me my writing-case ; my letter will be ready in two minutes, and I want you to place it in Mr. Biddulph's own hands."

"I'll be ready directly, miss," said Palmer ; and so she was, and with a trembling hand Nora gave her the few words she had written.

"DEAR MR. BIDDULPH : I wish to see you *at once*, so will you return across the loch with the bearers of this note ? Do please come, as this is most important. Very sincerely yours,  
LEONORA STEWART."

After she had despatched this, Nora sat counting the minutes by the clock on the mantle-piece with a fast-beating heart. He would have time to go away, she thought, before any official inquiry about this woman's death could be made. Not that she believed the story—it was some invention or mistake ; still, he had better know, had better hear, what Alick Fraser had said. And he would come—yes, she felt sure he would come, Nora thought, with a flush on her cheeks, and a deep nervous excitement in her heart.

And she was right. Biddulph was sitting thinking gloomily enough at Dunbaan, when he was told a young woman had brought a letter for him, and had been ordered to deliver it into his own hands. He looked up as old Donald gave him this information, and, thinking it was probably from Dr. Alexander, he desired the young woman to be shown into the room.

And presently the black-eyed, sprightly Palmer appeared.

"Miss Stewart desired me to give you this, Mr. Biddulph," she said, with a smile ; for Mr. Biddulph was very good-looking, Palmer was reflecting, even if he had murdered his wife.

Then Biddulph read the letter, and a flush stole to his pale face as he did so.

"Miss Stewart wishes to see me," he said, now speaking to Palmer. "Is there room in your boat for me to cross with you?"

"Oh, yes !" answered Palmer with decision ; "Alfred is very slight—he can sit anywhere."

Palmer was generally supposed to be engaged to Alfred, but she always spoke of him rather disparagingly, though he was really a very good-looking young man.

"Well, that is settled, then," said Biddulph, with a smile. "I shall be ready in one moment."

And half an hour later he was standing in the presence of Nora Stewart—standing pale and deeply moved, with his gray eyes, full of emotion, fixed upon her changing face.

"You sent for me?" he said, as their hands clasped.

"Yes, because—because——"

"Because," went on Biddulph, as Nora hesitated, unable to find words, "you have heard what happened this afternoon? You have sent for me because you at least do not believe I would commit murder? Is this so?"

"I have sent for you to warn you," answered Nora, with trembling lips. "I know nothing of this story: I trust you—that is enough. I do not and will not believe you would wilfully hurt anyone; but—but if an accident happened——"

"An accident happened and a woman died, Miss Stewart, but not by my hand. You have heard something of this story, I dare say; shall I tell you the whole of it?"

"If you will; if it will not pain you."

"It will pain me, for it has been all shame and pain from the beginning until now. Since—since you have honored me with your friendship, it has often trembled on my lips. But I naturally shrank from telling such a tale to you. I shrink now, yet it is better you should hear."

"I am ready to listen, Mr. Biddulph."

Biddulph did not speak for a moment. He began walking slowly up and down the room, his eyes fixed before him, with a far-away expression on his face.

"It is a long time to go back to," he said at length. "I was a boy of nineteen, a lad at college, when the tragedy that ended to-day began. I was at Cambridge at this time, and an accident happened there on the river one day—a foolish young fellow was nearly drowned. But I need not trouble you with *this* story; it is sufficient to tell you I got a chill and a fever, and went home first, and was then sent by my father (my mother was dead) to Calais, for a change.

"I went to a boarding-house there—I knew nothing of

the world—and this house was kept by a certain Madame Berauger and her daughter *Natalie*. I see the old woman still," went on Biddulph, with a break in his voice, as if making an effort to speak calmly; "I see her with her shrewd dark eyes, her dusky skin, and her dyed hair! And Natalie, she was then about twenty-nine, ten years older than I was, a woman, bright, gay, and I, in my boyish folly, thought handsome. But she was not handsome; she was flattering, amusing, and clever, and she had bright, dark eyes, and I believed I was in love with her. I suppose I believed so—at least we were lovers—and by and by they told me I must marry her—that a child was about to be born.

"Miss Stewart, I did marry her; I thought in honor I could do nothing else, and then I discovered it was all a lie. There was no child about to be born. Natalie and her mother had deceived me, and both now laughed in my face. At least Natalie did; the old woman had more prudence, but the young one had none.

"But they had secured me, the only son of a rich English lawyer, and they cared for nothing else. It was not until I told them that I had no money of my own—that I was certain that if my father knew of my mad act he would cut me off with a shilling, that they began to doubt whether they had done a good thing for themselves or not.

"The marriage was kept a secret, because they feared if it were known that I should lose my fortune. It is twelve years since now, and it has hung like a rope round my neck ever since. I returned to England, I went back to college, but you can understand with little heart. My life, in fact, was spoilt, and as years went on this tie became to me more and more burdensome. It grew, indeed, utterly loathsome, and I never saw the woman I was ashamed to think of as my wife. I passed at the Bar, but did not care to practise; any name I might have won I knew was already blackened for me, and I did not wish for success, which might only serve to drag to light this disgraceful story.

"My father allowed me an income of eight hundred a year, and this I always shared equally with Natalie. The money was sent regularly through my lawyer, and I never saw nor heard from her for years. Then my uncle died, and I succeeded to the property at Dunbaan, and to a considerable sum of ready money. I came down to

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Scotland, as you know, and I especially desired my lawyer to keep my accession of fortune a secret, and I have every reason to believe that he did so. Yet one day, Miss Stewart, about two months after I made your acquaintance, one morning, after I had dined the evening before at your house, I found freshly carved on the trunk of a tree in the avenue at Dunbaan, this woman's name. I was overwhelmed, maddened; and a few days later she appeared at my house, and told me what she had come for. She wanted her income doubled, and two thousand pounds. She had found out I had been left money, and she had become a notorious gambler. I gave her what she wanted on one condition—she was to go away, and not to utter a single word of the tie between us.

"But here let me do myself justice. Miss Stewart, you are the one friend whom I have made here, and to you I meant to confide my secret. I meant to tell you, or at least partly to tell you, that day of the picnic on the hills. But you know how that ended; then your illness interfered, and the last time I saw you—the time when young Malcolm Fraser came in while I was here—to my surprise, on leaving, I found him waiting for me in the avenue, and in insulting language he requested me to cease my acquaintance with you, his cousin, as I was a *married man*."

"What!" said Nora, a burning blush spreading over her face; "did Malcolm dare to do this?"

"He dared to do this and more. He absolutely struck me, but he got the worst of that."

"I am ashamed, utterly ashamed of him, Mr. Biddulph. He is a mad, stupid boy."

"But this mad, stupid boy's folly told me one thing, that Natalie had broken her promise, and I wrote and told her so—told her I would reduce her income to its former amount if this went on, and to my great anger she answered this letter in person. Miss Stewart, do you now begin to understand? This unhappy woman came down here, and wrote to ask me when I could see her at Dunbaan; and, to save further scandal I asked her to meet me in the Glen at Balla, where I hoped our meeting would be unseen."

"Oh, Mr. Biddulph!" cried Nora, bending forward with parted lips and clasped hands.

"I went this afternoon," continued Biddulph, with some emotion—"went with a bitter and angry heart, and waited in this lonely, silent place; and as I stood waiting—Miss



Stewart, I swear to God I am speaking the truth—a ball whistled past me, grazed my shoulder and tore my coat, and the next moment Natalie's death-shrieks filled the air.

"I ran forward ; I met her terrified, dying. She died in my arms. She thought I had murdered her. It was a ghastly scene ; but my hand is guiltless of her blood. You believe this ? Do not look so pale ; tell me that you believe me innocent of a hideous crime ?"

"I do, I do !" said Nora, with a sort of sob, stretching out her hand, which Biddulph took. "But oh, Mr. Biddulph, I am afraid—afraid for you."

"You mean that I shall probably be accused of her murder ? This, I think, can hardly be. I went to the Glen totally unharmed. I walked openly through the village of Balla, and my boatmen rowed me across ; and this poor woman was shot with a rifle, and the ball struck, or rather grazed, my shoulder first."

"Still, Alick Fraser said——"

"What has Mr. Alick Fraser said ?" asked Biddulph, with a sort of smile. "Do you remember our conversation not long ago about instinct, and I told you Mr. Alick Fraser was my enemy ?"

"Yes," said Nora, almost with a shudder.

"And, strange," continued Biddulph, "I felt, as I stood waiting for poor Natalie, as if something were about to happen—as if a dark hour in my fate had come——"

"Go away, Mr. Biddulph," said Nora, eagerly ; "this is why I sent for you. Alick Fraser said the police had been communicated with. Go, before they have time to do anything."

"And leave them to blacken my name," answered Biddulph, with some pride. "No ; I am innocent. I am not going to run away, which would be very unwise, you know, as I should be certainly caught ;" and Biddulph smiled.

But Nora did not smile ; her dark eyes were fixed on his face full of anxiety.

"It is more than good of you," continued Biddulph, "to interest yourself in my fate, and I dare not trust myself to speak of my gratitude ; but when this dark cloud is blown over, may I come and talk to you again ?"

"Do not wait until the dark cloud is blown over ; come to-morrow—any day. We are friends, and true friends are the same to each other in the sunshine and the storm. Perhaps you are right to stay and face it ; and—and what can they really say ?"

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"Probably a good many things ; but now you know the truth, and you still call me your friend ?"

"Yes, and I am not one to change."

Biddulph bent down and kissed first one of her trembling hands, and then the other.

"I have something, then, to carry away with me to my lonely home," he said ; and before Nora could answer him he was gone.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A SUSPECTED MAN.

Alick Fraser was a man who often boasted that he "never let a grass grow under his feet ;" he certainly never neglected an opportunity of pushing forward any business he had in hand. And as he rode from Rossmore, after his interview with Nora, there was a keen sense of anger in his heart, and an eager desire to revenge himself upon Biddulph, who, he considered, had unjustifiably stood in his way.

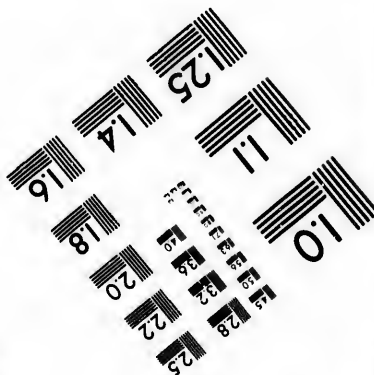
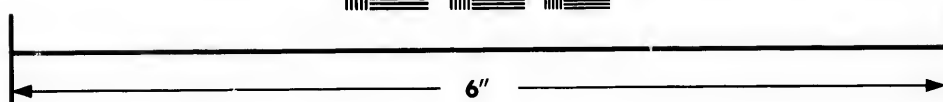
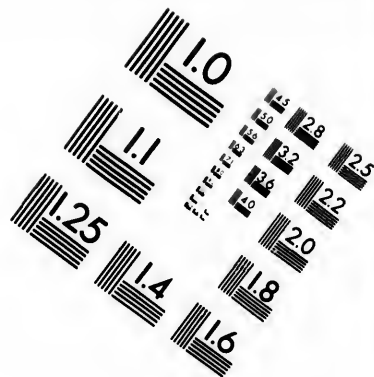
And Nora had wounded his vanity. Strange, that in one so hard and cold this weakness should be so strong. Yet it was so. Alick was vain of his money, his good looks, and his grand new house. And he was apt to show this in a surprising manner for a clever man. His age was a sore point, and he hated to hear his brother Jock joke about it, which sometimes Jock was apt to do. Alick, in fact, intended to marry well, just as he told himself he had always done well ; and he wanted youth, beauty, and money, too.

And Nora Stewart, his near neighbor, had all these good qualities. He had, therefore, meant to marry her, and so firm was his belief in his own power to carry out anything he intended to do, that he had small doubts of succeeding until the new owner of Dunbaan had appeared upon the scene.

He therefore bore a bitter grudge against Biddulph, and with his hard lips tight set, left Rossmore, determined to do his best to hunt him down.

We must not suppose he had given up the idea of wedding Nora because he thought she was unduly interested in this stranger, who, luckily for him—and Alick gave a





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grim smile—had now made such a fool of himself, and thrust his head into the jaws of the law. And he should not escape ; the woman had been shot on Alick's property, and it behoved him, therefore, to push forward the inquiry into her death, and he did not lose one moment in doing this.

The police were speedily on the spot, and the Glen of Balla was first thoroughly searched. On the ground where the woman had died, the fading bracken and soaked moss were trampled and blood-stained.

"There has been plainly a terrible struggle here," said Alick Fraser, who, in his right of owner of the soil, was watching the investigations of the police.

The inspector, whose face was shrewd and weather-beaten, did not speak. He examined the ground carefully, and then looked up at the jutting crag which had hidden the woman's approach from Biddulph's view. The rifle-ball had first grazed Biddulph's shoulder ; then hit the very edge of the crag, glanced off, and killed the woman.

"A ball has touched here," said the policeman, laying his hands on the crag, which showed signs of its course.

"The fellow has shot her from behind the rock, no doubt, as the poor woman went forward to meet him," now suggested Alick Fraser.

"By Dr. Alexander's account, Mr. Biddulph is wounded on the *back* of his shoulder," said the policeman dryly. "We must look higher up, Mr. Fraser ; but first let us see if one or more persons have been standing here."

The damp, rain-soaked ground showed recent footsteps, very plainly. These were here slim and straight—Biddulph's footsteps, in fact, the boots worn having been light ones. But higher up, among the crags and birchwood, the police soon discovered other footsteps—footsteps made by a larger foot and heavy shooting boots. These larger footprints were easily traced, going in two distinct tracks—the one approaching a certain point in the glen where the birchwood grew very thick, and the other leaving it. A man had evidently come and gone from this spot quite lately ; and, looking down from it to the crag below near which the woman had died and Biddulph had been hit, the policemen all agreed that a rifle-ball could have gone straight on its swift and deadly way.

Alick Fraser could not deny this, though he would not agree to it. In the hard winter time the red deer often

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came down from the deer forests higher up the loch to the Glen of Balla, and the policemen suggested that a stray buck had perhaps found its way, and had been stalked by some poacher, who had killed the "leedy" by accident, instead of the deer. There was some probability, at all events, in this, and the police carefully measured the footprints in the upper ranges of the glen, as well as those on the spot where the unfortunate woman had met her death.

"But where is the track of the deer?" asked Alick Fraser; and this certainly was not visible. But it would be wearisome to go into all the details of an inquiry which lasted for days and which aroused the interest of the whole countryside. Biddulph's position, and the romantic story—for people were ready enough to say he had wanted to get rid of one wife that he might marry a younger and handsomer one—excited the greatest curiosity and gossip.

In the meanwhile the hero of it all remained quietly at Dunbaan, not going (for her sake) to see the woman who believed in him, and trusted in him so entirely.

And she fought his battles for him also very bravely. Alick Fraser went over to Airdlinn and had a long talk with Mrs. Jock, and made Mrs. Jock's kind, womanly heart shudder by the account of the blood-stained ground in the Glen of Balla, and expressed his opinion very plainly that Biddulph, and only Biddulph, was the murderer.

"The case is as plain as can be, to my mind," he told his brother's wife, and his brother, too, forgetting he had no right to sit in judgment on a man who was not even arrested. "This fellow had married some low woman he was ashamed of and tired of, and who, no doubt, was always bothering him for money; and then, when the old colonel left him Dunbaan, he wanted to be rid of her altogether, and, I expect, wanted also to marry Nora Stewart. That young woman is very high and haughty about it all, too, I can assure you. Well, this Biddulph gets this poor creature to come down here, lures her into a lonely place, like the glen—the police have possession of a note he had written to her to ask her to go there *alone*—and when he gets her there he shoots her; and then, perhaps moved by her dying agonies a bit, he runs for that old fool, Alexander, who declares it is impossible he could have fired the shot, because his own shoulder is hit. My belief is that *his* wound was



an after-thought, and done after the poor woman was dead. However, the procurator-fiscal will be at Balla to-morrow, and the whole thing gone into. The police have a strong case, in my opinion, against Biddulph."

"It is a dreadful thing," said Mrs. Jock; "even the suspicion is dreadful. I hope Nora Stewart will never speak to him again."

"If Nora Stewart is the lassie I take her for," said Jock Fraser, now looking up, "I fear she will. The circumstances are suspicious, I grant you; but there is no direct evidence, as far as I can make out, against Biddulph. He ran out of the glen, bleeding and wounded, straight for the doctor. His own story is, Alexander tells me, that he was standing waiting for this poor creature, when the shot that killed her passed him, grazing his shoulder somewhat badly as it went. The police are inclined to think it was the stray shot of some poacher, I hear; and I think the police are right."

"You will think differently, I expect, by-and-by, Jock," answered Alick. "I am certain this fellow Biddulph is the guilty one; as I have often said to Jeanie here, I never liked him."

And Alick Fraser expressed this opinion freely wherever he went. Nevertheless, at the official inquiry held at Balla, the police had no proofs of Mr. Biddulph's guilt to lay before the procurator-fiscal, who held it, except that Biddulph had undoubtedly asked the woman to meet him in the glen, where she met her death. Dr. Alexander's evidence was taken, and Biddulph's own, who told his story truthfully and plainly. He was standing waiting for the lady, whom he had asked to meet him, he said, when the shot grazed his shoulder and killed her.

"And you saw no one, Mr. Biddulph, that you think could possibly have fired it?" asked the procurator-fiscal.

"I saw no one; I shouted loudly for assistance when I found the lady was badly wounded, but there was no reply to my calls. The person who fired the shot, however, must have heard them."

"You believe it to have been a stray shot—an accident?"

"I believe it to have been an accident; at least such was my impression at the time."

"The lady, as far as you know, then, had no one likely deliberately to attempt to take her life?"

"As far as I know, she had not."

It was then proved by Dr. Alexander that she had been

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killed by a rifle-ball, which he had extracted from her body, and that the wound on Mr. Biddulph's shoulder had also been inflicted by a rifle-ball. Biddulph had gone into the glen unarmed with a rifle, the police had ascertained, as he had passed through the village of Balla, and several people had seen him. In fact, the inquiry ended on the first day pretty much where it begun. It was a case of suspicion against Biddulph, and nothing more. The procurator-fiscal, however, adjourned the inquiry for a week, directing the police to make strenuous efforts to endeavor to learn who had been the person who had left the larger footprints in the upper reaches of the glen.

There was quite a gathering of the neighboring gentlemen in the little village of Balla when the inquiry broke up, all eager to learn how it ended; and when Biddulph appeared, pale, haughty, and with his head erect, one or two turned slightly away. But the kindly doctor slid his big hand through the arm of the suspected man.

"I'll just walk a wee' with ye," he said; and Biddulph turned round and smiled, understanding well the motive of the friendly action.

They passed down the village together, and on their way encountered the two Frasers.

Alick gave a short little laugh, while a stern smile flitted over his hard face. But Jock stopped, hesitated a moment, and then held out his hand to Biddulph.

"It's a cold day, Mr. Biddulph," he said, and that was all; but when he rejoined Alick, the younger brother shrugged his shoulders and remarked disagreeably:

"You are not particular about your acquaintances, it seems, Jock."

"I have no right to judge a man who is probably innocent," answered Jock, quietly.

Mrs. Jock had also been so moved by curiosity to hear at once the result of the inquiry, that she had accompanied her husband to Balla in the morning, but had taken the opportunity, while it was going on, to call at Rossmore to see Nora Stewart.

Nora looked very pale, but her dark eyes were bright and resolute as her kinswoman kissed her cold cheeks.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Jock, "I thought I would come and see you, as Jock and Alick are both at Balla, to hear how this bad business ends."

"It must be very painful for Mr. Biddulph," answered

Nora, raising her head with a little haughty air that well became her.

"It must be terrible ; bad as he is, I feel some pity for him."

"Bad as he is?" repeated Nora, indignantly. "Have you already condemned him, then, Mrs. Fraser, of what he is innocent?"

"My dear, how can you tell he is innocent?"

"Because I have heard the whole story from his own lips ; because I know he would have died before he had lifted his hand to hurt the miserable woman who has been the curse of his whole life."

Mrs. Jock did not speak for a moment ; she moved uneasily.

"Then," she said, after a little pause, "you have seen him—since this unhappy affair?"

"Yes, I have seen him ; I sent for him. I am not going to look coldly on the man who saved my life because an unjust suspicion has fallen on his name."

"But, my dear——"

"I know what you are going to say—that he had no right, I suppose, not to tell us all that, when almost a boy, he had formed a connection ; married a woman, if you will, of whom he was ashamed. Why should he tell this unless he chose ? He asked no one else to marry him, did he ? I think you are all treating him most unjustly, and I for one mean to be exactly the same to him."

"Nora, you are but a girl——"

"I am old enough to know right from wrong, at least, and I know Mr. Biddulph has done no wrong."

"Still, Nora——"

"Do not let us talk of it any more," interrupted Nora, with decision. "How are Minnie and Malcolm, Mrs. Fraser?"

"Minnie is very well, but Malcolm does not get over that terrible fall of his as I would wish him ; he looks very ill."

"Poor boy !" said Nora, thinking at the same time the "poor boy" quite deserved all he had got, for attacking Mr. Biddulph so unjustifiably.

They talked a little while of other things after this, and then presently Jock Fraser arrived to look after his wife.

"Well?" said Mrs. Jock, eagerly, as her husband entered Nora's drawing-room.

"Nothing decided has come of it," answered Jock to the unspoken question. "Alick and I have been talking to

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Mr. Grant, the procurator-fiscal, and he has adjourned the inquiry for a week, and the sheriff of the county will be here the next time as well. But my opinion is, there has nothing come out to bring it home to Biddulph."

"How could there when he is innocent?" said Nora, with quivering lips.

Jock Fraser looked at her with his kind brown eyes.

"There's a true woman for you!" he said, smiling.

"Well, my dear, I hope for his own sake he is innocent, and I am certainly inclined to believe that he is."

## CHAPTER XV.

### AN UNPLEASANT WELCOME.

The next day Biddulph went to see Nora, and to his great relief found her alone.

"I have come here," he said, trying to speak lightly, as he took her hand, though he was in truth much agitated, "under great difficulties, and I really dreaded to find anyone with you."

"Why should you? You are always welcome here," answered Nora.

"But when a man is conscious that his movements are watched, he gets a little nervous about the reception he may meet with—except from such as you."

"And do they still watch you?"

"A remarkably pleasant-looking, shrewd-faced constable crossed the loch a yard or two behind me, and when I landed at your pier, another received me with the most tender solicitude, and, I have no doubt, is waiting for me in your avenue. Yes, I am watched, and for this reason I have not dared to come to you before, but to-day I felt I must."

"What matter is it?" said Nora, looking at him with her dark eyes. "You are innocent; you need not care what they do."

"But a great many people—thanks to our friend Mr. Alick Fraser, I believe—*do not* think me innocent. But, as you say, I try to tell myself it is no matter, but all the same it is not pleasant."

"You must lift yourself above it."

"Up among the stars, eh, Miss Stewart? Do you know,

last night I tried to do this ; I stood looking at the vast luminous space of blue, and told myself that up there they knew the truth, the bright twinkling star-eyes that have looked down on all the ages."

"And did this thought give you peace?"

"A sort of peace—of awe, rather—the grand realities against the shams : but still, to be suspected of *murder*, and of the murder of a woman, too, is rather rough on one, you know."

"You will not always be suspected."

"I hope not ; sometimes I believe not ; but in the meanwhile, I repeat, it is not agreeable. However"—and Biddulph looked at Nora and smiled—"you are good enough, it seems, to believe in me, and the doctor."

"He is a dear, true old man!"

"He is more than that, I think, if anything can be higher than to be absolutely true in word and deed. But there was something positively heroic," added Biddulph, half bitterly, "in the doctor's conduct both yesterday and to-day. In the very face of Mr. Alick Fraser, his richest patient, no doubt, he yesterday put his arm through that of the man Mr. Alick Fraser wishes to hunt to death ; and to-day he followed the poor woman to the grave whose end was so drear, and whose life, judging by the higher moralities at least, was so unutterably sad."

"It is all unutterably sad for you."

"Unutterably sad, and unutterably degrading. I have wished during the last few days, Miss Stewart, that I had never been born."

"This feeling will pass away ; you will go away from here——"

"Not," interrupted Biddulph, with kindling eyes, as Nora paused, "until it is known who fired that shot in the Glen of Balla. They shall not say I ran away or shirked it, at any rate. I have offered three hundred pounds reward, and, if that is not enough, I shall offer a thousand ; my father wishes me to do so now."

"Your father?"

"Yes ; did you not know my father was living ? A close, self-contained, clever man, who seemed to give me very little love in my youth and manhood, and yet who is very eager to have this stain wiped off my name. I remember my mother, too, a gentle, dreamy-eyed woman, who died when I was a lad, before"—and Biddulph frowned—"my life was spoilt."

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"It is not spoilt," said Nora, her lovely blush mounting to cheek and brow ; "you have had a bitter, painful past, but it is *past*."

"How noble you look !" said Biddulph, fixing his gray, sombre eyes on her face. "You might lead a man on, Miss Stewart, to big deeds and a big life—a life worth living for."

Nora's blush deepened, and her eyelids drooped over her dark eyes.

"I did not know you ever paid compliments," she said, with a smile.

"Nor do I. I was thinking if, in my earlier manhood, anyone had helped me up, I might not now have had an aimless career before me. But as it is——"

At this moment the sound of carriage wheels was heard, and Biddulph rose and went to the window.

"Here is an arrival," he said, in an annoyed tone. "I shall go now, Miss Stewart."

"I ask you not to go ; I wish you not to go," said Nora, earnestly, raising herself on the couch, and looking round at Biddulph.

"But it will be painful for us all."

"Mrs. Conway-Hope," announced Alfred at the drawing-room door ; and the next instant, as Nora and Biddulph exchanged a glance of half-comic horror, that lady's gaunt, angular form made its appearance, and she at once rushed up to Nora, and kissed her effusively.

"My dear child ! I was determined to come at once. I have just heard this dreadful story about Mr. Biddulph."

"I think, Cousin Margaret, you have met Mr. Biddulph before," said Nora suppressively ; and upon this Biddulph advanced from the window to the centre of the room, and made a grave bow.

Mrs. Conway-Hope's face at this moment was a study. As her short-sighted eyes took in the fact that *this* man—this man accused of murder—was standing before her in Nora Stewart's drawing-room, she drew herself up to her full height, and her gray-tinted skin grew grayer.

"I—I am very much surprised," she said.

"To see me here ?" answered Biddulph, with a little scornful smile.

"Yes—I *am* surprised," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, with marked severity.

"To see any guest of mine in my own house ?" said Nora, haughtily. "Mr. Biddulph is my friend and my

*invited* guest, so why should you be surprised to see him here, Cousin Margaret?"

Mrs. Conway-Hope did not speak for a moment; then she sank down on a chair near as if quite overcome.

"I shall say nothing," she murmured, with a dismal shake of her head.

"I won't shock your feelings by my presence any longer, Mrs. Conway-Hope," said Biddulph, now going up to Nora's couch, who was sitting with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. "Good-by, Miss Stewart"—and he took Nora's hand—"I thank you for your generous words."

"Must you go? Will you promise, then, to come soon again?"

"Buried to-day," muttered Mrs. Conway-Hope in a sepulchral tone from her chair.

"I shall come if you ask me to do so," said Biddulph, ignoring Mrs. Conway-Hope's remark.

"I do ask you; I wish you to come—I shall expect you."

"I shall be too happy."

They shook hands, and then the moment after the room door had closed on Biddulph, Mrs. Conway-Hope rose and approached Nora.

"Nora," she said, solemnly, "I never expected this from my cousin's child."

"Nor did I expect," answered Nora, with quick anger, "that any one dare insult a guest of mine under my roof; but it shall not occur a second time."

"But this man! You know what is said—that he shot his unfortunate wife, whom he had ill-treated and ignored. Nora, I am shocked; I must speak the truth—terribly shocked to see him here."

"You will not be shocked again, then. You came in a carriage from the station I suppose? I shall ring and desire it to wait for you."

"I—I came to stay," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, not quite so resolutely.

"I am sorry, but I cannot receive you. I can receive no one who insults my friends."

"My dear, consider a moment——"

Nora rang her hand-bell, and her young footman appeared.

"Alfred, desire the carriage that brought Mrs. Conway-Hope to wait for her; and see that her luggage is put back. Mrs. Conway-Hope is leaving by the next train."

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Alfred bowed and departed, and Mrs. Conway-Hope drew out her handkerchief.

"Are you in earnest—my dead cousin's child, to whom I have been a mother?" she said, endeavoring to abstract a tear from her short-sighted eyes.

"I am quite in earnest."

"It is beginning to snow, and I have travelled forty miles without refreshment," now said Mrs. Conway-Hope, almost with pathos.

"I am sorry. What will you have before you go?"

"I feel I require—dinner."

"It is too early for dinner, but I will ring and order something."

Nora did this, and presently sandwiches and sherry appeared; but Mrs. Conway-Hope, overcome with emotion, and really not knowing where to go, could not eat the sandwiches, though she drank the sherry.

"I cannot," she said, with a genuine sob at the desolate prospect before her; and then, perhaps inspired by the two glasses of sherry she had managed to swallow, she wept out, "Nora, my child, will you turn me from your door—turn out my gray hairs to face the storm?"

Nora, who had really a very tender heart, began to relent. It was now snowing fast, and turning dusk; and, after all, this stupid woman was her dead father's cousin.

"I don't want to be hard," she said; "but I *will not* have my guests insulted."

"I—I meant no insult," sobbed Mrs. Conway-Hope, now completely humbled.

"Well, in that case——"

Mrs. Conway-Hope needed no further permission. She kissed Nora; she rang the bell eagerly for Alfred.

"I thank heaven our little quarrel is over," she said, throwing up her eyes to the ceiling. "Nora, my dear, may I have my usual room? Alfred, see that my luggage is taken to the blue room, and tell the housemaid to light a good fire; it is such bitter weather, and I have been a little upset."

## CHAPTER XVI.

## BIDDULPH'S REWARD.

Mrs. Conway-Hope, having thus established herself at Rossmore, was very careful not to offend Nora again, and she pointedly never mentioned Mr. Biddulph's name. And when a chance visitor happened to do this, she coughed significantly, as much as to inform the visitor that he had better avoid the subject. In fact, it began to be understood among Nora Stewart's friends—the Frasers and others—that she would hear nothing against Mr. Biddulph.

"I fully expect, if he gets clear out of this business, that she will marry him," Mrs. Jock said one day to her brother-in-law Alick, "and Jock thinks so, too."

Alick Fraser muttered something very like an oath as he listened to these words.

"Do you think she is such an utter fool as that?" he asked, darkly.

"I think she is in love with him," answered Mrs. Jock, "and it is a thousand pities."

Alick went away from Airdlinn with a frown upon his brow, and fresh anger in his heart. It wanted but two days when this conversation took place to the (supposed) final inquiry to be held at Balla on the death of the woman in the glen, and nothing further, it was understood, had been discovered by the police; and Alick went home determined to leave no stone unturned to produce fresh evidence. He really believed (so apt are we to persuade ourselves to think as we desire) that Biddulph had shot his wife; and it would be too horrible, he argued to himself, as he cast his covetous eyes on Nora's acres, which marched with his own, if she should be mad enough to marry this murderer. He would send for Sandy Hill, he determined. Sandy had ferreted out about Biddulph's marriage, and perhaps he might find out something about the murder, too.

"The police are a set of idiots," thought Alick, impatiently. He therefore telegraphed to his clerk at Glasgow to come at once to Inismore, and he informed his house-keeper she might expect a visit again from Mr. Hill, the upholsterer.

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Sandy arrived the day before the inquiry, at which the sheriff of the county was to be present, and Alick Fraser lost no time in laying the whole case before his subordinate, who listened with great attention.

"Looks very black for Mr. Biddulph," said Sandy, with his reddish head turned to one side, for he was taking it all in, and saw it would be agreeable to Mr. Fraser's feelings if he thought Mr. Biddulph guilty.

"It's as plain as daylight to my mind," said Alick. "Who else had any motive for shooting the poor woman? But the weak points in the evidence against Biddulph are, that he is said to have gone unarmed into the glen, and the scratch on his shoulder, which that old fool, Dr. Alexander, persists in affirming he could not have done himself. Now, if we only could find out that he by some means got hold of a rifle—he may have borrowed one, d'ye see, and bribed the gillie or the poacher to hold his tongue? He is rich, this Biddulph, and as his neck is in question——"

"He would be ready to pay, naturally," grinned Sandy.

"Try to find out something, man. I am ready to come down with a hundred, nay, two hundred, if it can be brought home to the fellow; it's a disgrace to justice if he escapes."

"I'll do my little all, Mr. Fraser," said Sandy, with mild facetiousness. But when the day of the inquiry before the sheriff at Balla arrived, Sandy had nothing new to tell his patron. He had mingled with the people about, and drank whiskey with them in their smoky cabins; he had talked to the servants, and, though he had heard a good deal of gossip, Sandy was too shrewd not to know it was not worth repeating.

Only the old evidence, therefore, was laid before the sheriff, who carefully went over the whole circumstances. He was a clever man this, a lawyer and a land-owner, and he had been personally acquainted with the late Colonel Biddulph, and his shrewd gray eyes and acute ears followed Biddulph's steady evidence with keen attention.

"This lady was, I believe, your wife, Mr. Biddulph?" said the sheriff, as Biddulph concluded his account of the woman's death.

"She was," answered Biddulph, firmly; "a wife whom I had not seen for years, until my uncle left me the property at Dunbaan, when she appeared to claim a larger income, which I gave her."

A faint smile passed over the sheriff's face. Mr. Biddulph was supplying a motive for wishing to be rid of his wife without being asked for it.

But this keen Scotchman knew the human heart too well not to know that these words pointed to innocence, and not to guilt. In fact, the inquiry ended in its being declared that this woman had met her death (probably) through inadvertence, by the hand of some person or persons unknown; but the sheriff considered himself justified in offering a reward for the discovery of such person or persons.

Then, as the inquiry ended, Biddulph, having first asked the sheriff's leave to do so, rose from his seat, and addressed a few words to those present.

"I wish, before this inquiry breaks up," he said, very calmly, and somewhat haughtily, "to offer one thousand pounds reward, in addition to the sum the sheriff has just named, for information that shall lead to the discovery of the man who fired the shot that killed my late wife in the Glen of Balla. I have the sheriff's permission to say this;" and he bowed gravely to that official.

And people believe him innocent after this. It is astonishing how quickly public opinion veers round; and a man was unlikely to offer a thousand pounds if there were any chance of incriminating himself by doing so. The sheriff entered into friendly conversation with Biddulph, the doctor warmly grasped his hand, and the ears of the police positively tingled. A thousand pounds! There was not a man among them did not wish, and perhaps hope, to make the desired discovery.

And there was a man outside who grew quite pale with excitement when he heard of Mr. Biddulph's offer. It must not be supposed, because Mr. Hill was cringing in manner, that he was without ambition. We all, probably, have some height to which we would attain; and Sandy's height was to cease to be a clerk, to cease to be *Sandy*, and to become Sandford Hill, Esquire, a merchant of the city of Glasgow, a ship-owner, perhaps a ship-builder, as his present master had been.

And if he could only gain this thousand pounds, Sandy reflected, the way would be open before him. He was a good business man, and he had good business connections; all he wanted was capital, and here was a chance!

The village of Balla was quite lively during the whole afternoon after the sheriff's inquiry was over. People

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watched Mr. Biddulph as he walked down to the loch, with his head a little more erect even than usual, and speculated and talked about him, and among those who watched him was Sandy Hill.

His friend the doctor went part of the way with Biddulph, and asked him if he would not go and see "the young leddy at Rossmore" before he crossed the loch. But Biddulph shook his head.

"Not to day," he said; "yet I should like her to hear," he added, a little wistfully; and the doctor took the hint.

"I shall be looking in there in about half an hour," he said, with a kindly gleam of humor in his small eyes; "and, maybe, the news I'll carry will do her more good than my potions." And he nodded, and turned away, and Biddulph walked slowly on to the loch, where his boat and his boatmen were waiting for him.

He felt serious, if not sad. He was a free man once more—free to go and come unwatched, and a hideous suspicion was lifted off, or ought to be lifted off, his name. And he was free to go also to the true-hearted woman who had stood by him when so many had turned away.

And this thought was very sweet to Biddulph's heart. Since he had known Nora, for the first time in his life he had met some one who seemed to understand that inner nature of his, which in ordinary society he was apt to hide away. He could, in truth, talk to her as he had talked to none other; speak of hopes and aspirations which were not bounded by narrow time. They were akin, he thought, and the fair garniture of womanhood made Nora, in his eyes, a purer and better self.

"She will pull a man up, not drag him down," he thought, recalling a certain lofty expression in Nora's dark eyes, which told of a soul unspotted by mean frailties and faults.

The "pretty follies" of her sex had, in truth, no charm for Biddulph. Perhaps that dismal early experience of his had made him bitter, and apt to be cynical, and not easily moved by a fair face. "If Miss Stewart had been a plain woman, I should have liked her just as well," he had frequently told himself; but perhaps upon this point he did not quite understand his own feelings.

He was sitting thinking of her after this solitary dinner was over, in the comfortable library at Dunbaan, on the day following the sheriff's inquiry at Balla, when he heard

the house-door bell ring, and the usual sounds of an arrival.

In this lonely Highland home this was quite an event, and Biddulph looked up with some interest, and a few minutes later old Donald brought him in a card, on which was neatly printed :

*"Mr. Sandford Hill."*

"Who is Mr. Sandford Hill?" he asked the gray-haired servant.

"I never heard of the gentleman, sir," replied Donald.

"Is he a gentleman?" inquired Biddulph.

"I could not take upon myself to say exactly, sir," said the cautious Donald.

"Show him in. I suppose he wants a subscription or something."

Then Sandy was ushered in. He was nervous, he was a little pale, but still he had his wits about him.

"I have taken the liberty to call, Mr. Biddulph. I have the honor of speaking to Mr. Biddulph, have I not?"

"I am Mr. Biddulph."

"I have taken the liberty of calling, then," repeated Sandy, "because I understand you have offered a certain reward in the event of the discovery of the person who unfortunately killed the lady in the Glen of Balla?"

"Yes, I have done so."

"One thousand pounds?" asked Sandy, insinuatingly.

"Yes."

"In that case," said Sandy, putting on an air of business. "I hope, sir, we shall be able to come to terms; I have found the man."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### SANDY WINS.

Biddulph looked eagerly up, as Sandy Hill made this surprising announcement.

"What?" he said.

"Yes, Mr. Biddulph," continued Sandy, approaching nearer to Biddulph, and lowering his voice into a mysterious whisper; "but might I be as bold, sir, before I com-

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municate my story, as to see that we have no listeners?" And Sandy looked at the door, which was slightly ajar.

"Certainly. Be good enough to shut the door, and then sit down and tell me all you know."

Sandy went to the door first, and peeped out; then he drew a chair close to Biddulph's, and sat down on the edge of it.

"I want you to understand first, please, Mr. Biddulph," he began in a low and confidential tone, "that in coming here to-night, in one way, I am making a sacrifice of my feelings—at least, of certain feelings; but in matters of business we must put feelings into our pockets."

"I do not in the least understand your meaning."

"Not yet, sir; but you will come to it. Let us first have a clear arrangement; I am a man of business, and I like everything on the square. The sum of one thousand pounds is to be paid down, then, by you to the person who brings such information to you that the police shall be able to lay their hands on the party who shot the lady in the glen?"

"Have I not said so?" asked Biddulph, impatiently.

"That is arranged, then; the next thing, perhaps, that I had best explain, Mr. Biddulph, is who I am, and how I happen to be mixed up in this business."

"I shall be glad to hear."

"I manage Mr. Alick Fraser's business affairs in Glasgow," began Sandy, with rather a grand air; but a hasty exclamation from Biddulph stopped him.

"Mr. Alick Fraser! He is not mixed up in your coming here to-night, is he?" asked Biddulph, sharply.

"No, Mr. Biddulph, he is not—not in any way mixed up; in fact, he would have stopped me if I had taken him into my confidence. But a sense of justice, and a sense of what is due to a gentleman in your position, sir, has induced me in this matter not to consider Mr. Fraser exactly."

"Well, if he has nothing to do with it, you can go on."

"I shall go on, sir, for he has not. To put things in proper order, Mr. Biddulph, I must return now to yesterday afternoon, when it became known in the village of Balla the handsome reward you had offered for the discovery of the murderer of the lady. It created an excitement, sir. The police were excited, and I shall not deny that I was also. I may here mention, Mr. Biddulph, that it has long been my desire to start in business on my own



account, and that want of *capital* has alone prevented me. I thought to myself, here is a chance of capital, if I can only hit the right nail on the head. I determined to try. I tried to hear what the police were whispering to each other, for I have long ears; but they took care I should hear nothing, for they are very artful, are the police. But as I kept moving about, sir, among the people, with my ears open, I may say, two lads passed me whose words I thought very significant."

"This was in Balla?"

"In Balla, sir, about seven p.m., when it was growing dusk, and the people were still talking all round about your offered reward. Said one lad to the other, as they passed me, 'But just think, Rob, what this money would do for us.' The other replied, 'For all that, I wouldn't have it on my conscience; and I won't break my word.'

"Mr. Biddulph, these words struck me. I'm sharp, and the manner of both the lads was very earnest. They were young fellows of between eighteen and twenty—brothers, by the likeness between them—and were dressed, one in game-keeper fashion, the other as a workman or woodman. Well, I followed them—not close, you know; but I kept them in sight, and presently they went into a little thatched hovel, not far from the roadside, on Mr. Alick Fraser's property. I hung about till it was quite dark, and then I crept on my hands and knees round a little hillock, at the back of the cottage, until I got close up to the mud walls. It was little better than a heap of stones, sir, and there were plenty of chinks that I could put my ears to, and my eyes also, for that matter. They had a good log fire on the hearth, and they were cooking something in a caldron hung over it, that smelt uncommon well, anyhow; and an old wife, deaf and smoke-dried, was sitting smoking. I listened; what do you think they were talking about, Mr. Biddulph?"

"How can I possibly tell?" said Biddulph.

"About yourself, sir—quite free like. May I make so bold as to tell you exactly what they said?"

"Of course you can."

"Well, sir, the one they called Rob said it was a bad job from beginning to end, and that he wished you had never came into the countryside. 'It's played the vera de'il wi' the young laird,' he said; 'he's a changed mon.'"

"With the young laird?" asked Biddulph, inquiringly.

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covered. Then they talked on about a set-to that you and Mr. Malcolm Fraser had had together, and said there was ill-blood between you, and the like. 'Still,' said the one they called Tam—the elder brother—'the young laird had na right to make a muir-cock of the puir-leedy.'"

"*What?*" cried Biddulph, with some excitement.

"That was what Tam said, sir; and then he began hammering on again about the money. With such a sum they could take a farm; they could go to Australia and become rich men, and a hundred things besides. Tam kept saying all this over and over, but Rob said very little, and sat with his head hanging down. Then suddenly he looked up, and spoke quite sharp-like.

"'Na, I won't,' he said; 'I won't bring the young laird to the gallows for a' the gold that e'er was coined! Don't talk na mair about it, Tam, my mind's made up; and luik here,' he added, drawing some money out of his pocket, 'here's five sovereigns the puir fellow brought this morn, and he told me it was a' he had; and he promised we should never want for naught, and that he'd get the laird to gi' us a bit holding as soon as he could. I'll keep his secret, an' ye must keep it, Tam; I could na lie in my bed if I thought I'd twined the rope round his neck—him I ha' known sa lang.'

"Mr. Biddulph," continued Sandy, growing quite excited with his narrative, "I have repeated word for word what he spoke, but I need not go on with all they said. They got their supper out of the caldron over the fire—a fat rabbit—and the stone jar of whiskey from the cupboard, and hadn't they a set-to, and the old dame, who could not hear a single word, along with them! And Tam agreed to keep the young laird's secret as well as Rob; for Rob reminded him he had made a solemn promise to do so, and that he would never have told his brother except that Tam had heard Rob rambling on in his sleep about the poor lady's dying shrieks, and had laid one thing to the other, and had thus found it out."

"And what else did they say?" asked Biddulph, who was very pale, as Sandy paused for breath.

"A deal, sir, and my very blood ran cold to hear them. Rob said that he and the young laird were on the high hills above the Glen of Balla, when they espied your boat crossing the loch through young Mr. Malcolm's field-glass. They were returning from the deer forest at the head of the Ach, and had sat down to drink some

whiskey from their flasks, and they saw you, and Rob said Mr. Malcolm's face grew black as night at the sight. Rob was carrying the young laird's rifle, and they had not had a chance of a shot at the deer all the day and the rifle was loaded ; and as Mr. Malcolm watched you, through his glass, land at Balla and enter the glen, the very devil himself, Rob said, seemed to get hold of the young laird, and his face grew just awful to behold. Then he snatched the rifle out of Rob's hand, and swore he would have a shot at you ; and Rob went down on his knees and prayed him for the Lord's sake to let you alone. But he swore he would, and he ran down the hill with his rifle in his hand, and stood among some birchwood ; but Rob stopped where he was, and turned his back, and wouldn't look as he did not wish to see his young master commit murder.

"Well, sir," continued Sandy, his very hair apparently standing on end with horror, and his round eyes dilating, for Sandy hated the very name of fire-arms, "the next minute Rob heard the rifle-shot, and the lady's awful screams. He'll never forget them, he said, to his dying day ; and as he stood terrified, young Mr. Malcolm ran back to him, with the rifle in his hand, and *murder* in his eyes ! 'I've shot them both,' he said ; and he called you and the lady, sir, such ill names, I could not take upon myself to repeat them in your presence. But he gave the rifle back to Rob, and they crept together out of the glen, through the high hills, and back to the head of the loch ; and Rob swore to the young laird that he would never betray him. So that's my story, Mr. Biddulph," added Sandy, drawing out his red silk handkerchief and mopping his face ; "and I think you'll agree with me, I have laid such information before you that I am entitled to the offered reward in full ?"

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Hill," answered Biddulph. And then he rose from his chair and began walking slowly up and down the room, with his eyes cast upon the floor. Of what was he thinking ? First a sort of a stern triumph filled his heart, that this cruel deed had been brought home to the headstrong youth who had twice attacked him, and whose own feet had now become entangled in the snare he had spread for Biddulph. But suddenly, Sandy fugitively watching him, saw his expression change. Biddulph stopped, bit his under lip, and then looked quickly at Sandy. A swift thought had

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darted into his mind—a most painful thought, for Biddulph had remembered Mrs. Fraser, and the mother's fond, almost passionate love for her only son.

How often had he seen her eyes soften as she looked on her boy's face; and this blow, he knew, would be most terrible to her. Again Biddulph resumed his slow paces to and fro; he was trying to think what it would be best to do, how he could "temper justice with mercy," in the trying position in which he found himself.

"And when do you propose, Mr. Hill," he said at length, addressing Sandy, to lay the information you have acquired before the police?"

"First thing in the morning, sir," answered Sandy, briskly. "I prepared the whole statement before I came here this evening, as I did not wish to come until the dusk, as one never can tell who is watching one. I think I shall be justified also, sir," he added, clearing his throat, "in applying for the two hundred pounds offered by the Sheriff."

"You will become quite rich, Mr. Hill," said Biddulph, a little grimly.

"I shall make a good use of the capital I have acquired, I hope, Mr. Biddulph. I propose, sir, to start in business on my own account at once; and I am sure, Mr. Biddulph, if you would care to entrust me with any commission, you will find me strictly honorable and honest, sir—the last penny accounted for, after a fair per cent. has, of course, been deducted."

"I shall not forget your obliging offer. And about this thousand pounds—when do you want it?"

Sandy's face fell.

"I understood," he said, after a moment's pause, "that it was to be paid *down*."

"Immediately upon the information having been given to the police, eh?"

"That was what I understood, sir."

"Well, come here to-morrow morning. Let me see—say about twelve o'clock, *before* you have been to the police. I want to go over the whole thing myself before you apply to them, so that there is no screw loose. Don't mention this to a soul until I have seen you again; and if you come here, as I said, to-morrow at *twelve*, I shall have your check for one thousand pounds ready for you; but only, remember, on the condition that you have not gone first to the police."

"Of course, I shall do exactly as you wish, Mr. Biddulph," said Sandy, opening his round eyes wider, and rubbing his hands together. He was too sharp not to perceive that Biddulph had some motive for deferring the time of laying the information before the police; but, of course, Mr. Biddulph must be responsible for the consequences of this.

"There was only one thing, sir," he added, determined to make this point clear. "If this delay should cause any accident in the course of justice—say, if Mr. Malcolm Fraser should get off before the police lay hold of him—I cannot be held accountable."

"Certainly not. You have done your part, and you shall have your money. And now tell me, what is the surname of your friend Rob, the faithful gillie who would not betray his master?"

"His name, sir—I ascertained all particulars this morning—is Robert Mackenzie; the two brothers are Thomas and Robert Mackenzie, and their father and mother were farm-servants with Mr. Fraser at Airdlinn, and they both died together—about the same time, at least—of fever, and Mr. and Mrs. Fraser of Airdlinn were very kind to these two lads, and the younger one, Rob, has always been a sort of attendant on the young laird since they were boys. Tam is the one for the police to tackle, sir, so as to get the whole story confirmed. The other, Rob, won't split on his young master until he is forced to do so."

"A loyal heart! And who is the old dame who enjoyed her supper with them?"

"Their grandmother, sir," answered Sandy, with a grin, and wriggling himself on his chair in appreciation of Mr. Biddulph's supposed joke. "And she's deaf as a post, sir, and very old; and Thomas—Tam is employed on Mr. Alick Fraser's property as woodman, and the like; and Rob gets work at Inismore, too, occasionally. But he spends the principal part of his time with young Mr. Malcolm Fraser on the hills; but he'll do that no more;" and again Sandy grinned.

"No," said Biddulph, briefly. "And now, Mr. Hill, will you take some refreshment? The night is waxing late."

Sandy took the hint.

"I'll go now, sir," he said, "and shall have the honor of waiting on you again to-morrow at twelve o'clock precisely, bringing all necessary notes and information. And since you are so obliging as to offer me a little refresh-

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ment, sir, I'll not refuse a drop of whiskey, which I'll make bold to ask your butler for as he lets me out. Good-evening, Mr. Biddulph"—and Sandy bowed low—"and I wish to express to you, sir, the full satisfaction and gratification that my visit has given me."

"All right ; I'll expect you to-morrow. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir. My humble and grateful thanks, sir. Again good-night ;" and with another bow Sandy was gone.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A LATE VISITOR.

About half-past ten o'clock on the same evening that Sandy Hill had visited Dunbaan, in Nora Stewart's drawing-room at Rossmore two ladies were sitting, feeling decidedly tired of each other's company.

They had been together all day, and the day had seemed very long. Nora was charmingly dressed in a tea-gown of pale bronze plush, lined and trimmed with very delicate blue. She certainly looked a remarkably handsome woman as she lay there, pretending to read behind her shaded lamp, but she also looked a little wearied and disappointed. She was disappointed ; she had fully expected that Biddulph would have called during the afternoon, and she had donned her new tea-gown in this expectation. And now she was mentally blaming Mrs. Conway-Hope because he had not done so, and this made Nora feel rather unamiable.

"We have not had one visitor to-day ; not even the doctor !" presently said Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"No," answered Nora, somewhat abruptly.

"The scenery is certainly beautiful here in *summer*," now said Mrs. Conway-Hope, putting aside her knitting for the night ; "but at this season one requires a little more social intercourse than one can expect to find in the Highlands. Have you decided yet, Nora, dear, when you start for town ?"

"I have not thought of it yet. Surely that was a ring ?"

The two ladies listened, and a minute later Alfred, the footman, came into the room with a card.

"Mr. Biddulph is in the hall, madam," he said, address-



ing Nora, "and he wishes to know if he can see you for a few moments, though he is sorry to disturb you so late."

"Certainly. Show him up," answered Nora.

"Shall I retire?" asked Mrs. Conway-Hope, with affected jocoseness, for she had not the least intention of going.

"Just as you like," said Nora, and the next moment Biddulph was in the room.

He looked pale and grave, and went up straight to Nora's couch and took her hand.

"How are you?" he said; "and will you forgive me for coming at this unreasonable hour?"

"I—I thought you would come to-day," she answered, with a pleased, bright look.

"How are you, Mr. Biddulph?" said Mrs. Conway-Hope, now going forward with her claw-like hand outstretched. "I must congratulate you."

"Thank you," said Biddulph, a little grimly, bowing over hand, while Nora's face grew crimson.

"Our good friend, the doctor," continued Mrs. Conway-Hope, quite playfully, "told us how everything passed off yesterday satisfactorily. I know the sheriff."

"Then you know a very agreeable man," said Biddulph. "Miss Stewart," he added, turning again to Nora. "I am going to make a very unusual request; but can I see you alone for a few minutes, on business?"

"I am in the way, then, it seems?" said Mrs. Conway-Hope. "In that case I shall retire. Good-night, Mr. Biddulph. I shall see *you*, Nora, my love, later on in your own room I suppose?" and Mrs. Conway-Hope bowed and disappeared.

"You will wonder why I have asked this," said Biddulph, going up close to Nora, and speaking in a low and somewhat agitated voice. "Miss Stewart, I am sorry; I fear I bring you ill news."

"What?" said Nora, with a little start, and looking at him eagerly. "Has anything happened *to you*?"

"Not to me; but are you sure no one can hear us?" And Biddulph hastily crossed the room and opened the door, and as he did so there was a rush of a silk garment, and someone made a very quick retreat up the stairs.

"I just fancied that lady was listening," he said, as he went back to Nora's side; "and what I've got to say none but you and I must hear. You are fond of your cousin

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Jock Fraser and his wife, are you not, Miss Stewart? Will you try to save them from a terrible grief?"

"A terrible grief! Oh, Mr. Biddulph, not surely about that unhappy boy, Malcolm?"

Biddulph's eyes fell.

"Unhappily," he said, "about that most unhappy boy. Miss Stewart, I have come to ask you to do to-night what in the eyes of the law is wrong; but for his mother's sake——"

"What has he done?" asked Nora, growing very pale as Biddulph paused.

For a moment he hesitated; then he said slowly:

"What he allowed me to be suspected of doing; Malcolm Fraser's hand fired the shot that killed poor Natalie in the Glen of Balla."

"*Malcolm!* But what motive had he? And—— Oh! I understand now! Mr. Biddulph, is this *murder*?"

"It's an ugly word, but I fear there is no other name. Motive? Shall I tell you his motive? He did not mean to kill the poor woman, but to kill *me*."

"Oh, this is too dreadful!" cried Nora, greatly agitated; and, forgetting her injured ankles in her great emotion, she rose all trembling from her couch. But Biddulph caught her hands and gently forced her back.

"Take care," he said. "Yes, it is dreadful, but you must not excite yourself and make yourself ill; I want you to show all your courage to-night, for Mrs. Fraser's sake?"

"Tell me about it. Tell me how do you know?" asked Nora, with heaving breast and parted lips.

"Do you know a lad named Rob Mackenzie—a gillie, an attendant on young Malcolm?"

"Yes, I know him well; he has often been here. He is devoted to Malcolm."

"And he has a brother?"

"Yes, and an old granddame. They live on this side of the loch, because the elder brother is employed by Alick Fraser. What have they to do with it? Surely Rob Mackenzie has not——"

"Betrayed his master?" said Biddulph, with a sort of smile. "No, the young Gael is true to the core. I offered a thousand pounds for information that would lead to the discovery of the man who killed yon poor soul in the glen, and this lad knew this, and spoke no word. But a man came to me to-night, another sort of a man, and sold the secret. And now I will tell you the story."

Then Biddulph told Nora what we already know—told all the details which Sandy Hill's long ears had heard, and Nora grew paler and paler as she listened.

"Then this means," she said, grasping Biddulph's hand in her own cold trembling ones, "that—that Malcolm will be arrested ; that it is murder ?"

"It means that Malcolm will be arrested, unless he can get away."

"And can this be done ?" said Nora, again starting up. "Oh, Mr. Biddulph, try and save him, though he has done you this great wrong ! For my sake, for his mother's sake."

"For your sake, and for his mother's sake, I have come here to-night. I have thought it all over ; the dreadful consequences to that kindly household of this boy's madness—the mother's terrible grief ! I cannot help him being arrested if he stays in Scotland. The reward and the sheriff's reward also, is justly earned by this man ; but if we can manage it, he will have twelve hours' start before the information is lodged with the police. In these twelve hours, Miss Stewart, he must fly."

"Oh, let us send for him now, then ; let me write !"

"It will, I think, be best for you to send for him here. Is there any one in your household on whom you can really depend ?"

"I think on Alfred, the young footman."

"He looks an honest-fellow. Well, could Alfred row across the loch alone to Airdlinn—it is a fine moonlight night—and bring young Malcolm back with him ? And will you write a few urgent lines to him, telling him that he *must* come, and he must never go back. I have brought my check-book with me ; he will want money, and he must go to America, Australia—out of the way, at least, and go at once, or nothing can save him."

"I will write. Will you reach me my desk ? Oh, what am I to say ?" asked Nora, who was terribly agitated.

"Tell him that you must see him *at once* ; that something dreadful has happened, which makes this an absolute necessity. His conscience," added Biddulph, grimly, "will perhaps make him guess your meaning. And do not tell him I am here ; I would go for him myself, only I know his fiery and uncontrollable nature might make him commit some fresh act of violence and folly. But you can influence him, for one thing. I give him some pity ; he likes you too well ;" and Biddulph's voice faltered.

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"I wish I had never spoken to him. I looked upon him as a boy, a brother."

"But he did not look on you as a sister. But we must not waste time. Will you write your letter, and I will go and seek out Alfred, and make it worth his while to hold his tongue?"

"How—how good you are!" said Nora, her dark eyes dim with tears.

"Do you not think I would spare *you* any pain?" asked Biddulph, bending over her. "See, your paper is all ready for you, only be sure to make your letter urgent enough."

He placed the note-paper before her, and put the pen in her trembling hand; then he went to seek Alfred, and came to a satisfactory arrangement with that young man.

"Miss Stewart's cousin, young Mr. Malcolm Fraser, has got into some trouble," he told Alfred, "and he must keep out of the way for a while. You have to give Miss Stewart's letter into his own hand and bring him here, and you shall have twenty pounds for your trouble. But you are *not* to tell him I have been here, as he and I do not get on together; and keep the boat ready for starting again when you come back here with him. You must row him down the loch in time to catch the first train in the morning."

Alfred was quite agreeable, but thought he ought to confide in Palmer (Nora's maid, and his sweetheart), but was too reliable to do this without leave.

"There is a young woman, sir," he said, an ingenuous blush stealing over his comely countenance, "whom I would like to mention it to before I go, if you have no objection."

"I have the very greatest objection," answered Biddulph, "and I can have no young woman mixed up in the matter. The young woman will forgive you," he added, with a smile, "if you buy her a present with part of the twenty pounds you are about to earn;" and Alfred, perhaps having some knowledge of the weakness of the female heart on the subject of pretty gifts, determined for once to do something without consulting his Palmer.

He left Biddulph to get the boat ready, and Biddulph returned to Nora, who looked up anxiously from her letter as he entered the room.

"I have written all that I dare," she said; "will you read it? Have you seen Alfred? Will he go?"

"That is settled. No, I will not read your letter. You have put it strongly enough, I hope?"

"I have told him I know that he is in great danger; that he must come here at once."

"That will do. Now seal your letter, and I will take it down to Alfred at the boat-house. He is a smart young fellow that."

Nora made no answer; she was cold, pale, and trembling. The whole thing seemed too frightful to be true, and yet she knew that it was true.

The letter was soon ready, and soon, also, Alfred was rowing as noiselessly as possible from the little pier below the house at Rossmore. Biddulph stood and watched him go out of the shadows on to the broad breast of the loch, where the moonbeams lay cradled on the dark tide. It was so still that each dip of the oars was heard with remarkable distinctness; and as Biddulph's eyes followed the lessening boat, he thought sadly enough of the blight its errand was about to cast on the once happy household at Airdlinn.

"And I suppose they will think I have brought this upon them," he reflected, gloomily. "Strange! had I never come to Dunbaan, this mad boy might have lived to be an honored man. But there it is. Our actions draw others down sometimes like a quicksand, and we cannot save them. All that is left for him now is to go away and never to return."

Then he remembered Nora's natural anxiety and distress, and went back to her, and found her looking so white and ill, he was greatly touched. He pulled her couch close to the fire, he stirred it, knelt down on the hearth to try to make it burn more brightly, and looked up with much feeling at her pale face.

"I seem to bring nothing but trouble to you all," he said.

"Oh, do not say that!" she answered, trying to suppress her tears. "But for you I could not bear this."

He took her hand, kneeling there with the firelight falling on his grave, handsome features and gray, sombre eyes.

"We can't help ourselves, Nora," he said, sadly. "I did not mean to blight the life of this poor lad, nor stain his mother's cheeks with tears. I would willingly bring evil on none, yet I have brought it—and not only on *him*;" and the shadows deepened on his face.

"It is through no fault of yours."

"I have been wondering about this, Nora—but may I call you Nora now, when we are drawn so close by this great trouble?"

"Yes; always call me Nora," she answered, with faltering lips, and her hand trembled in Biddulph's.

He felt this; he looked at her, and a wave of deep, yearning love swept over his heart.

"I must not say what I would say," he murmured, and he bent his dark head down, and laid his lips upon her hand. "Say you forgive me, then, the ill I have brought on your young cousin. Oh, Nora, but I pray not on you!"

"I owe my life to you. Why do you talk thus?"

"Because I know I was selfish. I had not strength to tear myself away when I knew I had no right to linger by your side. You knew this, did you not? You gave some pity to my weakness?"

Nora did not speak; and he knelt there still, clasping both her hands.

But suddenly she remembered Malcolm Fraser and she pushed him away.

"Oh, don't let us forget that poor boy," she said, "and his dreadful danger! You had better go away; it would only madden him to find you here."

"Yes," said Biddulph, and he rose. "But I won't leave Rossmore until he is gone; I dare not trust you with him without help near. These windows look straight down on the steep to the loch, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Then, I'll go now, and wait among the firs there, and if you open one of these windows and call I shall hear you. I shall be quite out of young Malcolm's way there, and I shall feel happier if I am near you. And about money; I will give you a check for any amount you think he will require."

"No, for he would see your name on it. I have thought about that. Luckily I got some money the other day; I have nearly a hundred pounds here;" and she opened her desk.

They made up a hundred pounds between them; and then Biddulph, looking out, saw the boat returning across the water from Airdlinn.

"Is he there?" asked Nora, eagerly.

"Yes, there are two figures in the boat. Nora, I had

better go now, but do not forget that I am near you in case of need ; but if he goes quietly away, I shall not see you again to-night."

She clasped his hand without speaking ; she looked into his face as if to gain strength from his calmness.

"Good-by," he said, almost in a whisper ; and he bent down and kissed each small, cold, trembling palm in turn. "Take courage ;" and the next moment he was gone.

Nora never forgot what she felt as she waited there during the next few minutes, to break to her young cousin the terrible fate he had brought on his own head. She never forgot when he entered, pale and agitated, with a look in his blue eyes she had never seen there before—a look of dread, as if some haunting and pursuing fear were always near him.

"What is it ?" he asked, as he went up to her and took her chill hand. "You sent for me. What is the matter ?"

Then Nora rose, pale, almost staggering ; she opened her white lips ; she paused for words.

"Don't, for heaven's sake, look like that ! What on earth is it ? Do speak, Nora !"

"Malcolm," she answered, tremblingly and falteringly, "you must fly to-night ; you must go now. Your mad deed in the Glen of Balla is known ; there is no safety for you here."

He started back as if she had struck him, and every particle of color faded out of his face.

"Who says this ?" he asked, in a hoarse voice. "What have I to do with this ?"

"God's eye saw you fire the shot, Malcolm, the blame of which you allowed to rest on an innocent man. Do not deny it—it is known ; there are witnesses coming forward against you, and all that is left for you now is to fly."

He did not speak for a moment ; he sank back on a chair as though utterly overwhelmed ; he covered his face with his hand.

"I have money ready for you," went on Nora, eagerly, "and you must go straight from here, and Alfred will row you down the loch to the station, and you must catch the first train that passes, and make your way direct to some port. You must not delay an hour. Go to Liverpool, that will be best, and start in some outward-bound steamer. Wherever you go I will send you money. Here is a hun-



dred pounds, Malcolm ; do not waste the time now, when it is so precious, in useless regret."

Then he looked up, and his face seemed to have turned suddenly haggard.

"Rob Mackenzie has betrayed this, then," he said, in a changed voice.

"No ; but the horror of that dreadful scene haunted the poor lad, and he rambled about it in his sleep, and his brother listened. And when they were talking of it, another listener crept, under the shadow of night, close to their little cottage walls—you know what a poor place it is—and this man heard the whole story, and, for the sake of the reward, carried it to Mr. Biddulph."

Malcolm Fraser started to his feet with a fierce oath.

"*What!* he's in it, then, is he? The man who has blasted my whole life!"

"Yet he came here to-night to try to save you ; knowing, too, that it was *his* life, and not the poor life you did take, that you tried to destroy when you fired that fatal shot. Malcolm, you have wronged Mr. Biddulph, as few men have wronged another, for you let the blame of your sin fall upon him, and yet he has done you no injury."

"*No injury!*" repeated the unhappy young man, in a tone of such intense misery and passion that his words seemed to pierce Nora's heart. "Is it no injury, then, to destroy every hope, every joy of a human life? Nora, this is what this man has done for me. You knew well I loved you—loved the very ground you trod on, and have kissed your shadow a hundred times as it fell upon the grass. Is all this nothing? From the time I knew what love was, I have loved you, and then this Biddulph came between us—he a married man!"

"But, Malcolm, you are mistaken ; Mr. Biddulph never sought me in that way—he never——"

"Oh, I know!" interrupted Malcolm Fraser, bitterly, as Nora hesitated ; "he did not ask you to marry him, I dare say, because he could not, but for all that he tried to steal, and did steal, your heart away from me! Do you think I am blind? And I grew mad. I sent him a challenge, and the coward would not go to France to fight like a man ; so, I will not deny it—I meant to shoot him like a dog!"

"Hush, hush! do not talk thus. Malcolm, you are wasting time. Have you no thought for your mother, and



her terrible grief if anything were to happen to her only son? Here is the money; take it and then go quietly away. You can always write to me here or in town, and you can have more money whenever you want it, only do not delay."

"Have you no pity for me?" he presently asked, standing before her with his blue eyes fixed on her face with strange wistfulness—"none for my wasted love and wrecked life?"

"Yes—yes, I have," answered Nora; and she held out both her hands, and her tears fell fast.

"Kiss me, then, once," he said, in broken accents; "kiss me before I go."

She bent her head forward and kissed him, and he sank down upon his knees.

"Forgive me; and, Nora, kiss my mother for me; tell her"—and a sob choked his voice—"tell her not to grieve. If I live I shall see her again—and you, too, my one and only love!"

He left her a few moments later, and Nora, utterly overcome, tottered to the window and watched the moonlit water. And presently a boat shot out from the shadows and glided on through the silver tide. It was bearing her young cousin into exile; bearing far away from kith and kin the fiery, passionate heart that had loved her too well.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE MOTHER'S GRIEF.

The next morning Nora awoke, with a confused sense of anxiety and uneasiness, from disturbed and painful dreams. She started up, she rubbed her eyes, and then she remembered—remembered the last look on Malcolm's face as he turned to leave her, his message to his mother, and the bitter task that lay before herself to-day.

And scarcely was she dressed when this was forced upon her. She had not, indeed, left her bedroom when Palmer entered, carrying a message from Mrs. Fraser, of Airdlinn, who was below, and wished to know if she might come upstairs and speak to Nora at once.

Nora could not quite hide her agitation from Palmer's quick eyes as she listened to this request. It was, of

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course, very well known in the household that something unusual had been going on late last night—Mr. Biddulph's late arrival—Alfred's mysterious disappearance, for he had only returned at dawn, and would give no further account of himself, except that Miss Stewart had sent him on a message.

Palmer was highly offended by this reticence, and had scarcely spoken to Alfred at breakfast; but the young man, having the pleasing knowledge that he was the happy possessor of twenty pounds, part of which he meant to spend on a present for his sweetheart, had borne her coldness so amiably, that Palmer thought it was quite time she was making up to him again.

Still Palmer was intensely curious to know what it was all about; and Mrs. Conway-Hope was more, if possible, curious still.

Therefore Palmer noted how, with quickened breath and paling cheeks, her young mistress heard that Mrs. Fraser was below, and wished at once to see her. And Nora felt she could not refuse this request. This poor mother *must* hear the terrible news before the day was over, and it was best to break it to her now. Therefore Nora bade Palmer to bring Mrs. Fraser upstairs, and a few minutes later Mrs. Jock entered, looking fresh, smiling, and well.

"How are you, my dear?" she said, going up to Nora and kissing her face in her kind, motherly way.

Nora often thought afterward how Mrs. Jock looked at this moment—so rosy, so happy, a matron in her comely prime, with her eyes, blue as poor Malcolm's, brimful of content and good-nature.

"I'm not feeling very well," hesitated Nora, with her eyes cast down.

"My poor child, I am sorry for that. But it's nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh no."

"That's all right, then; Nora, my dear, what have you done with my boy? I never was so astonished in my life when the house-maid told me this morning that last night, after Jock and I had retired to bed, that Alfred had arrived with a letter from you for Malcolm, and that Malcolm went back with him to Rossmore in the boat. Did he stay all night here, or go to his uncle Alick's?"

"He did not stay here," faltered Nora.

"Then he's at uncle Alick's. Jock felt a bit uneasy

about him, as Malcolm has not been looking well lately, so he proposed as soon as breakfast was over this morning, that we should cross the water and inquire about him. But I told Jock he was quite safe in your hands;" and Mrs. Jock laughed.

Poor Nora's task seemed to be growing more difficult every moment. She turned away her head; she gave a little gasping sigh, and the mother's quick ears of love heard it.

"There is nothing the matter, is there?" she asked, sharply—"nothing with Malcolm?"

Upon this Nora caught her large firm hand in her own cold, trembling one.

"Oh, Mrs. Fraser," she said, "I—I sent for Malcolm last night because he has got into some trouble—because just now he is better away."

"What do you mean?"

Mrs. Jock's voice was almost stern as she asked this question, and she fixed her eyes on Nora's changing face with some suspicion in her glance.

"It is terrible to me to have to tell you," went on Nora, "most terrible, but, Mrs. Fraser, it was Malcolm who fired the shot, who killed that unhappy woman in the glen."

"*Malcolm!*" cried Mrs. Fraser, a sudden flush passing over her face, and pushing Nora's clinging hand away in her quick agitation. "I don't believe a word of it. Who has been telling you this, Nora Stewart?"

"It is only too true, Mrs. Fraser—only too true," answered Nora, turning away her head, and her eyes filling with tears. "This is a bitter task to me, but you must know, and Malcolm, I hope, is safe. By this time he is far away."

"What do you mean? I ask you, what do you mean? You have not sent the boy away, have you, to hide himself, as if he had done some dreadful wrong? Where is he? I ask you, what have you done with my son?"

"Mrs. Fraser, last night news was brought me, such news it almost broke my heart. I was told—it is no invention—that the woman's death in the glen had been traced to Malcolm, and that to-day this information would be given to the police, and Malcolm would be arrested."

"*It is an invention!*" answered Mrs. Fraser, with strong indignation. "What had Malcolm to do with this woman? Nothing! A woman he never saw—a woman, the wife of another man?"

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"It was by accident he killed her ; but——"

"Then why did you send him away? Why did you not let him face any inquiry that could be made? My boy would speak the truth ; if he shot the woman by accident, he is not one to deny it."

Nora's distress was now very great. It seemed too dreadful to destroy the poor mother's proud confidence in her darling son.

"Where is Jock?" said Nora, greatly agitated. "We had better send for him."

"He is at Alick Fraser's. Yes, send for his father ; and Jock will tell you, as I do, that we have not taught our boy to run away and hide himself, whatever he has done."

Nora rang the bell, and sent Alfred for Jock Fraser ; and in the meanwhile Mrs. Fraser continued in a state of strong excitement and indignation. She began walking up and down the room, glancing occasionally angrily at Nora.

"I suppose," she said, presently, "that Mr. Biddulph is at the bottom of all this? He wants to shift suspicion from his own shoulders to those of my boy."

Nora did not speak. This was too unjust, she felt ; but her heart was so full of pity for the unhappy mother that she could not resent it.

"This man has brought nothing but mischief and trouble," went on Mrs. Jock. "But if he thinks he can make a scape-goat of poor Malcolm, he shall find he is mistaken. Did you hear this story of him, Nora? I will hear the truth."

"Wait till Cousin Jock comes," said Nora, gently ; "I can tell him better than I can tell you."

"Why? Am I not his mother? Is his honor not mine? Answer me, Nora Stewart, is it this man Biddulph who has been blackening Malcolm's name?"

"No, it is not," answered Nora, lifting her dark eyes to Mrs. Fraser's indignant face. "Mr. Biddulph has acted in this matter, as he always does, with the greatest consideration and kindness."

"You think no one is like him, that is the truth! But here comes Jock! Jock," she added, going up to her husband, who at this moment rapped at the room door, "come in, and hear what Nora Stewart has got to tell us. She says Malcolm—*our Malcolm*—killed that woman in the glen!"

Jock Fraser's brown face grew pale at these words, and a look of fear came into his brown eyes.

"Malcolm?" he repeated, looking first at his wife, and then at Nora.

"Yes, our dear boy; and she has got him to go away—to hide himself, instead of facing such a lie like a man."

"What is this, Nora?" now asked Jock Fraser, still with that look of uneasiness on his face.

"Oh, Jock, all this is dreadful for me!" answered Nora, taking her half-cousin's hand in her own. "But—but I acted for the best; when you hear the whole story, you will think I acted for the best."

"Where is Malcolm?" said Jock Fraser.

"Far away from here, I hope, Jock. Do you know a man named Sandford Hill—a man somehow connected with your brother Alick?"

"Of course I do. Sandy Hill—why, he is Alick's clerk at Glasgow."

"He has been down here, then," continued Nora; "and when he heard of the reward that Mr. Biddulph and the sheriff offered at the inquiry at Balla, for information that would lead to the arrest of the person who killed that woman in the glen, he went about spying and listening, as far as I can make out, and he heard Rob Mackenzie talking to his brother."

"Rob Mackenzie!" exclaimed Jock Fraser, with a scared face.

"Yes, the poor lad was talking to his brother, and meant no harm. Nay, this wretch overheard him say he would die, or something like that, before he would betray Malcolm. But these words made this Hill suspicious, and he followed the two Mackenzies to their cottage, and he listened, and, oh, Jock, he overheard the whole story, and—he is going to give information to the police to-day!"

"Oh, my poor boy!" cried Jock Fraser, much overcome. "Jeanie, my poor Jeanie!" and he went up to his wife, and took her in his arms.

But Mrs. Jock pushed him away.

"And even if this were so," she said, trembling with excitement—"even if this wretch did pretend to hear the boys Rob and Tam Mackenzie talking, why should we believe him? It is for the sake of the reward he has got up this story, and Malcolm must come back and face it."

"And you told Malcolm, Nora?" asked Jock Fraser,

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who was very pale. "You sent for him last night, and told him what you are now telling us?"

"Yes, I sent for him and told him. Mr. Biddulph came here about half-past ten. This Hill had just left him, and Mr. Biddulph persuaded Hill not to lay the information before the police until the afternoon of to-day. Then he came here and told me; he wanted to give Malcolm a start, and—and I sent for Malcolm, and he confessed it was all true, and went away."

As Mrs. Fraser listened to these words, a cry broke from her whitening lips.

"He confessed! What did he confess?" she asked, wildly. "He did not mean to do this—say he did not mean to do this, Nora Stewart, or I will strike you where you stand!"

But Jock Fraser caught the uplifted arm of the mad-dened woman.

"Hush, Jeanie! do not talk thus, and to Nora," he said. "I am sure Nora would mean nothing but kindness to Malcolm—you know that. But if the poor lad shot this woman by accident, it was foolish of him to go away."

"Jock, take Jeanie out of the room for a few minutes," said Nora, almost faintly, "and then you come back to me. I—I should rather see you alone."

"Very well. Come along, Jeanie, my dear; and then Nora and I will have a talk together, and see what it will be best to do," answered Jock Fraser, taking his wife's hand and leading her to the door. And Mrs. Fraser did not refuse to go; she looked half bewildered, and tottered as she went.

Her husband led her gently outside, and down the corridor from Nora's room. Half-way down the corridor there was a couch and Mrs. Fraser sank wearily down on this.

"Leave me here; but promise me, Jock"—and she seized his hand—"to tell me all she has got to say."

"Of course, my dear; and Jeanie," he whispered, bending over her, "pull yourself together a bit, for fear any of the servants come past here. For the lad's sake, don't let anyone see you are put out."

She nodded her head and sat there, still and cold, while Jock Fraser returned to Nora, who had been nerving herself to tell him the whole truth.

"Now, Nora," said Jock, after he had shut the door behind him, "let me hear it all, my dear. Whatever the lad has done, it is better that I should know."



So Nora told him, and Jock Fraser listened, in unmistakable emotion; and when he heard that his boy, the handsome youth of whom he had been so proud, had deliberately tried to shoot Biddulph, he groaned aloud, and covered his face with his hand.

"This is terrible," he said; "it will kill his mother!"

"But he will be safe. They will never find him now; he will be out of England to-night, before anything can be done."

"Safe!" repeated Jock Fraser, bitterly; "a hunted felon! And what are we much better," he added, "to let him go? I should rather have died—aye, a hundred deaths—than seen the old name dragged so low!"

"Oh, dear Jock, take comfort!" said Nora, whose own eyes were full of tears, laying her hand on her half-cousin's arm.

"Comfort! What comfort is there for us any more? Jeanie and I will never lift up our heads again."

And what could Nora say? To an honorable, upright man like Jock Fraser, this blow was, as he said, more bitter than death. But presently, with pitying tenderness, he remembered his wife.

"I'll get her home before I tell her," he muttered, "and before these fellows come to seek him. Nora Stewart"—and he rung her hand—"a broken-hearted man's blessing won't do you any good, I suppose, my dear, but still you have mine. Thank you for getting him away. It—it would have been worse for Jeanie if he had stayed!" and Jock Fraser put his hand over his face to hide his tears.

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## CHAPTER XX.

### THE BLOW FALLS.

The same morning, as the clock was striking twelve in the hall at Dunbaan, a ring sounded at the house-door, and when old Donald opened it there stood Sandy Hill, spruce, dapper, with a brown paper parcel under his arm, and a smile of satisfaction on his face.

"Mr. Biddulph at home?" he inquired, affably.

"Yes, sir."

"Take in my card, then, please—Mr. Sandford Hill. He expects me;" and, old Donald having complied with his



request, Mr. Biddulph received his card with a grim smile, and then looked at his own watch, which was one minute slow, therefore he thought Sandy was before his time.

"Sharp man of business," reflected Biddulph. "Show him in," he said; and a minute later Sandy, with a profound bow and a shuffle, was ushered in.

"Fine morning, sir," he said, "but seasonable. I'm up to time, I expect, Mr. Biddulph?"

"You don't allow the thief procrastination to steal it from you, then?" answered Biddulph, with a smile.

"No, Mr. Biddulph, I may candidly say I do not. Time means money gained or wasted, to my mind, and——"

"You like to gain it?" interrupted Biddulph, as Sandy paused a moment, remembering his errand at Dunbaan.

"I do, sir; it gives a man self-respect—confidence, I may say. A poor man—I mean one regularly down, you know—always inspires me with a wish to get out of his company somehow as quick as I can; I can't help it."

"A very natural inspiration," laughed Biddulph.

"It shows to me that he is a poor creature," continued Sandy, warming with his subject; "there's always a way for a fellow to get on if he has only the sense to find the right road."

"The world's mine oyster,'" quoted Biddulph.

"Well, sir, I don't know about oysters," replied Sandy, whose early education had been somewhat neglected; "oysters are rather out of my line—they are too expensive, that's the fact, and I never pamper the inward man. But I repeat, sir, a fellow can make his way if he uses his eyes."

"And his ears, too, sometimes, eh, Mr. Hill?"

Sandy burst into a giggle, and grinned all over.

"Very good, sir," he said—"quite *à propos*."

"Yes, it's very good," answered Biddulph, with pretended gravity, "and, as you say, quite to the point."

"You are a humorist, sir—a great deal of dry humor," said Sandy, flatteringly.

"I am glad you think so, though I have neglected both my eyes and my ears."

Sandy was not the least offended; he grinned even more delightedly than ever.

"You were born to money, sir," he said, "and that makes all the difference. I've had to find it as best I can, and therefore am obliged to use my faculties to the utmost."

"But you rather like the amateur detective business, don't you?"

"I like the *reward*, sir," answered Sandy, so promptly that Biddulph laughed aloud, and put his hand into his pocket and drew out his note-book.

"Your answer," he said, "is quite as you remarked before, Mr. Hill, *à propos*. Well, here is your check—you will find it all right, and I am very much obliged to you for having removed an ugly and unjust suspicion from my name."

Sandy rose and made his best bow, holding the check in his eager trembling hand.

"Mr. Biddulph—sir," he said, "I have only done my duty—an unpleasant duty, in one sense, sir, considering my connection with Mr. Alick Fraser, and the feelings of the family. But we mustn't consider these things, sir. I may say I look upon this almost as a public duty, the removal of an unjust suspicion from a gentleman of your property and means—yes, sir, *it is* a public duty," continued Sandy, waxing eloquent; "and the police, Mr. Biddulph, I consider a set of duffers."

"Duffers to you, at any rate, Mr. Hill."

Again Sandy bowed.

"I thank you, sir; and I repeat, Mr. Biddulph, if you should ever feel inclined to dabble in business, sir, shares or the like, if you honor me with your confidence, I'm your man. I am punctual, straightforward, and always have my weather eye open; therefore, if you have any spare cash, the amount of which you would like to *increase*, drop me a line, sir, and I will at once let you feel the pulse of the market."

"You are very good."

"It will be a pleasure to me, Mr. Biddulph; but I will send you my business card the moment I have fixed on my new offices. I mean to start on my own account *at once*;" and Sandy clutched his check still tighter.

"Pray send me your card."

"I will, sir; and now, Mr. Biddulph, if you will excuse me, I will wish you a very good-morning. And I shall, with your permission, proceed without delay to place these documents"—and he tapped his brown paper parcel—"in the hands of the county police."

"But have some lunch first, Mr. Hill," said Biddulph, who felt an unaccountable wish to delay Sandy's mission.

All the morning he had been thinking of poor Mrs.

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Fraser, and the terrible blow about to fall on a happy home ; and now, when it was creeping nearer, he would fain have put off the evil hour.

But Sandy was proof against all temptations.

"No, sir ; many thanks all the same, but my motto is, business first, and pleasure afterward. I shall, therefore, go at once, and catch the inspector when he comes in for his dinner at one o'clock. Good-morning, sir ; you shall hear from me soon again, and in the meanwhile, I remain your grateful and obedient servant, Sandford Hill ;" and with another bow Sandy vanished.

Biddulph looked after him with a sigh.

"Happy dog," he thought, "with a heart of stone enclosed in a hide of a rhinoceros. These are the fellows who swim clear ; no bumping up for them against rocks and shoals of passions and feelings. Yet there is something honest in his pure selfishness and open desire to make his way up in the world. His master, Alick Fraser, is just as hard and cold ; but he hides it better, or thinks he does. But I wish I could have spared all this to the genial Jock."

But the day did not close before the blow fell on the miserable household at Airdlinn. Jock Fraser had, with some difficulty, persuaded his wife to go home without again seeing Nora and without hearing any further details of the horrible truth. But when she did reach home she would not be refused, and at last Jock, in broken and faltering words, tried to make her understand.

But Mrs. Fraser would not believe it. She stood there with erect form and flashing eyes, fighting the battle for her absent son.

"Send for Rob Mackenzie," she said ; "let the boy come here, and see if he dare repeat this base lie before Malcolm's mother."

"My poor Jeanie, it's no use," answered Jock, with a groan ; "if Malcolm's hands were clear, why did he go away ? And, Jeanie, I haven't told you, for God knows I never distress you when I can help it ; but I've been uneasy about Malcolm ever since that woman was shot in the glen. I haven't liked the looks of the lad. I've had a sort of presentiment, I think, that he had something to do with it, for I knew that Rob and he were out on the hills that day."

"And what are you going to do ? Sit down and let a foul suspicion fall on him without trying to clear it up ?"

"My dear, best let us see what they do ; the longer this is kept quiet, the better it is for Malcolm now."

And before it was dark they knew at Airdlinn what "they" were going to do. Jock was sitting with bent head over the breakfast-room fire, and Mrs. Jock walking up and down in uncontrollable agitation in her bedroom, when a ring came to the house-door bell, which caused the hearts of both parents almost to stand still.

Then the house-maid came and told Jock that "some of the pollis are here," and wanted to speak to him ; and with blanched face he rose and went into the hall to face the accusers of his son.

The same inspector who had examined the footprints in the Glen of Balla, immediately after the woman's death had occurred there, now stood before Jock Fraser, and respectfully touched his helmet as he appeared.

"Vera sorry to ha' to come here on such an errand, Mr. Fraser," he said, in his broad Scotch accent, and with a genuine look of sorrow on his honest face ; "but fra information received, I'm bound to do it."

Then the agonized father had to hear again the same miserable story that he had listened to in the morning from Nora's lips. Sandy had lost no time and the police had lost no time ; and Tam Mackenzie, on pressure, had admitted the truth of Sandy's story.

But Rob Mackenzie was not to be found. Still, on the strength of Mr. Sandford Hill's information, and Tam Mackenzie's confirmation of the story, a warrant had been already issued for the arrest of Malcolm Fraser, and the police had arrived at Airdlinn to seek him.

Jock Fraser, on hearing this, behaved with considerable firmness.

"This is an extraordinary story, Mr. Andrews," he said, addressing the head constable ; "but my son Malcolm is not here to answer your charge. He left for London last night."

"Then, I suppose he got scent of this ?"

"That I cannot say ; but he is certainly not here," replied Jock Fraser.

The police consulted together for a few minutes, and then announced that they would be compelled to search the house.

"All right ; do your duty," answered Jock ; and he turned away, going straight to his wife's bedroom, who was standing in a state of almost distraction.

"Jeanie"—and he went and put his arms through hers—"be a brave woman now, for my sake and the poor lad's. The men are here."

"To take—Malcolm?" whispered the poor mother, with white lips.

"They can't take him, thanks to Nora Stewart, and I've put them on a wrong scent, the Lord forgive me! I have told them he started last night for London, and you must stick to the same story."

Mrs. Fraser gave a few gasping sighs, and held her husband's hand fast. The police found them thus, the husband and wife—they who had been together through long years of sunshine, standing together in the storm—and the head constable admitted afterward that he "nigh broke down at the sight."

But neither in the mother's bedroom nor anywhere in the long straggling corridors of the old irregular house did they find the young heir of Airdlinn. But they found his rifle, and his shooting shoes, which the head constable measured with a significant sigh, and then took possession of. All his belongings were lying about his room—his books, his letters, his pipes. Everything, indeed, bespoke of a secret and hasty flight; and such was the conclusion the police came to.

"He's been warned," they said to each other; "but ten to one he is hiding among the hills, with the lad Rob Mackenzie along with him. Ay, he'll be stealing home in the dusk." And for many days they watched the house at Airdlinn, but Malcolm never came; and Rob Mackenzie had also mysteriously disappeared.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE FIRST NEWS.

When Alick Fraser heard what had happened—heard from poor Jock's pallid lips that, through information given to the police by Sandy Hill, a warrant was out against Malcolm, his indignation knew no bounds.

"The ungrateful scoundrel!" he roared. "Why did he not come, then, with this story to me?"

"It was the reward Mr. Biddulph offered, I suppose tempted him," answered Jock, with a heavy sigh.

Then Alick cursed Mr. Biddulph and the reward and Sandy all in one breath.

"But I don't believe a word of it!" he added. "It's a concocted story—concocted between that villain Sandy Hill, who would do anything for money, and Biddulph. I have always believed Biddulph guilty, and always shall."

But Jock shook his head.

"It's no use trying to deceive ourselves, Alick," he said, sadly; "poor Malcolm confessed his guilt to Nora Stewart—but she's true as gold."

It was a terrible blow to Alick Fraser's vain, proud heart to hear these words. His family pride was very strong, and his conscience (which was not a tender one) smote him. He knew at least who, indirectly, had caused this heavy blow to fall on his brother's household, and he left Airdlinn, swearing to inflict condign punishment on the traitor Sandy Hill.

But before he went he had a word to say to his brother, which showed there was some good feeling left in this hard nature still.

"If Malcolm actually confessed to Nora Stewart," he said, "that he committed this mad act, he must never again set foot in Scotland. And he'll want money; I'm ready and willing, Jock, to provide him with funds, as I know you are not overburdened with wealth, so long as he stays away."

"Nora Stewart gave him a hundred pounds to go away with," answered the laird; "this, of course, I must repay."

"Don't bother your head about it—I'll pay the young lady; but if he's got a hundred pounds, that's plenty for him at present. However, I'll see Nora Stewart, and will arrange with her how money has to be sent to him. His secret is safe with her, unless she tells that Biddulph."

"But for Biddulph, poor Malcolm would have been arrested now," answered Jock, with a heavy sigh; and Alick Fraser, after having flung a few more oaths at Sandy's head, parted with his brother, and returned to Inismore, determined, as he mentally expressed it, "to thrash that cur within an inch of his life."

He grasped a heavy dog-whip as he strode through his grand new hall, and inquired in a voice of thunder where Mr. Hill was, and desired him to be sent to him at once. But Sandy had been too sharp for him. Instead of Mr. Hill himself, a note from Mr. Hill was presently brought

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to the angry master of the house, who was standing ready with his whip in his strong hand.

"DEAR SIR" (Alick read, in Sandy's neat, cramped hand),

"Important business has recalled me to Glasgow this evening, thus preventing my being able to await your return. I shall communicate by letter in a few days, and I remain, dear sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"SANDFORD HILL."

Alick Fraser waxed more furious over this letter than can well be told. He swore he would carry his dog-whip to Glasgow the next morning; but by the next morning wiser thoughts prevailed. Sandy, he reflected, might bring him up for assault, and, as already one member of the family was under the ban of the law, it was as well that he should remain quiet. And bad news, too, came from Airdlinn, both Mrs. Jock and Minnie Fraser being quite prostrated with grief.

The most intense anxiety, indeed, prevailed in this miserable household during the next few days, and also at Rossmore. But the police had quite taken up the idea that Malcolm Fraser was hiding among the hills, and Alfred (Nora's young footman) had proved himself to be entirely trustworthy. True, Nora had added a substantial sum to the twenty pounds Biddulph had given him; but he really deserved this, for neither the wiles nor the frowns of Palmer had drawn a single word from him, and Palmer began to respect him accordingly, and treated him with much more deference than she had formerly done.

The servants at Airdlinn were devoted to their young master, and one and all declared they knew nothing of his disappearance. They did not, of course, know where he had gone, and they also inclined to the belief that Malcolm was not far away. Tam Mackenzie, too, steadily denied that he knew anything whatever of his brother Rob's whereabouts. But three days after Malcolm's flight, a letter reached Nora's hand, which filled her heart with thankfulness, and she at once sent Alfred to request Jock Fraser to come to her immediately.

It was from Malcolm—a few guarded lines, posted on the eve of his embarkation for America. It was unsigned, but Nora knew the bold, careless handwriting very well;

and Jock Fraser too knew it, and his eyes grew dim as he read the lines his boy's hand had traced, and the message "to the dear ones at home, of whom I am always thinking."

Jock carried these precious words away with him, knowing they would do more good to the poor broken-hearted mother than all the doctor's "physics." Ah, what tears were shed over them, what fond prayers breathed! Malcolm had been the pride and darling of Mrs. Fraser's heart from the time he had stretched his lusty baby limbs in his little cot, until he had grown up to his handsome, imperious young manhood. "There is none like him," she had often said to her husband, gazing proudly at the straight features and blue eyes of this darling son.

And now it was very piteous, but at least he was comparatively *safe*. And these two, father and mother, knelt down together, side by side, and thanked God for this. Over that great waste of waters their prayers could still follow him, and their love might guard him, though their eyes saw him no more.

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### A SNOW-STORM.

Biddulph also breathed a sigh of relief when he heard from Nora's lips that her young cousin was safely out of England, and that the police were certainly at fault. He heard this on the afternoon of the same day that Nora had sent for Jock Fraser to tell him the news. Biddulph had not seen Nora since the night of Malcolm's flight, and they met with some embarrassment. Nora was conscious that, in the excitement of waiting for poor Malcolm, she had looked and talked to Biddulph as she had never done before. And he also felt that he had almost spoken of the love which they both knew filled their hearts.

It is a strange thing, this knowledge—this silent and mysterious binding together of two souls; for true love is this, though what the world mostly calls love is not. They met, then, these two, with a brief fluttering hand-clasp, a blush, and a little nervousness, which the woman betrayed the least. Nora began eagerly to tell Biddulph

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about Malcolm—to tell him how she had sent for Jock Fraser and all about the mother's anguish and despair.

"Thank God, the boy is safe, then," said Biddulph; "for I have never been able to get poor Mrs. Fraser out of my mind."

"It was really too terrible to see her. And Jock said, when the police went to Airdlinn he should never forget it. But she will be happier now, thanks to you."

"I only wish I could make her happy. I did not like the grim suspicion which Malcolm Fraser's mad act had cast upon my name, but yet I declare, when my good friend the doctor told me of the piteous condition of mind and body to which this poor woman was brought, I thought it almost a pity that the blame did not rest upon me still, for I have no mother."

"Do not say so. It was shameful that it ever fell on you," answered Nora, quickly.

"It must be unjust, at least; but I shall be honest, and I will not say that I would recall that poor woman again to life now, even if I could; but I will say I never would have raised my hand to injure her."

"Of course not. And yet it was a heavy burden."

"A burden almost too heavy to be borne; a burden that grew and grew. But why speak of it? It has slipped away from me, and still left me—*hope*."

He took a step nearer to her as he uttered that last word, and his eyes were fixed upon the pale, lovely face, which possessed for him the subtle charm, the wondrous beauty, which he only found in *her*. And as he stood, over her fair cheeks crept another tint, and her white eyelids drooped, and her sweet breath rose and fell with quickened throb.

"Nora, you know what that hope is," he began, his deep voice broken with the strong feelings surging through his heart; "you know——"

Nora was not destined at this moment to know, or, at least, to be told. The room-door opened, and the angular, black-robed form of Mrs. Conway-Hope appeared, and Biddulph naturally took a step backward in consequence.

"Ah, Mr. Biddulph, how are you?" said Mrs. Conway-Hope, holding out her hand, and probably quite unconscious that she was in the way. Her fate in life, indeed, appeared to be to say things that were not needed, and to appear where she was not wanted. Some people are like

this, and a cross-grained sprite must certainly have attended at the birth of Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"We have not seen you since you came that night, about this dreadful affair of young Malcolm Fraser," continued the lady. "It is truly terrible, isn't it? And I am very sorry for poor Mrs. Fraser, though I must say she was ridiculously proud of this young man, whom I confess I always thought very ill-bred, though I had no idea, of course, what a dreadful character he really was."

"I think, Cousin Margaret, we need not talk of the poor boy's faults now," said Nora.

"But, my dear Nora, the whole countryside is talking of them! Where do you suppose he has escaped to, Mr. Biddulph?"

"To some of the holes and corners among the hills, I dare say, Mrs. Conway-Hope," answered Biddulph, with an unmoved countenance. "You have heard, I suppose, Miss Stewart, that the lad Rob Mackenzie, whom my long-eared friend, Mr. Sandford Hill, overheard relating this unhappy story to his brother, has also vanished?"

"Yes, I have heard this," answered Nora. "The faithful boy is, no doubt, determined that his evidence shall not be given against his master."

"But is this right, my dear Nora?" asked Mrs. Conway-Hope, pensively. "I think faithfulness should cease with *respect*. What do you think, Mr. Biddulph?"

"I have a fellow-feeling for erring sinners, Mrs. Conway-Hope, and, therefore, I think it *should not*."

"And I think," said Nora, lifting her head with kindling eyes, "that faithfulness is only shown when the dark clouds gather and the storm is near."

"And you, too," said Biddulph, looking at her, "would have gone out as this lad has done, to live a hunted life amid the rocks and caves, rather than swear away a beloved life. I can understand it, and Rob's dog-like fidelity moves my heart—so much so, that I mean to-day to seek out the brother, and tell him that when Rob reappears I shall be glad to take him into my service. I should like an honest-hearted fellow such as this always by my side."

"He will probably live to cheat you, then," smiled Mrs. Conway-Hope. "I have invariably found that if you trust a person of this class too much, they always do."

"Then I shall be cheated," answered Biddulph, rising, and holding out his hand to Nora. "May I soon see you again, Miss Stewart?"

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"You can see me when you like to come," answered Nora ; and again that lovely tint stole to her cheeks.

"Good-by, then. I shall call and tell you how I get on with Mr. Tam Mackenzie."

"He certainly is a good-looking man," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, after he was gone, going on vigorously with her knitting. "But did you notice, Nora dear, that he spoke with a certain latitude, a levity rather, about sin? I fear he may have had some very good reason for that concealed marriage of his——"

"Cousin Margaret, would you very kindly reach me my book? I really do not wish to discuss Mr. Biddulph," interrupted Nora ; and with a sigh Mrs. Conway-Hope rose to comply with her request, and then again pensively subsided into her knitting, though occasionally giving a slight groan of disapproval as some unpleasing thought crossed her mind.

In the meanwhile Biddulph was wending his way through a thick mist to the little hovel, which Sandy Hill had not unaptly described "as very little better than a heap of stones," where the lads Tam and Rob Mackenzie dwelt.

It stood a little off the roadway, and Biddulph easily found it, and found, too, their elder brother, Tam, and the ancient smoke-dried woman, their granddame, who was crouching over the log fire.

The smoke was so thick in the cottage that Biddulph did not care to enter it, but beckoned the young woodman to come outside to speak to him, and then began to question him about Rob.

But Tam showed an extraordinary reticence when speaking about his absent brother. He knew nothing about it, he declared. Rob might be with the young laird, or he might not. Tam pretended to be totally ignorant on the subject ; but Biddulph, acute and observing, plainly saw the lad was keeping something back.

"He's a fine fellow, this young brother of yours," Biddulph said, before taking his leave, slipping a couple of sovereigns into Tam's not unwilling hand. "When he casts up again, send him over to Dunbaan, and I will take him into my employment."

Tam expressed great gratitude ; and then Biddulph went up to the blear-eyed, shrunken, old creature inside, who was bending over the smoking logs.

He spoke to her, but her sense of hearing was totally

gone; and it was not until he put some silver into her claw-like hand that the slightest change of expression passed over her face. But when she saw the money, her lips began to move and mutter; even on the verge of the grave its touch could rouse her still.

She tried to rise, and mumbled a blessing in words Biddulph could not in the least understand. For a moment or two he stood looking at her, this wreck of poor humanity, and then turned away, wondering if she had once been young and comely like the grandchildren she had reared.

As he walked down to the loch, after parting with Tam Mackenzie, Biddulph found the weather had changed. The wind had veered round, and the loch was dark and troubled, and the thick haze was lifting. Down the gray hills the gray mist rolled away like smoke-clouds, and the outlines, lately so indistinct, stood out sharp and clear. But the sky was wild and unsettled, and the boatmen prophesied a storm, and made haste to cross the blackening water; which momentarily became more rough.

And before nightfall the wind rose, and began howling round the house at Dunbaan, and snow and sleet came dashing against the window-panes. Biddulph grew restless, and went and looked out again and again, watching the twinkling lights on the lofty headland of Rossmore. And Nora's fair face seemed before him, with the rose-blush on her cheeks, and the soft light shining in her eyes as he had seen it to-day. Should he ask her at once? Make a sweet uncertainty into a yet sweeter bond? Then he pictured her sitting by his hearth, and sharing with him his daily life, and smiling at him with her bright smile.

"There can be no change with us," he thought, fondly, "for I have given her all I have to give."

"Heart of my heart, were it more,  
More would be laid at your feet."

He repeated these lines again and again, for their melody suited this mood, and their swinging rhythm had caught his ear. Outside the tempest blew and the snow drifted, but the man's heart was warm and full of love. He was free, he was happy, and the dark shadows of his life had rolled away.

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without, a chill thought suddenly crossed his mind. Where was the faithful lad Rob Mackenzie during this wild storm? Safe in the hovel by the hill-side, Biddulph hoped, as he shrewdly fancied that Tam Mackenzie was very well acquainted with his brother's whereabouts. Still the idea made him uneasy, and twice during the night, when he awoke, he remembered the young gillie.

And the next morning the snow lay deep; the lofty mountain range across the loch white, and each individual holly leaf in the avenue, each blade of grass on the lawn, white, too. It lay in soft undulating masses on the overhanging crags, and in the clefts and crevices, and on the storm-tossed firs. A cold chill world; only the water dark, and the sky gray; all else wrapped in the white pall, and a great stillness above and around.

And it snowed all day. Not drifting, nor wind-blown now, but the air thick with the floating feather-like fall, which came softly and gently, wrapping many a flock on the hills in its chill and death-embrace. And as the darkness gathered in for night, Biddulph, who was standing smoking at the house door, saw the lad Tam Mackenzie coming quickly up the avenue, and beckoned him to approach him.

The young fellow was breathless, and his face was white and scared.

"Do you want anything, my lad?" asked Biddulph, kindly.

"Weel, sir, I'se made bold to cam'," answered Tam, touching his cap, "'cause puir Rob, the lad ye spiered for yester, is out on the hills, and I canna' find him."

"What! Out in all the snow last night?" asked Biddulph.

"Ay, puir fellow, he wad gane; an' he made me take a solemn promise, sir, I wad ne'er tell where he lay hid. But I hae been thar now, and I hae shouted, and shouted, and get na answer, an' I'se sare afraid."

"Then you knew where he was? He went, I suppose, to prevent giving evidence against Malcolm Fraser?"

Upon this Tam confessed the truth, after, however, praying Biddulph not to betray "puir Rob." It seemed that the police had come upon Tam Mackenzie in the woods at Inismore, shortly after Sandy Hill had lodged the information against Malcolm Fraser with the constables, and they had told Tam everything was known, and that he might as well make a clean breast of it. Tam fell into

the snare, and admitted the truth of Sandy's story; but when Rob came home and heard this, he turned deadly pale, and swore his words should never be turned against "the young laird."

"He snatched his gun fra' the wa', sir," continued Tam, tears gathering in his honest gray eyes, "an' the young laird's bit pictur', which ay hung thar', an' said he'd be aff to the hills wi'out bite or sup. But I prayed him sare to tak' some wi' him, and tell me whar' he wad be. An' he did; an' I'se been thar' night on night, till the snaw cam' last night, an' I couldna' gan'. An' now, sir,"—and poor Tam put on a pleading air—"I'se made bold to cam' to ask ye to lend me the hound they say ye ha', which comes fra' whar' they seek men in the snaw, to seek puir Rob."

"You mean the St. Bernard. Of course you shall have the dog; but you cannot go to-night."

Tam wriggled his slim form about in evident distress, and pulled his cap off his rough brown head and looked appealingly in Biddulph's face.

"I couldna' rest, sir," he said at length, "an' think on puir Rob perishing in the snaw."

Biddulph looked up to the sky, and in the west, where the sun was sinking, hidden by the dense mass of snow-laden clouds, suddenly a pale blue rift had appeared.

It lay, a streak of light between two dark gloomy lines; but still it told the storm was breaking, and, after a moment's consideration, Biddulph made up his mind.

"I will go with you," he said. "Glen, the St. Bernard, we .ld not probably follow you, and might not obey you; and I too cannot bear to think of poor Rob without help among the snow."

Tam could scarcely find words to express his gratitude. He meant to say Biddulph's kindness was too much; that "yer honor's life" was too valuable to be risked for "the like o' them."

"Come into the house," said Biddulph, quietly, "and have some supper and some whiskey before we start. I shall have something, too; and we must take food and brandy. When we get to the other side of the loch, how far have we to go?"

Rob had taken shelter, by Tam's account, in a deep ravine, near the head of the loch, with which both he and Rob had been acquainted since their boyhood. Hither Tam had stolen night after night, when darkness had set

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in, to carry food and whiskey to his young brother. There was little shelter but the shelving rocks in the wild spot where Rob lay hid, Tam told Biddulph. And, to his dismay, on going this evening through the deep snow to their usual tryst, he could see nor hear nothing of Rob, though he had shouted himself hoarse to attract his attention. Then he had remembered Rob telling him of a dog Mr. Biddulph had, which he had bought from some good monks, who keep this breed especially to track men lost in the snow. And Tam had found courage, in his grief and distress, to go to Biddulph to ask for the loan of the St. Bernard to seek poor Rob.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### A FAITHFUL HEART.

Biddulph never forgot the night when he started out amid the snow, with Tam Mackenzie by his side, to seek the young gillie. The scene was weird and wondrous in the extreme ; for that rift in the sky had spread and spread, and, as they crossed the dark water, the moon suddenly shone out amid the heavy clouds, and lit up the white world around them with indescribable beauty.

It was a wild and dangerous journey, he knew well. The deep defiles among the mountain range would probably be blocked with snow, and a constant danger would exist, too, of a heavy fall of snow from the shelving rocks and precipices suddenly descending on them. But Biddulph was strong and courageous, and had been deeply moved by the story of the lad's faithfulness ; and Tam Mackenzie thought only of rescuing his young brother.

They took with them the St. Bernard dog—Glen, a noble creature, rich, ruddy brown in color, with the broad breast and splendid head which denotes his race. He was of pure breed, Biddulph having purchased him from a friend, who had actually bought him of the good monks at the monastery from which he derived his name. Biddulph had thought of taking some of the deer hounds and keepers, but Tam begged him not, as he was sure Rob would not be found, if he thought his hiding-place were publicly known.

They crossed the loch, then, alone, these two, in the

glinting moonlight, and, avoiding passing through the straggling village of Balla, soon came to the foot of the vast mountain range beyond it, at the commencement of which is the rugged and romantic pass known as the Glen of Balla, haunted for Biddulph with such grim and ghastly thoughts.

As they entered it, he involuntarily shuddered. The gloom here was great, in spite of the moonlight and the white snow, for the towering crags on either side left but a narrow strip of sky-line visible. Biddulph held the St. Bernard in leash, and as they neared the fatal spot where the woman had shrieked and died, the creature suddenly stopped, lifted its noble head, and emitted a weird and portentous howl, which ran echoing through the glen, and produced on Biddulph's heart a strange startled feeling, almost of dread.

He was glad when they quitted the dark defile, and emerged again in the silver moonlight shining on the white hills. The scene was now of extraordinary beauty, and as they kept skirting the loch, close at the foot of the mountain range, the snowy peaks glittering in the cold rays of light, the effect was so marvellous that Biddulph paused more than once, wondering and amazed.

"We'll gan' in thar'," said Tam, presently, now pointing to another pass among the mountains; and as they entered this, a fall of snow fell with a shuddering sound from one of the cliffs just in front of them, and completely blocked their path.

To plunge through this took both time and strength, and their way now became most toilsome and dangerous. Again and again snow-falls occurred as they wended among the hills, and struggled through the deep drifts, and both Biddulph and Tam became exceedingly exhausted. At last Tam made the welcome announcement that they were approaching the spot where Rob and he kept their tryst.

"It's na far to gan now," he said; and it was not. They had reached a little secluded glen, where in the summer time the tangled copse-wood and bushes grew thick, affording a splendid shelter for the black game, which made it a favorite resort. Now all was cold, white, and desolate, and no answer came when Tam Mackenzie once more shouted the name of his absent brother.

"Thar's a bit supper I hac' left," said Tam, pointing to some food on a stone, from which he had brushed the snow on his first visit this evening to the glen. At this

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moment the moonlight was shining with remarkable brilliancy, and every object was as plainly visible as by daylight; and they saw that the food was untouched, and that Rob had at least not visited the spot since Tam had been there.

In one part of the glen, a projecting shelving crag formed a sort of cave, and Tam told Biddulph that Rob said he sometimes slept there. But a deep drift of snow had blown into this rocky cavity; and it suddenly struck Biddulph that poor Rob might be sleeping there now, in the still sleep of death.

He led the St. Bernard near the spot, and then unleashed him. The sagacious creature seemed to understand what he was expected to do; stood still, sniffed the frosty air; grew restless, gave a low, short, inquiring bark, and then plunged into the snow-drift.

There he again stood still for a moment or two, and then commenced scratching with his fore-paws, and barking, in a state of evident excitement. Biddulph and Tam now followed him into the frozen mass, the drift reaching nearly to their waists; and still the St. Bernard threw up the snow with impatient paws, and seemed each instant to grow more eager.

"Ah, poor fellow, I fear he has found him!" exclaimed Biddulph.

Tam, too, gave a cry, and scrambled to the place where the dog stood barking and scratching, and began with trembling hands to help to push away the snow. It did not take very long. Beneath that white pall the young gillie lay sleeping, with a smile on his handsome boyish lips, and a look of unutterable peace in his half-closed eyes.

"Rob! Rob!" cried Tam, lifting up his brother's head; "wake up, mon, wake up!"

But the still white face showed no signs of waking, and the deaf ears heard not.

"Let us carry him out of this," said Biddulph, "and rub his hands and feet with whiskey, and try to get some between his lips; he may come round."

So they carried him out of the snow-drift, and laid him on a plaid, and pulled off his boots and rubbed his frozen feet with spirit, and his stiff hands. One of these stiff cold hands was clutched round a little common frame, and when Tam turned the palm to the light, he cried out it was the "young laird's" picture that Rob held so fast.

"Ay, he liked him too weel," said poor Tam, who was much affected; "he's gi'en his life for his!"

They tried a long time to recover him, but it was all in vain. There lay Rob Mackenzie cold and dead; and Biddulph soon saw that this was so. He had "given his life for his friend." And as the moonlight fell on his white face, it seemed to Biddulph that the boy smiled, as if proud to have died for the sake of his dear master.

"I'm afraid it's no use, my poor lad," said Biddulph at last, as Tam was vainly endeavoring to bring some warmth into the chill hands. "The question is, what shall we do? We cannot leave him here alone."

"I'll na leave him," answered Tam, sturdily.

"Are you strong enough to go back to Balla, and get the doctor and men to carry him home?" asked Biddulph. "I would go, but I should lose my way; you know it. Will you try?"

"He wadna' cam'."

"Oh yes, he will. There may be a chance—not a strong one—that he could bring Rob round. We can do nothing more; and if we stay here all night, we too may perish in the snow."

They finally settled this: Biddulph was to remain to watch the young gillie, and Tam to make his way back through the snow to Balla. Biddulph wrote a note to Dr. Alexander in pencil, entreating him to come at once, and empowering him to offer any reward he chose to give, to induce men to accompany him, for the purpose of carrying back poor Rob.

"I fear it is too late," he added, "but we must try."

He gave this letter to Tam, who started off as fast as his legs could carry him, and Biddulph was left alone in this white, silent, lonely place, with the dead boy lying at his feet. It was a strange position, and strange fancies began to creep into Biddulph's brain, and weird and ghostly stories, that he had heard in his youth, came back to his mind. He began to walk up and down, but still the glen seemed haunted to him, and gnome-like and fantastic shapes appeared to his excited imagination to be creeping nearer to him over the white glistening snow. One tall, dark shadow, he could have sworn, stealthily approached. But a moment later this glided away, and the antlered head told his reason that this doubtless was some deer straying in search of food from the neighboring forest.

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lying there with his unchanging smile. He stooped down and raised the hand which still held the photograph of Malcolm Fraser in its rigid clasp, and laid it on the brave lad's breast. And as he did this, the dog Glen, which had been moving restlessly about, went up and licked the poor boy's hands, and then—'tis sad, but true, to write human-like—he turned his attention to what the dead had left behind him, and began inspecting with evident interest the food which Tam had brought for his young brother, who now had no further need of it.

And Biddulph did not rebuke him. Why should the poor brute not have his supper, he thought, after his hard night's work? So Glen ate cold rabbit with relish, and then curled himself up and fell asleep on the plaid beside Rob Mackenzie's still form, occasionally, however, rousing himself to look at his master, and once more lick the dead gillie's cold hand.

"Would the time never pass?" Biddulph thought. Two hours had dragged slowly away since Tam had left him, and the sky was becoming overcast, and there was no token of his return. Then small snow began to fall, and Biddulph knew that, if the storm commenced in earnest, the mountain passes would soon become untrackable. It was a gloomy prospect enough, but there was nothing to be done but to wait. And presently he began to think of Nora Stewart, and to wonder what she would feel if she knew he was standing far away on the snow-clad hills.

A moment later Glen sprang to his feet with a sharp bark. His acute ears had caught the sound of distant voices, and, with a great sense of relief, Biddulph also soon heard them. He shouted loudly, and he was answered. Help had come then, and five minutes later, the doctor, Tam Mackenzie, and four men with lanterns, made their appearance in the glen; Tam running first up to poor Rob's body, and kneeling down beside it.

"Ha' he stirred, sir?" he asked.

"No," answered Biddulph, sadly; and the men gathered round the living and dead brother with many expressions of feeling and sympathy.

But the doctor, after warmly grasping Biddulph's hand, bade them stand back, and, kneeling down, felt the young gillie's stilled pulse, and laid his head over his heart. There was no beat—he was dead, and in a moment the doctor saw this.

"He is gane fra' our poor knowledge," he said, solemnly. "Don't greet, Tam, my lad," he added, laying his hand kindly on Tam's shoulder, who seemed quite broken down with grief; "yer brother has died a noble death; may we a' meet it as he has done!" And the doctor rose to his feet, passing his own hand as he did so roughly over his face to hide his tears.

There was nothing further to be done then but to carry the dead home, and the men had brought with them the means of doing this, and the sad procession soon started on the perilous journey through the snow. With great difficulty and toil at last they reached the village of Balla; and when the question rose where poor Rob's body was to be taken, Biddulph at once stepped forward.

"Carry him to my house," he said; "let my roof cover, for a few nights at least, this faithful heart."

And they carried him across the dark water to the house at Dunbaan, and there he lay in state. Such state as is not given by velvet drapery, nor any funereal garniture. He lay decked with something that money cannot buy—the poor boy had given his life rather than say a word to betray his young master, and women came and wept, and strong men sighed, by the flower-covered bier, where he slept in his unwaking slumber.

And there was one visitor came whose own heart was sore and broken down with grief. Yet when Mrs. Jock heard the sad story of Rob's death, she insisted upon paying this last respect to the youth who had been so faithful to her son.

Long she stood there, looking at the handsome boyish features; and then she bent down and kissed his cold brow.

"Good by, my lad," she whispered, and her tears fell fast. "I will tell my Malcolm how well you loved him." And the sweet smile on the dead face seemed to grow sweeter still.

They buried him two days later, in the little kirk-yard at Balla, and Jock Fraser, Biddulph, and Dr. Alexander followed him to the grave. It was a simple ceremony, but very touching, for it was known that lying on the dead lad's breast still was the portrait of Malcolm Fraser, to whom he had been so true; and outside the plain oak coffin were beautiful wreaths of white flowers, one sent by Mrs. Jock, and the other by Nora Stewart.

And it was by the side of the young gillie's grave that

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Jock Fraser first held out his hand again in token of friendship to the man whose acquaintance had really cost them all so much. They were turning to leave it, when honest Jock held out his black-gloved hand to Biddulph, and said, with some suppressed emotion :

"I have not seen you yet to thank you, Mr. Biddulph, for a great service."

Biddulph warmly grasped the hand extended to him.

"It was no service. I cannot tell you how intensely painful all this has been to me, on your account and Mrs. Fraser's."

"It's been hard on the mother," answered Jock Fraser, with twitching lips.

"When Mrs. Fraser honored my poor house by calling two days ago, to look once more on yon poor boy's face"—and Biddulph pointed to the still open grave—"I did not like to intrude on her. I felt she would not, perhaps, care to see me."

"Jeanie quite understood your motive; but she too desires to thank you. It's a sad house to ask you to come to, but still——"

"I thank you very much; I certainly shall call."

And once more they shook hands, and then Jock turned away; and people said, as they looked after him, that the poor laird had grown suddenly older, and that he stooped, and that his kind eyes had ceased to smile.

As Biddulph was leaving the kirk-yard, the doctor laid his big hand on his shoulder.

"Weel," he said, "yer not going to leave this side o' the water, are ye, without calling on the young leedy at Rossmore?"

"I should like to call, but——"

"I fancy, maybe, she'd like to see ye. And I'm sare grieved to tell ye," added the doctor, with a dry smile, "that Mrs. Conway-Hope is laid up wi' a bad attack of rheumatism, and cannot leave her bed."

"In that case," said Biddulph, in a changed and lively tone, "I shall certainly call on Miss Stewart; but really that old woman——"

"She's a bit trying, but she'll na trouble ye to-day; and now good-day to ye." And the doctor nodded and went his way, and Biddulph soon found himself ringing at the house-door bell at Rossmore.

It was opened by Alfred, who smiled a welcome

Yes, Miss Stewart was at home, he told Biddulph, and

had given orders that if Mr. Biddulph called he was to be admitted.

And not many moments later Biddulph was holding Nora's hand fast clasped in his.

"You have come," she said, quickly. "I thought you had forgotten me."

"And I thought you knew that never could be," he answered, looking into her dark eyes.

"I have heard, of course," faltered Nora, "of your great goodness, your bravery, your danger, in trying to rescue that poor boy——"

"There was no goodness about it, though perhaps some danger. Shall I tell you what I thought of when I stood alone among the white hills?"

"Yes, tell me."

"I was wondering, if the snow came down and I was buried there, if—you would regret me."

"You—you know I should——"

"But how much, Nora? As a woman regrets a passing friend, or a man she loves?"

She made no answer in words. She looked up for a moment into his face, and Biddulph bent down and caught both her hands.

"Am I so happy?" he said, passionately. "Has the one bright hope of my life come true?"

"If you mean that I care for you—yes."

She whispered the last word, but he heard it, and, sitting down beside her, drew her head upon his breast and kissed her sweet lips.

"I will try to be worthy of you," he said; "nothing pulls a man up like the love of a good woman. Say again, Nora, that you care for me—that you love me."

"Well, I do say it;" and she smiled.

"And nothing shall part us?"

"Nothing; I promise it."

"Then I have got something to live for at last. You don't know how I love you, dear; how my life is wrapped up in yours. I could not bear to live, Nora, if anything were to part us now."

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

## AN ENGAGEMENT.

Two hours later Nora, who could move about the house now, though she was still lame, went up to Mrs. Conway-Hope's room, with a flush on her cheek, and a bright light in her lovely dark eyes.

That lady was feeling aggrieved. When five o'clock came, and no five-o'clock tea, she had rung her bell and inquired if there were any visitors in the drawing-room.

She was told by Palmer that Mr. Biddulph was there, and she sighed, and requested Palmer, when tea was taken upstairs, to bring her a cup. But six o'clock came and still no tea, and Mrs. Conway-Hope's patience was exhausted. She rang again, and Palmer answered her summons.

"Has Miss Stewart not had her tea yet?" she inquired severely.

"No, madam," answered Palmer, mincingly; "Miss Stewart has not rung for it, and Alfred thought he had better not take it up until she did, as Mr. Biddulph is there."

"Hum! Well, bring me some, please, for I can wait no longer."

So she got her tea; but it was seven o'clock before Nora made her appearance in Mrs. Conway-Hope's bedroom, looking so bright and fair that "Cousin Margaret" secretly disapproved of her appearance.

"Well, dear Nora," she said, "I hear you have had Mr. Biddulph."

"Yes, Cousin Margaret," answered Nora, smiling; "and I hope you are feeling better, and that Palmer has been attentive to you?"

"I rang for tea twice, but it seems you have not had it in the drawing-room?"

"No;" and Nora laughed. She had, in truth, forgotten all about it; but she added, half demurely, a moment later, "I don't think Mr. Biddulph cares for tea."

"Hum! You seem to have had a long conversation together."

"And I have come to tell you what it was about," said

Nora, with a charming smile and a deeper blush. "Cousin Margaret, I am engaged to Mr. Biddulph."

Mrs. Conway-Hope emitted something between a groan and a sigh.

"Well, my dear," she said, "I *hope* it is for the best."

"I have no fear," answered Nora, with some pride, lifting up her shapely head; I am *sure* it is for the best."

Again Mrs. Conway-Hope sighed.

"I trust so, my dear—trust so for your sake; but I cannot help having *doubts*."

"There is nothing to have doubts about. Mr. Biddulph knows his own mind, and I know mine. From the first time I saw him I liked him, even when——"

"He was really a married man, you know, Nora dear."

"Well, he is not a married man now, at all events."

"No, but still that was a sad story, and I cannot—I admit I cannot, dear—think that Mr. Biddulph behaved as he should have done. He should have announced, when he came here, that he was married, and thus saved many disagreeable complications."

"It was a very unlikely announcement for a man to make, I think. But you don't know all the story, Cousin Margaret. He was tricked into this wretched marriage."

"I thank Heaven I know very little of such stories. Of course, when I thought that unhappy person met her death through his hand, I felt it was my duty, as you know, Nora dear, to—to protest, as it were, against you continuing your acquaintance with him. This did not please you, I know; but still I did my duty. Now it is different. We know who did this dreadful deed. I declare I shudder when I think how often that wretched young man, Malcolm Fraser, has dined under this roof. I pity his mother; Mrs. Fraser is no favorite of mine, but *still* I pity her—such disgrace. And Minnie's chances of marriage completely over; and I actually did hear that Mrs. Fraser was absurd enough to suppose that Lord Glendoyne *really* meant something."

"He paid her a great deal of attention at all events."

"Oh, my dear, what are attentions when girls have no money? Now, when girls have it is different; for instance, it is different in your case, as you have a good fortune, and naturally men think of this. Oh, of course they do; all girls with money have many proposals."

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"Well, Mr. Biddulph, at all events, cannot be accused of mercenary ideas, for he is rich."

"But still, dear Nora, you are a good match for him. Your fortune and his will make a very fine income. I do not say for a moment he thinks only of this. Of course not, but still it is a *consideration*, and men like a little money with their wives; and, I repeat, girls with money have always many offers."

Nora was too happy to be angry, but still she did not like it. Pleasant words are like the sunshine, and gladden each human heart. Mrs. Conway-Hope was a perpetual cloud, and Nora Stewart, as she stood looking at her, reflected with pleasure that she was not likely often to be a visitor in Mr. Biddulph's house.

"And have you made any arrangements for the future?" presently inquired Mrs. Conway-Hope. "Shall you live here, or at Dunbaan?"

"I shall live in my husband's house, of course," answered Nora, a little indignantly.

"That will be very nice. Then you will require some one to live here. In that case, Nora, my dear, I shall be happy to do so, and take care of the place for you. We never can tell in this world what will happen; you may wish some day to return."

"I can make no arrangements without consulting Mr. Biddulph. It is too soon, in fact, to talk of these things. I have told you of my engagement, because, as you are in the house, and my father's cousin——"

"My dear Nora," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, rising and pressing her gray-tinted face and blue-tinted lips against Nora's lovely cheeks, "I shall *pray* that you may be happy. If troubles come, you know that you have almost a mother in me—though my age is not great—but still you know you have one in whom you can confide and *trust*. I shall try to like Mr. Biddulph for *your* sake. He is good-looking, at all events, though I do not quite like his expression at times; it is too cynical—as if he had seen and gone through so much. But then, we *know* that he has done this, and therefore we must expect a little bitterness, a little irritability at times."

"What will you have for dinner?" said Nora, rather abruptly, anxious to put a stop to the discussion of Mr. Biddulph's little failings. "And, Cousin Margaret, as I am going to marry Mr. Biddulph, I should rather you did not talk of him in this way any more."

"In which way? I do not understand. Have I said anything you did not like?"

Nora gave a little laugh, a little shrug, and went away; and Mrs. Conway-Hope ate her solitary dinner with appetite and yet sadness. She did not like Mr. Biddulph. She had an instinctive knowledge that those gray eyes of his looked out at her from their dark lashes with no little scorn. She was his pet aversion, in fact, and he could hardly school himself to be civil to her.

"I have a presentiment," she told herself, as she helped herself a second time to grouse, of which she was fond, "that this marriage will end unhappily. Nora has made a fool of herself about this man ever since she knew him; she has run after him, in fact—I call it indelicately; and she came up to-night looking quite delighted because he had proposed. Few women would, I think, have taken him under the circumstances. Well, we shall see how it turns out; I hope, poor dear, well, but in my opinion it is a sad risk."

If such were Mrs. Conway-Hope's thoughts, Nora's were very different. Shall we look one moment at her, when all the house was still, and night had spread its sable wings over the world? A fair woman, sitting pensively, with her dark hair unbound, thinking of the great joy that had come to her heart. He loved her, then, this man, who seemed to her as a king among his fellows. Nora Stewart had had many lovers—some, no doubt, for the sake of the good income Mrs. Conway-Hope had remarked on—but no one had ever touched her heart until James Biddulph had looked at her, had understood her, and given a new beauty, a new, sweet, subtle charm to her life.

And now she was to be his wife; side by side always with this friend whose company was so dear to her, whose words her soul echoed, whose face was beautiful in her eyes. She sat there remembering little things, the first hand-clasp, the first sigh, now when her cheek was warm with the first kiss! And then crept back to her mind the memory of the strange message that had come to disturb her peace, and the dark tragedy, the fatal snap of the chain that had parted her from her lover.

It was starlight, and Nora went to the window, and, looking upward, began to dream of the sweet fable that twin-souls are born in the same star, and wander about alone on earth until they meet again. She had found her twin soul, then—this love of hers, whom she had known up there

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among the bright twinkling lights. Then she laughed softly at the foolish fancy, and looked across the dark loch to the house at Dunbaan, to the house that was to be her home, where they would watch the stars together, and talk of the wondrous world, and the hidden things which are too great for mortal men.

She turned away with a sigh of great contentment. She was happy, and in the night she dreamed still of the sweet dual life which was to have no end.

And in the morning she was happy too. She awoke early, and her heart was light, and she smiled to herself, thinking of "poor Cousin Margaret's" doubts and fears. Poor Cousin Margaret indeed, who had no lover nor love—whose life was all gray-tinted, whose joys were dead, whose hopes were grown old. Nora began absolutely to pity the sour old woman who had wished to throw cold water on her happiness. What a miserable, solitary existence! she reflected; no one to share her thoughts, no one to think of her all the day long.

Cousin Margaret was, perhaps, really to be pitied, for how miserable must be the mind that takes pleasure in thinking unkind things, and the tongue in propagating them! When we hear it said of a person that he or she "never has a good word for anyone," we naturally don't like that person. This means we think the person has been speaking against us, and no one likes to be spoken against. Such a character cuts the man or woman, in fact, off from the love and friendship of his or her fellows. It was like "giving a dog a bad name;" only the poor dog often does not deserve it, and the human being generally does. No one liked Mrs. Conway-Hope, and she had few invitations, and not one true friend. Therefore she *was* to be pitied—a solitary, sour old woman, whose company gave no pleasure, and whose words left a sting. She drew bitterness out of everything, and pushed the sweet cup of love and charity from her lips, and yet repined because she was alone.

She had passed a very uncomfortable night with the thought of Nora's engagement, and the aches and pangs in her own bones to torment her. But in the morning she began to reflect it was no use struggling against the inevitable, and that it would be the very best arrangement, if Nora married, for herself to live on at Rossmore, to keep the house warm for one thing, and for another to save the expense of living at her own cost anywhere else.

She determined, therefore, as she mentally expressed it, to try "to make the best of it," and when Nora went to her room to inquire after her rheumatism, Mrs. Conway-Hope, said, with a smile which she intended to be playful:

"I suppose we shall have the lover to-day?"

"Mr. Biddulph said he would come," answered Nora, smiling.

"Then, my dear Nora, I shall try to get down into the drawing-room; for your sake I wish to pay him this compliment."

"Indeed, Cousin Margaret, I should advise you not to do so; it is the very coldest day we have had this year. At least, wait until you have seen the doctor."

With some persuasion, Mrs. Conway-Hope agreed to adopt this rather Jesuitical piece of advice, and Nora felt she was going to have a happy day. She donned her newest and prettiest gown; she made her drawing-room fresh and bright with flowers; and she sat there trying to read, all the while, however, thinking of the real, and not an ideal hero.

About three o'clock she heard a ring, and a manly step ascending the staircase. And the blush which always made her so lovely rose to her fair cheeks, and she lifted her shining eyes in welcome, and the door opened and the stalwart form of Alick Fraser appeared.

She was very courteous, but it was all she could do to hide her disappointment. Alick Fraser, however, was satisfied with his reception, and sat looking at her admiringly, thinking all the while what a handsome woman she was, and that her accident on the hills had stolen nothing from her beauty.

He had called with a purpose. He had stood looking at his good-looking face and clear skin attentively before he had left Inismore; and then he had looked round with pride at his stately new home. He had been intensely angry and disgusted about Malcolm Fraser's mad act, and the worry and trouble it had brought upon them all, but he was not going to let the blow knock him down. He held his head as high, and walked with as proud a step as ever, and spoke to the men of his acquaintance of Malcolm as "that young fool." He was out of the country, and he should stay there, he determined, and he meant to provide him with means only on this condition. And he had called to see Nora partly to pay her the hundred pounds

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she had given to Malcolm, and partly on some business of his own, which long had haunted his mind.

"This is your property, Miss Nora," he said, with his hard smile, rising and laying a check for one hundred pounds on a little table by Nora; "this is the sum, I believe, that you advanced to that graceless boy Malcolm, and many thanks to you."

"But, Mr. Fraser," answered Nora, "indeed I cannot take this money! I gave that hundred pounds to poor Malcolm; I did not lend it."

"My dear young lady, that is nonsense—excuse me for saying so," replied Alick, still standing before her. "That wretched boy is indebted for his safety to you, and it behooves either his father or I to see at least that you do not lose money by the transaction. You know poor Jock is not overburdened with wealth, therefore I offered to do this; and I also want you to tell him, when you hear from him, that I shall provide for his future. He may take a ranch on the plains, an orange farm at Florida, anything he likes, and he shall have the money; but only on one condition—that he never sets foot in England or Scotland again."

"It is very good of you, Mr. Fraser."

"I am afraid there's a bit of selfishness in it, Miss Nora, and the money does not count much to me, you know. I suppose the young fellow must have taken too much whiskey, or he never would have done such a mad trick. I wouldn't believe it at first; thought that sneak Sandy Hill had invented the whole story for the sake of the reward your friend, Mr. Biddulph, offered. But I've had the lad Tam Mackenzie up to my place, and questioned him closely, and I suppose there's no doubt Malcolm shot the poor woman, though unintentionally, of course."

"He meant to shoot Mr. Biddulph," said Nora, gravely.

"So these two lads thought, but I question it very much. I expect he meant to *frighten* Mr. Biddulph. But it was a mad act, and no excuse can be made for it; it was rough on Biddulph, too, though I don't like the man."

"Mr. Biddulph acted very kindly about it, at least."

"So Jock tells me. I dare say he's all right, but his conduct, to my mind, remains inexcusable. He was married to this poor creature, by his own admission, and he passed himself off as unmarried. However, all this is old news, and I did not come here to talk about Mr. Biddulph."



"You came to tell me what you mean to do for poor Malcolm?"

"Yes: that and other things. Now, tell me candidly, Miss Nora, do you think me an old, or rather a middle-aged man?" and Alick Fraser gave an uneasy laugh.

"Of course you are not old," answered Nora, smiling.

"I don't feel old, at all events. I feel as fresh now as I did at five-and-twenty, though I am in a very different position financially."

"You are very rich, are you not?" said Nora, still smiling.

"Well, Miss Nora," said Alick, bending nearer to her, "I don't mind confessing to you that I'm not badly off. I don't talk much about my property at Airdlinn, for Jock is confoundedly hard up; and though I don't grudge him a trifle now and again, still one must think of one's self, especially when one intends to marry."

Nora did not speak; she ceased to smile, and began to feel uncomfortable; and Alick, noting these signs, set them down to maidenly modesty, and proceeded to enlarge on his money, as he thought that was the shortest way to any human heart.

"I'll admit to you," he continued, bending still closer, "that I've a net income of over fifteen thousand a year, and an increasing income, Miss Nora. Some of my money is magnificently invested, and the young lady who marries me will find I won't grudge her anything she chooses to ask me for."

"Well, that is only right," said Nora, trying to seem at ease.

"And now, can you guess, Miss Nora, who this young lady is? She's a very handsome young lady, and my neighbor, and I hope my friend."

Nora shook her head, and was conscious that she blushed deeply.

"I can't guess," she said.

"Oh yes, you can, though;" and Alick rose, and would have taken her hand. "The lady I want is yourself, and I don't care to have any other."

"Oh, Mr. Fraser, I am sorry you have said this!"

"Why, my dear girl? I know you are too straightforward a girl to let this confounded affair of young Malcolm's stand in the way."

"It is not that, of course," faltered Nora; "it is——"

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take time to think of it now, and come over some day and see the house of Inismore. I don't want to boast, but I think it is well done, and you must add the gimcracks and crockery, you know."

"But, Mr. Fraser, I—I cannot marry you. It is very good of you to ask me; but, perhaps, I ought to tell you. I am engaged to some one else."

Alick's eager, resolute countenance fell.

"No!" he exclaimed; "not possible!"

"But it is so, really. I am engaged to Mr. Biddulph."

A strong expression of wrath nearly broke from Alick's firm lips at this announcement, but he suppressed it. He drew himself up, and then said slowly:

"Is this lately, then?"

"Yes, quite lately. I should not have mentioned it, but I thought it better that you should understand; and—and I am very sorrow to cause any disappointment to you."

Alick drew a long breath, and for a moment did not speak. It was, in truth, a terrible disappointment to him, the greatest he had ever had in his prosperous, busy life. He really admired Nora Stewart; and then, her property joined his, and he wanted a wife, and the one he had coveted was snatched away from him by the very man he intensely disliked.

"And you have quite made up your mind to this?" he said at last.

"Yes, quite; but I hope we shall remain good friends and neighbors, Mr. Fraser. And about poor Malcolm, I shall only be too glad to write and tell him what you have said."

"Thank you, and you'll tell all the rest to Mr. Biddulph, I suppose?" said Alick, with some bitterness.

"Indeed, I shall tell nothing of the kind. I shall tell no one, Mr. Fraser, of the honor you have done me."

"Yet women like to boast of their offers they say."

"I am not one of those women, then. It is no boast, to my mind, to cause any one pain; and I am very sorry, I repeat, if I have caused any to you."

"You have, then," said Alick Fraser, bluntly. "But it's no good crying over spilt milk, and I'll have to make the best of it. Take up that check, though, please, Miss Nora; that wretched lad must not be indebted to you for his living."

"Very well; then I'll send it to him the moment I hear

where he is, and I'll tell him you will advance money for him to begin life with."

"In reason, mind ye? Don't let the boy suppose I am going to support him in extravagance or nonsense. And if you really send him this hundred pounds, Miss Nora, that will be two hundred he has had, you see; that should keep him for a year."

"I will let you know when I hear from him, and we can arrange it. I am so awfully sorry for Mrs. Jock."

"Jeanie's terribly cut up about it; it's a bad business at best. Well good-day, Miss Nora; I had hoped for a different answer, but it can't be helped."

And Alick Fraser went away; but he did not carry his head so high, now, and in going down the avenue he encountered Mr. Biddulph coming up it. The two men exchanged a brief good-morning, and punctiliously raised their caps to each other. But, as Alick Fraser strode on, he cursed the man between his set teeth who had robbed him of the woman he had chosen for his wife.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### HAPPY DAYS.

The next few days were the brightest of all Nora Stewart's life.

"I am ashamed to feel so happy," she said softly to her lover, "when I think of all the sadness at Airdlinn."

"And you are quite happy? You have no doubts, no regrets, Nora?" asked Biddulph, laying his hand upon her shoulder, and looking down at her sweet, upturned face.

"No—except—— Must I tell you one?"

"Yes."

"What if I remain a little lame? The doctor is not quite sure yet. How should you like a poor lame wife?"

Then he bent down and kissed her.

"My darling, if you could not move a step; if your beauty waned before my eyes, I should always love you now. It is *yourself*, your being, your soul, the immortal part of you, Nora, that I love, and not only that which I know must fade. Therefore, my sweet"—and he softly pushed back her dark hair from her fair brow—"in youth

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and old age, when this pretty head is white, and the bright eyes dim, I shall still be your lover—the loved and the lover.”

He whispered the last words, and she looked up with her dewy eyes, and smiled in his face.

“And you, too, are happy?” she asked, a little tremulously.

“Shall I tell you how happy? Have not I got my heart’s desire, the crown and pride of my future life? Nora, I don’t mean to be an idle man now. I thought my career was wrecked, and I cared neither for the praise nor blame of my fellows. Now all this is changed; I mean to work hard, and come home for my reward. I have written to my father to-day, and told him I mean to begin practice at the bar at once; he can give me plenty of work.”

“I wonder how you will look in your gown and wig?” said Nora, with a happy little laugh.

“Lovely, no doubt, as young ladies say. By the bye, my Nora, may I tell our good friend the doctor how happy we are? I know it will please him.”

“Yes, of course, tell him. I meant to write to tell Mrs. Jock and Jock to-day, but somehow I shrink from it; the contrast in our lives and theirs seems so great.”

“Yet I think it will please the kindly Jock; the mother, I fear, will think of her absent son.”

And Biddulph was right. Mrs. Jock received the news of Nora’s engagement with a sudden passion of tears, a sudden outburst of grief, that utterly astonished her husband.

“My dear Jeanie,” he said, “what is the matter?”

“It is too soon—too soon!” sobbed Mrs. Jock; “after all the anguish to my boy, Nora should have thought of this!”

“But, my dear Jeanie, she never could have married poor Malcolm now; and I like Biddulph—he’s a fine fellow.”

“He’s cost you and yours very dear,” said poor Mrs. Jock, with the unreasonableness of grief. But after a while she herself saw the injustice of this feeling, and was persuaded to write a few kind words to Nora, which Jock himself carried to Rossmore.

“Well, my dear,” he said, taking Nora’s hand and kissing her cheek, “I have come to wish you joy. May you be very happy, my dear girl.”

"Thank you, dear Jock."

"Jeanie would have come too, but, poor thing"—and Jock sighed—"all this has broken her down terribly; she's a changed woman."

"It is no wonder," answered Nora, with quick sympathy.

"But, dear Jock, I hope it may be all well with Malcolm still. Your brother called here about him the other day, and he will provide for him; and Malcolm is so young that his life may be a happy one yet."

"I pray God it may be so, dear; you did your best for him at any rate, and Mr. Biddulph, and we must try to bear it, as I tell Jeanie and Alick. I never thought Alick would have behaved as he has done; he has been very kind."

"Yes, I am sure he means to be so."

"But altogether it has been a terrible upset. And Minnie—I don't like the looks of the child; I suppose she frets after her brother."

"Why has she not been to see me?" asked Nora, kindly.

"You know, Jock, I am not allowed to walk a step I can spare yet, and so I cannot go to Airdlinn; but do send Minnie to see me."

"Thank you very much. I'll try to persuade the child to come;" and after a few more kindly words, Jock Fraser went away; but Nora looked after him with saddened eyes.

He was a changed man, as he had said his wife was a changed woman. The humorous twinkle in his brown eyes was gone, and he stooped, and the cheery ring had passed out of his voice.

"I can't get the poor lad out of my head night or day," he told his friend the doctor, who listened with sympathizing ears to the poor father's heart-broken words.

"It's a sare dispensation," he said; "but we must just try to bear these things, Jock."

"Ay, it's easy talking; but, as you say,"—and Jock sighed deeply—"we must try to bear what is laid upon us;" and the poor laird looked at this moment as if his burden was almost too heavy for his strength.

Nora, indeed, felt so uneasy about him that, when the doctor called to offer his congratulations, as Biddulph had told him of the engagement, she asked him if he thought Jock Fraser was really ill.

"He's an ailment, Miss Nora Stewart," answered the doctor, sorrowfully, "that na medicine can cure. Yon

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puir laddie has nigh broken his father's heart. But," he added, a kindly smile passing over his rough features, "this is na' what I came to talk on. So we're to ha' a wedding, Miss Stewart, and Mr. Biddulph is to be the happy mon?"

"Sometime or other," answered Nora, with a blush and a smile.

"Well, my dear young leedy, there's na joy I diinna wish ye. And ye've made a gude choice, and a lone life is aye a desolate one;" and the doctor sighed.

"Yet you have never married, doctor."

The doctor absolutely blushed.

"It's na' been in my way, somehow," he said.

"But it's not too late," smiled Nora.

The poor man shook his head.

"Ay, it's too late. I'll na' be saying I ne'er thought on't. I've ha' my dream like the rest, and I saw the leedy a while since, and she's vera bonnie still; but she's eleven bairns, they tell me, and they'd been an unco' charge;" and again the doctor sighed.

"And how is Cousin Margaret?" asked Nora, trying not to smile at the doctor's loss.

"Weel, Miss Stewart, I've recommended Mrs. Conway-Hope to keep her room for the present. She's maist anxious to be down, but I fancy the draughts are bad for her; and I fancy, too, Mr. Biddulph and yersel' won't fret at her absence."

"Indeed, doctor, we are only too glad to be rid of her. She said all sorts of disagreeable things when I told her I was going to be married."

"Some folks turn sour, and some sad," answered the doctor, philosophically; "and puir Mrs. Conway-Hope has got a bit curdled. Ay, ay, the world is full o' trouble, and an ill tongue is a great stirrer up o' it."

"That is quite true; we should all be so much happier if no one said unkind things."

"But there's a deal like saying them, though na listening to them," answered the doctor, with a smile. "Weel, I must away now. Gi' my respects to Mr. Biddulph, and tell him he's a happy mon;" and with this compliment, and a hearty hand-shake, the doctor went, going on his long rides over the snowy hills in his usual half-sad, half-cheery condition of mind.

And scarcely was he gone when Biddulph arrived, and for a little while Nora forgot everything but her lover.

"I know you will think me an unreasonable man," he said, after a little while.

"And how are you unreasonable?"

"It's getting most awfully cold up in the North here, isn't it, Nora?" answered Biddulph, with a little laugh.

"Well, it is cold. Do you want to go away for a while?" asked Nora, with a little air of disappointment.

"Yes," said Biddulph, with a comical shrug.

Nora felt aggrieved, but did not speak.

"I want to go away," continued Biddulph, taking both her hands, "and to take you with me. I want to be married at once, and for us to go up to town and spend Christmas with my father; and I want to introduce you to an old aunt of mine, Lady Barbara Biddulph, who is a wonderful woman; and then I want to take you to the sunny South, and for us to have our holiday among the orange groves."

"It is too soon, is it not?" said Nora, with a sudden blush.

"Why too soon?"

"For one thing, my ankle is not well yet."

"That is one reason why I want this. Our dear old friend, the doctor, and the man from Edinburgh, have done everything right, I have no doubt; but still I should like you to see some of the great London surgeons. Do consent, my Nora; it will make me so happy."

"But people will say——"

"Oh, what a little woman you are, after all! What on earth does it matter what people say to *us*? Are we not all the world to each other? And what can they say, only that Mr. Biddulph was in a great hurry to get married, and for once they will speak the truth?"

"And the people at Airdlenn——"

"Jock won't grudge us our happiness, my dear. I wish with all my heart we could make the fine old fellow happy, too; but we can't do this, Nora, yet awhile; but after that youngster gets settled a bit, things will seem brighter."

"Well, wait, at all events until we hear from Malcolm. Don't say anything about it until then."

Biddulph gave a little shrug.

"A letter may be lost or delayed."

"Still, let us wait," said Nora, softly, turning her sweet face to Biddulph; "it would make me happier, even amid my great happiness, if I could tell them their boy was safe."

He felt he could say nothing more.

"It is a promise, then," he answered, smiling. "When a letter arrives from the dear prodigal, I have to claim

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the privilege of fixing our wedding-day. I hope the dear prodigal won't be short of writing materials, and miss a post."

Nora laughed a glad laugh, and gave the required promise; and every day after this Biddulph's first inquiry was about her letters.

And he had not long to wait. One wintry afternoon, he found her with a deeper rose bloom on her fair cheeks than he was accustomed to see there, and a look half-shy, half-mirthful, shining in her dark eyes.

"I believe the letter has come," he said, taking both her hands, and earnestly regarding her face.

"What makes you think so?"

"I know it has!" cried Biddulph, triumphantly, "I see it in your eyes. Nora, am I right?"

"Yes," she whispered, softly; and her head fell upon his breast.

The letter from Malcolm Fraser had not only arrived at Rossmore, but had already been forwarded to Airdlinn. He had landed safely at New York, and was well in health, "though often very sad, thinking of you all," he wrote; and there were a few lines enclosed for his mother, and he gave his present address.

"And you won't go back from your promise, Nora?" inquired Biddulph, a little anxiously.

"I am afraid you are going to turn out an exacting tyrant; but I always keep my word."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### WEDDING GAUDS.

If Biddulph proved a little exacting, it did not seem to make Nora unhappy. Never had she looked so handsome as during the next three weeks, which was the time of grace her lover had given her. Mrs. Conway-Hope, of course, had her sigh and her groan at "the unnecessary haste;" "but then, we were prepared for sighs and groans," said Biddulph; and as Mrs. Conway-Hope now wished to remain on at Rossmore after the wedding, she was obliged to restrain the expression of her feelings to moderate limits.

Mrs. Jock, at Airdlinn, also thought Nora ought to have

waited "a little longer." The poor mother remembered the blow that would fall upon her absent boy when the news of Nora Stewart's marriage reached him, though she was too sensible not to know that a marriage between them was now impossible.

"He'll get over it sooner," said Jock; "and, Jeanie, we must not forget all Nora and Biddulph have done for us. What shall we give them for a wedding present, do you think, my dear?"

In spite of her grief, Mrs. Jock was still woman enough to have an interest in a wedding present. For one thing, they are most difficult to choose; for another there is a charm about them which belongs to no other gift. The gray-haired matron, the widow in her black robes, still looks with a softened smile at the marriage presents which were given her in the days when her life lay before her, clad in hope's delusive garb.

And Nora received many presents, as well as the one which the kindly Jock could ill afford. James Biddulph's father, who was rich, wrote a pleasant letter to his future daughter-in-law, and sent her a pair of really magnificent diamond ear-rings; and Biddulph himself gave her some beautiful diamond stars for her hair, and two valuable diamond bracelets; so with the splendid necklace the late Colonel Biddulph had left her, Nora declared when she wore them all she would be a blaze of shining stones.

And Biddulph's aunt, Lady Barbara Biddulph, the widow of General Biddulph, who had been the elder of the three brothers, also sent Nora a gift, with a note which was characteristic of the woman.

"DEAR MISS STEWART (Nora read, with an amused smile):

"My nephew James has written to inform me that you and he are going to be married soon; and, as it is customary for relations to do so on such occasions, I send you a small present. I myself am no great believer in the happiness of marriage, but some are, and I trust you will be among them.

"Yours very truly,

"BARBARA BIDDULPH."

"But Aunt Bab is not half bad, really," said Biddulph, with a laugh, after he had read this note. "I have known her do some of the kindest things."

The present was a handsome gold bracelet of rather

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a rigid form. Still Nora was pleased to receive it, and pleased to think her lover's people were to greet her pleasantly. But the gift which surprised her most came from Alick Fraser.

When he first heard that her marriage day was fixed, he had given way to a perfect storm of rage, in which wounded vanity, disappointed love (or what he thought was love), and also the remembrance of the coveted acres which had passed away from him, were all strongly intermixed.

It was a bitter blow to him, in fact; but Alick Fraser had the good sense to make no display of his feelings. And he knew, too, from the way in which his brother's family talked to him of Nora's marriage, that she had kept his secret, and told no one what he had offered to her.

And she had most honorably done this, not even hinting to Biddulph of all the wealth she had refused. And when Alick heard them talking at Airdlinn of the present for Nora, he was determined to give her a present, too, and made up his mind it should be such a one that she would begin to doubt the wisdom of her choice.

He heard about the diamonds, of course, so he would have none of them. He actually went up to town, and chose a sapphire necklace and ear-rings of such value that no one but a very rich man could have bought them; and strange to say he did not grudge the money.

"I will show her," he thought, "what I could have given her." And Nora, it must be admitted, had never liked Alick Fraser so well as when he came in person to present his splendid marriage gift. For there is no doubt that women, as a rule, are fond of gauds.

He took her hand, as he was leaving, in his strong grip, and a sort of softness crept into his brown eyes as he fixed them on her lovely face.

"Well, Miss Nora Stewart, I wish you all happiness," he said, not in his usual clear tones. "You know I wished things different, but it was not to be;" and, with another grasp of the hand, he left, and Nora stood looking pensively at his shining sapphires after he was gone.

For she was not a vain girl this, and it grieved her to have given this strong man pain. Of course, she did not think of the coveted acres, and naturally supposed that such a rich man could only like her for herself. And she thought it was so kind and generous of him to give her this gorgeous present, too, not recognizing any mixed motive here also.

But Biddulph was not so charitable. Nora was still looking at the sapphires lying in their satin beds, when he came into the drawing-room, and was at once attracted by the massive circlet, set with magnificent stones.

"What a splendid thing!" he exclaimed. "What millionaire has given you this, Nora?"

"I want you to guess," she answered, smiling.

Biddulph, who was rather a good judge of gems, took the necklace from its case and examined it admiringly.

"They are perfect stones," he said, "and the setting is magnificent. Well, who is the donor, my sweet?"

"Alick Fraser."

"Alick Fraser!" repeated Biddulph; and he put the necklace rather hastily down. "Then the great Alick must have meant to cut us all out."

"That is a very mean speech, and I won't allow Mr. Biddulph to make it," said Nora, playfully putting her pretty hand over his lips.

He held it there, and kissed it tenderly.

"Perhaps I am jealous," he said, "and it makes me spiteful. Have I any reason to be, Nora?"

"No, none, none," she answered; "but you know very well you have none."

"I hope not. The 'green-eyed monster' is not a creature I should like to nurse in my bosom. To me love means perfect trust."

"It is perfect trust. But here is Cousin Margaret."

Mrs. Conway-Hope entered smilingly.

"More presents?" she said, glancing at the case lying on the table.

"The present, Mrs. Conway-Hope," answered Biddulph.

"The richest man in the neighborhood has been determined to prove that he is so. These are truly regal."

Mrs. Conway-Hope examined the sapphires with her short-sighted eyes.

"I suppose they are real?" she said, touching them with her bony fingers.

"I suppose so," replied Biddulph, in a mock doubtful tone.

"Oh, Cousin Margaret, Mr. Alick Fraser has just brought them! Real? I should think so; they are splendid!" cried Nora, indignantly.

"Mr. Alick Fraser! Well, I am surprised, dear Nora. I always understood Mr. Alick was what the Scotch call 'near'—uncommonly 'near,' I have been told."

"Well," said Nora.

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"Well, he has not shown it in his present, at all events," said Nora, fastening her jewel-case.

"Apparently not. Well, my dear Nora, if I am not in the way, I want to talk to you about the arrangements for the fifth."

"Which politely means that I am in the way," laughed Biddulph. "Please, Mrs. Conway-Hope, make the arrangements as short as you can."

"But things must be done properly, Mr. Biddulph ; and, living so far in the country as this is, requires much consideration on the part of those who have the responsibility."

"I quite agree with you. Good-by, then, for the present, Nora ;" and Biddulph smiled, and went away.

This conversation took place on the 1st of December, and Nora's wedding day was fixed for the fifth. It was to be a very quiet affair, by the bride's wish ; but still, as Mrs. Conway-Hope justly suggested, in the country a great many arrangements are required to be made beforehand, even for a small party. And then, Nora had invited her two friends—Maud and Alice Lee—to stay with her for the occasion, and also Lord Glendoyne was to be one of the house party.

Nora's reason for asking the good-looking Anglo-Indian she kept a profound secret, even from Biddulph. But the truth was that Glendoyne had paid pretty Mary Fraser a great deal of attention, and then had gone south without saying anything serious to the young girl ; and Nora had heard from her father, and had herself noticed a great change in this fair Highland flower, even before the miserable event which had cast so deep a shadow on the household at Airdlinn.

Minnie was to be one of Nora's bridesmaids, and it came into Nora's kind heart that, if Glendoyne would come north for the wedding, there might be a chance of a match between them after all. Nora had always been on very friendly terms with Glendoyne, whose languor rather amused her, and whose graceful manner made him a very agreeable companion. She therefore invited him to come to Rossmore on the fourth of December, and was very pleased when he accepted the invitation.

Thus Nora expected four guests to stay with her, for she had also asked old Mr. Biddulph and Lady Barbara Biddulph. But the old lawyer had begged to be excused.

"It is too far for me to go in the winter time at my

age," he had written to Nora; "but I am looking forward to seeing my new daughter under my own roof."

Lady Barbara, however, who was very energetic, had accepted the invitation, and was also to arrive at Rossmore on the fourth of December. Thus there were arrangements to be made, and Mrs. Conway-Hope felt herself justified in turning out the lover occasionally, whom she indeed found terribly in the way.

Biddulph, in truth, was never happy out of Nora's sight. He could scarcely understand himself how this absorbing passion filled his whole being.

"If I read a page," he told her, "I want to talk to you about it; and when I am not near you, I feel as if I had lost something, but when I begin to look about for it, I remember it is—*Nora!*"

"He's unco' fond of her," the doctor (who was also to be one of the wedding guests) said once to Mrs. Conway-Hope, while he was feeling her pulse; "that's plain to see. His bonny gray eyes grow saft each time they fa' upon her face."

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### THE MARRIAGE EVE.

It was a busy day, the fourth of December, at Rossmore, and the sun shone brightly during the morning, and the wedding guests arrived without accident or delay.

The girls, Maud and Alice Lee, had enjoyed the long, cold journey, because Lord Glendoyne, by Nora's arrangement, had met them at Edinburgh, where they had stayed the night, and escorted them the rest of the way. But Lady Barbara, who had travelled only with her maid, had found the weather chill and drear, and the journey long. True, Biddulph had met her at the station nearest Rossmore, but she was somewhat in an irritable mood.

"If I had known it was so far, and the wind so cutting, I never would have come, James, I can tell you that," she said, as her nephew handed her out of the railway carriage, and her rugs and furs after her. "Your father was quite right."

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middle age, and was supposed always to speak her mind. She did this as she entered the softly-lighted drawing-room at Rossmore half an hour later, when Biddulph led her up and introduced her to his promised bride.

"So you are Leonora Stewart, are you?" said Lady Barbara, keenly regarding her. "Well, you are good to look at, anyhow."

"Her looks are not the best of her, Aunt Bab," said Biddulph, as his eyes rested proudly and fondly on the woman of his choice.

Nora was, in truth, looking very handsome. The excitement had lent a lovely blush to her fair cheeks, and she was dressed to perfection in dark-green plush and other. Her manner, too, was very charming, as she clasped Lady Barbara's bony hand.

"It is so good of you to come, Lady Barbara, all that long way," she said.

"If I had known it would have been so cold," answered Lady Barbara, "as I have been telling this nephew of mine, nothing should have induced me to come. But, as I am here, I have no doubt I shall enjoy myself as much as any one ever does at weddings, at least."

Nora laughed softly, and saw about Lady Bab's comforts. Then she took her up to the warm, comfortable bedroom that was prepared for her, and Lady Bab glanced round approvingly.

"You have a nice place here," she said. "The old colonel's place that James inherited is not far off, is it?"

"Just across the loch."

"So you two were neighbors, and fell in love with each other, I suppose? Well, I think James has made a good choice, as far as I can see, and I hope he will make a good husband."

"I have no fear."

"Quite right to stand up to him; and I expect and trust that he will. But don't let me detain you from your other guests. I shall make my appearance at dinner-time."

And a very good appearance it was. When Lady Barbara re-entered the drawing-room, she wore velvet and point lace, and, with her gray hair and diamonds, looked a very dignified lady indeed.

The whole party soon assembled, and Jock Fraser, with his shy, pretty, fair Minnie leaning on his arm, presently entered the room. Nora led him up to Lady Bab, who received him graciously.

"And are you to be at the wedding to-morrow, Mr. Fraser?" she asked.

"I am to have the honor of giving away the bride," answered Jock.

"She's a handsome creature," said Lady Bab. "It's a pity she's a little lame."

"But that was an accident, you know, and will all go right in time. I shall never forget the day it happened;" and Jock sighed, and a far-away look came into his kind brown eyes, for he was thinking of his boy.

Mrs. Jock had refused to come, and also had declined to appear at the marriage ceremony.

"Don't ask me, Nora, my dear," she said, when Nora was pressing her to do so, and tears came into her blue eyes as she spoke; "it would only upset me. Jock will take Minnie. I am better at home."

And Nora felt that perhaps this was true. Mrs. Jock's jealous love for her son would have made her miserable seeing another occupy a place she had fondly hoped would have been his. But she had sent her Minnie; and this fair girl, with a blush and a start, had recognized Lord Glendoyne, whom she had not expected to see.

He crossed the room, and shook hands with her in his usual languid, elegant way.

"And how have you been?" he said, just as though he had parted with her yesterday.

"Very well—at least, not very well," answered Minnie, with heaving breast and trembling lips.

She was wondering if he knew all the dreadful story about poor Malcolm, and of their trouble and grief. Glendoyne did know all about it. On the way from Edinburgh Maud Lee had told him the sad details, and said she was so sorry for "poor Minnie."

"And so am I," he had answered; and he felt really sorry, but the little girl who had been telling him did not. Maud Lee remembered, as she graphically detailed the tragedy in the glen, that Lord Glendoyne was supposed to admire Minnie Fraser, so she thought it as well that he should know all the disadvantages of the family.

But after dinner was over, to Maud Lee's annoyance, Glendoyne found his way to Minnie's side instead of her own. He was a very gentlemanly man, and the thought of the poor girl's trouble made him more attentive to her than, perhaps, he had intended to be.

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"Minnie looks very pretty and very happy," whispered Nora to Biddulph, who was bending over her.

"I know some one else who looks very pretty and very happy too," he answered.

"I don't know about being pretty, but I know I am very happy," she said, softly, looking up at his handsome face.

She felt proud of him—proud of his love, and his good looks. There was no one like him, she thought; and Lady Barbara, looking at these two at this moment with her keen gray eyes, was satisfied that their affection for each other was very great.

They kept the party up late, but at last Jock Fraser rose and said it was time for Minnie and himself to be crossing the water. Biddulph also was going to return to Dunbaan, as it is not considered lucky for the bridegroom to sleep in the house the night before the marriage. Nora went out of the drawing-room with Minnie, and after she had parted with her half-cousins, she was recrossing the hall, when she encountered Biddulph.

"I have waited for one last sweet kiss," he said, drawing her arm through his. "Come down this corridor, Nora, and we shall be alone."

She went with him, and he took her in his arms.

"I like Aunt Bab," she said, softly, lifting her dewy eyes to his.

"I did not come here to talk about Aunt Bab, my dearest, my sweetest love. I thank Heaven this is our last parting!"

About an hour later, perhaps, Biddulph was sitting in his own library at Dunbaan, thinking of Nora still, and no man ever thought of his future wife with more complete content. Nora Stewart satisfied every wish of his heart, and every desire of his soul. She was a perfect woman, to his mind, physically and mentally—the fairest, purest, and most lovable he had ever known. And to-morrow was his wedding day! To-morrow by this time he and Nora would be far away from here—far away from a place, haunted for them both with such painful recollections still.

He got up to stir the fire and light his pipe. He had not been in the room many minutes when he did this, and as he bent over the fire, a slight noise behind him attracted his

attention. He turned sharply round, and as he did so, he staggered back, the poker fell from his hand, and a look of unutterable horror and dread came over his face.

"Was he mad? Had his brain suddenly reeled over?" he thought, with quick fear. *There*, standing between the half-parted window curtains, which had been closed when he entered the room, was the form, the mocking face, of the woman who had once been his wife, whom he had seen lain in her grave in the kirk-yard at Balla!

Biddulph was a brave man, but an inexpressible shuddering dread passed over him at this moment. He put his hand up to his head, he rubbed his eyes; it might be a delusion. It was there still; and the next moment the familiar voice, the voice of the *dead*, sounded on his shocked ears!

"I am afraid I have given you a start."

"Woman! *fiend*! why are you here?" now burst from Biddulph's white lips. "Why have you risen from the dead to disturb my peace?"

"Perhaps I have not risen from the dead," answered those mocking lips; and the *form* slowly advanced toward him. "I'm awfully cold, James; may I come beside the fire and have a chat?"

Biddulph stood staring at her, bewildered—horrified.

"You think I am a ghost, but I am not. *There*! feel my hand and my arm; they are substantial enough;" and she laughed.

She put out her hand and touched Biddulph's as she spoke; the hand was *warm*. And the man, with wide distended eyes, with loathing, with sudden anguish, gazing at her face, saw it was seemingly the face of a living woman—the face of Natalie. Oh, God, the face of Natalie!

"What hideous farce is this?" he cried. "I saw you die; I saw you dead! *How—how* are you here?"

"My poor James, do you know I feel quite sorry for you. I admit you have been the victim of a shabby trick, and, on my honor, if I had not been obliged to do it, I should have let you believe I was dead still! It was not me you saw die, it was not me you saw dead; it was my twin-sister Josephine, and no one could ever tell the difference between us."

"Your twin-sister?" repeated Biddulph, hoarsely, still staring at her face. "I never heard of a twin-sister—of any sister."

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

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"No, we did not mention the name of poor Josephine in the family circle. The truth is, James, that my twin-sister Josephine made a sad fool of herself in her youth, some years before I saw you, and ran away with a married man, and went down, down, I don't know where—very low, at any rate, and my mother would never hear her name mentioned. She was supposed to be dead, in fact, but, strange to relate, she cast up last year, when I was at Monte Carlo, before I came down here to see you, you know, after you got your money; but naturally I said nothing about her to you."

"And you mean to tell me," said Biddulph, forcing himself to speak, and then pausing, overcome by the horror of the position in which he found himself—"you mean to tell me—that you are——"

"I am Natalie Biddulph, if every one had their dues. But I declare I am sorry for you. I did not know until I got here to-night that to-morrow was to be your second wedding day. You have been pretty quick about it, you know, James, for a despairing widower;" and again she laughed.

This misplaced mirth roused Biddulph to sudden fury.

"I believe it's all a hateful lie!" he cried. "I believe you are a fiend—some fiend in that woman's shape! I saw you *dead*. Go! Don't speak another word, for you are dead to me!"

But the woman did not flinch.

"It's all very fine talking like that," she said; "but I'm *not* dead, and I'm forced to come down here and tell you the whole story, because I'm so hard up. There—don't swear, but that's the truth. I've had a frightful run of ill-luck at Monte Carlo, and could only scrape enough money together to get back to England, and come down here—indeed, I had to borrow it—and I *must* have some, James. And, if you like, if you will pay me well for it, I'll pretend to be dead still."

No word came from James Biddulph's writhing lips. He covered his face with his hand; intense anguish overwhelmed his soul.

"Come, you need not break your heart about it. I admit it's rough on you, but I can't help myself. And it was not my scheme, but poor Josephine's own that made her come to such an awful end. You remember the letter you wrote me, telling me that it had got blown about here that I was really your wife? Well, when I got that letter I was



in a great rage, because you said in it you would put me back on my old allowance, if the story of our marriage came out. Josephine was with me in town then, and she urged me to go down to Scotland again, and get more money out of you, as she said, you evidently would pay any amount to keep the matter a secret. But I was ill at the time, and, as I told her, our interviews were never overpleasant. Then she proposed to personate me, and declared you would never find out the difference."

Biddulph put his hand down, and again began staring at the woman's face with a stern, searching look in his eyes.

"We were the living image of each other, that's the truth, even to the little brown mole on my cheek. You remember the little mole, don't you?"

Biddulph shuddered, spoke no word, but kept his eyes steadily on her face.

"Poor Josephine had little or no money, and wanted to raise some to try her luck at the gambling-tables, as we had fixed to go to Monte Carlo together. Well, to make a long story short, we settled between us that she was to go to Scotland and endeavor to get a thousand pounds from you as a little extra hush-money; and she was quite sure you would never find out the difference between us. I wrote the letters, but poor Josephine was the woman you were suspected of murdering. So you see, I am not a ghost, after all."

As she paused, Biddulph started to his feet, went up to her, and, seizing her by the hand, drew her beneath the bright lamp.

"Let me look at you," he said, hoarsely, gazing gloomily at her face. "How do I know you are not lying now, as you have lied all your life? There were two of you, you said—two devils. How do I know which you are?"

"I am Natalie," said the woman, moving uneasily.

"You look changed. I begin to doubt. I shall see you both face to face—the living and the dead. Then I shall know."

"You won't drag the poor woman out of her grave, surely, will you? Oh, James, spare me this!"

"Have you spared me?" he answered, in a hollow voice.

"Do you know what you have done? To-morrow——"

A groan broke from his white lips as he uttered the last word, and his expression was so terrible that it moved even the woman's callous heart to some sort of pity.

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ed to-morrow, as you intended, and I'll not say a single word. I'll go away early in the morning, if you'll give me a check for five thousand pounds, and no one shall ever know I've been here, except that old man of yours, and you can bribe him, too."

Biddulph flung back her hand as she said this, which he had been still holding in his fierce grip, and once more sank down on a chair, and again covered his face with his hand.

A temptation, powerful, horrible, had rushed into his heart. Should he take her at her word—pay her, and let her go away, whoever she might be? Her face seemed changed to him—older, harder, but still the same face—the face that had been the black bane of his life, and had now come to snatch the cup of joy from his lips.

Should he do this? Again he looked up. The woman had turned her back to him, and was warming her feet at the fire, as he remembered at this moment seeing Natalie do, when she had been in his room before. But how did he know this was Natalie? This hideous doubt—this likeness, which the woman admitted was so strong, made the difference to him between misery and joy, between happiness and unutterable shame!

And Nora? At this moment Biddulph's eyes fell on one of Nora's photographs, which was standing framed on the mantle-piece, and as he looked at it, at the fair, noble, gentle face, that dark and doubtful expression passed away from his own.

"I will not lie to her, I will not deceive her," he mentally decided. "I shall go to her now, and tell her the truth; and to-morrow, the woman that is lying dead at Balla and this woman shall be put face to face—then I shall know."

He had made up his mind. He moved slightly, and the woman at the fire-place turned round and looked at him.

"Well," she said, "will you agree to this? Give me five thousand pounds, and I'll not interfere with you. I suppose this is the lady?" and she pointed to Nora's portrait.

"Yes," answered Biddulph, with intense bitterness, "that is the lady; and he crossed the room as he spoke, and took Nora's picture in his hand. "Look at her face!" and he held the photograph where the woman could more plainly see it—"the face of a pure woman, of a woman with an angel soul—to whom evil is an unknown thing, and sin but a name! This woman was to be my wife to-morrow; and

when we talked of our future life, how do you think we planned to spend it?"

"As most people do, I suppose," answered the woman, with a shrug.

"Not in gambling, nor drunkenness," said Biddulph, with scathing scorn. "We planned to spend it in honest work, and trying to do some little good. And do you think I'd deceive such a one for *you*? Do you think I would bribe you to go away to-night, and fear you always like a nightmare? Don't I know what you would do if I were to put the hush-money, as you call it, into your hand? You would lose it at your favorite gambling-tables, and then come for more! Come with a threat—a hint, perhaps, in the ears of my pure wife!"

"What do you mean to do, then?"

"I will tell you what I mean to do. I shall go now and tell the truth to the woman I was to marry to-morrow; and I shall have the grave opened, where I believe Natalie is sleeping still."

"Then, you don't believe a word of what I've been telling you?"

"I do not. I believe you are this twin-sister, this Josephine you pretend came here."

"I swear I am not, James. And just think what you are going to do; think what this poor young lady even will feel, and—and all the dreadful scene you will make if you open poor Josephine's grave. What is a little money to this?" and she approached him, and tried to take his hand, but he pushed her away. "Give me two thousand, then, less even, rather than all this."

Biddulph gave a harsh and bitter laugh.

"No," he said, "I will know the truth. You have brought this on yourself, Josephine, or Natalie, whichever you be, and I mean to lock you up here until I return from Rossmore; you shall not escape me now."

"I should never have come if I had not been reduced to my last shilling. Will you give me something to drink, for I am half fainting."

He crossed the room and opened a cabinet, where wine and spirits were standing, and the woman eagerly drank some brandy. Biddulph watched her curiously as she did so, and her look and attitude seemed terribly familiar.

"That has done me good," she said, drawing a long breath, "I can't get on without it now."

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"You had better take some more, then," he answered. "I am going now. I shall not be long away."

He left the room as he spoke, locking the door behind him, and putting the key into his pocket. Then he opened the house door and looked out. It was a dark and stormy night, fierce gusts of wind and rain driving past him.

"It is no matter," he thought, gloomily; "what can anything matter to a man going on an errand such as mine?"

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### A BITTER HOUR.

No man ever went out, perhaps, with more bitter and agonized feelings in his heart than James Biddulph did, on the dark night when he started upon his perilous row across the loch, to carry such news to Nora Stewart that the very thought of it seemed to him more terrible than death.

The rain beat on his pale, rigid face, and the wild blast swept around him, but he never felt them. There was a storm raging in his own heart darker than the elements. It was too horrible, this coming back in life of the face he had seen still in death—the face, or a semblance to it, so close, so near, that Biddulph shuddered when he recalled the once familiar features.

And, strange, there flashed a memory across his brain, as he went on toward the wet and slippery little pier, over which the water was now dashing, of twin-brothers he had known in his young manhood, whose likeness to each other was so great that no one ever knew the difference between them when they were apart. When they were together, however, there was a subtle shade of distinction, though the lineaments were line for line, the coloring tint for tint.

Was this woman, then, lying or speaking the truth? Was this the wife he had wedded long ago, and whose claims and existence had been a burden almost too heavy to be borne; or was it the twin-sister, the dusky pages of whose life had been too soiled even to be mentioned under Madame Beranger's dubious roof-tree?

It was the horror of this *doubt* which filled Biddulph's soul with such overwhelming agony. He reached the little

pier like a man after he has heard his death-sentence. Outward things—the black, storm-tossed waters of the loch, the drifting rain, the howling blast—were as nothing to him. He saw only two faces—the dark, uncomely middle-aged one; and the fair, serene features of the beautiful woman who to-morrow was to have been his wife.

He found the boats were all secure in the boat-house, and the door was locked. In his dark mood, to speak to anyone was almost intolerable; yet he was forced to do this, and the necessity was no doubt good for him. One of the keepers had charge of the boats, and this man and his son acted as boatmen when Biddulph required to cross the loch. They lived in a cottage close to the water's edge, and thither he was now obliged to proceed, and with difficulty awoke the sleeping inmates.

When the man opened the door, his surprise was naturally very great. There stood his master in the drenching rain, and there was a look in Biddulph's face which at once told the keeper that something tragic had occurred. But when he heard what Biddulph wanted, he still ventured to remonstrate.

"It's na' safe, sir," he said, "the water's fearful rough."

"It is no matter," answered Biddulph, almost harshly; "I ask no man to risk his life; I am going alone."

"Na, na, that canna' be," said the keeper; "Jim and I'll gan wi' ye, if ye must gan."

The man knew that to-morrow was to be his master's wedding-day, and thought something had gone wrong, and began hurrying on his clothes, after calling his son.

"Is there danger?" asked Biddulph, briefly.

"I'll na' say there's nane, sir," answered the keeper, with a doleful shake of the head.

"Then I'll go alone. Send the lad down to push off the boat; that is all I shall require."

As Biddulph said this he turned away and walked gloomily back to the boat-house, whither he was quickly followed by the keeper and his son. But he would not let the men go with him. He was a good oarsman, and presently he found himself fighting with the stormy water beneath a dark and murky sky. The wind, luckily, rather subsided; but the rain fell in drenching torrents, and it was all he could do to manage the boat. It was not far to go; and presently a twinkling light became visible to his keen eyes, moving about in the house of Rossmore, which stands high above the loch.

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At last, breathless, storm-beaten, he reached the landing-place and secured the boat. He gave a heavy sigh, stood still for a moment, and thought of the bitter task which now lay before him. How was he to find words to tell such a tale?—tell it to the girl whose sweet kiss had rested on his lips not two hours ago? A groan broke from his lips now, a groan of unutterable pain; and then slowly, almost feebly, he began to ascend the steep hill which leads to the house at Rossmore, telling himself as he went that he wished the dark waters had swallowed him up, and that he had not lived to speak the shameful words.

He rang the house-bell, and at first there was no answer. Alfred had retired to bed, and the only people still up were Nora herself and her maid, Palmer, who was engaged packing Nora's wedding garments. These two heard the ring, and, on Biddulph repeating it, Palmer ventured downstairs, and Nora went on the landing to hear who it was.

"Ask who it is before you open the door," said Nora; and Palmer accordingly, in her shrill voice, called through the keyhole:

"Who is there?"

"It is I—Mr. Biddulph!" answered Biddulph from outside; and Palmer immediately gave a shriek.

"Oh, lor, miss, it's Mr. Biddulph!" she cried. "He's been upset, I believe, crossing the loch; I said to Alfred it was not fit for him to go. Oh dear, oh dear, I dare not open the door!"

"What folly!" said Nora, though she too grew very pale; and then, as quickly as her still weak ankles would allow her, she hurried downstairs.

"Is that you, James?" she asked, as she proceeded to unlock the door.

"Yes," answered a voice, so changed that Nora hardly recognized it; and with trembling hands she undid the chain and opened the door; and there, wet, with the pallor of death almost on his face, stood her bridegroom—the man who in a few short hours she was about to wed.

"What is the matter? What has happened?" she asked breathlessly, and with a sinking heart, holding out both her hands, and grasping Biddulph's chill, cold ones.

"Let me go in, and—I will try to tell you," answered the same hoarse, changed voice.

And then she led him in, led him across the hall to the dining-room, where a good fire was still burning, and called to Palmer to bring lights and brandy. She thought his



boat had been upset, and that he was a half-drowned man, dazed and stupefied with struggling in the dark water for his life.

"My dearest, my dearest," she whispered tenderly, pushing off his wet cap and drying his dark hair. "How did it happen, James? But do not speak; drink this brandy—it will do you good."

He drank the spirit, and then, with a sort of moan, sank down in a chair, Nora still holding his hand and gazing anxiously in his face.

"Are you a little better now? Shall Palmer call up Alfred? You must change all your things," she said.

Then he lifted his haggard face and looked at her.

"No; send Palmer away—there is something I must say to you."

Palmer at once discreetly went away, though she felt strongly tempted to hover near the door. But she was a young woman, she considered, of high principles, and therefore she did not like to put her ear exactly to the key-hole. She did not go very far off, however, for she told herself that Mr. Biddulph might require assistance, and she ought to be at hand to help her young mistress.

"What is it, dear James?" said Nora, putting her arm softly round his shoulder, and bending down her sweet face close to his.

A groan broke from the unhappy man as she did so. His head fell back for a moment on her white arm, which her loose dressing-gown sleeve had slipped back from, and again he lifted his gray eyes to her face, which were full of such unutterable pain and anguish that Nora's heart seemed to faint within her.

"What is it?" she faltered again, creeping closer to him and laying her lips upon his brow.

He started up, pushed her gently back, and began walking up and down the room with irregular, hasty steps.

"Would to God I were dead," he said, with deep emotion, "rather than speak the words I must now say to you!"

"I do not understand," murmured Nora, white-lipped.

"Understand! No, Nora;" and he went back to her; and clasped both her hands. "When I parted with you to-night I deemed myself the happiest man on earth—I was the happiest—and now I am the most miserable."

"Oh, James!"

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with me, near me, and I heard a faint noise behind me. I looked round, and what do you think I saw?"

"How can I tell? Oh, James, how can I tell?"

"I thought my brain had played me some trick at first, or that the dead woman had risen from the grave to disturb my peace. Nora, I saw standing there the form, the face, of the woman I saw die, whom I saw dead! But this woman was *not* dead; she came forward, she spoke to me, and she told me such a tale of horror that my blood seemed to freeze in my veins."

Nora started back, clasped her hands together, and stood gazing at him with wide-open, terror-stricken eyes.

"She told me," went on Biddulph, excitedly, "that it was all a plot, all a trick; that the woman who was shot in the Glen of Balla was not Natalie Beranger, whom I married long ago, whom I surely believed I saw laid in her grave in the kirkyard, but her *twin-sister*; that this twin-sister had personated her for the purpose of getting more money from me to spend at the gambling tables. She said that *she* was Natalie; and she offered to take five thousand pounds and go away."

A cry escaped Nora's white lips, and she staggered backward and covered her face with her hand.

"Yes, you may well shrink back, Nora; for it is horrible, too horrible! And I am not sure, a hideous doubt is in my mind, whether this is true or false; whether the woman who stood talking to me *was* Natalie or this twin-sister, of whose existence before I never heard. She said no one could ever tell the difference between them. But lies are nothing to her; she forced me to marry her by a lie—this may be a lie, too."

"But surely you could tell," faltered Nora, whose face was now deadly pale.

"I could not. This woman looked older, harder; but there was a look in her eyes as she drank some brandy" (and Biddulph shuddered) — "a look familiar, hateful; the look I have seen a hundred times on Natalie's face long ago, when she was drinking—that filled my soul with dread. But I shall know; I will see these two, the living and the dead sister, face to face, then I shall know!"

"Oh this is too dreadful, too dreadful!"

"She asked me to spare her this," continued Biddulph, with intense bitterness—"spare *her*, who had spoilt my life when I believed her living, and now has come back to blight and darken yours! But I will not spare her; she

shall stand there face to face with her dead sister, Natalie or Josephine, whichever she be; and I will know the hideous truth."

Nora moaned, and a deadly faintness crept over her, and everything grew dim to her sight.

"Oh, my poor love!" cried Biddulph; and he went up to her, and took her in his arms, and pillowed her head upon his breast. "My bitterest anguish in all this has been for you. And that fiend tempted me. She knew to-morrow was our wedding-day, and she promised to keep the secret and go away, if I would pay her enough. And I thought of this—my Nora, forgive me—till my eyes fell on your sweet pictured face, and I swore I would not wrong nor deceive an angel such as you."

"Tell me what—you think," faltered Nora, in broken accents, half raising her head. "Is—there—any hope?"

"My darling, I trust, I pray so. I told her I believed that she herself was this twin-sister, but she swore she was not. But to women such as they are oaths are nothing. She wanted money, and might think she could wring more from me by pretending she was the woman who stood between me and happiness, than as the twin-sister of a dead wife? This is my hope, Nora; but before we can be sure of this, there must be some necessary delay. I shall have to get authority to open the grave in Balla kirkyard. Yes, you may well shudder, my poor darling, my beautiful one; between you, so pure, so fair, and this degraded creature, living or dead, the gap is too great! 'Tis enough to make a man put a pistol to his throat; too horrible almost to think of and live."

There was such despair in Biddulph's voice as he uttered the last few words, that a fear *for him* suddenly darted into Nora's heart.

"Hush! you must not speak thus," she said; and she clasped his hand closer in her own cold, trembling one. "It is a bitter blow to us, but we must help each other to bear it. What shall we do, James?" and she lifted her dark beautiful eyes to his face, full of sweet trust still in him.

"Could you put off the marriage for a day—say you are ill, anything? Would not this be best? And in the meanwhile I must try to learn the truth; I must—. But why speak of it?"

"I can do this; and, James, even—even if this be the woman who tricked you into a marriage long ago, still

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she cannot part us always, you know. This little life, which is so full of trouble, is not the unchanging, blissful one that we have talked of so often—talked of, James, when we have stood together, and looked up and watched the stars."

As Nora said this she raised her head, and on her face a certain lofty, noble expression, which was not unusual to it, now took the place of the bitter pain and horror of a few minutes before. She was excessively pale, and her long dark hair was unbound; but her dark eyes shone with wonderful beauty and sweetness, and her words gave some sort of strength to Biddulph's miserable heart.

"Would that I could feel thus!" he said, gazing at her with a strange new feeling almost of reverence stealing over him; "but I cannot. I cannot think of another life when this one lies wrecked and blasted; when to-morrow, that bring my bride, my love, may bring me back a tie utterly loathsome and abhorred."

"Still, for my sake, try to bear this, James; and let me try to help you. Let us think what we must do. Will you stay here to-night?"

"No; I will go now to the doctor, and call him up, and I must tell him the hideous story, Nora. He will do what is necessary—he is a good fellow, and I can trust him; and then I must go back to Dunbaan."

"Oh, not to-night; not in the storm!"

"My darling, yes. I left that woman locked in a room there. But," added Biddulph, grimly, "I left her with the brandy-bottle, so no doubt she is content."

"Oh, my poor James!"

"Your poor James, indeed. But I must go now. Nora, will you kiss me before I go?"

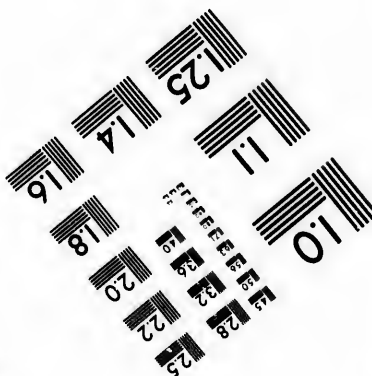
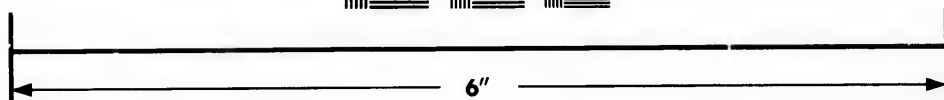
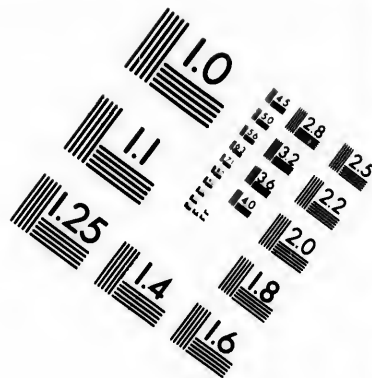
"Yes, James."

"And, my darling, as soon as I *know*, I will see you again; until then——"

"I shall try to find strength, James. I shall think of you and try to be strong; and you must try for my sake."

He took her in his arms and kissed her, and then again went out with his "burden of sorrow" into the dark night.





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## CHAPTER XXIX.

## A DEFERRED MARRIAGE.

Though Nora, in the end, had borne herself so bravely before Biddulph, yet scarcely was he gone when the overwhelming nature of the tidings he had brought her utterly overcame her, and she fell down on her knees and abandoned herself to the bitterest grief.

She could not restrain the choking sobs which seemed absolutely to rend her throat, and Palmer, hearing these, came into the room, and hurried up to her young mistress.

"Oh, Miss Stewart, what is it?" she cried. "What has Mr. Biddulph been and done? I thought he looked that awful, like a risen corpse, or something!"

Nora made no reply. She could not, indeed, have spoken—she was gasping for breath; and Palmer, seeing how ill she was, immediately began to sob aloud also.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" she exclaimed, "whatever shall we do? And everything ready, the dresses and all so beautiful!"

Palmer's cries and Nora's agonizing sobs in a few moments reached the ears of the lady who was occupying the bedroom situated above the dining-room, where they were. This was Lady Barbara Biddulph. She was sitting meditating, as her custom often was, before she retired to rest, with her feet on the fender, dressed in an old-fashioned white dimity dressing-gown, her gray hair in curl-papers, surmounted by a large white night-cap with a wide double frill.

She listened, and at once rose to her feet in her quick, brusque way. There was no mistake; some one was in bitter grief, and Lady Barbara was not the woman to hesitate. She wrapped a black woollen comforter round her throat, opened her bedroom door, and, guided by the sound of the sobs and cries, soon reached the dining-room, and stood for a moment outside, looking at the scene within.

This is what she saw. The bride of to-morrow was kneeling on the floor before a couch, her white arms flung forward, and her face hidden between them, while her whole form was heaving and convulsed. Beside her stood

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the maid, gasping and sobbing, too; and as Lady Barbara walked into the room with her firm step, Palmer turned round and emitted a loud shriek.

"What on earth is the matter?" asked Lady Bab, in her imperious way. "Girl," she continued, addressing Palmer, and seizing her by the arm and pushing her aside, "need you make a fool of yourself, too? Hold your tongue this instant, and go out of the room. My dear," she added, laying her hand on Nora's shoulder, "how is it I find you in such a state as this?"

Then Nora raised her stained, wet face, and looked at Lady Bab with eyes full of grief.

"Oh, Lady Barbara!" she gasped out; and she turned round and lifted up her arms as though appealingly—"oh, Lady Barbara, what shall I do?"

"Get up, and tell me what is the matter, my dear; that is the most sensible thing to do," answered Lady Bab, almost forcing Nora to rise with her strong bony hands. "Girl," she went on looking round at Palmer, who still lingered in the room, though her sobs had entirely ceased out of awe of Lady Bab, "have you any sal-volatile in the house? If you have, go and get it at once, and don't stand staring there. And now, my dear"—and again she turned to Nora, and put her arm around her quivering frame—"tell me what is the matter. Perhaps I may be able to help you, and you may trust me as if I were your mother; though I thank Heaven I never had any children to bother me! Is it anything about that nephew of mine? Why, I thought you and he seemed ridiculously fond of each other?"

"So we are," answered poor Nora, in a voice broken by sobs; "I care for him with all my heart, Lady Barbara; but—but something so dreadful has——"

"Don't talk about it for a moment or two. What is that girl about? Oh, there you are" (Palmer now entered). "Well, are you sure this is the right bottle?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Well, go and get some cold water, then. Now, my dear, you must drink some of this stuff, though I don't approve of people taking it, mind ye! But I suppose it will quiet your nerves, and then you and I will sit down and have a talk together, and I've no doubt we can put things all right between us."

Nora eagerly drank the sal-volatile, and in a few minutes grew more composed; and Lady Bab, seeing

this, suggested that she should go upstairs to her own room.

"I don't see any good in making things worse," she said; "and if we stay here we shall be catching colds in our heads, and all sorts of disagreeable things. I will go with you to your room, if you will allow me, for a quarter of an hour or so, and if you like to tell me what is the matter."

"You are most good, most kind. I am ashamed to have given way so; but James came to-night——"

"Come, now, don't give way again," said Lady Bab, with a kindly gleam in her keen gray eyes, as Nora's voice faltered and broke as she was concluding her sentence. "We had better go at once, and the maid and I will help you upstairs."

As Lady Bab said this she drew Nora's arm through hers, and desired Palmer to carry up the sal-volatile. But when they reached Nora's bedroom, she coolly ordered Palmer out of the room.

"And shut the door behind you, and don't put your ear to the keyhole outside," she added as a parting injunction, to the great indignation of Palmer.

"I am not in the habit of putting my ear to the keyhole, my lady," she answered, tossing her head.

"Oh, are you not? Well, don't begin now, then," said Lady Bab; and Palmer left the room, feeling she had been grossly insulted.

Yet so weak is human nature that, as the girl walked down the corridor, the temptation entered her heart to turn back again, and try to hear something that might explain Mr. Biddulph's mysterious visit, and her young mistress's uncontrollable emotion. And like many of us, wavering between duty and inclination, Palmer adopted a middle course. She stole back again on tiptoe to Nora's door, and stood there, but did not put her ear to the keyhole, and therefore could hear nothing distinctly.

In the meanwhile, in agitated whispers, Nora was taking Lady Barbara into her confidence. She was James Biddulph's aunt; and Nora was almost compelled to tell some one, or how could the marriage be deferred? She thought the position over for a moment or two, and then decided to tell Lady Barbara; and as that lady listened to the gruesome story her gray-tinted complexion grew a little pale.

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"Yet James seemed afraid," faltered Nora, looking at Lady Barbara with eager anxious eyes.

"But surely," answered Lady Bab, rising excitedly, "the idiot could tell! I know if my old general were to come back dead or alive, I should know him again in a moment."

"He said he could not be *sure*."

"Pleasant for you, I must say. And what do you say he is going to do—dig the poor woman up again!"

"It is all too dreadful!" said Nora, putting her hand over her face.

"For goodness sake, don't begin to cry again! How *could* James Biddulph be such a fool as ever to marry such a woman at all?"

"He was only a boy, you know."

"And a very stupid boy, that's my opinion! I am sorry for you, my dear;" and in her impulsive way, Lady Bab now returned to Nora's side and kissed her cheek. "Well, we must just try to make the best of it, I suppose; but it's a bad business—a very bad business. The wedding will, of course, have to be put off?"

"He said for a day."

"A pretty long day, if the woman's story be true! However, it mayn't be; and, in the meanwhile, what excuse can we make to defer the marriage?"

"We might say I am ill."

"You are ill enough, poor soul, in body and mind alike, I think. Have you a decent doctor that you can put any confidence in?"

"Yes, a very kind man; James has gone there now. Dr. Alexander will know now, for——"

"Send for Dr. Alexander, then, at six o'clock in the morning, and I will see him," interrupted Lady Bab, energetically. "He must say you are too ill to be married to-morrow, and I will tell the rest of the people, and keep them away from you."

"Oh, thank you; you are very kind!"

"Who is that intensely disagreeable old woman you call Cousin Margaret?"

"That is Mrs. Conway-Hope. She is sure to make me more unhappy."

"You must not let her into the room."

"She will force herself in, I am afraid."

"Not if I am here," said Lady Bab, with grim emphasis.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, my dear; I'll sleep in that big

armchair of yours there, and at six o'clock in the morning I'll call some of your people up, and send for the doctor—if we can only make that pert little maid hold her tongue."

Palmer, outside, had the pleasure of hearing the last remark, as Lady Bab spoke in very clear and decided tones.

"I do not think Palmer will say anything; but Lady Barbara, I cannot let you sit up all night—indeed you must not."

"Don't talk nonsense. Now ring for your maid to take all that rubbish off the bed, and then you get into it and go to sleep; come, now, be a good child, and do as you're told."

Again that kindly gleam stole into Lady Barbara's eyes; for the "rubbish," as she called it, she saw very well was some of Nora's wedding clothes, which Palmer had been engaged in packing when James Biddulph had arrived on his miserable errand. And in the open wardrobe hung the white shining wedding-gown and the long veil. It was pitiable; and Lady Barbara, in spite of her sharp tongue and plain speech, had a kind heart, and she felt intensely sorry for the poor girl, whose happiness and bright hopes had been so rudely interrupted.

But she did not say this. She rang for Palmer, who appeared after a discreet interval, and she insisted upon Nora going to bed, and on Palmer putting the marriage finery out of sight.

"And now, young woman," she said, addressing Palmer, in her brusque way, "you can go to bed, and I will stay beside Miss Stewart, and ring for you at six o'clock in the morning, and you must call up one of the men-servants, and send him for Dr. Alexander, as Miss Stewart is not well. And you have to hold your tongue—do you hear?—about what has occurred to-night. My nephew, Mr. Biddulph, has had some bad news, and hearing it has upset Miss Stewart, the marriage cannot take place to-morrow. But you have not to say a word about it."

"Very well, my lady."

"I dare say you have a kind mistress?" said Lady Bab, inquiringly.

"Yes, indeed I have," answered Palmer, sincerely.

"Then be kind to her, and don't gossip about all this, and you'll be no loser by it. And now go to bed."

But Palmer offered to sit up, and seemed so genuinely anxious about Nora, that Lady Barbara began to believe

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she was really attached to her young mistress, which indeed she was.

"It is not in mortal heart," she told her friend Alfred subsequently, when relating the events of this momentous night, "to feel no curiosity when such things are going on about one, and I could not sleep a wink for thinking what the secret could be. But that old lady need not accuse me of putting my ear to the keyhole, for all that."

And if Palmer could not sleep, Nora also could find no rest. She lay there, white, still, and prostrate, her heart torn by the most cruel doubts and fears. But presently from Lady Barbara's arm-chair proceeded distinct and audible evidence that her ladyship, at least, was able to compose herself to slumber. In fact, Lady Bab snored on steadily all night; and yet, as the hand of the clock pointed to six, she awoke, rubbed her eyes, and then rose erect and energetic as ever, and rang for Palmer.

"I can do that," she told Nora; "I fix the hour I have to rise, and I always wake then; I learn't to do it in General Biddulph's time, who was in a fine temper if he did not get his medicine to the minute, poor man."

When Palmer appeared, Alfred was called up and sent for Dr. Alexander. Then Lady Bab retired to her own room, to slightly change her costume to receive the doctor.

"Not that it matters much," she remarked; "but I suppose I must make myself presentable."

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## CHAPTER XXX.

### A DOCTOR'S NIGHT.

Lady Bab had not completed the change of dress that she deemed necessary for her interview with Dr. Alexander, when she was informed by Palmer that he had already arrived, and was waiting in the dining room to see her.

In truth, the poor doctor had spent a most miserable night, for he had been sleeping the sound sleep of an honest, over-worked man, after his accustomed two glasses of whiskey toddy, when he was roused by the loud ringing of the surgery-bell. The man was but human, and with a sigh he turned upon his pillow, and wished with all his



heart that his patient—as he supposed—had deferred his illness, or his visit, to a more convenient season.

However, there was no help for it, and with something between a groan and a yawn he arose, and donned his old plaid dressing-gown and his old worn slippers, and, shivering and unhappy, he descended the narrow staircase of his house, and, candle in hand, proceeded to unbar his door.

As he accomplished this, a gust of wind blew out his candle, and he found himself in the dark. But the next moment Biddulph spoke to him, and the doctor recognized his voice.

"Why mon," he said, in his broadest Scotch, "I took ye for a bogie. Come in, come in. What the de'il has set ye out on a night like this?"

"No good, you may be sure," answered Biddulph, as the doctor struck a match to relight his candle. "I have come to you to-night in such a strait as I think no man was ever in before."

The doctor by this time had succeeded in faintly illuminating the darkness, and as the light of his thin candle fell on Biddulph's pale, haggard face, he gave a sudden exclamation.

"What's happened?" he said. "Nothing wrang wi' Miss Nora Stewart, surely?"

"No," replied Biddulph, in a low, gloomy tone, as he followed the doctor into the parlor, where an expiring fire cast but cold comfort around; "yet it falls upon her—it is hardest upon her."

Then, in a lone tone of intense pain and suppressed emotion, he told the dreadful story, and the doctor listened in shocked astonishment.

"I've known twins as like as twa peas," he said, as Biddulph concluded; "but had the woman ye wed no mark ye could identify her by? Ever so small a thing would do; a mole, anything."

"She had a mole on her cheek," answered Biddulph, as if the memory were hateful to him; "but this woman at Dunbaan—Natalie, or her sister, which ever it be—said they both had this; but, I remember now, Natalie had two small brown moles on her right arm."

"They were not both likely to ha' these. Weel, Mr. Biddulph, it's a solemn thing to disturb the dead, but I see na help for it. And does Miss Leonora Stewart know?"

A look of inexpressible pain passed over Biddulph's face.

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"Yes," he said ; " and she has acted—as——" But here his voice broke, and he sank down on one of the doctor's chairs, and put his hand over his face.

"Nay, mon, ye mustn't break down. Ten to one it's the twin-sister after a'. But ha' some whiskey, Mr. Biddulph, and I'll make up the fire ; and ye must cheer up a bit, and we'll hope for the best."

But all the doctor's kindness could not rouse Biddulph from his overwhelming misery.

"I see her face still!" he cried, starting up. "And she had the same way of lifting her hand, the same expression in her eyes, as *Natalie*."

"Still, it may be the other one. But about her wedding-ring? Did ye not gi' her some token when——"

"In my mad folly?" said Biddulph, bitterly, as the doctor paused. "Yes, I gave her a wedding-ring and a guard-ring ; and in the inner circle of the guard-ring, I recollect now, her name was engraved."

"I took notice that yon poor soul lying in the kirkyard had a marriage-ring on, and a guard-ring, when we laid her there. Ye'll know her by this, Mr. Biddulph ; but yer wedding will ha' to be put off a wee'?"

"Yes," answered Biddulph, gloomily ; and then, forcing himself to speak, he made the necessary arrangements with the doctor for the grave in Balla kirkyard to be opened ; and, having done this, announced his intention to cross the loch and return to Dunbaan.

In vain the doctor pressed him to stay. Even his kindly, homely words jarred on Biddulph's ears, and he felt he would rather be alone. The night had somewhat improved, and after a silent pressure of the doctor's hand, he once more went out into the darkness, and feeling that the violent exertion and the danger were a sort of relief, he again crossed the stormy water, and arrived without accident at the small pier at Dunbaan, where he found the keeper and his son anxiously awaiting his arrival in the boat-house.

With brief thanks and without any explanation, he passed them and walked to the house, letting himself in with his pass-key, and speaking no word to old Donald, who was hovering about in the hall. Then he unlocked the library door, and found the woman he had left there lying on a couch fast asleep, and the brandy-bottle on the table, more than half emptied.

She was lying so that he could see her face very dis-

tinctly, and with a look of intense aversion he went up to her, and stood intently examining her features. They seemed but too familiar. Her attitude, also, was so like the woman he had believed dead that hope seemed to die in his heart, as he stood there watching the heavy sleeper.

Presently she stirred, threw back her left hand, and he saw she had *no wedding-ring* on, *nor guard-ring*. She had, indeed, no rings on; and Biddulph now noticed that her dress was shabby and travel-stained.

While he was still standing near her, she awoke with a start, sat up and rubbed her eyes, and seemed scarcely to know where she was. Then memory suddenly came back to her.

"Is that you, James?" she said. "So you have got back? I was so tired I fell asleep."

"Yes," he answered, still looking at her.

"Well, I hope you have changed your mind; that you'll give me the money and let me go quietly away."

"I have not changed my mind."

"But you won't surely——"

"What have you done with your wedding-ring and your guard-ring?"

A dusky blush came through the woman's dark skin as she looked down on her uncovered hand.

"If you must know the truth," she said, "I lent them to poor Josephine when she came here; I suppose they will be——"

"We shall see to-morrow," answered Biddulph; and without another word he left her, going to his own room and locking the door behind him, and wishing, as he had once done before, that he had never been born.

It seemed to the poor doctor that he had scarcely got into bed again after Biddulph had left him, though he had really been there an hour or two, when again he was roused from his slumber by the loud ringing of the surgery-bell.

Once more the unhappy man descended in the cold, and this time he found it was a message from Rossmore, to say that Miss Stewart had been taken suddenly ill, and that he must go at once.

"Na wonder, puir lassie!" he thought, as he listened to Alfred's words. "I'll go directly, my lad," he said; and he did this, and, on a black, dark winter morning, shortly

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found himself in the dining room at Rossmore, waiting until Nora was ready to see him.

The door presently opened, and Lady Barbara Biddulph entered, erect and tall, with a black woollen shawl wrapped round her shoulders, and some sort of black gown on; but her gray hair was still in curl papers, though she had taken off her night cap out of compliment to the doctor, who naturally looked at her with some surprise.

"Are you Dr. Alexander?" she asked, as she approached the gaunt Scotchman.

"I am, ma'am," he answered, for he did not in the least know who she was.

She looked at him a moment with her keen gray eyes, and then decided he was a man to be trusted.

"Have you seen my nephew James Biddulph to-night?" she next inquired. "I *am* Lady Barbara Biddulph, and have come down to this place to be present at his marriage, if it takes place;" and again she regarded him scrutinizingly.

"It's a vera bad business," answered the doctor, casting down his small eyes.

"He has made a nice fool of himself, it seems," said Lady Bab, grimly. "I am sorry for the girl—for Miss Stewart, and I have sent for you to give some color to the excuse we are obliged to make to put off the wedding. I want you to say Miss Stewart is too ill to be married to-morrow."

"She'll na be over weel anyhow, puir lassie! Ay, Lady Barbara Biddulph, I've seen yer nephew, Mr. Biddulph, in the sma' hours, and he's like a man distraught. It's a fearsome business fra' first to last; but ye know the story?"

"That poor girl upstairs has told me. I heard some one crying bitterly, and came downstairs to see what was the matter, and found Miss Nora Stewart and her little goose of a maid both in hysterics, the mistress really and the maid pretending. But I soon stopped *her*."

"Mr. Biddulph had left then?"

"Of course he had, or I think I should have given him a good shaking. Did you ever hear of a man making such a fool of himself? It was known in the family he had some low connection or other, though he never told his father he had married this woman—and a great idiot he was to do it."

"It's a sare pity."

"Pity! I really can't pity him; I pity the girl. But after he saw this woman die, and went to her funeral, now

to say she has reappeared again, really is too disgusting! What do you think, doctor? Are two people ever so alike that you cannot tell the difference between them?"

"I've seen twin bairns that the mother couldna tell any difference betwixt them, and I've seen grown up folks sa like that when they were apart ye couldna tell which it was; but when put face to face, there's mostly some subtle distinction."

"And he's going to have the grave opened?"

"Ay."

"A nice wedding-day, truly! And you're to be present I suppose?"

"My leedy, don't be hard on Mr. Biddulph, for he's in a sare strait."

"Brought on by his own folly, and I've no patience with him. But talking about it won't mend the matter. The facts are, James Biddulph, I suppose, believed his wife was dead, and now a woman so like her has cast up that it must either be herself or the twin-sister she pretends died when she was supposed to die."

"These are the facts, my leedy."

"The marriage, therefore, has not to take place to-morrow, and I do not want all the people in the house to know and gossip about this horrid story. You must see Miss Nora Stewart and say she is too ill to be married; and too ill, also, to see visitors in her room."

"It will be unco' hard to keep Mrs. Conway-Hope out."

"She's a detestable person; I noticed her. But if you give me authority to prevent her, I'll stop her."

A grim smile stole over the doctor's large face.

"She's unco' bad to stop," he said.

"And so am I!" answered Lady Bab, with energy.

"But come now and see the poor girl upstairs; her face looks so changed since last night, I should scarcely have known her."

"Between a light heart and a heavy one there's a deal o' difference," said the doctor, with a sigh; and then he followed Lady Barbara to Nora's room, and could find no words when he took her cold, trembling hand in his big one, so deeply was he moved by the expression of the poor girl's face.

"Well, my dear, here's your doctor," said Lady Bab, in her brusque way; and though I am not fond of the profession as a rule, and never go near them when I can help it, I think we can trust him."



## CHAPTER XXXI.

## THE TWIN-SISTERS.

The same day, about twelve o'clock, a weird and ghastly scene took place in the outer porch of the kirk at Balla.

There were assembled there five persons, James Biddulph, Dr. Alexander, the Rev. Andrew Macdonald, and the woman whose unlooked-for appearance at Dunbaan had caused all this misery. And lying on the flags, in the centre of the little group, was a newly disinterred coffin, and a man was kneeling beside it, engaged in unscrewing the lid.

It was a gray and murky day, and James Biddulph, leaning with folded arms against the time-stained walls of the porch, spoke to none, and scarcely raised his eyes. The expression of his face was all gloom, and his pallor was very great. Opposite to him stood the woman, crying, and with her head turned away from the coffin as if the sight were more than she could bear; and near her was the doctor, grave and solemn, for it seemed to him a terrible thing, this disturbance of the dead.

There was no noise but the sound of the screw-driver and the woman's suppressed sobs. The Rev. Andrew Macdonald's usually rosy face was pale too, for he was a timid, easy-going man, and liked nothing out of the common to occur. He looked uncomfortable and disturbed, and gave a visible start when the man kneeling on the flags exclaimed:

"That's the last one out! Shall I lift the lid now, gentlemen?"

"Yes," said Biddulph, in a changed, hoarse voice; and he made a step forward.

Then the man raised the lid, and Biddulph and the doctor went near, and stood for a moment or two looking silently down at the face of the dead. Suddenly Biddulph staggered and fell back; but the doctor, more used to the evidences of our frail humanity, knelt down by the coffin and took hold of the dead woman's hand, on which was a gold wedding-ring and keeper.

Her face was but little changed. The doctor gazed at her earnestly, and then turned round and looked at the



woman, who was standing behind, shrinking a little back, curious, yet afraid.

"Step forward, if ye please," said the doctor, addressing her; and the living woman advanced a step or two, and looked with half-averted eyes at the face of her dead twin-sister.

"Oh, this is too horrible!" she cried the next moment, turning away her head. "James Biddulph, I can't stand this. Give me some money, and let me go."

"Not until I know the truth," said Biddulph, sternly; and again he advanced and grasped the living woman's wrist, and pulled her back close to the coffin, eagerly scanning her face as he did so, and then looking down again at the dead.

The features were the same, the dark hair the same, even the shape of the hands. Each had a brown mole on the left cheek, and two small moles on the right arm. The likeness was so extraordinary, so wonderful, that it seemed to the horror-stricken gazers as if it were the same woman at once alive and dead; and with an exclamation of intense loathing, almost dread, Biddulph again fell back, while the doctor, too, uttered a bewildered cry.

"Eh, this is just marvellous; it's uncanny—nothing short of it," he said.

"Madam," said the Rev. Andrew Macdonald, plucking up his courage, "in this solemn hour, face to face with your dead sister, you will surely speak the truth. Are you Mr. Biddulph's wife or no?"

"I am," answered the woman, who was greatly overcome; *that*—and she pointed with her trembling hand—"is my twin-sister, poor Josephine. I don't defend what we did; we did it for money. Josephine did it for money, and it cost her her life. But all the same, I am speaking the truth. I was married to James Biddulph twelve years ago."

"And was your sister married also?" asked the Rev. Andrew.

"She said so; I don't know;" and she hesitated.

"She has a marriage-ring on, *pour* soul," said the doctor, touching the chill, encoffined hand.

"That is my marriage-ring, and my keeper," said the woman, more firmly. "I lent it to Josephine when we meant to deceive James Biddulph. "If you will take it off, sir," she continued, addressing the doctor, "you will see, in the inner circle of the guard-ring, my name is

engraved. You gave it to me," she added, looking at Biddulph.

The doctor gently drew the rings off the dead woman's hand, and there true enough, in the inner circle of the guard-ring, was engraved the word "*Natalie*," and a date twelve years ago.

"If I tell you," said the woman, now looking at Biddulph, "the shop you bought it at, and what you said when you put it on my hand, will you believe me?"

"How can I tell?" he answered, with intense scorn. "To such as you the most sacred things in life are but a jest!"

She crossed over and whispered a few words in his ear, and as she did so, a dark red flush came on his pale face.

"You are a *devil*," he muttered, in a low tone, starting back; and then an overwhelming rage seemed to seize him.

"Yes," he cried, in a loud voice, lifting his arm, his eyes full of hatred and despair, "I believe you. You are Natalie Beranger, the woman who tricked and deceived me into a marriage twelve years ago, and have now tricked and deceived me again. But you won't gain anything this time for wrecking my life. You did this for money, and you won't get any. I'll give you but one thing—my bitter, bitter curse!"

"My dear sir, consider this sacred edifice," said the Rev. Andrew, who was frightened at Biddulph's violence.

"You *must* give me some money; I have nothing to live on," sobbed the woman.

"Come away, my dear fellow," said the doctor, going up to Biddulph, and putting his arm through his. "If ye are satisfied this is the lady ye wed twelve years ago, there is nothing more to be said, and the minister here will see that yon puir soul"—and he pointed to the dead woman—"is put back to her long rest."

But Biddulph, excited beyond control, cursed the woman again as she stood there cowering before him, and was with difficulty half dragged by the doctor into the vestry.

"Bide here a wee, mon," said the doctor, in his kindly way, "and then gan' on to my house till ye come round a bit. Ay, it's enough to break a mon's heart; and to think o' the bonny lassie, too, who loves ye sa weel! But ye may be free some day; the leedy in there"—and he nodded in the direction of the porch—"looks as if she

liked a drop too much, and the bottle, though I say it who perhaps shouldn't, is not conducive to longevity."

It is as well not to record here Biddulph's answer. His darkest mood was on the man, and hatred and disgust were in his heart. It was a moment when the fierce hidden passions of humanity break loose, and the unchained tongue pours forth words that are ever best unsaid. The doctor listened, grave and sympathetic, until the storm spent itself, and then again proposed that Biddulph should go to his house.

"And—Nora?" asked Biddulph, in a broken, faltering voice.

"Weel, I've been thinking I might drop in at Rossmore, and ha' a private word wi' the old leedy, yer aunt. Ye'll see Miss Stewart by and by yersel', but she's best wi' the woman-folk to-day, I'm thinking."

"I will see her," said Biddulph, in a low tone of passionate emotion, "once more, and then I will go away never to return; I have not strength for more."

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### WAITING FOR THE NEWS.

Let us now go back a few hours, and see how things were going on at Rossmore, where the bridal guests were assembled, and were informed by Lady Barbara Biddulph at breakfast-time that there was to be no marriage that day.

The first person she told this to was Mrs. Conway-Hope. This lady found Lady Barbara standing before the dining-room fire, with her back to it, dressed in a dark gray homespun, and altogether with no appearance of wedding finery nor pleased excitement.

The wedding had been fixed to take place early, and Mrs. Conway-Hope had already donned a handsome brocaded silk gown, which had been Nora's marriage gift to her father's cousin.

She entered the room, smiling and self-satisfied, for she thought the new gown became her, and had wrested a promise from Nora that for the present at least she might remain on at Rossmore.

"How are you, Lady Barbara?" she said, advancing to-

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ward the grim figure standing on the hearthrug. "Well, I am afraid we have not got a very fine day for our wedding."

"There will be no wedding to-day," replied Lady Barbara, brusquely.

"No wedding!" repeated Mrs. Conway-Hope, in the utmost astonishment. "You are joking, I suppose, Lady Barbara."

"I rarely joke; certainly not on such a subject as this. The bride is seriously ill."

"Nora? Poor child! I must go to her at once;" and Mrs. Conway-Hope turned to leave the room.

"No, Mrs. Conway-Hope, you must *not*," said the determined voice of Lady Bab. "I have strict orders from the doctor that no one is to be allowed to go into her room but myself."

Mrs. Conway-Hope paused, for Lady Bab's manner was very authoritative; but, after a moment's hesitation, she drew herself up and prepared to defy the new-comer.

"I shall *insist* upon seeing my cousin, Miss Nora Stewart, at once," she said.

"It will do no good, your insisting; I may as well tell you plainly I will not allow it."

"And who gave you this authority in this house, may I ask?" inquired Mrs. Conway-Hope, with suppressed indignation.

"Dr. Alexander and Miss Nora Stewart herself. I was particularly told to keep *you* out," added Lady Bab, with relish.

"Then there is a mystery in all this! You are concealing something, Lady Barbara Biddulph?"

"She is not to be disturbed. She took ill during the night, and we had to call up Dr. Alexander, and he declares it is impossible she can be married to-day, and I am deputed to tell the wedding guests that the marriage is deferred."

"And *I* was not informed of all this—I, her nearest relation and friend?"

"Near relations are not always near friends," replied Lady Bab, with biting satire.

Mrs. Conway-Hope opened her lips to make some cutting retort; when the room-door opened, and the two Lees and Lord Glendoyne entered together.

The girls were not yet dressed for the wedding, but wore pretty pale tinted plush tea-gowns. They came into the

room, smiling and coquetting with the languid Glendoyne, who also seemed a little more excited than he usually did.

"Good-morning, Lady Barbara," said Maud Lee, who was the most talkative of the two sisters; "so our bride is not down yet?"

"She is not coming down," answered Lady Barbara.

"Miss Lee, you will be surprised—more than surprised—at least, I have been so," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, "to hear that Lady Barbara Biddulph has announced to me that Nora Stewart, *my* near relation, is too ill to be married to-day, though *I* have heard nothing of this illness before. It is inconceivable to me, I admit—absolutely inconceivable."

"Not to be married to-day?" repeated Maud Lee, in utter astonishment.

"Miss Nora Stewart," said Lady Barbara, in that sharp incisive way of hers, "took seriously ill during the night, and we had to call in the doctor, and he declares it is utterly impossible that she can be married to-day; and I have his orders, also, to allow no one to go into her room but her maid and myself;" and Lady Barbara gave a defiant glance with her keen gray eyes at Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"Oh, poor thing! I am *so* sorry," said Maud Lee.

"Rather rough on Mr. Biddulph," remarked Glendoyne.

"Extraordinary!" hissed Mrs. Conway-Hope.

"A fact, at any rate," said Lady Barbara, seating herself at the breakfast-table, which was spread in the Scottish lavish manner. "Now, young people, sit down and let us have breakfast, and then you must try to amuse yourselves as best you can."

"Very good advice," answered Glendoyne, taking advantage of it. "Miss Lee, may I help you to some of this kippered salmon?"

Glendoyne, who was a man of the world, and had considerable tact, saw very well there was something behind all this, but he did not show it. He talked in his easy languid way to Lady Barbara and Maud Lee, though, when he spoke to Mrs. Conway-Hope, she only assented with a groan.

"I had a presentiment," she presently said, in hollow tones, over her teacup.

"I hope it was a pleasant one?" asked Lady Bab, sarcastically.

"No, Lady Barbara, it was *not*," replied Mrs. Conway-Hope, with bitter emphasis.

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"That's a pity, or we might have asked you to amuse us with it. This is the land of presentiments and omens, is it not, Lord Glendoyne?" said Lady Bab.

"Yes," he answered, with a smile; "all families of distinction have, or pretend to have, an intimate acquaintance with something uncanny. Either it is the spirit of some slain enemy of the house, or of some hapless maiden who had succumbed too readily to a dead ancestor's attractions. In our case, the forlorn maiden does the business, I believe, and is supposed to appear, wringing her hands, etc., before any family misfortune occurs."

"And have you ever seen her?" asked Maud Lee, eagerly.

"Truthfully, I cannot say that I have; and yet I have had no end of misfortunes. I looked for her one night in the brilliant moonlight at Lahore—the night on which I signed away the old acres—but she did not appear."

"Oh, I wish she had!" cried Maud Lee.

"Well, I'm very glad she didn't," said Glendoyne. "Perhaps some day she'll remember the man from Glasgow, Mr. Fraser, who bought Inismore, and I shall not grudge her that luxury."

"He's awfully rich, isn't he?" asked Maud Lee, with interest.

"Awfully," replied Glendoyne, with great gravity.

"Now I shall leave you young ladies to amuse Lord Glendoyne," said Lady Bab, rising, for she had finished her breakfast.

"And do you mean to say you *refuse* to allow me to see my cousin Nora, Lady Barbara? I simply ask you *that*," now inquired Mrs. Conway-Hope, in a tone of intense exasperation, rising also.

"Yes, I simply refuse;" and then, erect and energetic as usual, Lady Bab quitted the room, and Mrs. Conway-Hope lifted her hands in astonishment as the door closed behind her.

"Well I must say I never saw such a person before!" she exclaimed.

"Must have kept the old general well in hand, I should say," suggested Glendoyne.

"She's hugely amusing, I think," said Maud Lee. "I suppose she won't let me see poor Nora either. In that case, what do you say to a game of billiards, Lord Glendoyne? There's a good table."

He assented; and presently the billiard-room rang with



Maud's shrill laughter, in spite of poor Nora's supposed illness.

"D'ye know, it's a very awkward thing, this marriage being put off," by and by said Glendoyne, standing contemplatively, cue in hand.

"Yes, isn't it tiresome!" answered Maud. "I wish some one else would get married instead of poor Nora, if she is too ill. What do you say, Lord Glendoyne?" and she smiled coquettishly.

"Don't in the least object," he answered.

"Will you be the victim, then?"

"Certainly I shall not; not at all in my way."

But while Maud Lee was chattering nonsense to Glendoyne, upstairs Nora was enduring to the bitter end one of the cruellest feelings that wring the human heart. It seemed almost too dreadful to bear, to wait hour after hour before she knew the truth. It was the doubt, the uncertainty, that seemed killing her. Her face was pallid, almost gray-tinted, with deep violet rims round her large dark eyes; and the expression of her eyes was so painful, so strained, that Lady Barbara turned her own keen ones away, not caring to look on such misery.

Lady Barbara herself kept walking up and down the room with restless impatience, occasionally looking at her large old-fashioned gold watch. "Oh, would the time never pass!" thought the poor girl, wringing her hands, though she spoke no word. "I wish the idiots would be quick," again and again Lady Bab inwardly reflected.

Then they heard the house-door bell ring, and with strained ears listened, expecting some news at last. But it was only Jock Fraser and Minnie, arriving as guests at the marriage which was not to be. But the unstaying hand of time went on, and just about one o'clock there came a rap at the locked bedroom door.

"Who is there?" asked Lady Bab, sharply.

"Only the doctor," replied Dr. Alexander's voice; and Lady Bab hastily unfastened the door, and there, visibly agitated, stood the tall, gaunt Scotchman, and they saw by his face he had nothing good to tell.

"Well," said Lady Bab, with a little break in her usually clear voice, "what news do you bring us?"

He shook his head, his pitying eyes fixed the while on Nora's agonized face.

"Do speak, man!" cried Lady Bab, in uncontrollable impatience. "What is your news?"

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"Na gude," he answered ; and as the words passed from his lips, Nora fell forward on her knees, with a bitter, bitter cry.

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

## THE DOCTOR'S LOVE-TOKEN.

Both the doctor and Lady Bab ran at once toward Nora, and lifted her up in their arms.

"My dear girl!" said Lady Bab.

"Don't break down, for *his* sake, my bonnie lassie," half whispered the doctor, with infinite compassion and tenderness.

Nora looked from one to the other with such a piteous expression in her dark eyes, that an unwonted moisture and softness stole into Lady Bab's keen gray orbs.

"My dear," she began, a little tremulously, smoothing back Nora's hair from her burning brow, "if I were to tell you he is not worth it, I suppose you would not believe me, so it's no good my doing so. But all the same I think it! James Biddulph ought to be ashamed of himself, if he isn't."

"He is just broken down wi' grief, my leedy," said the doctor, "and he's na to blame."

"Oh, of course *you'll* stand up for him; men always do for each other," retorted Lady Bab; "but I repeat, he ought to be ashamed of himself to have allowed such a creature as this ever to have obtained any power over him."

"Ay, but fra' Solomon downwards, my leedy, what mon is alway' proof against a woman's wiles?" answered the doctor, who was now engaged in mixing a composing draught for Nora.

"Solomon indeed! I have always thought Solomon ought to be ashamed of himself, too," sharply replied Lady Bab. "Pray do not bring *him* up!"

"Weel, but if the wisest mon——"

"Do be quick with that mixture, and don't stand arguing there," interrupted Lady Bab, without ceremony. "Now drink this, my dear," she continued, addressing Nora, "and then try to get a little rest. The suspense is over now, and let me tell you James Biddulph has had a greater loss than you have had."

Nora drank what they gave her, and then leaned her head against Lady Bab's erect, spare form.

"The woman he had the misfortune to marry is alive, then, I suppose, and her twin-sister was shot, and thus he was deceived?" said Lady Bab in her quick way, now looking at the doctor.

"That is so, my leedy."

"And there is no mistake? He was satisfied in his own mind that this was so?"

"He was fully satisfied."

"Then we don't want to hear any horrid details. Now my dear"—and again she turned to Nora—"lie down on the bed, and your friend the doctor here will stay by you until I return. It's a bad business, but it might have been worse, and we must all just try to make the best of it."

Nora did not refuse Lady Barbara's request. A great bodily weakness seemed to have come over her, as though the mental strain had been too great for its frail tenement of clay. She rose to her feet at Lady Barbara's bidding, but sank back again as if unable to walk. The doctor and Lady Bab, however, assisted her to cross the room, and then Nora lay down on the bed with a deep and weary sigh.

And after Lady Bab had carefully covered her with a rug, she quietly beckoned to the doctor to follow her one moment from the room. When they were outside, she had a word or two to whisper in his ear.

"Who is downstairs?" she asked. "Is that Mr. Fraser there—Mr. Fraser of Airdlinn?"

"Yes, my leedy."

"Will you, then, ask him to come to speak to me alone for a few minutes? This wretched story will have to be told, I suppose, and as he is a relative of Miss Stewart's, and looks a kind man, I think he is the best person to tell it to."

"There's na better fellow in the world than Jock Fraser! Vera weel, then, I'll send him to ye, my leedy."

"Yes, do; and where did you leave my nephew, James Biddulph?"

"He's at my house in Balla. Don't be hard on him, Leedy Barbara, for his cross is almost too heavy for mortal mon to bear."

"I've no patience——" began Lady Barbara; and then she remembered the stricken girl lying inside the room, and her voice sank into a whisper. "Tell Mr. Fraser to

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go into the dining-room, and I shall be there, and then you come back to her"—and she nodded in the direction of the bedroom door—"for she must not be left alone."

Having thus given her commands, Lady Barbara returned to Nora, until the doctor again knocked at the door, when she quietly left the room, and, descending the staircase, made her way to the dining-room to have her interview with Jock Fraser.

She found him waiting for her. Jock was standing, with an uneasy look on his kind face, in the centre of the room, and his eyes and Lady Bab's alike involuntarily fell on a great white, massive structure towering on the side-board.

This was the bridescake, which had been unpacked before it had been announced by Lady Barbara at breakfast-time that the wedding had been deferred, at least for the day, and no one had liked to interfere and give any orders for its removal. It stood there now, looking strangely out of place somehow, and Lady Bab glanced at it with an impatient sigh.

"Good morning, Mr. Fraser," she said the next moment, extending her bony hand. "I little thought when I parted with you last night, to be forced this morning to seek such an interview with you as this."

"They have been saying in the drawing-room that Nora Stewart is too ill to be married to-day, Lady Barbara; but I hope it is nothing very serious?" answered the kindly Jock, with genuine concern expressed on his honest face.

"It's about as serious as it can well be, that's the truth, Mr. Fraser, I have not thought much of the sense or discretion of your sex all my life, but I did not expect to be so utterly ashamed of one of my own relations—at least of a young man who bears my name, for, thank Heaven, he is no blood-relation of mine—as I am feeling to-day."

Jock looked more uneasy still.

"Surely," he began, hesitatingly, "Nora's illness has nothing to do with Mr. Biddulph——"

"It has everything to do with Mr. Biddulph. James Biddulph has caused it by his insane folly, and a pretty story it is for a respectable woman to have to tell to a man. However, the long and the short of it is that it must be told, and therefore I have sent for you, as you are a relation of the poor girl's. You know he was married long ago?"

A spasm passed over poor Jock's face. Lady Bab in

her excitement had forgotten, if she had ever known, who was supposed to be the slayer of Mr. Biddulph's wife.

"Well, this woman has cast up again——"

"What?" cried Jock, a gleam of sudden hope and joy lighting his brown eyes; "then—then she did not die——"

"Unfortunately, she did not die when James Biddulph, to do him justice, and everyone else expected she did. It was her twin-sister, it seems, who was shot; and this woman, this wife of his, had sent this twin-sister down here to try to get more money from this stupid nephew of mine; for how a man could not recognize his own wife, passes my understanding. However, he did not; he had never heard of this-twin sister, and they say the likeness between them is, or was, something wonderful. It deceived James Biddulph, at all events, and he believed himself a free man, and thus became engaged to Miss Nora Stewart."

"And—and this woman, this wife," said Jock Fraser, with faltering tongue and a sinking heart, for his eager hope that his boy's hand was not stained with blood had faded quickly away, "has reappeared?"

"He went home and found her waiting for him last night at Dunbaan. He did not believe her story at first; he believed that *she* was the twin-sister, and that she had come for the purpose of extorting money, which indeed she had. But he had the honor at least to come over here and tell the whole truth to Nora Stewart. After he was gone, I heard the poor girl wailing in bitter grief, and I stayed with her all night, for the suspense was almost too terrible for her to bear. But it is over now. James Biddulph had the dead woman disinterred an hour ago, and saw these two—these twin-sisters—face to face, and he is satisfied that he had been basely deceived; that, in truth, his wife is living still."

"It is terrible for Nora Stewart."

"Most terrible, and I have sent for you to act as you think right in this matter. There can be no marriage of course now, and the people in the house had better be sent away as quickly as possible."

Jock Fraser did not speak; he cast down his eyes, and his lips moved nervously.

"Will you do this?" asked Lady Barbara, quickly.

"Lady Barbara Biddulph," said Jock, now lifting his sad eyes to her face, "it would be painful to me, under the circumstances, to do this. Ask some one else; say Mrs. Conway-Hope."

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"I detest that woman."

"She is a relation of Nora's also. I can tell her if you like."

"Very well, settle it between you; and get the people out of the house, and have all these things"—and she pointed to the bridescape—"hidden away from the poor girl's sight."

While this conversation was going on downstairs between Lady Barbara and Jock Fraser, upstairs Nora and the doctor were exchanging a few sad words.

He did not speak to her when he first went into the room, but sat quietly down by the fire, looking vaguely at the glowing embers, and thinking sorrowfully enough of the terrible wreck that had come to two young lives.

But presently Nora moved on the bed, and turned her head and looked at him.

"Are you there, doctor?" she said, with a pathetic ring in her low voice.

"Yes, my dear young leedy," he answered, rising and going toward her; "and how are ye feeling now?"

"I want you to tell me about James—about Mr. Bidulph," she said, lifting her dark eyes to his face. "Where is he now?"

"He's at my house; I left him there till I came to tell ye my ill news."

"Tell him from me," said Nora, a faint color for a moment stealing to her pale face, "that he must not grieve; that—that this can make no change to my heart."

The doctor heaved a heavy sigh.

"Things may change," he said, "for human life is ay' uncertain—like its joys and woes."

"We—were so happy," said Nora, with a little tremulous break in her voice.

"Ay, that was plain to see. He just worshipped the ground ye trod on, Miss Stewart; and he's broken down wi' grief, puir fellow!"

"But tell him, for my sake——" began Nora, and then a little sob choked her utterance.

"Have ye na little token to send him?" said the doctor, clearing his throat to hide his own emotion—"a bit of ribbon, or a flower, or something, just to show him a kindness?"

Poor Nora looked around, and on all sides little tokens



met her eyes of the marriage which was not to be—white flowers, white ribbons, white gloves; she could not send him these, when black sorrow lay so heavy on his heart. But some rings were lying on the toilet-table, valuable rings flung carelessly down last night in her overwhelming grief; and she asked the doctor to hand her one of these, a diamond ring she often wore.

"Give him this," she said, "and—and tell him the sender will not change; tell him——"

At this moment the bedroom door opened with a sudden jerk, and Lady Bab walked into the room, while the doctor hastily concealed the ring in his waistcoat-pocket.

But Lady Bab's eyes had been too sharp for him. She saw the glitter of the diamonds as they disappeared into the doctor's pocket; but she made no comment.

"How are you now, my dear?" she said to Nora, approaching the bed.

"I feel a little better, Lady Barbara," answered Nora.

"You look a little better; the doctor's visit seems to have done you good."

"And as I've other puir sick folk to look to, my leedy, I'll just take my leave for the present; but I'll drop in and see how Miss Stewart is going on in an hour or twa," said the doctor, with rather a guilty look.

"All right; I will take care of her."

So the doctor escaped with his prize, thinking grimly to himself as he went, that he was in truth a strange bearer of a love-token.

"Of a' the queer emissaries o' Cupid, I'm about the queerest, I think; but what matter, if it eases a bit their puir aching hearts?"

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### A MAN'S DESPAIR.

He went straight home, and when he entered his little parlor he found Biddulph sitting there with folded arms, and his head bowed upon his breast. He looked up as the doctor opened the door, and there was despair in his gray eyes, and on his haggard face.

"Weel, and how are ye getting on?" said the doctor, with affected cheerfulness.

But Biddulph made no answer. He had been sitting there alone and silent ever since he had quitted the kirk with the doctor, and the darkest gloom overwhelmed his soul. There was no loophole, it seemed to him, no light. And the bitterest anguish was in his heart too, when he thought of Nora Stewart. The blight that he had brought on her young life, the crushing misery on the day she had fondly dreamed was to be her bridal one, added a hundred-fold to his own wretchedness, and hope had died for him, leaving him but black despair.

"Have you seen her?" he said at length, while the doctor was trying to frame some consolatory words.

"I just have, then; and I've left her mair composed than we could hope for, and she bade me tell ye that ye are na' to grieve."

"Not to grieve!" said Biddulph, starting to his feet; "when every hope of my life is shattered at one blow? Doctor," he went on excitedly, "it seems too hideous, too hideous to be true, and yet it is true; yon miserable woman whispered a few words in my ear which none but she could know."

"Don't distract yer mind any mair about the truth o' it, Mr. Biddulph; we must accept that. And Miss Nora Stewart, as I was telling ye, knows it all; and she sent ye a token by me—this ring—and she bade me tell ye her heart would know na change."

These words greatly affected Biddulph. He took the ring in his trembling hand and again sat down, turning his face away from the doctor.

"That old leedy, yer aunt, left me alone wi' her for a while, and her first thoughts were for ye. Where were ye? she asked; and she bade me say to ye that for *her* sake ye had na to grieve; and there was a look in her bonny dark eyes when she spoke of ye that a mon's heart might be proud to ha' won."

"But that's the bitterest of it all, the pain to her; I could bear it but for that—bear my own disappointment and unutterable shame! But to think of this girl, this noble, gentle girl, utterly unmans me."

"It's a sare blow, na doubt, and sarer because it fa's on the bonny lassie who loves ye sa weel. But, mon, it must just be borne like any other evil thing."

"It's easy talking."

"And d'ye think I've na feeling too? I'd rather ha' cut off my right hand, Mr. Biddulph, than ha' gan' wi' the news I had to carry to Rossmore to-day."

"Forgive me; you are very good, very kind, but grief makes one selfish, I suppose. And did she say anything else?"

"The old leedy did not gi' us much time; and she'd her eye on me, keen as a hawk's, as I slipped the ring into my waistcoat. But she's a kind heart; she railed sare at mon-folk fra' Solomon downward; but there was a soft glint passed o'er her face whene'r she looked at Miss Nora Stewart."

Biddulph made no answer to this, but began walking up and down the little room.

"There is but one thing left for me to do in honor," he said presently, as though half speaking to himself.

"And that is?" said the doctor, and then he paused.

"To go away out of her life, and out of her sight. I have no right to blight her whole existence. I know her nature; she would cling to me even now, as she clung to me when they called me a murderer. But this must not be; I will see her again, and then leave England for years—and she will forget."

His voice trembled and broke as he uttered the last few words, and the doctor looked at him with the deepest pity.

He opened his lips to speak, when a ring came to the house door-bell, and he approached the window to see if it were a patient.

It was a lad with a note; and a moment or two later, the elderly woman who was the doctor's sole domestic rapped at the room door, and put in her head.

"It's a note for the gentleman, sir," she said.

The doctor held out his hand and took the note, and, after glancing at the address, handed it to Biddulph.

And when Biddulph saw the handwriting, a terrible look came over his face, and he flung it passionately on the floor.

"This is too much!" he said.

"Is it fra'——"

"The woman who has blighted my whole life, who has been its curse, its bane! You may read it if you like," he continued bitterly; "it will harp on one string—'money, give me money to gamble and to drink.'"

The doctor stooped down and picked up the note, and

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would have again handed it to Biddulph, but he would not take it.

"No," he said ; "she has done her worst now, and I will never again speak a word to her, nor read a line she writes. I will allow her the same income which she had before I inherited Dunbaan—four hundred a year—so that she may not starve, but not a penny more."

"It's mair than enough ; but the laddie's waiting at the door for an answer, sa what shall I say ?"

"There is no answer ; give him back the note."

"Eh, mon, but if ye do that, she'll be here before we can turn oursel's round. I'll see her if it pleases ye, and tell her what ye say, and what ye mean to allow her for her maintenance."

"Will you really do this ? If you will I shall be greatly indebted to you ; and you can give her some money"—and he put his hand in his pocket and drew out some gold and notes—"to pay her train and get her away. Here is ten pounds, and when she gets to London she will find one hundred awaiting her at my solicitor's. And each quarter one hundred will be paid her, nothing more nor less."

Biddulph spoke briefly, harshly, and the doctor saw this was no time to discuss the matter further with him.

"I'll just put on my hat and go at once, then," he said. "Will ye bide here till I come back ?"

"I don't want to hear what she says ; I will listen to nothing. But don't let her come to Dunbaan. If she comes there it will be at her own peril."

"I'll get her away as quietly as I can. Weel, then, guid-bye for the present, Mr. Biddulph ; and if ye're not here when I return, I'll see ye across the water before nightfall."

"I will come here during the evening. I want to hear how——"

"I understand," said the doctor, nodding his head ; and then he left the room, and Biddulph watched his tall, ungainly figure wending down the village, until he stopped at the little hostelry where Madame de Beranger, as she called herself, was supposed to be staying.

He asked to see her, and found her sitting in the little parlor upstairs, with a bottle of whiskey on the table, and two empty soda-water bottles. But she was sober enough. She looked up as the doctor rapped at the room door, and

smiled and nodded her head, for she at once recognized him.

"I suppose you have come from that husband of mine?" she said.

"I've come fra' Mr. Biddulph," he answered, gravely.

"Well, he's my husband sure enough, though it's been bad luck for us both that we ever were married. However, what's done can't be undone. Does he agree, then, to my claims about the money?"

"Mr. Biddulph, ma'am, didna take any claims into consideration, if they were put forth in yer letters, for he never read it, and refuses to read it."

"Oh, but I must have the money," said the woman, rising impatiently.

"I'm empowered by Mr. Biddulph to inform ye, ma'am, what he will do. He will pay ye one hundred pounds quarterly—four hundred pounds per annum, not a bawbee less nor more."

"Ah! that won't do," cried Madame de Beranger, with a shrill laugh. "He'll have to pay me a great many more bawbees, as you call them, than a paltry four hundred a year. Why, I had that when he had no money but what his father allowed him, and d'ye think I'd put up with it now? I want a lump sum down, and I told him so in my letters; I *must* have it, or I shall be arrested."

"Weel, ma'am, maybe a short sojourn in 'durance vile' wad do ye na ill turn."

Again the woman laughed, and looked at the doctor with her bold, bright dark eyes.

"That was a horrid sight in the church, or the kirk, as you call it here, wasn't it to-day? I've had to refresh myself after it, I can tell you;" and she pointed to the whiskey-bottle. "So James Biddulph has sent you to deal with me, has he? Well, sit down and have some whiskey, and we'll talk it over."

The poor doctor was, it must be admitted, fond of whiskey, and he was also tired with his disturbed night and his disturbed feelings. He looked at the whiskey-bottle, and the temptation to accept her offer grew strong within him.

"I'll just take a wee drop," he said, "for, as ye say, yon was a grim sight."

"It was too horrid;" and she shuddered. "It was brutal of James Biddulph to force me to go through it. He has acted like a fool. If he had accepted my offer

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last night, and given me five thousand pounds to go quietly away, he would have been a wiser man. You know the girl, I suppose, he was going to marry?"

"I know Miss Leonora Stewart, and a sweeter, bonnier lassie does not live."

"Poor James!" scoffed the woman. "Yet I declare I felt sorry for him last night, when he saw his dearly beloved wife standing again before him, on the eve of his second wedding day. But I was forced to come. I am fairly cleaned out, and I must have money at once; so come drink your whiskey and sit down, and we'll see what we can arrange between us."

The doctor drank some whiskey and sat down, looking at the woman warily, however, with his small intelligent eyes.

"I'm empowered to make no further offer," he said.

"That is nonsense. I may as well tell you at once, I won't leave Scotland until I've got a good round sum; in fact, I can't. I suppose," she added, smiling, "you doctors are not over paid in an out of the way place like this?"

"I canna' complain wi' being over-burdened with cash," answered the doctor, dryly.

"Just so! And you would not object, I suppose, to make a hundred or a hundred and fifty on easier terms than tramping from hamlet to hamlet, with your pills in your pockets, would you?"

"I fail to follow yer drift, ma'am."

"It is this"—and Madame de Beranger bent nearer to him—"James Biddulph is rich. I want five thousand pounds down, and if you can induce him to give me this, and my usual allowance, I will give you, say, a hundred and fifty, and no one need be the wiser."

But the doctor at once rose to his feet, and drew up his tall, ungainly figure to his full height as he listened to this offer.

"I may as weel tell ye, ma'am, that I hope I may call mysel' an honest mon," he said, with a certain look of dignity on his homely features, which only provoked the laughter of the woman he was addressing.

"Honest!" she echoed, scornfully; "that's a virtue considerably gone out of fashion of late years. Is there *any* quite honest, do you think? Of course, we pay our debts when we've got the money to pay them, and don't steal unless our necessities are very great. But cheating



and lying, and trying to take in our neighbors for our own advantage in the way of *business*, is pretty generally practised, isn't it? This is a matter of business between you and me. James Biddulph has sent you here to make a bargain with me, and if you make a good one *for me*, I am willing to pay you. What harm is there in it, if you look at it in the right way?"

"It's not my way, anyhow. Mr. Biddulph sent me here to make na bargain with ye. He sent me here to tell ye that he'll gi' ye four hundred a year, and nothing mair. And he sent ten pounds to pay yer expenses and get ye away."

"Ten pounds! This is too absurd! Well, I shall just go and see him myself. Has he gone back to Dunbaan yet?"

"Ma'am," said the doctor, earnestly, "will ye take the advice of one who wishes ye na ill? Don't go near James Biddulph any mair. Yer sister came to a bloody end by a rash act, and I warn ye that ye've roused the vera deil in the mon whose life ye've spoilt."

"But what am I to do?" said the woman, beginning to walk up and down the room in an agitated manner. "I owe money right and left. Do tell him to give me something worth having—say two thousand."

"He swore he would not."

"But I've a right to it; I am his wife, and have a legal claim to a good income."

"Which he offers ye; and I doo't vera much but that ye've lost yer right altogether for maintenance, seeing ye allowed yer sister to be buried in yer place, and *she* had on the marriage ring, puir soul, and, as there's not a pin's head to choose betwixt ye, in any court o' law Mr. Biddulph might be justified in saying he does not believe ye are his wife still."

"But he does not deny this; he did not deny it to-day."

"Na; but he might deny it to-morrow, for in truth he has little certainty to go on."

The woman made no answer, but continued walking restlessly about the room again for the next few minutes. Then she stopped suddenly before the doctor, and looked straight in his face.

"What would he give to be free altogether, do you think?" she asked. "How much money, if I were to stand up and say I have been humbugging him all this time? that the poor dead one"—and she slightly shivered

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—"is really *Natalie*; would he pay me well then, do you think, and let me go away from here, and see his face no more?"

"Woman, would ye tempt him to commit a deadful sin?" cried the doctor, horror-stricken.

"What do I care for his sin, or sorrows either, for that matter? What I want is *money*, or you may be sure I would not have been here at all."

"But, surely," said the doctor, much moved, "there is na truth in this? Ye said ye were his wife in the house of God, did ye foreswear yersel' then?"

"That is my secret," answered the woman, defiantly; "the secret I will *sell*."

"But think o' the misery ye have brought about," said the doctor, almost pleadingly. "Yon young leedy at Rossmore is just broken-hearted wi' her sare grief. Would you lead her into sin as weel as sorrow, for the sake of what he canna' take away with ye, when ye go on yer lang journey, which yer sister has gane before?"

"I'll do anything for money, and if he gives me enough I am ready to swear one way or the other."

The doctor did not speak for a moment or two; then he said, determinately:

"I'll ha' no hand in such a business. I'll na gan' to him and distract his mind again wi' doubts and fears. He believes ye are the woman he wed twelve years ago, and I believe ye are; and if ye are not, ye'll ha' to answer for yer base deceit to the Almighty God."

The woman seemed slightly awed at this, for the doctor's manner was very solemn.

"Well, will you try to get me some money, then?" she said, a minute later.

"I'll try; but if my puir words ha' any influence on ye, never speak again the words ye ha' just spoken."

"Do then, like a good soul, get what you can for me," urged the woman.

"Weel, I'll see ye again in the morning, then," said the doctor, after a moment's hesitation; and then he left her refusing her pressing offers to take any more whiskey, and with a very grave and sombre face he returned to his own home.

But Biddulph was gone. There was a note, however, written by him, lying on the table, which the doctor read with a sad heart.

"I shall call this evening after it is dark, as I wish to know how N. S. is ; and if I find you out, I will await your return. Tell her, if you have an opportunity, that when I die, the ring she sent me to-day will still be on my hand. I shall never part with it in life, and will direct that after my death it shall be buried with me." "J. B."

Not a word of the woman the doctor had just left ; none of the tie which seemed somehow more unreal to the poor doctor's mind after the words still ringing in his ears—the offer to swear that tie was false, for the sake of gold !

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

### NO MARRIAGE.

Jock Fraser having summoned Mrs. Conway-Hope to him and imparted his grievous news, that lady felt no small satisfaction in repeating to Jock that she had had a presentiment of ill ever since the question of this marriage was mooted.

"I was *sure* something would happen," she said, "from the day when poor Nora came to my sick-room, unduly elated, I thought, to announce to me that she was engaged to Mr. Biddulph. I shall have a dread of my inward warnings again, Mr. Fraser, for this one was so distinct and vivid ; though, indeed, the terrible reality surpasses my expectations."

There was a time when this speech would have tickled poor Jock Fraser's sense of humor ; but now, so overwhelming to him was the memory of the position of his son that no gleam stole into his brown eyes.

"Will you tell the people, then, Mrs. Conway-Hope, that there is to be no marriage, and get them away?" he said ; "and I'll take Minnie home. As for poor Nora Stewart, it's too dreadful to think of it."

"Too dreadful !" echoed Mrs. Conway-Hope, with a sigh, raising her eyebrows and her angular shoulders at the same time. "But you must have some lunch before you go, Mr. Fraser ; with all the marriage preparations in the house, it is no use wasting good food."

But the kindly Jock shook his head.

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Hope," he said, "and thinking of yon poor girl. I'll just go home, and take Minnie along with me; thank you all the same."

"Have some wine, in any case. And we must try to get that dreadful person, Lady Barbara Biddulph, out of the house first."

Jock made no answer. He took up his hat in the hall and went outside, walking up and down the terrace in front of the house sadly enough; for he was fond of Nora Stewart, and was grieving very sincerely for her grief. And as he walked thus, the Rev. Andrew Macdonald was seen approaching up the avenue, and presently joined Jock, full, we may be sure, of the grim scene which had taken place a short while ago in the kirk at Balla.

"My dear sir," said the Rev. Andrew, "I have not been so upset since I entered the ministry. The likeness between the living and the dead was ghastly, and overwhelming in the extreme. But I conceive there is no reason to doubt; Mr. Biddulph has been made the subject of a most cruel deception."

"And my cousin, Miss Stewart, is the victim," answered Jock, with some anger in his tone.

"It is most unfortunate, most disastrous, from first to last," said the Rev. Andrew; and then he gave a little cough, and a blush rose on his fresh-colored, not uncomely visage. He had forgotten for the moment the miserable connection of Malcolm Fraser with the whole terrible affair, until the spasm of pain that passed over Jock Fraser's face recalled it to his recollection.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Conway-Hope was telling the same sad story in the drawing-room to the assembled guests. She had hurried away from Jock Fraser brimful of her news. No human heart, let us hope at least, is entirely evil. Some good, the love for a dead mother, for a wife or child, lurks surely in the most degraded breast. Therefore it seems hard to write that Mrs. Conway-Hope *enjoyed* relating how a death-blow had fallen on her young cousin's happiness. It is impossible that she really could do this; but the excitement of being the first to tell a dreadful tale, to have her presentiment against this marriage verified, made her almost appear to do so; and Lord Glen-doyme, a gentleman and a man of some refinement, listened completely disgusted, regarding the gray tinted face of Mrs. Conway-Hope, to whose faded cheeks an unwonted flush had risen, with scarcely veiled contempt.

"The deepest sympathy can only be felt for Mr. Bidulph," he said, as Mrs. Conway-Hope paused to breathe.

"I feel sympathy for him, of course," she answered; "sympathy, however, I must admit, considerably lessened by my knowledge of his conduct. And I warned my cousin, Lord Glendoyne, that I had no trust in him. Poor girl, she has found my words come true too late!"

"I always liked him," said Glendoyne, "and I feel for him most deeply; and, if I may be permitted to say so, for Miss Nora Stewart also, for whom I have the highest admiration and regard."

"Poor darling Nora!" cried Maud Lee.

"It is a dreadful thing to have happened," said her younger sister Alice, in a pensive undertone.

Glendoyne looked from one girl to the other, and then at the fair face of Minnie Fraser, who had listened to Mrs. Conway-Hope's news with such emotion that her face had flushed strangely, and her blue eyes were full of tears.

"I see you feel this very much," said Glendoyne to her, a few moments later. "Will you tell Miss Stewart from me, when you see her, how truly sorry I am also? As for that detestable old woman, I should like to throw her out of the window."

Minnie smiled faintly, and glanced timidly up in the good-looking Anglo-Indian's face.

"I—think it will just break Nora's heart," said Minnie, in a tremulous little voice; "and—they seemed so happy last night."

"Happiness somehow does not flourish in this sublunary scene, I have frequently remarked," answered Glendoyne. "If we are only miserable enough, or worried enough, length of days is mostly given us wherewithal to enjoy these luxuries in full. But if a man gets his heart's desire—if he is rich enough, shall we say? to indulge in that heart's desire—ten to one it is snatched away, when sweetest, from his grasp."

This speech brought a brighter rose-bloom to the young girl's cheeks to whom it was addressed, and a dangerous throb to her heart. She did not think exactly. Was she his "heart's desire?" but it was a vague joy to her that he should talk to her thus. And in truth Glendoyne, looking at her at this moment in her white bridesmaid's dress, was thinking how fair she was, and that her character was a very sweet and lovable one.

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"But it is out of the question," he also thought; "all the same, she is a dear little girl."

But a minute later, Jock Fraser, followed by the Rev. Andrew Macdonald, entered the room, and Jock at once went up to his daughter.

"Minnie my dear, we had best go home now," he said. "Good-by, Lord Glendoyne;" and he held out his hand.

"But I am leaving immediately, also," answered Glendoyne, taking Jock's hand. "I shall stay at the lodge for a couple of days; and before I leave, may I give myself the pleasure of calling at Airdlinn, Mr. Fraser?"

"We shall be pleased to see you," said Jock; and he turned away, and, declining all Mrs. Conway-Hope's offers of hospitality, he left Rossmore, feeling that it would be impossible for him to set down at a table from which the expected bride was absent, and lying upstairs in bitter grief.

But whatever might be the emotions of the other guests, they did not show them in the same manner as honest Jock. The Rev. Andrew Macdonald had been bidden to the wedding breakfast, and he did not refuse to partake of it under the altered circumstances. He put on a pensive air, indeed, instead of a jovial one, to commence with, but cheered up amazingly after a glass or two of champagne, and ate with unimpaired appetite in spite of the horrors he had gone through. Only Lady Barbara Biddulph did not appear, "for which we have indeed much cause to be thankful," smiled Mrs. Conway-Hope.

After lunch was over, for the word "breakfast" had been dropped by common consent, Lord Glendoyne left Rossmore, though the Lees entreated him to remain over the day.

"Do stay, out of compassion to us," said Maud Lee. "We cannot start until to-morrow morning, and how are we to get over the day with no one to amuse us?"

"I am sorry I cannot help you," answered Glendoyne, a little grimly.

But after he was gone, she drew the Rev. Andrew a little aside, and listened with no slight interest to the description of the weird scene in the kirk, which he detailed at her request.

"And she is not pretty, then, this wife, nor attractive, nor young? How very droll!" cried Maud Lee.

"She is not, Miss Lee; she has none of those charms



which we look for and find in your sex," answered the Rev. Andrew.

"Poor Mr. Biddulph!" said Maud, with a little laugh.

"He is certainly much to be pitied, to lose a lady endowed with fortune and personal attractions alike must be a heavy blow to any man."

"Well, he will just have to make the best of it; and, of course, Nora will marry some one else."

"No doubt that will be so, Miss Lee; and we must trust and hope that Miss Nora's next choice will be a happier one;" and the Rev. Andrew smiled a complacent smile.

And another man also smiled a complacent smile when he heard that Nora Stewart's marriage was broken off, and that Mr. Biddulph's first wife had reappeared on the scene. This was Alick Fraser. He had been invited to the wedding, but he had declined, and had pretended he had a business engagement in Glasgow, and had left Inismore on the previous day, with a bitter, angry, and disappointed heart.

But he returned on the afternoon of what he supposed had been the marriage day, when "it was all over," he told himself; and, with a certain restless feeling he could not restrain, he crossed the loch and went to Airdlinn, to hear "how it went off," as he knew by this time his brother and Minnie would probably have returned from Rossmore.

He walked with his stalwart step into the breakfast-room of the house, and found Jock and his wife sitting in the semi-darkness over the fire.

"So you've got back, Alick," said Jock, rising to welcome his brother.

"Yes, found I could manage it, and so I came home to-day instead of to-morrow. Well, and how did the bride and the gay bridegroom comport themselves?" asked Alick, with affected jocularly.

Jock looked at his wife, hesitated a moment, and then said, in rather a low tone:

"The marriage did not take place, Alick. A most extraordinary thing has occurred."

"*What!*" exclaimed Alick; and his healthful skin paled a little, and then flushed, and a great throb stirred his heart.

"It is a dreadful story," went on Jock, casting down his eyes and thinking of his absent boy. "Yon poor woman who was unhappily shot in the Glen of Balla, turns out

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now not to have been really Mr. Biddulph's wife, but her twin-sister, and the likeness between them deceived him."

"Then," cried Alick, excited beyond his usual self-control, "this fellow is still a married man, after all! How was it found out? The scoundrel! I dare say he knew all the while."

"That's unjust to Biddulph, Alick. He certainly believed his wife was dead, and had never heard of her twin-sister until last night. It's a terrible business for Nora Stewart, and the poor girl is just broken down with grief."

"She'll get over that," answered Alick, in his resolute way. "She has had a lucky escape, and will make a wiser choice next time;" and he smiled. He would win her now, he was thinking, and this failure of his, which he never could understand, would come right at last.

And he could not hide his elation from his brother's and his sister-in-law's eyes. Mrs. Jock, watching him, began to understand it all. Alick had wished to marry Nora Stewart, and thus had refused to be present at her wedding, and now he would try again.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### THE DOCTOR'S BARGAIN.

When the doctor went to see Nora again during the same afternoon, he took Biddulph's note with him, though his conscience somewhat reproached him for doing so.

"I suppose I shouldna do it; but weel, weel, I just canna' help it," he muttered to himself, as he placed the note in his pocket; and when he entered her room, he saw Nora's dark eyes at once wander inquiringly to his face.

But Lady Barbara was sitting there, and this made his position a difficult one, for Lady Bab's eyes were keen and her wits sharp. She could not understand, indeed, why the tall, ungainly man kept shifting his position so often, and at last it occurred to her mind that he might wish to speak to Miss Nora Stewart alone.

"Have you anything to say to Miss Stewart?" she

asked, in her direct way, "that you do not wish me to hear? Because, if so, I will leave you."

"Weel, my leedy," answered the doctor, blushing scarlet, "I ha' a medical question or twa——"

"All right," said Lady Bab, interrupting him and rising; "I leave you two together, then, for the present;" and she left the room, and the doctor was at liberty to produce Biddulph's note, which he did with something between a groan and a sigh.

"I gave him yer ring," he said, "and the puir fellow nigh broke down o'er it, but it did him gude all the same. And he left this note, Miss Leonora Stewart; and as the grist o' it is a message to yersel', I thought I might as weel fetch it along wi' me—so there it is;" and he thrust Biddulph's note into Nora's hand, his conscience smiting him, however, as he did so.

And when the poor girl saw the words which Biddulph had penned in his despair, her tears fell fast. He would never part, then, with the token she had sent him of a love that could have no change. The doctor had turned away his head, and then walked to the window, while Nora read and re-read the brief lines that to her seemed so precious. The cruel blow which had fallen on them both had left their hearts unaltered, and to the woman this thought brought immense consolation and peace.

"When you see him;" she began, and the doctor turned round at the sound of her voice, "tell him," went on Nora, "that I can see him to-morrow; that I shall expect him to come."

"Ye'll scarcely be weel enough to-morrow, Miss Stewart, if ye'll excuse me, to go through any further excitement."

"Oh! but you don't know how much happier I shall feel, doctor; and, you know, we must just get into the way of seeing each other, and meeting like friends as we used to do—and we must forget the rest."

The doctor made a sort of groan in reply to this proposition.

"We can't help this great misfortune that has come to us, and so we must try to make the best of it, and help each other to bear it."

Still the doctor did not speak. He knew Biddulph meant to leave Nora, and he knew that he was right to do this; but it seemed hard to take the poor girl's one consolation away from her.

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"I like his aunt, Lady Barbara, so much," continued Nora, "and she has been so good to me. When we go to town, of course, I shall often see her."

"She's a tough shell wi' a good kernel," said the doctor, "though I own I'm a wee bit in awe of her leedyship."

"Oh, she's very good; and, doctor, I want to ask you something else. This—this woman——"

"Ye mean——"

"The woman James was tricked into marrying when he was but 'a boy," said Nora, more firmly. "Is she gone yet? Has he seen her again?"

"He'll see her na mair; but he sent me to see her, and she's wrangling sare about the money."

"She's a wicked woman! But I hope she will go away; I should breathe easier if she were away. She might do some harm to James."

"Not she, my dear young leedy; it's na for luv o' Mr. Biddulph she's put up an appearance, I can tell ye. She wants money and nothing else."

"Oh, tell him to give it to her, doctor, and get her away! If she wants more than he has in the bank, I can lend him or give him a good sum. He will be ever so much happier if she were out of this place."

"She won't be here lang. Weel, Miss Stewart, I'll ha' gude news for Mr. Biddulph to-night; ye're better than I hoped to find ye."

"Yes; and tell him to come to-morrow," said Nora, as the doctor shook hands with her before taking his leave. And scarcely was he gone when the poor girl locked the door, and fell down on her knees, holding James Biddulph's letter still in her clasped hands.

The first shock was over now, the first bitterness, and, true to the sweet womanliness of her nature, Nora determined to make the best of a most painful position for *his sake*. She would be his best friend and comforter, she told herself; and in the long years to come their regard would know no change. They might never marry, but the bond between them could not die.

She was thinking this, kneeling there still, when a little knock came to the locked door, and, supposing it was Lady Barbara, Nora rose from her knees and unfastened the door, and outside Mrs. Conway-Hope was standing, who sprang forward and at once caught Nora in her arms, and crushed her forcibly against her angular form.

"My poor stricken child!" she gasped out. "Oh,

Nora, what I have gone through this day—what misery, what terrible distress, thinking of you, feeling that you had no support——”

Nora drew back, and endeavored to release herself from Mrs. Conway-Hope's arms, but it was not easy to do so.

“I have been forbidden to enter your room,” continued that lady; “told I should *not* do so by Lady Barbara Biddulph! And I think, considering who *she* is—her connection with the unhappy man who has brought all this misery and shame on a respectable family—that *her* lips, at least, ought to have been closed; that she ought not have interfered to part you and me!”

“I did not wish to see any one. Lady Barbara has been most kind to me,” said Nora.

“I can understand you not wishing to see any *stranger*, Nora; it is but natural that you should shrink from all the painful remarks that must necessarily follow the terrible occurrence of to-day. But am I a stranger? Why was I, your near relation and friend, not permitted to mingle my bitter tears with yours?”

“Please do not talk any more about it, Cousin Margaret. It cannot be helped; we must just try to make the best of it.”

“It is terrible, too terrible!” cried Mrs. Conway-Hope, with a dismal shake of her head.

“It is most painful, of course, but what is the good of talking of it? I mean to try to bear it as bravely as I can.”

“I pray you may be able to do so; we must try to be resigned at least. And, my dear Nora, I hope you will soon get Lady Barbara Biddulph out of the house.”

“Oh, do you?” said Lady Bab's voice, who at this moment entered the room, and had heard the concluding words of Mrs. Conway-Hope's speech.

Mrs. Conway-Hope started and looked up, and there stood Lady Bab, erect and grim; and Mrs. Conway-Hope's eyes fell somewhat abashed.

“I did not expect,” she said, “that anyone was *listening* to my private conversation with my cousin.”

“And I did not expect to find *you* in this room, when you were positively forbidden by the doctor to enter it, and I told you so,” retorted Lady Bab, who disdained to defend herself from the accusation of intentionally listening, of which she was certainly guiltless.

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"Nora, is this true?" asked Mrs. Conway-Hope, tragically. "Did Dr. Alexander forbid me to enter your room?"

"He forbade any one to do so but Lady Barbara, and Palmer, of course," answered Nora.

"*Lady Barbara!*" repeated Mrs. Conway-Hope, with stinging emphasis. "May I ask if this exception was made on account of her relationship to the gentleman whose unfortunate *mistake* has caused all this misery?"

"Do go out of the room, and hold your tongue, you tiresome old woman!" cried Lady Bab, whose patience was completely worn out.

"Old woman, indeed!" said Mrs. Conway-Hope, with extraordinary bitterness. "I beg to inform you, Lady Barbara Biddulph, that I am *not* old, and I am accustomed to be called a lady, by *ladies*."

"Oh, are you?" scoffed Lady Bab. "Please go out of the room, then, you tiresome old lady."

"I assure you I am very much younger than yourself, for the matter of that."

"That may be," answered Lady Bab, grimly, "for I am quite an old woman, and not ashamed to be called one. However, that is no matter, and I'll call you anything you like—a young lady even—to get you to go away."

"I shall not leave this room," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, determinately, "until requested to do so by Miss Nora Stewart. Nora," she added, "is it your wish that I shall be ordered out of your room by this stranger?"

"Yes, Cousin Margaret; I wish you to go," replied Nora to this appeal.

"Then I shall!" cried Mrs. Conway-Hope, in dramatic accents, as if announcing a catastrophe; and she slowly retreated, closing the door behind her with a loud and portentous bang.

"Well, I have seen many disagreeable people," said Lady Bab, turning to Nora after she had disappeared, "but I can honestly say none of them equalled that lady."

"She is very trying."

"She would not try me long under my own roof, at any rate. Well, my dear, you are looking better; that old Scotch doctor of yours always seems to cheer you up."

"I am very fond of him," answered Nora, softly.

"The old Scotch doctor," in the meanwhile, had returned home, and had scarcely arrived there, when "Mr. Biddulph" was announced.

He looked as worn and haggard as he had done in the



morning ; and the doctor, after glancing at him, began to speculate philosophically why the weak woman bore the blow better than the strong man.

"How is she?" asked Biddulph, without preface.

"As weel, and better, than we could have hoped for. Eh, mon, she's gat a brave, true heart," answered the doctor.

"And you told her," said Biddulph, with faltering tongue, and turning away his head, "what I wrote about her ring?"

The doctor nodded his head solemnly thrice.

"I doot that I've done right," he said, a moment later.

"How do you mean?" asked Biddulph, sharply.

"I gave yer bit of note into her own hand, and we had a long talk. She wants to see ye to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" echoed Biddulph.

"That was what she said; and there's something else I've to say. She's maist anxious that the *other*, ye ken, was away."

A sudden scarlet flush rose to Biddulph's pale face.

"Well, is she not gone?" he asked, impatiently.

"Na, nor likely to go, unless ye pay her weel. In fact, Mr. Biddulph, I may as weel tell ye that she won't move from this wi'out an honorarium, and for Miss Nora Stewart's sake——"

"I swore I would give her nothing!" said Biddulph, starting to his feet.

"Weel, one often swears what one can't stick to, and, as I was saying, for Miss Nora Stewart's sake I would pay her, and get her away."

"Only to return," said Biddulph, bitterly.

"But maybe ye won't be here when she does," answered the doctor. "Take my advice, mon—gi' her a thousand or so, and let us ha' her out o' the place before nightfall."

"What do you think she could do?" said Biddulph, who was acute, and saw the usually saving Scotchman had a motive for urging to get the woman away.

"She might annoy Miss Nora Stewart, for one thing; she's an ill tongue, and she's best out o' hearing."

Biddulph considered for a moment or two, and then he said slowly:

"Well, if I go home now, and draw a check for a thousand pounds and send it across to you, do you think you can get her to go away to-night?"

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"I will do so, then. And tell Miss Stewart I cannot see her to-morrow, for there is much to do ; but the day after I will call—to say good-by ;" and Biddulph's voice faltered and broke, as he uttered the last word.

"Then, ye mean to go ?"

"How could I stay ?" answered Biddulph, gloomily ; and with bent head, and with no word of ordinary salutation, he quitted the doctor's house and returned straight to Dunbaan.

An hour later, a note arrived from him containing the promised check of a thousand pounds, drawn in favor of Madame de Beranger, and with this in his pocket the doctor at once proceeded to the little inn where she was staying.

He asked to see her, and was ushered into the small sitting-room which she occupied, and found her lying on an uncomfortable little sofa, with a black scarf wrapped round her head.

But as the doctor entered, she started eagerly up.

"Well, have you brought me some money ?" she asked quickly and anxiously.

"I have, ma'am ; but ye can only ha' it on certain conditions," answered the doctor, gravely.

"What are these ? Quick, do not keep me in suspense !"

"I had a deal o' trouble to get it. Mr. Biddulph said ye had done yer warst, and refused to part wi' another bawbee ; but at last I induced him to gi' me a check for one thousand pounds, on the condition ye leave here to-night."

"Very well, I will. Give me the check ; a thousand is better than nothing ;" and she held out her hand.

But the doctor made no movement to produce it.

"That was Mr. Biddulph's condition, ma'am," he said, still more gravely ; "but I've one to add on my own hand."

"What on earth have you to do with it ? Do not be tiresome, and give me the money. Oh, I expect you want your share," she added, with a laugh.

"Yes, ma'am, ye've just hit it," answered the doctor, solemnly, regarding her with his small shrewd eyes.

"Well, how much ?" asked the woman, with another laugh. "I said if you got me five thousand pounds, you should have one hundred and fifty ; but as you've only got me a thousand, will fifty do, for I am awfully hard up ?"

"Ma'am, I do not want to be paid for my sma' service in gold or notes. What I ask ye is to promise not further

to disturb the peace o' Miss Nora Stewart, or to make Mr. Biddulph's life a greater curse to him than ye have already done."

"You mean——" And the woman's dark eyes fell abashed.

"I mean, as we are all puir weak, erring creatures, prone to fall, and easily tempted fra' the straight path, don't for the sake o' lucre lead him to doot again that ye are his wife; don't *bribe* him wi' false words."

The woman hesitated for a moment; then she said, with some little feeling in her voice:

"I suppose you are what they call a good man?"

But the doctor shook his head.

"Na, na," he said, "I'm not gude; but Miss Nora Stewart is, and for her sake——"

"I declare, I believe you are in love with her yourself," said the woman, more lightly. "Very well, then, for Miss Nora Stewart's sake, I won't tell James Biddulph any lies."

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### FOR THE LAST TIME.

Two days later, about five in the afternoon, Nora was sitting waiting alone in her drawing-room for a visitor, whom she ardently longed, yet half dreaded, to see.

This was Biddulph. But she little guessed, as she sat there with flushed cheeks and beating heart, that this meeting, during which she meant to re-establish the old friendly feeling between them, was intended by him to be a parting one; the last before he left Scotland never to return.

He had made all his arrangements to do so; discharged his servants, and meant to shut up the house at Dunbaan. He had told his friend the doctor this, but made him promise not to tell Nora of his intentions.

"I should break down," he said. "It would but unman me, if she asked me to stay; and I must go—I have not strength for more."

And it seemed to him as he neared Rossmore, where Nora was waiting for him, as if he scarce had strength even for this last meeting. He was pale and deeply moved as he went into her drawing-room, and when Nora's eyes fell

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on his haggard face, she saw that in truth "the iron had entered into his soul;" that the man's heart was still darkened with the shadow of a great despair.

"James!" she said, with wonderful softness and tenderness in her voice, starting up and holding out both her hands.

He took them for a moment, and then released them. And he spoke no word; it seemed to him that words were poor indeed to express the intense emotion that overwhelmed him.

"Don't look like that!" prayed Nora, again clasping his cold hand. "I thought it all over, James. We must just be great friends like we used to be, before all this happened; and—and we must try to help each other."

"I should be a poor help, Nora."

"We are not to blame, you know," went on Nora, eagerly; "it has been terrible pain to us both, but we must try to forget all that. James, I am going to try to be brave, and you must try too."

"All bravery is gone out of me."

"You must not say that. We have got lots of things to live for, you know, though—we cannot marry. I have been thinking of what we can do to help the poor people; I have thought of establishing a free school, James, for the children."

"My dear, my dear, I could not do it!" His voice broke into a sort of wail, and he sank down on a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"Oh, please, do not distress me thus!" said Nora, piteously.

"It is selfish, I know," answered Biddulph, raising his head; "but this has quite broken me down, Nora. I—I have come to-day to say good-by."

"Good-by!" she repeated; and she grew a little pale.

"For a time, at least; I shall get stronger by and by. Just now I am better away."

Nora did not speak; a chill pang of disappointment and pain darted through her heart.

"I mean to leave here to-night; to go up to town."

"Oh, James!"

It was the first reproach she had uttered through all this pain. But to leave her to bear it alone! It seemed to Nora at this moment that this was thoughtless of Biddulph, and she drew a little back as if his words had pained her.

"My aunt is still with you, is she not?" he said, abruptly, the next instant.

"Yes; she has been very good to me."

"And Mrs. Conway-Hope, is she here too?"

"Oh, no," answered Nora, with a little smile. "She and Lady Barbara do not agree; and I am thankful to say Mrs. Conway-Hope left yesterday."

"And you, Nora? Are you not going to leave here, too?"

"I have scarcely thought of it yet; at least, I have not decided when I shall go."

"I should be pleased to think that my aunt remained with you until you go south."

"I shall be very pleased if she will."

There was just a little touch of pride in Nora's voice as she said the last few words; and Biddulph, looking at her with his gloomy eyes, recognized this.

"Nora," he said, going up to her, and speaking in a voice broken with emotion, "I seem strange and changed to you, do I not? But—but, I dare not talk to you as I would; I dare not tell you what I feel!"

Nora did not speak, but great pity for him again filled her heart.

"I suppose I loved you too much," went on Biddulph, impetuously. "Do you remember my telling you I could not live my life if I were parted from you now? This is what I feel, and I must leave you."

"You will feel differently by and by," said Nora, gently.

"In how many long years, I wonder? But I have not thanked you yet for the ring you sent me. I shall always wear it, Nora."

"Very well," she answered; and she smiled.

"And there is something else I want. Will you give me one of these little curls?" and he touched her dark shining hair as he spoke.

"Yes, of course; but I shall see you in town, even if you do leave here to-night."

"Still, I want the piece of hair to carry away with me. Will you give it to me now, Nora?"

"Yes;" and she went up to the mirror over the mantel-piece, and cut off one of the little curls he coveted.

"There!" she said, handing it to him with a smile.

"And there is something else."

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Nora blushed deeply.

"We must forget all that, you know," she said, not raising her dark eyes to his.

"Yes; but for the last time, Nora—for the last time, may I kiss you now?"

She looked up one moment, and he took her in his arms.

"Good-by, my darling, my darling," he murmured, with his lips on hers—"Good-by; God keep you;" and the next moment he was gone.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### LADY BAB'S SUGGESTION.

Lady Bab had a word to say to her nephew, and she was waiting downstairs in the dining-room somewhat impatiently to say it. When, therefore, she heard him hastily descending the staircase after parting with Nora, she opened the room door, and beckoned him to come to her.

But when she saw his face she half-repented that she had done this. There was written on it such bitter, bitter pain, such utter despair, that she drew a little back; but Biddulph followed her into the room and closed the door behind him.

"I wanted to have a little talk with you," began Lady Barbara. "So you've seen the poor girl upstairs, have you?"

"I have seen her to say good-by," answered Biddulph, gloomily.

"Then you are going away? That is right; it is about this I wished to see you. When do you go?"

"To-night."

Lady Barbara nodded her head approvingly twice.

"Does she know?" she asked.

"Not that it is the parting that I mean it to be. Aunt Barbara, will you be kind to her—when—when she knows that she and I must meet no more?"

"Of course I shall be kind to her! It's a bad business, James."

"Why speak of it?" he answered, darkly. "To me it is worse than death—a living death."

"And it is such an extraordinary thing," said Lady Bab,



beginning to walk up and down the room in her energetic way. "I suppose—I scarcely like to say this—but I suppose you have *no doubt* in your own mind, James, that the sister is living whom you married twelve years ago?"

Biddulph lifted his eyes in surprise to his aunt's face.

"I have no doubt," he said.

"Still, that old doctor of yours said that there was no visible difference between them but the difference of life and death. And to women of their stamp lies count for nothing, you know."

Biddulph did not speak for a moment; then he said slowly:

"Aunt Barbara, she said a few words to me that only she could know—there is no doubt."

"That settles the matter, of course, then; and you are right to go away. The poor girl upstairs has an idea that you could go on seeing each other—that you are to be great friends; but all that is nonsense, though I do not tell her so. She is a fine character, and I can't help being very sorry for you, James, though of course——"

"Please do not discuss my folly, Aunt Barbara; I have paid a very bitter price for it. And—and let me think," and he hesitated a moment, "that when I am far away she will have a constant friend in you?"

Lady Bab did not speak for an instant, for she was a woman who made few professions; then she said, still with her eyes (in which there was some pity) fixed on her nephew's face:

"I shall do what I can, James; but *time* will be her best friend."

"Yes;" and then he put his cold hand into his aunt's and left her, and Lady Bab looked after him with an impatient sigh.

"There's good in him," she thought, "but he's made a poor use of it, and of the gifts that God gave him; and the worst of it is that the bitter fruits of his folly fall on the poor girl. Well, I had best go and look after her, I suppose."

But when Lady Barbara ascended the staircase and entered the drawing-room, where she expected to find Nora, she was not there. She had gone to her own room, and locked the door, and was kneeling by the bed, praying with clasped hands for the man with whom she had just parted. In the bitterest hour this still is left to us; though the black clouds gather, and the storm breaks over

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And when Nora met Lady Barbara at dinner, her face was very calm. Lady Barbara had been prepared for some signs of grief or emotion, but Nora showed none. Lady Bab noticed her voice was very low, but this was all; and when they returned together to the drawing-room, Nora at once quietly proposed that they should leave Scotland.

"If you do not mind, Lady Barbara," she said, "I think I should like to go south now."

"Mind, my dear! How can you suppose that a woman of my age can have any pleasure in staying on in such a climate as this in mid-winter? No, that the climate of London is not detestable in winter also; but, still, I am more used to it. Of course we can go whenever you please."

"I should like to go at once, then; and I've been thinking I should like to ask Minnie Fraser to spend some months with me, as soon as I settle in town."

"An excellent idea. She is pretty, that little Minnie, and won't, therefore, be a dead weight on your hands. And I suppose you'll want an old woman to look after you, and take you out into society occasionally?" added Lady Bab, somewhat grimly.

"Oh, dear, no," answered Nora, smiling. "I feel quite old now, and shall make an excellent chaperone for Minnie."

"I was going to say," continued Lady Bab, "that I hope, for goodness' sake, you won't invite that Cousin Margaret of yours also. Rather than you should do this, I shall take you out, whenever propriety demands it, myself, though I own, as a rule, I do not care to be bothered by girls."

"We shall be no bother to you, though I hope we shall often see you, Lady Barbara," said Nora, smiling still.

"That is all right, then. When do you propose to go?"

"I thought of the day after to-morrow; and I shall write and ask my cousin Jock Fraser to come over to see me and bring Minnie, and ask Mrs. Jock's leave for her to stay with me in town."

"Why not ask her to go with you now?"

"She might require some little preparation, you know," hesitated Nora.

"She could get dress and everything she wants much cheaper in London than anywhere else. I propose, my dear, that we take her with us. It will be brighter for you to have this young girl with you from the first."

And after thinking a moment or two, Nora decided that this was very good advice. She therefore, before the evening was over, wrote to Mrs. Jock Fraser, to ask if Minnie might be allowed to go to town with Lady Bab and herself, to pay a long visit.

"Lady Barbara has promised to act chaperone whenever we shall require one" (she added), "so I do hope Minnie will come to me. Will you, Jock, and Minnie, have lunch with us here to-morrow, and then we can decide all our plans, as we propose starting very soon?"

"Yours affectionately,

"LEONORA STEWART."

Nora sent this note over to Airdlinn, and told the bearer to wait for an answer. Alick Fraser had been dining with his brother and sister-in-law, and Mrs. Jock and the two brothers were still sitting at the table when it was brought in, though pretty Minnie had retired.

Mrs. Jock read it, and then looked at her husband.

"It is from Nora Stewart," she said, "and she wishes Minnie to go to London with her and Lady Barbara Biddulph, the end of this week, and she asks Minnie for a long visit."

A flush came over Alick Fraser's clear, fresh face as he listened to these words, and a look of pleasure into his brown eyes.

"It's a very good idea, I think," he said at once, in his decided way.

"I think Minnie would like to go, and perhaps her company would help to cheer Nora," said Mrs. Jock.

"Miss Nora won't need cheering long, Jeanie," remarked Alick, "or I shall be much mistaken. D'ye know that Biddulph is going to shut up Dunbaan and leave the country to-night—and a good riddance too!"

"I heard he was going," said Jock, quietly.

"Let Minnie go, by all means," continued Alick. "And as the child will want some fads and finery, I suppose, Jeanie, I'll give you a check for fifty pounds to smarten

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"You are really very kind, Alick," said Mrs. Jock, gratefully.

"Don't mention it, my dear. So you had Glendoyne calling here yesterday, Jock said?"

"Yes, Minnie saw him; but I didn't," answered Mrs. Jock, with a sigh.

"Humph! Well, settle about her going to town with Miss Nora to-morrow. I am glad Nora Stewart is showing such good sense, and not making a fool of herself, as some girls would have done; though such a disgusting piece of business was certainly enough to sicken any woman."

"It's a terrible business," said Mrs. Jock, with a little shiver.

"I'm told," went on Alick, "that old Alexander, though he's very close about it, managed to get Biddulph's wife away, and paid her a heavy sum to go. Biddulph himself would not see her, so he sent Alexander. However, the country-side's rid of him at last, for I don't think Mr. Biddulph will dare to show his face here again in a hurry."

Alick Fraser could not, indeed, conceal his elation at the terrible humiliation which had befallen the man who had crossed his own plans in life. He had listened to all the gossip he could hear on the subject with unfeigned pleasure and satisfaction. He had even sent for the doctor, for some fancied ailment or other, but found "old Alexander," as he called him, very reticent.

"It's an unco' bad business, Mr. Alick; and least said is soonest mended, when there's na gude to tell," was all he could draw from the doctor's lips.

"Well, Miss Nora Stewart is well rid of him," Alick had said, triumphantly.

"It's hard to tell," replied the doctor; and then he changed his subject, and Alick felt that he could not very well pursue it under the circumstances.

And this invitation to Minnie now caused him fresh satisfaction. He would hear how Nora was going on, through his brother's wife, when she was absent, and he would run up to town occasionally to see the "girls," he mentally decided, as he crossed the loch from Airdlinn and returned to his stately home.

When he entered the room where he usually sat, he found a packet lying on the table, addressed to himself, and a note in Nora Stewart's handwriting. He hastily

opened the note, and read the following lines, with no little excitement :

"DEAR MR. FRASER : I return, by the bearer of this note, the magnificent marriage present which you so kindly and generously gave me, as my marriage is unavoidably broken off. With kind regards,

"I remain, yours very sincerely,

"LEONORA STEWART."

Alick Fraser read these words again and again, and then he smiled, and proceeded to open the packet and look once more at his sapphire necklace.

It was really a splendid gift, and he felt proud of himself for having made it. Then he fastened it up again, and redirected it to Miss Nora Stewart, at Rossmore, and sat down to indite a letter to her, which Nora found awaiting her (and the necklace) when she went downstairs on the following morning.

"DEAR MISS NORA" (she read in Alick's clear handwriting),

"Please honor me by accepting a gift which was given as a small token of my regard for you and admiration for your character, which no circumstances can change. I was at Airdlinn last night when your kind invitation for Minnie arrived, which she was delighted to accept. If you are not ashamed to be seen with 'a country cousin,' I shall run up to town sometimes, when she is with you, and escort you young ladies to the theatres, or any other places of amusement you wish to go to ; and, with kind regards,

"I remain, very sincerely yours,

"ALICK FRASER."

Nora thought it was kind of Alick Fraser to send the necklace back, and stood looking at the shining stones for a few moments, and then sighed deeply. She was recalling the day they were first given to her, and Biddulph's face as he had stood by her side and admired the gorgeous gems. How happy she had been ! But 'tis a brief possession to most of us, drifting down the stream of life, the rocks and shoals of which we cannot see ahead, this perfect joy. Nora's had been but short-lived, but, while it lasted, all the coming shadows were hidden from her view.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

## A HAUNTING DOUBT.

Jock Fraser, his wife, and Minnie, all lunched the same day with Nora at Rossmore. Minnie had been delighted to receive the invitation to go to town with Nora, and her fond father and mother were pleased with her pleasure. She indeed looked a different girl, so much brighter and happier than she had done of late, when she entered Nora's drawing-room and kissed Nora, whispering, "Thank you so much," as she did so.

They all met with just a little embarrassment, neither Jock nor his wife having seen Nora since the tragical ending of her engagement. But Lady Barbara could talk well when it pleased her to do so, and she entered into an animated conversation now with Jock Fraser, regarding some ancient highland customs, and soon the whole party felt more at ease. Then, when lunch was over, Mrs. Jock slid her hand through Nora's arm, and indicated to her that she had a few words to say she wished to speak in private.

Nora led her to her own room upstairs, and when they got there Mrs. Jock turned round and tenderly kissed her cheek.

"Thank you, dear, so much," she said, "for asking Minnie."

"But it will be a great pleasure to me to have her," answered Nora, with some emotion, for she knew Mrs. Jock must naturally be thinking of other things than Minnie's visit.

"And there is something I want to say, Nora, about my boy," continued Mrs. Jock, clasping Nora's hand, while tears rushed into her blue eyes. "Day and night I think of him, you know," she went on; "and I want you to send him this twenty pounds, dear, that I have saved out of the housekeeping. Don't tell Uncle Alick this, though Alick has been very kind lately—since our great grief—but this is just a little present from his mother."

"Very well, dear Jeanie," said Nora, whose eyes also grew a little dim. In truth, it was impossible for any one whose heart was not cold to look unmoved now at the faces of Jock Fraser and his wife. There was always a shadow



in Jock's kind eyes, and care and anxiety expressed on every line of Mrs. Fraser's once jovial features. One thought, indeed, was ever present in her mind—her son's danger—and sad days and sleepless nights soon write their story.

"And I have brought a letter for you to send to him, Nora. I dare not post them here, of course; but when you get to town I can write often to him, can't I? I shall send them under cover to you, not Minnie, on account of the name; and God bless you, my dear, for being kind to him!"

"Of course I shall do anything for him that I can."

"And, Nora, I want to say also," said Mrs. Jock, with a little hesitation, "how—how much I have felt for you during this dreadful——"

"Please, Jeanie, do not mention it," interrupted Nora, quietly but firmly, though a sudden flush passed over her pale face. "I wish it never to be mentioned to me at all—and will you tell Minnie this—let it be as if it had never been."

"She is a brave girl," Jock Fraser told his wife, when Mrs. Jock repeated this conversation to her husband on their way home.

"And yet I can tell by her face how deeply it has cut into her heart," answered Mrs. Jock. "Alick thinks she will soon get over this; but she won't."

"She is behaving splendidly, at all events; and I like that old dame, and pity Biddulph from the bottom of my heart."

But Mrs. Jock, with the unreasonableness of a loving woman, could never quite forgive Biddulph, since indirectly through him all this misery had fallen on her beloved son. She had been secretly jealous of, and had grudged him his happiness with Nora, when no shadow seemed to lie between their lives. And now, though she grieved for Nora's pain, it must be admitted she did not regret her engagement was broken off.

"He is a good-looking, clever man," she said to Jock; "but, to my mind, the whole thing is too absolutely revolting. A man has no right to marry a woman and forsake her, as Mr. Biddulph confessedly did. If he had been a true, or even an ordinary husband, our boy would not have been in exile now."

"You are a prejudiced woman, Jeanie!" answered Jock, with a smile; but the next moment he sighed and turned

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his head away. He too knew that Biddulph had cost them all very dear; how dear, the poor laird never talked of, even to his wife.

In the meantime, the unhappy man whose misfortunes had become so strangely intermixed with those of the family at Airdlinn, was passing through one of those dark phases of life when we ask ourselves in bitterness, Why were we born?

Biddulph could not bow to the rod, nor accept the terrible punishment which his own early fault had brought down upon his head. He saw his life blasted, he believed unjustly, and there was anger as well as grief in his heart. And, strange, though he had expressed no doubt at the time, that suggestion of Lady Barbara's that there might still be some uncertainty about the identity of his wife recurred again and again to his mind. It came like the whisperings of an evil spirit tempting him. The woman had said a few words in his ear that none but Natalie could know, self-argued Biddulph. "But," suggested the mocking voice that would not be gainsaid, "to such women nothing is sacred; these twin-sisters might have no secrets."

He tried to force himself not to entertain this idea, but tried in vain. It came again and again, clothed in different words, but the essence was the same. It unsettled him, and made him yet more impatient of what he deemed an unjust fate. And he was in this condition of mind when he received a note from his aunt, Lady Barbara, to tell him that Nora Stewart, Minnie Fraser, and herself, were to arrive in town on an evening she named.

Lady Barbara had thought it proper to write this, so that Biddulph might leave England before he had any chance of seeing Nora again. But he did not do this. He went to Kings-cross Station at the time when the train from the North was expected to arrive, on the night Lady Barbara had mentioned, and he lingered there until it came in.

And he saw Nora again. Shrinking back in the shadow, he watched her pale face, which, though wearied looking, had a certain serenity of expression which his now never wore. And he saw her smile, too, and put her arm through Minnie Fraser's, while Palmer and Alfred were claiming the luggage, and his aunt was personally inspecting the safety of her own.

He stood there, looking at the woman nearest to his

heart, cut off from her by a tie of which there was still a *doubt*. That familiar spirit of his told him this very distinctly in the busy station, and urged that a man is a fool to throw away his life's happiness on a quibble of honor.

He made a step forward. Should he speak to her, feel her little hand in his for one brief moment? Again Nora smiled, and Biddulph resisted the temptation.

"Why disturb her peace," he thought half-bitterly; "why fill her heart with the burning, unsatisfied questions that are distracting mine?"

But later during the same evening, he called on Lady Barbara, who lived in one of the small streets leading out of Park Lane. He found that lady sitting in her little drawing-room, and when his name was announced she looked sharply up, for she was reclining very comfortably in any easy-chair by the fire, with her feet resting on the fender.

"So you are not gone yet?" she said, holding out her hand.

"Not yet; but I am on the eve of going," answered Biddulph.

"Well, we all got safely back to town a couple of hours ago."

"I know; I saw you arrive."

"Ah!" and Lady Barbara fixed her keen gray eyes on her nephew's face. "James Biddulph," she continued a moment later, "you are better away, do you know; and you are looking remarkably ill."

"Nora does not look very ill?"

"No," answered Lady Bab, nodding her head; "that girl has a wonderful amount of—what shall I call it—faith? Something that makes the things of this world seem of secondary importance."

"I wish I had," said Biddulph, darkly. "To me these things become daily more dim—more 'unknown and unknowable.'"

"Many people feel thus when things go wrong with them."

"But why should my life be cursed?" answered Biddulph, with quick passion. "What have I done that everything should be made bitter to me?"

"And what have any of us done that our lives should be made quite pleasant to us? I don't want to preach, but have you deserved this?"

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his) to walk slowly up and down the room, and Lady Barbara's eyes followed him with some pity.

"Aunt Barbara," he said presently, "will you write to me when I am away?"

"Yes, of course I shall, if you wish me to do so."

"And tell me how everything goes on?"

"You mean everything about Miss Nora Stewart, I suppose?"

"Yes—tell me if she seems happy—if—I am forgotten."

"You would not like that, I fancy?"

"I would not; yet, for her sake, I think it would be well."

"There is one man I am certain means to propose to her."

"Who is that?" asked Biddulph, sharply.

"Mr. Fraser, of Inismore; a rich man, I am told."

"Alick Fraser—impossible!" said Biddulph, angrily.

"Quite possible, I assure you. He was at the station to see us off this morning, and as that pretty little niece of his is with Nora Stewart, he will of course make her the excuse to run up to town constantly; in fact, I heard something of this."

"If I thought——" began Biddulph, and then he paused. What right had he, he told himself bitterly, to interfere with Nora's life, or stand between her and any other man? Not that he believed for one moment that she would marry Alick Fraser, though he had noticed that Alick admired her, and believed the antagonism he had shown toward himself had sprung from this cause.

"Will you see Nora to-morrow?" presently said Biddulph, resuming his slow walk up and down the room.

"Yes; we settled I had to go there to lunch to-morrow."

"Then I want you to tell her the reason I am leaving England is that I have not strength to stay—will you tell her this to-morrow after I am gone?"

"And are you really going to-morrow? Does your father know this?"

"Yes, I dined with him yesterday; he thinks I am on my way to Liverpool now, which I shall be in a few hours, and there I shall start for New York."

"Well, I think you are wise, James."

He did not speak for a moment, and then he held out his hand.

"Good-by, then, Aunt Barbara; I shall write to you when I reach New York."

They shook hands and parted, and after Biddulph left her, he drove to South Kensington, alighting near the street where Nora's house was situated. He knew the number, and stood there outside, watching the lights in the windows, and thinking of the fair woman within, his heart racked by the contending emotions which struggled in his breast.

It was starlight, and suddenly, Biddulph looking upwards at that wondrous sight which dwarfs all others, a wave of purer thoughts swept through his mind. He remembered lingering hand-in-hand with Nora on such a night as this, and how they had talked of hopes and aspirations not bounded by mortal span. Would he drag her down, even if he could, he now asked himself. And what was best in his nature answered no. He turned away with something like a blessing on his lips, and returned to his hotel, and when he reached it he sat down to write to Nora to bid her farewell.

"MY DEAR, DEAR NORA (he began). When this letter reaches your hands, I shall have left town and started for America, where I propose to make a lengthened tour. Dear Nora, you know why I do this? You, in your sweet trust proposed that we should resume our old friendship, and forget alike our days of grief and joy, and, on my part at least, of passionate despair. But Nora, I cannot do this. My nature is not as yours, and my strength is but weakness. My aunt tells me that your strong faith has bridged over for you the terrible grief which has literally struck me to the earth. I should but disturb your peace, my dear one, by the sight of my restless misery. I am better away. But will you write to me sometimes, and tell me all about your daily life? These letters will be my consolation in my long exile. And believe that I shall remain always,

"Faithfully yours,

"JAMES BIDDULPH."

He did not post this letter, intending to do so after he reached Liverpool on the following day. And he did this; Nora, in the meanwhile, listening during the whole of the next morning with a beating heart and flushed cheeks to every ring that came to the house door bell.

She felt so sure that Biddulph would not delay in calling to see her; and when he came not during the early hours of the morning, she decided that he meant to come to lunch with his aunt, Lady Barbara.

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But Lady Bab arrived alone at two o'clock, looking very erect and grim. She kissed Nora, and patted Minnie Fraser's fair cheek with one of her bony fingers, regarding them both at the same time critically.

"You girls look very well after your journey," she said; "but my poor old bones have a hundred aches, of course."

"Is James coming to lunch?" asked Nora, with a sudden blush.

"Not that I know of," replied Lady Bab, who did not think that this was quite the time to break her news to Nora, and also reflected that she might as well have her lunch first.

To lunch accordingly they went, and Lady Bab's shrewd eyes noticed how Nora was listening and watching for a visitor that Lady Bab knew would not come. But she said nothing about her nephew, James, until the meal was over, and the three ladies had returned to the drawing-room.

Then she said to Nora she should like to see over the house, and Nora accordingly led her upstairs.

"Let us go into your room for a few minutes and have a chat," suggested Lady Bab.

Thus they went together into Nora's bed-room, and presently Lady Bab, after one or two remarks, said in her abrupt way:

"Well, I had a visit from James Biddulph last night."

"I have been expecting him all day," answered Nora, with a pretty blush; "but he will be coming later, I suppose."

"He is not coming, my dear."

"Not coming?" repeated Nora, with a swift change of countenance. "Has he left town, then?"

"Yes; he thought it right to go, and he was right."

"Was this," began Nora, with faltering tongue, and again flushing deeply, "because I am here? He need not have been afraid."

"He likes you too well to stay—that is the truth, Nora; he is afraid of himself."

Nora did not speak; she was greatly agitated, and could scarcely conceal her emotion.

"He has gone to America for a time," said Lady Barbara, considerably. "When he comes back the first bitterness of this unhappy affair will be over. My dear, he was wise to go."

Still Nora did not speak; she was beginning to under-



stand now what Biddulph had meant when he had asked to kiss her "for the last time," when they parted at Rossmore.

"He looks changed and ill," continued Lady Barbara, who was woman enough to know that Nora would rather hear this than that, under the circumstance, he seemed well and happy. "The change will do him good. All this has cut him to the heart."

"And—he left no letter, no message?"

"Yes, he sent a message, and he no doubt will write to you. I was to tell you he was going away because he had not strength to stay."

"I—I think he might have told me this," said Nora, with some pride. "Shall we go downstairs again now, Lady Barbara? I think Minnie will feel dull if we stay here."

But later in the day, when she received Biddulph's letter, all her pride and her little feeling of anger melted away. She could not mistake the tone of the words he had penned with such a sore and aching heart. He loved her too well, then, to forget the "brief days of joy" and "passionate despair" that she had been prepared to ignore, to bury with the sweet dreams and dead hopes which then had ended.

She kissed his letter again and again, and laid it against her breast as if it were some living thing. Sweet words! that told her he was thinking of her then, and would think of her when he was far away. This love of theirs at least was strong and deep and true, and, like gold, would bear the cruel crucible of absence and time. Nora stood there thinking of Biddulph, seeing him with that strange mental vision of ours which beholds features that are not present—the glance, the smile, that memory re-pictures on our brain. She knew his face so well—the gray eyes that softened when he looked at her, that grew tender when he listened to her words.

"My dear," she said softly, "I know you will not forget me; my soul is too near akin to yours for us to change."

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## CHAPTER XL.

## A NEW FEAR.

Many of us have a sincere admiration for virtues which we never attempt to practise, and thus Lady Barbara Bidulph, who was one of the most impatient of women, was much struck, during the days which followed her nephew's departure to America, by the unselfish sweetness and patience of Nora's manner to every one around her.

Lady Bab was too shrewd not to know very well that the girl's heart was "sad, and grieving sore." But Nora made no parade of this, and talked cheerfully, and smiled pleasantly, and was ready and pleased to take Minnie Fraser about, and, in fact, bore herself so bravely, that the elder woman honestly regarded her with wonder.

"A man," thought Lady Bab, who was always ready to cast a stone at the stronger sex, "would have worried and bothered every one, or taken to drinking, or done something absurd. But this girl gives no trouble, and can think of others, and hides her disappointment in a manner entirely creditable to her."

And presently Alick Fraser came up to town, and was also struck by the gentle dignity with which Nora Stewart carried herself in a position which, at least, must have been eminently galling to any woman's heart. She, in fact, never alluded to the events which had cost her such bitter pain, and those around her understood that the subject was never to be mentioned.

Her friends, Maud and Alice Lee, lived in the same street in South Kensington, and Alick therefore found Nora's house quite lively with young voices and faces. He liked going there, and taking boxes at the theatres, and escorting two or three pretty girls to public places. He did not attempt to pay Nora any particular attention. He was ready to take the Lees, Minnie, or Lady Barbara wherever she pleased. He called himself her "country cousin," but took very good care at the same time to let every one see he was a rich man, and that he could spend money when he chose to do so as lavishly as any one.

"Our 'country cousin' is delightful, I think!" said Maud Lee one day, when Alick had sent expensive bouquets to Nora's house for the "four young ladies."

"He is very kind," answered Nora, and she began to think that he really was so. She was thrown into a closer intimacy with him also on account of Malcolm Fraser. Alick sent the money he had promised to give through Nora, as he always declared he did not want to know anything about "the mad boy's whereabouts."

"Only don't let him come to England, you know, Miss Nora," he impressed on Nora; "but I am ready to advance him a fair amount of money for his father and mother's sake—for all our sakes, in fact—to start some respectable business on."

But some three weeks after Nora's arrival in town Malcolm Fraser caused her fresh pain, and added a new fear to her heart. His mother, in her letter she had intrusted to Nora to post to him, containing her little savings for this darling son, had told him the story of Nora's interrupted wedding, adding that though she was sorry for the poor girl, she could never have believed it was for Nora's true happiness to have married the man "who has cost us all so dear."

These injudicious words aroused in the fiery jealous heart of the young Highlander a yet deeper indignation against Biddulph, whom he believed had destroyed all hope and happiness for himself, and had now brought the most bitter humiliation on Nora Stewart. And, in his first excitement, he wrote such a letter to Nora that he filled her mind with uneasy apprehensions. "I regret most bitterly now," Nora read, with pallid lips, "that I missed my aim in the Glen of Balla, and that the bullet did not bury itself in his false heart, instead of one of his poor victims; and if he and I were standing here together now, he should know this to his cost."

There was more in this strain, plainly showing to Nora that Malcolm nourished the most deadly enmity to Biddulph. And now they were in the same city! Nora turned sick and faint when she thought of this, and how chance or fate might bring them face to face. At last she made up her mind to write to Malcolm, urging him, in the strongest language she could use, to be more generous and just.

"DEAR MALCOLM (she wrote), I have received your letter, and you have given me great pain, by writing it. You are very unjust to Mr. Biddulph, and very unkind to me. He was the victim of a most cruel deception, and acted throughout

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with perfect faith and honor ; and the subject of my marriage is now never mentioned to me. Yet you have revived all this, which I wish to forget and be forgotten. And I think you should remember also what Mr. Biddulph did for you. You recklessly tried to take his life ; yet he did everything to spare you and your father and mother further pain. If you ever had it in your power, you should try to repay this, and not write as if he were your enemy. If you and he ever meet again, please remember my words, Malcolm, and do not forget the great debt that you owe him.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"LEONORA STEWART."

She did not mention this letter of Malcolm's to Alick Fraser, nor, indeed, to any one ; but she could not forget it. What if this rash, passionate young man were indeed to meet Biddulph ? Still Nora felt sure that, for her sake, Biddulph would avoid, if possible, any quarrel with him ; it was Malcolm she feared, and, as the sequence proved, her dread was well-founded.

In the meanwhile, to all outward seeming, Nora's life was not an unhappy one. Minnie Fraser was a very sweet, affectionate girl, and was devoted to her, and the two Lees were perpetually in and out of the house, their father, a barrister of some standing, having been an old friend of Nora's father, Mr. Cust, before she took the name of Stewart, when she inherited Rossmore.

And Alick Fraser also, with his hard good sense and strong personality, his boxes for the theatres, and his bouquets for the girls, helped to make the time pass ; and presently Lady Barbara's shrewd eyes perceived that Maud Lee took very good care to be always most charming when the rich man made his appearance among them.

And Alick liked adulation from a pretty girl, as he liked it from all. But though he laughed and jested with Miss Lee, he never wavered in his secret determination to win Nora Stewart for his wife. But he gave Nora no hint of this, at least in words. He waited for success as he had waited for it in his earlier life and won, and he did not now doubt the result.

But his complacency was somewhat disturbed by the appearance of Lord Glendoyne upon the scene. Alick had taken a box at the Lyceum for his "four young ladies," as he called Nora, the two Lees, and his niece Minnie, and

between one of the acts was returning to it, when he encountered Glendoyne.

"Ah—Mr. Fraser," said Glendoyne, pausing, and holding out his slender hand to the man who had purchased his ancestral acres at Inismore. "And how are all the good people among the hills?"

"I have not been among the hills lately," answered Alick, with a smile. "My niece Minnie is staying in town with Miss Nora Stewart, and I have been here for the last week or so also."

"And how is Miss Nora Stewart?" asked Glendoyne, with a slight change of expression, as he had never seen Nora since the evening when they had all met at Rossmore, before what ought to have been her wedding day.

"She is very well," said Alick, sturdily; "looking extremely well. She is here to-night."

"I should like very much to go and talk to her."

"Come along, then; my box is close here." And a few moments later Alick opened the door, and Glendoyne followed him.

"Here are my four young ladies," he said, with that hard smile of his. "Miss Nora, I have brought an old friend to see you."

Then Nora looked round, smiled, and cordially welcomed Glendoyne; while over Minnie Fraser's fair face passed a sudden flush.

Glendoyne shook hands all round, and then took a chair next Nora.

"I did not know you were in town," he said, "or I should have given myself the pleasure of calling to see you."

"I should have been very pleased; you must come now," answered Nora, thinking of Minnie Fraser.

"I shall be delighted. May I call to-morrow?"

Alick Fraser overheard this conversation, and he did not quite like it. He knew Glendoyne was a very poor man, and, with that quick intuition which had made him so successful a man of business, it suddenly struck him that the impoverished lord might think that Nora's fortune would be a great assistance to him on the journey of life. But presently Glendoyne turned round and began to talk to Minnie Fraser, and Alick smiled at his own fears.

Yet the next day, and the next after that also, when he went to call at Nora's house, he found Glendoyne. In truth, Nora's drawing-room was a pleasant place for a man

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to spend a dull winter's afternoon in, for there were pretty women and bright words always there, and Glendoyne liked the warm firelight, and would sit on a low chair close to the hearth, and hold out his slender hands to meet the glowing blaze.

He was sitting thus when Alick Fraser came upon the scene, and by the fire, too, sat Nora Stewart, shading her fair face from the heat with a feather fan ; and Alick felt that he decidedly did not like it. Glendoyne looked too content and too much at home to please the future would-be owner of the house and the pretty woman whom Alick coveted, and he frowned, and acted rather as a discordant element among the quiet group.

"I do not know what she sees in this languid, dandyfied fellow," thought the ruffled Alick ; "not his looks, certainly—he's nothing to look at. Perhaps she likes the title ; they say women do ;" and this idea opened a new train of thought to Alick Fraser's mind.

"This middle-aged person can't surely be thinking of Miss Nora Stewart," Glendoyne was reflecting at the same moment, for though his movements were slow, his brains were quick, and he at once had noted the frown on Alick's brow. "It is very droll if it is so. The property joins, certainly." And then Glendoyne continued reflecting that Miss Stewart was a very charming person ; that she had over two thousand a year, it was said ; that he supposed she would marry some one ; that this room was very comfortable, and that, altogether, he liked sitting there, and that he meant "to sit Mr. Alick Fraser from Glasgow out ;" for Glendoyne could never mentally reconcile himself to call Alick, Mr. Fraser of Inismore.

And he did this. Alick remained as long as he could without being invited to stay to dinner, but he left Glendoyne warming his hands by the fire still. And as Alick descended the staircase with his stalwart steps, he did not feel very amiable.

But presently he began to think of his big income and Inismore, and he smiled.

"She would never take a poor beggar like that," he thought ; "and if she has a fancy to be called my lady, well, I dare say I could manage it ;" and he smiled again and went back to his hotel thinking of himself as Sir Alick Fraser of Inismore.



## CHAPTER XLI.

## ON THE TRACK.

And now let us leave Nora for a while, bearing her secret grief and her secret anxiety with a smiling face, as some women do, and see how it fared with the unhappy young cousin who deemed himself exiled for her sake.

When Malcolm Fraser had first heard from Nora's lips that it was known who had shot the woman in the Glen of Balla, he had been overwhelmed and prostrated by the horror of his position. He had gone to Liverpool feeling himself a hunted man; to escape seemed everything just then, and his love and his hate alike dwindled in his mind.

And an incident which occurred just as the steamer he sailed in was starting, yet further made him shrink from the possible consequences of his crime. One of the intended passengers, a young man accompanied by a young wife, left the steamer again, accompanied by two men whom it was whispered around were detective officers. The arrested passenger's face was pallid and downcast, and the wife's wet with tears. They passed through the crowd and quitted the ship, and while the rest talked of them, speculating about the cause of the young man's detention, Malcolm Fraser felt a cringe of fear run through his strong frame that he had never felt before. He had changed his name when he took his passage, and now called himself Stewart, but still, was he safe? He did not feel this until the wild green sea only was visible. Then he breathed more freely. But for the first few days the terrible *mal-de-mer* utterly prostrated him, and it was only during the latter part of his voyage that he realized in full the miserable consequences of his mad act.

He was an exile then for life from home and country! Pacing the deck with folded arms, and seeking friendship or acquaintance with none, the handsome young Highlander's heart was full of bitterness. And, strange, he did not blame himself. It was the man whose "base deceit," as he mentally called Biddulph's keeping his marriage a secret, that had brought about this wretchedness, and made Malcolm Fraser feel himself a fugitive upon earth.

And his hatred and jealousy of Biddulph seemed to grow and grow. It was like a gnawing pain always

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present, and some of his fellow-passengers wondered what the cause could be that had cast so deep a gloom on so young a brow.

He wrote a few lines to Nora when he reached New York, little guessing that the arrival of these lines were eagerly awaited for by Biddulph, as Nora had promised when they came that she would agree to fix her wedding-day. Then the news reached him of the death of the young gillie in the snow, and Rob Mackenzie's faithful love and mournful fate filled the passionate and embittered heart of Malcolm Fraser with fresh grief, and a yet stronger sense of anger against Biddulph, whom he considered had caused all this misery. But the crowning blow came when he heard that Nora was absolutely going to marry Biddulph. The young man read these words, and the blood seemed to rush with blinding force to his head, and he staggered as if he had been struck. But with an effort he remembered he was not alone, for a man standing near him had turned round and looked curiously in his whitening face.

It was only when he reached his bedroom in the hotel where he was staying that he gave way to the fierce agony that rent his heart. He had truly loved Nora Stewart—had loved her, as he had told her, since he knew what love meant—and to lose her thus! He struck his clenched hands against his forehead; the veins swelled in his throat, his eyes grew red with the terrible passion and anguish of his soul. Then he swore he would return to Scotland and stop this marriage, if it cost him his life. He looked at the date of his mother's letter, sent through Nora, and saw it had come too late. He could not reach England in time. Mrs. Jock, with the fond maternal love which filled her breast, had delayed as long as possible inflicting this pain upon her beloved son.

"If you tell him, he will get over it all the sooner," Jock Fraser had said; but the mother understood better that Malcolm's feeling for Nora was not one to be soon forgotten. She had put off telling him, therefore, of the engagement until the very eve of the wedding. And as the unhappy young man paced his room like some caged wild creature, he knew he could do nothing. He had lost everything now, love, hope, faith, all through one man, and in words dark and terrible Malcolm Fraser lifted his hand and cursed the enemy of his life.

Then the grim thought stole into his mind. Could he

endure this life? go on with this burning pain scorching his existence? Malcolm Fraser asked himself this question many a time during the days which followed his mother's news about Nora Stewart. He used to go out alone and wander about the streets of the strange city, where he had no friend, debating in his own mind whether he should not end it all—kill the restless jealousy, the furious hate, which was tormenting him, by one fell blow. There was an hour when he had fixed to do this; when the unendurable torture in his heart gave him courage to face the secrets of the dark night which has no morning.

He wrote a few farewell despairing lines to his mother and Nora, and then, before he posted these, with strange self-torment, he went to the post-office, expecting to find there a letter to tell him that the marriage, the thought of which was maddening him, had absolutely taken place. There was a letter for him—a letter from his mother—and pale, almost ghastly, Malcolm grasped it in his trembling hand and tore it open.

As he read it, everything grew blank before his dazed sight. It contained his fond mother's little gift of money; but Malcolm never glanced at this. The words that seemed to blind him with sudden joy, to intoxicate him with a wild sense of elation, and give him new hopes for the life that he had so nearly taken, were those which told him of Nora's bitter disappointment; of the reappearance of Biddulph's wife, and the end of everything between them.

Malcolm Fraser's excitement was so great that for some hours it amounted to a species of delirium. It was a bright day, and the young man who had gone into the post-office hating the sun and all things under it, now went forth to revel in its beams.

But this mood did not last; there succeeded to it an undefined, yet deadly purpose to revenge (so he called it) the wrongs of the woman he so passionately loved. Under this impulse he wrote the letter to Nora which caused her such bitter pain, and before he received a reply it seemed to him as if his enemy had been delivered into his hands.

Lounging one day in Madison Square, he accidentally saw a cab drive up to the chief entrance of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, on which there was a considerable amount of luggage, and a tall slender man with spectacles emerge from it, and apparently commence a mild argument with the driver on the extravagant nature of his charges.

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ness ; but when he got close to the hotel, another gentleman made his appearance from the cab, with his arms laden with rugs and travelling-cases, and put his hand into his pocket also to pay the driver, and said something smilingly to the man in spectacles. He turned his face as he did this, so that Malcolm could see his profile. It was Biddulph ! In a moment Malcolm recognized him, and a fierce throb of passion darted through his heart ; he started, drew back, and watched his enemy unseen.

There was no mistake ; it was Biddulph, browner with his sea-voyage, and thinner, but Malcolm's jealous eyes knew the face too well which had caused him such misery. And presently, after Biddulph and his companion had settled the dispute with the cab driver and entered the hotel, Malcolm passed the entrance just as a porter was carrying in the luggage, and he plainly saw the hated name "Biddulph" painted in white letters on a port-manteau.

It would be almost impossible to describe the changing storm of passions which swept through Malcolm Fraser's mind after he had made this discovery. It was now extravagant joy that he had realized with his own sight that Biddulph and Nora were separated ; now rage and hate against the man who had caused them all such bitter pain. He went back to his hotel, and sat down and tried to think what he should do. On one thing he was determined : Biddulph should now be called to account for all the wrong that he had done.

Biddulph, against whom he nourished such bitter enmity, in the meanwhile was very calmly conversing with his temporary companion, Mr. Dalton, these two having formed a sort of intimacy during the voyage to New York.

They had become acquainted by sitting next each other at table, and, being both men of a sombre frame of mind at the present time, they suited each other, and would pace together for hours on the deck, talking in the vague, speculative fashion in which it was Biddulph's fancy sometimes to indulge.

Biddulph gathered, during these conversations, that his companion had recently become a widower, but Dalton made no especial moan over his loss.

"Most men, I suppose," he said to Biddulph one night, as the great green waves of the Atlantic rolled past and around them, "have some interest in life which helps them to bear its troubles with philosophy, and I have found

mine amid the rocks. I am going to America to inspect the wonderful formations among the valleys and mountains of the great Northwest. I am told those of the Yosemite Valley and the Yellowstone Park almost defy the geologist by their varied wonders ; but we shall see."

He was a calm, cold man this, and Biddulph used sometimes to envy him the power of thus completely wrapping himself up in the structure of the world's crust, its rocks and their changes, so that its passions and disappointments seemed dwindled, or almost indifferent to his mind.

"I wish I only could interest myself in something !" he exclaimed one evening with an impatient sigh to Dalton, as they walked side by side, and dusky shadows stole over the misty sea.

"Come with me on my tour by the Northern Pacific line, then," answered Dalton, in his quiet way ; "surely you can find sufficient interest in the vast prairie lands ; in the teeming geologic curiosities which everywhere abound, to make you forget the worries which, I conclude by your manner of speaking, you are now leaving behind."

"My worries," said Biddulph, somewhat grimly, "won't be left behind ; they travel with me as you perceive ; but all the same, unless you will think me a very tiresome and ignorant companion, I think I should like to go with you, and have a look at the hot springs of Yellowstone Park."

They settled it thus before they landed. Biddulph and his new companion (they could scarcely be called friends) were to spend a short time in New York, and to see all that was most interesting in the city, and then were to start together on a tour through the vast continent, finally reaching the wonderful Yellowstone Park, which, in truth, had been Dalton's chief object in visiting America, so interested had he become in the accounts of this grand, wild, volcanic region, where he hoped to find unique specimens, and to build theories on the stupendous changes wrought in bygone days by the mighty upheavings of some unseen power.

But Biddulph was not fated ever to behold the boiling geysers of the Firehole Valley. He little guessed that from the day of his arrival at New York, his footsteps were persistently dogged, and his movements constantly watched by the fiery, vindictive young man who had already once attempted to take his life. Yet this was so ; Malcolm Fraser was determined to force Biddulph to fight him, or, if he refused, as he had already done, to show

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him no pity. And his fierce, jealous anger was yet further roused when he received Nora's letter, in which she pointed out to him that he even owed Biddulph gratitude instead of hate. Every line of this letter seemed to fill Malcolm's heart more completely with that passion which is "cruel as the grave." He understood now why she had written it; she feared for "this fine lover of hers," he thought bitterly, knowing that he (Malcolm) might now meet him, and call him to account for the evil he had done.

"She loves him still," reflected Malcolm, with writhing lips, as he read and re-read Nora's words; "but it shall not last. Either this man or I shall cease to live."

He quietly, and under the shadow of night, removed to the great hotel where Biddulph and Dalton were staying, and he bribed one of the waiters secretly to tell him of all their movements. He knew when these two men went to Brooklyn, and he followed them unseen to museums, churches, and art collections; but he never saw Biddulph alone. Once he absolutely met them in Fifth Avenue, but neither of them noticed the young face glaring at them pale with jealous rage.

Then one day he heard that they were going to leave New York for Philadelphia, and he left too. But it would be useless and wearisome to tell how from city to city Malcolm Fraser followed the two travellers as surely as a sleuth hound. His means were getting low, and his patience was utterly worn out by the time that Biddulph and Dalton began to near the goal of their long journey. They had started from St. Paul's for the Yellowstone Park, but Dalton found such geologic wonders on the way that he could not be induced to travel quickly. And the beautiful prairie lands, extending wave on wave; the valleys, with their wondrous myriads of pyramids, ravines, and precipices; the marvellous coloring; the weird grandeur of scene succeeding scene, made Biddulph also for a while forget the dark shadows which still steeped his heart almost in perpetual gloom.

Dalton was particularly interested in this region by the varying beds of different strata—the coal beds, the leaf beds, where some fossil leaves were of a deep scarlet hue, though still retaining the perfect form and surface as of a growing leaf. They finally took up their abode for a week or so at a little newborn city named Glendive, where the railway enters the valley of the Yellowstone River;



for Dalton wished to stay here for a short time to arrange his already large collection of specimens, before proceeding onward to the hot springs, and the beautiful scenery around Glendive suited Biddulph's fancy, and helped to soothe and elevate his soul.

It was on the second day of their stay in the new city that, after their early dinner, Biddulph left Dalton poring over his treasures, numbering them, and counting them as a miser counts his gold, and went out alone to have a stroll among the wild and beautiful hills.

And as he went he not unnaturally was thinking of Nora Stewart. This was the first walk he had had without his travelling companion since they had started from New York, and Nora's memory was his companion now.

The ring the doctor had brought him in his bitter despair was on his hand; the little curl she had cut from her white brow was carried in a locket he always wore; and her sweet face was plainly pictured on his brain.

He went on with bent head until he had quitted the abodes of men. Then, as the picturesque scenery opened out before him—for Nature, with her green and lavish hand, here fills the gazer's soul with alternate admiration and awe—the towering pine-crowned peaks, the deep silent ravines, the mighty blocks of granite of wondrous form and coloring, the green slopes and dangerous precipices that are to be seen on every side, form picture after picture of strange beauty and grandeur; and Biddulph's mood, musing, meditative, was in perfect keeping with his surroundings.

At last, after two hours' walking, he found himself standing on a huge granite mass, the dark pines growing in some places thickly up its rugged sides. A streamlet went trickling down through a cleft in the rock to the ravine below, forming there a little dot of a lake, on which at this moment the sun was shining. It was a wild and lovely spot, with "the thick moss of centuries" growing in green patches where the moisture from the water fell; and as Biddulph stood almost on the edge of the precipice, watching two waterfowl disporting themselves in the rocky basin of the little lake below, he suddenly heard a footfall behind him, and turning quickly round, he perceived a young man in a gray suit approaching the spot where he stood,

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This was Malcolm Fraser, who had followed Biddulph on his long tramp through the mountain ranges, and now drew near him with a deliberate and settled purpose in his mind. But for the moment Biddulph failed to recognize him; he saw a tall young Englishman, as he thought, with a gray travelling-cap pulled far over his face, making his way toward him, and, with his usual grave courtesy of manner, he made a step backward, turned to Malcolm, and slightly raised his cap.

But the jealous, fiery young Scot made no answering salutation. He stopped when a few paces off Biddulph, and stood regarding him sternly with his blue eyes.

"We meet alone at last, then, Mr. Biddulph," he said, after a moment's pause.

Then Biddulph remembered him, and guessed, perhaps, something of his purpose.

"You are Mr. Malcolm Fraser, are you not?" he answered, slowly. "I scarcely expected to see you here."

"Yet I followed you deliberately here—have followed you week after week; I suppose you know why?"

"Indeed I do not."

"I have followed you," said Malcolm, growing pale to the very lips with the violence of his emotion, "to call you to account for your shameful conduct to my cousin, Miss Nora Stewart."

Biddulph, too, grew pale at the mention of Nora's name, yet he answered, with cold reserve:

"I fail to understand your meaning."

"It is this!" cried Malcolm, passionately; "you have grossly insulted her! Do not deny it. You were going to marry her, knowing well that your own wife was still alive."

"Mr. Fraser," said Biddulph, with some dignity, looking steadily at the young man's agitated face, "perhaps you have been misinformed as to the facts of a most unhappy story. I surely believed the woman to be dead whom I had the misfortune to marry in my young manhood; I believed I saw her die—you know how—before I presumed to ask Miss Stewart to be my wife."

"It's easy to say this after you are found out!" exclaimed Malcolm, tauntingly.

A flush passed over Biddulph's face as he listened to these words. He bit his lips, but was silent, disdaining, indeed, to make any reply.

"But it has come to this between you and me," went on

Malcolm, with gathering passion, for the sight of this man so cold, so scornful, seemed to increase his rage—"that the world is not big enough for us both to live! You have your revolver with you, I suppose? I have mine. Let us fight like men, unless you are a coward too."

"I am no coward, but I decline, as I did before, to lift my hand against you," said Biddulph, coldly. "Enough misery has been caused already to you and yours; I shall not add to it, whatever in your mistaken judgment you may say."

"I will *force* you to fight!" cried Malcolm, furiously, drawing a revolver from his pocket. "Do you see this? Defend yourself, or I will shoot you like a dog!"

He levelled the pistol straight at Biddulph's breast as he spoke, with such a deadly determined expression on his face that Biddulph saw that he was in earnest, but he did not quail.

"Mr. Fraser——" he began.

"I shall listen to no words now; you and me have met at last in what I mean to be a death-struggle. Will you defend yourself, or I shall fire?"

The words had scarcely passed his lips when, quick as thought, Biddulph raised his stout walking-stick, and, striking upwards, struck the revolver clean out of Malcolm's hand, flinging it first high in the air, and then sending it rolling down the precipitous side of the granite mass where they were standing, into the ravine below.

A scream of rage burst from Malcolm's lips when he saw his weapon was lost to him, and he rushed at Biddulph in uncontrollable fury, striking him with such tremendous force on the breast, that for a moment Biddulph staggered beneath the blow.

Then commenced a dreadful struggle between the two men—a struggle for life.

"You shall follow it!" swore Malcolm, mad with fury, endeavoring to force Biddulph back to the edge of the cliff. They wound their arms round each other, they strained, they panted, Biddulph trying to thrust Malcolm away from the dizzy verge, while he with vindictive hate sought to drive his enemy to what seemed certain death.

And as they wrestled in this deadly fight Biddulph felt his strength gradually failing him, and was conscious he could not long resist the determined attacks of the young Scot. A moment more, and his foot was at the very verge of the cliff. He made a frightful effort to recover himself,

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catching hold of Malcolm Fraser's arm just as he fell back, and in an instant, less time than it takes to write this, these two men fell together, down, down, Biddulph grasping the branch of a pine as they were hurled past it ; but the frail stay broke, and all grew blackness and darkness to his sight.

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CHAPTER XLII.

## A DARK NIGHT.

Biddulph's first conscious sensation after that frightful descent was one of intense pain. Then, in hazy and uncertain fashion—like an indistinct dream—he began to realize what had happened. He had fallen, or rather, been thrust, over the precipitous side of the great granite mass above, and, in a last terrible effort to save himself, had caught hold of Malcolm Fraser's arm, who had fallen with him.

As Biddulph vaguely remembered this, he lifted his head and looked around. How dark it seemed ! Dusky shadows lay on the towering hills beyond ; dusky shadows on the sky. Biddulph rubbed his eyes and tried to see more clearly ; and in the dim light he now perceived, lying a few yards from him, a huddled up form clad in gray. This was Malcolm Fraser, then ; in seeking to kill Biddulph, had he brought about his own death ?

This thought passed through Biddulph's half-dazed brain, as he gazed with his half-blind eyes at the motionless figure lying near him. Then he endeavored to rise, but the sharper pangs of agony that darted through his own frame as he did this, told him that he could not ; that his lower limbs were powerless, and his injuries great.

Suddenly he recollected that he had carried a flask with him when he started on this ill-starred, solitary ramble. He could move his arms, and, after a little difficulty, he drew this flask out of his coat-pocket, and drank some of the brandy it contained. The spirit instantly revived him ; he began to see more clearly, and to understand more acutely, the dreadful position in which he found himself. In this wild and lonely spot, how could help reach him ? Would he lie here until he died ; how long, Biddulph vaguely wondered, in such torture could he live ?

These gloomy thoughts were interrupted by a moan.

Again Biddulph turned his eyes to the gray form, and now he saw it stir. He was not dead, then, this headstrong, passionate youth, who had brought about this terrible strait? Another moan—a moan of such intense anguish that it moved Biddulph's heart to some feeling of pity—now fell on his ears, and he once more raised himself and spoke to Malcolm Fraser.

"Are you much hurt?" he said.

There was no answer; the gray, huddled up form stirred again, or rather, shuddered, and even the moans ceased. He was dying, then, Biddulph thought, and it seemed to him, even amid his own pain, terrible to leave a fellow-creature unaided in such a deadly pass, and he tried to drag himself on his arms closer to Malcolm Fraser.

The pine branch that Biddulph had caught in his hand as he was hurled down the precipice, lay between them, and Biddulph had to thrust this aside. But the brandy had given him strength, and after some painful efforts, he succeeded in reaching Malcolm Fraser, who was lying doubled up together in an extraordinary position, just as he had fallen.

And when Biddulph saw his white, ghastly face in the fading light, he thought he was actually dead. But Biddulph put out his hand and touched Malcolm's; it was still warm, and there was a faint beat in his pulse.

"Rouse yourself, and drink this," said Biddulph, pouring out some of the brandy from the flask; and as he spoke, the young Scot opened his blue eyes and looked in Biddulph's face; and when he did so, somehow Biddulph remembered Jock Fraser and his wife, and the once happy home at Airdlinn.

"Try to drink it," he said more gently, putting the brandy to Malcolm's white lips. The injured man seemed to understand; he swallowed some brandy, still with his eyes fixed on Biddulph's face, and then, with another moan, turned away his head.

"My back is broken," he said in a faint voice; "I'm done for!"

"We are both in a very bad plight, seemingly," answered Biddulph; "but can't you move? Why are you lying as you are?"

"I can't move."

"Let me help you; I can use my arms—there, is that better?"

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strange, unnatural position, which Biddulph found it almost impossible in his own condition to alter.

"It's no good," groaned Malcolm; "leave me alone; let me die alone."

Biddulph did not speak, and the two lay there in silence together as the shadows deepened, and darkness and night came creeping down. It was a solemn moment, for it seemed to Biddulph that for Malcolm Fraser there would be no morning. For himself, his resolute will and strong constitution might help him to bear up, though he knew now that one of his own legs was broken, and the other, if not broken, was greatly injured. But his arms were all right, and his head was not hurt, and his mind was now clear. He looked at his watch and found it had stopped; but, by the fast fading light, he understood that hours and hours must have been passed in unconsciousness since that fearful fall. He lay there and reckoned his chances of life or death; and strange, the life that had lately seemed so miserable to him now grew more precious in his sight. If he could live until the morning, Dalton was sure to search for him, he thought, and perhaps this idea made him endure his great pain with courage and fortitude.

And by and by the stars came out, and looked down with their solemn eyes at yon strange sight in the little ravine among the hills. The two men were still silent; Malcolm Fraser, for pride's sake, forcing back the groans that rose on his pale lips, lest his enemy should triumph over him. And of what was Biddulph thinking? One by one the events of his past life rose before him, and Natalie Beranger's dark face, and Nora Stewart's fair one came hovering near. Would he see them again, or should the mighty secrets that are hidden from living men soon be open to his view? This life of ours—the sad gift we cling to even when most sad, for the opening and the shutting of the unknown door appals us all—was surely never meant to end with breath! Thus Biddulph thought, lifting his eyes upwards, silently asking for the help we all must need. And sleep—sweet boon of God—presently stole over his waking thoughts, and soothed his sharp pangs with soft embrace.

And he dreamed. Lying there, with his closed eyelids facing the starlit sky, a vision, strange, beautiful, was



given to that mysterious sight of ours which sees in dreams. The heavens above seemed cleft, and a track of white and shining light came straight to earth, and winging her way through the bright path, a white-robed messenger of light came floating down.

She stood at Biddulph's feet, and the sleeping man saw the angel's face, full of great pity and eternal love. He stretched out his arms and gazed and gazed, and as he did so the heavenly visitor's countenance seemed to change to one familiar. It was Nora Stewart who stood looking at him now out of the shining light, with love, pity, and tenderness in her dark eyes.

Biddulph started up with a cry, and awoke. He looked around; the light was all gone, and a deep gloom lay over the earth, and the stars had paled. Then there fell on his ears a wail of anguish.

"Oh, my God—my God!—*water, water!*—I hear it—I hear it. In mercy give me a drink!"

It was Malcolm Fraser who spoke the piteous words. And as Biddulph listened, he, too, heard the trickle of the little streamlet down through the rock above, and remembered the tiny lake he had noticed in the ravine during the afternoon; and a memory, a whisper, perhaps, now moved his heart.

"If thine enemy thirst, give him drink; if he hunger, feed him."

"I hear water falling also," he said, addressing Malcolm, and dragging himself a little nearer the dim outline of his quivering frame; "but I fear it is some little distance off."

"Oh, I'm choking, I'm choking!" cried Malcolm, now flinging his arms in the air. In his anguish he had contrived to move the upper part of his body somehow, and lay gasping apparently for breath. "Oh, give me one drop—one drop of water to cool my tongue!"

It was terrible to hear him, and, with courage that was almost heroic, Biddulph answered—

"I shall try to get you some. Here, drink this brandy to keep you up until I return."

Malcolm eagerly swallowed the spirit; and then, slowly, painfully, Biddulph commenced to drag himself along the ground by his hands and arms in the direction of the sound of the falling water.

It is dreadful even to tell of Biddulph's sufferings as he went along. The broken bones of his leg jarred together,

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wounding the flesh, and inflicting on him intense torture. He was a strong man physically, but he grew faint and weary, and great drops stood on his brow long before he reached the rocky basin of the little lake, and contrived to pull himself to its edge.

At last, panting and exhausted, he leaned over and put his hands into the cool water and drank, and drank, and grew refreshed. It seemed to give him new life; and, after resting a minute or two, he filled the now nearly emptied flask and his cap, which he had found lying near him, and started back on his toilsome way to the miserable sufferer he had left behind.

The yards seemed miles on this terrible journey. The difficulty of carrying the cap full of water, and the positive agony of feeling it slowly soaking through the cloth—the precious fluid that he had come through so much to obtain—was truly dreadful. It was, indeed, with the utmost labor that Biddulph could pull himself along; the moans that rent the still night, from the unhappy young man he was trying to succor, giving him fresh courage to continue his painful task.

When he neared Malcolm Fraser, almost a frenzied cry burst from his parched lips.

"Have you got it? Give me it, give me it, or I shall die!"

He drank it *all—all* to the very last drop, and then cried for more. But Biddulph kept back the little that he had in the flask mixed with the remaining brandy, for future necessity, feeling that it was impossible that he could go again to the small lake for a fresh supply.

He told Malcolm this, and tried to cheer him by telling him that his travelling companion, Mr. Dalton, would be sure to institute a search for them early in the morning, and that then they would have water and the help they required.

"My chest seems crushed in," answered Malcolm, "and my back, I believe, is broken; but I would care for nothing if I could only get drink."

It was this consuming thirst that, indeed, seemed intolerable to him. Biddulph himself felt faint and choking with thirst also, and the temptation rose strongly in his mind to drink the water mixed with spirit that was left himself; but he resisted this, bearing as best he could the weakness and pain that at times almost overpowered him. Again he slept, but this time no heavenly visitor

came to comfort him, and a sense of suffering never left him. When he awoke the east was radiant with the pink clouds of dawn, and presently over the hills rose the bright king of day, lighting the myriad peaks and pyramids with inexpressible beauty and splendor.

From the rising sun Biddulph's eyes fell on the prostrate form near him, and on the agonized face of the young man who had wrought all this deadly ill. Malcolm Fraser's expression was terrible, and his brow clammy as with the dews of death. His blue eyes were wide open, and he tried to move his lips, but no words came forth; but he pointed feebly with his hand to his parched mouth, and Biddulph could not resist that mute appeal.

He pulled himself closer to Malcolm, and held the flask containing the brandy and water to his lips. A gleam of joy passed over the features of the apparently dying man, and as he drank he revived—Biddulph having no heart to withdraw the cup until it was empty, though he knew it was probably the last chance gone of prolonging his own life.

But he tried to speak cheerfully, and presently tied his handkerchief to the branch of pine he had brought down with him in his fall, and raised this up as best he could, to endeavor to attract attention from the granite masses on each side of the ravine where they lay, should search be made for them.

But the hours passed away, and the sun grew hot, and no help came. Malcolm Fraser sank into a half-stupor, half-sleep, under the influence of the brandy and exhaustion; but for Biddulph there was no more rest, and he now also was tormented with a burning thirst, and the pain in his lower limbs became more intense.

It was a cloudless day; the strip of blue sky visible from where they were was of the deepest blue, and the breeze crept through the dark pines, and the sun shone on the little lake, changing it to a sheet of gold. Oh, could he but reach it again, thought Biddulph, gazing at it with dim, longing eyes. And the trickle of the streamlet seemed to grow louder in his ears, tempting him, maddening him, with vain desire once more to quench the consuming thirst which seemed to fill his whole being.

About noon the full rays of the sun began to pour upon them, and Malcolm Fraser grew delirious, talking rapidly, and waving his arms, fancying sometimes that he was at home again at Airdlinn, and at others that he was pursu-

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ing with relentless hate the man who was lying helpless near him.

But there was one refrain always to his frenzied fancies. "*Nora, Nora!*"—he repeated his half-cousin's name again and again, and Biddulph listened, and understood, half-pityingly, how deeply this love of his had been imbedded in the young man's heart. Then Malcolm began to rave of thirst once more, piteously entreating Biddulph to give him water, and looking at him with beseeching eyes, from which the light of reason was now fled.

"I, too, am dying of thirst," answered Biddulph, half-bitterly, to one of these appeals, "but to save your life or mine, I cannot drag myself another yard."

He thought this; but his own intolerable sufferings grew so great, and Malcolm's frantic cries so terrible, that at last he determined to make one more effort to reach the water. Each movement was now torture, and a deadly feeling of faintness and stupor began to steal over him. Still he went crawling on, dragging himself by slow degrees nearer and nearer the shining pool which lay before his famished sight. But he never reached it; an agonizing pang shot from his broken leg, and a blindness came over his eyes, and the sound of the trickling stream ceased in his dulled ears.

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"I fear he is gone, poor fellow." Biddulph heard these words as in a dream, lying there like one dead, unable to make any sign or movement, while Mr. Dalton bent over him, and bathed his face and head with the water from the little lake.

He was slow to revive. But Dalton had brought brandy and restoratives, having become uneasy (in his calm way) when his travelling companion did not return at nightfall on the previous evening, as Biddulph had told him he was merely going for a walk among the hills.

To search for him during the night was impossible; but with the early dawn Dalton and others had gone out for this purpose, and the handkerchief Biddulph had hung on the pine branch had attracted their attention to the little ravine, in which, about three o'clock in the afternoon, they perceived the body of Biddulph lying.

There was happily a track between the granite masses to the ravine, which some of the men present knew, and, as quickly as possible, a stretcher was brought from the

town, and Dalton at once proceeded to endeavor to revive Biddulph, who after a time opened his eyes, and understood that help had come at last.

"My dear fellow," said Dalton, as he held up Biddulph's head and put brandy to his lips, "how did this happen?"

For a minute or two Biddulph did not speak; then he said, slowly and painfully—

"It was an accident, and a young fellow I know is lying yonder in a worse plight than I am. See after him, please, Dalton, for he has a mother."

## CHAPTER XLIII.

### "FORCED BY FATE."

It was late in the afternoon when the two injured Englishmen were carried into the hotel at Glendive where Biddulph was staying. By Biddulph's wish, Malcolm Fraser was taken there also, though his condition was at first believed to be hopeless, the lower part of his spine being terribly hurt, and many of his ribs broken.

He was very, very ill, and Biddulph also for some days was in great danger, and suffered intensely from the compound fracture in his leg, the broken bone having terribly lacerated the flesh in his efforts to drag himself to find water. But, to do Dalton justice, he even neglected his specimens to nurse his friend.

"My dear Biddulph," he said, about a week after "the accident," as he sat one day by Biddulph's bedside, "I have no doubt now that you will pull through; but as for that young Scotchman, your friend, I think the prospect is very black."

"Do you mean he will not recover?" asked Biddulph, with some feeling in his voice.

"He can never absolutely recover; the lower part of his body is paralyzed from the injury to the spine; but the doctor says his left lung is injured, and this will probably kill him. In my opinion, if you know his friends, they should at once be communicated with."

Biddulph sighed, thinking of Mrs. Jock, and stirred uneasily in bed.

"I know his people," he said slowly; "this news will be a terrible blow."

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"You need not put it in so acute a form to them as I have expressed it to you," said the calm Dalton. "You can tell them of the accident, and say he is severely injured. This will break it to the unfortunate parents, who, I am afraid, are certainly going to lose their son."

And after reflecting on Dalton's advice, Biddulph came to the conclusion it was but right that Mr. and Mrs. Fraser should know, or at least have some hint, of Malcolm's great danger. He decided, therefore, to write to Nora Stewart, but, anxious to spare them all additional pain, he determined still to call it "an accident," and to do all he could to screen the unhappy young man from any further blame. He had written to Nora before he started on his tour to the Yellowstone Park, and also to his aunt, Lady Barbara; he would write again, then, and tell Nora of the terrible mischance which had happened to her young kinsman.

It was about ten days after that awful night of anguish in the ravine among the hills that Biddulph once more saw Malcolm Fraser face to face. By his request, he was carried to the room where the young Highlander lay helpless, and when Malcolm saw him, a sudden flush spread over the sickly pallor of his skin.

Biddulph, on his part, was greatly shocked by the change in Malcolm Fraser's appearance. The face had grown hollow, and the eyes large, bright, and wistful, and there was an unmistakable foreshadowing, Biddulph thought, of the yet greater change to come.

"Well," he said, affecting a cheerfulness he could not feel, "and how do you find yourself now, Fraser?" And again that quick flush rose to Malcolm's pale face.

"I am in less pain now," he answered in a low tone.

"Well, that is something. I have asked to see you to-day, because I have a few words to say to you," continued Biddulph, somewhat nervously.

Malcolm's face winced, but he did not speak.

"I wish what really happened among the hills that day to be buried between you and me," went on Biddulph. "Should it ever be known, it would but add pain to those—dear to us both."

The lids fell over the bright, eager blue eyes that were fixed on Biddulph's face, as Malcolm listened to these words, and his thin white hands moved restlessly on the coverlet.

"For your father and mother's sake, I wish this—and



for Miss Stewart's," said Biddulph, forcing out Nora's name with a little effort. "I have written to them to-day, and I have told them that an accident occurred, and that you were severely injured, but that I hope you are a little better now."

"I shall be no better," said Malcolm, suddenly and bitterly; "I see it in the doctor's face, and the nurse's. You have got your full revenge, Mr. Biddulph!"

"God knows I wish for none; and, though you have wronged me unjustly, I freely forgive you."

"I would have killed you," said Malcolm, gloomily; "and I sometimes feel as if I could kill you now, for I am lying here a useless log all through you! But it's no good talking—it's all over with me—I'm done for!"

The look of hopeless despair in the young man's face as he uttered these last words touched Biddulph's heart.

"I most earnestly hope you may recover," he said, "and for this reason—I am anxious you should have further advice than can be procured here. As soon as possible, I wish, both for your sake and mine, to get back to New York. We can have sleeping cars all the way and Mr. Dalton will look after us."

Malcolm made no answer; he moved restlessly, and a strange new wistfulness came over his face.

"Let the past be forgotten between us," continued Biddulph. "I am much older than you are, and have been thinking it all over, and I know that this is the best way to end our quarrel."

Still Malcolm did not speak, but he lifted his blue eyes, and looked eagerly at Biddulph.

"If we move back to New York, your father and mother might perhaps join us there. You would like your mother to nurse you, I am sure?"

"But is there—a chance, do you think?" asked Malcolm, with an anxious ring in his voice he could not hide. "And—and I have no money for this long journey."

"That is easily found," said Biddulph, smiling; "and you need not feel yourself indebted to me, as your father will repay me, you know, and for the present I can supply you. Let us settle it, then—as soon as the doctor gives us leave to travel, let us start—and we must carry hope with us."

Again Malcolm's hands moved restlessly, for a great struggle was going on in his heart.

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"you must mean to 'heap coals of fire' on my head, Mr. Biddulph;" and he smiled a wan, forced smile.

"I mean to do nothing of the sort," answered Biddulph, smiling also. "I dare say we have both been mistaken in each other, and you must try to get well for your mother's sake."

Malcolm Fraser sighed wearily after Biddulph left him, and lay there thinking, with a far-away look in his eyes, how fate had been too strong for him, and how now he was forced to lean on the very man whose destruction he had sworn to bring about.

And a deep longing came over his heart also to look once more on his mother's face. Not always had this young man's breast been rent by the fierce passions which of late had swayed his actions. Malcolm Fraser had been a bright, high-spirited youth, until his fatal and unrequited love for Nora Stewart had changed his whole existence. And now, lying weak and weary, some of the earlier and tenderer feelings of his heart came back.

"I should like to see my mother again—and Nora," he thought wistfully, remembering Mrs. Jock's unchanging affection and devotion. Ah, what love had been like her's! None, Malcolm knew—none, at least, for him. Nora had never loved him, he understood now, or only loved him as a brother, while he had wasted on her all the deep, passionate feelings of his young manhood. It was very piteous; and this longing for the sight of his mother's face grew and grew as the weary days passed on, and a faint hope rose within him that he still might live.

But the lower part of his body was completely paralyzed, and at times the injury to his lung gave him great pain. In the meanwhile Biddulph had written to Nora Stewart, and told her that he had accidentally encountered Malcolm Fraser, who had met with a most severe accident, and that he was going to try to bring him back to New York, as soon as he could be moved with any chance of safety. He also told her that he himself had contrived to break his leg by a tumble over one of the precipices near Glendive, but not a word of that fierce fight for life on the granite mass, nor the long hours of thirst and anguish spent in the ravine.

Biddulph, in truth, felt only pity now for the young man whose life was crippled in its prime.

"He will never walk again," the doctor told him, and only a hard heart could listen to such a doom unmoved,

when Biddulph recalled to his mind the bright, handsome young Highlander, whom he had met for the first time at his father's house at Airdlinn.

"Perhaps it is wrong to talk of hope to him," Biddulph said one day to Dalton, "for I believe he will not live."

"Why deprive him of any consolation?" answered Dalton, philosophically, who was, as usual, engaged in arranging his geological specimens. "To hope will do him no harm, and will, no doubt, do us good, for it will help him to bear the fatigue of the long journey. When a man ceases to hope he soon ceases to live."

"Yet I have felt it die out of my heart," answered Biddulph, gloomily.

"But it was probably not really quite dead," said Dalton, looking up with his calm smile. "When a man is young and in good health, the future may always have in store for him his heart's desire—he may only have to wait."

Biddulph did not speak; the long vista of the future was hidden from his view, and yet sometimes hope did now steal into his breast, and he would dream of the days when the life which lay between himself and Nora Stewart would pass away. And sometimes, too, that *doubt* of Natalie's identity still disturbed his mind.

"If I live I shall see her again," he told himself many a time as he lay at Glendive; and he, too, grew restless to go from the regions of the great Northwest. But before they started on their journey, Dalton insisted on fulfilling his original intention, and visited the famous Yellowstone Park, with its fifty geysers, its picturesque waterfalls, and wondrous lakes.

There, where some famous artist has been said to exclaim, with regretful enthusiasm, that to portray the beautiful tints everywhere around was beyond the reach of human art, Dalton spent some of the most enjoyable days of his life alone, though his friend lay sick and sad, and was wearying to be gone. But Dalton did not put the fretfulness of any invalid in comparison with the grandeur of nature.

"My dear Biddulph," he said, on his return to Glendive, "I should never have forgiven myself if I had gone without visiting these wonders. I am sorry I have detained you by doing so, but it could not be helped."

"Let us be off now, at least," answered Biddulph; and Dalton regarded him in mild surprise, reflecting how much

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he had given up for this man's sake, who certainly did not seem as grateful as he ought to be.

However, they started at last, and everything that could be done for Malcolm Fraser's comfort was done; but as he was carried out of the hotel to the railway carriage, more than one woman looked after him with pitying eyes.

"Ah, poor fellow," they said to each other, "they are only carrying him to his grave!"

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## CHAPTER XLIV.

### ILL. NEWS.

It is well indeed for us poor children of change and chance that passing events are mercifully hidden from our sight, unless we behold them with our mortal vision. The sailor's wife sleeps while her husband's death-cry rings through the wild storm; and Nora Stewart was sitting smiling in her drawing-room when Biddulph, whom she loved so deeply, lay half dead in the deep ravine among the hills, and when he dreamed there that she visited him in an angel's garb.

She had received the letter that he had written to tell her he was about to start on a tour through America with Mr. Dalton, and this letter had given great relief to her mind. He would be quite out of Malcolm Fraser's way, she vainly supposed, when he was travelling, little guessing with what fierce determination Malcolm had followed him from city to city, or of the terrible encounter that had taken place at last between them.

Minnie Fraser still remained in town with Nora, and Alick Fraser often visited at her house, though he had not yet summoned up courage again to try his fortune by asking her to be his wife. But all the same he meant to do so, and his annoyance was very great, because he began really to believe that Glendoyne also contemplated wooing Nora; and, in truth, this idea was often floating through the good-looking Anglo-Indian's brain, for his heart, it must be confessed, was not very greatly interested in the matter.

But Nora was a charming woman, with a good fortune and a very pleasant house, Glendoyne often reflected; and he liked to go there, and he liked also to watch the soft

blush which stole to Minnie Fraser's fair cheeks when he did so. He knew very well that Miss Stewart did not blush when he entered her drawing-room; but then, she always smiled and seemed pleased to see him there. And as for thinking of Minnie seriously, he self-argued, it was absurd; she had no money, and he had no money, therefore it was out of the question. But all the same she was a dear little girl, and he liked to talk to her, and, of course, there could be no possible harm in that.

But there was more harm than Glendoyne allowed himself to suppose. Minnie Fraser, brought up among the Scottish hills, knew very little of the world and its crooked and uncanny ways. She knew, too, that Nora Stewart had loved Mr. Biddulph, and been parted from him on the very eve of her marriage, and that she was not a likely girl soon to forget her lost love. She naturally supposed, therefore, that Glendoyne did not go to Nora's house exclusively to see Nora. He did not seem to care to talk to the Lees, and he did seem to care to talk to herself. Poor little simple Scottish maiden! Minnie never thought that Nora's fortune might be more precious in Glendoyne's sight than her own tender heart, which he was fast stealing away. Each day he grew more interesting to her, and her timid admiration pleased Glendoyne, and made Nora's house still more agreeable to him.

He went with them to exhibitions and picture-galleries, but rarely into society. Glendoyne, in truth, hated crowded "at homes," and took very little trouble to make himself pleasant to indifferent acquaintances. He lived at his club, and contemplated matrimony in a lazy, far-off fashion, sometimes thinking quite seriously of Nora, and then allowing himself to drift away from the idea, and glide very naturally into a semi-tender conversation with the pretty girl whom he always told himself it was absurd to think of.

But as the season moved on, an event occurred which somewhat quickened his languid pulses, and induced him one day half seriously to approach the subject of marriage with Nora Stewart. This event was nothing less than that an additional fortune of fifteen thousand pounds was left to Nora by her late father's only sister, Miss Cust. The old lady had been an invalid and a recluse, and had taken very little notice of her niece during her lifetime, and Nora used always smilingly to declare that "Aunt Bessie" was sure to leave her money to some favorite curate. But she was mistaken. Miss Cust left five thousand pounds to various

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charities ; but the bulk of her comfortable fortune was bequeathed to Leonora Cust Stewart, for Miss Cust had never approved of Nora entirely dropping her father's name.

Glendoyne heard of this bequest by finding Nora one afternoon when he called, attired in deep mourning. He ventured to inquire into the cause, and listened to the account of "Aunt Bessie's" legacy with a certain mild interest and a mental pricking-up of the ears. It was not much, to be sure, but Glendoyne was actually poor, and as he sat and gazed pensively at Nora with his half-patetic dark eyes, he thought he had never seen her look so handsome before.

It might be that her black gown contrasted well with her fair skin, or it might be the extra money, but Glendoyne nearly made up his mind. Minnie Fraser was not there to distract his attention, for she had gone to spend the day out of town with some friends of her mother's, and Nora and Glendoyne were quite alone. It was an opportunity he rarely found, and Glendoyne, after a few moments' consideration, endeavored to take advantage of it.

"Do you—ah—think a man is better married or unmarried, Miss Stewart?" he asked in his slow way ; and Nora immediately answered, with great frankness :

"I think married, Lord Glendoyne."

"Ah—that is some encouragement ; but it requires—ah—so much money."

"Oh, no ; it requires some, of course ; but, if a man really cares for a girl, money is a secondary consideration."

"But how is the man to know that the girl cares?" inquired Glendoyne, a dusky blush stealing over his usually pale skin.

"That is easily found out, isn't it?" said Nora, with a little laugh, and a blush also.

"I wish I could find out."

"But have you tried?" asked Nora, a little archly, for she always believed that Glendoyne really admired Minnie Fraser.

"I was just thinking of—ah—doing so."

Something in his manner made Nora begin to feel a little nervous, and this emboldened Glendoyne.

"I wonder now—ah, Miss Stewart, if you like me?"

"Yes, of course I like you ; but——"

"But I mean for good, you know. Do you like me well enough to take me for better or for worse, as they say in the Prayer-book, don't they?"



"I suppose you are joking?" said Nora, with some gravity.

"Indeed, no; never was more in earnest," answered Glendoyne, stroking his heavy mustache with his slender hand.

"I still believe you are joking; but if you are not, I will tell you the truth, Lord Glendoyne. You know I was very nearly being married once, and that it was broken off through no fault of—Mr. Biddulph, and I am not one to quickly change."

Nora's voice broke and faltered as she uttered the last few words, and Glendoyne was too gentlemanly to pursue the subject.

"I can understand that," he said quietly; and a minute later he began to talk of something else, and parted with Nora half an hour after without the slightest change in his usually languid manner.

And he continued to go to her house the same as formerly, and Minnie Fraser never imagined for a moment that Glendoyne had actually thought of marrying Nora Stewart. Lady Barbara Biddulph, however, guessed this, for she was a shrewd woman, but knew also how to keep her observations to herself.

And she understood that, though Nora bore herself so bravely before the world, she was "not one to quickly change." Little things told Lady Barbara very plainly that Nora's love for James Biddulph had not grown cold during the long months of his absence.

"I wish that woman were only dead," Lady Bab frequently reflected; but she did not say this to Nora Stewart. Nora rarely indeed mentioned Biddulph's name to his aunt; she thought of him too much to make him the subject of commonplace words.

And she began to grow exceedingly uneasy at not hearing from him as time went on, and also at receiving no letter from Malcolm Fraser. She had sent Malcolm some money which Alick Fraser had given her to forward to him, and no acknowledgment of this had arrived from him. And about the middle of June, Mrs. Jock Fraser wrote to Nora, anxiously to inquire when she had last heard from Malcolm. The last letter she had received was the one written after the news that her marriage was broken off had reached Malcolm, and to Nora's answer to this Malcolm had vouchsafed no reply.

Nora was obliged to tell Mrs. Jock this, but added that

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she expected every day to hear from him. But days passed away, and no letter came, and before the end of June Nora determined to return to Scotland.

One reason for this decision was to escape a prolonged visit from Mrs. Conway-Hope. Though this lady had left Rossmore in a rage, she did not actually mean to quarrel with Nora. She had written twice during the season to offer to stay "a few days" at Nora's house, but Nora had replied she had no spare room at present, and Mrs. Conway-Hope had found it impossible to go. When she heard, however, that Miss Cust had left an additional fortune to Nora, Mrs. Conway-Hope determined no longer to be refused.

Nora received a letter one morning, asking if she might arrive on the following day, as she was "passing through town, and hated hotels." "If, my dear Nora, I receive no answer to this, I shall expect I shall be welcome," read Nora, with consternation, "and I shall hope to see you about twelve on Thursday."

Nora received this letter actually at half-past twelve o'clock on Thursday. It was dated two days back, but as Nora sprang up to send a telegram to stop her, a cab drove to the door, and "Cousin Margaret" herself appeared, in her limp black, and three minutes later was embracing Nora.

"You would get my letter yesterday," she said, as she pressed her gray-tinted visage against Nora's face. "Well, my dear Nora, how are you? You are not looking very well, but what could we expect?" and Mrs. Conway-Hope sighed.

"I am fairly well," answered Nora, quickly; "and I hope you are well?"

"I am fairly well, also, though I must say I have felt very much hurt not to be remembered in the will of Bessie Cust. I cannot understand it; I am her own cousin, and I never neglected to send her a Christmas card, and even an Easter one, and I wrote to her regularly, and I naturally expected some little acknowledgment for all these attentions. I understand you have received a considerable sum?"

"Fifteen thousand pounds," laughed Nora, "and I never paid her any little attentions."

"She was a most eccentric person and exceedingly disagreeable, and set up to be so religious, too, though I must say I never saw any practical results of her piety."

"Poor old lady! we ought to let her rest now."

"But you can understand Nora, I am sure, that I naturally feel a little indignant. I think people ought to remember their relations when they are making their wills."

"But Aunt Bessie did, you know."

"I at least have no reason to feel any respect for her memory," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, severely; and Nora soon found that the grievance of Miss Cust's will was a very bitter one.

It made Mrs. Conway-Hope more sour even than usual, and was for ever rankling in her mind. Even poor Minnie Fraser did not escape a passing stab.

"And how is your poor mother, Miss Fraser?" asked Mrs. Conway-Hope, with a meaning sigh.

"She is very well, thank you," answered Minnie, blushing scarlet.

"Ah! it was very sad," said Mrs. Conway-Hope, shaking her head; and Minnie naturally felt this allusion to her unfortunate brother very deeply.

"And that dreadful woman, Lady Barbara Biddulph; I trust, my dear Nora, that you see nothing *now* of her?"

"I frequently see her," replied Nora, with heightened color; "Lady Barbara is a great favorite of mine."

Mrs. Conway-Hope raised her eyebrows and her shoulders with an expression as much as to say that words would be poor to declare her feelings on the subject. In fact, she was so disagreeable all around, that Nora confessed to Minnie Fraser, before the first day of her visit was over, that she really could not stand it.

"Let us leave town the day after to-morrow, Minnie; and if she offers to go with us to Scotland, I shall just simply refuse," said Nora; and it was thus settled.

"You know Cousin Margaret, that we start for Rossmore on Saturday," Nora told her visitor the next day at breakfast.

"Do you *really*? I thought the painful associations connected with the place would have been too recent, Nora. I wonder you don't take a house at some south-country watering-place instead, particularly when you have got all this large sum of ready money now at your command."

"I prefer my own house," said Nora, abruptly.

"Still, dear, after all the sad, indeed dreadful, circumstances which took place there in the winter——"

Nora rose and walked out of the room, and Mrs. Conway-Hope looked after her with a sigh.

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"Poor dear Nora is terribly upset still, evidently," she said, turning to Minnie Fraser. "Do you ever hear anything of the dreadful man who caused all this scandal and trouble?"

"I believe Nora hears occasionally from Mr. Biddulph; but it is a subject that is never mentioned to her," replied Minnie.

"Well, it is certainly an unpleasant one for you all," said Mrs. Conway-Hope; but later in the day she found she had gone a little too far, for when she more than hinted to Nora that she was quite ready to go with them the next day to Scotland, Nora took not the slightest notice of her veiled proposal.

"It will be very inconvenient for me to leave here on Saturday, my dear Nora," she presently suggested; "I reckon on spending a week or ten days at least with you. Would you mind letting me remain over Sunday at least?"

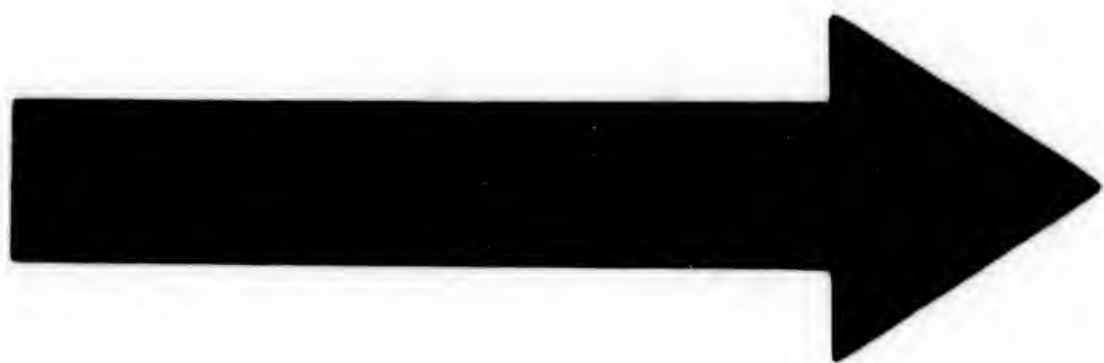
"Not in the least," answered Nora, "only there will be no one in the house but the charwoman, as I take all the servants down with me."

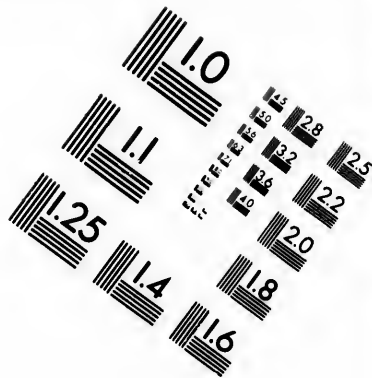
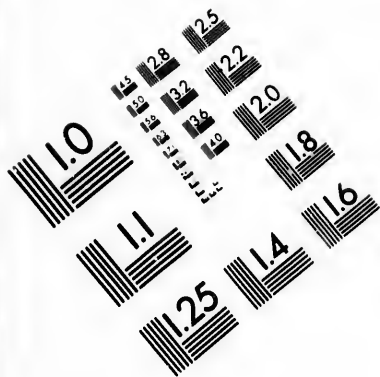
"Could you not leave a couple of them for a day or two?"

Nora finally agreed to leave one of the housemaids; and Mrs. Conway-Hope having thus provided herself with free quarters for a week or two—for she really had no intention of leaving earlier—she became a little more amiable; but both Nora and Minnie Fraser were still exceedingly glad to think that they would soon be rid of her company.

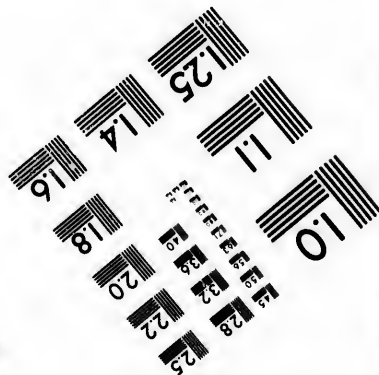
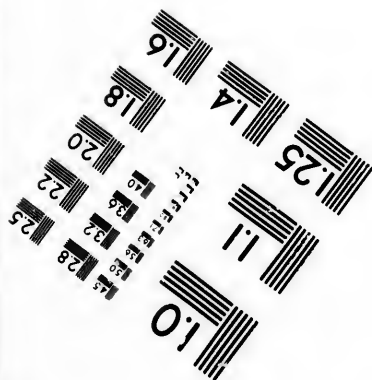
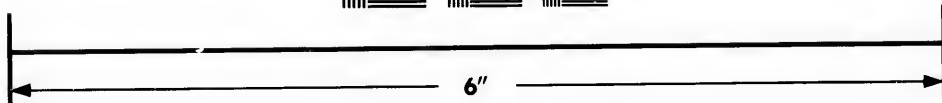
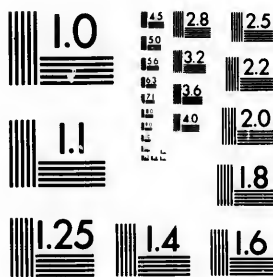
They had fixed to start on an early train for the north, but before they left town Nora received a very great shock. This was caused by the letter Biddulph had written to her from the hotel at Glendive, to tell her of Malcolm Fraser's dangerous condition. He said as little about his own injuries as possible, but Nora read his letter with pale cheeks and bated breath. Instantly her mind turned to the extraordinary coincidence that both Malcolm and Biddulph should be injured, and that they should have met in the valley of the Yellowstone River, when Malcolm had expressed no intention of going there. "He has followed James," thought Nora, with that quick intuition of the truth which women possess. "He is keeping something back. Oh, this is terrible, too terrible!"

She clasped her hands, and stood there thinking what





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she should do. "I think his parents should know at once," Biddulph had written, "for I shall not disguise from you that the doctor here has a very bad opinion of his case. I shall try to get him back to New York, and both you and Mr. and Mrs. Fraser may depend upon my doing everything that is possible for him; but the injury to his spine is very serious."

Had they fought, and had Biddulph shot him? Nora asked herself, with a sinking heart. And how could she tell the mother this, who had already become so anxious about her son?

"Poor Malcolm—poor boy, poor boy!" and Nora's tears fell fast. All her young cousin's hot faults were forgiven and forgotten now, for Nora knew Biddulph would not have written as he had done if there had been much ground for hope. And if Biddulph's hand had done this? But no, this could not, could not be!

Nora tried at first to disguise her agitation from Minnie Fraser, who came into the room while she was still standing with Biddulph's letter in her hand, but Minnie instantly perceived something was wrong.

"What is the matter, Nora?" she asked, anxiously. "Nothing has happened at home, has there?"

"No, dear," faltered Nora.

"Then, it is something about poor Malcolm," cried Minnie. "I see it is, Nora! Oh! what has happened? he—he—is not——"

"He has had an accident, and is badly injured," said Nora, as Minnie paused. "I've had a letter from Mr. Biddulph, and he has met Malcolm somewhere in the neighborhood of the Yellowstone Valley, and—and he is going to take him back to New York."

"Mr. Biddulph!" repeated Minnie, and her face flushed, "Oh, Nora, what could they have to do with each other? Poor Malcolm hated Mr. Biddulph. There is a secret in all this."

"You think——"

"They've quarrelled, and Malcolm has been hurt. Oh! what will mother say? This will just break her heart."

Minnie began to sob aloud, and Nora, too, was greatly overcome. That this idea should have occurred to Minnie also seemed like confirmation of her own fears. And Biddulph? Perhaps he was keeping back his own danger out of tender consideration for her, Nora now thought with blanched cheeks and a sinking heart.

"What shall we do, Minnie?" she asked. "Telegraph for your father, or go home?"

"Then poor mother would be left alone if my father came here, and that would be so dreadful for her. Let us go home as we intended, Nora, and then father will decide what it will be best to do."

They settled this, and went on with their preparations for leaving town in silent anxiety and grief.

"Don't let us tell Mrs. Conway-Hope," Minnie said; and Nora spoke no word to "Cousin Margaret" of Malcolm Fraser. That lady, however, noticed that both the girls had evidently been greatly disturbed, and that their eyelids were red and swollen with tears.

"I hope you have had no ill news, my dear Nora?" she asked, curiously; but Nora made no answer, and Mrs. Conway-Hope instantly decided that her conjecture had been right.

"It is something about that wretched Biddulph, I dare say," she thought; "or perhaps young Fraser. Oh, well, they may keep their secrets if they like."

And they did keep their secret, and started on their journey without satisfying Mrs. Conway-Hope's strong desire to know what was the matter. They sat with their hands clasped together in the railway carriage, and tried to speak (each for the other's sake) more hopefully than they felt.

"Father and mother are sure to go to New York," Minnie said; "mother I know will never bear to think that Malcolm is very ill, and that she is not near to nurse him."

"If they go," answered Nora, with heaving breast and a sudden flush dying her pale face, "I shall go, too. I—I must see poor Malcolm again."

"To see you would do him more good than anything else, Nora, Poor Malcolm! he cared for no one as he cared for you."

"And I cared for him too, Minnie, but I thought of him as a boy, a brother. But he may get well still; the doctors at New York may bring him round. We must hope for the best, dear."

"Yes;" and again Minnie's blue eyes grew full of tears.

He was her only brother, and these two had grown up together side by side, and made the old home bright, until the fatal passion had seized on Malcolm which had destroyed him.

They travelled the whole day, and it was late at night

when they reached the little Highland station nearest Rossmore, and found Jock Fraser's friendly face waiting for them there.

"Well, my dears," he said, going up to the door of the railway carriage, and kissing them each heartily as he handed them out. He was glad to have his little Minnie back again, and he was fond of Nora Stewart; but presently he noticed that Nora looked very pale and sad, and that Minnie also seemed ill at ease.

"You are both far too tired," he said, in his kindly way. "If it wasn't that mother would like to see you, Minnie, I would ask Nora to give you a bed, and not take you across the loch to-night."

"Come with us to Rossmore, Jock," said Nora; "I've got something to tell you."

Jock Fraser's brown face instantly flushed, and an anxious thought for his son crept into his heart.

"Nothing about——" he said, in a low pained tone, and paused.

"Wait until we get to Rossmore," whispered Nora; and scarcely a word was spoken by the three in the short drive to Nora's home. When they reached it, Jock Fraser drew Nora into the dining-room and closed the door behind them, as the servants were bringing in the luggage.

"What is it, Nora my dear?" he asked, anxiously. "Not surely about my poor boy?"

"Malcolm has had an accident, Jock," faltered Nora; "and—and Mr. Biddulph has written to tell me about it. I got the letter this morning."

"*Biddulph?*" repeated Jock, in great surprise and agitation.

"Yes; they met, it seems, somewhere near the valley of the Yellowstone River, and it was there Malcolm's accident occurred. But you had better read Mr. Biddulph's letter—~~this~~ is it;" and Nora put it into his hand, and scarcely dared to look at the father's face when he read the words, which seemed to him like a death-sentence to his only son.

"My God!" he cried, and grew pale, and his hands trembled.

"We must try to hope," said Nora, who was deeply moved; "he is young and strong. By this time I hope he will be back to New York, and the doctors there may be able to cure him."

But Jock shook his head.

"Who will tell his mother?" he groaned. "Oh, my poor Jeanie!"

"He must have fallen down some cliff, I suppose."

"But how did he get there?" asked Jock with his white, dry lips. "Where did Malcolm get the money to go on such a long and expensive journey, and why were we not told? There is some secret, Nora; Biddulph is keeping something back."

"Your brother Alick sent him some money through me," said Nora.

"But why should he go to the Yellowstone Valley? And Biddulph, it seems he is hurt too. Nora, can these two have fought?"

Nora did not speak; she looked up in Jock's face, and saw what she feared.

"Oh, my poor boy!" said Jock, greatly overcome; and he turned away his head. He was too just a man to blame Biddulph, even if this were so; it had been his rash, headstrong son who had brought this on himself, Jock at this moment felt convinced.

"Mr. Biddulph, I am sure," said Nora, "would never willingly have injured Malcolm, but Malcolm wrote to me in very bitter terms about him after my marriage was broken off, and he may——"

"Have forced Biddulph to fight him? Yes;" and Jock covered his face with his hand, and then sat wearily down.

"Dear Jock," said Nora, with tender pity, laying her hand on her half-cousin's shoulder.

Then Jock looked at her, with his wet, brown, pathetic eyes.

"It's his mother I'm thinking of, Nora. God knows both our hearts have been nigh broken as it is, but this will finish it, I think; it will kill his mother."

"It may not be so bad."

"Biddulph would never have written this"—and Jock pointed to the open letter lying on the table—"if he thought the lad would live. But we must go to him, if he's alive still. I'll take Jeanie to New York, but we must telegraph to Biddulph first. Where did he stay?"

"At the Fifth Avenue Hotel, in Madison Square; and he will, no doubt, return there."

"I'll telegraph to-morrow, then."

"And, Jock, if you and Jeanie go to New York, I should

like to go with you," said Nora. "I—I too should like to see poor Malcolm again."

Jock did not speak ; again he lifted his eyes and looked sadly in her face. He was too shrewd not to know Nora's motive for wishing to go with them. "It's not for the poor boy's sake," he thought, but without any bitterness, for the kind laird knew that Malcolm's love had all been wasted.

"Well, my dear," he said, a few moments later, and he rose, "I must go to poor Jeanie now. Keep Minnie with you to-night ; Jeanie and I will bear it best alone."

Nora had no heart to detain him, nor to speak any more consoling words. She went with him to the room door, and kissed him.

"If I can do anything, Jock, send for me," she said, in a low tone ; and he nodded and went away with bowed head and pallid face, to tell his wife the mournful news.

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## CHAPTER XLV

### "OUR ONE BOY."

The next morning, before Nora was up, a note arrived for her from Airdlinn. It was from Jock Fraser, and Nora read it with deep pity.

"DEAR NORA,"

"Will you come here as soon as possible, and bring Biddulph's letter with you, for poor Jeanie is in a dreadful state, and insists upon seeing it. She wishes to start for New York this morning, but I must go to Glasgow first and telegraph to Biddulph, to know *if it will be of any avail*, before I allow her to do this. If it is too late to see our poor boy alive, it would but give her useless pain. It is very terrible to me to see her.

"Yours affectionately,

"J. FRASER."

About an hour after receiving this, Nora and Minnie started for Airdlinn, arriving there in the dewy freshness of the morning ; and while all nature was smiling outside the gray old house by the blue loch, inside the unhappy

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mother was walking up and down the bedroom, in a condition truly pitiable to behold.

Jock Fraser met Nora in the hall with a sorrowful, worn face, and silently clasped her hand.

"How is Jeanie?" whispered Nora.

"About as ill as she can be, I think," answered Jock. "I've sent for Alexander, and you, my dear, will you stay with her while I go to Glasgow?"

"Yes, of course I will stay, Jock."

"It's a terrible business, but it's no use going to New York—if——" And Jock Fraser turned away his head.

"We must hope for better news."

"Yes; and, Nora, bear with poor Jeanie, even if she is unjust a bit to Biddulph. She is broken down with grief, you know, and may say things she should not; still——"

"Do not be afraid, Jock; I feel too much for her," answered Nora, with faltering tongue and dim eyes. She in truth felt worn and weak, for she had spent hours and hours of sleepless anxiety, thinking of Biddulph. It was "not for the poor boy's sake," as Jock Fraser had truly thought, that she was grieving most deeply. Biddulph had admitted that he also was injured, though he has made as light as possible of his own sufferings.

"They have fought," Nora had told herself again and again during the night, "and James also is wounded, though he has tried to spare me."

This idea filled Nora's heart with a strange yearning to look once more upon his face. But she did not admit even to herself that she wished to go to New York to see Biddulph. It was "poor Malcolm," whose hand she hoped to clasp once more before he died, that would take her there, she told herself; and she determined to go if Mr. and Mrs. Fraser went.

"Come up to Jeanie, now," said Jock, a moment later; and he led the way to his wife's room.

Nora had been prepared to find Mrs. Jock in bitter distress, but was scarcely prepared for the mournful sight that now met her gaze. Mrs. Jock, dressed in a white dressing-gown, with her fair grizzled hair pushed back disorderly from her brow, and her blue eyes fixed, wide-open, staring as it were into distance, was pacing up and down her bedroom like a woman bereft of reason. And as her husband and Nora entered, she stopped abruptly, and at once addressed Nora.

"Have you brought it?" she said, her haggard face

flushing for a moment as if with intense indignation. "Have you brought the letter from the man who has killed my son?"

"Hush, Jeanie! do not talk thus," said Jock Fraser, soothingly.

"Is the truth never to be spoken?" answered Mrs. Fraser, passionately. "Nora Stewart knows it is true, and you know it is true! Biddulph has murdered my boy—murdered my boy!" And she wrung her hands together, and then fell upon the bed in a paroxysm, a very agony of grief.

"Oh, dear Jeanie, do not give way thus," said Nora, going up to her and laying her hand on her shoulder.

But Mrs. Jock started, and pushed away Nora's hand as if the touch had stung her.

"Don't come near me," she said, "for it is all through you! For love of this man you first broke Malcolm's heart, and now you have killed him between you."

"You are unjust, Jeanie, and forget what Nora did for poor Malcolm," said Jock Fraser.

"What she did for him!" cried the wretched mother, turning round and facing her husband. "Yes, I'll tell you what she did! She taught him to love her, encouraged him to love her, till this man came, and then she turned away. Don't try to deceive me with soft words any longer," continued the unhappy woman, beginning once more her restless paces; "this is the truth, and now the end has come!"

"Malcolm may get well, Jeanie," said Nora, gently.

"He shall have his mother at least beside him; he has his mother still!" and Mrs. Jock clasped her hands together. "Jock, get things ready; we must start at once, you know—we must not lose an hour."

"We can't start while you are in such a state, Jeanie; try to compose yourself, my dear," said Jock Fraser.

"How can I?" she answered, "when I think ——" And again she wrung her hands convulsively together, and looked wildly up in her husband's face. But when she met Jock's sad brown eyes, and read the unspoken grief there, her mood suddenly changed.

"Forgive me," she said; and went up to him, and clung to his arm. "Forgive me, Jock; but I am only a weak woman, you know, and—and I loved him so, our one boy, our darling son."

"Yes, dear; but grief should not make you unjust,"

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answered Jock, gently kissing his wife's cheeks. "See how you are distressing poor Nora, who has been so kind to our children."

Nora's tears were now flowing fast, and Mrs. Jock, seeing this, and moved perhaps by her husband's words, held out her hand.

"Don't mind me, Nora; I don't know what I'm doing or saying, I think. I—I may be unjust, as Jock says; but——"

"Only try to take comfort, Jeanie, and hope for the best," said Nora, grasping the hand extended to her. "In his letter, Mr. Biddulph says you may depend upon him taking the greatest care of Malcolm, and I'm sure he will do everything for him that he can."

"May I see his letter?"

For a moment Nora hesitated, and then drew Biddulph's letter from the pocket of her dress, which Mrs. Fraser eagerly grasped in her trembling hand. And, strange, as she read she seemed to gain hope.

"His spine?" she repeated, quoting the letter; "but many people recover, and live for years at least, with injuries to the spine. We must start at once, Jock; get to Liverpool to-day."

At this moment Dr. Alexander rapped at the room door, and entered, looking sadly enough from one parent to the other, and silently took Nora's hand.

"Ye've had bad news from the laddie, I hear, Mrs. Jock?" he said, with infinite tenderness of tone.

"He has had an accident," she answered, eagerly; "he has hurt his spine. But people can live with injured spines, can't they, doctor?"

"Na doot; and the laddie's young and strang. Ye must keep up yer heart, Mrs. Jock."

"We are going to Liverpool to-day, and from there to New York. We'll soon be there," she said.

"Ye're na fit to travel to Liverpool to-day. Let Jock go to Glasgow, and telegraph to New York to ask if they've arrive yet," said the doctor, who had received a hint from Jock Fraser about what he was to advise. "Miss Nora Stewart here will stay wi' ye while Jock's away, and I'll gi' ye a draught so that ye'll ha' a bit o' sleep to frishen ye up for yer journey."

After some difficulty, Mrs. Jock was persuaded to follow this advice. Jock Fraser started for Glasgow, and telegraphed from thence to Biddulph, Fifth Avenue Ho-

tel, New York, and waited in Glasgow until the reply arrived. It was as follows, so Jock had some hope to take back to the unhappy mother at Airdlenn :

"Arrived safely at New York. M. bore journey better than we expected ; is looking eagerly forward to seeing his parents. "BIDDULPH."

## CHAPTER XLVI.

### ONCE AGAIN.

One morning, about a fortnight after Biddulph had dispatched his telegram to Jock Fraser, in a private sitting-room, in the Fifth Avenue Hotel, New York, two gentlemen were talking and speculating rather anxiously about his expected arrival there.

These two were Biddulph and Dalton ; the latter having just returned from a visit to Malcolm Fraser's sick-room.

"I don't think that poor young fellow looks so well this morning," said Dalton, in his calm way, approaching the couch where Biddulph was lying, which was placed close to one of the windows of the room, out of which Biddulph had been gazing vaguely on the gardens in Madison Square, and on the fountain playing in the midst.

"What?" said Biddulph, turning sharply round.

"Unless his father and mother make haste, I doubt very much that they will see him alive," continued Dalton, "I don't like his looks, and he seems very weak."

"The doctors will not have seen him yet, I suppose?" asked Biddulph, anxiously. "If they do not come in half an hour, we had best send for Dr. Lester, Dalton. What does the nurse say?"

"She says he is very restless, and that he is pining to see his mother."

"Poor boy! it's a sad case."

"Yes;" and then Dalton retired into a corner of the room, and, drawing a key from his pocket, unlocked a box which was standing there, and stood gazing contemplatively at the treasures it contained.

These were his geologic specimens, and were more interesting in Dalton's sight than the young life which he deemed drawing near a close. He took out a piece of a petrified stump, once part of a great tree, now apparently transformed into solid quartz, and examined it with pro-

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found attention, and then carried it across to Biddulph's couch.

"The petrified stump from which I chipped this," he said, "was seven feet in diameter, and was standing erect in the soil, where it seemingly once grew."

But Biddulph failed to show any interest.

"I am anxious about Malcolm Fraser," he said, after glancing one moment at the petrification in Dalton's hand ; "I think I should like to see him."

"My dear Biddulph, you know Dr. Lester said you were to move about as little as possible ; and seeing the poor fellow can do him no good."

"Still——" began Biddulph, restlessly. But at this moment a waiter rapped at the room door, and brought in a card, and handed it to Biddulph. He glanced at it, and gave a quick exclamation.

"It is Mr. Fraser, Dalton—Mr. Fraser of Airdlinn ! They have arrived, then. Is there a lady with this gentleman ?" he inquired of the waiter.

"There are two ladies, sir," answered the waiter ; "English ladies."

"Two ? Ah, to be sure, the poor fellow's mother and sister. Will you go to them, Dalton, and explain how my broken leg prevents my going to receive them ? And then take them to Malcolm Fraser's room—and don't tell them you know quite how really ill he is."

"I shall go at once," answered Dalton ; but before so he carefully deposited his petrified stump back to its place in his box of treasures, and locked it, and pocketed the key.

Then he went to receive Mr. and Mrs. Fraser, and Biddulph was left alone. He felt not a little excited and upset, knowing how terrible would be the shock to the fond mother to see her handsome, stalwart young son transformed into a hopeless cripple. For Malcolm Fraser had never recovered the use of his lower limbs, and would never walk a step again on earth, all the doctors had told Biddulph.

"Poor Mrs. Fraser !" he thought compassionately, and he sighed. Biddulph himself was also greatly changed, for his face was pale and haggard, and his hair had grown slightly gray at the temples, and altogether he looked an altered man. He had, in truth, suffered terribly from the laceration of the flesh by the broken bones of his leg, when he had dragged himself to seek water to save Malcolm

Fraser from perishing by thirst. He used crutches when he left his couch, and his leg was still in splints; and he had grown thin, and ten years older looking than when he had first stood by Nora Stewart's side amid the Scottish hills.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour passed, and then Dalton again opened the room door, and Biddulph looked eagerly toward him.

"Well," he asked, "have you taken them to his room?"

"Yes," answered Dalton, with a quiet smile; "and now I am bringing a visitor to see you. There is a young lady outside in the corridor here, who wishes to see you—Miss Stewart."

"*Miss Stewart!*" repeated Biddulph, and his pale face grew paler, and then flushed. "Where is she—where—"

"She is here," said Dalton, still smiling, opening the room door a little wider; and then, pale too, and deeply agitated, Nora appeared, and with faltering steps drew near Biddulph's couch, who half rose, holding out both his hands.

"You did not expect to see me," said Nora, nervously, with heaving breast, and downcast eyes. "I—I came with Mr. and Mrs. Fraser to see poor Malcolm. I—I thought I should come and speak to you, while they first see him."

"I shall go and see after some refreshment," remarked Dalton, considerately, and he disappeared; and then Nora lifted her eyes, and looked in Biddulph's changed face.

She gave a half-cry, and drew a little nearer to him.

"Oh, James," she said, clasping his hand with both her trembling ones, "you, too, are very ill! I am glad I came."

"I am much better," answered Biddulph, who was deeply moved. "I have a broken leg, you know, and have gone through a lot of pain; you see me greatly changed, I dare say?"

"Yes," she said, looking at him, with her dark eyes full of the old tenderness; "and you did not tell me."

"I thought it was best not to worry you more than I could help," said Biddulph, trying to smile. "Poor Malcolm Fraser's condition was enough ill-news at once."

"Is he any better, do you think?"

Biddulph shook his head.

"He will never be any better, Nora," he said, sadly. "I am glad that his father and mother have arrived; he

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wished to see them so much, poor fellow ; but I fear it will not be for long."

"Poor Malcolm !"

"It's a terrible business ; I feel so much for his mother."

"It has been dreadful to be with her since the news came ; but after your telegram arrived she has cherished great hope."

"He was better when I sent that than he is now ; I fear there is little hope now."

"And—and it was an accident ?" asked Nora, tremblingly.

"An accident among the precipices in the valley of the Yellowstone River. Malcolm Fraser got a tremendous fall there, and injured his spine so badly that it was supposed he was going to die."

"And you heard of it ?" inquired Nora, with more confidence.

"Yes," answered Biddulph, briefly ; "I was staying at the same place."

"And you have been very kind to him," said Nora, again raising her dark eyes to his.

"I have done what I could, of course, but it is not much. He has seen several of the leading doctors here, and their verdict is not reassuring."

Nora sighed, and then there was a minute or two of embarrassed silence. These two, who had thought of each other almost every moment of time since they had parted, now felt that a strange new feeling of shyness had grown up between them. They could not forget the past, in the chill present ; and presently Biddulph sighed also, and abruptly turned away his head.

"I have quite a gay view from here, as you see," he said, trying to speak indifferently.

"Yes."

But two waiters happily at this instant came to their relief. Dalton had ordered lunch for the travellers to be brought up to Biddulph's sitting-room, thinking that under the circumstances both Mr. and Mrs. Fraser would prefer this to the public table. And a few minutes later, he also entered, and in his placid way began to talk to Nora of New York, comparing it with the other American cities through which they had journeyed.

While they were speaking, Jock Fraser came into the room, and went straight up to Biddulph, and warmly shook his hand.

"I do not know how to thank you enough, Mr. Biddulph," he said, in a voice husky with emotion, "for your great kindness to our poor boy."

"Do not speak of it, Mr. Fraser," answered Biddulph; "anyone under the circumstances would have done what they could. How do you think he looks?"

Poor Jock slightly shook his head. His honest brown eyes were red-rimmed, and his face showed all the traces of recent tears. He had, in truth, fairly broken down at the touching meeting between the mother and son; for when Mrs. Jock, trembling, agitated to such a degree that her limbs seemed almost to refuse their office, had first entered Malcolm's room, he had stretched out his arms with a kind of cry.

"Mother!"

The next moment she was beside him, had clasped him to her breast, and was passionately kissing the white face, which she had last seen so healthful and so brown.

"My Malcolm—my best-loved," she murmured; "at last I see you again!"

The intense yearning love that was expressed in these words was very pathetic. Neither spoke again for a moment or two, and then Malcolm, looking fondly at his mother's face, said simply:

"I am so glad you have come, mother—and you, father;" and he held out his hand to Jock Fraser, who clasped it with his stalwart grasp, and then looked at his boy's changed face with a smothered sigh.

Malcolm had always been handsome, the pride and darling of the two who now stood looking at him, with chill dread in their hearts; and he was handsome still. Almost a beautiful face this, with regular features, curling chestnut hair, and blue eyes, which once had been bold and smiling, but were now unutterably sad. For he knew—lying there in his young manhood—that, in this life, he would walk no more. He was hopelessly paralyzed, and unable to move any part of his body below the waist. It was a melancholy sight even to an indifferent stranger; but to the mother on whose breast he had slept when a little babe, it was the very rending of her heart-strings.

"I hoped so much that you would come," said Malcolm, putting his hand in hers.

"Come!" she echoed. "My darling, I would have gone to the world's end to look once more on your dear face!"

And again she passionately kissed him, and he felt her hot tears upon his cheek.

No wonder that Jock Fraser turned away with dim eyes and quivering lips, and went to the window of the room, and stood looking out on the animated scene beyond, thinking all the while of the wrecked hopes that had come to so sad a close. Then, presently, he heard Malcolm speak to his mother of Biddulph.

"You must thank him," he said; "I—I misunderstood him—but for him I should have never seen you again, mother."

"But how did your accident happen, my darling?" asked Mrs. Jock, in a low, anxious tone; and a deep blush rose on Malcolm's white face as she made the inquiry.

"I slipped my foot on the verge of one of the tremendous precipices out there," he answered, "and fell down an immense height—and—and Mr. Biddulph found me; and that is how his leg was broken, trying to get to me—and, since, he has been very kind."

Mrs. Jock did not speak, as she listened to Malcolm's somewhat lame account of how he came by his injuries, which he and Biddulph had agreed mutually to tell, so as to spare the poor father and mother the agony of hearing the truth. It was Biddulph who had proposed this almost justifiable deception, as he knew well it would doubly add to Mr. and Mrs. Fraser's grief to learn the story of the awful struggle for life which had taken place between them, and which had ended in such terrible retribution for Malcolm.

"Then Biddulph absolutely broke his leg in trying to get to you, my boy?" said Jock Fraser, from the window.

"Yes," answered Malcolm, huskily.

But at this moment Malcolm's nurse, who had left the room when the father and mother entered it, came back, and brought a message from Mr. Biddulph, to tell Mr. and Mrs. Fraser that lunch was ready for them in his sitting-room.

But Mrs. Jock refused to leave her son.

"I shall be your nurse now, my dear," she said, with infinite tenderness, as her eyes rested on Malcolm's face; and he smiled, and Jock Fraser left them together, going to Biddulph's room, and thanking him warmly when he got there for his kindness to his son.

"Have you told him I am here yet?" asked Nora, in a low tone of Jock, before they sat down to lunch.

"Not yet, dear," he answered; "the mother will tell him by and by. You must prepare yourself for a sad change, Nora;" and Jock gave a heavy sigh.

Mr. Dalton, however, was one of those happily constituted people who take everything calmly. He quietly ignored the evident agitation of the rest of the party, and talked sensibly and well on many subjects, and Biddulph was thankful for the presence of this well-read stranger; it made things easier for them all. And after lunch was over, Nora rose and retired to her own room, and, to Biddulph's surprise and secret disappointment, did not reappear the whole of the day.

But as he lay on his couch by the window, longing, yet half dreading again to look on the sweet, familiar face, which he had seen many times in his dreams since they last parted, he little thought that Nora was giving way in secret to the bitterest tears, caused by the great change in his own appearance, and his but too evident ill-health.

It had been a shock and a surprise almost too great for words, when she had first lifted her eyes to his face, and read there the signs of weakness, weariness, and pain. She had tried to hide this from him; but no sooner was she alone, than the pent-up anxiety and fear in her own heart quite overwhelmed her, and it was some time before she could recover her composure.

When she did so her eyelids were red and swollen, and her face stained with tears. Then a message was brought to her from Mrs. Jock, to ask her to go to see Malcolm Fraser, to whom his mother had now broken the intelligence that Nora was in the same hotel; and the news had greatly excited the young invalid.

Nora bathed her eyes, and went to this painful interview with a sinking heart. And the sight of Malcolm's white face, his deep emotion, and the knowledge of his pitiable condition, so moved her, that again tears rushed unbidden into her eyes, and she could only falter out a few broken words.

"You—are better?" she said, holding his thin hand fast in her trembling one.

Malcolm sighed, and fixed his eyes wistfully on her face, but spoke no word.

"His mother will take care of him now," said Mrs. Jock, who was standing near, watching half jealously this sad meeting.

"Yes," said Malcolm, half bitterly, half tenderly, "I

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have my mother now; *she* will not change to me, Nora ;" and Nora understood the covert reproach, though, in truth, the poor boy's own feelings had always misled him as to hers.

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CHAPTER XLVII.

## ONE BRIEF MOMENT.

It was indeed a very sorrowful interview this, and it was a relief to Nora when it was over, and when the mutely reproachful eyes of both mother and son were no longer fixed upon her face.

She went back to her own room, and sat wearily down, wondering whether she had done right to come, and whether her presence had not given fresh pain to the young man, on whose features the gray shadow of death so plainly lay.

But she was near Biddulph at least, and he was ill and sad, and she must try to help him, Nora presently reflected; and the old dream of the faithful friendship that was to take the place of the lost love stole back to her mind. "I said once that I should be his best friend and comforter," she thought, tenderly; "and now, when he is so changed, I can surely be this—he will not, I think, wish to leave me now."

Yet she did not see him again during the day of their first meeting after their long separation. She made that convenient womanly excuse, a headache, for not reappearing at dinner, and remained in her own room during the rest of the evening, though the kindly Jock came twice to her door to inquire after her. But the next morning Nora rose refreshed, and had settled in her own mind how she should for the future regard Biddulph. About twelve o'clock he was lying on his couch by the window alone, having just had an interview with his doctor, when a little rap came to his sitting-room door, and a moment later Nora Stewart entered, smiling and fair, and held out her hand to him in a frank and friendly fashion, without (apparently) any of the embarrassment and emotion of the previous day.

"How are you?" she said.

"Are you going out?" he asked, looking at her hat, without answering her query,

"I was going to ask you the same question," smiled

Nora. "You go out in a bath-chair sometimes, do you not? It is a fine morning, and I have been wondering if you will go out now; and in that case, if you like, I shall go with you."

A flush passed quickly over Biddulph's face.

"I should like very much," he said; "but my going out is such a formidable affair. I am not allowed even to limp downstairs on my crutches, you know; I have to be carried in the chair. You would not like to be bored with such an incubus."

"Oh, yes, I should. Do, please, come; I want to go out, and the air will do you good."

"Mr. Dalton will take you about and show you the sights, I am sure."

Nora gave a little shrug of her pretty shoulders.

"Mr. Dalton is too learned for me," she said, "and I should rather go with you."

The consequences of this conversation were that, half an hour later, Biddulph, in his invalid chair, was sitting beneath one of the trees in the gardens of Madison Square, with Nora standing by his side. And they were talking together as familiar friends; talking as those talk between whose minds there is that subtle bond which comes unsought. This link makes common themes seem bright and fresh, and Biddulph was smiling, and Nora looking animated and handsome under her white sun-shade—a different Nora, in truth, to the gentle, pensive woman she had been during his absence. Yet they were saying nothing particularly brilliant, and were merely commenting on the people passing around them.

And, presently, Biddulph once more mentioned Dalton.

"You will like him better when you know more of him," he said; "his manner is cold, but I owe him so much, that I am naturally prejudiced in his favor."

"What do you owe him?" asked Nora, quickly.

For a moment Biddulph hesitated, remembering Nora knew nothing of his terrible sufferings in the ravine; then he said quietly:

"He has been very kind to me since my accident, and also to poor Malcolm Fraser."

"I shall try to like him, then—but here he actually is!"

For at this moment, Mr. Dalton, who was passing through the gardens on his way to the hotel, had caught sight of Biddulph in his chair, and at once made his way toward him.

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"Good morning, Miss Stewart," he said, doffing his hat. "Well, Biddulph, I am glad to see you out ; this is as it should be."

"Miss Stewart has persuaded me to make an exhibition of myself, as you perceive," answered Biddulph, smilingly.

"You see how sensitive a man's vanity is, Miss Stewart," said Dalton, also smiling. "Now I have rarely been able to induce Mr. Biddulph to do what is really most essential to his recovery ; and as I look upon his life with a sort of godfatherly feeling, I am naturally anxious to see him get well."

"Do you mean because you have nursed him since his accident ?" asked Nora.

"I mean that when I found Mr. Biddulph in one of the ravines of the valley of the Yellowstone River, that the vital spark was about as nearly extinguished as ever it was in living man."

"You never told me this," said Nora, looking at Biddulph, while a little quiver passed over her face.

"Yet it was so," continued Dalton. "I am not emotional, but I must confess I almost gave up hope when my eyes first fell on your white, nay, ghastly face, Biddulph. He looked twenty years older, Miss Stewart, and for a moment or two I almost failed to recognize my travelling companion."

"Don't talk about it," said Biddulph, quickly ; "it's like a horrid nightmare, best forgotten. Do look at that eccentric hat, Miss Stewart—there, on the pretty, fair girl !"

He thus changed the conversation ; but for a few minutes afterwards Nora looked very pale and grave. Then she tried to shake off her feeling of depression, and talked brightly to Biddulph and Dalton, until they returned to the hotel for lunch. Jock Fraser joined them at this meal, but Mrs. Jock still refused to leave her son.

"I want to read to him this afternoon," said Nora to Jock Fraser, "and then Jeanie will lie down and have a rest."

"Thank you, my dear," answered Jock ; and, after lunch was over, he took Nora to Malcolm's room, who smiled and held out his hand as she went in.

"He looks better this morning, don't you think, Nora ?" said Mrs. Jock, anxiously.

"Yes," answered Nora, with faltering tongue. For as the bright sun-rays fell on the pallid young face, on the

damp brow, and bright, restless, sunken eyes, Nora saw only too plainly that for Malcolm Fraser there would be no improvement upon earth. But how could she tell this to the fond mother? Mrs. Jock had had a bed made up in the dressing-room, and grudged every moment when her eyes could not rest on the beloved face. But Nora persuaded her to lie down, and then began reading to poor Malcolm, who lay very still, except when his cough disturbed him. Nora had chosen a sensational story of adventures by sea and land, such as, in his young days, Malcolm Fraser used to love, and by and by she paused and asked him how he liked it.

"I have not been listening much to the story, I think, Nora," he answered, with his wan smile, "but to your voice."

"Would you rather, then, that I just talked to you, dear Malcolm?" she asked, gently laying her book down on the bed.

"I think I should like that best," he said. "Is mother asleep?" he asked, a moment later; and Nora rose softly and looked through the dressing-room door.

"Yes, fast asleep," she whispered, when she went back to Malcolm's bed.

"Poor mother!" he muttered. "Nora," and he stretched out his thin hand and took hers, "I won't get better, you know, and I want you to be very kind to mother after I am gone."

"Oh, Malcolm!"

"I hoped I might get better once," he went on wistfully; "though to lie like a useless log all my life seems almost worse than death—at least, since I have seen you again."

"Don't talk thus, please, Malcolm."

"It doesn't matter much when I am going to die, you know," he answered, with a little break in his voice. "Do you remember, when I went away that night at Rossmore, that I said if I lived I should see you again? We did not expect it would be like this, did we?"

"No, indeed."

"I meant to go back to see you, if it cost me my life, for you were more to me than life—but you knew this very well."

"You pain me so much by saying these things, Malcolm."

"I won't any more, then; only, I want you to understand. I want, I suppose, to make you think of me a little more kindly after I am dead."

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"I do think of you most kindly ;" and she took one of his restless, twitching hands, and held it in her own.

"Because you don't know all, perhaps. Nora, shut the dressing-room door very gently, so as not to wake mother. I've got something to tell you—something she must never hear."

Nora silently obeyed his request, and then went back to his side, and again took his hand. "I don't like to die without you knowing the truth," began Malcolm. "Some day Biddulph will tell you, and I should rather you heard it from me—and—and knew something of what I felt."

"What have you to tell me, dear Malcolm ?"

"Nora, when I heard you were going to marry Biddulph, I was like a man possessed with an evil spirit, I think ! I wandered about the city here until I could stand it no longer, and then I determined to blow out my brains, and end it all."

"But why go back to this now ?"

"Because I want you to understand—for my father and mother's sake—Biddulph and I agreed not to tell the truth ; but I know you will hear it ; and, as I said, I should rather you heard it from me."

"Then you and Mr. Biddulph fought, Malcolm ?" asked Nora, in a lower tone, growing very pale.

"I meant him to fight, but he would not. I followed him from place to place, after I heard that his wife had cast up again ; and I was determined to fasten a quarrel on him, and to avenge the insult he had cast upon you——"

"I cannot stay to listen to all this, Malcolm," interrupted Nora, rising, and trying to draw away her hand.

But he held it fast.

"I won't trouble you long," he said, "so have a little patience with me now, Nora. I want you to understand how I was wild with misery, or I never should have acted as I did. Perhaps Biddulph did not mean to deceive you, but I thought at least that he did, and so I followed him, as I told you, from place to place ; and at last we met, and I wanted him to fight. I had brought my revolver, and I meant that only one of us should live—and that would have been best !"

"And what happened ?" asked Nora, with pale, parted lips.

"He would not fight ; and I pointed my revolver at him, and he struck it out of my hand, and sent it rolling down into the ravine below the cliff on which we were standing.

Then I grew mad with rage, and said he should follow it ; and we had a fearful struggle, and it ended in our both falling together over the cliff ; and this is how——”

Nora gave a kind of cry, and covered her face.

“Oh, Malcolm, this is too dreadful !”

“We lay there all night together——” went on Malcolm ; and then, suddenly, Nora grasped his wrist with a warning gesture. She was sitting by the side of the bed, opposite the dressing-room door, and as Malcolm proceeded with his terrible story, Nora perceived that the dressing-room door was being cautiously opened, and that Mrs. Fraser was standing there listening to Malcolm’s words.

“I shall go on with the book again now,” said Nora, hastily, again pressing Malcolm’s wrist. “Where were we ? I have lost the place, I think.”

By this time Malcolm understood ; he turned his head, and also saw his mother ; but she shrank back as he did so, and Nora commenced reading again, though the words presented nothing to her mind, for she was thinking all the while of that dreadful fall among the hills.

A quarter of an hour later Jock Fraser came into the room, and Nora was thus at liberty to lay aside her book, and take leave of Malcolm.

“Come again to-morrow, Nora,” he said, as she parted with him ; and she promised, stooping over him and kissing his damp brow before she went away.

“Poor, poor boy !” she said to Jock, who followed her out of the room, as he did not wish Malcolm to hear a few words he had to say to her.

Jock shook his head sadly in reply.

“My dear,” he said in a low tone the next moment, “I’ve promised Biddulph that we shall dine with him this evening at eight o’clock. Will you do this ?”

“Yes, Jock.”

“To-morrow we will begin dining downstairs at one of the public tables, but Biddulph made such a point of it to-night.”

“I shall meet you at his room at eight, then,” answered Nora ; and then she turned away, going to her own bedroom, her heart full of the news she had just listened to.

How nobly Biddulph had acted, she thought ; and her cheeks flushed, and her breath came short. He had borne this terrible pain, been at death’s door, Mr. Dalton had said, and yet tried to screen the poor rash boy who had

caused it all in his foolish, jealous rage ! Biddulph not unnaturally seemed a hero in Nora's eyes at this moment, and when, an hour or so later, she entered his sitting-room, dressed in a white gown for dinner, he lifted his gray eyes to her face and smiled his welcome.

She went up to his couch, and stood talking to him ; and, with that wondrous silent knowledge of each other's feelings which lay between these two, Biddulph understood that Nora knew something she had not known when he had last seen her. He read this in the downcast, dewy eyes, just as he had read in the morning that she meant to be his faithful friend, and to help and cheer him through life's dull mill. And so sweet had this thought been to him, that Biddulph's face had brightened, and the little things that had worried and wearied him before Nora had arrived at New York, now appeared easy and pleasant to his mind.

Mr. Dalton even had his mild joke on the improvement which had taken place in Biddulph's appearance ; for, after looking at him attentively a moment or two through his spectacles, he turned to Nora with a smile.

"I believe it is the fashion now-a-days," he said, "for you young ladies to take out diplomas as doctors and physicians, is it not ? If I might venture to express such an opinion, I am quite sure that you, Miss Stewart, would excel in the art of healing ; Mr. Biddulph is a changed man since you came."

Nora laughed softly and blushed, but Biddulph blushed and frowned.

"Mr. Biddulph is an old and intimate friend of mine," she said, "and I am glad you think I shall be able to do him some good."

"It always does a man good," replied Dalton, sententiously, "to find a charming woman interested in his welfare." And again he smiled, thinking, poor man, he had made a most judicious and appropriate remark !

Then Jock Fraser came in, with his sad face, and the little party sat down to dinner ; Biddulph, however, dining at a small table of his own placed near his couch, by the window, as he had strict orders from his doctor to keep, if possible, in a recumbent position. And presently, while Dalton and Jock Fraser went on with their wine, Nora rose from the table and crossed the room, and went to the window near which Biddulph lay, and stood looking out silently at the brilliantly lighted scene below.

The room was almost dark, in the fast gathering twilight, but Biddulph could just see her delicate profile, and in a little while he heard her sigh softly.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked in a low tone.

Then she turned her charming face, and looked at him with a smile.

"Perhaps I was not thinking at all," she said.

"Oh, yes, you were!"

"Our thoughts are strange things—always active."

"Yes, we each hold ceaseless inward council; we judge, we condemn, sometimes we pardon—all in thought."

"And all the time we are often smiling and talking nonsense, too!"

"We naturally do not tell every one what we think—you would not tell me just now, you know."

"I was thinking," said Nora, almost in a whisper, bending her head nearer his, "of something I have heard to-day—something about you, James."

"What have you heard?"

"Of—of what you have kept secret for poor Malcolm's sake."

"And he told you?"

"He told me. Oh, James, it was too terrible!"

"Poor boy! he should not have told you."

"He said his father and mother must never know. I—I do not know how to thank you—to tell you what I feel——"

Her voice faltered and broke as she whispered the last few words, and an instant later his hand had stolen into hers, and they both were silent.

Disjointed sentences from the two at the table fell on their ears, but they seemed like far-away murmurs. Jock Fraser was a good listener, and occasionally such words, in Dalton's calm tones, as "lignite beds," "deciduous leaves," and so on, reached them; but they passed like empty sounds. Below were the brilliant lights and stir of the great city, but of these Biddulph and Nora took no heed. In that brief moment the world and the things of it were forgotten, and, with quickened breath and beating hearts, they lived alone.

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## CHAPTER XLVIII.

## A SAD END.

"Will you two join us in a game of whist?" said Mr. Dalton; and his voice broke the spell, and the clasped hands parted, and, with a sigh, they wrenched themselves away from sweet oblivion.

"I shall be delighted," said Nora, hastily.

"We ought to ring for lights, I think," suggested Biddulph.

And the lights were brought, and the game of whist was played; and during it, Biddulph made up his mind not to allow the pleasant friendship of the morning, which Nora had seemed so anxious to establish, to lapse again into those dangerous moments of forgetfulness through which they had just passed.

"I tried going away, and it was no good," he thought, as he made an egregious error in the game, and trumped his partner's trick, to Mr. Dalton's indignation. "She wishes me to remain her friend, and I shall; it's something, at least, to see her and talk to her sometimes."

"I really cannot compliment you on your play, Biddulph," remarked Dalton, when the game was ended.

"I can never keep my attention to cards. I do not know how it is," answered Biddulph, with a good-natured laugh.

"Apparently not," said Dalton, dryly.

"Miss Stewart," said Biddulph the next moment, "do you mean to be good enough to insist upon my going out to-morrow morning again?" And he looked at Nora and smiled.

"If you wish to go, I think it will do you good," answered Nora, somewhat shyly.

"I am sure it will do me good; yet I hate to be stared at. A man looks such a fool in a bath-chair!" laughed Biddulph.

"That is, suppose any one looks at him," said Dalton, calmly. "In the country we are, unhappily, of sufficient interest to our neighbors for our actions to be watched and commented on; in cities we escape observation. I do not suppose any one will notice you, Biddulph."

Again Biddulph laughed, and they finally settled that

he was to go out, and risk the chance even of being remarked upon.

"He imposes on my good nature, you perceive, Miss Stewart," said Biddulph, as he shook hands with Nora, alluding to Dalton, who was standing near.

"Well, I shall see you in the morning, then," replied Nora, smiling, as she left the room; and when she reached her own, her face was flushed and her eyes shining.

"He seemed better to-night," she thought softly; and she thought, too, of that silent hand-clasp, and of the brief moments when the shadow athwart their lives seemed almost forgotten.

But they both remembered it the next morning, and no further allusion was made either to the past or the coming days. They were friends, and Biddulph accepted the position, and life did not seem dull or wearisome to him any longer. They had a hundred things to talk of, without even nearing subjects which they knew were best ignored. In the sunny gardens they spent many hours, and Biddulph grew stronger daily, and presently was allowed by his doctor to limp on his crutches by Nora's side.

Once while he was doing this, some passer-by—a lady—made a remark to a friend which sent a burning blush to Nora's cheeks, but which she hoped Biddulph did not hear.

"I suppose she is his wife," said this lady, looking at Nora.

"Yes, I suppose so; she seems very fond of him," answered the friend.

A minute later Biddulph made some commonplace remark, and when Nora ventured to glance at him again he was looking very pale. She thought he had not heard the stranger's words, and in a little while regained her composure. But Biddulph, in truth, had heard them, and they disturbed him, and filled his heart for a little while with restless pain.

But he did not show this to Nora; this friendship, from which he had once fled, had grown too sweet and precious to him to be risked by indulgence in vain regrets. And as weeks went on, and the summer began to wane, Mr. Dalton left New York, his concerns recalling him to England, and Nora and Biddulph were thus thrown more entirely alone.

For awhile they loitered in the gardens, or took excursions to the sunny beach of Coney Island, and sat there watching the blue waters. In Malcolm Fraser's sick-room

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the gathering shadows of death grew nearer and nearer, and neither father nor mother would be persuaded to leave him.

Nora went to see him every day ; but poor Mrs. Jock felt a strange jealousy of these visits, and grudged the wan smile which used to flit over Malcolm's face when Nora appeared, knowing how terribly dear this love had cost her son. And she knew, too, that Nora went out with Biddulph, and secretly resented this also.

"She came here to see him, I suppose," she said to Jock, bitterly, "and not our poor boy."

Alick Fraser also heard, with deep and concentrated anger, that Biddulph was staying in the same hotel as his brother and sister-in-law and Nora. He had not approved of their going to New York at all, to see the last of "that stupid, idiotic boy," as he called Malcolm, and had been absent from Inismore when the news of Malcolm's terrible injuries reached Airdlinn. But he did not know that Nora Stewart had gone with them until they had absolutely started. When he found this was the case, he gave way to a violent fit of passion, knowing that Nora would thus again meet Biddulph.

"But she can't marry him, at all events," he consoled himself by thinking ; and then he went over to Airdlinn, and brought Minnie back to stay with him at Inismore until her parents should return.

He thus heard constantly how Malcolm was going on, as Mrs. Jock naturally wrote to Minnie all the news about her brother, and sometimes news about Nora Stewart, too.

"Nora Stewart seems to see a good deal of Mr. Biddulph, apparently," Alick once read in one of these letters, and he frowned and bit his lips as he did so. The idea of going out to New York crossed his mind, but more prudent thoughts prevailed. He was not quite sure of that quick temper of his, and he did not wish to get into "any row," as he called it, with "that confounded fellow Biddulph ;" nor did he wish to be mixed up in any way with poor Malcolm Fraser.

"He is best dead," he thought many a time, in his hard way, and he grew impatient for the news. Perhaps, had he seen the young man stricken down in his prime, laying panting and gasping for breath during the hot August days, his heart might have relented. It was very pitiful, and moved Nora many a time to tears ; while the mother's grief was too great and bitter to be told.

Mrs. Jock grew old, white-haired, and bent during this sad vigil. At last the end came, and one bright morning Jock Fraser called up Nora about six o'clock, to tell her that Malcolm was dying. She hastily dressed, and went to his room, and there a most mournful sight met her gaze.

Mrs. Jock was holding him up in her arms, as his difficulty of breathing was very great, while the gray pallor of his face, his damp brow, and dim, sunken eyes, told that the coming change was very near.

He looked at Nora as she approached him, but did not speak.

"Dear Malcolm," said Nora, going up to the bed, and kneeling down and taking one of his wasted hands.

Then he turned his head toward her.

"Kiss me," he gasped out in a hoarse whisper; and she bent over him and kissed him again and again, while her tears fell hot and fast upon his face.

"I—I—loved you too well," she heard him murmur; "so forgive me—before I go."

"I—have nothing to forgive," wept Nora. "Dear boy, do not distress yourself about anything now."

"Tell Biddulph I am sorry," went on Malcolm, still in that hoarse whisper; and then he grew silent, his breathing changed, and the mother, with her agonized eyes fixed on his face, thought the end had come.

But he lingered about an hour, apparently in a semi-unconscious state; and then, just before he died, he opened his eyes, and looked straight at his mother.

"Mother," he said, and spoke no more; and until the last breath passed his lips, and the film of death stole over them, his blue eyes were still fixed on his mother's face.

"His last thoughts were for you, Jeanie," said Jock Fraser, trying to draw her away; but, with an "exceeding bitter cry," she flung herself on her dead son's breast.

"My darling—my darling, look at me again! Malcolm—Malcolm, my son!"

It was terrible to see her, for there was no comfort for her any more.

"Oh, Lord, take me too!" she kept crying. "Let me die, since Thou hast taken *him*!"

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The next few days were most miserable ones, and it was in vain that Jock Fraser or Nora tried to soften the grief of the bereaved mother.

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"Why was he born?" she asked almost fiercely, in reply to some soothing words. "Why did God give him to me—my babe, my first-born—if He meant to take him away? Don't talk to me of hope or hereafter; my hope is dead!"

And she refused, positively refused, to allow her son's body to be buried in America.

"I shall take him home," she said. "Jock, I have not long to live, for I won't live after him, so don't refuse my last request. Let us take him back to Airdlinn, and let him sleep among the hills where he was born, and bury me beside him."

This, of course, meant great expense, but Jock Fraser had no heart to refuse. And during this sad time Biddulph acted with such generous forethought and kindness, that he quite won poor Jock's heart, and many a time Nora Stewart told herself that but for "James" her own heart would have been broken too.

Malcolm's death drew them nearer and nearer, and made the tie that parted them more hateful and bitter to Biddulph every day. He used to sit and look at Nora's sweet face, and listen to her words, while the doubt of Natalie's identity passed and re-passed through his mind. Should he tell Nora this—he began asking himself—leave her to judge? Honor told him he had no right to do this; but another feeling—a feeling that grew and grew—urged him to let her at least share this vague hope.

"May I go back with you?" he had asked Nora, when the conveyance of poor Malcolm's body home was discussed; and she looked up in his face, as if half surprised at the question.

"Surely you would never stay on here alone?" she said.

"No, that would be too desolate," he answered; and he sighed, moved uneasily, and then turned away his head.

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## CHAPTER XLIX.

### GOING HOME.

There was no question after this about Biddulph going back to England with the sad party. Mrs. Fraser was too utterly prostrate to take the slightest notice of any arrangements, and Jock Fraser was really glad of his company,



and truly grateful to him for having tried to save the life of his unfortunate son. Malcolm's secret had died with him, as far as his father and mother were concerned, and none but Nora and Biddulph knew that he had brought his miserable fate upon his own head, and had twice attempted to take the life of the man who had done his best to save him.

And this joint knowledge added another link to the bond between these two, whose strong and faithful affection had been so sorely tried. Women are quick to recognize generosity of any sort in men, and ready to forgive any faults and failings better than meanness or self-glorification. Biddulph had borne great pain in silence rather than add another pang to Jock Fraser and his wife; and this seemed very noble in Nora Stewart's eyes. And one day, when the poor boy lay dead, Biddulph told Nora something of that terrible night in the ravine in the Yellowstone Valley, and of the anguish of thirst that he and Malcolm had endured.

It was not a story for a woman to hear unmoved, and Nora dare not trust herself to speak the words that rose unbidden to her lips. But Biddulph saw her cheeks grow pale, and her dark eyes fill with tears, and he understood something of what she felt, and knew that the love Nora had once given him was still unchanged.

It was a terribly trying position for a man of strong feelings to continually keep the chain on his tongue, and hold back the words which he knew he ought not to speak. As he had foreseen and told Nora, he was not strong enough to be constantly near her without some of the old feeling peeping out. To do him justice, he tried hard not to show this; but little things—a look, a sigh—reveal so much; and during the voyage back to England he was naturally always thrown with her.

Jock Fraser's whole time was taken up with trying to console his broken-hearted wife, and Nora, in her deep mourning for her poor young cousin, felt no inclination to make new acquaintances or friends. The "pale, handsome girl in black," and the "grave, good-looking man on crutches," as they were called, kept very much to themselves, and perhaps were really not unhappy, as the great green waves of the Atlantic rolled around them; for they were together, and that, to them, meant much they only understood.

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old sweet madness stole over Biddulph's heart with such irresistible power, that he yielded to the temptation to tell Nora of the doubts which now constantly beset his own mind. Up and down on a short space of the deck of the big ship these two had been walking more than an hour, and the white light shining on Nora's upturned face made it seem fairer than ever to Biddulph's eyes. Once or twice their arms had accidentally touched as the ship swayed on the waters, and each time a thrill had passed through Biddulph's frame, as he involuntarily bent nearer to her. Then, suddenly, the moon became overcast, the sea darkened, and a summer storm seemed about to commence.

"I hope it will not thunder," said Nora, half timidly.

"You are not afraid, are you?" asked Biddulph, feeling at that moment almost a wish that a great storm should engulf them, if they might but die together. "It would be better than to separate now," he thought, as he walked almost in silence by her side.

"No, I am not afraid; still——"

"Would you rather go below, then?" said Biddulph, making a great effort to speak calmly.

"Oh, no; it is so tiresome there! One has to talk."

"Take my arm, then; the ship is rolling a little—it will steady you."

She laid her hand lightly on his arm; but as they walked together he drew it closer to him.

"Why don't you lean on me? Are you afraid?"

"Oh, no," answered Nora, with a smile and a little conscious blush.

"Nora," began Biddulph the next minute, as though moved past control by his own feelings, "there has been something trembling on my lips for days—something I would fain tell you—and yet I shrink from doing so."

"You must tell me now, then."

"Do you remember," continued Biddulph, in a broken voice, "that miserable night when I went to Rossmore, to tell you such a tale that I should rather have died than spoken the hateful words! I told you then my mind was full of doubt as to the actual identity of the woman who claimed to be the wife that I had believed dead."

"I remember," answered Nora, growing very pale.

"I thought that doubt was settled the next day, when I saw the dead and living women face to face—when the living one said a few words in my ear I believed none but Natalie Beranger could know. But afterward—strange,

the suggestion was made by Lady Barbara—I began again to doubt. The likeness between these two twin-sisters was so wonderful, it was perfectly easy for either to assume to be the one that it was most convenient, financially, to be; and it was, of course, more convenient to appear as a living wife than a distasteful sister-in-law. In fact, I have thought and thought of this, night and day, since I parted with you, before I went to America, and I have thought of it constantly since we have met again. Perhaps I have no right to tell you this."

"No right!" echoed Nora, with parted, quivering lips, looking eagerly up in his face; "when this would make all the difference between——"

She stopped abruptly, and her eyes fell, and her breast heaved. Her violent emotion startled Biddulph, who had become accustomed, as it were, to argue this doubt in his own mind. But to Nora the idea had never occurred since the doctor had gone to Rossmore to tell her that Biddulph was satisfied his wife still lived. And *now!* Again she looked up in his face with eager, questioning eyes, and Biddulph felt her hand trembling on his arm.

"To me," he said, laying his own hand on those small, quivering fingers, "it would make the difference between a life worth living for and a life which is not. It is no use disguising the truth, Nora, and this is about it. With you it is different, I know; you seemed happy and content, my aunt told me, when I was away—and I was glad."

Nora did not speak; she turned aside her head, and tried to hide, as women do, the overpowering emotion of her heart. *Happy!* She thought at this moment of the bitter pain she had endured, and the resolute endeavor she had made not to show this to a world that scoffs at unfortunate or unrequited love. She had been calm, and very anxious not to make those around her uncomfortable, and Lady Barbara, perhaps, might have thought she was "happy and content;" but Lady Barbara, in truth, had done nothing of the sort.

"I have worried—I have pained you," said Biddulph, remorsefully, the next moment, for he saw how deeply she was agitated. "Forgive me for being so selfish; you know I did not mean to disturb you in any way."

"It is not that," faltered the poor girl; "it is the thought——"

Ah, she could not tell him, and yet he knew! It was the thought that their lives might no longer be apart, that

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they might openly live for each other, as they now did in secret, which filled her with such emotion she could find no words. And Biddulph, seeing this, felt strangely moved.

"I meant," he said, clasping her hand yet closer, "to return to England and see this woman, even before we met again, Nora; and I shall do so now the moment we arrive there. Until then, I cannot give up the idea that I was deceived."

The last words were spoken in a very low tone, but she heard them, and a sudden flood of joy seemed to sweep over her heart; and as the night-wind passed and kissed her pale cheeks, the lovely blush which now so seldom stole there, crept back with *hope*.

And Biddulph's grave face, too, flushed, and a new light lit his gray eyes, as they walked there in silence together, thinking of what might still be. Presently the moon shone out again from amid the dark and broken clouds, and the white rays recalled to his mind his dream, when he laid so sorely injured in the ravine, and a track of shining light seemed to fall upon him, and the angel's face changed to that of the fair woman by his side.

"Do you know, I dreamed of you, Nora," he said, his voice vibrating with deep feeling, "when I spent that terrible night in the Yellowstone Valley. I thought you were an angel, first, sent to comfort me, and then I saw your face—the face I loved best to see."

"In a dream?" asked Nora, softly.

"Yes, all in a dream—only a dream, Nora, for when I awoke, that poor fellow, Malcolm Fraser, was crying for water, and it was stern enough reality after that."

"Oh, don't speak of it—I never dare think of it!"

"You are a tender-hearted little girl," said Biddulph, looking down at her with a smile.

"I don't know about being a girl; I don't feel like a girl now—never since——"

"Since when, Nora?"

"Since that night when you came to tell me that—that the woman whom you believed to be dead——"

"I believe her to be dead still, I think!" interrupted Biddulph, with sudden impatience. "Don't let us speak any more of her to-night—to-night, when it almost seems like the old happy times."

And they did not mention her again. They watched the waves and the sky, and Biddulph talked almost as he

used to talk before the bitter blow had fallen on his life, which seemed to change it all to bitterness. He had that vague poetic instinct in his nature which finds vent sometimes in picturesque words and phrases, though not in rhymes. And the hour and scene—the dark clouds with moonlit rifts, the changing silver tracks upon the sea—stirred these dreamy fancies, and made him, for the time, at least, forget the gloomy shadows that stalked so often by his side.

At last, with a blush and a sigh, Nora remembered how late it was, and bade Biddulph good-night, going below too much excited to sleep. If this should be true—if he were free after all, and she might be his wife! She could think of nothing else, and the next morning she met Biddulph with a new sweet shyness, which he knew very well how to interpret.

And it made him happy, sometimes too happy. He began, in truth, to persuade himself that he had been deceived by "a base, wretched woman;" and he was eager to reach England, so that he should have an opportunity of trying to force her to speak the truth. He thought this one day, and the next awoke in the morning full of chill, sad doubts. It was like a fever, this uncertainty, with fits of hot and cold, and lasted during the remainder of the voyage; Biddulph's changing moods naturally influencing Nora.

They had settled that when they reached Liverpool they were to part, Nora returning to Scotland with Jock Fraser and his wife, and Biddulph proceeding to town, to see his lawyer and find out the present address of the woman who had called herself his wife.

And when the hour came, and they stood together on the landing stage, both pale and grave, they spoke few words of farewell. They clasped each other's hands, and they understood each other's hearts.

"We, at least, shall always be friends," faltered Nora, her dark eyes dim with unbidden tears, and he emphatically answered, "Yes."

Then Jock Fraser warmly grasped Biddulph's hand, also, in silence; but the poor mother never raised her crape-hidden face. She was carrying home her dead, and all other things were as nothing to her. It was the saddest journey—the sorrowing father and mother bearing back the encoffined form of their only son; and a hearse awaited them at the Highland station, as well as the carriage

which was to take them to the loch-side, before they crossed to Airdlinn.

For "he shall go home again," Mrs. Fraser had said; and thus Malcolm Fraser's body was borne back to the old roof-tree under which he had been born. It was a gloomy, wet evening when they reached the water, and the shadows of the great hills fell dark and lowering on its breast. And the weather-beaten faces of the boatmen who awaited them were wet with tears as they carried "the young laird"—as Malcolm had always been called—on their shoulders to the boat, in which so many of the days of his boyhood and young manhood had been spent.

One of these was Tam Mackenzie, and the poor lad fairly broke down, remembering the devoted love which his brave boy-brother Rob had given to the "young master."

"It's weel he did na live to see this day," said Tam, rubbing his eyes with his brown knuckles, to try to hide his fast-falling tears. "Ay, they're both gane now—and *his* bit pictur' is lying on Rob's breast still."

So across the darkening loch the young heir of Airdlinn, the pride and darling of his mother's heart, was taken home dead, after his long sufferings and sorrow. The kindly, homely face of the doctor was watching for them at the other side, ready to grasp Jock Fraser's hand in truest sympathy, and to do what he could for her whose dry eyes shed no tears, and whose white lips spoke no words.

Not even when Minnie Fraser flung herself weeping into her mother's arms did Mrs. Fraser break that silent agony of grief, which was past all human expression. She had grown gray and old; her mourning for her son had eaten into her length of days as moths into a garment.

They buried him the next day in the kirk-yard at Balla, among his kinsfolk; for long generations of Frasers sleep there beneath the green mossy turf. His father followed him to the grave, and the doctor; but the stern man at Inismore stayed at home. Alick Fraser, in truth, was very wroth that Jock had yielded to "Jeanie's folly" about bringing back Malcolm's body, and did not go to Airdlinn until after Malcolm was in his grave.

"Useless waste of money; just making people talk again," many a time Alick had reflected angrily, since Jock had telegraphed to him from Liverpool that they

had arrived there. But after the funeral was over he went to see his brother, and felt a sort of shock when he saw how gray Jock had grown and how old-looking.

"And you saw that fellow, Biddulph?" he presently asked, abruptly.

"Yes," answered Jock; "he came home with us, you know. I shall never forget what he did for our poor boy."

"He came home with you?" repeated Alick, sharply. "Then, are Miss Nora and he sweet-hearting again in spite of his being a married man?" And Alick laughed disagreeably.

"There was no question of anything of the sort, I should say; we were all in too much trouble."

"Where is he now, then?"

"He left us at Liverpool, and went up to town. He's a fine fellow, Alick, say what you like; he got his own leg badly broken, trying to save our dear lad;" and Jock's brown eyes grew dim, and he turned away his head.

"He may be one thing or the other; I know nothing about him, nor wish to; but he's a married man, and Nora Stewart had best keep out of his way if she minds her good name, in my opinion."

Jock Fraser made no reply to this, nor did he speak to his brother of the long walks together on the deck of the steamer, or of the intimate friendship which, no doubt, existed between Biddulph and Nora Stewart. It was Jock's private belief that Nora would never marry any one else; but he confided this opinion to no one.

"It is no business of mine," he had decided; and, like a wise man, he held his tongue, knowing well also what made Alick so bitter on the subject of Biddulph.

"He is wasting his time," thought Jock, when he heard that Alick had been to call on Nora at Rossmore; but he did not tell his brother this, and Alick seemed to be very well satisfied after his visit.

For he could not look into the girl's inner life, nor see her kiss the letters which came from the man she loved. Biddulph had seen his lawyer, and Madame de Beranger's last quarterly allowance had been forwarded to Monte Carlo.

"I mean, therefore, to start at once for this place, though I detest it," wrote Biddulph, "and shall no doubt find her there squandering her last penny. I shall tell you everything, my dear—my dearest, and leave you to

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judge. I believe now I have been the victim of a base deception ;" and so on.

Alick Fraser did not know how often Nora read and re-read these words ; he did not know the fond hopes that filled her heart, nor how she watched for the post, and eagerly looked for the news Biddulph's letters might contain. He only saw her as a handsome woman whose estate lay next his own, and whom he cared for as much as it was possible for him to care for any one, except the owner of Inismore.

Nor did he see her receive a letter one day which drove the blood from her cheeks and lips, and filled her heart with sudden excitement and fear. This letter, written in a handwriting which seemed familiar to her, was carried up to her bedroom by her maid, Palmer, about a week after her return to Rossmore, and Palmer told her that the lady who had brought it was waiting in the dining-room downstairs to know if she could see her.

Nora glanced at the letter, and then grew pale.

"I shall tell you in a moment," she said ; "ask the lady to wait."

Then, when Palmer was gone, she drew out the key of the desk where she had always kept locked away that first communication which she had received to warn her against James Biddulph—the strange message that had come to her from an unknown hand—and she laid this letter and the letter which she had just received side by side, and stood looking at them both with blank and staring eyes.

For the handwriting was *the same* ; the words that had bade her long ago to beware of James Biddulph, and the words that now asked her to receive the writer, as she had an important communication to make, was written evidently by one person. Nora's breath came short, and a bitter feeling of disappointment and pain swept over her ; for if the first letter had been written by Biddulph's wife, as she had always believed it to be, Nora knew that she still must live.

## CHAPTER L.

## WIFE, OR NO WIFE.

It was a great blow, and Nora realized at this moment how strong had been her hope, and how terrible it was to her to relinquish this, though she had told herself a hundred times that she must not set her heart upon what might prove utterly delusive.

And should she see this visitor? Nora asked herself this question again and again, while a positive agony of doubt and uncertainty filled her heart. One moment she told herself that she would not do so; the next, the overwhelming wish to know what this woman had to tell induced her to hesitate; and, finally, she decided to go downstairs, and hear with her own ears what the "important communication" might be.

With a certain dignity and pride, of which she was unconscious, she lifted her shapely head a little higher as she descended the stair-case to go to this interview. She looked a very handsome, rather haughty lady, with a flush on her usually pale cheeks, as she opened the dining-room door, and walked into the room; and so the stout little woman standing there thought, examining her critically with her bold dark eyes.

Nora bowed loftily.

"You wish to see me?" she said.

"If you are Miss Stewart, of Rossmore, I do," answered the visitor.

"I am Miss Stewart."

"In that case I wish to have a talk with you. You are the lady who was going to marry James Biddulph last winter?"

"Yes."

"When"—and the woman gave a sort of laugh—"some one unexpectedly appeared and put an end to his love-making! Mind, I was sorry for him; he at least believed his wife to be dead, and that he was free to marry any one he had a fancy to. Now, the question is, was she dead, or was she not?"

Nora slightly started; her face flushed deeply and her lips trembled.

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lovely visage before her, "the woman who went to him on the night before what was to have been our wedding-day?"

"Yes, I went to him; but I did not know till I got to his place that he was going to be married the next day. And I offered, for a certain sum, not to disturb the happy pair, nor interfere with the wedding;" and again she laughed. "But my gentleman did the high and haughty; he went and told you; he put off the marriage, and dragged one poor woman out of her grave, to compare her with another poor woman who sometimes wishes she was in it!"

"I—I do not understand you!"

"The truth is, it all hangs on a question of money, Miss Stewart. I suppose you still wish to marry James Biddulph?"

"How dare you ask me such a question," answered Nora, with quivering lips and kindling eyes—"you who parted us!"

"Yes, I parted you; but if you make it worth my while—well, that parting can soon be ended. You know the story, of course; how James Biddulph married long ago one of twin-sisters so like each other that there was, in fact, no difference between them? He tired of his wife, and left her, and when he got his uncle's money she came down here to ask for her income to be increased, and he consented to this on the condition that his marriage should be kept a secret still?"

"I know all this," said Nora, forcing herself to speak—"all the shameful story."

"Yes, shameful to your ears, no doubt," retorted the woman bitterly, "who were born in a good position, and of good fortune, and to whom men make honorable love! But what about a woman born of low estate, with no money, and whom Mr. James Biddulph tried to make a fool of—only she was too clever? There are two sides to every question, young lady, and perhaps my story—or my sister's story, as the case may be—was as shameful to James Biddulph as it was to the poor woman he married and forsook."

"I will not discuss it," said Nora, trembling with emotion. "If you came here only to talk of Mr. Biddulph thus, I should rather you would go away."

"I don't wish particularly to talk of him, nor abuse him, for that matter. Other men have tired of their wives before him, and other men will tire after him; and my only reason for naming so common an occurrence is that it bears

upon the little business between you and me, for if Mr. James Biddulph had lived with his wife, you, in all probability, would never have wasted a thought upon him. However, there it is. He did tire of her; and after he believed that he had got rid of her for good, he was going to marry you, until she, or her likeness in the shape of her twin-sister, stepped in, and the marriage was stopped. You look very much shocked, Miss Stewart, but it is better to speak the truth."

"The truth!" repeated Nora, with heaving breast. "What is the truth, then? Are you Mr. Biddulph's wife, or are you not?"

"Ah, that's my secret!" and she laughed her shrill laugh. "Come, young lady, I'll be honest with you, though you may despise and scorn me as you like. What would you give—I mean, how much money—to know that James Biddulph was free to marry—that his wife in reality is dead?"

"How much money!" cried Nora, passionately. "Everything I have—every penny—to know that—that this miserable tie was ended for ever!"

"He is so much to you as that?" said the woman, looking at Nora's excited face. "Ah, it's a queer thing, love! I don't want everything you have, though—you would grudge that, I can tell you, after a month or two of marriage. No, I shall be reasonable. If you and he between you will make up ten thousand pounds, I will swear I am not his wife, that I took him in, and that—his wife"—for a moment she hesitated—"is lying here in the graveyard."

"But—but is this *true*?" asked Nora, in a broken voice. "You are not deceiving me for money, as you deceived him, are you? Oh, think what this is to me! You, a woman—surely you must know!"

"She wrung her hands together in the extremity of her excitement and doubt, and commenced walking with hasty and irregular steps up and down the room, and the woman's eyes followed her.

"Where is he?" she asked presently.

"Where?" said Nora, stopping abruptly. "He has gone to Monte Carlo to seek you; some doubts arose in his mind; he began to believe that you had deceived him, and his lawyer told him you were there, and he followed you."

"So I was there," and the woman shrugged her shoulders, "until ten days ago; but I've the worst luck ever a poor soul had, I believe! Everything goes wrong with

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me, that's the truth, Miss Stewart. And so James Biddulph has gone to seek me? He'll be more anxious to make a bargain, then, than he was before?"

"He wants but to know the truth," said Nora, eagerly, "and I but want to know it. If you want money you shall have it, but, for God's sake, do not deceive us now!"

Her voice trembled with the earnestness and passion of her soul, and for a moment the bold black eyes fixed upon her changing face fell, and her visitor moved uneasily. The next, however, the woman looked up again.

"Did the old doctor that lives down here," she asked, "ever tell you of a certain conversation that he and I had on this same subject?"

"Dr. Alexander? No, never."

"Yet the 'canny Scot' and I talked it over. I asked him then how much he thought James Biddulph would give if I were to stand up and say I had been humbugging him, and that his wife was dead. But the old doctor read me a fine lecture, and said some hard words which I need not repeat. It ended by him promising to try to get some money for me, which he did, and I went away. But, as I tell you, things have gone wrong with me since then; in fact, I am ready to make a bargain—to swear, if you like, that I deceived Biddulph; but I must have the money down before I do this."

Again Nora fixed her eyes on the woman's face, while a rush of conflicting emotions swept through her heart—revulsion, disgust that such a being could live, that there was standing before her one ready to sell her honor, even her soul! She would swear either way for the highest price; and on such a creature's oath depended the happiness of two lives.

"I—I—will send for Mr. Biddulph," at length faltered Nora. "Until then, what can I say?"

"All right; send for him, and name the price. I've doubled it since I was here last. I offered to take five thousand pounds to go away and say nothing to interrupt your marriage; but then Biddulph said I was sure to come back again—and perhaps he was right!" And once more she laughed.

"But," said Nora, moved past ordinary control by these shameless words, "do you not think all this dreadful—most dreadful? I know nothing of your past life; I judge alone by your own words. And how can you utter them—how degrade yourself so far!"

The dark face of the woman she addressed flushed with sudden anger.

"It's easy talking," she answered, passionately—"easy for such as you to air fine ideas and lead straight lives—you, who have everything you want for asking, and have no pity for those who have to keep body and soul together by sin or toil. No, you know nothing of my past life, and the less you know the better, perhaps; you had best send for your housemaid after I am gone, to brush your carpet, lest some of the dust fallen from my feet should chance to stain it!"

She poured forth these words with extraordinary volubility and indignation, and stood there defiantly, even while proclaiming what she was.

"We could all be good women, I dare say," she went on scornfully, "if we had the means to pay for the luxury; though some of those who have, to be sure, do not set us poor ones a very good example. But what is the good of talking thus? We must take the world as we find it, and the saints and sinners are very much the same, to my mind; for instance, you like James Biddulph, yet——"

"I beg you not to mention him," interrupted Nora. "I will let him know what you have said; and now this conversation had better end."

"Which means, politely, you had better go away. Well, I can take a hint as well as my betters, so I shall go."

"And where," asked Nora, shrinking from the question, yet feeling the necessity of making it, "will you stay—until—Mr. Biddulph comes?"

"At the little inn at Balla, close here, where I have been before. But I won't have to wait long, I expect," she added, with a coarse laugh; "James Biddulph will soon arrive on the wings of love, and, until then, I shall say good-day to you; but remember my terms, mind." And she nodded and went away.

She left Nora in an almost indescribable state of mind. Her horror of this woman, her shrinking from the thought that she could ever have been Biddulph's wife, was very great, and gradually it seemed to her that he *never could* have married her; that this must be the other sister—the viler sister—that had planned to deceive Biddulph—who had deceived him; and in that case, if she could prove this, he was free!

And the sudden joy which had swept over her when she



had first heard of Biddulph's doubts on board the steamer, now stole back to her heart, and the color to her cheeks. What was any sum of money in comparison to this precious knowledge? Ten thousand pounds! Nora remembered her Aunt Bessie's legacy, and thought how easily this money could be paid, and how gladly. Then she sent a telegram to Biddulph at Monte Carlo—an urgent telegram—and began to count the days when it would be possible for him to answer it in person.

In the meanwhile, it was naturally much talked of in the little village of Balla, the return of the lady who had called herself the wife of Mr. Biddulph, of Dunbaan, and whose former visit, or visits there had been fraught with such momentous consequences.

The doctor heard "the leedy" was back again, and groaned in spirit at the news, which he shrewdly guessed boded ill for Miss Leonora Stewart's peace of mind. And Alick Fraser heard it, and smiled; and Jock heard it, and sighed; and the Rev Andrew Macdonald wondered whether it was his duty to call upon her, partly from spiritual, and partly from temporal motives.

One day the doctor, mounted on his sturdy, rough, chestnut-coated pony, actually encountered her; and Madame de Beranger waved her red sunshade in token of recognition, and smiled and nodded; while the doctor, after a moment's hesitation, pulled up, and nodded in return.

"So yer back?" he said, laconically.

"The proverbial fate of the bad penny, you know," laughed the woman, with another wave of the red sunshade, and a merry glance of the bold dark eyes. "And how wags the world with you, my good friend, the country doctor?"

"As weel as I deserve, I dare say," he answered, moving his somewhat ungainly form uneasily; "that's what we mostly get, I think, ma'am."

"Then I must be a very bad lot, for ill-luck follows me, and no mistake!"

Again the doctor moved uneasily, shook his head, and cleared his throat.

"Yer not down here again on any ill business, I hope, are ye?" he asked.

"I came down to have a talk with James Biddulph. There's no harm in that, is there?"

"May be there's not; I canna' take upon mysel' to say."

"But Miss Stewart tells me he's at Monte Carlo—gone to seek me there—and I'm waiting on in this lively spot till he returns."

"Miss Stewart?" repeated the doctor. "Ye've not been troubling Miss Leonora Stewart, surely!"

"I'd business with her; I called upon her, that's all," answered Madame de Beranger; and her eyes fell.

"Ma'am, ye've not broke yer solemn promise, surely?" said the doctor, sternly. "Ye've not gane to her wi' the lying words ye promised never to speak again, when I gat the money for ye fra' Mr. Biddulph?"

"My good friend, mind your own business—that's my advice to you?" And she gave the red sunshade an angry shake.

"But this is my business—the business of any honest mon! Did ye not promise me not to come here to disturb the young leedy's peace?"

"The young *leedy*, as you call her, seems very well able to take care of herself, and holds herself pretty high, considering all things! Bah! My friend, don't bother your head about her; leave us to make our own bargains and settle our own affairs. Some day, maybe, we'll astonish you."

"I believe ye're after na gude. If aught I say can ha' any influen'ce wi' ye——"

"It has none," laughed the woman, as the doctor paused. "There—don't begin to preach! Good day to you; I'm tired of standing;" and again she waved the red sunshade, again nodded, and went on, leaving the poor doctor gazing after her with a very troubled face.

"Ay, she's an ill tike!" he thought, disconsolately. "She's gane to Miss Leonora Stewart for na gude, I'm certain; and the puir lassie wi' nane to gi' her counsel. I'll away mysel' and see what the hussy has been up to;" and as he came to this conclusion the doctor turned his pony's head in the direction of Rossmore, and, having arrived there, found Nora looking, he thought, excited and anxious.

He sat down and said very little, for he was thinking how he could broach such a painful and delicate subject; but after a little pause Nora herself did this.

"Doctor——" she began, and then hesitated; "I wish to ask you about something—to tell you of a strange visitor who came here the other day."

"Ay," answered the doctor, nodding his head gravely.

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"Have you heard," went on Nora, with a deep blush, "that the woman who—who called herself Mr. Biddulph's wife is down here again?"

"Ay," again said the doctor, with another nod. "I've just met her, and was sore grieved to see her face."

"Did she tell you anything?" asked Nora, eagerly. "She told me she had once spoken to you—about"—and Nora's breath came short—"a doubt which has crept lately, too, into Mr. Biddulph's mind. He thinks he may have been deceived—that this is not the woman he married, but the twin-sister."

Nora forced out these words in disjointed sentences, with her eyes fixed on the doctor's face, who looked sadly down as she spoke.

"She's na gude," he said, with a solemn shake of his head; "she's a lying tongue of her ain, Miss Stewart, and wad sell her vera soul, I believe, if she could get a bidder."

"Then you think——" faltered Nora, with a chill feeling of disappointment creeping into her heart.

"I think she's come here for money, and will say anything to get it. Ha' naught to do wi' her, Miss Stewart!"

"But," said Nora, rising excitedly, "you said these two—the dead and living sister—were so like each other, no one could tell the difference. You told Lady Barbara this. What if she deceived James, then—if it is his wife who is really dead? Oh, doctor, think what this would be to us!"

She stood before him with clasped hands and pale, parted lips, and the doctor's small eyes grew full of pity.

"My dear young leedy——" he began, and then paused; he was, in truth, afraid to speak, for he saw how deeply Nora was agitated.

"It was Lady Barbara herself," she continued a moment later—"and you know how shrewd she is—who first put the idea into Mr. Biddulph's mind that he had been deceived. And why should he not have been, doctor? Was it not more likely that the wife should come down to see him, than she should send her sister? I cannot but think that the woman who broke off our marriage, who made all this misery, was the twin-sister whom James had never seen."

"Yet she swore she was the wife in the house of God, Miss Stewart," said the doctor, with a sort of solemnity stealing into his voice, "there wi' her dead sister lying be-

fore her ; and I looked in her face and believed she was speaking the truth, and I believe it now."

"But it is impossible to say——"

"It is impossible, na doot ; for these two—the living and the dead—were cast, seemingly, in the same mould. But true words ha' a ring in them that false ones ha' not, and it seems to me——"

"Yet," interrupted Nora, almost impatiently, as the doctor hesitated, "Mr. Biddulph has begun to doubt, and Lady Barbara doubted, and I own that I do."

The doctor gave a sort of groan, and again shook his head. Then he rose and held out his large bony hand.

"It's a bad business fra' first to last," he said. "Weel, good day, Miss Stewart ; if there is anything I can do for ye, just drop me a line."

"We must wait until Mr. Biddulph returns ; but I cannot help thinking you may be mistaken."

"Ah, poor lassie," thought the kindly doctor, after he had taken leave of her, and was wending his way among the hills, "it's hard to dash her hopes and his, for it's plain to see what their hearts are set on ! That vile hussy will name a price, and he'll be ready to pay it. God help them, for it's a sare strait !"

## CHAPTER LI.

### THE HANDWRITING.

It was but natural that this interview with the doctor should only further unsettle and disturb Nora's mind. She saw very plainly that he firmly believed this woman to be Biddulph's wife, and that her only motive for hinting at any doubt of this was to gain a large sum of money, which she believed that Biddulph would now be ready to pay.

The doctor's earnestness so far influenced Nora that her own hopes began to wane, and a great sadness crept over her. It was like a second bitter disappointment, though she had always told herself to expect nothing. And another fact also she could not ignore, which was that the letter she had received long ago was evidently written in the same handwriting as the last one, and this was doubt-

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less strong confirmation of the doctor's belief ; for though these two sisters might have been personally so like that no one could tell the difference between them, it would have been more extraordinary still if their handwriting had been absolutely the same.

And she knew how bitterly, too, Biddulph would feel all this, and shrank from writing to tell him what the doctor had said. No answer had come to her telegram to Monte Carlo ; but the day after Dr. Alexander had called she received a letter from Biddulph, dated from Paris, whither he had gone in search of Madame de Beranger, as he found she had left Monte Carlo before he had arrived there, and was believed to have proceeded to Paris. In this letter Biddulph seemed full of hope ; he told Nora that Madame de Beranger was well known at the gambling tables, and had lately lost large sums of money there. One man he had met remembered the twin-sisters, whose likeness to each other was so remarkable that they were said sometimes to personate each other. "In fact, my dear Nora," wrote Biddulph, "I believe now that this wretched woman utterly deceived me, and that it was in truth poor Natalie who was shot in the Glen of Balla. But I shall follow this other one until I find her, and no doubt she will be ready for money to tell the truth, and then what is there to part us ?"

Only a terrible uncertainty of what *was the truth*, Nora's heart answered to this question. This woman was ready to swear she was not Biddulph's wife if she were sufficiently paid for doing so ; but a false oath would not undo the marriage. It was a terrible position, Nora felt ; yet when she answered Biddulph's letter she had not strength of mind to tell him of the doctor's words. She told him what the woman had said, or at least she partly told him, and she urged him to come at once to Scotland, "for this uncertainty is too dreadful," she wrote.

Biddulph's reply to this was a telegram to tell her that he would be with her the next day. And he came late in the evening, looking worn and pale, for he was not sufficiently recovered for hasty travelling. They clasped each other's hands, and for a few moments looked mutely in each other's eyes, both reading there the intense anxiety which filled their hearts.

At last Biddulph spoke.

"So she is here," he said ; "and you have seen her ?"

"Yes," answered Nora, and her eyes fell.

"I believe we have been utterly imposed upon. I shall see her in the morning, and force her to speak the truth."

"Oh, if we could but know it!" said Nora, almost passionately. "James, I don't know—I cannot satisfy myself—Dr. Alexander believes this woman is your wife."

"What can he know about it?"

Nora clasped her hands together in great distress.

"It seems," she said, "that she spoke to him when she was down here before—that she made a sort of offer then, and asked Dr. Alexander how much he thought you would give her if she were to stand up and swear that she had deceived you, and that she was not your wife. But the doctor did not believe her—does not believe her now."

"But what right," answered Biddulph, in quick anger, "had Alexander to keep such an offer to himself—to give me no hint of this, when he knew how much depended upon it?"

"He thought it was just for money, I suppose; he did not, perhaps, wish to disturb your mind—or mine."

"But he had no right to think anything of the kind! Good heavens, Nora, what months of misery we might have been spared had I known this! Of course this is Natalie's twin-sister, then; she would not have made such an offer unless she were."

"But—but, James, there is another thing," said Nora, in a faltering voice, "something which makes me afraid, uncertain. You remember the letter I got when I first knew you, the letter to warn me—before the woman died in the Glen, you know? The letter I got the other day was written in the same hand-writing, and in this case——"

Biddulph's face grew blank and dark.

"Is this so?" he said, abruptly. "Let me see these letters, Nora."

"Yes;" and she left the room to get them. And when she returned the frown was still on Biddulph's brow.

He took them from her hand and laid them side by side, as she had done. They were seemingly written by one person; there was a little difference here and there, as we see in the same handwriting, and Biddulph noted this as he eagerly scanned the lines. And he thought, too, at this moment of letters he had received long ago—love letters at first, which had grown colder and colder, which apparently also were written by the same hand.

"This proves nothing," he said. "This woman told me when she came that night—the night before our wedding-

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day—that she wrote the letters when her sister, as she pretended then, came down here ; yet one of these letters was written from the little inn at Balla, the day before Natalie was shot. They probably were taught at the same school, and wrote the same handwriting, just as they were alike in everything.”

“Still——” began Nora, who was pale and trembling.

“Nora, will you risk nothing ?” interrupted Biddulph, in a voice of passionate reproach. “If this woman is ready to swear she is not my wife, and never was my wife, is not that enough ? I am not so hard to convince.”

“But—but, James, just think—suppose it is a lie—suppose we were married and happy, and she came again, and said it was a lie ?” And Nora put her hand over her face, and tears rushed into her eyes.

“Perhaps you would leave me ?” said Biddulph, half bitterly.

“What could I do ?” answered Nora, with a sob. “Oh, James, let us be sure ; try to trace out her life—don’t only believe her word ! Dr. Alexander said she would do anything for money, or say anything ; and it’s so strange about the handwriting. I am afraid—afraid to hope.”

Nora completely broke down as she uttered the last words, and sobs she could not restrain choked her utterance. The sight of her grief moved Biddulph, and his expression, which had been moody enough, changed and softened.

“Forgive me,” he said ; and he took her hand. “I shall see Alexander, and make every inquiry that I can. Don’t think I am quite selfish, Nora ; but I really believe that this woman is nothing to me—that it was a clever scheme which she was able to carry out by her extraordinary likeness to her dead sister.”

“But Dr. Alexander said she swore when her dead sister lay before her in the kirk at Balla,” answered Nora, in a broken voice ; “surely, *there*, she would not take a false oath ?”

“How many are taken *there*, Nora ? How many women go into churches and take false oaths, and how many men ? What was a false oath to a woman like her, who has lived a long life of deceit and lies ? Ah, my dear, you know nothing of such lives, and I thank God !”

Nora did not speak ; she stood there before him, with heaving breast and throbbing heart.

“You shall judge for yourself, Nora,” went on Bid-

dulph; "judge between she and I. If she is ready to swear what I believe to be the truth—that she is no wife of mine—I will bring her here, and you shall hear the words from her own lips."

"Oh, don't ask me to judge, James!" cried Nora, pitiously; "I dare not. Ask Dr. Alexander, Jock Fraser—any one but me."

"Well, I can ask Mr. Fraser. I shall go to Alexander's house now, and hear what he has to say. Don't distress yourself thus, my poor girl."

Again he took her hand, and again they looked into each other's faces as they had done when they had first met. Then Biddulph put his arm round her and drew her closer to him.

"It would be hard to part now, wouldn't it?" he said.

"Yes," she half whispered.

"And I don't believe we shall do so. We have had enough misery, have we not, Nora?"

"Yes, yes, indeed!"

"You must take courage. I shall see you again in the morning, and I shall see this wretched woman and Alexander, and I am quite ready to pay her price if she will swear to the truth, and swear never to go back from it."

"About money, James—I almost forgot," said Nora, putting her hand to her brow, as if trying to think. "Aunt Bessie, you know, left me fifteen thousand pounds which has never been touched. I do not want it."

"You are a rich young woman," answered Biddulph, trying to speak lightly and smiling. "We can manage about the money, I think; and now, good night."

He then left her; but, long and late after he was gone, Nora sat thinking. It seemed to her there could be no certainty, no dependence on an oath which was to be bought.

## CHAPTER LII.

### "MY BROTHER-IN-LAW."

Early the next morning Biddulph arrived at Dr. Alexander's house in Balla, after spending a restless and dissatisfied night, for his common sense told him, though he had not admitted this to Nora, that the likeness in the handwriting of the two letters was at least a remarkable

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fact. Yet his ardent desire to believe that this woman was not the Natalie Beranger he had wedded years ago, swept everything before it, and he went to Dr. Alexander's determined to be convinced of nothing else.

The doctor came down in his old plaid dressing gown—a somewhat uncouth figure, for he had not shaved, nor yet had breakfasted—and held out his hand, and took Biddulph's in a warm and friendly grasp.

"Ye've come about this bad business. Eh, mon, ye're changed!"

"I've gone through a good deal since I've seen you, doctor, and have had a very sharp fight for life."

"Miss Leonora Stewart told me of yer sare trouble, and of yer goodness to the puir laddie, Malcolm Fraser, whose gat hame at last! Eh, Mr. Biddulph it's been a tangled web all this, and now there seems no end of it still."

"You know what I have come about; and now, doctor, I want to hear the exact truth. Miss Stewart told me last night that this woman who is here now—who went to her and offered, for a certain sum of money, to admit she was deceiving us all when she declared she was my wife that day in the kirk, had told or hinted something of this to you before. Is this so?"

"Ye mind," answered the doctor, gravely, "when ye declined to give her the money she wanted, and sent me to tell her sa, she said she *must* ha' it; and then and there she started up, and asked me how much she thought ye wad gi' to believe you yersel' again a free mon."

"And why did you not tell me this?" asked Biddulph, briefly.

"Mr. Biddulph, I'll answer ye as I answered her. I told her we were all puir weak, erring creatures, prone to fall, and I thought this offer was tempting ye too far."

"You might have allowed me to judge of that."

"Maybe I should, but in my puir judgment——"

"You would have spared me months of pain if you had done so," interrupted Biddulph, as the doctor hesitated.

"How, Mr. Biddulph? The woman was lying then, as she wad lie now."

"But how do you know this? She swore she was my wife in the kirk, you will say; but she was ready to swear to you then, and she is ready to swear to me now, that she is not. Why should you believe one oath more than the other?"

"Truth is a vera' subtle thing, Mr. Biddulph. That,

woman standing there in the house of God that day had it in her eyes and on her tongue, to my mind, and when she made this offer she had not."

"This is only your own idea. And have you forgotten that Natalie's wedding-ring—the ring with which I married her, at least—was certainly found on the dead woman's hand?"

"Ay; but what about the words she whispered in yer ear—the words ye said none but she could know?"

A dark flush rose to Biddulph's very brow.

"They were only some folly," he said, abruptly; "some stupid speech I made when I first placed it on Natalie's hand, which she no doubt had repeated to her sister."

"But ye did not think this that day in the kirk?"

"I do now, at all events; and I want you to go to her and, if you will be so good, to arrange about the money, and also about the time when she will make a solemn declaration—take an oath, in fact—that she is not my wife, before witnesses. I think of asking Mr. Fraser, of Airdlinn, to be present."

But the doctor shook his head.

"I'll ha' naught to do wi' it," he said; "it's unjust to the young leedy, whose soul is white as snaw."

"It's unjust to me that my whole life should be rendered wretched by a false claim!"

"But is it false?" said the doctor, fixing his small scrutinizing eyes on Biddulph's dark, agitated face. "Mr. Biddulph, doesn't a sma' voice within ye whisper that this sin—this folly of yer youth, we may call it—hangs round yer throat heavy as a millstane still?"

"I will throw it off, then," said Biddulph, flinging back his head with a passionate gesture; "I will see this woman if you will not; and if she will swear on the Bible she is no wife of mine——"

"She would sell her vera soul," interrupted the doctor.

"Let her sell it, then! I believe she's a vile impostress, who traded on her likeness to her dead sister. I wish you good morning, Dr. Alexander;" and, with a somewhat haughty bow, Biddulph took up his hat and went away.

Yet scarcely was he gone when his heart reproached him for being angry with a good man for speaking according to his conscience. The doctor thought differently to what Biddulph so earnestly wished; but, as he did think so, Biddulph knew that, for Nora Stewart's sake, he was justified in expressing his opinion. And

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Biddulph's head fell low on his breast as he slowly walked from the doctor's house to the little inn at Balla. Dr. Alexander's strong convictions had not tended to make his mind easier; it influenced him as honest, truthful words ever will.

When he reached the small hostelry, and asked for Madame de Beranger, he was told she had not yet appeared. Biddulph was still so lame that to walk was a very great exertion to him, and he therefore sat down to wait until she was ready to receive him. She sent a message that she would not be long, and presently the door of the little parlor opened, and Biddulph half started when he saw the strangely familiar dark face appear.

She smiled a little scornfully, and nodded her head as she walked into the room.

"So you've come to seek *me* this time?" she said.

"Yes," answered Biddulph, still with his eyes fixed upon her face.

"Well, are you willing to come to terms?" went on the woman who called herself Madame de Beranger, yet more scornfully. "Are you and the young lady who are so anxious to marry each other willing to pay down the sum I asked for the luxury?"

"I am willing to pay you a large sum if you will speak the truth."

"The truth that is most pleasant to you—eh?"

"No, the real truth," said Biddulph, firmly. "Were you lying or speaking the truth that day in the kirk here, when you claimed to be the woman whom I believed dead?"

"How much will you give to know?"

Biddulph frowned and bit his lips at this mocking question.

"You named a price," he said the next moment, "to Miss Stewart; that price, great as it was, I would give to be certainly assured that I was free. But you must prove this; for Miss Stewart's sake, I cannot accept your word, even your oath alone."

"What do you mean by proving it?"

"I mean you must go into some details of your past life; bring forward some witness to prove that you are Natalie's twin-sister, and not Natalie herself, as I believe you only pretended you were."

The woman laughed her strange shrill laugh.

"You have grown very particular," she said.

"It is for Miss Stewart's sake, I repeat; this has cost

her enough pain already, cruel pain, and I do not wish to add to it. Surely you have some friend whom you can bring forward to prove your words?"

Again she laughed.

"I have borne Natalie's name lately, of course," she said—"the name she took when you refused her yours—and have been known as Madame de Beranger, since my income depended upon this, as you are aware. Her friends have been mine naturally, and mine hers. One of us was known to be dead; but the one who had the rich husband who would not acknowledge her, was supposed to be alive. I had to play the part I had chosen, you know!"

"And you will swear that you were acting—swear that you are not Natalie Beranger, but Josephine?"

"I will swear this for the sum I named."

"Who was your husband? Is he dead?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and laughed aloud.

"I am happily rid of him!" she said.

"What was his name?" persisted Biddulph.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want to trace your past history—to find out that you are not deceiving me again."

"I don't want my past history traced out. My life has not been quite a bed of roses, I can tell you; but I am ready to swear *you* are not my husband—ready to swear I took you in for the sake of getting Natalie's income, as I had none of my own. There! Will that not satisfy you? It will the young lady, I am sure, for she's so desperately fond of you that she said she would give her whole fortune to know that you were free."

Biddulph's face slightly flushed.

"And you will go to her and swear that I am?" he said—"swear before her friends that you deceived me when you pretended my wife still lived?"

"I will swear this—you know what for?"

"Yes, I know."

"And you will give me this money before I do this?"

"I will give you half of it, and my bond for the rest."

"All right. I can bring forward a friend, if you like, too, who will swear I am—Josephine."

"You had better do this. When can you bring forward this friend?"

"Let me consider—this is Tuesday. He can be down to this benighted region by Thursday. He lives in town; he is half a Frenchman."



"Very well; on Thursday afternoon, then, will you and this friend go to Miss Stewart at Rossmore, and there declare that you never were married to me; that you assumed your dead sister's name for the sake of money; and your friend will bear you out in this?"

"It is settled, then; you agree to my terms, and I will keep my word."

"Good day, then, until Thursday;" and Biddulph bowed gravely, and slowly left the room.

"Good-by, my *brother-in-law*!" cried the woman in mocking tones as he left her; and somehow her words had a false ring to Biddulph's anxious ears.

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## CHAPTER LIII.

### DOUBTFUL EVIDENCE.

Two days of suspense passed away; of suspense so cruel that Nora Stewart sometimes wished that this question had never been mooted; that she had remained Biddulph's friend, without the fond hopes and bitter doubts which now so constantly beset her heart. And Biddulph, too, looked pale and anxious. He had seen Jock Fraser on the matter, and honest Jock had declared he could not understand it. Dr. Alexander remained firm, he declined to have anything to do with it. And the two to whom it meant so much spoke of it with clasped hands and bated breath.

"It is more than life to me, I think," Biddulph said, and Nora could only answer with a sigh.

At last the hour came when the momentous declaration was to be made, and at Nora's earnest request Jock Fraser had consented to be present. Biddulph was standing near Nora when the house-bell rang, and Jock came in and silently shook Nora's hand, looking at her very kindly as he did so. Then again the door-bell rang, and this time two strangers were ushered into the drawing-room by Alfred; and as the eyes of the three already assembled there fell on the face of the man who had come to confirm the woman's story, they all felt at once that they were looking at a most dubious witness.

He was middle-aged, dark, and foreign-looking, with longish, greasy black hair, parted so as to endeavor to

conceal that he was growing bald; but it was the expression of his black eyes that filled the gazers' hearts with doubt.

They were bold, bad, and crafty; he had an evil face, in fact, on which the impress of an ill-spent life had left its dusky shadows. He bowed profoundly as he entered the room, gave one quick glance at each of the three standing before him, and then dropped his eyes, and stood hat in hand, waiting for Madame to begin the conversation.

This she did with even more than her usual volubility.

"This is my friend," she said, waving her red sunshade in the dubious looking man's direction, "Mr., or if you like it better, Monsieur Dobree. This gentleman has known me more years than I like to mention; since my early girlhood, in fact, when poor Josephine—I mean, poor Natalie—and I—were—were children."

She tripped and faltered in her speech after she had said the word "Josephine," but tried to recover herself; but Nora, listening, clasped her hands together, and stood with parted lips and a sinking heart.

"And he is ready to prove," went on the woman rapidly, "that I am not the wife of this gentleman;" and she pointed her sunshade at Biddulph. "This gentleman married my sister—you are ready to swear this, Dobree?"

"Perfectly ready, madame," answered Dobree, with a bow and a quick warning glance at the woman's face, who looked excited and strange. I have had the honor," he continued, speaking in a slightly foreign accent, "of knowing this lady and her twin-sister *Natalie*" (he pronounced the name with marked emphasis) "since their interesting infancy;" and again he bowed.

"And who did this lady marry?" asked Biddulph, in a cold, inquiring tone.

Monsieur Dobree shrugged his shoulders, and raised his hands with a gesture of regret.

"It was a misfortune," he said, "this lady's marriage. Her first marriage was an unhappy one; her second," and he smiled, "I hope will be otherwise."

"What was his name?" asked Biddulph, sternly.

"It was Monsieur Whitaker—one of your countrymen;" and again Monsieur Dobree shrugged his shoulders.

"And you can prove this?" asked Jock Fraser, looking with his shrewd brown eyes at the Frenchman's face.

"I will swear it! These ladies and I have no secrets. I know all about Monsieur Whitaker and Biddulph."

"And you know," said Biddulph, with a darkling brow, "that this woman came to me and swore falsely—pretended she was her dead twin-sister?"

Once more Monsieur Dobree raised his shoulders and hands to express regret.

"Alas, I know!" he said. "Madame Whitaker was what you call hard up. What could she do! You must pity and forgive her."

"It was a vile deception!" said Biddulph, passionately. "But you are ready now, and she is ready to swear before this gentleman and lady that you both are now speaking the truth."

"I swear it as a gentleman!" cried Monsieur Dobree, grandly.

"And you?" said Biddulph, looking at the woman fixedly.

"I swear it, too. When poor Josephine was shot——"

"Fool!" muttered Monsieur, with tight-drawn lips.

"I mean poor Natalie, of course," continued the woman, with a little conscious laugh and a dusky blush; "but your Highland whiskey is so strong, my brain seems half muddled."

But Nora had caught Biddulph's hand as she again had uttered the word "Josephine."

"She is not speaking the truth, James," she half-whispered in his ear; "I do not believe her. Ask her about the handwriting, I believe this *is* Natalie."

"Did you write the letter to warn Miss Stewart I was a married man?" asked Biddulph, sharply, the next moment.

"Yes—at least——"

"And the one you wrote to her lately, to tell her you had something to communicate to her?"

The woman looked as if afraid to commit herself; she hesitated, she glanced uneasily at Dobree.

"I get puzzled," she said presently; "you ask so many questions."

"I think," said Dobree, with a profound bow, "if this young lady and madame will permit me to suggest, that this interview had better be deferred until another day. Madame, in her agitation, had taken more of the potent spirit of this land than is good for her brain. She is a little muddled, in fact; but if Monsieur Biddulph will come

with me and her to the small inn, I shall prove to his satisfaction and the young lady's that this *is* Josephine Beranger, the twin-sister of Monsieur Biddulph's late wife. With your permission we shall now take our leave, and I shall communicate with monsieur."

He bowed to Biddulph as he spoke, and offered his arm to the woman, who took it without speaking, and they left the room together. Nora and Biddulph looked at each other as they went out, and there was bitter pain in Nora's eyes.

"James," she said, clasping his hand, and forgetting the presence of Jock Fraser, "it is all false! We cannot believe her, nor the man!"

"He's a disreputable looking fellow, and I don't believe a word he has been saying," said Jock Fraser, bluntly. "Nora, my dear, you cannot act on such evidence as this."

"No," she answered. "James, don't go near them any more," she continued, looking up in Biddulph's agitated face; "we—we must forget what—we have hoped might be—we must still be friends."

She was very pale, and the bitterness of the disappointment was very great; but still she bore herself with a certain dignity, and displayed far greater calmness than Biddulph, whose face was black as night.

"Then you give up all doubt?" he said, abruptly.

"I—am afraid so."

"I *cannot*!" he answered, with bitter emphasis and passion.

"Biddulph," said Jock Fraser, kindly but firmly, "it's no use, my dear fellow, going on the word of such a man as that. Nora could not do it; you could not ask her. It's hard to have to say such a thing, but I believe this woman is your wife."

"I'll see the fellow, at any rate," said Biddulph, "and I'll try to find out about this Whitaker. It may be a patched up story, but there may be some truth in it after all."

"I fear not," answered Jock, and Nora's heart echoed his words.

Then, presently, Jock went away, and Nora and Biddulph were alone.

"Don't give up all hope, Nora," he said, taking both her hands.

She looked up in his face and smiled a sad smile.

"We shall always be friends, you know," she said gent-

ly; and he knew from her manner she meant they could be nothing more.

The same night, about ten o'clock, the doctor was sitting refreshing himself with his accustomed toddy, before retiring to his well-earned rest, when a loud rapping at the surgery door disturbed him, and, with a sigh, he laid down his pipe and went to open it.

Outside stood the village innkeeper, with an agitated, frightened face.

"Anything wrang, Jamie?" asked the doctor, who was well acquainted with the man.

Then the innkeeper in many words told his story. The "leedy" who was supposed to be the wife of Mr. Biddulph of Dunbaan had been staying at his house for some days past, and this morning a friend, "a queer-looking foreign chap," came to visit her, and they went out together during the afternoon. But before they went "the leedy," by the innkeeper's account, drank many glasses of whiskey, and the man (the foreigner) seemed angry with her for doing this. And when they returned high words were exchanged between them; but afterward more whiskey was called for, and then they apparently began to quarrel again—at least, the people in the room below thought they even heard the sound of blows. At five o'clock, however, the man came downstairs, and seemed all right. He told the innkeeper he was going out for a little walk, as "madame," who had been agitated and fatigued, had lain down to rest in the sitting-room, and was not to be disturbed until she rang the bell. "But I shall return for a little supper, my friend," he added to the innkeeper, and thus left the house smilingly. But he had *never returned*; and half an hour ago the innkeeper's wife, becoming alarmed at "madame's" prolonged slumber, had knocked at the sitting-room door, and, receiving no answer, had ventured to open it.

Madame was lying huddled up on the sofa, with a shawl over her head. The innkeeper's wife asked her if she were ill, but got no reply. Then the innkeeper's wife went nearer, and something in her attitude and her silence frightened the woman, who drew the shawl from her face, when a terrible sight met her gaze. There was blood on her hair, blood on her brow, and her dress also was stained.



"My belief is, doctor, the villain has just knocked her on the head and murdered her," said the innkeeper, with scared looks; "but ye best see. My old woman is in a sare state, and the whole house upside down."

The doctor, we may be sure, lost no time in hurrying on his coat and following the innkeeper home; and when he reached the same little parlor where his own two former interviews with the woman who had called herself Madame de Beranger had taken place, he found her now lying cold and still in death.

Long the doctor stood and looked at the changed face, at the half-open, blank dark eyes, which now smiled scornfully no more. At last this chequered life—a life whose dusky shadows none could know—had ended, like her twin-sister's, in a violent and sudden death. She had been struck on the head by some heavy instrument, and her skull was broken, and the splinters had pierced her brain. The weapon with which the cruel deed had been committed was not difficult to find. On an old iron poker in the fender there was a blood-stain, to which adhered some coarse dark hair. The man she had brought to confirm her story (true or false) had murdered her, probably in a rage at her breaking down in her evidence, and then had disappeared, carrying Biddulph's check with him, which, however, was never cashed, nor the murderer ever found.

It was a dark end to a dark life, and with a sigh the doctor turned away, going out into the night with some very solemn feelings in his heart. Then he looked at his watch, and a kindly smile stole over his rugged features.

"It's unco' late," he muttered; "still I'll gane to Rossmore, and tell the bonny lassie the news; she may as weel sleep wi' a light heart as a heavy one."

And when Nora heard—there was nothing now at least to part her from one whom she loved so well—like a foolish woman she broke down, and for a few minutes could not keep back her tears.

"Na, ye must na' greet," said the doctor, patting her on the shoulder, as if she were a child, with his big hand. "We'll ha' a wedding after a' now, and I'll dance a reel at it mysel' if I ha' a leg to stand on!"

"Doctor," said Nora, pleadingly, looking up at the face of her old friend with her dark eyes, "would you mind—it's a shame to ask you when it is so late—still, would you mind going to-night to Dunbaan, to tell him?"



"Weel," answered the doctor, with a little comical shrug, "I'll be na doot vera' welcome, so I'll just gane."

And though the hour was late, and the night dark the kindly man crossed the loch with the tidings that were to give the gloomy owner of Dunbaan relief too great for words. Biddulph was standing smoking on the terrace before his house, with folded arms and a restless, miserable heart, when the tall form of the doctor emerged from the mist and approached him.

"Weel, Mr. Biddulph, I've brought a message for ye," he began.

"A message?" repeated Biddulph, quickly.

"Ay, fra' the young leedy at Rossmore. She bade me tell ye she'd be pleased to see ye in the morn." Then he told what he had really gone to tell, and Biddulph listened with deep emotion, and in silence wrung the doctor's hand.

"This ends all doubt, then," he said, a few moments later. "Thank God, at last I am free!"

Need we go with him on the morrow to Rossmore, or tell of the meeting which took place in the shady garden, during which at first few words were spoken? They met, these two, like those meet who together have escaped some great peril, and clasped each other's hands in silent joy. For to both the passing away of the bar between them—a bar uncertain, doubtful, Biddulph ever afterward maintained—was a release from a haunting shadow, a grief which only could have ended with the woman's death, whose deceit, or that of her twin-sister had darkened Biddulph's life.

And her secret died with her. Whether the woman that Biddulph had wedded long ago perished in the Glen of Balla, or by the hand of her so-called friend, remained among one of those unanswered problems of which human life is full. The mysterious likeness between the two sisters made it, in fact, impossible to tell the end of which doubtful and dishonored life set Biddulph free.

## CHAPTER LIV.

## TRUE LOVE.

There was a quiet marriage about a month after this, but not at Rossmore. Nora was married from Lady Barbara Biddulph's house in town, that lady especially desiring that this might be, "As I suppose, James," she said, with her usual brusqueness, to her nephew, "that there is no fear of a *third* woman laying claim to you?"

Biddulph having assured his aunt that this need not be dreaded nor anticipated, Lady Barbara wrote a kind letter to Nora, and also invited the doctor to be present at the ceremony.

This invitation gave the good man great pride and pleasure, but much perplexity. For one thing, he had a secret fear of Lady Bab's sharp tongue, and for another, some of his poor patients at this time were sorely in need of his aid. Finally, he decided not to go to the marriage, writing to tell Lady Bab "that such things are a bit out of my way;" at the same time thanking her for the honor she had done him, and wishing that all God's best gifts should be given to the two "who were about to share, and thus lighten, the burdens of our mortal life."

He also gave a gift to the bride before she left Scotland—a gift about which the halo of an old romance still hung; for in the days of his young manhood the doctor had bought this pretty, simple pearl ring, meaning to give it to the girl he then silently worshipped, when fame and fortune came to him.

Fame and fortune never came to him, and his love wedded another, not even knowing of the faithful heart she had won. But the doctor made no second choice, and for thirty years the ring never saw the light.

It pained him even now to look at it, though he had often thought of this unused love-token; but a few days before Nora left Rossmore, he arrived with it in his waistcoat pocket, and presented it to her with a blush and a sigh.

"I bought it lang ago," he said, with simple pathos, "when I had my dreams, too, maybe, Miss Stewart; but no woman's hand has ever worn it—and though it's a pair

thing amang all yer gauds, still if ye'll take it, and my blessing alang wi' it——"

He turned his head abruptly away, absolutely to hide that his eyes were dim with tears ; and Nora, seeing this, caught his large hand in both her own.

"I shall always prize it," she said, earnestly ; "and I shall never forget, doctor, all the true kindness you have shown to us in our great troubles."

"Which, with God's good grace, are, I pray, ended," answered the doctor, reverently, for the man's heart was full of simple, pious faith.

But all Nora's neighbors did not give her such good wishes. Alick Fraser heard the news of her second engagement to Biddulph with secret but bitter anger. He sent no present this time, but left Scotland ; and a few days later, Nora, with a little surprise and amusement, received a letter from Maud Lee to announce her engagement to "our country cousin."

Alick, in fact, hid his disappointment as best he could, and his offer to Miss Lee was accepted with pleasure and alacrity. She had always intended to marry a rich man if she possibly could do so, and was delighted to have succeeded. They were married very shortly after Nora and Biddulph—two people who knew nothing of each other, and cared nothing ; who married for mutual convenience, and therefore, it is hoped, expected nothing but what they bargained for.

Jock Fraser did not go to his brother's wedding, nor to Nora's. The blow of her son's death had struck home in the mother's heart, and Jock would not leave his grief-stricken wife ; but Minnie went to both marriages, and at each the languid Glendoyne paid her so much attention that, as Minnie is now the future owner of Airdlinn, people say it will end in a marriage ; Nora Biddulph, it is also said, doing her best to arrange this.

One picture more, when a bright August sun was shining on the lofty headland of Rossmore, and on the blue loch that lapped its steeps. A happy picture of a young wife sitting on the grass, looking smilingly up in the face that to her is beautiful ; a grave face still though, for that shadowed youth of his has left its mark on Biddulph's brow, and the memory of those bitter days of shame and pain has not yet passed away.

But they love each other with a love no words can tell, a love strong, tender; for between them is that strange soul-link which no time can snap.

"Do not look so grave," said Nora, rising and laying her hands on his shoulders, for she knew by the dreamy look in his gray eyes of what he was thinking.

He turned round and laid his head against her arm.

"I was thinking gravely," he answered, "thinking how miserable I might now have been—but for you."

THE END.

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