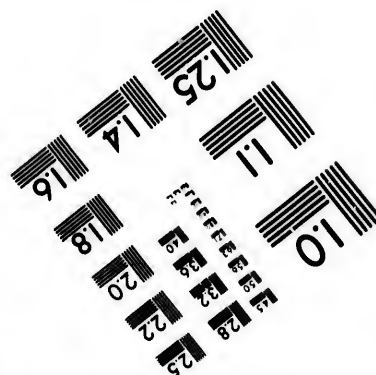
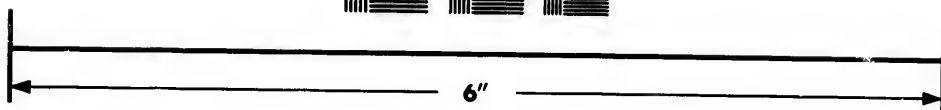
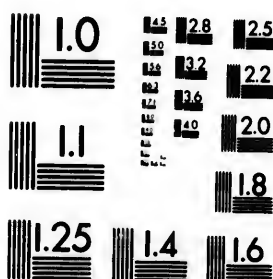


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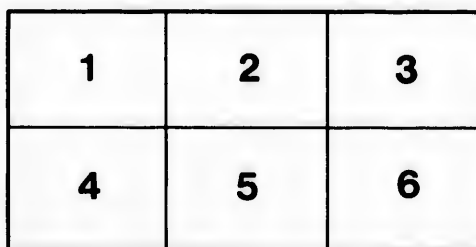
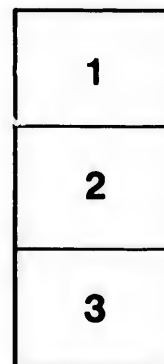
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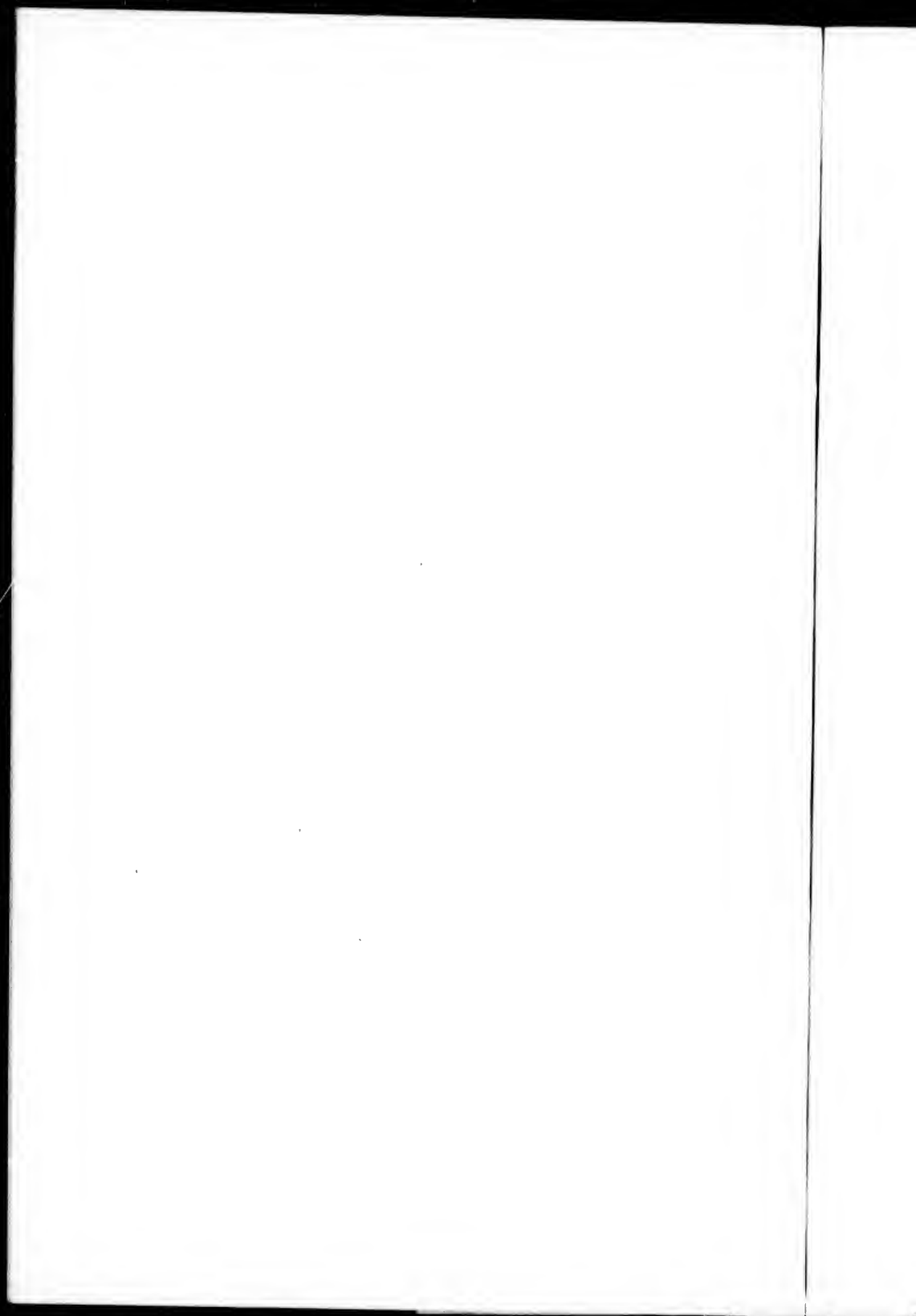
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I
II
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IV
V
VI
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XV
XVI
XVII
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XIX
XX
XXI



CONTENTS.

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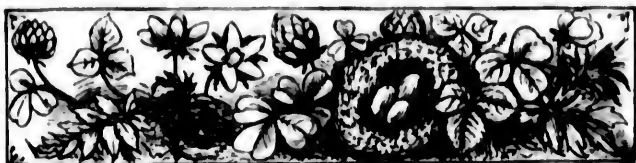
CHAP.	PAGE
I. RUINED HOPES	11
II. WEIRD WORDS	20
III. THE TRYST	30
IV. ALL FOR LOVE	41
V. A TRUE WOMAN	55
VI. MEMORIES	64
VII. FAITHLESS AILIE	77
VIII. FRIENDS	84
IX. UNLOOKED-FOR EVENTS	92
X. TRIUMPH	102
XI. HUMBLD VANITY	113
XII. THE END OF IT	121
XIII. THE BLACK SHADOW FALLS ON RUBY BAY	129
XIV. IN THE PRISON CELL	136
XV. IN COURT	143
XVI. INTO THE HAVEN	152
XVII. FULFILLED TO THE LETTER	159
XVIII. FREE!	166
XIX. AILIE	173
XX. JOHN'S REVENGE.	182
XXI. CONCLUSION	189

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CHAPTER I.

RUINED HOPES.

THE hall clock struck seven. Dinner was just over at Castle Bervie, and on the terrace beneath the dining-room windows two young men paced leisurely to and fro, enjoying the fragrance of their cigars and interchanging an occasional remark.

They were the sons of the house, but only half-brothers. John, the elder, was the only child of his father's first marriage; Richard, the only one of his second. There were but a few years between them, but they were widely different in appearance and disposition. A tall, handsome, manly fellow was John Maxwell, and upright and honourable to the core. His half-brother was tall also, but slightly built, and of dark complexion. His face could not

be called plain, but it lacked the open, winning expression which was John Maxwell's peculiar charm. To a close observer, Richard Maxwell's face was repellent. There existed a tolerable amount of friendliness between them,—nothing more. Apart from their peculiar relationship, their natures had nothing in common. They were opposite as the poles.

It was an evening of August's sunniest mood. A great peace and beauty seemed brooding over all, and the waters of the Firth lay like a sea of glass beneath a cloudless sky.

Many tiny boats, with idle rowers resting on their oars, drifted out in the bay; and just beyond the harbour bar a solitary yacht rode at anchor. A dainty thing she was, painted white and gold, and she lay upon the smooth surface of the water like a butterfly. Once Richard Maxwell paused at the further end of the terrace, and, turning his eyes in her direction, said,—

‘The yacht will need a coat of paint soon, Jack. She looks grimy enough from here.’

John Maxwell answered without looking,—

‘Ay, I believe she will.’

His thoughts at that moment were occupied with something infinitely more important than the painting of the yacht.

‘Did Mrs. Maxwell say how my father was this afternoon, Richard?’ he asked abruptly.

‘No. He’ll be about the same, I suppose,’

Richard answered carelessly. 'There's never any change.'

John Maxwell flung away the burnt end of his cigar, and went through the open window and upstairs to the drawing-room. He found his step-mother there alone, as he had expected. She was sitting at the window, a piece of lace-work in her delicate fingers, and looked up with a bright smile of recognition when her step-son appeared in the room. She was a tall, graceful, handsome woman, dark-complexioned and black-browed, and she had preserved her youthful looks marvellously well.

'Are you coming to entertain me, John?' she said, with her amiable false smile. 'To what do I owe this unusual kindness?'

'I have not come to entertain you, madam,' returned John bluntly. 'I only wished to ask if my father is well enough to bear a few minutes' conversation on important business.'

Mrs. Maxwell's eyes expressed eager surprise.

'He has been pretty well to-day,' she said cautiously; 'still, if it be unpleasant business, you know it is not safe to agitate him. A scrape you have been getting into? Perhaps I might smooth it for you, if you use me as a medium.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Maxwell,' replied John curtly. 'It is no scrape, and my business with my father is private.'

A red flush sprang to Mrs. Maxwell's dark cheek,

and her eyes flashed, but she kept her tongue smooth and sweet.

'I don't wish to force confidence,' she said gaily; 'and since your communication is not to be of an unpleasant nature, I think you may see him now. He is always freshest of an evening.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' returned John curtly, and left the room; for you will perceive that John Maxwell did not get on very well with his step-mother, and he found it conducive to domestic peace to keep out of her way as much as possible.

Her work dropped from her fingers when the door closed upon him, and, leaning her head on her hand, a thousand thoughts chased each other through her brain. Finally she rose and left the room also. She paused a moment on the landing, but there was not a sound in all the house. Then she slipped along the corridor leading to the suite of rooms occupied by the invalid Master of Bervie. She bent her head at the door of the sitting-room, and laid her ear close to the keyhole. She heard the voices distinctly, but so low that the words were lost.

A slight shade of disappointment crossed her face. She paused only a second, and then slipped noiselessly back to the drawing-room. Nothing was to be gained by eavesdropping this time.

Meanwhile John Maxwell was sitting in a chair opposite his father's couch, uttering commonplace remarks, not knowing how to broach the subject of which his mind was full.

For three years the Laird of Bervie had been confined to these rooms, and none knew how many more he might have to spend within their limits. He had been stricken down when little past his prime, and from a hale, vigorous man, who had never known a day's illness in his life, had become a poor, useless, pining invalid, utterly dependent on others. He was thin and worn now to a degree, but the grey eyes could sparkle yet with their old keenness, and the pride of his race had not been humbled even by these weary years. For his first-born son William Maxwell had a peculiar affection; he was the child of his first love, and moreover his heir. On him all his hopes were built. To-night, as his eyes rested on the handsome face and the goodly figure, he thought exultantly that he was a fit representative of the ancient house, a fit heir to the heritage he must shortly leave for ever. But before an hour went by, his fond hopes had crumbled to ashes at his feet.

'You look well to-night, father,' said John Maxwell; 'better, I think, than I have seen you for weeks. Who knows, we may see you quit these rooms yet.'

The old man smiled slightly, but shook his head.

'I do feel well, comparatively well,' he said; 'but, John, I shall never leave these rooms restored to health. It was very bitter at first, but now I am reconciled; and you will make a good Master of Bervie.'

'I hope the day when I shall be Master is far distant,' said the young man earnestly. 'I did not come to-night to speak of that, father. Will you listen to something which very nearly concerns my happiness and welfare?'

The old man raised himself on his elbow and turned his eyes on his son, eager questioning in their depths.

'Of course, of course,' he said hastily. 'Tell on. Everything pertaining to you is of vital interest to me.'

Only a second did John Maxwell hesitate, then he said briefly,—

'I am going to marry.'

'Yes, yes; I have hoped and expected to hear of this for long,' returned the old man. 'It is my own wish to see you with a wife before I die. Who is she? Don't hesitate. I can trust you to marry as I wish,—as your mother would have wished.'

John Maxwell winced. He had nerved himself for this hour for long, but his task was harder than he had deemed it. He rose and came close to his father's couch,—stood looking down from his tall height, his face full of strange, pleading earnestness.

'Father, you do not know the woman I love, and until you see her perhaps you may rebel against my choice. She is not a high-born lady, and the world, in all likelihood, will say I have made a poor marriage; but she is as pure and sweet a gentlewoman as my mother was, or any of the women of our house.'

'Her name?' said William Maxwell, in a strange, husky voice.

'Her name—at least her father's—is not unknown to you,' said John Maxwell, in the same eager, earnest voice. 'My chosen wife is Agnes Bonner, the child of David Bonner's first wife.'

'What!'

The tone was one of simple incredulity.

'I said, father,' repeated John Maxwell, 'that my chosen wife is Agnes Bonner, daughter of David Bonner's first wife.'

A grey pallor crept up over William Maxwell's face, and he fixed his keen eyes full on his son's face; they were blazing with passion.

'Do I understand you aright?' he asked, in a thick whisper. 'Did you say you wished to bring the daughter of a common fisherman home here, to Bervie, as its mistress?'

'I did say so,' returned John Maxwell firmly. 'I guess what you would say. Leave it unsaid till you have seen her. Let me bring her to you.'

All the fierce, proud, passionate blood of his race surged to William Maxwell's white face, and he waved his hand towards the door.

'Go, quit my presence. Repent of this idle folly, and of the shock you have given me. Don't come to me again till you come to tell me you have relinquished all thought of that low-born girl. If you refuse to do this, quit Bervie for ever. Your brother Richard would make a better Master than

you ; he has at least the sense of honour which you seem to lack.'

They were bitter words, and fell into John Maxwell's ear like molten lead.

'If you mean what you say, father,' he said sadly and earnestly, 'I have no alternative but to obey you, and quit Bervie for ever. I will tell you the truth ; it is the bitterest punishment you could have inflicted, for my home is as dear to me almost as life itself ; but my promised wife is dearer still. My sense of honour is at least so fine, that it would scorn to throw a woman's love and trust aside to further selfish ends. Father, I who never knelt to man or woman in my life before, kneel to you now, asking you, by the memory of your own youthful love, to deal less hardly with me. Do not send me from you till you have seen her. Let me bring her ; then send us from you, or bid us stay, as you will.'

Every feature of the old man's worn and wrinkled face was quivering with passion, and again he waved his hand towards the door, saying hoarsely,—

'Go, leave me, before I curse you. For, by Heaven ! I will, unless you hurry from my sight. Take one week to consider ; come to me then, cured, I will pray, of your madness. If not, you will have the consolation that you have ruined every fair hope and desire of my heart, and embittered the last days of your father's life by your wicked, ungrateful rebellion.'

'Father !'

The word fell low and pleading from John Maxwell's set lips, and he lifted his hand as if to deprecate the scathing words.

But his father had fallen back upon his couch and hidden his face in his hands. He had no more to say.

Then the young man turned upon his heel, and quitted the room he had entered full of hope and happiness scarcely an hour before.

Sitting in the drawing-room still, Mrs. Maxwell heard the shutting of doors, and then his step on the stairs. He was evidently leaving the house.

Then a fierce peal from her husband's bell sounded through the quiet house, and she rose hurriedly to answer the summons.

She found him weak and breathless, and evidently labouring under intense excitement. By and by, when he grew calmer, her smooth, false tongue elicited what had passed between father and son.

Never in her wildest flight of imagination had Eleanor Maxwell dared to hope for such a complete rupture as this. Knowing her step-son's true, honest, steadfast heart, she had no fear of the course he would pursue. And in the near future she saw her own beloved son absolutely Master of Bervie, and its doors closed for ever on its rightful heir.


Till then, however, there was much to be done, —infinite tact and cunning to be called into play; but she was a perfect mistress of her art. Without her interference there might have been some hope for John Maxwell; with it there was none.



CHAPTER II.

WEIRD WORDS.

NO man in all Elie was more popular than David Bonner, skipper of the sloop *Nannie*. He was a trifle stern, perhaps, and rigid in his notions of right and wrong, but his leal, true heart and kindly ways won the hearts of young and old. He was a native of Elie, but had married an English woman, belonging, they said, to gentle-folks, although the inns and outs of David Bonner's first marriage never became known. She was a pale, fragile-looking creature, shy and reticent, and never made the homely fisher folks of Elie her friends. She died when her first child was born, and took with her all the sunshine of her husband's life. How the great, strong, rough seaman had worshipped the fragile English blossom he had plucked, I do not think any but himself ever knew. He buried her memory deep, and never spoke of her, and repelled any mention of her from



others. The child was a girl, named Agnes, after her mother. In course of time David Bonner married again—an Elie girl who had loved him for years, and they lived happily enough together; but in Jean Bonner's heart of hearts there lingered a deep jealousy of his dead wife and her innocent living child. She was kind to her in her own way, but by and by, when her own children came, the little Agnes was made to feel the difference between her and them very acutely. Her father was often away months at a time with the sloop, and, true to the core himself, the thought that his wife did not do her duty by the child never entered his head. And from her earliest years Agnes Bonner had buried her sorrows—childish at first, but growing as the years went by—locked in her own heart. No word of complaint ever crossed her lips. She was early removed from school, and her willing hand became her step-mother's help among her own children.

The eldest was a girl also, with a disposition too sweet to be spoiled by her mother's indulgence. Between the step-sisters there existed a strong affection, which, as they grew to womanhood, deepened in strength. They were never seen apart, and Ailie Bonner was ever ready to resent a slight upon Agnes. David Bonner was well-to-do, but could not afford to keep his family in idleness; so, when the younger members of the family no longer needed Agnes's attendance, she set up a dressmaker's

business, and had always her hands full. Ailie was supposed to be her partner, but the gay girl loved the sunshine and the sea too dearly to spend the heat hours of the day in a low, dingy room, bending over dresses to adorn the young ladies of the town. She was oftener flying over the Braes with the children, or drifting in the boat on the bay, while Agnes bent her tired head over her sewing and plied the needle busily, trying to content herself with the glimpse of the sea the little, low window afforded. Her leisure hours were few and short, and her life a monotonous routine. But by and by a new, deep current began to glow into it, and wrought a wondrous change.

On the evening following that which witnessed the scene at Bervie, David Bonner and Caleb Haliday, the shoemaker, were leaning over the low wall separating the street from the beach. They were old friends, and David Bonner had more patience with the shoemaker's garrulous, meddling tongue than any of his neighbours. The sun had just set. The tranquil waters in the bay still reflected the blush in the western sky; behind the Braes the young May moon was coming shyly up to take her place among the myriad stars. The tide was at its full, and the murmur of the waves mingled pleasantly with the voices of the fisher folk grouped about the doors, enjoying, amid homely jest and gossip, the quiet idle hour 'tween the gloamin' an' the mirk.' One or two boats lay

moored close to the wall, and John Maxwell's yacht still rode at anchor in the bay. She was being admired, but in a half-contemptuous manner, by the weather-beaten fishermen lazily criticising her from the shore.

'I'd like uncommon tae see her weather Cape Wrath,' said David Bonner, glancing at his own stout sloop, which had bravely beaten the wild northern waters across of times. 'Ae squall wad knock her slim apart tae shivers. But she's a bonnie boat as long as she's safe in Elie Bay.'

'Ay,' said the shoemaker, striking a match on his leathern apron, and re-lighting his pipe. 'But I ae warrant the young Laird wadna be awer tae try't if he thoct o't. He was aye a daft laddie, an' feared naething under the sun.'

'I hope he'll no try that for his ain sake, an' for the sake o' Bervie. The auld place hasna ha'en sic a guid Maister for mony a year. He's a better Maxwell than any o' his forbears. Is that the lassie comin' doon the Taft, Caleb? I canna see without my glesses.'

'Ay, it's Agnes an' Ailie awa' tae meet the chaps, maybe.'

A half smile crossed David Bonner's face.

'Ailie maybe, but no' Agnes,' he said. 'The bairn disna tak' up her heid wi' sic' nonsense.'

'It wud be better for her if she did, maybe,' retorted Caleb smartly. 'She surely sits ower close at the sewin', Davie? She's as white's a cloot.'

'She was aye that,' answered David Bonner; and, turning his eyes seaward again, he added absently, 'Her mither was jist like her five-an'-twenty years ago, ye'll mind.'

There was something in the old man's rugged face which kept Caleb's garrulous tongue quiet for a few moments, and the next instant another voice spoke,—a woman's this time, sweet and low, and singularly pure of accent,—

'Father, will you get us the boat, please? Ailie and I would like a sail.'

She was a girl in the first blush of womanhood, with a sweet, pale, serious face, lit up by deep, shining grey eyes. She was plainly dressed, and had only a s'awl draped about her head and shoulders, but she looked like a lady. Much more so than the red-checked, blue-eyed damsel hanging upon her arm, her hat dangling in her hand, and her flaxen locks tossing in the wind. No greater contrast than these two presented could well be imagined.

'The boat, Agnes wumman?' repeated David Bonner, wheeling round. 'It's gey an' late tae be on the water, I'm thinkin'. Ye'll no' be gaun far?'

'Nannie's been sewin' sin' six this mornin', father,' broke in Ailie's gay, ringing voice, 'and her heid's sair,—I ken by her e'en,—an' naethin' but the sea mak's it better.'

David Bonner answered nothing, but turned and

went down the steps to unmoor the boat. Agnes followed, and stood upon the second step watching him, while Ailie remained chatting to Caleb and several others who had sauntered up to the dyke.

As Agnes stepped into the boat, her father lifted her face in one hand, and looked at it long and searchingly.

'Agnes, bairn, there's nae ca' for you tae work yersel' ill,' he said sharply. 'D'ye sit as close an' as lang when I'm awa'?'

She stooped down trying to evade his gaze.

'Sometimes; but I am well and strong,' she said hurriedly. 'Only my head sometimes. It will be all right soon. Come, Ailie.'

Ailie sprang down the steps, disdaining the aid of sundry willing arms, and took her place at the helm, while Agnes took the oars. In a minute the boat shot from the shore like an arrow, for Agnes was a skilful rower, and loved the work. David Bonner watched them a moment, and then, lighting his pipe, sauntered off in the direction of the Braes. His daughter's white face and heavy eyes troubled him. Possibly he might have been more troubled had he known the state of affairs while he was absent, and how every penny of her hard-won earnings were calmly appropriated by his wife, and used for the benefit of herself and her children.

'Ye hevna seen the Laird's yacht yet, Nannie,' said Ailie, after a few minutes' silence. 'Let's gang close an' see't, my pet. It's a bonnie boat.'

'Yes,' was the brief reply, and Agnes lifted the oar till Ailie turned the boat.

They swept almost close past it, and Agnes caught sight of five letters on its side which made her heart beat and her cheeks burn. Ay, and well they might, for the five golden letters spelt her own name.

'I'd like tae be a grand leddy and sail in that boat,' said Ailie, with almost childish eagerness. 'Wadna you like it, Nannie?'

'I don't know, dear. Don't you feel cold?' answered Agnes, shivering slightly. 'The wind seems to be rising.'

'Cauld?—no. An' that's a bonnie mune,' returned Ailie. 'It's as licht as day.'

Agnes rested on her oars, and let her eyes wander from sea to sky, and again to the yacht riding like a butterfly on the surface of the shiny water. They were drifting in the track of the moon, and its soft light lay full on the face of Agnes Bonner, making it strangely beautiful. Her eyes were brimming with tears. Ailie saw them and crept to her side, leaning her arms on her lap.

'Dinna look like that, Nannie,' she said. 'What is't? Ha'e ye ony trouble?'

Agnes dashed aside her tears, and laid her hand a moment on her step-sister's sunny head.

'None, Ailie; at least none you can help me with. Are you tired or cold? Shall we go back?'

'Row along tae the Ferry, Nannie, and let's gang

tae Bell Souter's and get oor fortune read. Naebody wad ken,' said Ailie eagerly. 'I've never had a better chance.'

Agnes shook her head.

'I thought you had forgotten that, Ailie,' she said gravely. 'It would do you no good, and make father angry, as you know. How can poor old Bell Souter tell your fortune?'

Ailie Bonner's red lips pouted in vexation.

'I want tae gae for fun, Nannie. Ye micht, tae please me this aince. Come on hame, then. There's nae use bidin' oot here.'

'Come, then, let us go to the Ferry, Ailie,' said Agnes Bonner after a moment's hesitation. 'It won't take us half an hour.'

Ailie's smiles returned, and, taking the oars from Agnes's hands, rowed down with might and main.

Bell Souter was an aged crone living alone in a trig hut almost close to the beach, and, from her eccentric ways, had earned the reputation of being able to pierce the veil of futurity. She turned many a penny by her fortune-telling among the lads and lasses of the town and surrounding district.

Ailie had long wished to consult Bell, but did not care to go alone, and till now Agnes had resolutely refused to accompany her.

They succeeded in mooring the boat, and a few steps took them to Bell's door. A low tap elicited a request to 'Come in;' and, pushing open the door, they crossed the threshold, closing it again behind

them. It was a small apartment, meagrely furnished with old-fashioned things, and lighted by a solitary dip candle on the table. The old woman was in her arm-chair by the smouldering fire, smoking, and looked round curiously when the girls entered. She knew them both. Agnes took the seat the old woman pointed her to, and asked for her rheumatism. But no answer, good or bad, did Bell vouchsafe, only kept her face towards the fire, and her keen black eyes peering into its smouldering embers.

‘What are ye wantin’ here at this time o’ nicht, ye glaiket lasses?’ she said at last, in her shrill, cracked voice.

‘I want you to read my fortune, Bell,’ said Ailie eagerly. ‘Will you?’

The old crone shook her head and took her pipe from her mouth.

‘An’ what for d’ye want tae ken what’s gaun tae happen tae ye, Ailie Bonner?’ she said snappishly. ‘Ye’ve a weel-faured face ’at’ll bring ye a man, I’m thinkin’.’

‘Come on, Bell; dinna be sae crabbit,’ said Ailie coaxingly. ‘I’ll gi’e ye a saxpence if ye read it weel.’

‘Weel, come here then; lat’s see that hand o’ yours. Eh, it’s a bonnie paw,—no gi’en tae muckle hard wark, I’m thinkin’. There’s mony a line on’t, though,’ she said, smoothing the dainty pink palm with her withered fingers,—‘queer, nesty thrawn lines. Awa’ hame, Ailie Bonner. Ye’ll no thank me, mebbe, if I tell ye what I see.’

'Come, Ailie,' said Agnes, seeing her step-sister's cheeks paling slightly. 'Don't listen to such nonsense. It is worse than foolish.

But Ailie Bonner was obstinate, and insisted on the old woman continuing her reading.

'Here's a line here shouldna be,' she went on, again examining the hand. 'I never saw't fail but that line brocht wae wi't; an' here's anither I dinna like. Lassie, lassie, yer weel-faured face 'll bring ye naething but dool, an' ye'll never be a wife, although there's some seekin' ye already.'

Ailie snatched her hand away, crying pettishly,—

'Ye're tryin' tae fricht me, Bell Souter, but I dinna believe ye; an' though yer fortin-tellin's no worth a hapney, there's yer saxpence. Come on, Nannie.'

Bell grasped the silver greedily, and looked to Agnes.

'Come on, my wumman; ye ha'e a better hand, I can see.'

Agnes shook her head.

'I am no believer in such nonsense, Bell; and I'm sorry I let Ailie come. Good-night.'

The twain passed out of the house and took their way to the boat again, silent, Ailie at least visibly distressed; and Bell Souter rose to bolt and bar her door behind them, muttering to herself,—

'Dool an' wae, dool an' wae. I ne'er saw't fail yet!'



CHAPTER III.

THE TRYST.

MORNING was a stirring time in David Bonner's household, and breakfast anything but a pleasant meal. Jean Bonner was a careless housewife, and took her own ease and comfort, permitting the wheels of the domestic machinery to move as they pleased. She would set herself carelessly down to her own breakfast, and occasionally administer a slap or a sharp word to the half-dozen children clamouring and scrambling for a bit and sup. Ailie followed her mother's example, and but for Agnes the youngest members would have fared badly. She moved quietly about the untidy kitchen, lacing a little boot in one corner, and fastening a collar in another, or coaxing a refractory urchin to take his porridge, and finally would see them, books and all, safely off to school. When David Bonner was at home he went for a smoke till the

bustle was over ; no man loved peace and quietness more than he.

‘When’s the sloop tae sail, then, Dauvid?’ inquired his wife one morning. ‘I dinna mind her lyin’ sae lang in the Elie harbour afore.’

‘The end o’ the week, Saturday maybe,’ replied the skipper. ‘See some tea, Ailie. Whaur’s Agnes?’

‘At the sewin’, faither ; I heard her rise at five this mornin’ tae finish Miss Farquharson’s gown. She wants it tae wear at Bervie,’ answered Ailie, not choosing to heed her mother’s warning glance, ‘an’ she couldna tak’ nae breakfast.’

A cloud gathered on David Bonner’s brow, and he finished his meal in silence, then rose and strode across the passage to Agnes’s room. She was in the window seat, her head bent over the shimmering folds of silk on her lap. The window was open, and the fresh wind from the sea tossed her hair to and fro on her brow, and fluttered the ends of the lace collar, which was her only adornment. Her father was struck with the perfect neatness of her attire,—it was a pleasant contrast to the pair in the kitchen,—and yet these busy hands had been at work since five o’clock. She looked up when the door opened, and nodded and smiled to her father ; but there was no answering smile on his face. It was grave almost to sternness.

‘Ailie tells me ye was up at five this mornin’, Agnes,’ he said. ‘I tell ye, aince for a’, I’ll no ha’ed. Ye’re killin’ yersel’, an’ there’s nae ca’ for’t.’

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Agnes sewed on with downcast head and trembling lips. She was as sensitive as a child, and this unusual sternness of tone hurt her.

'I won't take in so much work, then, father,' she said at last. 'But I want this dress finished to-day. Miss Farquharson wants it to wear to-night.'

'At Bervie?' added David Bonner. 'Agnes, I heard something last night that's putten me sair about. Lay doon yer wark an' look at me; I want tae speak tae ye.'

Her hands fell on her lap, and she lifted her true eyes to his face, her own flushing crimson.

'They say, Agnes, that the Laird has a fancy for ye, an' ye've been seen thegither. Is't true?'

'Yes.'

The answer was clear and unhesitatingly spoken, and her eyes met his gaze unflinchingly.

'D'ye ken what the notice o' the Laird o' Bervie means for the like o' you, Agnes?'

Her face paled, but she drew her little head up proudly, and answered quickly,—

'I know what wicked people can and do say, father,' she said. 'But surely you can trust me. Am I not my mother's daughter and yours?'

The look which accompanied it stirred David Bonner's heart to its depths. He came close to her and laid his hand on her head with strange tenderness.

'Ye ha'e yer mither's e'en, bairn,' he said huskily, 'an' yer mither's very ways. I'll say nae mair about

it, but mind I've warn'd ye. Oh, Agnes, bairn, tak' care. Ye're dearer tae me than a' the rest.'

She caught his hand and laid her cheek a moment against it in silence.

'Father, I wish you were always at home,' she said falteringly. 'I sometimes feel I have nobody in the world. I—'

She paused suddenly and lifted her sewing, for the door opened again, and Jean Bonner peeped suspiciously in. Her sharp eyes detected in a moment that something unusual had been passing, but she could not surmise the truth.

'Miss Farquharson wants her goon at six o'clock, mind, Agnes,' she said sharply. 'Is't near done?'

'Yes; it will be done in time,' answered Agnes briefly, and David Bonner left the room and the house.

Agnes sewed busily all day, and, with an occasional stitch from Ailie, finished Miss Farquharson's gown early in the afternoon. Towards six o'clock she put on hat and shawl, and set off to take it to its owner. It was a fifteen minutes' walk up the familiar road to Bervie, and just as she turned a bend in the road which hid her from the town, she met face to face the being of whom heart and thoughts were full.

It was John Maxwell. He raised his hat courteously, and, though he longed to do so, did not even touch her hand in greeting. Her sweet face flushed painfully, and she half paused, not knowing whether to speak or not.

‘I was coming down to Elie in the hope of seeing you, Agnes,’ he said quickly and earnestly. ‘Will you meet me to-night at half-past eight at Ruby Bay? I have something particular to tell you.’

She raised her eyes in momentary questioning to his face, thinking it grave and serious beyond its wont, and then answered hurriedly,—

‘Yes, I shall be there. I must go now. Good-bye.’

Again he raised his hat, and, as they parted, Mrs. Maxwell’s phaeton swept round, and her keen eyes took in the situation at a glance. She drew rein, and carelessly asked her step-son to permit her to drive him home; but, saying he had business in the town, he thanked her, and walked off in the opposite direction. Then Mrs. Maxwell drove on, and drew rein again at the gate of Miss Farquharson’s cottage, just as Agnes passed into the house with her parcel. Mrs. Maxwell has no earthly business with Miss Farquharson at that minute, but for a motive of her own chose to call. The solitary maid-servant motioned her into the sitting-room, where Agnes already was shaking the gown out before its fastidious owner. She was a maiden lady, past middle age, with a slender income, which, by thrift and frugality, managed to support her tolerably well. She was of gentle birth, and her bright, vivacious manner and gentle kindness of heart made her a welcome guest at the tables of the rich, as well as a much-loved visitor in poorer homes. Mrs. Maxwell

greeted her effusively ; and, when the old lady in a few brief words named Agnes, the haughty Lady of Bervie made her a distant bow, which measured the social gulf between them more effectually than the most cutting words. Agnes bowed also, and, though her face flushed slightly, she drew herself up with a certain proud dignity which became her infinitely well.

‘May I go now, Miss Farquharson?’ asked she, and her quiet eyes raised themselves pleadingly to the old lady’s placid face. I think she understood the glance.

‘Certainly, my dear, and I am thoroughly satisfied with my gown. It will make quite a youthful figure of me. Good-bye. Come up some evening when you are not busy. I am always pleased to see you.’

She purposely emphasized her last words, and Mrs. Maxwell elevated her eyebrows in unmistakeable surprise. Really Miss Farquharson was very odd, speaking to this young person as if she was in all respects her equal. Miss Farquharson was a thorough gentlewoman herself, and knew a lady when she encountered her, however poor her circumstances might be.

Again Agnes was humiliated by that supercilious, distant inclination, and thankfully quitted the house.

‘Rather a superior-looking young woman that,’ said Mrs. Maxwell carelessly. ‘Astonishingly well-bred and self-possessed for her position.’

‘She is a perfect lady in mind and manners,’ said

Miss Farquharson curtly, and, much to Mrs. Maxwell's annoyance, declined to pursue the subject further.

You may be sure the Laird of Bervie received a minute and slightly contorted account of the meeting, but, curiously enough, his wife forgot to mention that she had been struck by the lady-like appearance of Agnes Bonner.

To one at least of the company at the dinner-table at Bervie that night, the meal seemed interminably long. And when the ladies rose at last and quitted the room, he made a brief apology to the guests, and left Richard to entertain them. He drew an overcoat above his evening dress, and hurried from the house, knowing that even sharp walking would not bring him to the trysting place punctually at the half-hour. And he was right. When he reached the little sheltered cove, he found Agnes already there, pacing slowly to and fro the narrow strip of beach. She looked infinitely relieved when she saw him, and in the full light of the harvest moon he could see how the sweet face flushed beneath his passionate gaze.

'There were friends at dinner to-night, Agnes,' he said in explanation, 'and I could not possibly come a moment sooner. I was so afraid you would be gone, my darling.'

No strange eyes were upon them here, no ears to hear save the murmuring sea, whose mighty breast holds many secrets never breathed to mortal man.

John Maxwell drew the slender, drooping figure

within the shelter of his strong arms, and held her there as if he could never let her go.

'You have something to tell me,' she whispered at last. 'What is it?'

'Tell me first, my dearest,' he said, 'that you care for me still, and will be my wife some day, come what may.'

'Care for you!—oh, John—'

That was all, but her voice was faltering with emotion, and her grave, beautiful eyes shining with her great love. She was a woman of few words, and with these John Maxwell was more than content.

He drew her arm within his own, and they paced to and fro for a few minutes in silence.

'I have told my father I mean to make you my wife, Agnes,' he said at length, and he felt the light hand tremble on his arm.

'He is angry,—forbids it,—as I anticipated, John,' she said, in a low voice. 'I knew it when I saw your face to-day.'

'You are right,' returned John Maxwell. 'I may as well tell you the whole truth, Agnes, because I know you will be satisfied with nothing less. He says that if I persist in my resolution,—and you know I will,—I must leave Bervie to my brother Richard, and henceforth be as the merest stranger to them all. All that I am willing—more than willing—to forego for you, my darling. I am young and strong, and able to work for my wife when I have got her. Look at me, my dearest, and tell me you

can trust me with yourself and your future, though at this moment I have nothing earthly to offer you but the love of an honest heart.'

Again the light hand trembled on his arm, and then withdrew itself very slowly, and she moved a little way from him, and both stood still.

She was very pale, but her eyes shone like stars, and in their deepest depths lay the tears which would be shed by and by.

'I do trust you, John,' she said, her sweet voice faltering sorely,—'just as I love you, and that is with my whole heart. It is because I love you so that I have strength to say this. We must part here and now, John, never to meet any more,—at least as we have done. I was wrong to let it go on; but I am a woman, and my heart is very weak. Be reconciled to your father; go to him, and tell him that I will not let you pay such a heavy cost. By and by you will forget me, and take for your wife some high-born lady who will bring honour to your house.'

'And you?' interrupted John Maxwell, in strange, slow tones.

'Do not think of me,' she said hurriedly. 'By and by,' too, it will be easier for me. Far better to part now. In after years perhaps you might regret the step you would take, and that would break my heart more surely and more cruelly than anything else on earth. John, John, go away now; do not make it any harder for me.'

'Agnes,' said the young man, in the same slow, strange voice, 'do you remember the night, not three months ago, when you promised on this very spot to be my wife some day, no matter who interfered?'

No need to ask her; the memory was as fresh in her heart as if it had been but yesterday.

'It was a sacred promise, Agnes,' he went on quickly, 'and you dare not break it. You belong to me as truly at this moment as if we were already wedded. Gainsay that if you dare.'

She had never seen him so deeply moved, and her heart beat with happiness in spite of the great shadow on it. He moved to her and took her again in his strong arms, whispering that nothing but death could part them.

'Lift your eyes to my face, Agnes, and repeat your promise as you did that night.'

'God forgive me if I am doing wrong,' sobbed the girl, raising her brimming eyes to his face; 'but I will be your wife, John, and will love you to the end of my life. Now let me go.'

'Nay,' he whispered, a sunny smile breaking over his face. 'My promised wife must not go home alone. I will take you myself, Agnes, for all Elie must know now what you are to me. To-morrow I shall come and ask your father for his daughter.'

He drew her arm within his own again, and they turned their faces towards the town, the soft moonlight following in their track, and shining upon them tenderly, as it has done on many a pair of lovers

since the world began. They did not speak much, for deep emotion seldom finds relief in a multitude of words.

He left her at her father's door, in sight of many curious, staring eyes, and then set out on his lonely homeward way, happy as he ought to have been, but still somewhat perplexed as to his future. But youth is ever full of hope, and love can gild the heaviest thought.



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CHAPTER IV.

ALL FOR LOVE.

IN the pleasant morning room at Castle Bervie, just after breakfast, sat Mrs. Maxwell and her son Richard. The latter was smoking, as usual, and, though his mother hated the odour of cigars, she indulgently permitted him the enjoyment in her presence. It would not have mattered either way, Mr. Richard Maxwell being a gentleman much given to following his own inclination, without any regard for that of others.

They were talking of the subject nearest their hearts, the breach between John and his father.

‘The week ends to-day,’ said Mrs. Maxwell. ‘Have you no idea, Richard, what John means to do?’

Richard shook his head.

‘He wasn’t likely to make me his confidant, was he?’ he asked. ‘But he hasn’t given up the girl yet, I know that.’

'Let us fervently hope he won't give her up,' said his mother. 'It would be too much to see the golden apple snatched from your lips just as you were about to taste, wouldn't it?'

'Rather,' returned Richard Maxwell energetically. 'What an idiot John is! There isn't a woman born I'd do quarter as much for. But I'm much obliged to him, for all that. Is the old chap cut up about it?'

'Yes; but there is no fear of him relenting. Do you know he had set his mind on John marrying Chatty Elphinstone? *She* was willing enough, I know.'

'Ay, she was sweet on him, I believe,' returned Richard Maxwell, tossing the end of his cigar through the window. 'Well, look here, mother. I trust to you to see everything is made square and right for me if John turns out. I daren't hint at anything myself, you know, to the old man. I have to appear very miserable and sympathizing, and wishful for John to repent. It wouldn't do for him to suspect it's what I've been pining for for years. I feel I shall owe my future sister-in-law a handsome present for this.'

'Leave it to me,' said Mrs. Maxwell assuringly. 'I'll manage it, never fear.'

And truly Richard Maxwell could not have left his interests in better hands.

The bell rang at that moment a summons to the invalid's room. Mrs. Maxwell was not slow to obey,

These had been anxious days for the Master of Bervie,—days of doubt, and hope, and fear, mingled with passion and indignation. He had not seen his son since that memorable evening, and, now that the day of decision had come, was impatient to summon him to his side.

‘Is John in the house, Eleanor?’ he asked, directly his wife appeared. ‘Let him come to me immediately.’

‘Are you sure you are well enough for the agitation of another interview?’ she asked, with well-assumed solicitude. ‘You have not slept well, you say, and look fatigued. Put it off another day, William. It will be safer.’

‘Send John to me,’ he repeated impatiently. ‘Impossible to wait, woman. Great issues are at stake.’

She murmured assent, and went in search of her step-son.

She found him in the library, evidently expecting the summons she brought.

‘I hope you will be able to restore you father’s peace of mind,’ she said gravely. ‘In any case, smooth the worst for him. He is very weak.’

In the excitement of the moment John Maxwell did not even seem to hear the request, but hurried immediately to his father. Two minutes afterwards she heard the doors closed, and she paced restlessly to and fro in the hall, her hands locked together, and her mind in a tumult of anxiety. Equally

anxious, although outwardly as cool as usual, Richard Maxwell remained in the morning room awaiting the issue. They had not long to wait.

The great hands of the hall clock had not moved fifteen minutes round when the doors were opened and shut again, and John Maxwell came down stairs. Richard discreetly kept out of sight, but Mrs. Maxwell waited till he came. His face was white, his lips firmly set. There was scarcely need to ask the question on her lips.

'You are still at variance, John?' she said, with a mighty effort to restrain her eager curiosity.

He nodded, and took his hat from the stand.

'I am very sorry for this, John,' she said. 'Perhaps by and by the breach may be healed if you would only—'

'There is no use to discuss the matter, madam,' said John curtly, and he looked at her curiously, as if seeking to gauge her inward thoughts. 'You do not need to be sorry; the game is yours and Richard's. He will be Master now, I suppose. Tell him I wish him luck. Good-morning.'

Before she could answer, the door had opened and closed upon John Maxwell for many a long day.

She had but time to communicate the joyful issue to her son, when she was summoned again to her husband's room.

'Is Richard in the house, Eleanor?' he said, and she was astonished at the outward calm of his manner. 'Let him come here; he is my only son

now. And let a message be sent to Edinburgh immediately for Jamieson. Tell him to come on to-night; I have a lot of business to do.'

Jamieson was the head of the firm of lawyers employed by the Laird, and Eleanor Maxwell departed to do his bidding with a heart swelling with pleasurable hope and exultation.

Meanwhile John Maxwell was walking slowly, with his eyes bent on the ground, along the avenue to the lodge gates. These were bitter moments, for till now he had not realized what his father's decision meant for him. It meant leaving the only home he had ever known, the goodly heritage of his forefathers, which till this day he had been taught to believe his own. It meant, also, perfect severance from kith and kin,—coldness and avoidance, perhaps, from those he had called friends,—a sudden change from affluence to poverty, from pleasant indolence to necessary work; it meant all that for John Maxwell, but even in these first sharp moments no misgiving mingled with his natural regret, because the loss of these things meant the possession of the woman he loved. It is a wondrous thing this love, which makes such sacrifices light. He lingered only a moment at the gates, and took a long look at the home he was leaving. Then he turned his back upon it, and strode with firm, quick step down the road to Elie. When he reached Miss Farquharson's cottage, and saw her sitting in

the parlour window, an uncontrollable impulse moved him to seek admittance there for a few moments. I do not suppose any thought of giving her his confidence entered his head, though they were close friends. She gave him a warm greeting, and her shrewd eyes guessed something was troubling him, although he talked freely enough.

‘It is early yet, John,’ she said, glancing to the clock, which was just pointing to ten. ‘What are you doing down here at this time in the morning?’

‘I had no alternative but come, Miss Farquharson,’ he answered bluntly. ‘In fact, I’ve been turned out.’

The old lady’s knitting fell from her hands, and she stared at him in mute and questioning surprise.

‘Laddie, what for?’

He smiled at the abruptness and quaintness of the question.

‘I may as well tell you everything, I suppose,’ he said, feeling it a relief after all to tell some one. ‘I mean to make Agnes Bonner my wife; my father objects. And since I cannot give her up, he has given me up. Bervie, I suppose, will be Richard’s.’

‘This is a very grievous thing, John Maxwell,’ said the old lady, crossing her hands on her lap, and looking gravely at him. ‘I have no word to say against Agnes Bonner,—she’s an eident lassie

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an' a bonnie; but I'm vexed she should have come between you and your father.'

'She didn't come between us, Aunt Margaret,' said the young man, using again the familiar name he had used in boyhood. 'It was entirely my fault. Agnes wanted to release me, but I declined to accept my freedom at her hands. I would rather face poverty with her than be Maxwell of Bervie without her.'

'Ye talk after the way of foolish youth,' said Miss Farquharson, with a little odd smile. 'When the wolf's at the door, ye'll maybe rue't, John Maxwell. But what's done can't be undone. Maybe ye'll tell me, now, what you think to live on, you an' Agnes Bonner?'

'Indeed, Aunt Margaret, I don't know,' returned the young man, half jestingly, half earnestly. 'I'll need to go off to the city, I suppose, and turn my education to account.'

Miss Farquharson shook her head.

'There's hundreds cleverer than you, John Maxwell, that can't make a meal of their education. Ye'll mean to lay aside your pride now, I'm thinking, for, if you marry the lassie, ye'll need to work for her.'

'Of pride, Aunt Margaret, you know I have none,' said John Maxwell; then, 'at least of the kind which disdains work. I'll break stones on the road-side if need be.'

'As long as your Auntie Marget has a penny

she'll no see her laddie come to that,' said the old lady, with a sudden dimness in her eyes. 'I'll tell ye what, though, an' ye'll maybe find this harder than breaking stones: Sir Robert Elphinstone wants a factor at present, an' if ye ask him I have no doubt he'll give you the place for the sake of what ye are.

John Maxwell's face flushed slightly, and the old lady seeing it, nodded shrewdly.

'Your pride's no quite buried yet, John, I see; but if ye'll take my advice, ye'll look after the place. It's worth five hundred a year. Ye'll better go to Elphinstone to-morrow. Sir Robert's at Edinburgh the day, I think, for I saw him drive to the station this morning.'

'Thank you, Aunt Margaret,' said John Maxwell, rising. 'I shall take your advice, and you are right about it being harder to do than break stones.'

The old lady laughed.

'Folk have to do mony a queer thing to get on in the world, laddie; an' it's best to bear the burden in your youth. Ye'll be away tae David Bonner's, I'm thinkin'. Tell Agnes tae come up to me; I have something to say to her. I'm no saying but she'll make a good wife, John, but I wish this hadna happened. Your father's a stern man, John Maxwell, and a proud, and I sair misdoot he'll no repent o' his harshness this side the grave.'

'Not when he is in constant intercourse with my step-mother and her son,' returned John Maxwell, with the first tinge of bitterness in his face and voice. 'Good-bye, Aunt Margaret, and thank you. You are as good to the man as you were to the wild boy who used to waste your flowers and climb your apple trees.'

She stood within the porch watching him till he was out of sight, and then went back to her work with a smile and a tear.

'He's a guid, guid laddie,' she said to herself; 'but, like all the rest, headstrong in love; but I wish him well.'

In the 'sewing-room' at David Bonner's house sat Agnes and Ailie, busy with some white dresses for a wedding. Jean Bonner was 'redding up,' as she called it, in the kitchen, and occasionally sauntered across the passage, broom in hand, to see the progress the work was making, or repeat some idle bit of gossip to Ailie.

The sloop was to sail next day with a cargo for Sunderland. David Bonner and his mate Stephen Ramsay had been busy with her all the morning, and now were sauntering to and fro beside the dyke, conjecturing how long it would take the *Nannie* to make the trip. Let me pause one moment to describe Stephen Ramsay to you, for he plays an important part in this history. Perhaps the best word I can use is *manly*; it was characteristic of him in every respect. He towered

a head above David Bonner, and was a Hercules in strength. His face was a fine one,—open, winning, and sincere,—and the heart within was as tender and true as David Bonner's own. He was as dear to him as his own son, and it was understood between them that one day Ailie would be his wife. There had been no definite words of love spoken between the young pair, but each knew the other's heart perfectly. And the girl was young enough yet, David Bonner said; better for her to remain at home a little longer.

'We'll ha'e a longer trip next time, Stevie lad,' said David Bonner, still eyeing the sloop affectionately. 'Macdougall o' Exeter wants me tae tak' a cargo o' tatties tae Rotterdam i' September.'

The *Nannie* 'll be brawly able for that, skipper,' said Stevie Ramsay cheerily. 'There's the young Laird comin' doon the Taft.'

David Bonner wheeled round suddenly. 'Twas John Maxwell's handsome figure striding down the middle of the street. Unconsciously he put his pipe into his vest pocket, and took two or three strides across the road to his own door. He reached it simultaneously with the young man, who stopped, and said pleasantly,—

'I am happy to have found you at home, Mr. Bonner. Can I see you privately anywhere for a few minutes?'

'We'd best walk along the shore, sir,' said David

Bonner briefly. 'It's mair private there than ony gate.'

'Very well,' returned John Maxwell; and the pair turned round the end of the house, and down to the beach leading in the direction of Ruby Bay.

There was nothing said till they were beyond the range of curious eyes or ears, then David Bonner stood still and fixed his eyes keenly on his companion's face.

'I'm ready tae hear onything ye may ha'e tae say tae me, sir.'

John Maxwell answered promptly and impulsively, as was his wont,—

'I want you to give me your daughter Agnes for my wife.'

A great surprise gathered on David Bonner's face. It was several moments before he answered.

'My bairn Agnes for yer wife, Mr. Maxwell?' he said at last. 'I'm a plain man, an' a puir man, an' I canna think ye mean what ye say.'

'I have learned to love your daughter,' repeated John Maxwell simply and earnestly, 'and have come here to-day to ask you to give her to me.'

David Bonner drew his hand across his brow in a dazed kind of way, as if yet unable to comprehend his companion's meaning.

'It is due to you, sir, that I should tell you the whole truth ere you hear it from a dozen gossiping tongues,' said John Maxwell, walking slowly to and

fro. 'My father is *not* pleased with my intended marriage, and, because I persist in my resolution, has sent me from Bervie for ever, I believe. I have no hope that one penny of my father's wealth will ever come to me, and I stand before you a poorer man than you are, with nothing to offer your daughter but an honest heart and a pair of willing hands. I do not ask you to give her to me till I have a home to offer her, which I believe will be soon. Only give me a promise that, when the time comes, you will not say me nay.'

As the young man spoke, David Bonner grew to understand the state of affairs, and he held out his hand to him, saying huskily,—

'I ha'e wranged ye, sir, in thocht, mony a time. I was feared ye were but playin' wi' my bairn. I'll no' hide it frae ye. This isna a marriage I wad ha'e socht or liket for her, but if she's willin' I ha'e nae mair tae say. Ye ha'e gi'en up a hantle for her,—richtly or wrangly I dinna ken,—but it's no' for me noo tae stand between ye. Wull ye come tae the hoose, sir, an' I'll tell ye sae again afore Agnes?'

It was evidence of the delicacy of John Maxwell's nature, that he had spoken to this plain, rugged old seaman as if he had been the highest in the land; the answering delicacy, as strong and as rare in David Bonner's breast, appreciated it to the full.

What was the amazement of Stevie Ramsay to see the twain come back to the Taft together, then enter David Bonner's house!

From the kitchen Jean Bonner saw them pass the window, and heard them enter the house. Not being in her Sunday gown, she did not care to appear before the Laird, and was devoured with curiosity as to the motive of his visit.

They went into the sewing-room, and at a word from her father Ailie quitted it, and joined her wondering mother in the kitchen.

The rush of colour died from Agnes Bonner's face almost as quickly as it came, and she rose to her feet, the white garments she was sewing falling round her like a cloud.

She glanced from her father to her lover with much questioning eyes. It was several minutes before the silence was broken.

'Agnes,' said the old man then, his voice strangely grave and earnest, 'I ha'e been askit this day tae gi'e ye awa' oot o' my keeping into his.' He pointed to John as he spoke. 'Are ye willin' tae gang?'

'Yes, father.'

The words were clearly and unhesitatingly spoken. This was no time for reserve.

'Then I ha'e nae mair tae say, sir,' said he, and, moving to his daughter's side, he laid his broad hand on her slender shoulder. 'I warned ye, Agnes, ye'll mind, tae tak' care o' the Laird o' Bervie: in that I wranged baith him an' you. He's gi'en up a'thing for you, bairn; see an' mak' it up to him, for it's a deep, honest love he offers ye. An' may yer

mithers God be wi' ye, my bairn, an' bless baith you an' yours for ever. Oh, sir, be guid till her, for she canna stand tae be harshly dealt wi'.'

And all the answer John Maxwell made was to grasp the old man's hand in a grip which spoke volumes.

Then David Bonner joined their hands, and with one more murmured blessing hurried from the room.



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CHAPTER V.

A TRUE WOMAN.

MISS ELPHINSTONE of Elphinstone was pacing to and fro in her spacious dining-room, her hands clasped before her, and her beautiful face graver than its wont.

A visitor had come and gone within the last two hours, and a piece of gossip she had told was the cause of Miss Elphinstone's gravity.

It was only the rumour of John Maxwell's rupture with his father, and his probable marriage with the daughter of David Bonner. You will remember Mrs. Maxwell's verdict on Miss Elphinstone, and I fear it was not altogether a mistaken one. But it is not for me to pry into the secrets of the girl's heart. She was the only child of the house of Elphinstone, the idol of her widowed father, and the pet of the whole country-side. She was so bright, so winsome, and so beautiful, that to know her and not love her was a thing impossible.

The shadows were creeping into the corners of the great room, and the last glow of the sunset fading in the sky. It was nearly seven o'clock, and Miss Elphinstone was impatiently waiting her father's return from a neighbouring town, whither he had gone on business in the morning.

It was past his time, and, wondering much what detained him, she was about to ring for light, when she heard his step in the hall, and flew to meet him.

'Papa, I thought you would never come,' she exclaimed. 'What has kept you? Was the train behind?'

'No, my love. Miss Farquharson waylaid me, and kept me nearly half an hour. Is there a fire in the library? You will come in here till I surprise you with a piece of news.'

'Is it the same as mine, I wonder?' said she, following him into the room. He flung himself in the easy-chair, and Flora knelt down beside him.

'A very bad piece of news indeed,' said Sir Robert gravely. 'I don't know when I felt so amazed.'

'What is it, papa? You haven't told me yet,' cried Flora impatiently.

'Well, it seems that foolish boy Jack Maxwell has got entangled with some fisher girl about Elie, and insists upon marrying her. Naturally and properly, his father opposes the thing, and the result is, John has been expelled from Bervie, and will be

disinherited, I suppose, in favour of that smooth-tongued brother of his. I expected better things of Maxwell's son.'

He did *not* say *what* he had expected, but I believe his daughter guessed. Her fair cheek flushed a little, and she kept her head turned away.

'I heard it too, papa, to-day from Lady Murray. But you are a little mistaken. She is not a fisher girl, but a dressmaker, and a very superior girl too, I suppose.'

'Well, her father's a fisherman, and that's the same thing, Flora,' said her father irritably. 'I declare I don't know what the young generation is coming to.'

There was a short silence.

'Miss Farquharson waylaid me, as I said, and it was to tell me this, and to ask—guess what?'

'I don't know, papa,' said Flora quickly.

'She wants me to give Brown's place to John Maxwell. I said no pretty sharply, I fancy, and said what I think, that he and his wife deserve to starve.'

Miss Elphinstone made no answer whatever, but her father had an idea that his words had vexed her.

'I've no doubt you think me a cross, hard-hearted old dragon,' he said. 'Indeed, Miss Farquharson told me so to my face. Do *you* think I can conscientiously give that rebellious young man the place?'

'I don't see what your conscience has got to do

with it at all, papa,' replied his daughter frankly. 'But since you ask me, I do think you should give it him. Come now, please me this once, papa,' she added coaxingly. 'Give John the place, and earn his gratitude and mine.'

'Yours, you saucy monkey; it doesn't last twenty-four hours,' said he grimly, though a relenting smile crept to his mouth. 'You women are all alike; give you a love affair, and you'll make a resolution to get it settled to your content. Well, if the young fellow comes here to-morrow, as I believe he will, I won't spare him, Flora, though I may give in at last.'

'I daresay he feels bad enough,' said Miss Elphinstone, springing to her feet. 'Well, papa, we have been sitting forgetting there is such a thing as dinner in the world.'

She departed to her dressing-room, heart and thoughts full of John Maxwell and his affairs, and her busy brain full of a hundred kind plans for the welfare and happiness of the young wife, who would doubtless feel lonely and strange and shy in her new position, and be pleased to make one friend. There was not a more unselfish being on earth than Flora Elphinstone.

To John Maxwell's infinite relief, he was spared the necessity of explaining his errand when he appeared at Elphinstone next morning. Sir Robert received him with a strange mixture of cordiality and grim sternness.

'Mind you, I don't approve of your doings, young man,' he said, 'and I never saw any good come of unequal marriages in my life.'

'Perhaps mine will convince you that they may be good sometimes,' said John Maxwell. 'And I am not afraid of it.'

'No, I don't suppose you are,' said the old man, with a twinkle in his eye. 'Well, away to Flora, and introduce yourself as the new factor. If it is any satisfaction, she is with you heart and soul in this business, like the silly girl she is.'

'God bless her,' said John Maxwell, under his breath; aloud he said, with the simple earnestness peculiar to him,—

'I cannot thank you as I would, Sir Robert. My faithful services will show my gratitude better than mere words.'

'We will hope so,' returned the Baronet good-humouredly; and so, with a few brief words, the matter, one of such importance to John Maxwell, was settled.

It was evening before he came again to Elie, and, pausing at Miss Farquharson's for an hour, the gloaming was coming on when he knocked at David Bonner's door and asked for Agnes. Jean opened it, all smiles and curtsies, but he declined to come in. If Agnes was ready, he said, he would see her outside. For David Bonner he had a sincere respect and liking, but this vulgar, gossiping wife was not much to his taste.

Agnes joined him in a few minutes, dressed for walking, and the pair turned, as usual, to the beach.

'The sloop is gone, I see,' said John, glancing towards the harbour.

'Yes; she went with the tide in the afternoon,' returned Agnes. 'Father thought to see you again, perhaps, before he sailed.'

'I wish I could have seen him, to tell him I can offer you a home already. Say you are glad, Agnes. Sir Robert Elphinstone has given me his steward's place, with an income of five hundred a year.'

No need to ask if she was glad. Her sweet face was sufficient answer.

'So, my darling, we can be married very soon, and I can procure you a true friend in Miss Elphinstone. She is your friend already.'

'I had rather she did not wish to befriend me, John,' returned Agnes quietly. 'I am not used to the ways of great ladies. I should feel shy and strange. And another thing, I do not want to be patronized, because, when I am your wife, shall I not be the equal of any of them?'

He liked the pride with which she spoke, and fancied he saw the surprise on Miss Elphinstone's face when she saw this proud, self-possessed, lady-like woman, instead of the awkward country girl she expected.

'We will say no more about this at present, Agnes,' he said, half laughing. 'I think there would be some difficulty in patronizing you. Why, my

darling, you looked like a princess when you drew up your little head as you did just now.'

'Nonsense, John,' she said, laughing a little also; 'let us go by the Braes instead of the beach to-night. The lights on the opposite coast are so clear, and I like to watch them.'

So they took the sloping path to the Braes, talking as they went of the bright future before them, and feeling that no shadows lay around their path.

'There is some one going to the Lady's Tower, John,' said Agnes suddenly. 'Do you see—'

'Yes,' returned John briefly. 'It is my brother Richard.'

Their unspoken thought was to wonder what brought him alone to that quiet spot. They did not know how often Richard Maxwell had come alone to the Lady's Tower before to-night.

He turned when he reached the ruin, and came leisurely along the turf, apparently unaware of their appearance. He started when he saw them at last, and seemed irresolute whether to turn or face them. Then he came forward, carelessly lighting a cigar as he did so.

'Oh, is it you, Jack?' he said, with apparent surprise, when they were close upon him. 'I've been wondering what's come over you. Never dreamed you were in Elie still.'

Now the truth was, Richard Maxwell was perfectly aware of all his brother's movements, even up to the hour he had left Elphinstone.

John Maxwell hesitated whether to introduce Agnes or not, but Richard took the initiative.

‘This will be Miss Bonner, I suppose?’ he said, and his tone was a trifle sneering. ‘Won’t you introduce me, John?’

John Maxwell’s eyes flashed, and he bit his lip, and strove to utter the few brief words calmly. Agnes made a slight, distant bow, which Richard Maxwell returned, but did *not* raise his hat.

‘Fine night for a stroll. Ah, I quite envy you two, ’pon my word,’ he drawled. ‘Well, I’ll be off. Good-night, Jack; happy to hear of the event when it comes off.’

But for the pleading touch of Agnes’s fingers on his arm, John Maxwell would have knocked the insolent fellow to the ground without a moment’s hesitation. By a mighty effort he kept his passion in curb, and with a curt good-night drew Agnes in the opposite direction.

‘Thank you, my darling,’ he whispered, after a while; ‘you kept me from myself. But for you, there would have been blows to-night. Curse him, he has got my all. Can’t he leave me in peace?’

‘Your all?’ said Agnes timidly.

The words told; the gloom left his face, and he clasped her to his heart, whispering how dear she was, and how every trouble flew when she was by his side.

But the meeting had cast a brief shadow on their happiness, and soon they turned their faces home-

ward. The tide was receding, and they descended to the shore, and walked slowly almost at the edge of the sea. As they passed the little cove known as Ruby Bay, Agnes caught sight of two figures standing there, and drew John's attention to them. In the dim light she did not distinguish or recognise them, but his clearer vision succeeded.

'Agnes, as I live, it is my brother Richard and your sister Ailie.'





CHAPTER VI.

MEMORIES.

HAVING made up his mind to befriend John Maxwell, Sir Robert Elphinstone considered it his duty to inform his father of his intention. They had been close friends in the days when they rode to the hunting field together, and it had been the hope of both their hearts to see their children united. It was a disappointment to the Baronet, but only short-lived. There were plenty of suitors for Flora, he knew, as desirable in all respects as John Maxwell.

He rode over to Bervie one evening, and found his old friend very weak and irritable.

‘I’ve had my death-blow, Elphinstone,’ he said feebly. ‘He was the very apple of my eye, and he has broken my heart. It was wicked of him, after all I’ve been to him.’

Mrs. Maxwell was in the room, and Sir Robert saw her colour change, and guessed she was dis-

pleased at the invalid's plainly expressed preference for his first-born son.

'Leave us a little while, Eleanor,' said the old man querulously. 'You are not always so attentive.'

'He has grown fanciful and irritable since this new trouble came,' said Mrs. Maxwell to Sir Robert. 'He is often impatient even with me.'

'There is no need to give Elphinstone a list of my peculiarities, Eleanor,' said the sick man, more irritably still. 'Go to your son, and leave me a little.'

Mrs. Maxwell shook her head meaningly at Sir Robert, and quitted the room.

'I don't trust her, Elphinstone, though she is my wife,' said the sick man, moving his head wearily on his pillow. 'And Richard is too smooth-tongued. I never see his real self. *He* was all open and above board,—no deceit about him. He never said no if he meant yes in his life. My death-blow from him, Elphinstone,—it was cruel, cruel!'

'You might have forgiven him once, Maxwell,' said the Baronet bluntly. 'It was the first time he had gone against you, and it isn't the first time a gentleman has married a daughter of the people.'

'No Maxwell ever did,' said the old man impatiently. 'I could not brook that he should be the first. Where has he gone, do you know? *They* profess to know nothing, but I don't trust them—they are too smooth.'

'He isn't out of Elie,' returned the Baronet, 'and

I don't know what you will say to me, Maxwell, but I've taken him in hand and given him Brown's place. Flora persuaded me, and that's the truth.'

'Ay, ay, your little maid,' said the invalid musingly. 'How is she, Elphinstone? She never comes to see her old friend now.'

'She is well, and as saucy as ever, and much interested, I can tell you, in the new factor and his affairs.'

The invalid waved his hand impatiently.

'Enough of that, we will talk of something else. It is over and done with. He has chosen his own way, let him travel on it. Would you have any objection to give your little maid to Richard if they were so minded?'

Sir Robert had several objections, the greatest of which was a strong personal dislike to Richard Maxwell, but he merely said if the young pair settled anything of the kind he would not stand in their way.

'It was an old plan, Elphinstone, but it was nipped in the bud. If you will give Richard freedom to visit you, knowing his intentions, who knows we might see Elphinstone and Bervie one yet.'

'He is welcome to come as often as he pleases, but I can't answer for Flora's behaviour. She is not very particular in her manners sometimes,' said the Baronet. 'But it might be—it might be. Well, I will be off, Maxwell. Good-bye, and try to pull up a bit.'

The invalid shook his head.

'I'll never get over this, Elphinstone. It's my death-blow. Tell your little maid I should like to see her sometimes. She used to come often.'

The Baronet looked pitifully at the poor helpless wreck of the man he had known in the prime of splendid manhood, and, saying hastily he would bid Flora come, left the room.

He did not encounter Mrs. Maxwell or her son on his way out.

Before another week was gone John Maxwell entered on his new duties, and applied himself to them with heart and soul. He would have made a very *beau idéal* country gentleman, for he knew the value of every acre of ground on Bervie, and had been the personal friend of every one of his tenants. There was a steward at Bervie, but John Maxwell had supervised all his own concerns, and was therefore eminently fitted for the post the good-natured Baronet had given him. The dwelling-house he was to occupy was within the policies, and not ten minutes' walk from the mansion. There John dwelt in solitary bachelorhood, awaiting the time when Agnes should be ready to become its mistress. In the furnishing of it Miss Elphinstone had come to his aid, and had been much interested in all its arrangements. She was almost as impatient for Agnes's coming as John himself. David Bonner had consented to permit the wedding in the beginning of the new year. So through the weary days of the

closing year Agnes Bonner made her few simple preparations for the change in her life, with a heart in which there was not a shadow of doubt or misgiving. She had suddenly become a person of much importance in Jean Bonner's eyes, and was treated with much deference and respect, which Agnes received as quietly as she had done the neglect of former days.

But of all the household, Agnes felt the greatest change was in Ailie. She had not spoken to her of having witnessed her meeting with Richard Maxwell, for Agnes was shy and reticent, and seldom cared to meddle with the affairs of others. That she met him frequently yet, she knew, for she would be often gone for hours of an evening, and give no explanation of where she had been. Seeing how restless the child had grown, and how changed from her old bright, careless self, Agnes trembled for her. She knew enough of Richard Maxwell to distrust and fear him.

The *Nannie* made the voyage to Rotterdam and back in safety, and arrived at Anstruther harbour two days before the wedding. David Bonner was perfectly satisfied now with his daughter's prospects, and was, indeed, happy to think she would soon occupy a position for which she was better fitted than her present one. His admiration and liking for John Maxwell had steadily increased, and the two were firm friends.

On the night before the wedding, John Maxwell

came down to Elie for a last word with Agnes, but she had gone to Miss Farquharson's in the afternoon. He was about to go in search of her, when David Bonner appeared, and asked him to take a stroll with him, as he had something particular to say.

'I'll no keep ye lang, sir, for I ken ye wad fain be awa' up by,' he said, as they went leisurely along the pier. 'I only want tae tell ye something about Agnes's mither. It's never passed my lips afore, an' it wadna noo, but that ye're gaun tae mairry my bairn the morn an' lo'e her sae dearly. Ye'll hae patience wi' an auld man's story, John?'

'No need to ask, sir,' said John Maxwell sincerely. 'And, believe me, I feel deeply that you should trust me with anything so dear to you.'

'Trust ye, lad; there's no muckle I wadna trust ye wi', I'm thinkin',' said the old man huskily. 'But I maunna be sae lang about it.' He paused a moment, and in the dim, uncertain light of the flickering winter moon John Maxwell saw the old man's face softened into a strange emotion and tenderness. 'It's just five-an'-twenty years ago this month,' he went on again, 'that I took a cargo of wheat up tae Newcastle. The *Nannie* was new then, and trade was brisker i' the Elie than it is now. We had an awfu' passage,—deed, I never thocht tae see the Elie again,—an' we were keepit a week an' mair i' the port waitin' for fair weather tae come hame. Ae nicht I had been up the tcon seein' an auld acquaintance, an' was comin' doon by the quay,

gey late, aboot eleven maybe, an' as I was passin' by ane of the warehouses I heard a soond like a woman greetin' i' the door. It's a waefu' soond tae hear at ony time, an' I couldna gang by withoot seein' what it was. It was pitch dark, but I struck a match an' lookit in. There was a young thing, a lassie, leanin' up i' the corner, sabbin' as if her heart wad break. She was dressed in black as far as I could see, gey worn an' puir-lookin', but she had a look o' something better aboot her; an' when she turned her face tae me, it was a bonnie ane, though waefu' white an' sad.'

"Can I help ye, ma'am?" I said, for somethin' made me speak respectfu' till her. "It's ower late for ye tae be oot yersel'." She drew her bit shawl aboot her, and lookit at me haughty like afore she spoke. An' then she only askit me tae pass on an' leave her tae hersel'; but that I couldna dae.

"I'm a plain, honest Scotchman, ma'am," I said firmly, "an' I hae a bit sister at hame I wadna like tae see i' this place at this time o' nicht. I'm no' askin' tae ken yer trouble, only let me see ye safely oot o' this tae yer hame, whaurever it may be." Wi' that she steppit oot o' the door, and stood just at the lamp an' lookit at me wi' her twa earnest e'en as if she wad read my vera soul. I didna wince, though the look made my heart jump. Syne she held oot her hand, and said simply,—

"I'll trust you; and if you will show me my way I shall be very grateful. I have lost myself, I believe, among the streets."

'She telt me whaur she bade; it was a puir, puir street a mile an' mair frae the quay, but I kent the road well, and we went aff thegither. I never spak'; her grief, whatever it was, was tae be respeckit, though I'll no say but I wondered sair what she nicht be. We had gane, I believe, aboot half the way afore she said a word.

"I haven't heard a kind word for weeks," she said at last, an' her voice was waefu' weary. "I ran out of the house to-night to find my road to the river and drown myself. But it was so cold and black, my heart failed me."

'Still I spak' never a word,—I couldna,—an' efter a bit she said again,—

"This is a great city, sir, but there are no kind hearts in it, surely. Scotland must be a better land than this, if all are like you."

"There'll be kind hearts here tae, ma'am," said I, wi' a kin' o' tremble i' my voice, "though ye've maybe no come ower them. But thae's waefu' words tae hear frae the like o' you."

"I ran out of the house to-night," she went on, an' I felt her hand shakin' on my airm, "to escape from my father. He was going to murder me."

"Guidness, lassie, what for?" cried I, forgettin' mysel' in astonishment.

'It was just a wee while afore she answered again.

"I forgot I am talking to a stranger," she said quickly. "I think I can find my way alone now, thank you."

'I was hurt, an' I suppose my face showed it, an' she said,—

"You think me ungrateful," she said, wi' a little bit smile that brightened her face wonderfu'. "Forgive me, I don't know what I am saying; I don't, indeed, my mind is so upset."

'I didna say what I thocht, nor how I felt for her, but jist answered short like,—

"Dinna speak o't, ma'am, but let me tak' ye a' the way. It's late, an' yer no safe yer lane."

'So there was nae mair said till we reached her hame, twa bits o' rooms in a puir-lookin' hoose in that dirty by-street. She got a wee hurried an' frightened like as we got near till't, an' she stoppit at the entry and said in a tremblin' way,—

"Good night, and may God bless you, sir, for your kindness to a helpless woman."

'A woman! thocht I. She lookit little mair than a bairn. I dinna mind richtly what I said, but I mind o' askin' if I micht ca' the morn' an' speir for her, an' she didna say no. Syne she went slowly intae the hoose, an' I stood a meenit i' the street waitin', I dinna ken what for. I dinna think it could 'a' been mair than a meenit, when I heard a man's voice speakin' like somebody in a passion, an' syne a scream, an' without anither thocht I rushed intae the hoose, an' saw her tremblin' and crouchin' in a corner, an' a man stannin' ower her—a tall, thin-lookin' man—his face workin' wi' passion, an' his bleered e'en rollin' like a madman's.

“What! you good-for-nothing baggage. Back again without a penny, and me dying by inches for lack of a monthful of drink! Get out of my sight, or I’ll murder you!”

‘He lifted his hand to her, but the next meenit I had him by the throat an’ brocht him tae the flure. Then, whisperin’ tae her tae gang ootside, I slipped oot tae, an’ lockit the door i’ the ootside an’ left the key i’ the lock. I heard him screamin’ an’ swearin’, and kent he was mad wi’ the drink. I fund the lassie—his dochter, I supposed she was—standing in the entry shakin’ frae heid tae fit. She cam’ awa’ quite readily wi’ me, an’ I gaed tae the first hotel we cam’ tae an’ ordered a room for her. I bade her guid nicht then, an’ the tears were streamin’ doon her cheeks as she tried tae thank me. My ain e’en, John, werena dry. Syne gaed awa tae the quay again, an’ walked the deek o’ the sloop till mornin’.

‘Afore ten o’clock I went tae the hotel again, and fund her there, as I expectit. She was that white, an’ her e’en sae weary an’ heavy, I kent she hadna sleepit. She askit me tae sit doon till she telt me wha she was, an’ a’ her little history. I’ll gie ye’t, John, as nearly as I can in her ain words, but ye’ll never ken the pathos in which she telt it.

“My name is Agnes Trent,” she said. “He is my father, Arthur Trent. He was an eminent physician in a country district not many miles from here, and was, besides, the younger son of a Cumberland landowner. My mother died when I was a

child, and I was permitted to grow up much as I pleased. My father seldom noticed or spoke to me. I was afraid of him from my earliest years. I don't know how or when he first learned to drink, sir, but it grew upon him till he was scarcely a day sober, and then people began to be afraid to employ him. His practice dwindled away till by and by he was obliged to leave Wygate and come to the town. He never ~~gained~~ again after that, but earned something by copying and writing for newspapers; but he soon left that off too, and we have sunk lower and lower, till we are as you found us. I have tried to earn a little by sewing sometimes, but work is scarce, and the people in cities very hard." Her head bent doon on her hands at this, an' for a meenit she didna speak. "Last night he ordered me to go and get money somewhere by any means, and used words to me I cannot repeat. They seemed to break my heart altogether. He would have murdered me, I believe, sir, but for you. It is not the first time neighbours have had to save me from him."

'I dinna mind what I said then, and it disna much maitter. I tried tae tell her, I ken, what I felt, an' syne she askit me if I were going hame wi' her aince again, and see what he was aboot. He was her faither, ye ken, and she cared for him yet, I believe, in spite of his cruelty. So we gaed, and found him lyin' dead on the flure. She was maist beside hersel', puir thing, an' I didna ken hoo tae

comfort her. The doctor said the cause was "excessive drinkin', an' that naethin' could ha'e saved his life." Weel, he was buried, an' the weather was mendin', and it was time I was hame wi' the sloop. Hoo was I tae leave her—a helpless lassie in a great toon—without a frien' or a way tae earn a penny? My mither was livin' then, an' I kent wad hae been guid tae the bairn; but I wasna that auld, John, an' it wad hardly hae dune tae tak' her hame i' the sloop. Only ae way was open, an' that was tae mak' her my wife, if she wad. I had learned tae love her, John. These things come a' o' a sudden, as ye ken; but I was sweer tae ask her, leddy as she was, tae gie hersel' tae a rough seaman chield like me. The day cam' at last. I was obleeged tae sail wi' the tide at nicht, so I gaed aff i' the mornin' tae see her, an' bid her guid-bye. I thoct I'd tell her what I cam' for, an' I suppose my face had betrayed me again, for I saw her colour rise, and she rose tae her feet flurried-like. I didna mind the rest; something i' her wistfu' e'en gar'd me forget a', an' pit an honest question till her. Weel, sir, I needna say nae mair. We were mairried that day afore the sloop sailed, an' she was Agnes's mither.'

In their intense interest both speaker and listener forgot themselves, and stood still at the end of the pier, unconscious of the biting wind, and the spray dashing up almost to their feet. David Bonner's face wore a strange, far-off expression, and John's one of eager, sympathetic interest.

‘So yer wife has some gentle bluid i’ her veins, John,’ he said, with a half smile. ‘I ha’e some bits o’ things, trinkets that were her mither’s, that I’ll gi’e her the morn’s mornin’. I keep them i’ the cabin o’ the sloop, because, ye ken, second wives dinna like tae see a man set a heap on onything that was his first wife’s. They have been very dear tae me, John; she was my first love, ye ken, an’ there’s nane like it in a man’s life again.’

John Maxwell dimly understood how the brave, true heart sacredly cherished the relics of ‘his first love,’ as he termed it, and in that moment loved and revered David Bonner more than any man he had ever met before.

‘I’ll gang hame noo, lad, I think, an’ maybe ye’ll gang for Agnes,’ he said dreamily. ‘I’ve keepit ye lang, but I see ye’re no wearied. Eh, man, the auld memories mak’ a man feel queer a while. An’ I never spoke o’ this afore, an’ never wull again. Ye’ll tell Agnes maybe when ye’re awa’ thegither by yersel’s?’

John Maxwell could scarcely speak for emotion. He nodded only, and the two men’s hands met in a close, lingering pressure. Then, with no other word spoken, they retraced their steps to the house, and parted with a brief good-night at the door.



CHAPTER VII.

FAITHLESS AILIE.



THE wedding was to take place in an Edinburgh hotel. They wished to avoid the comment and interest it would excite in the town, so the Elie gossips were deprived of the chance to peer, and pry, and talk over the consummation of what had been their choicest bit for weeks. By the morning train David Bonner left Elie with his two daughters, Agnes and Ailie, the latter to officiate as bridesmaid.

Miss Farquharson was in Edinburgh, and had specially asked if she might be present; and came, dear old soul, in as great state as if it had been a fashionable wedding in an aristocratic mansion. She was the only stranger present. So at three o'clock in the afternoon Agnes was married, in the presence of only five people, including the clergyman.

Much to Jean Bonner's indignation, Agnes had declined to robe herself in the orthodox white attire,

and chose to be married in the dress she travelled in, a soft brown cashmere; and her only adornment was a lace collar, fastened by a ring brooch of exquisite design and workmanship,—one of the treasured trinkets her father had given her early in the morning. She looked what she was, a pure, sweet, ladylike girl, and to her husband's fond eyes the dearest and bonniest wife in all the world. She made her marriage vows without any show of emotion, and looked, as she felt, perfectly happy and at rest. David Bonner was very deeply moved, but kept it hid till the last moment, when Ailie and he must go, leaving Agnes behind.

'Oh, sir, be guid till her,' he said again to John Maxwell, and his eyes dwelt almost pleadingly on the young man's happy face.

'There shall no care or trouble come near her if I can shelter her from it, sir,' he said, and bent his head over the hand he held. 'So help me, God.'

Then the old man drew his best-loved child within his arms, but what he said was inaudible to all but her.

'We will be at home in a day or two,' cried John Maxwell cheerily, 'and you will need to pay us a long visit. Agnes will belong to you as much as ever.'

'Me, na!' said David Bonner. 'She's yours now: but the bairn 'll not a'thegither forget her auld hame, I trew that.'

'Come, come, I must really put a stop to these

long good-byes,' said Miss Farquharson. 'Mrs. John Maxwell, I congratulate you with all my heart; and you too, my laddie. Now, Mr. Bonner, ye'll miss the train,' and she led the way, insisting on Mr. Bonner and Ailie following her. Ailie had made a pretty bridesmaid, but seemed wonderfully quiet and subdued. So they departed to the station, and took train again for Elie, David Bonner thinking with a great heartache how desolate the house would be without Agnes. From Ailie, Jean Bonner received a minute account of the proceedings; but her husband scarcely spoke of them, and for once she did not bother him with a string of questions. About eight, Stephen Ramsay came along, ostensibly to make some inquiry about the loading of the sloop, but in reality to see Ailie. He sat down by her at the fireside, and took advantage of the noise the children were making, to ask if she would take a walk with him. She glanced up at the clock, and then said carelessly she did not mind if she did go out a bit. Her mother called to her not to stay late,—a request the saucy girl undutifully ignored. She tied on her hat, threw a shawl over her shoulders, and followed Stephen outside. It was dark, but clear overhead, and the night air, though sharp, was not unpleasant. The young man turned round the end of the house, but she drew back, saying impatiently,—

'I dinna want to trail along the shore at this time o' nicht, Stevie Ramsay; just come tae the end o' the pier an' back—it's far enough on a winter's nicht.'

'The full force o' the wind blows on the pier Ailie,' said he. 'We needna gang far; ae road's as guid as anither.'

'If ye dinna like tae gang my way, I'm awa' in then,' she said pettishly; and Stephen turned hastily and said he was willing to go her way. He was used to the girl's capricious temper, and it did not occasion him much anxiety. He thought that she cared for him beneath it all.

'Ye'll miss Agnes,' he said, when they had gone a little way in silence.

'I'm sick tired o' folk sayin' that. Ha'e ye nae thing new to say, Stevie Ramsay?'

The young man laughed.

'Plenty, Ailie, if ye'll ha'e patience tae heart. There's mony a thing I've wanted tae say tae ye months back.'

Ailie knew perfectly to what he referred, but chose to appear surprised and mystified. She was a born coquette.

'Say awa', then, Stevie; I'm sure I'm no hinderin' ye,' she said saucily. 'Mind, we're at the end of the pier, an' I'll be awa' hame the noo.'

Stephen Ramsay grew serious now. He had spoken only jestingly at first, but it might be long before such an opportunity was vouchsafed to him again.

He drew her hand within his arm, and bent his head from his tall height, speaking earnestly.

'Ailie, I ha'e lo'ed ye lang, as ye ken, an' I think

ye care some for me. Ye'll be my wife some day, will ye, Ailie ?'

'Ye're gey sure, Stevie Ramsay.'

'I'm no sure, Ailie ; I'm only askin' tae *be* sure.'

'I dinna want tae be mairrit, Stevie ; my mither says I'm ower young.'

'Ye'll be aulder by and by, though, Ailie. Say yes,' he pleaded. 'I canna speak a lot o' fine words, but ye ken hoo muckle I lo'e ye. I've naebody tae care for in the world but you.'

'I'm gaun hame, Stevie ; there's rain blawin' i' the wind, an' I ha'e my new goon on.'

It was a strange answer to an earnest question, but he must be patient with her.

'Jist the noo, Ailie,' and he kept firm hold of her hands, 'when ye gi'e me a word o' promise. Say yes, an' I'll tak' ye hame.'

'I'll tell ye some ither time, Stevie ; let me awa' ; I canna be fashed wi' ye the nicht ; ye're a perfect torment.'

But Stevie could be firm enough when he liked, and said she must stay till she gave the word he craved for.

'Just say yes, Ailie,' he pleaded, 'an' I'll no' bother ye again.'

'Weel, maybe in aboot fifty years, when I canna get onybody else,' she said pertly, 'I'll mind ye o' what ye said the nicht.'

A smile stole to the young man's face. Fancying her heart securely his, he could afford to be content

with her ungracious consent, and, with a murmured word of endearment, bent down to steal the kiss which was his right. But she was too quick for him, and, slipping from his grasp, sped along the pier at a pace he could scarcely have believed possible. He followed quickly, and found her waiting by the door.

‘Guid-nicht, Stevie, if ye’re no comin’ in again,’ she said, taking it for granted he was not. ‘I’ll see ye the morn, maybe.’

‘Ye’ll no be sae sauey, Ailie, next time I see ye, maybe,’ he said, with a light laugh, and he passed on without further remark.

She waited till the darkness hid him from sight, and then, drawing her shawl more closely round her, slipped round the end of the house and along the path to the Braes. Curiously enough, though there was veritable rain in the wind now, the thought of her new gown did not seem to trouble her. She took the direction of the Lady’s Tower.

As fate would have it, instead of going straight to his lodgings, Stephen Ramsay lit his pipe and sauntered along the Braes, to think over what Ailie had said to him. He had come a shorter way, and was only a hundred yards or so behind, but the darkness of a moonless night hid the slim figure in its folds, and that light footfall would never have betrayed her, even if the waves breaking at the base of the cliffs had not effectually drowned them. He was so absorbed in thought that he went further than he had intended, and found himself, to his

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surprise, close upon the ruined tower. His pipe was out, and one or two attempts to strike a match in the wind had proved useless, so he bethought himself to seek the shelter of the tower for that purpose.

As he drew near he fancied he heard voices, and, surmising it might be a pair of Elie sweethearts, resolved to give them a fright. Nobody loved a joke better than Steve Ramsay. There was a lull in the wind just then, and he heard a man's voice speak, and the tones were not familiar to him.

'It is a wretched night, my pet, for you to be abroad,' it said. 'I almost feared you would not come. How did the wedding come off?'

Stephen Ramsay's heart seemed to stand still as he waited for the answer. It came at last in Ailie's saucy, ringing tones,—

'Oh, the weddin' was weel enough, but no' the kind I wad like; yet Agnes seemed mair than pleased. Edinburgh's a bonnie toon, Richard.'

It flashed across Stephen Ramsay's brain that the man could be no other than Richard Maxwell of Bervie. For one moment the impulse was strong upon him to confront them, but it passed, and he turned shivering from the ruin, and took his way by the path he had come, staggering like a drunken man.

To many another the proofs of a woman's faithlessness had come home with as much suddenness, perhaps, but surely never with such black, bitter suddenness as this.



CHAPTER VIII.

FRIENDS.



RS. JOHN MAXWELL had been at home a week before Miss Elphinstone ventured to call upon her. John wished her to come when he was at home, but the young lady chose to make her visit at a time when she was sure he would not be at home.

So one morning at eleven o'clock she put on her hat, wrapped a shawl about her dainty shoulders, and ran across the park to the pretty house among the trees, and tapped lightly at the door. It was opened immediately by Agnes, who looked just momentarily surprised, and then said, with a smile,—

‘Miss Elphinstone, is it?’

‘Yes; and I hope you will excuse me coming at this time; but I wanted to see you by yourself,’ said Flora frankly and smilingly. ‘May I come in?’

‘Yes,’ said Agnes, and held open the door wide.



'If you will excuse my attire; I have been busy; the girl does not come home till Monday.'

Amazed at the perfect ease and self-possession with which she spoke, Miss Elphinstone followed her into the sitting-room.

'I don't know what you will think of me, Miss Elphinstone,' said Agnes, with a gay laugh. 'But would you mind coming to the kitchen for a little while? I am making dinner, and I am afraid it will spoil.'

'Mind! I should like it above all things!' exclaimed Flora, in great delight. 'I am very much obliged to you for asking me so frankly.'

So the two, feeling friendly already, departed down to the mysterious regions of the kitchen,—a place Miss Elphinstone did not investigate once in a month at home. But this was more novel and much more interesting in her eyes than the domains of the Argus-eyed cook at Elphinstone.

Agnes was making a pudding, and turned up her sleeves as they had been before she went to answer the visitor's knock; and Miss Elphinstone watched her pretty hands deftly mixing up the mysterious ingredients, and thought what a very interesting and charming picture she made. Her morning dress was the perfection of neatness; and Flora thought it wonderfully enhanced by the great housewife's apron, which enveloped the entire front.

'John was hoping he should be in when you came,' said Agnes. 'Do you know I was afraid of you?'

VIII.

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A ringing laugh broke from Flora's sweet lips.

'Afraid of me! Why? I am a very insignificant young person,' returned she, in an amused voice. 'Well, since you have told me your candid opinion, let me give mine of you. Mrs. Maxwell, you are no more like what I anticipated than the moon is like the sun.'

'Tell me what you thought I would be like,' queried Agnes, growing more and more at her ease with her visitor.

'Shall I? Well, pretty; I knew you would be that, but not as you are. I fancied a blue-eyed rosy-cheeked damsel.'

'Awkward, and staring, and generally countrified,' supplemented Agnes, with her rare smile.

Miss Elphinstone nodded.

And instead, I find a graceful, somewhat haughty-looking lady, with the sweetest face I ever set eyes on. Oh, Mrs. Maxwell, how much your husband cares for you!

Agnes turned her head swiftly away. Not just yet could she listen to a careless mention of him unmoved.

There was a moment's silence. Agnes went to the fire, and busied herself at it longer than need be.

'I am afraid I have said too much,' said Miss Elphinstone abruptly. Then Agnes came over and stood beside her, looking down into the flower-like face, her own very grave and earnest.

'My husband told me long ago, Miss Elphinstone,

she said, with a slight falter in her voice, 'that I should find a true friend in you, and indeed I am sure he was right. You have come to me here, and you treat me as if I were your equal, and not something to be despised and humiliated. For that I thank you with my whole heart; and thank you and your generous father for what you have done and been to John. I have made a long speech, Miss Elphinstone. In general I am a woman of few words, and I may never speak of this again. If I do not, you will understand that it is not because I do not feel, but because what I feel most deeply is seldom spoken of.'

And Flora Elphinstone's answer was to place her arm about Agnes Maxwell's neck and kiss her once, and that kiss was the seal of the friendship which, begun then, never knew change or wavering through many years of close intimacy. Then Agnes went back to her work again, and the two, understanding each other, talked away as if they had been acquainted over fifty years.

'What a nice husband you have, Mrs. Maxwell!' said Flora, in one of her sudden bursts of candour. 'I don't mind telling you I wanted him myself once, but he wouldn't have anything to say to me.'

Agnes laughed, not dreaming how much truth lay beneath the jesting words.

Miss Elphinstone lingered beside her new friend till the clock proclaimed that her father would be looking for his luncheon, so, with a hurried good-bye,

she went off, promising herself many a pleasant hour with John Maxwell's young wife.

The intimacy between them very soon became a topic of remark and wonderment among Miss Elphinstone's friends, but several who ventured to remonstrate with her found themselves treated with such scant courtesy that they did not venture to repeat the experiment. She was a young lady of very independent opinions, and cared no more for what the world said of her than the man in the moon.

Her father was amused at her enthusiastic championship of John Maxwell's despised wife, but never dreamed of crossing his little maid in this if it pleased her; she was at liberty to go to the house among the trees every day if she liked. Her father had been duly introduced to Agnes, and had fully endorsed his daughter's opinion, and had further informed John that she was worth the sacrifice he had made, and that it was a pity his father could not see her.

All this was very pleasant to John Maxwell, you will readily guess, and life was full of ease and happiness for him in those days. The Baronet declared he had never had less to do, or less anxiety in his life, for he could leave his interests in his factor's hands, knowing them to be safe there.

With the more genial days of spring the Master of Bervie seemed to take a sudden change for the better, and his dutiful son Richard saw with dis-

appointed eyes that the day when he would be absolute master seemed to be further off than ever. The old man was able to move about his room, and on sunny days took a short drive under the care of his attendant.

One afternoon, in the beginning of April, they were out for a short airing in the brougham, and just as they reached the gates on their way home, Miss Elphinstone's dainty equipage came swiftly along the road. She was driving, and there was a lady with her.

'Is that Miss Elphinstone, Jacob?' said the old man, when they waited for the lodge-keeper to open the gates.

'Yes,' the man answered, and, recognising her companion also, wondered what would follow.

'Just wait till she comes, will you, Jacob?' said the old man, and the coachman sprang from the box and held the restive horse by the head.

'Mr. Maxwell's waiting for us, Agnes,' said Flora, secretly delighted that the opportunity she had longed for had come at last. Agnes was very pale, but retained her self-possession, and the next moment they were close to the brougham.

'I am glad to see you out again, Mr. Maxwell,' said Flora heartily. 'This spring air is life to you, isn't it?'

The old man raised his hat with courtly politeness.

'You have deserted me quite, little maid,' said he, with a remnant of his old smile. 'You look well,

my dear. Is this lady a new friend, Flora ? I do not recognise her.'

A red flush sprang to Agnes's face, while Flora answered, with a little tremulous smile,—

'This is my dear friend, Mrs. John Maxwell. Mr Maxwell—'

A slight flush rose also to the old man's wan cheek, but he raised his hat to her also, concealing the surprise which almost overwhelmed him.

Agnes was much distressed and unnerved by the meeting, seeing which Flora touched her ponies with her whip and made her adieux.

'Good afternoon, dear Mr. Maxwell,' she said. 'I am so glad to see you so much better.'

'Thank you, thank you. Will you be driving this lady in this direction to-morrow or next day ?' he said a little eagerly. 'Perhaps we might meet again.'

'Miss Elphinstone is very good to me, sir,' said Agnes, impelled to speak ; 'but I cannot take advantage of her kindness so often as she generously insists.'

The old man looked at her, more and more amazed. She not only looked like a lady, but spoke like one ; and Miss Elphinstone's evident attachment to her spoke volumes in her favour. What a sweet face she had, too ; and those eyes seemed to look at him with a kind of wistful entreaty which awoke some strange chord in his heart.

'I am very glad to have met you,' he said at last. 'Is your husband well ?'

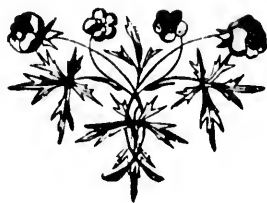
‘Yes, sir;’ and the look which accompanied the two simple words revealed to him how she loved him.

‘Well, I will bid you good afternoon, ladies,’ he said, again raising his hat, and the brougham drove on.

‘So that is my son’s wife? She is very different from what I thought, Jacob,’ said he musingly. ‘Who knows, we may meet them again to-morrow, —eh, Jacob?’

‘It is possible, sir,’ said the man, amazed at the unreserve with which he spoke.

But never did the Master of Bervie pass through these gates in life again.





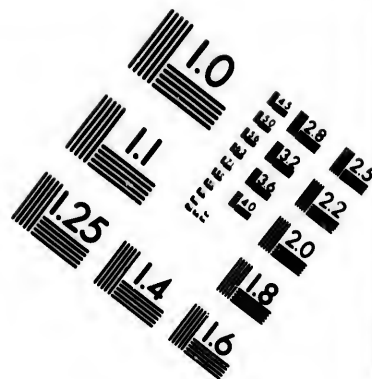
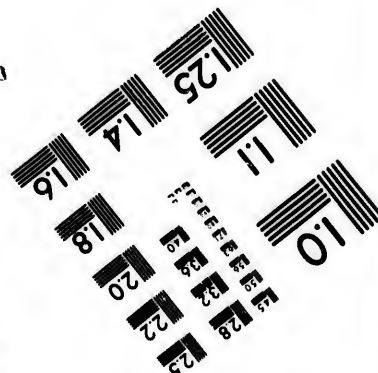
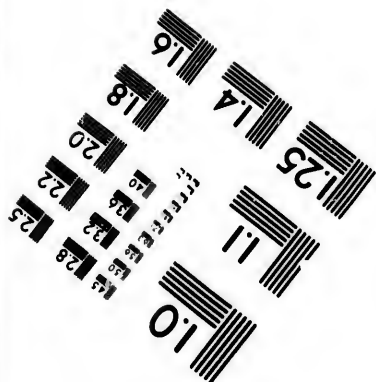
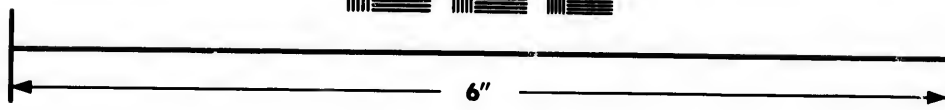
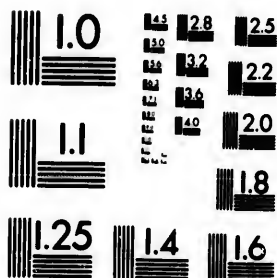


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CHAPTER IX.

UNLOOKED-FOR EVENTS.

THAT night the Laird of Bervie had a sudden relapse, and lay down upon the bed from which he should never rise again.

At daybreak a messenger was sent in hot haste to the town for the doctor, who needed but one glance to tell him the end was not far off. The old man was perfectly conscious, but too weak to speak above a whisper. He motioned to the doctor to come close to him, and whispered so low that those in the room could not hear.

‘Send them all out. Say you need to see me alone ; anything, only get rid of them for an hour.’

The doctor was much surprised, but obeyed him, and so skilfully, that even Mrs. Maxwell failed to suspect anything beyond the fact that he wished to make an examination of his patient. Jacob remained in the adjoining room within call when he was wanted.

The moment the door closed, the sick man whispered eagerly,—

‘Get a pen and ink and paper out of that desk there, Welsh; quick, in case they come.’

The doctor first turned the key in the lock, and then procured the required articles.

‘I want to right my son John, Welsh. I disinherited him, you know,’ he said feebly. ‘Write down, will you, what I tell you? I can sign it, I think. Quick, quick! in case they come, or my strength fail me.’

The doctor drew a small table close to the bedside, and, leaning his head as close as possible to the sick man, wrote at almost lightning speed.

The thing was done in twenty minutes, then William Maxwell asked him to call Jacob to witness the signature.

The doctor opened the door, and the man appeared immediately.

‘This is my last will and testament, Jacob,’ said his master feebly. ‘See, I sign it with my own hand; you can bear witness.’

It was a pitiful, trembling scrawl, but he succeeded in writing his full name; then the doctor and the servant added theirs.

‘Fold it up, Welsh, and just tap with your finger on that panel above the washstand. There’s a secret slide there and a recess, where it will be safe till the funeral day. You’ll give it to Jamieson privately then, and see to John being righted at last.’

'Yes, sir, I promise you faithfully,' said the doctor, and, obeying the old man's directions, placed the will behind the panel.

Jacob Greig took particular note of the proceedings.

'He was a good lad, John, and I was hard on him,' he murmured dreamily; 'but he'll forgive me, and so will his wife. I think she looks sweet and gentle. John, my little lad, my son, right—at last I'

He fell into a dozing sleep then, and the doctor called Mrs. Maxwell.

'He may last over to-morrow,' he said gravely, 'but it is doubtful. I may as well go. You can call me if there is any change for the worse.'

During the early hours of the day there was no perceptible change, but towards afternoon he seemed to grow weaker and ramble in his thoughts. His wife was sitting in the room alone with him, when he suddenly turned to her, and said with perfect clearness,—

'Eleanor, I have not many hours to live. Send for John and his wife at once, and be sure to say his wife.'

Mrs. Maxwell bit her lips, but kept her voice smooth as usual. This was what she had been dreading, but she was prepared for it.

'It will agitate you very much, William. In the morning you may perhaps be stronger.'

'I said I had not many hours to live, Eleanor,'

he repeated, without impatience. 'Let them be sent for at once.'

She rose and left the room. The afternoon wore on. An hour was ample time to make the short journey from Elphinstone; but the old man lay still, patiently thinking perhaps he might not be at home, and it would take a little time to find him.

'They are very long, Eleanor,' he said wearily. 'Are you sure you made the message urgent enough, and did you say his wife?'

'Yes,' she answered; but, behind the curtain, her face flushed a guilty red.

'Will you go and see if there is any word of them?' he said, after a few minutes' silence. 'They have had time now, and my hours are hastening on. It is not like him to be so neglectful of anything urgent. Surely he will bear me no malice; that sweet wife of his would not let him.'

'Had he seen her, then?' was the thought which flashed through Eleanor Maxwell's brain; but she had no time to wonder long, for he bade her again, a little impatiently, go and see if they were not coming.

She was long gone. Twilight shadows were darkening the room when she came again; she was glad of them to veil her face.

'Well,' he said querulously, 'are they here, John and his wife?'

'It is as I thought, William,' she answered, with cruel distinctness. 'They would not come.'

Then the Master of Bervie turned his face to the wall.

She waited by his bedside through the first hours of the night, Dr. Welsh being present also. At midnight, William Maxwell suddenly turned his face to the watchers, and, fixing his eyes on the doctor's face, said with difficulty,—

‘You tell John and his wife my last thoughts were of them, and that I should have liked to kiss his wife before I died. Eleanor—Richard—good-bye—be, be—’

His voice broke, and, turning his face to the wall again, William Maxwell closed his eyes on earth for ever.

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Wonderfully calm, even in the first shock of her widowhood, was Eleanor Maxwell. After a few hours' rest she was up busying herself with arrangements for the funeral, and other matters connected with her husband's death. In the course of the forenoon she and Richard were together in the library, discussing the future, when a servant burst into the room, with sudden tidings on her lips.

‘Oh, ma'am,’ she said, ‘we’ve ha’en word that Dr. Welsh fell doon deid this mornin’ as he was comin’ oot o’ the hoose. Jacob brocht the word frae the Elie i’ the noo.’

Mother and son looked surprised—nothing more. They were too much occupied with their own affairs to take much interest in those of others. But by

and by they were to learn the importance of this sudden death to them.

The servant left the room, and, a few minutes afterwards, Jacob Greig sought admittance. Mrs. Maxwell was annoyed at such frequent disturbances, and asked him rather sharply what he wanted. The usually stolid-looking man seemed ill at ease, and spoke hesitatingly.

'I've had a letter this morning, ma'am,' he said, 'from my mother. My sister lies very ill in Glasgow, and I am to come home immediately to see her before she dies. There will be no objection to me going to-day, will there, ma'am?'

'Certainly not, Jacob,' returned his mistress. 'Had it been yesterday, I am afraid I could not have said the same. How much did Mr. Maxwell owe you?'

'Nothing, ma'am. He paid me a quarter's wages a day or two ago.'

'Ah, that is all right; you may go, then.'

Still the man lingered, with his eyes on the floor, and twisting his thumbs, the very picture of humility.

'If you don't mind, ma'am,' he said, 'I should like to see the Master just once before I go. I am not to come back to Bervie, I suppose?'

'You can leave your address, and if you like there may be a post found for you, Jacob,' said his mistress graciously. 'You attended your master very faithfully. Certainly you may go and see

him. 'There is the key of the door; do not forget to lock it, and fetch the key again to me.'

The man thanked her humbly, and withdrew, and the two returned to their interrupted conversation, little dreaming what the quiet, humble, unassuming Jacob was about upstairs, and what a mine of trouble he was preparing for them.

He stole very softly up to the room where his master lay, and, entering it, shut and locked the door behind him. Without one glance at the bed or the quiet sleeper lying there, he went to the opposite wall, and lightly tapped on the panelling, till a hollow sound indicated where the slide opened. He pushed it back without difficulty, took out the document, the dictator and writer of which were both now dead, and, slipping it into his inner pocket, replaced the panel, and turned to go. He hesitated whether to approach the dead, and at last took a stride across and lifted the covering from the face. Something in the icy calm of the face, some fancied look of reproach about the stern mouth, struck a sudden chill to Jacob Greig's heart, and he turned and hurried from the room. Well he might be conscience-stricken, for he was robbing the dead. He returned the key to his mistress with a few murmured words of thanks, and with a humble bow quitted the room and the house. Not another thought of him ever crossed either the mind of Mrs. Maxwell or Richard, but they had not heard or seen the last of Jacob Greig.

Next morning there came to Richard Maxwell a letter addressed in a scrawling handwriting, and bearing the Edinburgh postmark. They were in the breakfast room alone together, afterwards both were thankful no servant had been attending them as usual. This was the letter,

'Mr. Maxwell

'Sir, This comes to inform you that if you wish to become Laird of Bervie, you had better communicate with me at once. Your father made a last will on Tuesday night, leaving Bervie to Mr. John. Dr. Welsh wrote and signed it, I was the other witness. It was hidden in a sliding panel in the room where the Master died. I got it this morning when I got the key from Mrs. Maxwell to go and see him. If you look, you will see where I got it. I am open to terms. I will come to Thornton tomorrow at three o'clock, and if you do not meet me there I shall give the will to Mr. Jamieson; he will bring it with him to the funeral. It will be best for you to come, because there isn't much left to you in this will, nor to Mrs. Maxwell. Yours respectfully,

'JACOB GREGG.'

No pen could describe the face of Richard Maxwell as he perused these lines. It became absolutely demoniacal in its rage and chagrin. His mother took up the paper he had dashed from him, and read it with livid face and angry eyes.

'I believe it's a cursed lie,' said Richard passionately. 'The thing can't be another will, and Bervie mine already.'

'The first thing will be to see if the panel he speaks of exists,' said his mother in a low voice. 'Let us go upstairs.'

So the twain quitted the table, and went up to the chamber of death. After vainly attempting to move some of the panels, the slide was reached at last, and sprang back at the touch of her fingers. There, sure enough, was the little recess, in which lay some old, faded letters, tied with a blue ribbon, useless and uninteresting to all save him who had laid them there, for they had been penned by the hand of the only woman William Maxwell had ever loved,—the dead mother of his first-born son.

'The thing had been done that night when Welsh turned us all out on pretence of making an examination,' said Richard bitterly. 'Fools—blind dolts—not to suspect; after all our watching and care, to be sold at the end!'

Forgetful of the presence of the dead, a passionate oath came from his lips as the clear truth came home to him.

'And I am forced to cringe to that insolent blackguard. Hang him! I should like to throttle him for that insolent letter. Who would have thought it of Greig? He was never heard or seen in the house.'

'These are the best spies and plotters, Richard,' answered his mother. 'Well, there is no time to be lost. You must see him, and come to terms at any price. If he will not be induced to hold his tongue—'

'He will,' said Richard briefly, and then added significantly, 'or I'll find a way of shutting his mouth. Well, I'll go with the mid-day train, and can be back at night; and do not be afraid,—I shall bring the will with me, if it is in existence.'





CHAPTER X.

TRIUMPH.

LEISURELY pacing up and down the platform at Thornton Junction, awaiting the arrival of the mid-day train from the east coast, was Jacob Greig. He looked like a man conscious that he had a winning card to play. His stolid face wore an expression of satisfaction, amounting almost to triumph.

The train puffed into the station behind time at twenty minutes to three o'clock. But a handful of passengers alighted, and among them Richard Maxwell.

Jacob Greig sidled up to him with a friendly grin, offensive because of its familiarity. Richard Maxwell took no notice of it whatever.

'Well, I am here, Greig,' he said haughtily, when they had met, 'in consequence of that impertinent letter of yours I received this morning. What have you to say to me?'

‘Not so fast, Mr. Richard, sir,’ said he easily. ‘I’m not dyin’ to part with my information, and you needn’t have come unless you particularly wanted to.’

In bygone days Jacob Greig had received many a snub and imperious order from Richard Maxwell, who had not much consideration for dependants, but time had turned the tables, and it was the servant’s turn now.

Remembering how much might depend on keeping the man in humour, Richard Maxwell curbed his indignant passion, and said with calmness,—

‘Where can we talk in peace, Greig? Not here, surely.’

‘Scarcely,’ returned Jacob serenely. ‘There’s a little inn down by, *The Oatsheaf*,—perhaps you know it? We’ll get a room there for half an hour, I don’t doubt. I had my dinner there.’

‘Come on, then,’ said Richard Maxwell briefly, and Jacob led the way without further remark.

Ten minutes’ walking brought them to the place in question, a small hostelry on the wayside for the benefit of pedestrians or travellers on their way to the town.

A sitting-room was placed at their disposal, a dreary place, smelling vilely of ale and tobacco, and whose only gleam of comfort was a cheery fire sparkling and dancing in the rusty grate.

Richard Maxwell laid his hat and cane on the table, and turned to Jacob Greig.

‘Until I see the will, Greig,’ he said slowly, ‘I cannot, of course, be expected to believe in its existence.’

Jacob nodded, and, cautiously drawing the precious document from his pocket, held it up before Richard Maxwell’s eyes. There, sure enough, was the writing of Dr. Welsh, and Jacob opened it slowly to show him the signatures. His father’s bore evidence of having been penned by dying fingers, but still it was legible, and, beyond a doubt, his own writing.

‘Perhaps you’d like to know what’s inside, sir?’ said Jacob pleasantly. ‘Move a little away, if you please, and I’ll read it to you.’

Richard was obliged to obey, and, standing in the window, with his back to Jacob, he listened to his reading:—

‘LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT.

‘I, William John Stewart Maxwell of Bervie, Fifeshire, and Glengowan, Island of Arran, being in my sound judgment, make, this fifteenth day of April 18—, my last will and testament, as follows:—To my widow Eleanor Moncrieff Maxwell, I give the sum of five hundred pounds per annum to the end of her life, together with the lands and estate of Glengowan, in the Island of Arran, and all revenues pertaining thereto, solely on condition that she makes her abode there; otherwise the lands and estate will pass from her, and she will be entitled only to the five hundred pounds per annum aforesaid: To my son Richard Moncrieff Stewart Maxwell, the sum of one thousand pounds per annum, to be paid out of the revenues of my lands

and estate of Bervie, to the end of his life: To my well-beloved son John Graham Stewart Maxwell I bequeath the lands and estate of Bervie, with all revenues pertaining thereto, excepting the thousand pounds to Richard Maxwell aforesaid: Also to the said John Stewart Maxwell, all the furnishings, pictures, and plate in my house of Bervie: Also to his wife, with my blessing, all jewellery pertaining to my first wife, Isabella Graham or Maxwell; and I hereby declare this my last will and testament, signed in the presence of witnesses here in my bed-chamber at Bervie: And I charge my friend and physician, Alexander Welsh, to see it carried out, for which trouble I desire my son John Stewart Maxwell to make fitting recompense.

(Signed) 'WILLIAM JOHN STEWART MAXWELL.

ALEXANDER WELSH, M.D., witness.

JACOB GREIG, witness.'

It was several minutes ere Richard Maxwell felt himself equal to facing the man again. At last he wheeled round, and said sharply,—

'How much will you take for the will?'

'I won't take anything for the will, Mr. Richard, sir,' said Jacob, smiling easily. 'But I'll take something to keep quiet about it. It is quite harmless this bit o' paper, and will be safe enough with me.'

'I'll give you a thousand pounds on the spot for the paper. It is not worth the duty.'

'Isn't it?' said Jacob, fingering it affectionately. 'Well, Mr. Richard, sir, I'm a poor man, and I don't mean to lose a chance of bettering myself. Give me

a perpetual lease of the Hill Farm, free of rent, and the thousand to stock it, and I promise you to burn the will.'

'That's equal, Jacob, to a thousand a year; it's the best farm on Bervie. Will nothing less serve you?'

'I've named my terms, Mr. Richard, sir, and I ain't going back a jot.'

'All right,' said Richard Maxwell briefly. 'Get me a sheet of paper, pen and ink, and I'll give you a written agreement.'

Jacob Greig was amazed; he had not expected such ready acquiescence. The required articles were procured, and Richard Maxwell sat down at the table to perform his part of the agreement. Jacob Greig stood on the hearthrug leisurely re-reading the precious document. Richard Maxwell watched him furtively, and made a desperate resolution.

'Doesn't this cursed place boast of a scrap of blotting paper, Jacob?' he said, rising. 'I'll have to dry this side at the fire, I suppose. Haven't time to wait on it drying of it's own accord; I want to catch the four o'clock.'

'You'll do yet,' said Jacob carelessly, and continued his reading, suspecting nothing.

'Will the first item do?' said Richard Maxwell, holding up what he had written before the man's eyes. Jacob was off his guard, and, before he could prevent it, Richard Maxwell had snatched the will from his hand and thrust it into the heart of the fire.

With a shout like that of a demon, Jacob Greig made a futile effort to rescue it, but the fire was at white heat, and consumed the flimsy thing in less than a moment.

Richard Maxwell took up his hat, cane, and gloves.

'You could murder me, Jacob, with pleasure, I see,' he said, with a smile. 'But the game wouldn't pay. Well, good afternoon, and when you've made enough to stock the Hill Farm drop me a line, and I'll take your case into consideration. There's a sovereign to pay your expenses to Glasgow, and to atone for your disappointment. Again, good afternoon.'

Richard Maxwell reached home in ample time for dinner. You may be sure his mother waited his arrival in a fever of suspense and anxiety. You may be sure also that they exchanged warm congratulations over the successful result of the interview with Jacob Greig.

'But I say, mother, if Welsh hadn't happened to drop off as he did, we would have been in a pretty fix,' said Richard, as he filled his glass at the dinner table. 'It was a special interposition of Providence, and shows Bervie is rightly mine. It would have been too much for John to come into luck at the end, after offending the old man as he did, and giving us so much trouble keeping smooth and sweet.'

'Everything has turned out for the best, my son,' said Eleanor Maxwell, feeling her mind perfectly at rest. 'Did you send an intimation to John?'

'No, but an invitation to the funeral can be sent to-morrow. It doesn't matter, there isn't much for him to get.'

Before their meal was over, a visitor came to Bervie, and was admitted before either of them heard of his arrival.

It was John Maxwell, and the servant who opened the door to him, faithful still in heart to the eldest son of the house, wrung his hand like a vice, and, divining his unspoken errand, took him upstairs to his father's room without any remark. The key was in the door.

'Do not announce me, James,' he whispered, as the servant turned to withdraw. 'I would rather come and go unknown.'

But Mrs. Maxwell happened to be leaving the dining-room just as John passed through the hall on his way out. She only caught a glimpse of his back as he opened and shut the outer door, and could not believe what her eyes saw.

'Who went out just now, James?' she asked, meeting the servant on the stairs.

'It was Mr. John, ma'am,' he answered. 'He wished to see the Master, and would not let me announce him.'

'In future, remember, James,' she said, her black brows contracting in displeasure, 'all visitors'

names must be brought to me first. I do not choose you should take upon yourself the admittance of all or every intruder to the house.'

'God forgi'e ye, wumman,' muttered the faithful servitor to himself as he went his way downstairs, 'I sair misdoot there's evil days in store for Bervie.'

Mr. Maxwell had died on Wednesday; the funeral took place on Saturday afternoon. It was large, as might have been expected, for the Laird had been much beloved in the district. The half-brothers walked side by side to the vault, but beyond the distant recognition at the meeting, no word passed between them. John Maxwell was about to leave the company, when Mr. Jamieson touched his arm.

'Your place is at the library, sir, where the will is to be read now. There is no reason why you should absent yourself.'

John bowed assent, and walked with the lawyer back to the house. A few old and intimate friends only returned to the library, where Mrs. Maxwell, becomingly attired in the garb of her widowhood, awaited them. She recognised her step-son by a slight inclination of the head, which John briefly acknowledged. Then Mr. Jamieson cleared his throat, and without further preamble proceeded to read the will. It occupied only a few minutes. With the exception of a few trifling legacies, and an annuity to Mrs. Maxwell, the entire property and all monies were left to Richard Maxwell. There was

no mention of John. All present except the widow and her son felt the unjustness, and the bitter position in which the young man was placed. Only the plain-spoken lawyer ventured a remark.

‘When my client requested me to draw up this will, I advised him very strongly against it,’ he said. ‘I considered it then, as I do now, a most unjust will, and, believe me, Mr. John, I feel very deeply with you. Up to the last I was in hopes of being called to alter it or draw up a new one.’

The deep shadow cast by the heavy curtains behind Mrs. Maxwell’s chair hid the sudden rush of colour to her face, but Richard Maxwell preserved an unruffled composure.

‘I have no right nor inclination to dispute my father’s liberty to will his possession as he pleased,’ said John Maxwell, rising to his feet, and speaking with manly dignity. ‘I came here to-day expecting no other result than this. Only one thing I wish to ask of you, madam.’ He fixed his keen eyes on his step-mother’s face, and she started visibly. ‘During my father’s illness, did he never mention my name or express a wish to see me?’

She rose and swept him a haughty curtsey, and uttered a falsehood without a falter in her voice.

‘He did not mention your name after your base and unworthy return for all his kindness to you. You could scarcely expect it.’

‘I will dispense with your remarks on my behaviour, if you please,’ he said haughtily. ‘My

father left no message for me, then,—had no thought for me, even to the last ?’

‘I have answered you already, sir. You chose your own walk of life. It lay apart from his. From that time he looked upon you as a stranger.’

‘Madam, I thank you, and you also, Richard, for the kind and courteous treatment I have received in my father’s house this day,’ said John, and, turning upon his heel, quitted the room.

Oh, but these were bitter moments, and but for the sweet face waiting for him at home John Maxwell would have given way altogether.

He accomplished the distance to Elphinstone in a marvellously short time, but entered his own home with slow, sad step. In the sitting-room Agnes waited for him, but he scarcely noticed her at first, and, sitting down at the table, gave way to the first tears he had shed since his boyish days, when he had wept for his mother’s loss.

His wife moved to his side, and stood close to him, her gentle hand on his shoulder, her quivering lips unable to frame a word.

‘Not a word, Agnes ; gone without one kindly mention of my name, or a blessing on my head. This is harder to bear than all the rest.’

She passed her arm about his neck, and, bending her head to his shoulder, sobbed as if her heart would break. It was seldom indeed she showed so much emotion, and John drew her closer, whispering tenderly,—

‘My darling, what is it?’

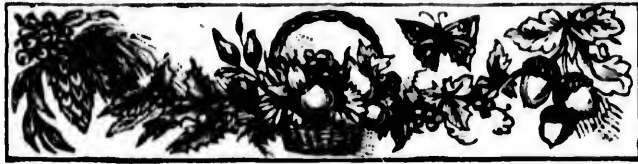
‘I am very selfish, I fear, John,’ she said, ‘but I can’t help thinking that but for me you would not have had to bear this to-day. It—it breaks my heart.’

‘Listen, my wife,’ said John Maxwell, lifting her face to his. ‘You are dearer than everything else on earth; all I have lost is as nothing to you. My darling, you must comfort me now, for indeed I have nobody in the wide earth but my wife to care for me, and never, if you love me, speak as you did again. What evidence of love can any man give that I have not given you, since I married you, tell me that?’

‘I was not complaining, John. You understand,’ she said. ‘And but for that one shadow, I am the happiest woman in the world. I promise you, my husband, that never, as long as we both shall live, will such words cross my lips again.’

And they never did.





CHAPTER XI.

HUMBLED VANITY.



AFTER his father's death, friends, who had hitherto held aloof from John Maxwell, began to rally round him, moved by a common indignation against the treatment he had received at the hands of his step-mother and her son. Sir Robert Elphinstone and his daughter seemed kinder, if possible, than before, and all that friendship could do was done to make John feel his position less acutely. And by and by, as it ever is, the first keen edge of sorrow wore off, and peace reigned again in the house among the trees.

Time hurried on, and before the year closed a son was born to John and Agnes Maxwell, and brought a new rich element of sunshine and love into their home. Of course there never was such a baby anywhere, and to watch Miss Elphinstone nursing the little mite was a sight to see. She was devoted

to him heart and soul, and never a day passed without bringing her to spend an hour with him. But we have been long absent from our Elie friends; it is time we took a peep at their affairs.

The *Nannie* still made successful trips to various ports, and became daily dearer to David Bonner. Stephen Ramsay was not happy as he might have been, for, though he had questioned Ailie regarding Richard Maxwell, and she had passed it off jokingly, he had made her promise that of such jokes there should be no more. When he was in Elie he could keep watch over his fickle sweetheart, but during his frequent absences he had no security that she would be as true to him as he was to her. A man is to be pitied who cannot put absolute trust in the woman he loves. It flattered Ailie Bonner's vanity to see that she, as well as Agnes, could get a gentleman lover, but Richard Maxwell knew her weak point, and made these stolen interviews so sweet to her, that even for Stephen she would not forego them. Simple though she was, she knew enough to feel certain that Richard Maxwell had no intention of making her his wife, and by and by, as she had said, she meant to marry Stephen; so all the summer through she played with edged tools, torturing the honest heart of her faithful lover, and contributing to the idle amusement of the Laird of Bervie. He had cast his eyes in another direction, and come to the conclusion that Flora Elphinstone was the wife for him. She was beautiful, and an heiress, and

their lands marched together. It had been his father's wish, it was no less his mother's; therefore, you will see, the match was in all respects desirable. So, towards the close of the year, Richard Maxwell paid frequent visits to Elphinstone, and made himself attentive to the heiress, in nowise repulsed or discouraged by her coolness. She was civil to him, as befitted she should be to her father's guest, but a man less vain than Richard Maxwell would have had some difficulty in the way of his wooing. Like others of his stamp, Richard Maxwell thought all women easily won, and, with his rent-roll and position at his back, deemed himself able to woo and win wherever he willed.

'Papa, what brings Richard Maxwell here so often?' inquired the lady of his choice one day. 'I am afraid I cannot be civil to him any longer. He is quite insufferable.'

The Baronet smiled an odd, dry smile, which possessed yet a shadow of relief, but answer good or bad made none.

One afternoon, early in the new year, Richard Maxwell came once more to Elphinstone with the intention of settling an important question before he quitted it. He was not quite sure in what words he should couch his proposal,—women were such fools, he thought; they expect a man to talk rubbish about love and things. Well, his tongue was glib enough; he did not anticipate much difficulty even in such a difficult affair,

Miss Elphinstone was at home. She longed to tell the servant she was not, but could not make use of a falsehood even to Richard to free herself from these irksome visits.

He was shown to the drawing-room, and her greeting was distant and constrained, but had no effect on Richard Maxwell. He took his seat opposite her in the window, asked her what she was reading, and paid her a few flimsy compliments, which, instead of pleasing as they were intended, made her angry and indignant.

'I am sorry papa is not at home,' she said, 'because I was just thinking of going out when you came in.'

Nothing could have been plainer than that, but still Richard Maxwell was not disconcerted.

'I came to see you, not papa,' he said, with a smile; 'surely you know that, Flora.'

'I don't know it at all, Mr. Maxwell,' said Flora smilingly; 'and I do not know that I have given you liberty to call me by my name.'

'No, but you will,' said Richard Maxwell, rising and moving a step towards her. 'You will give me the right now, won't you, Flora? You must know how dearly I love you. I have done my best to show it.'

Flora rose to her feet also, her face flushing painfully, and drew herself back from him.

'I beg you will not repeat such words, Mr. Maxwell; I have not given you the right to use

them to me. You must have seen, had you chosen, how distasteful your visits and attentions have been to me.'

'Have been, perhaps, Flora,' he said reassuringly, 'but not now, surely. I admire you for your distant demeanour, my love; it is a relief from that of most women. Come, confess you care for me, and tell me you will be my wife soon.'

The colour flew from Miss Elphinstone's face, and her lips quivered with passion.

'Since you do not seem to have comprehended my meaning, sir,' she said haughtily, 'let me make it plainer still. I have tried everything a woman could to show you how unwelcome you were here. Any man but you, Richard Maxwell, would have understood, and spared me the necessity of saying this to-day. I do *not* care for you, and will not be your wife. I hope you will comprehend my meaning now, and let me bid you good afternoon.'

Richard Maxwell's sallow face grew livid in its passion. To be thus humiliated, insulted almost, by this insignificant girl, whom he had chosen to honour with his preference, was a bitter pill to his vanity, all the more so that it was so utterly unexpected.

'If it had been John instead of Richard Maxwell, possibly he might have met a different reception,' he said sneeringly, forgetting in his rage that he was insulting one who would not be slow to resent it.

Miss Elphinstone smiled, his revenge was so pitifully mean, and fell so harmlessly to the ground.

‘John Maxwell is a man and a gentleman, sir, and I am proud to call him my friend,’ she said, her clear eyes looking on her baffled suitor with measureless scorn. ‘Another time, when you wish to insult me, it will be wise to choose a different theme. I am a lady, Richard Maxwell, and much as I despise you, I shall spare you one humiliation, and ask my servant to show you down-stairs. I fancy it will be for the last time.’

She moved across the room and touched the bell-rope. A servant appeared; she made Richard Maxwell a distant bow, and he had to quit the room and the house.

Sitting with her father in the firelight that night, Flora told him that Richard Maxwell would come no more to Elphinstone, but the details of the interview she kept to herself. At first the father did not answer, nor pass a solitary remark, and she flung up her head suddenly, a great fear seizing on her heart.

‘Papa, you did not wish me to marry Richard Maxwell?’

‘God forbid!’ said the Baronet involuntarily, and he passed his arm about his daughter and bent his head to hers. ‘I don’t want my little maid to marry any one, and least of all him. I think it would have broken my heart, Flora.’

‘Thank you, papa,’ said the girl, with a sob. ‘Let me stay with you; I don’t want to marry anybody, if you will only let me.’

I believe the old man understood in that moment that the only man who could have made his little maid happy had found his happiness elsewhere, and he bent his white head down to the golden one, and whispered tenderly,—

‘My darling, your old father will never fail you;’ and Flora sprang up, not wishing him to see the mist of tears in her eyes, and fearing he might ask the cause.

That night Richard Maxwell found solace in an hour’s talk with Ailie Bonner. The sloop was at Inverness, so she was free to enjoy these stolen meetings without fear of Stephen’s jealous eyes.

Never had Richard Maxwell been so devoted, so tender, as he was to-night; and into the girl’s poor foolish ear there came a grand castle in the air, where she saw herself the Lady of Bervie, surrounded with the grandeur for which she pined, and she had not one thought then that night for Stephen tossing on the wild Moray Firth, thinking longingly of her and of the last stroll they had had together on the bonnie Braes of Elie.

On her way home from her secret tryst she met Bell Souter, and paused to ask wonderingly what brought the old woman there so late.

‘Ay, weel a wat ye may wunner, Ailie Bonner,’ she said, peering into the girl’s face; ‘but no’ as sair as folk may wunner what ye dae at the Leddy’s Tower yer lane i’ thae soor nichts. Ech me! it’s the auld story. Stephen Ramsay on the sea dream-

ing, I'se warrant, o' his fause love. Ailie, wumman, tak' care; ye ha'e thrawn lines on thae bonnie hands.'

Ailie shivered.

'Ye jist haver, Bell Souter, an' ye ha'e nae business wi' Stevie Ramsay or me.'

'Oo, ay, speak sharp an' angert tae auld Bell Souter, daft Bell,' said the old crone, shaking a skinny forefinger in the girl's face. 'When the dool an' wae come upo' ye, Ailie Bonner, ye'll mebbes mind what I said. The sun was shinin' bonnie on Ruby Bay this mornin', but there'll be a black, black shadow on't yet. Gae hame an' say yer prayers, an' dinna gang tae meet the black Maxwell i' the Leddy's Tower again. Ye'll ha'e tae dree a weary weird yet, Ailie Bonner; ay, ay, ay, ay.'

A chill fear laid hold on the heart of Ailie Bonner as she listened to the dreary words.

'Bell Souter, ye're no fit tae be let wauner aboot yer lane,' she cried. 'I ha'e dune naething tae ye that ye should say sic things tae me.'

She drew her shawl round her, and, turning from the old woman, fled home as fast as her feet would carry her.

The old woman stood a moment looking after her, and then turned her eyes to the sea, heaving and sobbing in the chill winter wind.

'Ay, ay, dool an' wae an' a weary weird's comin', Ailie Bonner. Ye'll mind auld daft Bell's words afore anither year's gane by!'



CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF IT.

GOOD-BYE, then, father; safe home again,
Kiss grandpa, Baby. If he could speak,
he would say, "Safe trip to the *Nannie*."

It was Agnes Maxwell who spoke, and she was standing on the threshold of her own home, with her baby in her arms, bidding her father good-bye. In the early morning the *Nannie* was to sail from Anstruther harbour for Rotterdam. Finding her to his mind in all things, Macdougall had chartered her again. David Bonner had come to Elphinstone early in the afternoon, and had lingered as long as he could. How he loved the house among the trees, and those who dwelt in it, was known only to himself.

'Guid-bye, then, Agnes, my bairn. Eh, wumman, you an' your bairn dae my heart guid.'

And so they might. Her sweet face seemed to shine with the sunny happiness and content of

her life, and her beautiful eyes were without a shadow.

John took his crowing son from his mother's arms, and David Bonner took his daughter to his breast.

'God in heaven be wi' ye, Agnes, bairn,' he said brokenly, 'and bless you and yours for ever and ever. I ha'e daily thanksgivin' tae Him, Agnes, for lettin' me see ye in sic happiness and peace.'

Agnes hid her face a moment on his breast, to hide the tears the solemn, tender words had brought. In after days she remembered often how close he had held her that night, and how his farewell had been full of a strange, deep pathos.

'Ye'll step doon the road a bit wi' me, John?' he said, turning to his son-in-law; and John answered readily, 'Of course.'

Still the old man lingered. It seemed as if he could not leave Agnes that night.

'Guid-bye, then; guid-bye, my darlin',' he said hurriedly at last, and went without trusting himself to look back.

'I dinna ken what way it is, John, my man, but I feel I've looked my last on Agnes,' he said, in a low voice, when they were out upon the road. 'I'm feared this'll be the *Nannie's* last trip.'

'Nonsense, Mr. Bonner,' said John gaily; 'why should it be? She's made the voyage before, and the weather is glorious.'

The old man shook his head.

'I've never felt sae afore, John, an' I'm thinkin'

I'm richt; but we're in the Lord's hands on the sea an' on the dry land. I'll ha'e tae be stappin' a wee smart, though, or I'll no get the Enster train the night.'

They parted here; and as David Bonner grasped the young man's hand, he said huskily,—

'If onything happens tae me, I can leave Agnes safe wi' you, my lad; it's a great ease tae me.'

'I say to you now what I said on my wedding day,' returned John earnestly, 'and she is infinitely dearer now than then.'

'Fareweel, then, John; an' if I dinna come back, ye'll keep me in mind whiles, you an' Agnes,—for oh, lad, I lo'e ye weel.'

There were tears in John Maxwell's eyes, and for a moment he could not speak. When he did, it was only to say good-bye, and with another warm grasp they parted, and David Bonner went quickly on to Elie. He had little more than time to bid his wife and family good-bye, and on his way to the station met Stephen.

'I'm awa' up tae see Ailie, skipper,' said he; 'I'll walk along tae Enster by an' by.'

'A' richt, Stevie; dinna be ower late,' said David Bonner, and Stephen went on to the house.

After spending an hour there, he persuaded Ailie to convoy him part of the way by the beach to Anstruther, and she seemed quite willing. She was wonderfully kind to him to-night, and he felt happier, yet unaccountably sadder, than he ever

remembered to have felt in her company before. She stopped when they had sauntered about a couple of miles, and said she would need to turn, for though the moon was peeping out it was a long way to go back alone.

'Ye'll be true when I'm awa', Ailie?' he whispered.

She clung to him as she had never done before, and besought him to forgive her for all her past unkindness, and promised sobbingly to be true in word, and thought, and deed.

'And, Stevie,' she whispered, 'if ye want me yet, I'll be your wife at New Year, though I dinna deserve ye should lo'e me as ye dae, for I'm a thochtless lassie.'

'Oh, Ailie, wumman, I'm that happy I dinna ken what tae say,' he answered simply, but he clasped her very close and kissed her, which told his gratitude perhaps better than words. They lingered long over their parting, but she freed herself at last, and ran sobbing from him. He watched her for a few minutes, and then walked briskly on for a few more. Then suddenly he came to a halt, and, wheeling round, retraced the steps he had come. What made him do it I cannot tell, but if he had kept on to Anstruther that night, what I am about to tell would never have happened. But I must leave him, and tell you what was passing on the Braes at the Lady's Tower at that moment.

John Maxwell had come down to Elie with a

forgotten charge from Agnes to her father, but had missed him by half an hour. He had done some other business in the town, and was returning by the Braes, not because it was a shorter way, but because he had a partiality for it, and a hundred yards or so this side the Lady's Tower he met his brother Richard.

Both stood still.

'Well, John, have you been seeing your respected father-in-law off?' was Richard's greeting, of which John took no notice.

'Richard,' he said quietly, 'I want to speak to you.'

'Go on, then, I'm all attention.'

'You are here to-night to waylay Ailie Bonner as she returns from her walk with Stephen Ramsay.'

'I know, and I want to.'

'You are less than a man, Richard, trying to turn the girl's head. Before you came in her way she was content and happy with her lover. Let them alone; you can do her nothing but harm.'

'When did I give you leave to lecture me?' inquired Richard Maxwell hotly. 'What would you have said, I wonder, if I had given you such advice when you used to meet her sister here?'

'Leave my wife's name out of your conversation, if you please,' said John pointedly. '*That* was very different. You have no honourable intentions towards the girl, Richard, and, knowing that, it is cowardly of you to tempt her to meet you here.'

'Cowardly! by heaven, you shall not insult me,' cried Richard Maxwell angrily. 'If you don't pass on and mind your own affairs, leaving me to mind mine, I'll teach you a lesson you won't like.'

At that moment a man passed them, going towards Elie, and looked curiously at them both. He was a stranger to them, though a dweller in Elie, but he knew them well enough.

'Good night, Richard,' said John Maxwell briefly. 'You lose your temper so fast, there's no use trying to speak to you.'

Then he passed on. If he had been a few minutes later he would have met Ailie, and might possibly have thus averted what followed. But he did not see her, and she met Richard Maxwell at the Lady's Tower. To do her justice, she had no part in this tryst, and was only vexed that she was obliged to stop and speak to him. She was beginning to repent her folly, and to estimate Stephen at his true worth. She did not stand ten minutes with him, and said at last,—

'Guid-nicht, I'm off!'

'You aren't like yourself to-night, Ailie,' said Richard Maxwell. 'I'm glad that lover of yours is out of the road again.'

'*That* lover' heard these words, and saw the parting kiss the false Maxwell stole from the lips he had touched not an hour before. He did not know—how could he?—that the meeting was an accident as far as Ailie was concerned, and that she

was eager to be gone, that she might dream of Stephen's parting words. No, he only saw the black, bitter side, and the fires of Gehenna seemed raging in his breast. When Ailie fled from him, Richard Maxwell turned into the ruin and lit his cigar, then leisurely set off in the direction of home.

He had not gone many steps before he found himself face to face with another man.

'Confound it!' he muttered, 'is all Elie on the Braes to-night?'

Then the moon shone out behind a cloud full on the man's face, and he saw to his amazement it was Stephen Ramsay.

'Stop, Richard Maxwell, I ha'e a word wi' ye,' said Stephen steadily.

'Look sharp, then, fellow; I haven't any time to waste,' Richard answered brusquely.

A storm of angry, passionate, bitter words fell then from the lips of Stephen Ramsay, to which Maxwell listened with a contemptuous smile.

He answered with a few taunting words, which lashed Stephen's honest wrath to fury. His temper was slow to rouse, but, once up, it was like a mighty hurricane, sweeping all before it. Something he said nettled Richard Maxwell, and he lifted his dainty cane and brought it across Stephen's broad shoulders.

'Take that, you cur, and perhaps you may get more next time you insult a gentleman.'

These words, that blow, were to cost him dear.

Stephen Ramsay's passion was like a madman's in its fury, and in a moment he had closed with his opponent, and both fell. They were dangerously near the edge of the cliff. The slim, effeminate gentleman was no match for the strong, sinewy seaman.

Richard Maxwell staggered and fell, rolling to the edge of the cliff. He had to save himself, and Stephen Ramsay looked on, and stretched out no helping hand. The sea beneath was as smooth as a mill pond, but a fall on the treacherous rocks was certain death.

A hoarse cry broke from Richard Maxwell's lips as he went down, then all was still.

'My God! what ha'e I dune?' said Stephen Ramsay, great beads of perspiration trembling on his brow.

He stood only a moment, and then fled the place, and, turning from the sea, went on to Anstruther by the road.

At half-past two in the morning the *Nannie* sailed, and Stephen Ramsay was on board.





CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLACK SHADOW FALLS ON RUBY BAY.

BEFORE seven o'clock next morning, old Bell Souter passed David Bonner's house on her way to Ruby Bay. In the summer time she made a little by disposing of the rubies she gathered to the visitors who came to Elie during the season. Her search was always made thus early, before she was likely to be interrupted or disturbed by strollers about the shore. The inmates of David Bonner's house were not yet astir,—Jean Bonner being no believer in early rising, even in these glorious mornings, when it was a pleasure to be up and about in the early freshness of the day.

There were no bathers on the beach, for the tide had turned at four o'clock, and was out beyond the pier. Not a living soul did Bell Souter encounter as she went on her way, crooning a scrap of a quaint old song. About half-past seven, Ailie Bonner

unlocked the door, and came out to take the shutters off the window. Glancing westward, she saw Bell coming towards her, and thought carelessly that the old woman was returning earlier than her wont. She lifted the shutter to the ground, and was about to go into the house again, when she saw Bell waving her hand as if wishing her to come to where she stood. She waited a moment, and then, curious to know what the old woman wanted, ran down to the beach and along to meet her.

‘Ha’e ye gotten a lot o’ rubies the day, Bell, or what is’t?’ was her greeting; and the old woman laughed a low, chuckling laugh.

‘My certy, ay, there’s a braw ruby lyin’ on the sands at Ruby Bay the day, Ailie, but I canna lift it mysel’. Will ye come an’ help me tae fetch it along tae Elie?’

‘What is’t, Bell?’ repeated Ailie, unable to understand.

‘Come an’ sec,’ said the old woman; and, pulling her little tartan shawl over her head, hurried off again in the direction she had come. After a moment’s hesitation the girl followed her. Bell was so fleet of step that even Ailie could scarcely keep pace with her; but at last all the jutting points and little inlets were passed, and she turned round the sharp corner into Ruby Bay. Oh, what was that!

The figure of a man lying full length on the firm wet sand, dressed in a garb Ailie knew well. Her strength seemed to slip from her, but she

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BELL SUTER ON HER WAY TO RUBY BAY. — Page 130.

managed to totter up to the old woman, who was looking down on the prostrate form, grinning horribly.

'Weel a wat but it's a bonnie corp, Ailie Bonner; an' this'll be the beginning o' the dool an' wae. Look at this, lassie.'

She knelt down and lifted the heavy dark hair from the temples, disclosing a long purple bruise, the only mark of any kind on the body of Richard Maxwell.

'Dool an' wae, dool an' wae,' muttered the old crone dismally. 'The black shadows fa' on Ruby Bay. What think ye o' yer braw lover noo, Ailie Bonner, an' wha think ye's had a finger in this pie?'

No answer fell from the white lips of Ailie Bonner, but she tottered and fell upon the sand in a swoon. Then the old woman fled to Elie to tell the news, and bring assistance to the girl.

That was a day of strange and terrible commotion in the quiet little town, and ere noon a horrible whisper got abroad which pointed to John Maxwell as his brother's murderer. For Robert Wilson, a weaver in the Ferry, had passed them standing together on the cliffs, and had heard high words, which were probably the beginning of this awful tragedy. Strong men carried Richard Maxwell home to Bervie, and laid him dead in its hall. No warning had been sent before, for none had been found to undertake the task. His mother had passed the night in an agony of fear, dreading some unknown evil, but she was not prepared for this.

Those who saw and heard her in that hour never forgot it. An awful cry broke from her lips, and she fell upon her knees beside her poor drowned boy, calling to him frantically to open his eyes and speak to her only once. Ah, never, never more!

There was no heart in all Elie that did not bleed for the desolate widowed mother, and longed for the unravelling of the mystery, so that just retribution might overtake the murderer.

Having some business at Burntisland, John Maxwell left Elie by the first train that morning, and was away till late in the afternoon. At one of the stations on the line, the stationmaster told him of the tragedy, only one piece of the tale he kept to himself, but he looked keenly into his listener's face, expecting to see some sign of guilt or fear. But there was nothing depicted there but absolute amazement and horror. The train moved off before he could hear any particulars, and he was impatient to reach home. He wondered why the officials and the few loungers about Elie station looked at him in surprise; he could not be expected to know that he was supposed to have murdered his brother, and had fled to escape the consequences. He asked the stationmaster a few eager questions, which were briefly enough answered; and this man, too, kept one bit of the tale to himself. It was on the point of his tongue, but, looking into that honest face and clear, true eyes, he could not utter the words.

'If Maister John Maxwell killed his brither, my

name's no' Geordie Geddes,' he said to the porter when John had left. 'I wad as sune believe I'd dun't mysel'.'

John Maxwell longed to go down the town, or straight to Bervie; but he knew Agnes would be expecting him, and as he did not know how the shock of this thing might have affected her, he felt his first place was at home. So off he set.

During the day the authorities had not been idle. Robert Wilson had been closely examined, and on the strength of his evidence a warrant was granted by the Sheriff for John Maxwell's apprehension. So, while he and his wife were lingering over their supper table, talking over the affair, there came a violent peal at the bell. Agnes started up in affright. Her nerves were unstrung, and she feared she knew not what. They heard men's voices in the hall, and then there appeared on the threshold of the room two men,—the superintendent of police and a constable. Had a thunderbolt fallen upon them, husband and wife could not have felt or looked more utterly surprised.

'John Maxwell, in the Queen's name, I arrest you on a charge of murder.'

Neiher spoke, but John Maxwell's face grew as pale as death; as for Agnes, she felt the very life-blood stilled in her veins.

'On what evidence, may I ask?' inquired John, amazed at his own calmness.

'We have not time to explain, sir,' returned the

official civilly but decidedly. 'It has been sufficient to procure a warrant for your apprehension. You must go with me, if you please.'

'It is a foul and monstrous calumny,' said John. 'I—'

The official here begged to remind him that any word he uttered might be used against him in court, and that he would have ample time to make defensive statements by and by.

'I am ready to go with you,' said John Maxwell, very quietly still. 'But the originators of this outrage on an innocent man shall pay dearly for it, I swear. Will you step outside a moment till I take leave of my wife?'

The official looked dubious, but obeyed him. During all the time Agnes had spoken no word, but her face was pitiful to see. The moment the door closed she tottered to her husband, and fell on his breast.

'Oh, John, John!' That was all she said, but she clung to him as if she felt him slipping from her for ever.

'Agnes, my darling, I don't need to ask if my wife has faith in me.'

'John!'

He laughed a strange, tremulous laugh.

'Forgive me, my wife; but when a man is dumbfounded like this he does not know who may be against him. Now, listen; you must go up immediately to Elphinstone and ask Flora to let

you stay till I come back. You know how glad she will be. And keep up a brave heart, my darling.'

A brave heart! how could she?

She smiled wanly, and said she would try.

'And you, John, where will you be the while?'

John shuddered. He was no coward, but knowing what humiliation awaited him, he was unable for the moment to speak.

An impatient tap at the door reminded them time was passing, and they must part.

A close embrace, a few broken words, and the next moment John was gone. Agnes stood where he had left her, feeling all strength and power failing her, but knowing she dare not yet give way. After one brief agonizing prayer for help and comfort, she stole upstairs to rouse her sleeping child, so that she might obey her husband's wish. That evening Miss Elphinstone and she sat far into the night discussing the affair in all its bearings. Flora's indignant horror knew no bounds. Oh, if Agnes could have seen her idolized husband sitting on the solitary seat in a cell in Cupar jail, like the vilest criminal in all Scotland! and if she could have known what was passing in his mind, I fear she would not have talked so surely and hopefully of his speedy release and return.

Ay, John was turning over every minute detail in his mind, and was forced to confess to himself that the case was dead against him, and that his chance of escape was very slender indeed.




CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE PRISON CELL.

NEXT day John Maxwell was brought up for examination before the Sheriff. I need not detail the proceedings; they were very brief, and resulted in his committal for trial at the Edinburgh Justiciary Court. He was accordingly removed to the Calton Jail in that city, to await his trial in a few weeks. For this his wife had not been prepared, but, necessarily great as the shock was, she bore up with wonderful firmness. Miss Elphinstone was in a sad way, and for that matter so was her father.

The Baronet declared his intention of going to Edinburgh himself, and engaging the best counsel for the much-injured prisoner. Agnes was longing to be with her husband, and her friends knew it. Yielding to Flora's entreaty, Sir Robert took a suite of apartments in an Edinburgh hotel, and conveyed thither his daughter and Mrs. Maxwell. Agnes did



not say much; what she did say sank deeply into the old man's heart, though he bluntly told her he was only pleasing himself, for he was strongly interested in the case.

So, while John spent the slow hours of the days in his cell, brightened and cheered by the daily visits of his wife and his faithful friends, desolation and woe abode in the halls of Bervie.

In due time Richard Maxwell was laid to rest beside his father, and his mother was left with all her loneliness and woe. She was a proud woman, and bore herself calmly before the eyes of strangers, but in the seclusion of her own room her agony found vent. What she suffered was awful. Only one sign was visible to outsiders. When she came down-stairs on the morning after the funeral, her hair was as white as the driven snow.

These silent watches of the night must have witnessed an awful mental tempest. And surely Eleanor Maxwell's sin was visited on her head a thousandfold. Ay, the agony with which remorse commingles is the worst on earth. In the first shock she did not seem to be able to comprehend how her son had come to mischief, or that any man was charged with his murder. And when they told her that John Maxwell was suspected, and lay awaiting his trial in jail, she seemed roused to extraordinary interest and energy. And, to the amazement of her servants, and of the distant kinswoman who had been with her since her bereavement, she announced

her intention of undertaking a journey to Edinburgh. She would go alone, she said, and begged her cousin to remain at Bervie till she returned. What her motive was they could not guess, and dared not ask. She was driven in a close carriage to Elie one morning to catch the early train, but she did not leave unobserved. Elie was on the *qui vive* regarding everything connected in any way with the house of Maxwell, and exhausted its ingenuity to discover what took Mrs. Maxwell to Edinburgh. The wildest rumours were afloat, and the trial was waited for with anxiety and impatience. Arrived in town, Mrs. Maxwell drove at once to her hotel, and after dining went out alone on foot. Her destination was the Jail. Her request to see the prisoner John Maxwell was, however, refused; she could not be admitted, they said, without a special order. The man told her where to procure it, and she left, only to appear early next forenoon with the required order. She was admitted at once. The warder took her unannounced to the prisoner's cell, and, having admitted her, and thinking it probable the visitor might be the prisoner's mother, considerably withdrew.

John was sitting on the solitary bench, his head bent on his hands, the picture of humiliation and dejection. Not expecting any visitor at that hour, and thinking it might be the warder with water, he did not move until he heard the rustle of a dress. He flung up his head and sprang to his feet at sight

of the tall figure draped in crape from head to foot. Eleanor Maxwell slowly lifted her veil, and they looked at each other steadily and in silence for a brief moment.

'You are surprised to see me here, John,' she said at last, and her voice, though low and listless, was gentler than ever he had remembered it before. Still, in his amazement, he had no word to say.

She looked round the dingy little cell, and then smiled the ghost of a smile.

'What a place!' she said, with a shudder. 'What a place for you to be in, John!'

Only one thought was in John Maxwell's mind, Did this woman believe him the murderer of her son? But until she spoke he could not frame the question.

'You are here, they say, because you have murdered your brother,' she said, in a strange, calm voice; 'and I am here, John, to tell you that I know you did not.'

Oh, the unutterable relief which sprang to the young man's face!

'Mrs. Maxwell,' he said huskily, 'for this I thank you as only a man in my position can.'

'What fools men are!' said this strange woman, pacing slowly up and down the narrow cell, her ungloved hands locked together before her. 'To look at you, John, might have convinced them of the utter absurdity of the thing.'

There was a moment's silence.

'Mrs. Maxwell, I thought you would be the first to believe this charge, and to prosecute it against me,' said John involuntarily. 'The relief is almost greater than I can bear.'

She looked at him then with those gleaming eyes of hers; he was puzzled to understand what they said.

'I have known you for twenty years, John, and I know what you are. O my God, I wish I was dead!'

She pressed her hands to her eyes, as if to shut out some horrid vision, while John stood looking at her, wondering if the shock of her bereavement had unhinged her reason.

'John,' she said suddenly, 'where do you suppose Richard is at this moment?'

What answer could he make to this strange question? None.

'Oh, it was cruel, cruel!' she moaned. 'Opportunity for repentance might have been granted him, my murdered boy. If there is a bar of judgment, as they say, after death, how could he answer the charges against him? They were black and many; and I—God forgive me!—urged him to them. John, do you hate me now?'

'God forbid that I should hate a fellow-creature,' said John. 'And you were my father's wife.'

'You think your trials at this moment the deepest in the world,' she said drearily. 'But I

tell you I envy you,—how painfully you cannot guess. Oh, John, John, I am a wretched woman !’

She sank upon the bench and gave way to a wild burst of weeping, which frightened John. He stood beside her, not knowing how to express the intense pity he felt, until she grew calm again, and lifted her eyes to his face.

‘When does this trial take place?’ she asked abruptly.

‘A fortnight from to-day, I am told,’ he answered.

‘When you are freed again, I have much to tell you,’ she said wearily. ‘It has kept long, and can keep a few more days. I shall stay in Edinburgh till then, but it will be better we should not meet perhaps till it is over. Think kindly of me if you can, for I fear by and by you will not be able. In the meantime, good-bye.’

She rose, her old calm self again, and held out her hand to him. He took it in both his own, and looked into her face with his true, earnest eyes.

‘Good-bye. God comfort your loneliness. I can say nothing more.’

Her lips quivered, and she drew down her veil suddenly, and turned to go. Then, moved by some sudden impulse, she came back, and, laying her hand on his shoulder, kissed him once.

‘I have steeled my heart against you, John, since you were a child ; but of all the injury I have done you, as yet you are ignorant. I take these kind words that rise with me to my lonely woe,

knowing they will be the best. The time is coming when you will not suffer me in your presence. Good-bye. God bless you, John. You are one of His followers; pray for me.'

Then she hurried from the place, leaving him as she had found him—dumbfounded.

As she passed out of the prison gate a carriage drew up there, and two ladies alighted. It was Agnes and Flora. Both looked at the black-veiled figure and then at each other in mute questioning surprise.

'Agnes,' said Flora at last, 'it is Mrs. Maxwell.'

The figure passed them without recognition, and hurried on along Waterloo Place in the direction of her hotel in Princes Street.





CHAPTER XV.

IN COURT.

THE trial of John Maxwell created an intense and universal interest in Edinburgh and elsewhere. Many Fifeshire people came across to hear it, and the court was densely packed, while hundreds were unable to obtain admission. The evidence being so slight, it was estimated that if the jury could agree, it would be settled in one day.

John Maxwell entered the court-room between two constables, with the upright, dignified air of an innocent man falsely accused. He was pale and anxious-looking, but his eyes wandered calmly round the vast assemblage without wavering or falterings. Agnes was not there, therefore he could be brave. He was accommodated with a seat close to his counsel, and as he sat down a light hand touched his shoulder, and a voice whispered,—

'Keep a brave heart, my laddie. The Lord 'll deliver ye frae this tribulation.'

It was Aunt Margaret, who for love of her laddie had come to Edinburgh to see and hear the case. Flora was there also, beside her father, who was looking daggers at everybody.

The proceedings began immediately, and in answer to his name John rose to his feet and looked about him with fearless eyes.

In reply to the usual question, he answered, clearly and distinctly,—

'Not guilty, my lord.'

Then, after a few minutes' delay, Alison Bonner was summoned to give evidence. A poor, pale shadow of herself she was, and she kept her eyes fixed on the ground, and took her oath with trembling lips.

'You knew Richard Maxwell, the deceased?' was the first question.

'Yes, my lord.'

'You saw him, I believe, on the night of the murder?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Did he say anything about his meeting with the prisoner, or make any remark about him to you?'

'None, my lord. He seldom spoke o' him, an' there was no cause for him to speak o' him that nicht.'

'What time was it when you met the deceased?'

'I dinna ken, my lord; it might be nine o'clock, or mair; but I dinna ken.'

'Was it at the ruin in question—the Lady's Tower—your meeting took place?'

'Yes, my lord; but it wasna a meetin; by that I mean there was nae tryst,' said Ailie hurriedly. 'I was comin' hame frae seein' a frien' along the sands, an' met Maister Maxwell accidentally. Only twa or three words passed between us, an' syne I gaed on hame.'

'Did you not meet the prisoner on your way?'

'No, my lord; I met naebody a' the way.'

The investigator here paused to ask if there were no other way by which the Lady's Tower could be reached, and being answered in the affirmative, said witness might go down. Ailie was assisted from the box, and led out of the Court.

Bell Souter was called next, but on it being explained she was of weak or unsound mind, her evidence was dispensed with.

'Call Mrs. Eleanor Maxwell.'

All eyes turned to the door when she appeared, and perfect silence reigned when the black-robed figure mounted the witness-box. She took the oath and answered the questions put to her unhesitatingly.

'The deceased Richard Maxwell was your son. Can you tell precisely what time he left the house on the night of the murder?'

'I cannot tell exactly, but it was after dinner. We dine at seven. I should think it might be a quarter or twenty minutes past eight.'

'Did he say where he was going?'

‘No.’

‘Can you say—and remember you are on your oath—whether any animosity existed between deceased and the prisoner?’

Every ear was strained to hear the answer.

‘I have some difficulty in answering the question.’

‘I will put it in another form. Had the prisoner any quarrel or disagreement with deceased?’

Eleanor Maxwell’s lips quivered.

‘The prisoner had great and ample cause for animosity against my son; but as I am upon my oath, I believe he felt none, and would not have injured a hair of his head.’

A murmur ran through the Court. This from the mother of the murdered man was strongly in the prisoner’s favour.

‘May I ask what cause prisoner had for feeling animosity against deceased?’

‘I must decline to answer that question.’

There was a whispered conference on the bench, then the question was allowed to pass unanswered.

‘Do you think deceased was a man likely to take his own life?’

Eleanor Maxwell started visibly, and drew down her veil.

‘By whatever means my son met his death, it was not by his own hand,’ she answered slowly and distinctly. ‘Of that I am as certain as I stand here.’

‘He was likely to be careful of himself and keep

out of the way of danger of any kind? Am I correct?’

Witness bowed, and was then permitted to withdraw. She lifted her veil, and recognised John with a bow and a faint smile. His answering look was eloquent. He was grateful for her championship. These things were noticed by the whole Court.

Katie Finlay, servant to young Mrs. Maxwell, was the next witness called. She was an Anstruther girl, a frank, honest, faithful creature, devoted to her master and mistress. Her indignation at the charge brought against him was unbounded, and she was hard put to it to keep quiet and civil in Court. Her mistress had impressed upon her the necessity of answering truthfully and without hesitation, and, having been thus warned and prepared, Katie showed to advantage in the witness-box.

‘Catherine Finlay, you are in the employment of the prisoner as a domestic servant,—are you not?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ answered Katie composedly.

‘You were in his house on the night of the murder, I presume?’

‘I was, my lord.’

‘Please to state what you know of your master’s movements that evening.’

‘I will that, my lord; onybody nicht ken them an’ no’ be nane the waur,’ said Katie triumphantly.

‘He cam’ in till his tea at six, an’ gaed oot on the back o’ seeven. When I was helpin’ tae bath the bairn, the mistress said she hoped he wau’ be in time tae see Captain Bonner afore he gaed awa’ wi’ the train. That was what he gaed oot for, but he didna ken the train time,—it had been changed.’

‘What time did he return?’

‘Aboot half-past nine; I took in the coffee at twenty minutes tae ten, jist efter he cam’ in.’

‘While you were in the room, did the prisoner make any allusion to what had transpired outside?’

‘I dinna ken what ye mean, sir.’

‘Did he say he had seen any one?’

‘He said he was ower late tae see the Captain at the station.’

‘Did he mention any other name?’

‘I hadna my lug tae the key-hole, my lord,’ said Katie snappishly, whereat a titter ran through the Court.

Katie was admonished to be more respectful, and as it was evident she could throw no further light on the subject, was allowed to go down.

The next witness called was Robert Wilson.

A few minutes passed before this witness appeared, during which a busy hum of talk pervaded the Court, but silence reigned again when he entered and took his place in the witness-box. He was a middle-aged man, of douce and sober appearance,

and much respected in Elie. He gave his evidence with reluctance, but answered every question truthfully.

'I understand you came along the Braes past the Lady's Tower on the night of the murder?'

'I did.'

'Can you tell what o'clock it was?'

'No, I never cairry a watch, but it was some time between eight an' ten. It was aboot ten when I got hame, an' I was twa-three meenits i' the public-hoose at the Taft.'

'You saw prisoner and deceased standing together?'

'I did.'

'Please relate what you saw and heard, remembering you are on your oath.'

'There's no' muckle tae tell. It was gey an' dark, but when I was comin' near the Leddy's Tower I heard voices speakin' angry like, an' when I came close past I saw the prisoner an' Mr. Richard Maxwell staunin' jist on the turf ootside the ruin.'

'How were they standing? Was deceased nearest the edge of the cliff?'

'Yes, my lord. He wasna mair than twenty yairds frae the edge. He had his back tae't; the prisoner was staunin' in front o' him. I thoct they had been quarrellin' frae the look o' them.'

'Did you hear anything?'

'Yes; jist afore I was close tae them I heard deceased say, "Cowardly! By heaven, you shall not

insult me! If you don't pass on and mind your own affairs, leaving me to mind mine, I'll teach you a lesson you won't like." He spoke like a man in a passion.'

[Sensation in Court.]

'Was that all you heard?'

'Yes. I walked on quickly, an' thoent tae mysel' there wad be blows afore they pairted. When I heard o' Mr. Richard Maxwell bein' fund in Ruby Bay in the mornin', it was the first thing I thoicht o'.'

'You are sure you heard nothing more?'

'I heard nae mair, my lord, for I walked on smairt.'

'Is that all your evidence?'

'I ha'e nae mair tae say.'

'Remove the witness.'

That was all the evidence.

Then the counsel for the Crown made a long and eloquent speech, which was dead against the prisoner. Before he concluded the Court rose, to meet again in the morning; so another night and day of suspense were in store for those whose life's happiness hung upon the issue.

Next morning John's counsel spoke long and ably, and his speech had a visible effect on the bench as well as on the audience. Then the judge briefly addressed the jury, and they retired. Patiently the dense crowd sat on in the stifling court-room; and the prisoner waited patiently—but oh, how

anxiously!—in his seat, cheered by his counsel and the friends who were about him on every side.

Just before the Court rose, the foreman of the jury appeared, saying they could not agree.

So they were ordered to be locked up together, the prisoner was removed, and the Court cleared.

Yet another night of suspense for many aching hearts, scarcely able to sustain the weight of dread and anxiety already laid upon them. But it would be over soon—for weal or woe, who could tell?





CHAPTER XVI.

INTO THE HAVEN.

THAT night an awful storm swept along the Fifeshire coast.

Rain fell in torrents from inky skies, and the mad wind tossed the foaming billows mountains high.

The *Nannie* was coming up the Firth in the teeth of the blast, after a sunny and prosperous voyage. She was like to be storm-tossed in the familiar waters at home. The cold was intense, though it was only October yet. The sturdy little sloop wrestled bravely with the seething tide, but she was already disabled, and made but poor progress.

The harbour lights were flickering through the gloom, but the beacon on the rocks at Earlsferry seemed to be extinguished; for, strain their eyes as they might, none of them could catch a glimpse of it. The gale was increasing every minute, and for the first time in his life David Bonner feared the

Nannie would not ride safely into Elie harbour. They worked with might and main, but a sudden blast carried off the mainsail, and swung the sloop round like a toy in its mighty grasp. Then a heavy sea broke over her, and swept a seaman and the cabin-boy overboard, and she drifted now at the mercy of wind and waves.

'We're dune for, Stevie lad,' said David Bonner. 'We maun just try an' save oorself's frac the heavy sea, an' pray we may be keepit aff the rocks till mornin'.'

'Ay, ay,' said Stephen Ramsay. 'It's a slim chance o' life we ha'e, skipper.'

'I never thocht it wad be i' the Firth the *Nannie* wad come tae grief,' said David Bonner, 'within half a mile o' hame.'

Then a silence fell upon them, and David Bonner's thoughts flew to his home, where his wife and children were safely housed, little dreaming of the peril he was in not a mile from them. He was no coward, but it was hard to die here, within sight of home and those dear to him, so near the help they could not reach.

Stephen Ramsay's thoughts were strange indeed. During the voyage David Bonner had been struck by something odd about his mate,—a strange feverish unrest, which seemed to possess him night and day. He asked him if Ailie and he had been quarrelling, and was put off with a laugh, which convinced the old man his surmise was right. But being of opinion

that love affairs right themselves in course of time, he made no further allusion to it. Both were in ignorance of what had been passing in Elie, and latterly in Edinburgh, while they were absent. Stephen could only guess;—but oh, how far short of the truth, remained for him to learn by and by!

The minutes passed, each one laden with desperate peril, and the sea was such that the skipper feared even the stout spars of the *Nannie* would not long withstand it. They were being driven before the wind, in what direction they could not be sure, but, they feared, towards the dreaded rocks skirting the shore at Earlsferry. Before another hour went by their fears proved too well grounded. They were clinging to the masts, drenched with spray, and benumbed with cold, feebly wondering if morning's light would find them alive, when a heavy swell carried the sloop forward till she came dash against a rock. She broke up clean amidships, and one half sank in the yawning wave. It was over in a moment, and with it went down the truest, noblest heart that ever beat in man's bosom. The other half stuck fast on the rocks, but Stephen was washed from the mast to which he had been clinging, and, after being tossed a moment by an angry billow, was swept up on the highest part of the rock.

He was stunned by a blow on the head, and lay there still and motionless; if he survived till morning,

and was observed before the tide came in again, his life might be saved. Slowly the hours of that night passed; in many homes along the coast anxious eyes peered forth into the storm, and anxious hearts sent up an agonizing prayer for those in peril on the sea.

Before going to bed, Jean Bonner came to the door and looked out; the wind sweeping round the corner nearly carried her off her feet.

'I wunner whaur the maister 'll be the nicht? Surely he wad pit intae port afore it grew as bad as this.'

Then she went to bed and slept soundly, but not so soundly as her husband did beneath the waves in the wild embrace of the angry waters of the Forth.

At midnight the wind fell,—not gradually, but suddenly and sharply, as if some unseen hand held back its skirts,—and by and by the sky broke overhead, and a peaceful moon shone out tranquilly on the heaving sea,—ay, as peacefully and calmly as if no desolation or woe had been wrought by that night's tempest, and as if the dawn would bring no certain agony to hundreds of breaking hearts. The morning was calm and still and smiling, and a silver sea crept up to the beach, lapping the sand as softly and musically as if there was no such thing as grief or desolation or death in the world.

With the earliest light the wreck upon the Ferry rocks was discovered, and a boat launched without

delay. There was nothing whereby the poor disabled spars could be recognised; but one man, with a cry of horror, summoned his fellows to a crevice in the rocks, where lay the still and prostrate form of one all knew well.

'Guid Lord, it's Stevie Ramsay, and this maun be the *Nannie*,' said another. 'Whaur'll Dauvid Bonner be?'

No need to ask; the treacherous waters had the secret in their keeping.

'He's leevin' yet,' cried the first man, kneeling down and laying a hand on Stephen's broad breast. 'Ha'e ye a drap o' whisky on ye, onybody?'

A flask was produced, and they forced a few drops between the lips of the unconscious man. He stirred uneasily, and his lids fluttered. Then he relapsed as before.

'Get him tae the boat, an' hame as fast's we can. I doot the skipper an' Alick Broon an' wee Dod Simpson had gane doon last nicht. Eh, lads, it was a sair thing tae dee at ane's very door.'

With all speed the body was carried to the boat, and they rowed quickly to the shore. By this time, attracted by their movements, a small crowd had gathered on the beach. The news that the wreck was the *Nannie*, and all were drowned save Stephen Ramsay, created a feeling of horror and dismay. The women cried without restraint, and even strong, rough men felt their eyes dim. As they moored

the boat, a boy came running along the sand, with white face and dilated eyes.

'Captain Bonner's lyin' on the sands alang a wee this side the Stane Brae,' he cried. 'He's drooned.'

In a moment the crowd was hurrying along the beach, led by their informant. He was right. Ay, there he lay, with his face turned upward to the tranquil sky, and there was the shadow of a smile on his lips, as if he had not found it hard to die. A strange silence held the crowd as they looked upon David Bonner, whom all Elie had loved and honoured above any man in the town. Then the sobs of the women broke out afresh, and in all the company no man's eyes were dry. But it was well with David Bonner. The grand old man had died as he had lived,—at peace with God and man. Yes, it was well with him.

I pass over the scene which followed. I cannot linger over the breaking of the news to Jean Bonner and her family. It was a sore blow to her, for, with all her faults, she had loved her husband well. Such cases of swift and sudden bereavement are of daily occurrence among those whose loved ones 'go down to the sea in ships,' and because they are daily occurrences, perhaps, are only glanced at with careless eyes, and spoken of lightly by those who see or hear of them. But God treasures up the tears and remembereth the mourning of the widowed and

the fatherless, and will give them recompense by and by in that sure haven where cometh no storm or tempest, and whose sea is a sea of glass, encompassed by a great ineffable calm for evermore.



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CHAPTER XVII.

FULFILLED TO THE LETTER.

IN the course of the day a telegram was sent to Ailie, and she returned to Elie accompanied by Robert Wilson in the evening. The girl was like one in a dream. The dool and wae' predicted by Bell Souter had indeed fallen upon her now, and her mother was amazed at the strange, tearless calm with which she heard the particulars of the wreck of the *Nannie*.

Jean told them, with many tears and sobs. Hers was the garrulous grief which finds relief in such demonstrations ; but Ailie sat with her hands folded on her lap, and, looking straight into her mother's face with dry eyes, said,—

'Mither, hoo can ye greet?'

'Lassie, sic a question to ask a puir 'reft widow,' she said, with a spark of her old temper. 'I aye kent ye for a thochtless lassie, Ailie, but I thocht ye lo'ed yer faither.'

Ailie made no answer, only turned her eyes to the tranquil sea, and by and by rose and crept away to the chamber where her father lay. It was almost dark there, but she drew up the blind, and the glimmer of the dying day crept into the room, and was light sufficient for what Ailie came to see. She went over to the bed, drew the covering from the face, and looked upon it with a passionate, yearning gaze. It was so calm, so peaceful, so beautifully still, that though the girl was in the presence of the dead for the first time in her life, she felt no fear. Why should she? He was her father, and oh! how she loved him—she knew only now, when his ears could not listen to her voice, when his eyes could not look upon her and see it in her face. Since her childhood she had tried him often and sorely, and failed in her duty to him, and given him many a pain and headache. She fell on her knees by the bedside, and hiding her face, prayed as she had never done in her life before. The past days seemed to have changed her from a gay, careless, thoughtless girl, to a woman with a burden of care and sorrow on her shoulders, and to whom the sunshine of life would come again no more. She knelt long there, so long that her mother came to seek her by and by, wondering why she stayed. Repenting of her impatience with the girl, Jean's voice was wonderfully soft and gentle.

'I wadna disturb ye, Ailie bairn, but there's a message come frae Stevie. He's better a wee, an'

wants tae see ye. But if ye think ye wad rather bide till the morn, I'll tell the laddie.'

'If Stevie wants me, mither, I maun gang,' said Ailie, rising. 'He has a richt tae sen' for me when he likes.'

Jean was afraid of that strange, calm, constrained look on the girl's white face, it was so unlike Ailie. She followed her with anxious eyes as she tied on her hat and wrapped a shawl round her.

'I'll no' be lang awa', mither,' she said, and the next moment was gone.

Stephen had recovered consciousness late in the afternoon, and his first question had been for Ailie. The doctor tried to dissuade him from seeing her, —at least for another day; but he would not be quieted. 'Ailie, Ailie!' was all his cry; and his eager, restless eye wandered ever to the door as if in search of her, till at last the doctor yielded and despatched a messenger. The only light in the little chamber was a small lamp burning dimly on the stand, and Ailie crept in so softly that Stephen was not aware of her presence till her hand touched his, and her voice said tremulously, 'Stevie!'

His white face flushed, and he tried to raise himself and welcome her; but the Hercules was conquered now, and had not strength to raise himself in his bed.

'Oh, Ailie, I thocht you wad never come,' he said feebly.

'I cam' whenever I could. Ye ken, Stevie, I only got hame frae Embro' at five o'clock.'

'At Embro'?' repeated Stephen wonderingly. 'What were ye daein' there, Ailie?'

'Ye ken,' she said hurriedly. 'The trial, Stevie. It was yesterday.'

'What trial?' he said, so sharply that the girl started. Had he not known, then, and would it not harm him to be told in his present weak state? It could not be helped now, he would not be put off.

'The trial, Stevie—Mr. John Maxwell's trial for the suspected murder of his brither. Stevie, what is't?'

'My God! Ailie Bonner, an' me the murderer lyin' here, an' an innocent man in jail. Get my claes, Ailie, I maun awa' tae Embro' the nicht.'

Ailie sat still as a statue, her great eyes fixed on her lover's face.

'Stevie,' she said, in a gasping whisper,—'Stevie, what are ye sayin'? What did ye say?'

'I said I was the murderer, Ailie,' he repeated feverishly. 'Tell the doctor I maun up the nicht an' aff tae Embro'. I never thocht o' this, Mr. John Maxwell. Tell the doctor quick, Ailie.'

Still the girl did not move.

'Stevie,' she said, in a kind of wail, 'are ye no' wanderin' i' yer mind? is yer heid no licht wi' the fa' ye got? Hoo could it be? Ye was awa' tae Enster afore Mr. Richard cam' up.'

'Ay, but I cam' back, Ailie. I followed ye back every stap. I was jealous o' Richard Maxwell; I saw ye meet; I heard him speak tae ye, an' kiss ye, Ailie. It was that that drave me mad.'

'What mair, Stevie?' asked Ailie, with parched and trembling lips.

'I waited till ye was on yer way, an' syne I faced him. We had some words, and he hit me wi' his cane, an' syne I fell on him, no meanin' tae dae him rale herm, but just to show him a puir man wasna dirt beneath his feet. He rowed tae the edge of the cliff an' fell owre, an' I lookit on an' didna put oot my little finger to save him. Was that no' murderin' a mar, Ailie Bonner?'

'Oh, Stevie, I wish I had never been born!' fell low and bitterly from Ailie's set lips. 'I'm at the bottom o't a.'

He did not contradict her, because he could not. It was not the first time a woman had driven a man to despair, but surely never was woman's coquetry visited with such awful punishment as this.

'The jury are sittin' the nicht tae try an' agree on a verdict, Stevie,' she said after a while, in that voice of unnatural calm.

'If ye hadna come back,—if ye had gaen doon in the sloop,—he micht ha'e been hanged for't, and Agnes wad hae dee'd as sure as I'm sittin' here. I'm no fit tae tak' God's name on my lips, Stevie, but I thank Him for His mercy, although what's tae come may be the breakin' o' my heart. Oh, Stevie, Stevie!' Her head fell forward on her hands, and a low moan of anguish escaped her lips. This man whom she loved was saved from death only to be parted from her for ever, and receive the punish-

ment of the sin for which she was directly to blame.

‘Ailie, my wumman,’ whispered Stephen, ‘I’m no’ fit, but will ye kiss me aince? It’ll be the last time, my darling, for ye’ll no’ be my wife at New Year noo.’

She bent over him and laid her lips to his, as he had said, for the last time.

‘Fetch the doctor noo, Ailie, and though we maun meet on earth nae mair, maybe through the long road o’ repentance we may meet abune. Good-bye, my darling.’

Then Ailie turned from the bed and left the room. She called to the doctor as she passed out, but dared not stay to meet the eyes of any.

She hurried along the street, and down one of the openings to the shore. But her feet did not move towards home. No, not yet. There was a fierce battle to be fought, a tide of agony and anguish to be breasted, a future to be faced,—away from mortal eye, on the bleak seashore, alone with herself and the night. As the evening sped, and eleven o’clock passed without bringing Ailie, the mother began to be anxious.

Surely four hours were enough to spend with Stephen,—unless, indeed, he had grown suddenly weaker.

About half-past eleven she came to the doorstep for the fifth or sixth time, and peered anxiously up the street. It was deserted; but even then there

came out of the darkness of the opposite way a drooping figure, walking slowly as if every step was a task.

‘Ailie, is it you, lassie?’

Yes, it was Ailie. She passed her mother in silence, and went into the kitchen. The little ones were all in bed, sleeping the dreamless sleep of innocent childhood, and, save their quiet breathing, there was no sound in all the house. Jean Bonner locked and barred the door, and hurried to the kitchen. Ailie was standing there looking about her in an eager kind of way; there was something so strange about her, her mother was afraid.

‘Ailie, what ails ye? ye’re no like the same lassie; what’s happened tae ye sin’ ye gæd oot? Ye look twenty years aulder than ye did.’

It was the simple truth. The conflict by the lone seashore had left traces on the girl’s face which even time would not efface.

She smiled wanly, and, turning to her mother, stretched out her arms, saying,—

‘Mither, wid ye just haud me in yer airms as ye used to dae when I was a bairn? My feet’s slippin’ frae me, an’ my heart’s broken,—that’s a’.’

Surely Bell Souter’s weird prophecy was fulfilled to the very letter, for the dool and wae had come and broken Ailie’s heart at last.





CHAPTER XVIII.

FREE!


AS Ailie passed out, the doctor went to Stephen's room. One keen glance at the patient's face showed that his fear of the excitement had not been groundless.

And when the sick man sat up demanding his clothes, as he must be off to Edinburgh that very night, the vexed medical man concluded he was delirious, and wished all women at the bottom of the Firth.

He took no notice of his ravings, as he thought them, but proceeded to mix a sleeping draught, till he was arrested by Stephen's words.

'I tell ye, man,' he said hoarsely, 'an innocent man's lyin' in the Calton Jail, an' me the murderer o' Richard Maxwell; canna I get tae Embro' tae set him free?'

The doctor set down his phials and came over to the bed, looking into Stephen's face in a dumb-founded way. Could there be any truth in his



words, and was this the true unravelling of the Maxwell mystery?

‘Man, dinna stand there wastin’ precious time, an’ Maister John Maxwell i’ the jail. Gi’e’s my claes, or I’ll miss the last train, an’ who knows they’ll ha’e him sentenced tae be hanged afore I get there.’

‘If you get up out of your bed this night, my man,’ said the doctor gravely, ‘you would die before you got the length of the station. If you will keep quiet, I’ll send for a justice of the peace, and he can take your deposition in writing. It will do as well.’

‘Wull’t? are you sure?’ asked Stephen suspiciously.

‘I wouldn’t be likely to tell you a lie about it, would I? Just lie down and compose yourself till he comes.’

‘If it’ll dae as weel, I’ll dae’t,’ said Stephen, falling feebly back upon his pillow. ‘I’m weaker than I thoct. Let him be sent for quick. Man, it wad be an awfu’ thing an’ I were tae dee afore he cam’.’

‘No fear of that just yet,’ said the doctor; and then he administered the sleeping draught and went to try and procure a justice. He was at a loss for the moment what to do. Sir Robert Elphinstone was in Edinburgh. There was nothing for it but yoke his gig and drive seven miles to Logie for Captain Skinner, the only other one he knew of. He had but lately come to Elie, and was imperfectly

acquainted with the gentlemen in the neighbourhood. He did not care to ask information, for such a question would rouse curiosity and remark, which it was as well to avoid yet. To his man's amazement, he said he would drive himself, and would not be a couple of hours absent.

He found the gentleman at home, and very loth he was to turn out of doors to drive so far on a cold night, but there was no help for it.

Stephen was asleep when they arrived, but he seemed to know instinctively when they entered the room, for he opened his eyes and looked relieved to see the justice. Pen, ink, and paper were produced, and Stephen's deposition taken. It was simply a solemn declaration of his part in the death of Richard Maxwell, and the circumstances attending it. He was able only to sign his name, his fingers being guided by the doctor, when he fell back fainting on the bed.

'He won't live, I fear, till the morning,' whispered the doctor. 'The excitement has done for him; but he had a slender enough chance of life before it.'

'Poor fellow,' said the Captain, in sincere pity. 'But I'm thankful for this, it will save an innocent man; but, for that matter, only an idiot would believe John Maxwell guilty of such an atrocious crime. If you can house me all night, doctor, I'll be up and off to town by the first train to-morrow. There is no time to be lost.'

The doctor was more than willing, and, after attending to the patient, and leaving directions for the administering of his medicines, the twain departed to the doctor's house, to sit far into the night discussing the new phase of the Maxwell mystery.

Meanwhile an unlooked-for impediment had occurred in the way of settling John Maxwell's case.

At the end of twelve hours, there being no likelihood of the jury being able to return a unanimous verdict, they were discharged, and a new trial granted. This occasioned much inconvenience and delay, for, as you are aware, some of the witnesses had left the town.

And of the additional suspense it was to those vitally interested in it, you can form a faint idea. Agnes broke down under it. She was not very strong, and the shock of her father's death, combined with the long tension on her nerves, brought on a low fever, which kept her a prisoner in her room at the hotel. Her heart was sick with a double longing, to be with her husband, and to be able to look once on the face of her much-loved father before he was buried; and both privileges were denied her. She lay fretting her heart out, and but for Flora the consequences might have been serious.

Surely never had mortals in distress a more faithful friend than this brave, brown-eyed maiden, who, utterly forgetful of self, devoted herself to

trying to lighten this burden for those she loved. She attended to the baby, talked cheerily and hopefully to Agnes, and to John, on whom this long, bitter trial was beginning to tell; in short, she went from prison to hotel like a ministering angel. Her father fumed and fretted, and anathematized all courts, and juries, and false accusers, but all this would not bring the desired consummation any quicker. In the course of the third day, John was sitting in his cell in the same listless way: he was beginning to lose hope now, for prison walls have a wonderfully disheartening effect upon the most buoyant nature. The day was closing in, and through the narrow window a faint, dim light fell aslant upon his stooping figure, and upon his bent head and listless, hopeless face. Presently he heard footsteps coming along the corridor,—not Flora's light tread, he knew, but the heavier tramp of men. The next instant the door flew open, and Sir Robert Elphinstone burst in and grasped him by both hands.

'Hurrah! my lad; you're free, John! The murderer's turned up at last,—confessed on his deathbed,—and the new trial can't go on. Free! Get up, man; come out, and away home to Agnes!'

John rose up slowly, looking about him in a dazed way. There were several people at the door,—the familiar form of the judge and other Court officials,—evidence surely that what his friend said was true.

He heard somebody reading something in a

formal voice, but the only words he caught were 'wrongous imprisonment and acquittal.'

'John, man,' cried the Baronet, 'you don't look like a man just hearing good news. Get on your hat, and come out, or—bless me!—the girls will be after us to seek us. It's true you're a free man, and that fisherman Stephen Ramsay helped to murder Richard.'

Then John Maxwell put his hands before his face and burst into tears.

A carriage awaited them outside, but John said he would walk the short distance to the hotel. Oh, it was sweet to breathe the blessed air of freedom again, and to feel that the cloud had lifted, and that very night all men would know him innocent of the crime laid to his charge. Understanding his silence, the Baronet bottled up his exuberance of spirits, and did not seek to break it.

From the window Flora was watching eagerly, but dusk had fallen, and in the crowded street it was useless to try and single out those she looked for. But she heard them come in, and ran to the stair, holding out her hand, with her eyes full of tears.

'Oh, John, my heart is like to break for joy!' she said tremulously.

He took the slim hands in a grasp painful in its iron closeness, and, bending down, touched her brow with his lips.

'Afterwards, Flora, perhaps thanks will come,—not now,' he said. 'Where is Agnes?'

She pointed to the door and silently withdrew. John turned the handle and went in, closing the door behind him.

I think neither you nor I would care to enter with him. Let these sacred moments pass without intrusion.



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CHAPTER XIX.

AILIE.

BY-AND-BY these re-united friends met at the dinner table in their private sitting-room, but very poor justice was done to the fare before them. Joy is such a wonderful healer, sometimes, that Agnes had risen, and insisted on taking her place at the table. She was very pale and thin, but her face was beautiful with its unutterable content. She ate nothing, and during the meal kept her eyes on her husband's dear face. A telegram was despatched to Jean Bonner, saying they would be at Elie early in the day, and John would be able to attend David Bonner's funeral. Agnes, too, might yet obtain the last look she craved for. On her husband's breast she wept out all her grief for the grand old father who had loved her so well, and who could not participate in the deep joy that was hers to-day. He had died not knowing or dreaming of the trials encompassing his

beloved Agnes. They would have been a sore, sore grief to him, but he had been spared it.

Towards nine o'clock Mrs. Maxwell arrived at the hotel. They had forgotten her, and she had only heard of John's release from the evening paper. She awaited him in the ante-room below, and he went down at once.

'Congratulations are needless from me to you, she said. 'I knew you would be cleared. When do you return to Bervie?'

'To Bervie?' repeated John, in tones of anger; and then it flashed across him for the first time that his brother's death had left him possessor of his own again.

'You amaze me, John,' said his step-mother, with the ghost of a smile. 'Is there any worldly-mindedness in your nature?'

'When a man has been in such sore straits as I have been,' said he, with emotion, 'these things become very trifling in his eyes; and, believe me, I would willingly relinquish all thought of Bervie even now, when it is within my reach, to see Richard restored to life again.'

She drew her veil down suddenly over her white face, and for several minutes there was nothing said.

'When do you go home to Bervie?' she asked again; and her voice had a strange, sharp ring in it, as if she was in pain.

'My wife and I return to Elie to-morrow

morning, in time for me to attend Mr. Bonner's funeral.'

'Bonner!—oh yes, that is your wife's father. I remember. He was drowned in the storm. I get confused with so many things on my mind. Well, I'm going to Bervie to-morrow by the first train. Will you and your wife come straight to Bervie?'

'No,' said John, after a moment's thought. 'We will come up in the evening after the funeral,—that is, if my wife is able; if not, it will be next day. But will you not wait and travel with us? we go at nine to-morrow morning.'

'No, no,' she said, with feverish haste. 'I had best go alone, and don't keep me waiting longer at Bervie than you can help. I cannot bear this burden much longer.'

John looked at her curiously, marvelling at her words. How he pitied her, none but himself knew. Her life seemed a barren desert, unrelieved by any ray of light or love of any kind. She had dealt hardly with him in the past, but all thought of it had long since passed from his mind. In John Maxwell's sunny nature there was no room for Hatred's black sister Malice. So out of the fulness of his heart he spoke.

'Mrs. Maxwell, do come up and see my wife. Believe me, she feels for you as deeply as I do at this moment.'

She hesitated.

'Well, I will,' she said at last. 'She may say

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a kind word to me now, but not after, — not after !'

What on earth did she mean ? John wondered sorely, but held his peace, and led the way upstairs. He opened the door very softly, and both stood a moment on the threshold unobserved. The room was lighted only by the flickering firelight, and on a low chair on the hearth sat Agnes with her baby in her fair young arms, humming a low melody to soothe him to sleep. She looked round, and, seeing them, rose to her feet.

'I have brought you a visitor, Agnes,' said John, who had no fear of how his wife would receive her.

Mrs. Maxwell came forward into the room, looking at her closely and searchingly. She laid the baby in its crib, and held out her hand to this sorrowful-looking woman, forgetting everything but that she was a widow and a desolate mother, left alone in the world.

Mrs. Maxwell took the hand offered her, and bent her face over it. She could not meet the tearful sympathy of those pitiful eyes.

'My dear, I thank you,' she said.

Then Agnes lit the gas and offered her a seat, but she shook her head.

'I must not stay,' she said. 'Is—is the baby asleep ? may I see him ?'

'He is asleep, but I can lift him nicely,' said Agnes ; and, moving to the crib, brought the sleeping child and laid it in the elder woman's arms.

The haughty head bent low over the boy's lovely face, and her eyes were full of a strange, passionate yearning. Then, pressing her set lips to his brow, gave him back to his mother, and, without another word or look, drew down her veil and hurried from the room.

'John,' cried Agnes, 'what does it mean? Have I offended or hurt her in any way?'

John shook his head.

'I am afraid the shock has unhinged her reason, Agnes,—she looks and acts so strangely. I am very sorry for her. My darling, how proud I was of you to-night!' He moved close to the side of the baby's crib, where she stood, and threw his arm round her, while she hid her face, her eyes full of happy tears.

'Oh, John, God has been very good to us! if— if father might have been spared to me.'

'He has gone to a better world than this, my darling, and it will be my aim to try and make even this sorrow light. It was his last charge to me, Agnes, that night,—the last he spent with us. He said he could leave you safe with me. I was thankful for the words,—they showed me he could trust me, for you were his dearest treasure, as you are mine to-night.'

And though Agnes Maxwell's tears fell fast, her heart was uplifted in thankfulness to God, who had given her the blessing of such love and care as this.

At noon next day John and his wife stepped out

on the platform at Elie station. Few people were about, for the arrival had not been expected or dreamed of. If it had, he might have met a more demonstrative reception than the welcoming smiles on the faces of the officials. Neither of them was in the mood, however, for receiving congratulations yet, and they hurried off as quickly as possible to David Bonner's house. The funeral was at two o'clock: it was one now, so time was short.

Jean Bonner had given up hope of them till evening, and was startled to see them pass the window. She ran to the door and welcomed them warmly, though in a quieter way than her wont, and, taking the babe from Agnes, led them into the sitting-room. A fire was burning cheerily there, but it was unoccupied.

'Where's Ailie?' was Agnes's first question, as she glanced round expectantly.

'She's i' the but-end beside her faither,' said the widow, wiping her eyes. 'Oh, Agnes, ye'll be wae tae see her. I dinna ken what tae dae wi' her. I think she's lost her senses i' the middle o' thae awfu' griefs.'

'Just keep baby, will you, till I come back,' said Agnes, laying her bonnet and shawl on the table. 'John will tell you all you wish to hear.'

The widow, nothing loth, dried her tears, and, sitting down close to the fire with the child on her knee, prepared to listen to the history of the trial, which, for his wife's sake, John told minutely and patiently.

Agnes crossed the familiar lobby, peeped into the kitchen, where the children in their black clothes were amusing themselves in unusual quietness; then she turned the handle of the room where her father lay, and stole in very softly.

The coffin lay on the bed; the lid was as yet unscrewed; Jean had insisted on putting it off till Agnes came. But the kneeling figure by the bed chained her attention first. She went over to her, laid her white hand on the slender shoulder, and said softly,—

‘Ailie, dear Ailie!’

The girl sprang up, and held out her hand calmly to her sister.

‘You have come, Agnes,’ she said, quite calmly, ‘jist in time.’

For the first few minutes Agnes was unable to speak. That three days could have brought such a change on a human face she could not have believed.

‘Ailie,’ she said at last, in a strange, shocked voice, ‘what has happened to you?’

‘Ye ken, Agnes,’ she said, with a faint smile,— ‘ye ken what I’ve ha’en tae bear. Ye’ll be gled ye’re in time to see faither yet.’

She turned to the bed, lifted the lid from the coffin, and then Agnes saw her father’s face. The perfect rest and peace on the dear face calmed her agitated feelings, and she could not weep.

‘He looks happy, Agnes,’ said Ailie, ‘Oh, wumman, if I were but there instead o’ him!’

Agnes put both her arms round her step-sister's drooping figure, and pillowed her aching, golden head on her breast. Her father was beyond all need of love or care; this weary, stricken heart claimed all the comfort she could give.

'Ailie,' she whispered, 'my dear, my heart has gone out to you pitifully since we heard the truth. It brought unutterable gladness to us in one sense, and in another much grief. My sister, what can I say to comfort you?'

'Everybody's been that guid tae me, Agnes,' she said, in the same listless voice; 'I ha'ena heard a word o' reproach frae a body! There's nae need, for guid kens my ain reproach is enough tae bear. Ye'll no' ha'e heard Stevie dee'd this mornin'?''

Agnes was astonished, but she could not be sorry.

'Another sore blow for you, Ailie; but it is better so, is it not? It has spared him and you the misery of a public examination, and him perhaps something worse.'

'Yes,' said Ailie, 'it is far better; but what I'm tae dae, Agnes, wi' what remains o' my life I dinna ken. I'm jist twenty. Oh, Nannie, Nannie!'

The unnatural calm was broken down at last, and tears fell from Ailie's worn eyes like rain. Agnes held her close, not trying to stem the torrent of her grief, knowing it was best to let it have its way.

By and by the undertaker came to fasten down

the lid, and shortly after the minister and those invited to the service in the house.

And so, through the clear, pure light of the October afternoon, they carried David Bonner to his last resting-place, and left him in his quiet grave.

He needed no marble tomb to mark where he lay, or to record what he had been in life. They laid him beside his first wife, in a sunny corner of the Auld Kirkyaird, where in the summer time the gowans would blossom bonnily, and bend their heads to meet the caresses of the sea-breezes he had loved. Henceforth it would be a dear and sacred spot to many a heart in Elie.





CHAPTER XX.

JOHN'S REVENGE.



AT half-past six that night a carriage swept through the High Street and down the 'Taft' to David Bonner's house. The coachman tapped at the door, saying briefly he had come for Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell.

The widow had persuaded them to remain with her over night, but they could not well refuse this urgent message. So there was nothing for it but to lift the sleeping baby and robe him in his outer garments,—a task which the widow performed while Agnes went to dress in an adjoining room. Ailie accompanied her.

'I'll never see ye noo, Agnes,' she said, with faltering lips. 'Ye'll be the Liddy o' Bervie.'

'Hush, Ailie,' said Agnes a little sharply; 'don't you know me by this time? Have I ever changed to you yet? And I am sure my husband would



not wish me to shun my oldest friends. Can't you believe it of him and me ?'

'Yes,' said Ailie, and was unable to add another word. The good-byes had to be hurriedly made, for the coachman was growing impatient, and in a few minutes they were off.

'Agnes,' said John, with a slight smile, 'what scenes this little atom of humanity has witnessed in his brief life, especially during the last month or two !'

An answering smile stole to Agnes's lips.

'I have been so hurried and tossed about somehow of late, I can't realize who or what I am sometimes. Surely we shall have quiet by and by.'

'I hope so, in our own home at Bervie,' answered John. Then a silence fell upon them both, and their thoughts flew to the desolate woman, whose all had been snatched from her, and in the mind of Agnes there came a vision of all she would try to be to her if she would but let her. Remembering their last meeting, she had not much fear.

They were not long upon the road, and, as they swept up the avenue between the beeches, John's eyes grew dim, for he loved the house of his fathers with a most passionate devotion.

The faithful servitor who had admitted him last time was in his place in a state of joyful expectation.

'Well, James, here I am again,' said John, with a smile in which there was a shade of sadness.

'Ay, thank the Lord, back tae yer ain again, sir,'



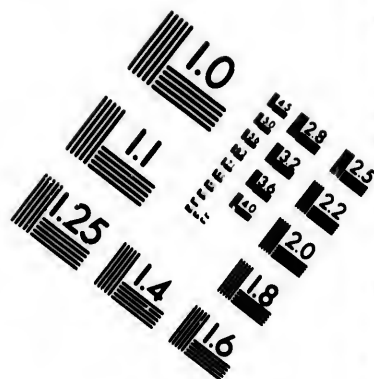
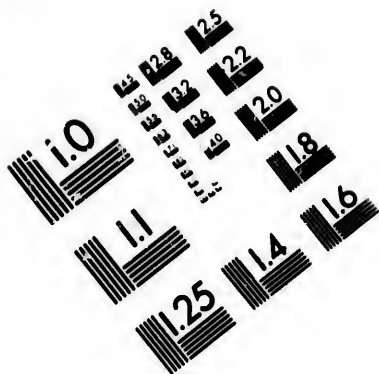
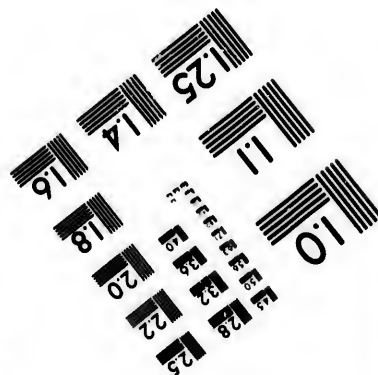
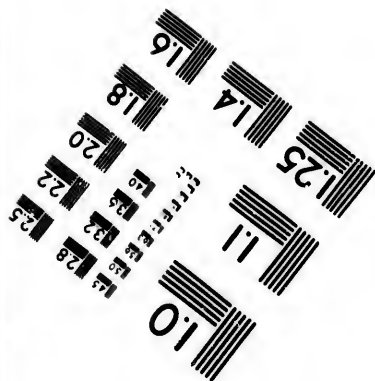
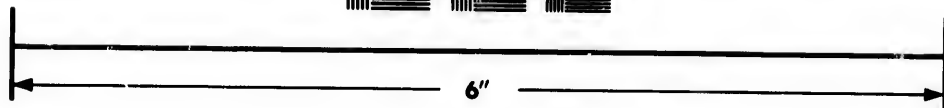
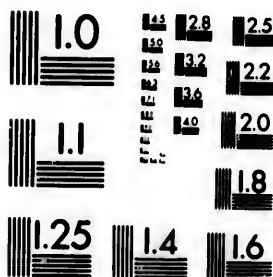


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said the old man huskily. 'An' there'll be the Leddy an' the Heir o' Bervie.'

Agnes held out her hand instinctively, smiling too, though she did not speak, and then, uncovering the face of her sleeping child, held him out to the old man.

'God bless ye, ma'am, an' the little Heir, an' gi'e him joy o' Bervie,' he said solemnly, and then, fairly sobbing, ran from them, leaving them to find their way upstairs alone. Agnes followed her husband up the wide staircase, looking wonderingly at the magnificence, and understanding more fully every step how much he had given up for her.

Mrs. Maxwell heard them come, and met them at the dining-room door. John held out his hand, but she shook her head and motioned them in.

'Is the child asleep, Mrs. Maxwell?' she said to Agnes. 'I have had a room prepared for him, and the housekeeper will look after him in the meantime. You may trust him with her for an hour. I want your presence here.'

She spoke decidedly, imperiously even, and Agnes bowed in acquiescence. Then the bell was rung, and the little Heir delivered into the housekeeper's care. Mrs. Maxwell shut the door, and motioned Agnes to a seat, and began walking restlessly up and down the room. Then she paused by a side-table, leaned her hand upon it as if for support, and faced husband and wife.

'John Maxwell,' she said steadily, 'do you

remember two questions you asked me in the library that day your father was buried ?'

'I have not forgotten them,' answered John gently. His heart ached for his step-mother, and he could forgive the past.

'Do you remember what I answered ?'

'Yes.'

'I told you a lie,' she said. 'Curse me if you will, I deserve it, for I told you a lie. I said your father never mentioned your name or expressed a wish to see you. He spoke of little else, indeed, and desired me to send for you an urgent message ; his heart was breaking to see you. But I kept the message back, and said you would not come.'

'God forgive you, woman,' said John Maxwell, and covered his face with his hands.

'He only spoke once after that, just before he died. He turned to the doctor, and desired him particularly to tell you his last thought was of you, and that he should have liked to kiss your wife before he died. If Welsh had lived, the message would have been delivered ; but, as you know, he died that very day.'

She paused a moment, and from the depths of John Maxwell's anguished heart there rose a bitter cry. All the pain and sorrow of the past was nothing to this. That his father should have died longing to see him, and believing that he would not come, was more than he could bear. Agnes sat still, awed by the depths of heartlessness she could not have believed a human being capable of.

‘That is not all,’ continued Eleanor Maxwell drearily. ‘The day before he died he made a will. Welsh drew it up, and he and Greig signed it. It left Bervie to you, and Glengowan conditionally to me. An annuity was left to Richard. It was hidden in a secret panel in his room, and after Welsh died Greig was the only one aware of its existence. He stole it, and left Bervie without suspicion that morning. Next day Richard had a letter from him, asking him to come to Thornton Junction and buy his silence. He went, and by some stratagem succeeded in destroying the will, and the man was powerless. He told me the contents. Your wife was specially mentioned. Your mother’s jewels were bequeathed to her, with his blessing. The only consolation I can give, John, is that he forgave you before he died, and, if he had lived, he would have received your wife as a daughter. That is all I have to tell. That you will or can forgive me I have no hope; only remember my sin has been visited on my head. I am left widowed, childless, with no hope for this world or the next. Your agony, keen though it is, cannot equal mine, for it has no sting of remorse in it. In a few hours I shall be gone from Bervie for ever. Perhaps, long years after, one pitiful thought may rise in your hearts for me. Farewell.’

She gathered her skirts in her hand and swept from the room, closing the door behind her. Then Agnes rose and knelt by her husband’s side, and for

a long time there was nothing said. The anguish the disclosure of this perfidy had brought was terrible, and could not be overcome in the space of a moment. That he had been fraudulently deprived of his inheritance, sank into insignificance before the picture of his poor dying father asking continually for him, and dying at last without the last word, the last look he craved for.

'I could have forgiven everything but that, Agnes,' he groaned. 'Oh, it was cruel, cruel!'

And Agnes could only weep with him, her heart so sorely re-echoed his words.

'It will be all right with him now, John,' she whispered. 'There is clearer vision yonder.'

And again there was a long silence.

'She has suffered for it, John. Her burden is very heavy.'

'Yes,' said John. 'By and by, perhaps, Agnes, you may lead me to forgive her, but not yet.'

He rose and paced restlessly to and fro the long room, his face dark with the grief within.

They heard some one moving about upstairs, and John said suddenly,—

'Did she say she would leave Bervie to-night, Agnes?'

'She said within the hour.'

'There is no need for such haste,' he said then. 'We need not meet though we are under the same roof. Do you go to her, Agnes, and say I ask her to stay at least till to-morrow.'

It was what Agnes's own kind heart suggested, but till her husband proposed it she could not. She slipped out, and, guided by the footsteps above, easily found the room. She tapped at the door, and it was opened immediately. Mrs. Maxwell was already dressed, as if for a journey.

'Oh, don't leave to-night!' cried Agnes, moved by the stony look in the haggard face. 'John sent me to say it,—indeed he did.'

'Tell him I thank him more than I can say,' she said slowly, 'but I will not try him further. I have been a curse to this house. The sooner I leave it the better. Ask him, as a last favour to me, if he will permit his carriage to drive me to my kinswoman's at Heron Hall?'

Agnes sped back to the drawing-room and delivered the message word for word.

'Come with me, Agnes,' he said, and the two went upstairs again together.

She was standing on the threshold, and covered her face with her hands when she saw them.

'I forgive you, as I hope to be forgiven,' said John gently. 'The first bitterness is past; and who am I that I should add my weak vengeance to the punishment of Heaven? In my own and my wife's name I ask you to stay. You are my father's widow, and justly entitled to a share of his wealth, and to some consideration from his son.'

And that was John's revenge.



CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

JEAN BONNER lives still in the house her husband left her; her children lighten the gloom of her widowhood.

And what of Ailie? Let me write of her tenderly, for her life is beautiful in its utter unselfishness, in its tender devotion to others, in its loving effort to lessen human pain and grief. If there is a bereaved mother to be comforted, an ailing baby to be nursed, a sick-bed to be cheered and comforted, a pain or ache to be relieved, or a breaking heart to be taught to find solace above, there Ailie Bonner is to be found. She has come unscathed out of the deeps, and though for her there will come no sunny earthly happiness, she has learned to be content, and wait for that which is to come. Agnes and she are close together in heart, and meet often.

I have no more to tell. The gowans and heather

still bloom on Elie Braes, and bonnie waters in the bay glint and glisten beneath the summer sun, and moan drearily, too, in the winter wind; and bits of life tragedy or comedy are enacted in the quiet little town, as they are all the world over.

But in the meantime I must bid it and you farewell.



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