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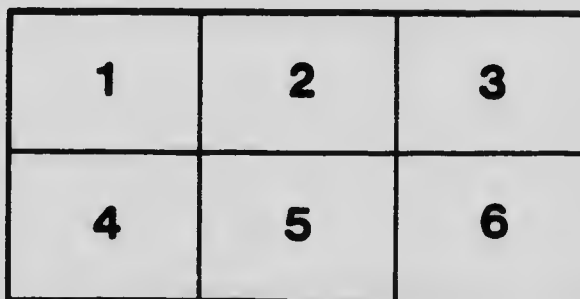
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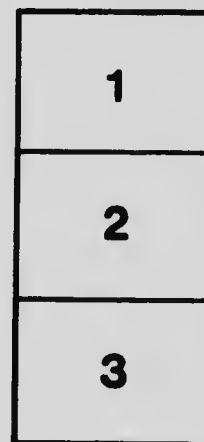
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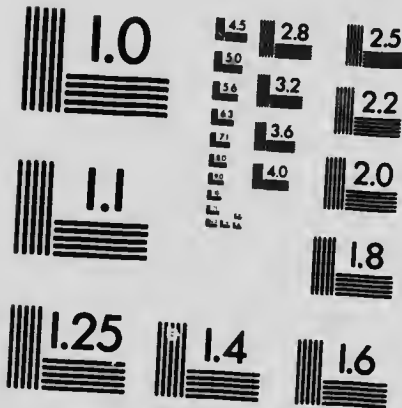
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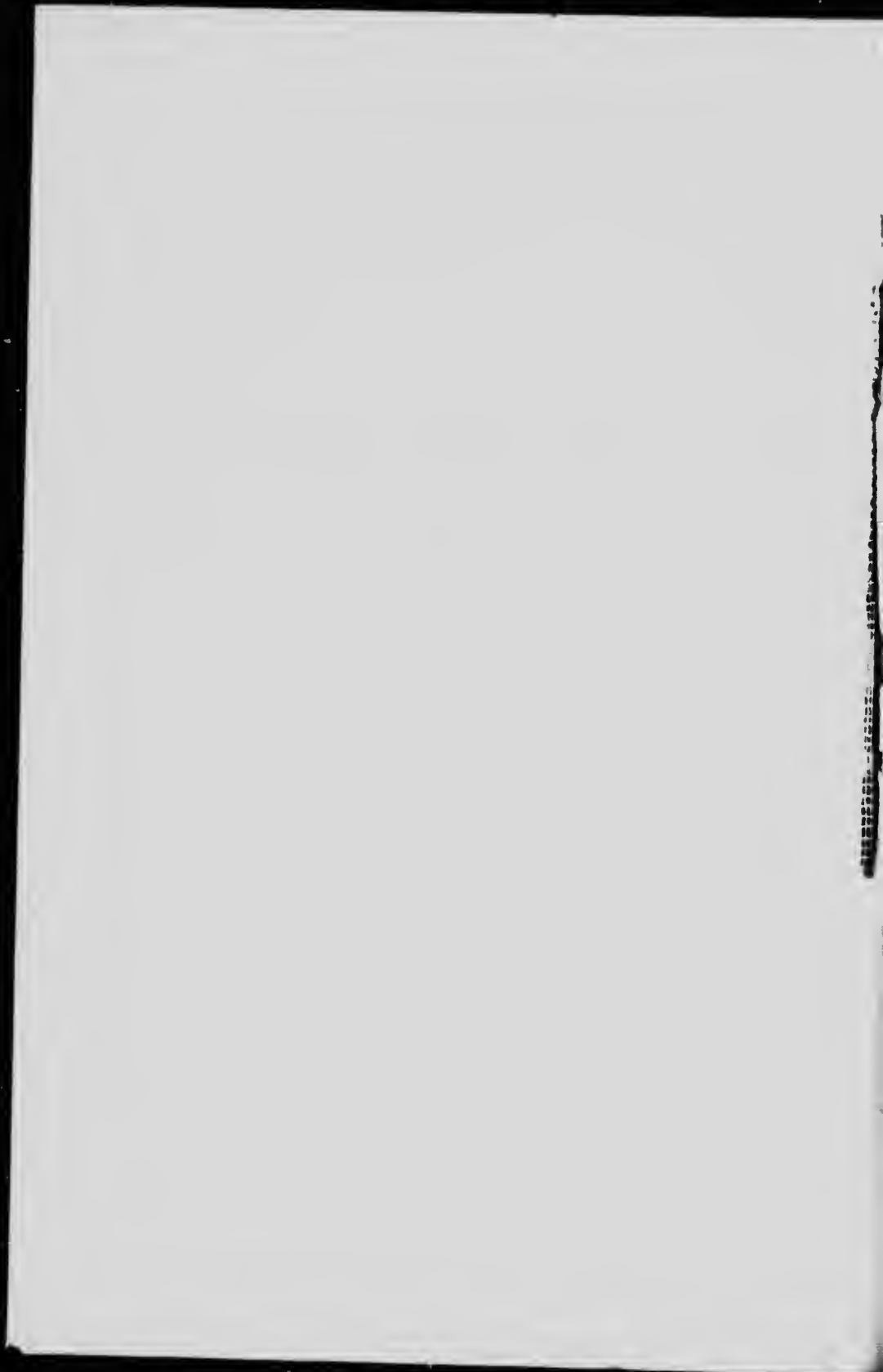
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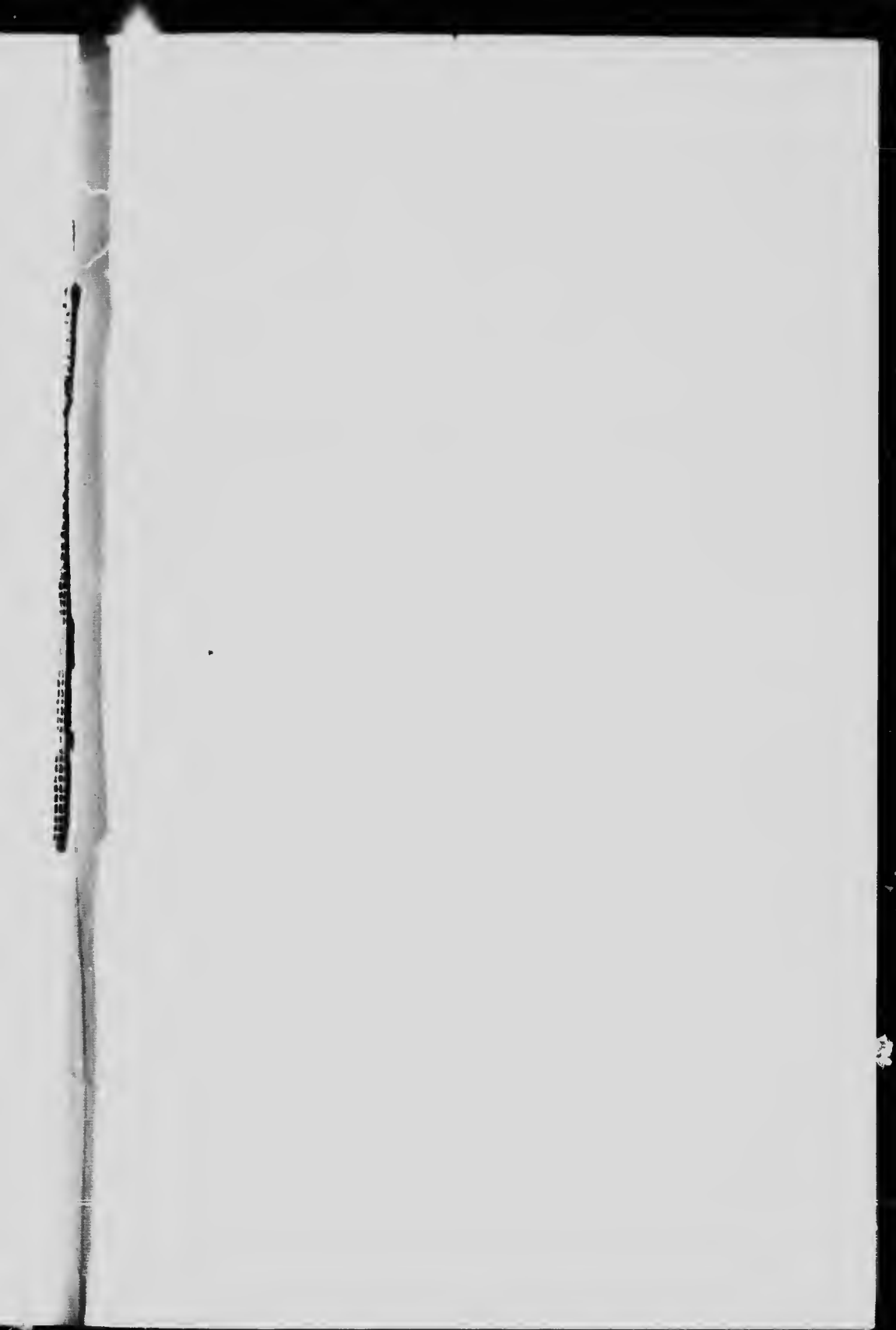
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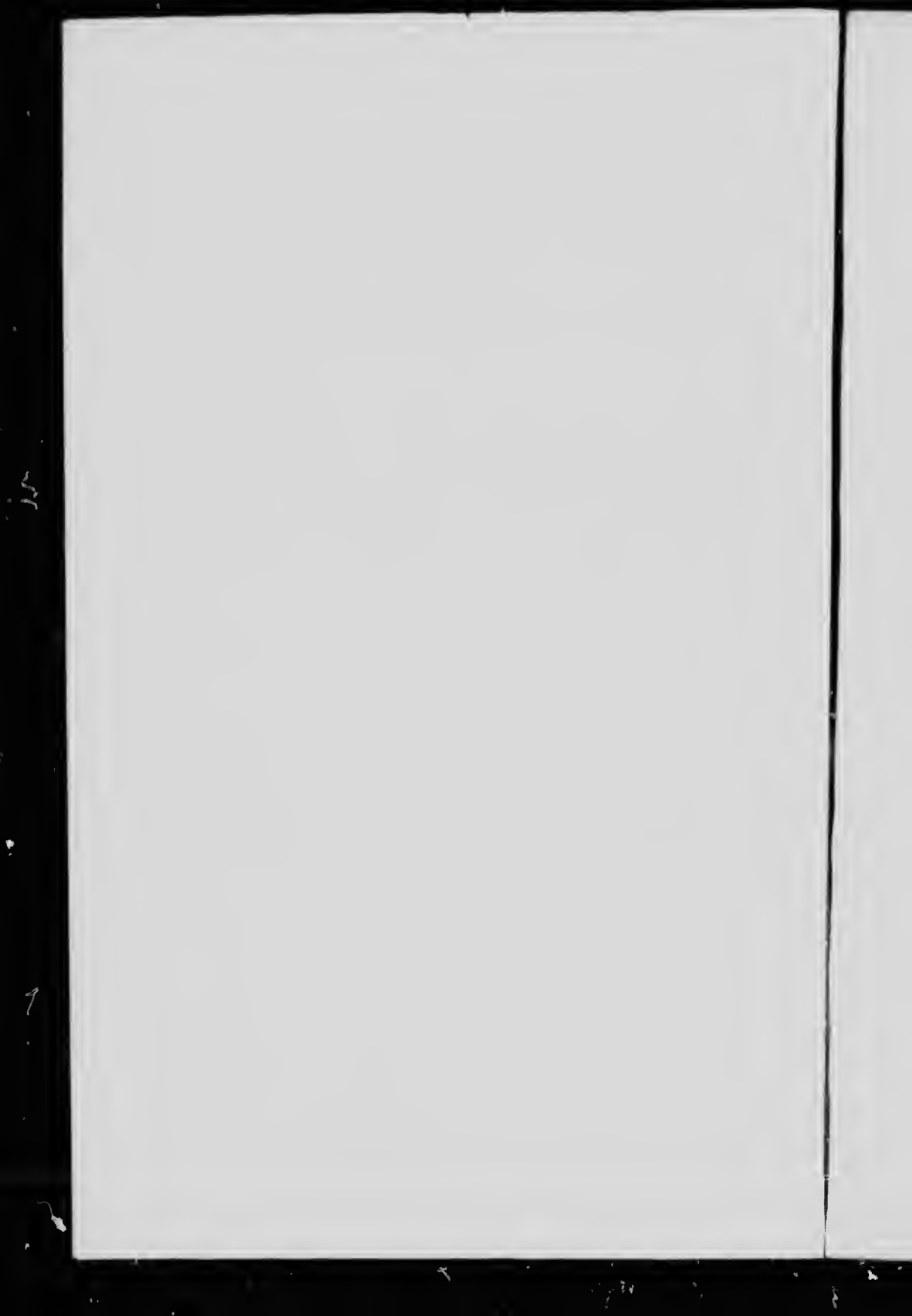


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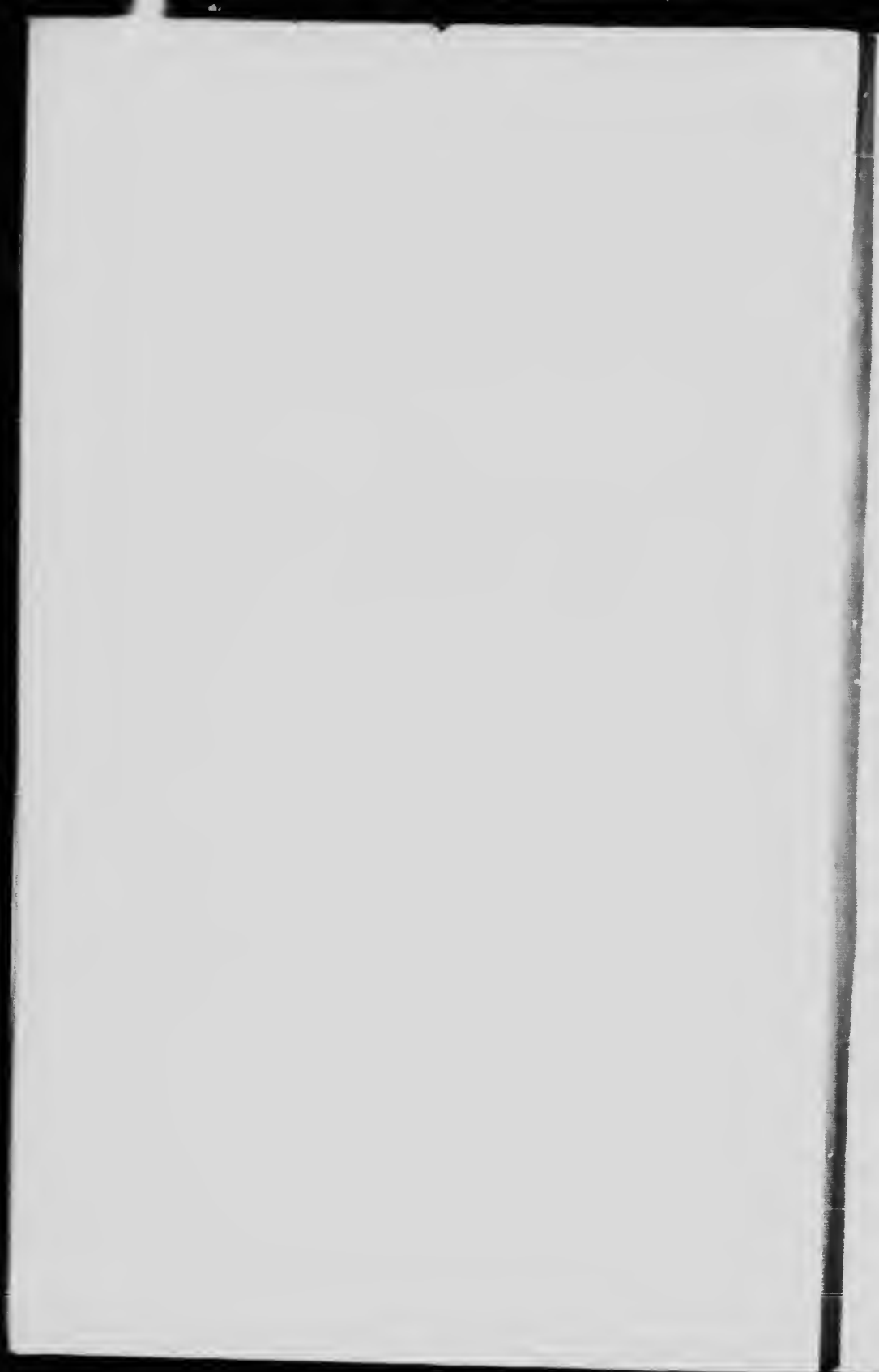
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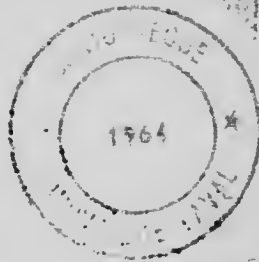
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BY
AGNES C. MITCHELL

Author of "Paying the Price"



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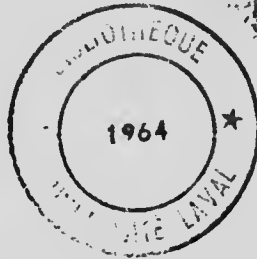
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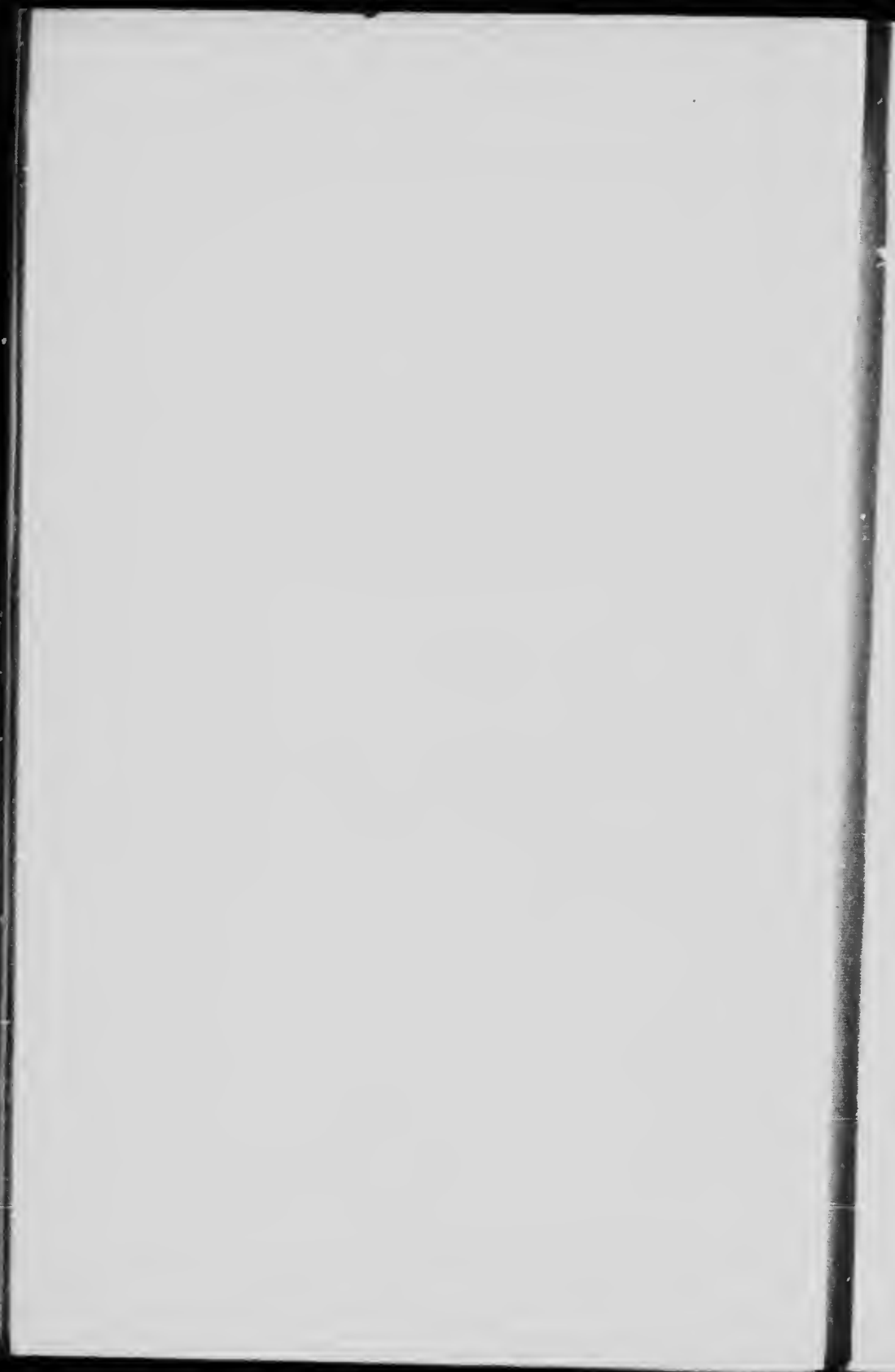
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TO MY MOTHER



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THE SPINNING OF FATE

CHAPTER I

A WEEK-END VISIT

It was half-past four on a fresh, sweet morning in May. The London train, which usually thundered past Strathbog Station at four-thirty to the minute, but which was being stopped this morning by special request, had not yet put in an appearance, and the station-master, coming out of the gate which gave direct access from his garden to the platform, glanced up at the signal with eyes which were only half open. It fell as he looked, and, with a yawn and a stretch of his arms, he moved past the wooden structure dignified by the name of waiting-room to the white paling beyond, and viewed the road outside.

He expected to see a vehicle of some description waiting, but there was none, and he took off his cap and scratched his head perplexedly. "Dod, that's queer!" he muttered. "The

train wouldna be stoppin' if it wasna for some o' the big fowk, an' there's no' ane o' them that'll think muckle o' a walk frae here at this oor o' the mornin'. Ah ! here's something noo."

The faint, steady beat of horses' hoofs was clearly distinguishable, and almost immediately a carriage drawn by a pair of horses swept round a corner of the road and came forward rapidly. Daniel Chisholm recognised it at once.

"Oh ! Greystane," he said half aloud. "It'll be Mr. Barrington. I micht hae guessed that, though what he can want traivellin' through the nicht I dinna ken. He never did it afore."

The train slowed up and stopped, and two passengers alighted—one a slightly built, rather boyish young fellow of about twenty-three, with a good-tempered, laughing face ; the other a strong, tall, athletic man five or six years older, with something so true and honest in his pleasant, clean-shaven countenance that to see him was to trust him. The younger man had a huge portmanteau, a couple of suit cases, and a rug to drag out after him, but Lyall Galbraith's luggage consisted simply of a week-end bag.

"One would think you had come to stay," he said as the train puffed away, and Barrington Weddellburn looked first at his belongings and

then, vainly, for a porter. "You will have to leave these. Chisholm will take care of them for you."

"I thought they would have sent down," Lieutenant Wedderburn remarked rather ruefully. "I wired that I was coming. Chisholm!"

"Good-morning, sir. Good-morning, Mr. Galbraith. Glad to see you down again, Mr. Barrington. The carriage is comin'; I saw it on the road this minute. Will you be takin' these with you, or are you to leave them?"

"If the carriage is here I'll take them. Just let them stay there till I see. Come on, Galbraith. Hullo! here's Mollie."

The last words were uttered in surprise as a tall, slim girl, with very deep dark violet eyes and masses of shining bronze-brown hair came in at the station gate and hurried towards them, her hands outstretched. Her lovely face flushed when she saw Lyall Galbraith, and the man's honest eyes kindled at the sight.

"I did not expect to see you here," she said brightly, giving a hand first to her brother, then to him. "Did you think there was no one to meet you, Barry? How the horses have galloped! I saw the smoke of the train coming round by Millhall when we were far up the road,

and Fisher made them do their very best. I'm glad you are late, though it is ever so little."

"I wasn't looking for any of you at this unearthly hour," Barrington said. "You must have been up half the night."

"I don't feel more than half awake now," she confessed laughingly. "Have you travelled all the way together?"

"Yes; we ran up against each other in St Pancras Station." It was Galbraith who answered. "I intended leaving the train at Edinburgh and coming on with a slow, but as Barry had made arrangements for having the mail stopped here I accepted my luck and welcomed it. He was more far-seeing than I."

"Or less modest," Mollie Wedderburn said with her happy laugh. "We will go round your way," she added as they went out to the carriage. "Oh, don't look doubtful, please! It won't take us five minutes longer."

Lya'll Galbraith shook his head. The meeting with her here would make the day unlike other days for him, but he knew the danger of playing too much with fire.

"Barrington is anxious to be home," he said. "Thanks all the same, but I had better walk. It will take the stiffness out of me."

"As if five minutes more or less matters to me!" Barrington exclaimed. "Come on, Galbraith, and no nonsense! You'll soon get rid of your stiffness when you begin your day's work. Get in."

"Do!" the girl urged softly.

He could have held out against Barrington, but he could not resist the look in Mollie's dark eyes. He took his seat beside her, and the horses started up the long brae which led to the High Street of Strathbog.

The station was at the foot of the town; the great coal pits owned by Mrs. John Wedderburn lay to the east; Greystone, where the Wedderburns lived, was to the west, a mile and a half from the town.

"You have not been long away, Lyall," Mollie said as they passed up the quiet street, where as yet the blinds were all down and there was no sign of life. "I saw you on Tuesday."

"Only one clear day," he answered with a smile. "I went up on Wednesday night, spent yesterday in London, and started for home as soon as I was free. I had to go to see my cousin. He sent for me, and, as it was business, I had no choice but to set off."

"You might have taken a day or two when

you were at it, and done the theatres," Barrington said. "You are not half enough alive to the good things of life, Galbraith. Frank wouldn't make the same mistake, I'll guarantee. Catch him rushing out of town without seeing all there is to see!"

"Frank is a man of money and leisure; I am not," Lyall Galbraith made answer, looking past Mollie's lovely face to where the grey turrets of Castle Morven were outlined against the sky. "He has been in town for the past three weeks, and is likely to remain for a few weeks longer, though I did my best to persuade him to take his departure. He would be better here than there."

"It seems too bad that the Castle should never be lived in," Mollie said, following his gaze. "I passed it yesterday, and I could not help wondering how Sir Frank can possibly keep away from it. When he takes a wife she may coax him into doing his duty," she added with a laugh. "I don't think the heart of any ordinary woman could withstand Castle Morven."

"But he might not marry an ordinary woman." The remark came with an odd smile. "You have been in town pretty often

lately, Barrington: haven't you come across him?"

"Once or twice."

The brief answer was given guardedly. It was evident that Barrington Wedderburn did not wish to commit himself regarding Sir Frank Galbraith, and the others dropped the subject at once. And a minute later they came to the square stone building which was bank and bank agent's house in one, and the home of Lyall Galbraith.

He had come to Strathbog as bank agent three years before, and because he was cousin to the young laird of Castle Morven, Mrs. Wedderburn had been pleased to receive him as an equal, and he had become almost as one of themselves to the young people of Greystone. That privately Mrs. Wedderburn considered she was stretching a point in so receiving him he was quite aware, and though he smiled inwardly at the knowledge, it brought its own bitterness with it.

"Your housekeeper isn't out of bed," Mollie said, glancing at the closed door of the house, and smiling as she saw the shuttered windows. "Is she afraid of burglars, Lyall? She seems to have barricaded herself to the best advantage."

"She thinks she has the care of the bank on her shoulders when I am away," he said lightly. "That is why she is so careful. Good-morning, Mollie, and many thanks. Good-morning, Barrington. Give me a look in to-day or to-morrow."

He would be sure to, Barrington said, and they drove off, the soft flush which Galbraith's warm hand-clasp had brought to Mollie's cheeks lingering there. She was prettier each time he came home, her better thought, as he settled himself again in his corner, and looked at her admiringly.

"How are my mother and Robert?" he asked.

"Very well. Robert is in Edinburgh, and won't be home till evening. He went over on Monday."

Barrington nodded; but he did not vouchsafe the information that he had known of his brother's absence and it was on that account he had applied for leave to come north.

"When did you get my telegram last night?"

"When we were at dinner. Mamma laughed at the idea of my getting up in time to meet you: she said I never would; but I borrowed Ann Campbell's alarum clock, and it awakened

me at half-past three. Ann is staying in the house just now because Martha is on holiday. What put it into your head to come off so suddenly, Barry? Mamma has been afraid there might be something wrong."

"What did she imagine could be wrong?"

He spoke with an attempt at carelessness, but the words were not a denial, and Mollie was quick to notice the evasion. She turned her inquiring eyes full on his face.

"Is there anything, Barrington?"

He shifted uneasily, then laughed.

"Nothing particular. I have outrun the constable again. That's all. And, seeing the mater has sent me only half of what I have asked for the last once or twice, when I saw the chance of getting leave, I thought I couldn't do better than come and convince her that I'm really in need of a decent cheque. Neither she nor Robert understand what regimental life is like. A fellow has to spend at every turn."

"I suppose he has," the girl agreed half-doubtfully. "All the same, I don't think all the officers can spend so much as you do. And you ought not to, Barry, when you know it causes trouble at home. Robert worries."

"Old Bob is too steady by half! If he doesn't take care, he will end in being a miser."

Mollie's eyes flashed resentfully.

"He will change his nature then," she said bluntly. "If there is a better man living than Robert, I don't know him. How long leave have you got?"

"I have to be back on Wednesday morning. Is there anything fresh going on?"

"Miss Emerson is coming to us next month."

The cloud that had darkened her face disappeared as quickly as it had come; she spoke quite pleasantly again. "Her father is going abroad, and mamma is very pleased at being asked to have her while he is away. You have no objections, I suppose?" she added with a laugh. "Mamma says there will be no question this summer as to where you will spend your leave."

Barrington's face reddened.

"I haven't seen Faith since she left Aldershot," he said rather lamely. "She will help to keep you lively. She isn't quiet."

Faith Emerson was a young lady to whom he had been most devoted at Aldershot during the past winter, and with whom his mother, paying a visit to the great garrison town, became very

friendly. She belonged to an aristocratic English family, and Mrs Wedderburn, fired with the ambition to see her Barrington's wife, had left no stone unturned to bring them together.

She had invited both her and her father to Greystone, and Major Emerson had stayed there for a week in March, but Faith had been prevented from going. Quite recently, however, the Major, who had retired, had written asking her if she would be willing to take charge of his daughter for a time, as he ^{is} to go abroad, and could not take her with him. Mrs. Wedderburn had joyfully acquiesced, and all her acquaintances had had it hinted to them that there was likely to be a match between Miss Emerson and Barry.

Five o'clock had not long chimed from the stable tower when the carriage stopped at the open door of Greystone, but it might have been nine judging by the order and brightness of the room which they entered, the perfectly appointed and lavishly spread breakfast table. A thin, wiry, elderly woman, wearing an immaculate cap and apron, was placing a shining silver coffee-pot on the table, and Barrington caught her by the shoulders, and wheeled her round.

"Well, Ann? When I bargained for eating

my breakfast here this morning I didn't expect you were to serve it! This was worth coming north for! What have you been doing to yourself? You look younger than ever."

"Ay, I'm shuir to be that!" she answered scoffingly, twisting herself out of his grasp. "Time stands still for me, of coorse, though it gaes on for every other body! I thocht ye werena comin' up again till July, Mr. Barrington? Ye said that the last time ye were here."

"I couldn't stay away from you any longer," he said laughingly, throwing off his coat, and drawing a chair up to the table. "How have you been keeping, Ann? Had any more visits from Duncan?"

"No, the Lord be thankit! An' I would gie a year's wages to ken I would never hae anither."

Ann Campbell had come to Greystone as nursemaid when Mrs. Wedderburn's first child was born, and had left sixteen years afterwards to marry a miner. The man took to drink, and for ten long years Ann endured a martyrdom while he dragged her down to the lowest depths of destitution, and made her a wanderer from town to town; then she left him, and, getting work in a restaurant kitchen in Glasgow, she saved as much as enabled her to dress herself

respectably and get a few clothes to put in a box, when she made her way back to Strathbog, and offered her services to her old mistress.

The laundrymaid at Greystone, who had a cottage and bleaching greens a short distance from the house, happened to be leaving, and Mrs. Wedderburn, glad to see Ann, had given her the place. It had not been long before Duncan Campbell found her out, and the recital of her encounters with him when he paid his occasional visits had always afforded Barrington the keenest enjoyment, for Ann was well able to hold her own.

"He hasn't taken the pledge yet?" he asked, hoping to set her tongue agoing.

"Him! He's that feared o' water he winna use it even on his skin! A pledge to bide awa' frae it is the only ane he's ever likely to tak'."

She shut her mouth with a snap. Barrington's eyes twinkled.

"You will have to take him back, and reform him, Ann," he said. "Has that never occurred to you? Think what you might make of him."

"I'd mak' an' end o' him, an' that afore very lang."

"Then you might get another husband! I'd come and dance at your wedding."

"If the Lord forgi'es me for my first rash act, Mr. Barrington, I'll no offend Him agen. I've tholed ae' man; hoo any woman ever tholes twa beats me to ken. She has aither mighty little sense or an amazin' lot o' patience."

She had changed the position of a knife and fork, moved the cups nearer Mollie's place, and drawn the blinds higher up. She turned to go now, but at the door she stopped.

"Will I knock to the mistress, Miss Mollie? You said maybe she had better not be disturbed?"

Mollie looked inquiringly at her brother, then shook her head.

"Better not, Ann. Mamma is never well if her sleep is broken."

"I want to go to bed for a couple of hours anyhow," Barrington said. "I never slept a wink in that blessed train, and I can't go and visit my friends at six o'clock in the morning. If you have nothing else to do, Ann, you might unpack my things, will you? My man packed them, and I haven't an idea where anything is, but I know you will sort them out for me. There are my keys."

Ann took the keys and disappeared, a pleased look on her face. She would have served the younger Wedderburns on her bended knees, and

to be asked by any one of them to perform the most trifling service filled her with unqualified delight.

She emptied the portmanteau first, marvelling all the while at the multifarious articles which were squeezed into it; then gave her attention to the suit cases.

The first she opened contained a dinner jacket, a dress suit, and some brushes, besides a few odds and ends which had apparently been beyond the capacity of the portmanteau. The second held nothing save a light grey suit; and it was while she was lifting out the jacket of it that the pleased look went suddenly from her face, and an incredulous, dismayed expression dawned slowly in her eyes.

Something had slipped from the inner pocket—a photograph, she saw, and stooping to pick it up a pair of familiar dark eyes met hers, a pair of curved, laughing lips smiled up at her.

The photograph was a cheap and common one, but the likeness was true, and she had no need to question who the original was. Everybody in Strathbog knew bonnie Rosa Middleton. Ann sat down on a chair, growing white and cold.

“Mercy be guid to us!” she gasped when she found her voice.

CHAPTER II

AN INWARD FEAR

"WE need not say another word about it, Barrington. I have doubled your allowance within the last two years, and I am not to go on continually throwing good money after bad. What you do with what you get I cannot imagine, but it is high time things were on a different footing."

"Haven't I just told you what I do with it?" Barrington, in no way disconcerted, and not at all hopeless in spite of his mother's seeming determination, smiled good-temperedly. "A fellow must have some fun, and I can't pretend to be too good to take a hand at cards when they are going. And it isn't my fault that I lose occasionally. I would very much rather be winning, mother mine."

"What do you make of the money you win—when you do win?"

"Oh, it goes the way of the rest! I can't save, mother. If you wanted a plaster saint of

an officer for your son, you should have put Bob into the army. He wouldn't have troubled you for extras."

Mrs. Wedderburn gave her shapely shoulders a scornful shrug. She was a tall, stately woman, very handsome, with a haughty face, and black glossy hair, in which there was as yet no thread of grey. Her eyes had a hard look in them, and there were stubborn lines about her mouth, but as a rule she had a most charming manner; and her younger son at any rate generally contrived to keep her sunny side.

She had been the daughter of a Leith merchant who had failed, and was living in genteel poverty in Edinburgh when John Wedderburn fell in love with her, and made her his wife.

People said she married him for his money; but be that as it might, they were very happy, and when he died, leaving her with three children, the eldest eight years old, and Barrington a baby of four months, he showed his implicit confidence in her by leaving her with complete control of almost everything he possessed.

Greystone had been settled upon her by marriage contract; by his will the revenues from the collieries were absolutely at her disposal during her lifetime. And she had taken care to

keep the reins of government in her own hands. There was nothing yielding or vacillating about Isabel Wedderburn.

She was passionately fond of Barrington; proud of his good looks, his easy, pleasant manners, his popularity. Her love for him was the one weak spot in her nature, and because she had become conscious of her weakness, had been roused to the possibility of indulgence ruining him, she had begun to fight against it of late. She did not know that the mischief was already done.

"You must make up your mind to cut your coat according to your cloth," she said. "I will give you a hundred pounds, and that must be the last, except your allowance."

She spoke firmly, and for the first time the fear that he might not succeed in his errand laid hold of Barry Wedderburn, and the thought of what failure might mean flashed across his mind, turning him cold with a sickening dread. But only for a second. Nothing ever rested heavily upon him, and, never having known disaster, it seemed impossible that it could come to him.

"Make it two hundred, mother, and that will put me right," he coaxed, slipping his arm round her shoulders. "Do! Just write two instead

of one, and I'll bless you for ever and a day! You'll never miss the extra hundred, and I'll promise to live like a monk for the next six months."

"No; my mind is made up." Mrs. Wedderburn rose, crossed to a Sheraton bureau, which stood against the wall, and, unlocking it, took out a cheque-book with an air of finality. "You can get along with the hundred if you try, and a lesson in economy won't do you any harm. There you are."

She handed him the cheque filled in in her clear writing, and taking it silently he stood with his head bent, his brows drawn together, folding and refolding it, and drawing it through his fingers. Mollie, who was sitting by the window reading, and had heard all that had passed, looked across at him with a smile that was half-sympathetic, half-mischievous, but he took no notice, and after evidently hesitating as to whether he would say anything more or not, he put the slip of paper into his pocket, and left the room.

Mollie turned to her mother as the door closed.

"Why didn't you give him the two hundred, mamma?" she asked. "After his coming all the way from Aldershot to ask for it too!"



"Because it is time his extravagance was being put a stop to," was the sharp retort. "I told him at Christmas there must be no more of it, but I have had two heavy bills to pay for him since then. I am not to be defied."

Mollie smiled, but her eyes had an anxious look.

"Barry wouldn't defy you, mamma. I dare say what he says is true—he is led into expense such as we have no idea of. And he must keep up with the men he mixes with: he won't have much pleasure in his career if he cannot do that. It is not as if you didn't have the money."

"Possibly not, but he is not to get it this time."

"But if he is really in need of it? You would not like to think of him perhaps being in straits for want of it."

"I surely know what is best, Mollie."

The sharpness of her tone forbade further discussion. She drew a sheet of notepaper towards her, and began to write a letter: but presently, when Mollie had stepped out through the open window, and wandered away towards the gardens, she pushed the blotter from her, and leaning her head on her hand sat impatiently biting her underlip. To refuse Barry anything

was not pleasant, and she had been so long in beginning that the process was hurting her nearly as much as it could hurt him.

She was still sitting thus when the door opened, and her elder son came in. He was very plain-looking, of middle height, and walked with a slight limp; and because of that limp life had been made doubly hard for Robert Wedderburn. It had been his from birth, and the grudge which his mother bore Fate for bestowing it had found vent in her treatment of him.

She looked at him in surprise, and instantly took up her pen again.

"You are back very early," she said, and the coldness which was almost invariably in her voice when she spoke to him was noticeable at once. "I thought you said something about not coming till the last train?"

"I got finished sooner than I expected," he said, taking up his stand on the hearth with his back to the fern-filled grate. "I believe Barrington is here?"

"Yes. He came this morning."

"For long?"

"Till Tuesday. He saw the chance of getting a day or two's leave, and thought there was no

use in missing it, he said. I heard him go out a few minutes ago. Did you not meet him?"

"No; Lyall Galbraith told me he was here. Lyall is coming to dinner this evening, mother; I asked him. Gilbert Barclay is coming also, but he invited himself," he added with a slight laugh. "He told me he was to walk over and beg his dinner from you because he was lonely, and as Lyall and he and I were all standing together at the time I said I was sure you would be glad to see them both."

A flush, partly of gratification, partly of annoyance, rose to Mrs. Wedderburn's face.

"It did not occur to you, I suppose, that Mr. Barclay was not likely to have any particular desire for Lyall Galbraith's company?" said drily. "It would be too much to expect from you, Robert, to imagine you would understand that; though I think even you might have seen by now what Gilbert Barclay comes here for. Lyall Galbraith can only be in the way."

A shadow darkened Robert Wedderburn's eyes, but he laughed.

"You mean Mollie?" he queried. "Yes, of course I know that, but Barclay is only wasting his time. I am quite sure she will have nothing to do with him."

"That is a matter of opinion," was the stiff reply. "It would be a very suitable match for her."

It might be, Robert thought, but he would be greatly mistaken if Mollie would consider it so. He said nothing more, however, but went off to remove the traces of his journey, and not until dinner did he see his brother.

Barrington came into the dining-room after they were seated, gay, laughing, apologetic. He had gone with one of the grooms to try a horse which had been added to the stables since his last visit home, and had stayed too long, he explained.

All through the meal he rattled on, and Mollie, listening, concluded that the extra hundred pounds had been of no real consequence after all. Probably he had just been planning to have an unusually gay time, she thought with an inward smile.

He had to go to the Post Office, he said, after they had finished, and, slipping on a coat and a cap, he went out. But he did not go near the town. Striking across a path by the side of a field some little distance from the gate of Grey-stone, he walked on swiftly till he came to a stile leading into a wood, and there, leaning

against a tree, waiting expectantly, was the girl whose photograph had so startled Ann Campbell.

If Barrington Wedderburn was guilty of folly he had at least a good excuse in the shy, smiling gipsy face and the dark brown, velvety eyes that met his gaze. Rosa Middleton was more than ordinarily pretty at any time; in the soft light of the sweet May evening, under the shadow of the fresh greenery overhead, she was bewitching, and the glad anticipation in her face made her irresistible in Barrington's sight.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting very long, Rosa; I could not get away sooner," he began, lifting his cap and shaking hands with her with as much deference and courtesy as he could have shown to any of the women in his own particular set. "There were people at the house at dinner, and I thought we were never to rise from the table. I simply bolted at the end."

"I thought something must have hindered you," she said, and, though the slow Fife accent was very noticeable in her voice, she spoke with a fair measure of correctness. Believing, poor soul, that Barrington's attentions could have but one ending, she had set herself long ago to

try to suit her speech to his, and, notwithstanding much derision at home of "Rosa's English," had bravely persevered. "I knew you wouldn't be late if you could help it."

"Let us go up the hill and down by the quarry," he suggested. "It will be pleasant round that way, and it will be quiet. But stand still first till I get a good look at you. You could not imagine, though you tried, how many times I have pictured your face since I saw it last."

The rich colour in her cheeks turned to crimson under his searching, admiring gaze; her smooth eyelids, with their long, curling lashes, drooped over her eyes. He drew her closer, and, bending down, kissed her on the lips.

"There! seeing I have stolen that one you will have to let me give it back to you presently," he said with his boyish laugh. "You are the prettiest girl I've ever seen, and I only wish I had you down in Aldershot beside me. Wouldn't I be proud of you!"

She smiled, and, arm in arm, they commenced to climb the hill. He looked down at her, and began again.

"You haven't told me yet that you are glad to see me. Do you know that, young lady?"

And the whole of this day I have thought of scarcely anything but that I should see you in the evening. Are you glad, Rosa ? ”

He lowered his voice tenderly as he put the question, watching appreciatively the flickering blush on her cheeks, the upward curl of her lashes as she lifted her eyes.

“ I have been so glad since I got your note that I haven't been able to do a single thing,” she confessed. “ My father told me at tea time that I would have a downcome before long ; I was in too high a key, he said. But I wish you had been staying longer than Tuesday, Barrington. This is such a wee visit.”

“ I would have come for a shorter so long as I was sure of seeing you. How is the singing getting on ? ”

“ Fine.”

“ Is that precentor still making love to you ? ”

Rose drew herself away slightly.

“ He doesn't make love to me ; I wouldn't let him,” she said quietly. “ He is still training my voice, and crying to my father that it's a pity I can't get it properly cultivated. I suppose it is, but I have been telling him he must stop speaking about it ; father can't send me

away, and it vexes him to be cried to about doing it. He would if he could."

"I wish some fairy godmother would appear and do the needful—lift you up and set you down in London to be trained," he said laughingly. "That would suit us, Rosa! I would make it my business to be in town every spare hour I had then. And a good few I couldn't spare, I expect."

If it ever occurred to Barrington Wedderburn that he was doing harm he brushed the thought aside. To be attentive and deferential to all women was second nature to him; and he could no more help flattering a pretty girl than he could help breathing. In Aldershot three or four girls fancied themselves to be in love with him; each one of at least as many more believed he had lost his heart to her own particular self. But these girls were different from Rosa Middleton; they were in his own station, adepts for the most part at the game of flirtation: she was a miner's daughter, and believed that only real love could have made him seek her company. And that belief kept her heart full of unalloyed joy.

They gained the summit of the hill, descended the other side, and rested a little while on a seat

above the old quarry, one of the most picturesque spots near Strathbog. It was ten o'clock when they came to the lighted streets of the town, and, choosing a quiet back lane, made their way to the door of her father's house.

"You couldn't manage to take a half-holiday on Monday afternoon, could you?" he said tentatively when he was bidding her good-night. "If you could we might slip over to Edinburgh with the three o'clock train, have tea there, and be back by nine. You would enjoy it, Rosa."

Rosa's eyes sparkled, but she shook her head.

"You don't need to tell me that; I know I should," she said. "But I couldn't tell them at home, so I would rather not go. And I could not get away in any case. We are busy in the shop just now."

She was a shop-girl in one of the two steady-going, old-fashioned drapery shops on the High Street. Barrington looked disappointed for a moment, then accepted her decision with his usual good grace.

"It will have to be evening, then. Will you meet me at the stile again? I shall be off on Tuesday morning, so that will be our only opportunity."

"Until you come in July."

"Yes, until I come in July," he said.

But as he walked homewards the fear that had been in his heart once that day came back again, and for one brief moment he wondered if he would ever return at all. Then he jerked his shoulders as if throwing off some intolerable weight.

"I am not to think of that," he said to himself. "Luck has never deserted me yet, and it won't now. I'll get clear somehow."

CHAPTER III

A TELEGRAM FROM ALDERSHOT

It was Monday afternoon, and Ann Campbell was hard at work ironing. The tablemaid whose place she had been taking had returned, and Ann was again in her own house. She had risen at five o'clock that day and commenced a washing despite the fact that it was a wet morning; and by two o'clock found herself with both the laundry and the drying loft full of wet clothes, and the rain still coming down in torrents. A few small articles were dry now, and, carrying these into the kitchen, she had made a beginning at "gettin' them oot o' the road," as she expressed it.

Hundreds of tiny rivulets were streaming down the window; a spray of one of the budding crimson ramblers which covered the front of the cottage from the ground to the overhanging eaves was tapping monotonously against the diamond panes. Once or twice Ann had glanced at it, but she did not go

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outside to fasten it up. She had set the porch door wide open, and was listening too intently for a sound she was hoping to hear to give much heed to anything else.

"I'll sune pit it to him," she muttered as she passed her iron smoothly over the lace-edged frill of a pillow-case. "He'll say it's nae business o' mine, but muckle I'll care! An' I would just like to get my tongue ower her—the young clip! I suppose she is thinkin' she has fa'en on her feet. Jean Nicholson says that a' Strathbog has kent for a twel'month that he has been gae'n about her."

Somewhere outside a gate clanged loudly. She lifted her iron & ' stood with it poised in her hand, her head bent, till above the pattering of the rain on the leaves and the steady gurgle of the water from the spout into the big barrel at the gable she distinguished the quick, swinging tread of feet on the path which led from the gardens of Greystone to her house. She resumed her work then, and a minute later Barrington passed the window and came into the porch, shaking the wet off his cap.

"Upon my word, Ann, I think the flood has come back again," he cried laughingly, looking in at her from the doorway. "What am I to

do with my coat? It seems to me I had better sit down here, and admire you from a distance. I dare not set my feet on that floor. Distance lends enchantment to the view anyway."

"I hope you aye mind that," she said, with a significance which he did not notice then, as she hurried to take his waterproof. "Step in bye and never mind the floor; it was made for folk walkin' on, whether they be wet or dry. I was hopin' the rain wouldna keep you from comin'."

"You knew it wouldn't. It wouldn't be like coming home if I didn't pay you a visit," he said, seating himself on the wide, scrubbed board which formed the window sill, and looking round the low-roofed, spotless room. "Mollie was coming with me, but Barclay, of Ballathie, came in, so she had to stay where she was. I don't think she was charmed," he added with a laugh, "but I cut without waiting to see."

"Mr. Barclay would be doin' as much guid at Ballathie; he'll no' mak' much o' comin' to Greystone," was Ann's grim comment, delivered with decision. "But I'm obliged to him for his call the day, for I've been wantin' to speak to you by yoursel', Mr. Barrington. I was listenin', gey anxious for your comin'."

"Going to read me a lecture?" he queried easily.

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"Maybe ay, maybe no; that's just as you take it," she answered quietly. "It's aboot that lassie Middleton," she went on calmly, smoothing out a daintily embroidered handkerchief, and keeping her eyes on it. "I dare say you think it gey impudent o' me to mention it, but if there is ony friendship between you and her—well, there shouldna be, Mr Barrington. It's no' like the thing."

Barry's eyes gleamed dangerously. His face had flushed at the mention of Rosa's name, and a sharp rebuke rose to his lips, but he pulled himself together before it was uttered. The words were presumptuous, but he could not say so to the woman who had always been his devoted slave.

"What are you talking of?" he asked, making an effort to speak coolly.

"You ken. Folk have been speakin' of you an' her for a while, an' it's a miracle the gossip hasna reached the mistress's ears. There will be trouble if it does. She will be neither to haud nor bind."

"Trouble! Over having a walk and a talk with a pretty girl!" Barrington scoffed with a careless laugh. "I thought you were a long way off your dotage, Ann, but I'll soon believe

I have been mistaken if you go on like this. The girl is nothing particular to me. I know her, but that is all. I haven't said more to her than I have said to a dozen other girls."

"Ay, but does each ane o' them ken there is anither dozen?" Ann asked shrewdly. "That's whaur the pinch comes! A lassie generally thinks she is the only ane, and whether she does or no', she is aye keen on gettin' the best. You canna be ower careful, Mr. Barrington. It's a lot easier sometimes to be drawn in than to get oot."

"I haven't been drawn in yet at all events, and I am not likely to be—not by Rosa at any rate. She isn't that kind. What an old goose you are about us, Ann! I believe you imagine half the men in the country side are dying for Mollie, and that Bob and I might have any of the girls for the asking! Wouldn't you get a few eye-openers if we began to try!"

"Some o' them micht do a lot waur," she maintained shortly.

"Or a great deal better," he supplemented lightly. "But we will give the girls a rest, Ann, if you don't mind. Bob and Mollie have both to go off before me, you know, so I may as well have what fun I can get before my turn comes. I am not doing any harm."

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Harm? No! Ann agreed with him there. Her boy could do no wrong. But she made up her mind on the instant that she would have Rosa Middleton put right regarding his intentions. She did not know Rosa herself, but there were channels by which the information could be conveyed. She cleared away her ironing, put out her best china and delightful home-made scones, and he took tea with her, gratifying her heart by declaring that it reminded him of his nursery days, and that he had not enjoyed his tea so well for an age.

Mollie came in when they were finishing, and he walked back to the house with her. Later he kept his appointment with Rosa, and next morning took his departure. He had made another appeal to his mother for money, but had been refused, and he said nothing on the subject to Robert, though they left Greystone together, and travelled to Edinburgh by the same train.

The Strathbog Colliery Company, of which Mrs. Wedderburn was sole owner, had a large connection in Midlothian: and Robert, who managed the business, spent much of his time there. He meant to be only two days away this week, but he was detained, and he was still

absent on the following Friday afternoon when a telegram addressed simply, "Wedderburn, Greystone, Strathbog," was brought to Mollie.

Her mother had gone to St Andrews with some friends for the day, and, thinking it might be from either her or Robert, she tore it open. The message, which had been handed in at Aldershot an hour before, was very brief, but Mollie's lips grew ashen as she read, and the warm blood in her veins seemed to turn to ice.

"Come immediately. Barry in grave trouble. Urgent.—Leslie."

Lieutenant Leslie was in the same regiment, and Barry's own particular chum. When she had gone over the words twice she sat very still, trying to grasp them, trying to think what they could mean, what the trouble could possibly be. That it was something in connection with money seemed most probable, but no suspicion of the real truth came to her. That was mercifully spared her for a little while.

Obviously the summons was for Robert; it was he who was wanted. Lieutenant Leslie and he had met once or twice. But she knew nothing of Robert's whereabouts, nor did they at the office. He was moving about, and, having had occasion to telephone to the office earlier

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in the day, she had asked, and had been informed that they did not have his address. Probably he intended coming home that evening or next day, and did not think it worth while having his letters sent on, the clerk who answered her had said.

She glanced at the clock; then, in a dull, mechanical way, got a time-table and looked up the trains. In an hour and a half one for Edinburgh would leave Strathbog, and any one wishing to reach Aldershot by next morning must travel by it. There was no time to search for Robert, no time to communicate with her mother. Mollie's decision was made before she closed the book.

"I can catch it quite easily," she said half aloud. "I can leave a message for mamma. There is no one else to go."

She wrote a note to her mother, also one to Robert, enclosing the telegram in his, and placed both ready for their home-coming; then hastily packed a bag and ordered the carriage, and her hat and coat were on when she discovered that the sum total of the money she had in the house was less than two pounds. She had a banking account of her own—some years before an aunt had bequeathed five hundred pounds to her, and that amount and a

little more was at her credit—but it was after banking hours. Her only hope lay in Lyall Galbraith being at home; he would cash a cheque for her if he was, but that was doubtful. She had time to think as she was driven down, and she had worked herself into a very agony of dread when she alighted before the bank house.

Lyall Galbraith, drinking a solitary cup of tea in the dining-room, and reading a newspaper the while, heard the carriage stop, but paid no attention, and when his housekeeper opened the door and ushered Mollie in, he thought for an instant that eyes and ears alike were deceiving him.

“Mollie!” He rose in astonishment, and went forward to meet her. Then he saw her face clearly, and the expression on his own changed.

“Mollie!” he repeated, half below his breath. “What is it?”

“I am in trouble, Lyall.” A sob came with the words, the hands he clasped in his were shaking. “I have come to ask you to cash a cheque for me. I have to go to Aldershot.”

“To Aldershot?” He drew her to a chair as he spoke and, looking down at her, he saw that

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the tears were wet upon her white cheeks. "What to do there?" he questioned. "You are not going alone?"

"I must. There is not a minute to lose." She drew out her cheque-book feverishly and opened it. "Can you give me thirty pounds, Lyall? I don't know what I may need, but Robert will come on after me as soon as he knows, and he will bring plenty. Will you give me a pen?"

"In a moment. Let the money wait, Mollie, till you tell me what is wrong. Is Barry ill?"

It was worse than illness, she breathed. And then in a voice that would not keep steady she told him of Lieutenant Leslie's wire and of Barrington's avowed need of money when he was at home.

He listened gravely, trying his best to look as if the matter might be less serious than she was deeming it, but only partially succeeding.

"If I might do what I would I would go with you," he said quietly. "But that is impossible. And there is only one alternative."

She looked up, questioning him with her eyes. He answered slowly, speaking with the deliberation of a man who is choosing every word.

"I will go instead of you if you will allow me.

But there is your mother to think of. It might not please her to know that I am cognisant of the matter at all. That is the only obstacle. Whatever the trouble is I am more fit to deal with it than you, but she might be angry, not only with me for interfering, but with you for telling me. I think I ought to go, but it is for you to decide, Mollie. I shall go or stay just as you bid me."

The trouble in Mollie's face almost vanished for an instant beneath the glow of gratitude that came into it. Then her lips quivered, and a tear splashed down on the cheque-book which lay open in her lap.

"I must go, Lyall. Mamma is proud, and Barry is her favourite. If there is anything that must be hidden she will want to think that only we ourselves are aware of it," she said tremulously. "But you know that I am grateful," she added, raising her true, sweet eyes to his. "I would take your help if I dared—take it and be thankful for it, Lyall; for I—I am not brave, but——"

She broke off abruptly as the door opened, then a sudden exclamation of gladness and thankfulness burst from her lips, and into Lyall Galbraith's face a look of infinite relief came,

for it was Robert Wedderburn who stood upon the threshold, his eyes going from the one to the other in puzzled inquiry.

"Where have you come from?" Lyall asked. "No man's presence was ever more earnestly wished for than yours has been this last half-hour."

"Why?" Robert queried. "I have just arrived: I was on my way from the station when I caught sight of Fisher out there, and he told me Mollie was here. He said you were going from home, Mollie, so I came in. Where are you going? What is the trouble?"

It was Lyall who explained. Robert's face grew grey as he heard, but he said not one word to add to his sister's fear; and it was not until he had sent her back to Greystone, and Lyall was walking with him to the station, that he opened his mind.

"Barry was deeper in debt at Christmas than my mother knew," he said. "I squared up things for him then, and he gave me his word that he would keep within his income afterwards, but somehow I have doubted him. I can't tell why, except that I've had a suspicion once or twice that my mother has been sending him money, and I knew she wouldn't do that unless

he asked for it. I wondered, too, if that was partly his errand home last week, but my mother did not tell me, and I could not ask."

"Mollie has made that plain. But you have one comfort, Robert—he will have let himself in pretty badly if your mother can't take him out. Many a poor beggar comes a cropper, and though his people are ever so willing, they have nothing to save him with. It's different with him."

That was so, Robert assented, and he tried to find some consolation in the thought all through the long night journey, but a fear of overwhelming calamity was upon him, and would not be shaken off.

He left Strathbog on the Friday afternoon, and on Tuesday morning he returned, having sent no word in the interval. He had not written because he could not write the truth, he said, when his mother questioned him. He could not put it down in black and white.

Barrington had disappeared: he was absent without leave, Robert explained in a husky, shaken voice, his honest face haggard and drawn. The boy they had been so proud of had been implicated in some fraudulent dealings with the regimental funds, and there was a warrant out for his arrest.

CHAPTER IV

FOUND ON THE SANDS

"ARE you for walking?"

"Yes, Jeannie. It looks pleasant outside to-night."

It was pleasant, the energetic little country girl said, nodding her head. Then she clattered round the corner of the house, and Barrington Wedderburn, leaning against the door-post, heard her calling shrilly to her cows as she summoned them to be milked. He had heard that shrill calling every evening for a fortnight, for it was three weeks since he had stolen away from Aldershot, and two of these had been spent at this lonely farmhouse on the shores of the Forth.

He had turned north at once in the belief that it might be easier to leave the country from a Scottish port than an English one, and had fixed on Leith as his goal, hoping to be able to get away on board one of the foreign vessels trading to that harbour; but fearing to make

the attempt while a careful watch was most likely being kept for him, he had sought a refuge here, and was biding his time.

He had not been beyond the strip of beach in front of the house since he came, and even that distance had been ventured upon only in the dark; but to-night he had grown restless, and could not stay indoors.

He went down the narrow, stony path, and passing through the gate in the low wall, hesitated as to which way he should turn, but the lights of Leith twinkling far along the coast drew him. There his hope lay. If the greater danger was in that direction, so also was the chance of escape.

He had had nothing to relieve the monotony of the past days but reading. There were few books in that quiet dwelling, but the farmer's only daughter, Jeannie, had been ungrudging in her service, and had gone to Leith every day for newspapers for him. He had seen his own case referred to in some of these: the man whose tool and accomplice he had been was waiting his trial by Court-martial, and Barrington set his teeth determinedly when he read that. They might take him dead: they would never get him alive to face such a trial.

He told himself so again for the hundredth time as he walked on now, fingering the ready revolver in his pocket with an almost loving touch, and keeping a nervous look-out for any chance comer. But he wandered almost a mile without seeing any one, and was asking himself how near Leith he might dare to go, when round a bend of the shore the figure of a man appeared, sharply silhouetted against the evening sky. Very steadily he was walking, looking around him as though searching or watching for something or some one, and Barrington came to a halt, paralysed by fear.

The man advanced quickly, skirted a tiny bay where the water crept far up, and disappeared. But he would come into view again in a moment Barry knew; only one jutting shoulder of rock hid them from each other. There was no escape. None. If this stranger had come in search of him, he was doomed. His legs had become powerless, and would not carry him though he tried to run. The shining toy in his possession offered the only way.

And then, while he still watched the corner, his fingers gripping stealthily in his pocket, out on the clear air a sharp report rang; a cry and a moan reached his ears. Silence fell again

immediately, and as Barrington, after standing rigid for a moment, ran forward, his own peril forgotten, he knew instinctively what he should find behind that screening rock.

The body lay face downward on the sand, and even at the first glance there was something strangely familiar in the squarely-built shoulders, the bare, close-cropped head, that made his heart leap to his mouth as he turned it over. He recoiled with an involuntary shudder then, sickening at the sight, for the revolver had done its work only too thoroughly, and the face was mutilated beyond recognition.

Barry sank down, his face hidden in his hands, and wondered whether he could ever look at that awful sight again; but by degrees he forced himself to go back, and spreading his handkerchief over the head, began to seek for some means of identification.

The light summer dust coat which the man had worn over his evening dress had been tossed off, and Barry held his breath when he caught sight of his own tailor's name inside it. And when he saw the engraved signet ring on the little finger of the left hand, and drew out the gold hunting watch with the monogram on the back, the wild suspicion which had flashed across

his mind became a certainty. The man before him was Sir Frank Galbraith, of Castle Morven.

“My God! So this is the end of him!”

Barry sank down and covered his face again. Frank Galbraith and he had been at school and College together, and had kept up their friendship since. It was only a month ago that the young laird of Morven told him he hoped to be married before the summer was over. And instead he was lying here to-night; sent to his account by his own hand.

“It’s Lillith Ashmead’s work; he was mad over her,” Barry muttered chokingly. “I saw her engagement to old Neumann, of Johannesburg, announced in one of these papers Jeannie brought this week. All the fellows said it would bowl Frank over if she chucked him—and this is what has come of it! My God! I couldn’t do it to myself now after seeing him!”

He wiped the cold sweat off his forehead; again the sickness came upon him, and a shudder, more violent than any he had yet experienced, swept over him.

“I couldn’t! Oh, God, it’s too awful! And for the sake of Lillith Ashmead! Heaven knows I would have changed places with him gladly.”

The thought caused a new idea, savouring of

madness in the first blush, to spring into being. Why not change places? Why should it not be believed that it was Barrington Wedderburn who lay there, his wrecked career ended for ever?

"It would cut the knot for me—I could go where I liked then," he muttered excitedly, rising and beginning to pace the desolate strip of sand. "If it could only be accomplished! If I could only pass myself off as Frank Galbraith, even for a week, I would be safe. Well, I don't care! There is risk for me in everything no matter what I do, and I can't be much worse off than I am. I'll do it!"

He went through the dead man's pockets deliberately then. A handful of loose coins, a bunch of keys, a handkerchief, and a letter were the sole contents. A wet mist was creeping in from the sea now, and it was beginning to grow dark, but Barry could see that the letter was addressed to Lyall Galbraith, and opening it he read it without any great difficulty. It bore that day's date, and the address of one of the best hotels in Edinburgh.

"DEAR LYALL,—When we parted you did not expect to hear of my arrival in Scotland so soon,

but it is the unexpected that nearly always happens, isn't it? So you will say when you have read this anyhow.

"I have been here nearly a week, and yesterday evening I was at Castle Morven. Just outside it, though. I had a fancy to have a last look at it, but I didn't feel like speaking to any one, so I took care not to be seen. And I steered clear of Strathbog.

"You will have noticed the announcement of Lillith's engagement in the papers, and you will be thinking that now I must see the truth of what you said when you were in town. Well, I do, old chap, but that doesn't make any difference. Lillith is all the world to me; I have loved her desperately, and I can't live without her, so I am going to put an end to it all. When you get this you will be Sir Lyall. But don't blame Lillith, mind. Perhaps she couldn't help herself.

"I paid Gould off in London. He knew too much about Lillith, and he got on my nerves with his eternal watching. But all my things are in order though I am alone. You will find my cheque-book and some cash in my writing-case.

"Good-bye, old chap. I hope the tenth Baronet of Morven will have a better ending

than the ninth. At any rate he is a better man.—Yours for the last time,

“FRANK.”

The round boyish handwriting showed no sign of unsteadiness, save where Lillith Ashmead's name was written; for the rest, the signature was as firm as the first word.

Barry crammed the letter into his pocket.

“That makes things easy; I'm not afraid now,” he said. “All I ask from Fate is a couple of hours.”

The couple of hours were granted, and close on midnight, shorn of his moustache, and wearing Frank Galbraith's coat, he walked along Princes Street in Edinburgh, and turning into the hotel which was his destination, he stopped at the office in the hall, and asked for Sir Frank Galbraith's letters. Two were handed to him without demur, and having, as he expected, the number of his room marked on the envelopes, he mounted the stairs, outwardly cool, and passed along the corridor till he found the right door.

Ten minutes afterwards when a sleepy chambermaid answered his bell, he was bending over a portmanteau tugging at the straps.

"I have to leave early to-morrow morning," he said, without lifting his head. "Tell the manager to send up my bill, and I will settle it to-night. I shall want breakfast by half-past six, and my luggage must be at the station by seven o'clock."

Next day, when he had left Edinburgh safely behind, he marvelled at the ease with which the whole matter was carried through. No one suspected, no one questioned him: his orders were implicitly obeyed. As Sir Frank Galbraith he quitted the Scottish capital, as Sir Frank Galbraith he sailed from Leith to Antwerp, and then, by unfrequented routes, journeyed south.

Four days after he left Scotland, Robert Wedderburn and Lyall Galbraith arrived at Strathbog with the evening train, and together passed out of the station to the closed carriage which was waiting. Many sympathetic glances followed them as they went, for it was known they had been away burying "Poor Mr. Barrington." The news of Barry's death had come as a great shock to the people of the little Fife town; but his disgrace was known, and it was whispered pityingly that perhaps it was not the worst that might have happened.

The body had been laid to rest in the Dean Cemetery in Edinburgh, in the ground where

Mrs. Wedderburn's own father and mother lay. She would not have it brought to Strathbog to have the funeral gaped at by a crowd, and the grave made a rendezvous of every man, woman, and child in the parish, Isabel Wedderburn had said fiercely, and Robert had been more than willing to carry out her wish. To do what was necessary unnoticed and amongst strangers was trying enough; to have had it to do under the eyes of his own workpeople, meeting their sympathy at every turn, would have unnerved him altogether.

"I wish you would go all the way with me, Lyall," Robert said when they neared the bank. "It will be hard work going through it alone to my mother and Mollie. And they will want to thank you. Will you not say yet that you will come?"

"Not to-night, Robert." Lyall gave the refusal somewhat hurriedly: he could not see too much of Mollie's grief and keep himself in hand, he knew. "You will be better alone; your mother will not want any outsider. Tell them I will take a run out to-morrow to see how they are."

They shook hands; a stronger, firmer clasp than usual; then Lyall passed within his own

door, and Robert was driven on towards Grey-stone.

Before he reached the gate ; indeed, just beside the field path along which Barry had gone so often to keep his trysts, Mollie, looking very tall and slight and wan in her black dress, stepped forward from a gate in the fence, and signed to Fisher to stop. Robert sat up with a start when he saw her, and hastily opened the door.

“I could not stay in the house any longer, Robert,” she said as he helped her in. “Has Lyall gone home ?”

“Yes ; he will be out to-morrow. We would be better alone to-night, he said, and I dare say he was right. How is my mother, Mollie ?”

Her lips quivered.

“Not well at all. But I will tell you about her afterwards. Tell me what you found—there. Had he been very unhappy, Robert, or—did anything drive him to despair at the end ?”

“No, there was nothing at the end, so far as we could find out. The man Wilson with whom he lodged said he was very quiet, but very pleasant to have in the house ; he generally read all day, and took much interest in the shipping news. He wished to get a steamer from Leith, he told them, but he never said where he in-

tended going, nor which steamer he was waiting for. He went out that last evening—not for long, they think, but they don't know, for they did not see him return, and did not know he had come in till he tapped at the kitchen door just before ten o'clock, and said he was going for a long walk."

"He had changed his clothes, and was wearing a light coat, and they wondered why he should have dressed again so late, but there was nothing in his manner to arouse suspicion. He talked easily and quite calmly, and told them not to sit up for him; just to leave the door on the latch, and he would lock it after him when he came in."

"And he never came?"

"No. But they did not know that till morning. Wilson went along the sands then, and found him. He had given them his name as Melville, but, of course, when they went through his pockets his cards and letters showed them at once who he was."

There was silence for a minute, broken only by the sound of a stifled sob from Mollie. Then she faltered a question.

"You saw him?"

"Yes." He would not harrow her feelings by

telling her that Barry had not been recognisable, and he changed the subject abruptly. "His watch and chain, and the things he had in his pockets are all there," he said, indicating a bag on the opposite seat. "All except the money; I gave it to Wilson, and all his clothes. He had not very many with him, but what he had were good, of course, and his light coat was almost new. He had taken it off before he—fired, and it and his revolver were lying beside him."

"He left no message?" she whispered.

"No. I wish he had left a word for my mother, but there was none. Is she able to be going about again, Mollie? When I went away she looked to me as if she would never rise."

Mollie's eyes filled.

"Mamma will never be the same again, Robert," she said, and her voice shook pitifully. "This has put ten years on her head, and it is making her as hard as a stone; these last few days she has not uttered a word that has not been hard and bitter, and this afternoon she has refused altogether to speak to me. I don't blame her," she added hastily, with that quick allowance for weakness and suffering which those who knew Mollie Wedderburn never looked for in vain from her. "Her heart has been riven,

and the pain is beyond endurance just yet, but I pray this hardness may be simply a passing phase. She is hurting herself."

"Is she still blaming me?" Robert asked, and Mollie was quick to note the soreness in his voice.

"She blames us both," she said gently. "You for saying to her at Christmas that she ought to give Barry less money; me for not trying to get his confidence about his affairs when he was here last. She says he might have given it to me had I asked him, but I don't think he would, Robert. Barry told me a good deal, but it is not likely he would have told me that he was in need of money for—that."

"I am sure he would not; don't let that vex you." The attitude his mother had taken up in regard to them both was utterly unjust, Robert knew, but there was no reasoning her out of it, and they could only make the best of it. "One or two letters which I found in his pockets showed me he was backing a horse for a race that was to take place at the beginning of this month, and the conclusion I have come to is that, after failing to get the money from my mother, he counted on winning as much then as would enable him to put things straight. But discovery came quicker than he expected."

"He was so gay and light-hearted with it all," Mollie sobbed. "One can't think of Barry always having something to conceal." Then she dried her eyes, and spoke in a different tone. "Faith Emerson is here, Robert. She arrived yesterday."

"Oh!" Robert uttered the monosyllable as if he was rather taken aback. "Is it wise that that arrangement should still hold good?" he asked after a moment's pause.

"There is no question as to its holding good apparently; she has come to stay as a matter of course."

"Well, I think it is almost a pity."

"You will like her," Mollie predicted, as the carriage stopped. "I don't know whether she was in love with Barry or not, but she is very charming."

CHAPTER V

FAITH

WHEN Robert came downstairs after his interview with his mother, a girl in a white gown, with dancing hazel eyes and wavy auburn hair coiled on the top of her head, was standing in the open doorway of the hall, and looked over her shoulder at him with a friendly smile. He moved forward with shy awkwardness—he had had his imperfections dinned into him so effectually that he never forgot them, and therefore seldom showed to advantage in the presence of women, and it was she who spoke first.

“I am Faith,” she announced; “and you are Mr. Robert Wedderburn, aren’t you? I have been studying your photograph, and I should have known you if I had come across you in the middle of the High Street of Strathbog. But you are not a bit like the others.”

The easy frankness of her address seemed to put them on terms of familiarity at once. Robert laughed.

"I am very glad to see you," he said; "but I am afraid if we had met in the High Street, you would have had the advantage of me. I have never seen any of your photographs."

"And I'm not in the least like a 'Faith'!" Her dancing eyes met his merrily. "Oh, I know I'm not, so please don't try to convince me that I am! My name was a huge mistake—a Faith should be patient, and calm, and sweet, and perfect, to say nothing of being tall and dignified. And I'm five-feet-one!"

"Is that a drawback?"

"Sometimes! But names are misplaced half the time, aren't they? I think we ought all to be numbered until we are old enough to show what will suit us. I have a cousin called Jo, and she parts her hair smoothly down the middle, and won't speak to a man!"

She laughed, and her laughter was infectious. After the gloom and misery of the past weeks her bright nonsense was like sunshine succeeding a storm, and Robert felt his spirits rise.

"What would you have chosen for yourself?" he asked.

Faith Emerson made a merry grimace.

"That is beyond me. When I was aged ten, Gwendoline Ermytrude was the height of my

ambition. I am always promising myself I shall live up to my own name some day, but I shall have to go in for some cultivation of the virtues before I am ready to begin. At present my good resolutions are in the 'some day' stage. Don't we all have a great many 'some days,' Mr. Wedderburn?"

"I have, at any rate," Robert admitted, with a smile.

"If I ever meet a person who hasn't, I'll trot him round on exhibition," Faith laughed. "He would be unique! Isn't it nearly time for dinner? Perhaps it isn't very polite to say so, but I am positively famishing!"

"So am I." He had come downstairs unwillingly, wishing he had not to sit through the meal, but he awoke now to the fact that he was hungry. "Another five minutes and your waiting will be ended," he said, glancing at his watch. "How do you think you will like to stay in this part of the country?"

"I love being here. Strathbog looked pretty miserable yesterday when I passed through it, but it was raining, and I have not heard that any mining town is particularly exhilarating on a wet day, even when that day is in June. However, I am going to explore it very soon.

I would have started off this very afternoon, only, I—did not want to leave Mollie.”

The pause before the last words was so slight as to be almost imperceptible, but Robert noticed it. She wished not to make any direct reference either to the trouble they were in or to Barry, he decided; perhaps, poor girl, she could not: more than likely her gaiety was covering agony that she dared not show. A more bitter anger than any he had yet felt against his brother rose in Robert's heart, but he could not express it, and after a moment's silence Faith spoke again.

“I should like to go down a mine, Mr. Wedderburn—right down to the bottom of one of your coal pits. Will you take me? Please say yes! Mollie says she has never been down, but she has promised to go if you will be bothered with us.”

He would take them some day, he said; and then they both laughed over the “some day,” and the laughter was still on their lips when Mollie appeared, and the gong sounded.

There was no attempt at either singing or playing at Greystone that night, but Faith kept them bright with her chatter, and when they went quietly to bed at half-past ten both Robert and Mollie felt that her company had been an inestimable boon. If she was suffering herself

she gave no sign, and she so scrupulously avoided Barry's name that they could not speak of him to her.

Lyall Galbraith, calling next afternoon, found Mollie alone. Faith was about the grounds somewhere—she had sent her out, she said, and her mother was confined to her room, and could not see any one.

She did not tell him how hard she had pleaded with Mrs. Wedderburn to make an exception in his favour; he had done so much, Mollie reminded her, and ought to be properly thanked. But the elder woman had been obdurate. She had sent him a note that morning thanking him, and that was sufficient, she said. The cold, stilted terms of that note, conveying as they did a veiled hint that he had been officious, were rankling in Lyall's mind, and but for Mollie's sake he would not have intruded at Greystone again.

"I can never thank you enough, Lyall," Mollie said, looking up at him with those soft, dark eyes that made his pulses quicken whenever they met his. "Just to say 'Thank you' seems so very, very little when one's heart is filled with gratitude, but the gratitude will always be there. Robert says no one can ever know how much you helped him, but I understand."

"I don't want thanks or gratitude, Mollie. God knows, I am only sorry that the necessity was there."

"I know, Lyall; you are always like that." She turned away her face for a moment that he might not see her tears, and when she spoke again her eyes were still averted. "And now I want to add to your debt. I want to burden you with something else that is troubling me."

He looked at her inquiringly.

"It will not be a burden to me if I can help you," he said quickly. "Only for your own sake, I hope it is nothing very serious."

"More serious for others than for me," she answered quietly. "If the story I have been hearing is true, we are not the only persons in Strathbog who have to mourn for Barry. Have you heard that?"

She had moved again, and was looking him straight in the face. The question was put in her simple, direct way, and the man drew his brows together sharply. Only too well he knew to what she referred, but he had hoped the knowledge might be kept from her.

"They are all mourning him," he fenced. "You have every one's sympathy."

"I am speaking of a girl," she said quietly.

"That girl Middleton, in Birrell's shop, on the High Street. Do you know if it is true that he was courting her and writing to her?"

"Who said that to you?"

"I heard it. Do you know anything of it, Lyall?"

"You needn't believe one-half that you hear! If people would only learn——"

"Lyall, don't put me off." She laid her hand on his arm with a simple, entreating gesture. "I have asked you because I trust you. If you won't tell me, I must try some other means to find out."

He looked past her, out through the open window, at the trees rustling softly in the summer wind, and just then a dainty, little white-clad figure came from the direction of the gardens, and wandered towards the drive. He spoke without shifting his gaze.

"Isn't Miss Emerson's presence here sufficient answer to that gossip?"

"No. Barry was not engaged to Miss Emerson—not formally at any rate—and if he had been that would only have made this matter worse. I don't know whether Faith even cared for him, and because I don't I must be careful. If Barry has given her pain already we should

be the last to add to it." Mollie's pretty voice shook, her slender fingers twisted themselves together nervously. "Cannot you see my difficulty, Lyall?" she pleaded. "If he led this girl Middleton to believe he cared for her she has a claim on our sympathy. We have no right to stand aloof from her, but mamma is furious over the whole story, and will not listen to me when I say so. And I don't want to drag Robert into this; he has had enough to do already. Did you ever see them together?"

Lyall nodded. "Yes, I have," he admitted reluctantly. "Repeatedly last summer and at Christmas, and on the Monday evening when he was last at home. He knew I saw them, but the subject was never mentioned between us."

"She is a—nice girl?"

"Yes."

"Not the sort of girl who would have let him single her out if she had believed he was only amusing himself with her?"

"No," he said decidedly. "Rosa Middleton, from what I have heard, was above that."

Mollie's hands began their nervous twisting again, and Lyall, watching her, felt a rush of uncontrollable anger against the person who had enlightened her on the subject.

"Who told you?" he asked again.

"Mr. Barclay. Mamma was downstairs the morning he called, and he blurted out the whole story. I think I knew from the first that it was true," she said, passing her handkerchief across her unsteady lips, "though I tried for a little to persuade myself it could not be. In spite of all the rest, I had the belief that, so far as women were concerned, Barry was a gentleman. But even that belief has had to go. If I only knew what I ought to do!"

"There is nothing, Mollie—absolutely nothing. It is rough on the girl, certainly, but you can't wipe out Barry's misdeeds, and turning poor Rosa Middleton's head was one. Try not to think of it; the gossip will soon die down. Barclay was something worse than a fool to mention it to you at all."

She could not forget it, she said, but Robert and Faith came in together at that moment, the girl bare-headed, and carrying her white sunshade in her hand, and the matter had to be dropped. She had gone to the gate to meet Robert, Faith announced frankly, and had coaxed him into promising to take her for a long drive the next afternoon. She wanted to see the country, she declared.

Robert came home to lunch the following day, and immediately afterwards they set off in the dogcart. As soon as they were out of sight Mollie ordered the carriage and drove into Strathbog, and Mr. Peter Birrell, airing himself in the shop door, backed inside in a flurry when the big chestnuts stopped by the kerb before him, and Mollie entered the shop, sweeping her glance across the faces of the three girls behind the counter. The one she was looking for was at the far end, and with a bow and a murmur about gloves she passed the little draper and walked up to Rosa Middleton.

"Good afternoon. Will you show me some black gloves, please?" Mr. Birrell had followed her; she took the chair he offered, then turned her back on him and looked searchingly at Rosa's face, which had crimsoned painfully at sight of her. "I have come because I wish to speak to you," she added as the man, taking the hint, moved away and left them alone. "You knew my brother, I believe?"

Rosa's cheeks grew hotter. She bent over the box she was opening. "Yes," she answered, shortly, and very low.

"I only knew this week. Barrington has been much to blame," Mollie said, and her voice

was sharp with the sound of pain. "We ought not to speak ill of the dead, I know, but it is hard to say nothing but good when one has been deceived on every hand. Did you not hear from him after—after he left England?"

"No." Rosa's mouth hardened. She had been sore driven in these last days, and no one but herself knew what she had endured. The rumour that Faith Emerson would probably have been Barry's wife had things gone smoothly with him had reached her ears time and again. Barry's disclaimer of there being anything serious in his acquaintance with herself had been duly chronicled by Ann Campbell, and had been retailed to her from a dozen different sources. "But there's no occasion to blame him for that," she said stiffly. "Maybe I took more meaning out of his attentions than he put in them; but if I did it's myself that has to suffer. I have been well told about my folly."

"Since I have known, I have thought that perhaps you have had to suffer more than any of us. If he sought you out deliberately you had a special claim upon him," Mollie said firmly. "As to folly—Barry was older than you, and knew the world better, and he had no right to lead you to believe anything he was

not prepared to carry out. I am very, very sorry about it all, and if I could help to make things easier for you I would."

The brown eyes suddenly filled. But scant sympathy had been vouchsafed to the girl who had stayed all her trust on Barry Wedderburn, and, coming now from such an unexpected quarter, it was almost more than she could bear.

"Not many have said as much, Miss Wedderburn. I am leaving here on Saturday because I can't stand it any longer. Folk come in just to stare at me, and some of them don't stop at staring; they say things so that I may hear. That's the kind of sympathy a girl gets when she has to face the public."

Again an expression of pain crossed Mollie's face. It was cruelly hard that even this girl's means of livelihood should have to be given up because of Barry's heedlessness and sin.

"Was it from the newspapers you learned of his death?" she asked pityingly.

"No. My father heard it at the pits the day Mr. Robert was sent for, and he brought home the word. I—I wasn't able to come to the shop next day, and everybody had something to say, and then when they heard other gossip their

tongues wouldn't hold. I'll be glad to be where I'll have no chance of hearing anything more about it."

"Have you got another situation?"

"No. I'll look for one by and by, but it will not be in Strathbog. I am going to my aunt's in Glasgow for a week or two."

"Perhaps you will get one there," Molly said, rising. "I am more vexed than I can say that it is through anyone belonging to me that you have to leave home. I sometimes wonder why it is the careless ones of the earth who win so much love," she added wistfully. "So many of us fix our hopes on them, and then they ride over our hearts rough shod."

She indicated the gloves which she would take, shook hands, and left the shop. When she was crossing the pavement Mr. Hutchinson, the schoolmaster of Strathbog, who was also organist in one of the churches, came along the street, and, seeing him, she waited. Mrs. Wedderburn had promised to distribute the prizes at the closing of the school, but that could not be now, and she thought she had better mention the fact.

"You will get some one to take my mother's place at your exhibition, Mr. Hutchinson?" she said, when she had greeted him. "You quite

understand, of course, that she cannot be present?"

"Certainly; when I heard of your bad news, I knew it would be impossible for her to come," he replied courteously. "I have had a disappointment, too, in connection with our church recital," he went on, opening the carriage door for her. "Miss Middleton can't come; she is going away, and I don't know what I am to do with my contralto solos."

"Is she a singer?"

"A singer!" The organist's face lighted up. "Rosa Middleton has the very soul of music in her; her voice would make her fortune if it was properly trained. I never listen to that girl without thinking of what is being lost, not merely to herself, but to the public. And she revels in song. If I were a rich man she should not go one day without the means to develop her gift."

CHAPTER VI

MOLLIE'S PLAN

MOLLIE pondered the organist's words as she drove home, and for the next day or two they were seldom out of her thoughts. On the Saturday morning she wrote to Rosa, asking her to let her have her aunt's address, and one day in the following week she joined the morning train for Glasgow, and at Queen Street Station Rosa, to whom she had telegraphed, met her.

"I am returning as soon as possible, so we cannot go very far," she said as they made their way outside. "Just let us walk up to Sauchiehall Street; we can talk as well in a crowd as anywhere. It is about your voice I have come to speak."

"My voice?" Rosa echoed.

Mollie nodded.

"Yes. Mr. Hutchinson has been telling me of it; you have a fortune hidden in your throat, he says. Don't you feel that you should like to have it cultivated?" she asked. "Wouldn't it

be worth a big effort if you could be a public singer some day?"

A big effort! Something caught Rosa's breath. She looked across the stream of traffic with eyes that did not see; and its dull roar changed in her ears to a volume of silvery sounding song.

"If there is anything I wouldn't do for the chance of that, I haven't come to know of it yet. I would give twenty years of my life for the sake of being a singer for one week," she said with sudden passion. "But famous singers don't rise from shop-girls. My father will never be able to give me training, and all I can earn myself will never pay for proper lessons."

"No; I quite understand that." Mollie twirled the handle of her parasol nervously. "But if—well, there are different ways in which it could be managed. Lots of people don't pay for their own training."

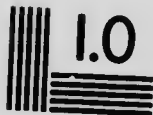
"You mean they take scholarships?" Rosa flushed painfully. "I know. But I couldn't take one. I—I am not well enough educated."

It hurt her to make the confession. Mollie saw that as she watched the pretty face to which the radiant bloom was beginning to creep back already, and the momentary embarrass-



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ment gave her courage to plunge into her own proposal.

"I was not thinking of a scholarship, Rosa. I have been planning your training myself. I want to help you to realise your dreams and make the most of your gift, and seeing I have some money of my own——"

She stopped short, for Rosa had drawn away from her sharply. They had turned out of Buchanan Street, and were in the throng of Sauchiehall Street now, but, heedless of the passers-by, the younger girl stood still on the crowded pavement, her lips quivering oddly, an angry, fiercely resentful look in her blazing eyes.

"Thank you! But if that is what you have come to propose we needn't walk any farther; your train will soon be leaving, and we may as well go back," she said, speaking as if she was choking. "That is, if you want me to go with you. It is time I was home, and I would rather say good-bye here."

"You are angry, Rosa." There was distress in Mollie's voice, very real trouble in her wistful face. "But indeed I did not mean to offend you," she pleaded. "I only wish to help you if I can, and this is something I can do—some-

thing to make you happier. And surely we can talk it over. It won't hurt you to do that."

She laid her hand on the other's arm, and tried to draw her away. Rosa twitched herself free, and stood immovable.

"The treatment I got is not to be made up for with money, Miss Wedderburn—I'm not come quite so low as that!" she flashed passionately. "Though your brother amused himself by making a fool of me, I don't see that that has given you the right to insult me. Though I was starving, I wouldn't take a penny from one of Barry Wedderburn's folk! You can all look down on me for my poverty, but you will never despise me for doing that!"

She began to walk on now, swiftly, towards the west. Mollie kept by her side.

"I think you have sense enough to know that I would not have come near you at all had I despised you," she said quietly. "And I would scarcely have taken a special journey to Glasgow, and asked you to meet me, simply for the sake of trying to hurt you. Mr. Hutchinson first put the idea into my head by a chance remark he made, and I—I have thought and planned and woven all sorts of fancies round it. I hoped you would see it in the same light as I

do, and take as much pleasure in accepting my help as I was taking in offering it."

There was a break in her voice at the last words, and Rosa, impulsive always, had to fight with her tears. But her determination did not relax.

"I'm sorry if I've been rude, but I have my pride as well as you, and I cannot take your money," she said. "Barry treated me ill, and though maybe you can't understand it, there are some things that poor folk can't be recompensed for with money."

"I know that ; but my offer was not made in the nature of a recompense—nothing can atone for what my brother did. But I was very fond of Barry, Rosa : he and I were always chums, and though he did so much wrong, I want to do what I think might please him best if he could know."

Unconsciously she had used her strongest argument. The thought of what Barry would like carried Rosa back to the evening when they went up the hill and down by the old quarry together, and he expressed the laughing wish that some fairy godmother would undertake her training. The careless words weighed with her, as every word of Barry Wedderburn's

ever would, because of the great love she gave him, the love which she could not quench, and almost against her will she gave the first sign of yielding.

"How much would it take?" she asked after they had walked about thirty yards in silence.

"I don't know. My own idea was that we might go to Doctor Bertram—he is one of the best authorities on the voice in Glasgow—and get his opinion and advice. If he should be as enthusiastic as Mr. Hutchinson, the cost, whatever it might be, would not stand in the way."

"Would it be—only to you I should be indebted? No one else?"

"No one—only to me. And I am your friend, Rosa. You would do as much for me if it lay in your power."

"I would maybe do more," Rosa said with an odd twitch of her lips. "All the same——"

"You could go abroad, Rosa, and get the best; and think of what success would mean." Mollie, reading the signs of wavering, made the interruption hastily, before Rosa might repeat her refusal. "Think of what you could do for your people," she urged. "Your father may not always be able to work, and your mother must have a hard struggle as it is."

Ay! and a ceaseless one, Rosa knew.

"You could be spared from home?" Mollie asked.

"I am spared as it is. I am not going back to Strathbog to work, and they know that. It took my wages to keep me, so I'm not a loss."

"That makes it all the easier then. There is nothing to hinder your going away if you care to. Won't you go and get Doctor Bertram's opinion, Rosa? It would be something to you at all events to know what he thinks of your voice."

Rosa made no answer, a sharp line, telling of the struggle between pride and temptation, was showing between her brows. Mollie slipped her hand through her arm.

"He will know what he is speaking about. And I want to hear you sing. Grant me this one favour, whatever comes after it."

A cabman with an empty hansom was driving slowly by, and, without waiting for an answer, Mollie signalled to him. The next instant both girls were in the cab, and within ten minutes they were standing in Doctor Bertram's presence, telling him what they desired.

His manner was cold, critical; his questions searching; the tests he gave severe; but he

thawed when Rosa began to sing. With each note that passed her lips he grew more genial, and when she had sung a song to him there was in his face the look of a man who has stumbled unexpectedly upon great and hidden treasure.

His verdict was more than favourable; it was enthusiastic. Adam Hutchinson had done his work well; the infinite care and patience which he had bestowed on his pupil earned him no mean praise that day: the long hours during which Rosa had practised after her day's work in the shop was over brought her rich reward in Doctor Bertram's generous commendation.

He would advise her to go to either Paris or Italy at once, he said, as her accent was her weakest point. Her technical knowledge was very good, her expression almost perfect, her voice such as had never rung out in his rooms before. If she would study for a year or two and work very hard, there could be no question as to her future success.

Even then she would not altogether yield; the fight with pride was hard. She would think of it, she said, as she went with Mollie to the station; she must write and consult her father and mother before she decided. If they thought she should accept Mollie's offer, she—

well, she might; and a hungry light came into her eyes as she made the admission. Only every penny she accepted—if she did accept—must be as a loan, to be repaid as soon as she was earning anything. She would not take it as a gift upon any condition.

“Very well.” Mollie smiled when it came to that stage. The battle for the girl’s happiness was nearly won, she felt. Some day Barry’s cruelty to her would be forgotten because of the happiness to which it had opened the gates. “As a loan be it. When you are a second Madame Melba I won’t be above taking repayment—unless you are surer of my motive then, and are not quite so fiercely independent. I shall see your father and mother, and talk the matter over with them. I don’t think they will object.”

“Maybe not,” Rosa said. Then she went back to a question she had asked before, and the suspicious ring was in her voice again.

“You are sure it would be only your money—only you that would be helping me?” she persisted.

“The money is quite my own,” Mollie assured her. “Why?”

“Your—your mother would have nothing to do with it?”

"Nothing."

"You are certain?"

"Quite."

Her answers sounded curt in their brevity, but there was nothing more that Mollie could say. Her mother knew nothing of her errand to Glasgow that day; she had not told her, well aware that she would be forbidden to carry out her plan, or any plan for the benefit of Rosa Middleton, if Mrs. Wedderburn had any inkling of it. When everything was fixed beyond recall she would brave her anger and tell her, but not before.

She called on David Middleton and his wife immediately she reached Strathbog, and after extracting a promise that they would place no obstacles in the way if Rosa decided upon going abroad, she set out for home, choosing the most unfrequented streets, for since their trouble came upon them she had shrunk from observation. She was nearing the outskirts of the town, when Lyall Galbraith, coming up a side street, came face to face with her, and turning at once, walked on by her side as a matter of course.

When he learned where she had been, and what she was proposing to do, his face was a sight to see in its astonishment.

"I never look for your doing things by halves, but I did not dream you would take up that poor little soul like this," he exclaimed. "Does Robert know?"

"Not yet."

"Nor Mrs. Wedderburn?"

"No."

Lyall suppressed a whistle.

"You have courage, Mollie," he said with quiet admiration. "What do you expect your mother will say when you tell her?"

"That is what I dare not contemplate." She smiled, but the smile was pitifully uncertain, and his strong face contracted. "She will be very angry, I know, but I cannot let that make any difference. I have done only what is right."

"Other people's duties have a trick of coming your way for performance," he said, slackening his pace as they came to the gates of Greystone. "When will you tell her?"

"After Rosa is away. Are you not coming up, Lyall?"

"Not to-day: I have ever so much to do when I get back." Then he looked down at her, and his tone altered slightly. "I was at Edinburgh yesterday," he said. "Our manager

there is retiring shortly, and I went over to see what I could do."

"About getting the post?" she asked.

"Yes. They think I am too young, but that is a fault which will mend every day, and I have written to Frank asking him if he will use his influence with the Directors on my behalf. He will, I know, and as it is pretty strong in that quarter, I am hopeful that something may come of it."

For some inexplicable cause Mollie's face had crimsoned, and speech had suddenly deserted her. Lyall bent his head lower.

"You know why I am so anxious for it, Mollie?" he said in a low voice. "I can't ask you to come to me in Strathbog—I'm not quite so selfish as that, little girl, but it won't be my fault if I don't have something better to offer you very soon. You understand, dear, don't you?"

"Yes, Lyall, I understand."

"And—you wish me success, Mollie?"

Her answer was to put her hand into the one he held out. They had the road all to themselves, the friendly trees seemed to shut them in, and he slipped his arm round her, and drawing her close to him kissed her. They

made no protestations of love, no binding promises, but Lyall walked back to Strathbug with a great glow of happiness in his heart, and Mollie went on to the house feeling as if all her sorrow had been swept away by some magic touch. Even telling her mother about Rosa Middleton seemed a less formidable task now.

It was hard enough when it did come, however. A month later when Rosa was already on her way to Italy, and Mrs. Wedderburn was downstairs again taking her accustomed place, Mr. Barclay, of Ballathie, called one afternoon. No woman living was ever more inquisitive regarding her neighbours' affairs than was Gilbert Barclay about his; few men would have concerned themselves with the gossip which was to him as the very breath of his nostrils. "Inquire Within" Faith Emerson had dubbed him. He knew everything about everybody, she said.

He had heard that morning that Rosa Middleton was away. His informant—one of his own keepers—had said it was the Greystone folk who had sent her, and, nothing doubting, he proceeded to expatiate on the matter now with the familiarity of a privileged friend.

"Very good of you to be so decent to that girl Middleton, Mrs. Wedderburn," he said, drop-

ping his voice that Faith, who was sitting just outside one of the long windows, might not hear. "By Jove, if she blossoms out into a prima donna I won't be sorry I was the first to tell you about her! Wonder how she will get on in Italy? Rather a sudden change, isn't it? When one sets a beggar on horseback there is always the risk of not knowing where she may ride to."

Mollie, who was gathering up some magazines which had been thrown down on a couch, dropped them in sudden confusion. Mrs. Wedderburn favoured him with a haughty stare.

"Of what are you talking?" she inquired icily.

Gilbert Barclay saw that he had blundered, and stumbled into an explanation, which Mrs. Wedderburn met with a scornful denial and some scathing words concerning Rosa.

Mollie spoke up then. It was she who had helped Rosa to go, she said, and to her dying day she never forgot her mother's face when she heard, nor the blaze of fury which came into it when she wrung from her the admission that one other person had known, and that person was Lyall Galbraith.

“It is the last time he will aid you in defying me,” Isabel Wedderburn said passionately. “I shall let him understand that he is not to come here in future, and I forbid you to speak to him again. A beggarly bank clerk, to presume to concern himself with our affairs!”

CHAPTER VII

A WOMAN'S WRATH

THAT evening was a miserable one at Greystone. Mollie shut herself up after the scene with her mother, and though she appeared at dinner she sat silent throughout the meal, and returned to her room immediately afterwards. Faith made a brave attempt to talk as if there was nothing wrong, but Mrs. Wedderburn's grimness quenched even her; and Robert, not daring to inquire what, but conscious that something had seriously disturbed the domestic peace, was as uncomfortable as any one. Faith would have enlightened him, but she got no opportunity, for Mrs. Wedderburn, for the first time since the beginning of the trouble concerning Barry, remained downstairs until bed time, and marched the girl out of the drawing-room before her.

"Don't sit up late," she commanded when they stopped in the corridor above to bid each other good-night. "Have you anything to do?"

"I began a letter to papa this morning, and

perhaps I shall finish it," Faith answered, privately resolving she would slip into Mollie's room as soon as the coast was clear. "I am not at all sleepy."

"It is time you were in bed all the same. You can finish your letter to-morrow; the mail does not go till afternoon. Tell Colonel Emerson I send him my kindest regards."

She passed on, haughtily erect, and turned the handle of the next door she came to. It was not locked, as she had half anticipated it might be, and when she stepped across the threshold Mollie was standing before the dressing-table brushing her long, glossy hair.

"I want to know where that girl is living."

Mrs. Wedderburn made the demand imperiously as she moved forward to the middle of the floor. Mollie, whose face wore unmistakable traces of tears, did not pause in her task.

"You know that she is in Italy, mamma," she said quietly; "I have told you I sent her there."

"I wish a little more definite information than that, please. If any one told you I was in Scotland you would scarcely consider that a sufficient clue to my whereabouts, would you? What is her address?"

The colour rose in Mollie's cheeks. Only daughter though she was, she had had to bend to her mother's will always, and almost anything would have been easier than to refuse to do what she was asked.

"What do you intend to do with it if you get it?" she inquired in a low tone.

"What I intend to do with it does not signify; what you have to do is to give it to me." Mrs. Wedderburn's hand came sharply down on the back of a chair, and her long, well-shaped fingers gripped the mahogany tightly, as if she were endeavouring to restrain herself. "Where is she?"

Mollie's eyes met the hard ones bravely.

"I cannot tell you, mamma, if you are going to interfere with her in any way," she said resolutely, but with a quiver in her voice.

"Rosa Middleton has been too much hurt already, and it is not for any of us to add to the soreness of her heart. If you will write her a friendly letter I will send it on gladly, but——"

"I am sure to do that!" The interruption came in a tone of withering sarcasm, accompanied by a harsh laugh. "Perhaps you would like me to write and invite her to come here; no

doubt, in your estimation, she and Faith Emerson would be most suitable society for each other. It is a wonder you did not try to enlist Faith's sympathy for her. It would have been like you if you had."

Mollie made no answer. She had turned away, and was nervously arranging the silver-topped articles on the dressing-table. Her mother's lips twitched with a passion that was rapidly getting beyond control.

"Was I nothing to you, was the honour of your house of no account, that you dared to associate yourself with that girl after I had told every one that Faith Emerson was likely to be your brother's wife?" she asked shrilly. "What right had you to deliberately put me in such a false position, making every one believe I had been telling lies, and turning Faith's presence in this house into ridicule? You have made her and me a laughing stock to the whole place with your ill-directed charity."

"It was not charity," Mollie turned again looking steadfastly into the angry face. "It was a duty, and since no one else seemed ready to do it I had to. I had no greater desire than you had to see Barry marry below his station, but——"

"Marry! I suppose you have taken in every word of that girl's trumped up tale!"

"I believe what all Strathbog has known for a very long time—all except ourselves. What Barry's intentions were is what none of us can tell, mother, but he certainly made Rosa Middleton believe she was to be his wife. As to Faith, or of what you have said concerning her, you know better than to imagine I would willingly show the slightest disrespect to either of you. I have only wished to do right, and because Rosa is poor and has suffered more than any of us I have tried to make things a little brighter for her. That is all. Barry has done worse than break Rosa's heart; he has broken her trust in everything."

"And you are mending it with a trip abroad!" Isabel Wedderburn sneered, shrugging her shoulders with a gesture of contempt. "She and her friends between them have played on you beautifully, though you have not had the sense to see it. It is the worst thing in the world for a girl to assert that a man has been in love with her when she knows he is beyond contradicting it. But whether you like it or not, I shall take the matter into my own hands—I have made up my mind to do that—so give me

her address and do not make any more trouble. I will very soon settle her."

There was a moment of silence, then Mollie's answer came, low, but very firm—

"I cannot, mamma."

Mrs. Wedderburn's eyes flashed ominously.

"Mollie, don't provoke me! I am in earnest."

"I cannot give it to you."

"You mean you will not?"

The girl drew a sharp breath. "Yes, I mean that. I—I am sorry to disobey you, but I cannot do anything which will lead to Rosa Middleton being hurt."

They had come to a deadlock. The knuckles of Mrs. Wedderburn's hand, still resting on the back of the chair, showed white through the skin, betraying the convulsive pressure of her fingers; a red spot burned on each of her cheek bones. Mollie, quailing before her anger, shrank back slightly, her breath coming quickly, but the determination in her face did not lessen.

"I have reason to be proud of my family!" It was the elder woman who spoke first, flinging out her words with scathing bitterness. "I thought I had got enough through the one who is gone, without receiving open defiance and ingratitude from those who are left, but it seems

the more trouble I have, the more you try to give me. If there is anything you and Robert can do to vex and annoy me, you set yourselves to do it. People who talk of their sons and daughters being a comfort, must have very different ones from mine!"

Mollie said nothing. Attacks on herself and Robert had been many and fierce of late, and in her pity for her mother she had been schooling herself to bear with quiet patience.

Mrs. Wedderburn turned now and swept towards the door, speaking as she went.

"Defied I will not be. Understand that, once and for all! Since you will not give me that address I will get it elsewhere, and write to the girl I certainly shall. If she is harbouring any misconceptions regarding having a claim upon us, I shall very quickly remove them."

She was a woman who seldom hesitated over anything once her mind was made up, and before she slept that night she dashed off her letter to Rosa—a letter that for harshness and cruelty and deliberate stinging insults it would have been hard to surpass.

"The story that my son was on intimate terms with you has been circulated in Strathbog, either by you or your people," she wrote, "and in

justice to yourself as well as to the lady who was to have been his wife, I consider it only right to point out that you are damaging your reputation by spreading such a ridiculous fabrication. Those who knew my son are quite aware that his choice of a wife was made, and that even though it had not been, under no circumstances whatever could there have been any question of his contemplating for a moment a marriage with any one not his equal in either birth, position, or education. His tastes would have been utterly opposed to any union of the kind, and had you ever spoken to him you must have realised the width of the gulf between you. The very absurdity of your assertion, however, convinces me that you never came in contact with him at all.

"I understand my daughter has been supplying you with money. Allow me to remind you that the law punishes very heavily any one who obtains money by false pretences, and unless you take means to have your story contradicted, and write to me acknowledging, that it is quite untrue, I shall deem it my duty to place the matter into my solicitor's hands or report it to the police."

"That will show her I am not to be trifled

with," she muttered, as she put the sheet of paper in an envelope and locked it away in a drawer. "If it does not frighten her I shall get Mr. Macdonald to write next, but I won't say anything to him till I have her reply. I shall see to-morrow about getting her address. Mollie cannot be the only person who has it."

Ann Campbell might obtain it for her, she thought. Ann had a good many friends amongst the miners' wives, and she could speak to her on subjects which she would not discuss with any of the other servants. And Ann was not easily beaten. She would try her first at any rate.

She went down to the laundry cottage next morning as soon as breakfast was over. Ann was on the bleaching green, but she left her work and hurried up the path when she saw her mistress approaching, and they met at the porch.

"Good-morning, Ann! I have come to ask you about something." Isabel Wedderburn smiled her pleasantest, conscious that to succeed here she must be gracious. "May I go inside?"

"Surely, ma'am." Ann opened the kitchen door and drew aside to let her pass. "It is

cooler inside than outside the day—here, anyway. The sun is fair scorchin' down on that green."

The casement window of the stone-flagged kitchen was wide open, the white cotton blind was drawn down to its utmost length, and everything within was cool. The mistress of Greystone glanced round appreciatively as she sank into a chintz-covered chair.

"It will rest you to take five minutes of this," she said. "But shut that window, Ann. There is no saying who might come along, and they could hear us before we saw them."

Ann obeyed, a peculiar expression on her shrewd face. There was a moment's silence after she turned round again, then Mrs. Wedderburn put a question abruptly.

"Have you been hearing any of these tales about Mr. Barrington that that girl Middleton has been spreading?" she asked.

Ann drew in her lips.

"A body would have needed to be gey deaf no' to have heard them," was her dry answer. "There are some folk aye so keen on onything like that, that they canna haud their tongues. They dinna ken the wey."

Her mistress beat her foot angrily on the floor.

"Then you have heard also that we have sent her abroad?" she said.

Ann laughed. "I can thank the Lord that I have as much sense left as no' to believe a' I hear. What for would you send her abroad, ma'am? Mr. Barry spoke to her sometimes, but that was the head of it. He told me himself there was nothing between them."

"He told you that?" Mrs. Wedderburn stared at her questioningly. "How did he come to speak of her to you?" she queried sharply.

"Because he couldna help it; I asked him," Ann answered imperturbably. "I had gotten an inklin' that he was friendly wi' her, and I took it upon mysel' to gi'e him a word o' caution. I kent how keen she would be to draw him in. But he just laughed at me for my pains. Rosa Middleton was naething to him, he said."

"I knew that!" A glow of triumph lit up Mrs. Wedderburn's face, and her eyes flashed. "The whole story has been an invention pure and simple. Either the girl's head was turned by his taking some little notice of her, or she was planning from the beginning to get money out of us. More likely the latter!"

"I dinna believe she is awa' to Italy either,"

Ann remarked. "Somebody saw her in Glesca' the week after she left Birrell's shop, an' I'm thinkin' it's a mair likely place for her bein'. Strathbog fowk will say ony mortal thing."

"I suppose you could not easily get her address for me?"

"There's naething to hinder me if you want it. I dinna ken the Middletons mysel', but I ken somebody that does."

"Thank you, Ann. I shall be obliged if you will." Mrs. Wedderburn rose and picked up her black-frilled parasol. "It is time something was being done to put a stop to the talk that is going on, and I want to write her a word or two of remonstrance. She has managed to impose on Miss Mollie, and get some money from her, and, seeing that I made no secret of the fact that Miss Emerson would probably have been my daughter-in-law, I am placed in a very painful position."

She would get the address as soon as she could, Ann promised; and she lost no time, for she went up to the house with it that evening, and by next morning's mail Mrs. Wedderburn's letter started on its journey to Milan.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CUT DIRECT

"ARE you to be at home to-night, sir?"

"No; I am going to Greystone to dinner." Lyall Galbraith, sitting on the arm of a chair, waiting while his housekeeper sewed a button on one of his gloves, came out of a reverie with a start. "Didn't I tell you?" he asked.

"No; I don't think you did."

"I am sorry; I meant to," he said apologetically. "Never mind; if you have made my dinner just hand it over to somebody or other who will be the better for a good square meal. Only it's a pity you have had the trouble of cooking it."

"Oh, I'll soon dispose of it—there are two or three who will be glad enough to take a share of it," Mrs. Stewart remarked, breaking off her thread. "There you are, sir; it is all right now."

"Thank you. If I don't see you again before I go, mind you don't sit up for me. I will put out the lights when I come in."

The bank was closed for the day. The big safes were locked up, and the clerks had gone home, but Lyall had a business call to make yet, and he put on his hat now and went out. Before he had gone twenty yards from his own door an open landau from Greystone, drawn by the fine chestnuts, came sweeping along the High Street, and an eager light flashed into Lyall's eyes as he recognised it. Three days had passed since he last saw Mollie, and the thought that she might be in the carriage sent the blood rushing through his veins like any schoolboy's.

He halted by the kerb as the horses came on; if Mollie was there she would make Fisher pull up, he knew. The next instant he saw Mollie was not there; Mrs. Wedderburn, lying back on the cushions, was the sole occupant.

"She won't see me," he told himself, noting the angle at which her parasol was held. "I wonder where the girls are? Oh, she is to look! She——"

He stopped, his hand arrested in the act of going up to his hat. The parasol had been suddenly shifted, the steel-grey eyes stared fixedly into his without the slightest sign of recognition, the hard, haughty mouth remained

set in an immovable line, as the carriage wheels grazed the pavement where he stood, freezing the ready smile that had risen to his lips. There was no pretence of not seeing him. Mrs. Wedderburn's look was as direct as one person could give to another, and he knew that he was deliberately cut.

His face burned under the insult. It seemed to him for the moment that every one of the passers-by must have noticed it, and he strode on hastily, anxious to be away from the eyes that were regarding him curiously.

"What on earth have I done to offend her?" was his mortified speculation. "She has been stiff enough to me for weeks, but there is a wide difference between being stiff to a man and refusing to recognise him. It cannot be Mollie."

The thought brought him to a momentary standstill again, his brows contracting in sudden alarm. Not for himself. No man living was more independent and fearless than Lyall Galbraith, but the thought of what the woman he loved might have had to endure from her mother's merciless tongue, if Mrs. Wedderburn had learned of the understanding there was between them, was sufficient to stir him to the very depths.

"I cannot go to Greystone to-night now; that's one thing certain," he decided quickly; "but I must see Mollie. I will go to the house for that if need be, though I cannot go to break bread. If there has been trouble in connection with me, I ought to have been there before this. I wonder whether I ought to go now?"

He drew out his watch, glanced at it, and after mentally debating the question for a minute, turned back towards the bank. He would telephone to Robert, withdrawing from his engagement for the evening, he determined, and perhaps he would glean a hint from him as to what was the cause of Mrs. Wedderburn having taken offence. He could make up his mind then regarding what would be the most advisable course to follow.

When he let himself in at his own door the housekeeper appeared, carrying a letter on a salver.

"You were not three minutes out, sir, when one of the boys from Wedderburn's office brought this," she said. "He asked if there would be an answer, but I had just to tell him if there was you would send it down."

Lyll nodded, and tore the envelope open. Mrs. Stewart, watching him, saw the shadow on

his face deepen as he read, but he smiled oddly when he finished, and put the note into his pocket.

"I am not going to Greystone after all, Mrs. S. Mr. Wedderburn has been called from home," he said quietly. "But don't let that make any difference about the dinner," he added as he passed on. "Send it away as you meant to. Anything will do for me."

Robert's letter was longer than the notes he usually wrote, and his elaborate explanation that he had to go to Edinburgh that afternoon and could not return until next day, together with an obvious confusion in his apology, made plain the fact that the real reason for cancelling his engagement was not given. Lyall could read between the lines, and he knew that whatever cause had driven Robert to pen these words, they had not been penned willingly.

"Madame has refused to receive me; that's the short and the long of it, and poor Bob has been forced into a corner," he said half aloud, standing by one of the windows of the dining-room, and staring across the street, the odd bitter smile returning to his lips. "But what has set her up now is more than I can conceive. Granted she does know I care for Mollie—and she is a good deal

blinder than I take her for if she doesn't—she has seen that so long, I can be pretty sure it isn't that only. And the more I think of it, the more positive I am that Mollie hasn't told her anything, so that cause is scored off too. But if she fancies I am scored off, she never made a bigger mistake! She may do many a thing, but she shall never take Mollie from me—never!"

His strong shoulders squared themselves, his head went up with a touch of conscious power. He trusted Mollie Wedderburn with the absolute trust of a great and perfect love, and knowing that she cared for him, her mother's disapproval was merely a secondary consideration. But the knowledge of how it would distress and worry Mollie vexed him; and the cloud did not lift from his face as he recalled his last meeting with Mrs. Wedderburn, and in his own mind went over again and again every word he could remember her uttering, every little act of his own.

She had not been overwhelmingly cordial, but she was not given to treating him with particular geniality, and her cold civility had not seemed colder than usual. No; whatever had made her determined to terminate his intercourse with Greystone had occurred since then; of that he was positive.

"I will take a walk on the Thornton Road as far as the bridge, and see whether I may not meet any of them," he resolved at last. "And I'll haunt the road till I do meet Mollie," he added, setting his mouth determinedly. "Her mother cannot make a prisoner of her."

He swung along the High Street towards the west, and very soon had left the town behind, and was on the tree-shaded road which passed the gates of Greystone. There were few people about there. It was too early yet for the courting couples who patronised the road in the evenings, and save for a sauntering nursemaid and her charges, a footsore tramp, and a couple of the Ballathie gamekeepers, he had it to himself.

No sign of Mollie was visible anywhere, and when he had passed the lodge gates of her home and the little wood, known as "The Roundie," which screened Ann Campbell's cottage from the road, he gave up all hope of seeing her that evening. But the thought of going on till another day with his burden of unrest and anxiety upon him was not a pleasant one.

"I would write to her, and get some one to take the note up if I could be sure it would not get her into trouble," he thought, as he made up his

mind to turn back. "It would be all right if it didn't fall into her mother's hands, but Mrs. Wedderburn may be on the watch. Better not, perhaps; not till another day at any rate. It might make matters worse for her."

The Emmock burn was just round a bend in the road beyond "The Roundie." He would go to the corner and no farther, he decided, but when he came in sight of the old stone bridge that spanned the burn he went hurrying forward, his disappointment a thing of the past, for leaning against the parapet, looking down at the brown dancing water, in which every now and again the trout were leaping, was the girl he had come in search of.

She glanced up at the sound of his footsteps, and in the soft clear light of the early evening he saw the swift change of her expression, the rush of gladness that came into her face. She did not move to meet him, only held out her hand as he came near her, a look of indescribable thankfulness in her dark eyes.

"Did something tell you I needed you?" she said, letting her slim fingers lie in his strong clasp. "All day I have been longing for you."

"What is the trouble?" he asked, his eyes bent on her winsome face. "What has gone

wrong? I am in disgrace with your mother, I know. She cut me dead in the street this afternoon, but that would not disturb me if it was not for your sake. Have I brought trouble on you?"

Mollie shook her head.

"No, I have brought it on myself; you are only an accomplice," she said with a whimsical smile. "My mother has learned all about Rosa Middleton's going away, and I had to tell her that you knew what I had done, so you are getting a share of the blame. Gilbert Barclay was at Greystone yesterday, and repeated something he had heard, and then everything came out."

Lyall knitted his brows angrily.

"Barclay wouldn't be himself if he was not carrying gossiping tales of some sort!" he exclaimed. "If ever there was a scandalmonger on the face of the earth, he is one." Then his tone softened. "Did it come very hard on you, dear?" he asked. "Is your mother very angry?"

"She was furious," Mollie answered, choking back a sob; and without waiting to be questioned she gave him the details of what had passed. He listened in silence, giving a comprehending nod at intervals. Mrs. Wedderburn's

attitude towards him was made plain, and his suspicions regarding Robert's note were confirmed. She had intimated curtly that he would not again be admitted to Greystone, and Robert, angry and hurt, had set off to Edinburgh to give colour to his excuse.

"I don't think my mother quite knows how hard she is becoming," Mollie said, looking across the fields with eyes that saw the green waving corn but mistily. "Her grief for Barry has warped her very nature, and changed her in every way. It is the knowledge of how he died," she added, her voice breaking sharply. "Death through illness of any kind would have been as nothing compared to taking his own life. She has said some terrible things about—the Hereafter. She believes that any one who—who has committed suicide——"

She stopped: her quivering lips would not go on. Lyall waited a moment in silence, then spoke with the slow hesitancy which most Scotsmen display when they must mention inward things.

"None of us can tell what will be dealt out in the Hereafter," he said gravely. "We can only be sure there will be mercy. And we shall all need it."

"She will not go to church; she has never been since the word came, and yesterday she forbade Robert to say grace at dinner," Mollie resumed with a sob. "She told me one day that if Barry is shut out of heaven, she has no wish to go in. I am terrified when she speaks like that."

"It may be but a passing phase," Lyall suggested, trying his best to comfort her. "I have known people as bitter, and after the first shock of the calamity wore off, their faith came back to them stronger than ever. So will hers. Everything is distorted now, but when time has helped her she will take different views."

"That is the only hope I have, but the fear that mischief may be done meantime is lying upon me like a nightmare. I can bear what she says to me, and I know you will understand, Lyall, whatever happens; but I am living in dread of her interfering with Rosa Middleton. If she offers her any insult it will utterly wreck any little good I have been able to do. Rosa will resent it hotly."

"Well, you can't control that; you have done all you can. And she may not be able to get the address though she tries," he answered, in blissful ignorance of the letter that was already

on its way. "Should she apply to the Middletons, they will probably suspect what her motive is, and refuse to give it."

The gloom slightly lifted from Mollie's face; it was impossible to resist his hopefulness. He laid his hand above her slender white one as it rested on the moss-grown stones, and bending till his cheek almost touched hers spoke again.

"I wish I could take you away from it all without another day's delay, Mollie," he said passionately. "Had Frank answered me as I hoped he would, I should have gone to your mother this very night, and claimed you. I would not have you suffer one hour if I could prevent it."

She half raised her head, turning it so that her true eyes, wet and shining, met his.

"I know," she said simply. "I know, Lyall. But I am almost glad you cannot, for my duty is with my mother, and I don't want to be tempted too much. I—I might not be strong enough to hold out."

"You mean you would not come to me?" he questioned blankly.

"I could not—not yet; not while my mother is as she is," she answered bravely. "We both know how ambitious she has always been, and

I must not do anything which would add to her bitterness just now. My place is with her till I can go away in a manner pleasant to her. I could not be happy afterwards if I did not do that."

"That will never come so far as I am concerned."

"I hope it will." Mollie's sweet voice was tremulous. "We don't know what the future has for us, Lyall, but I—I could not live if I did not believe it has that. By and by, when you can go to her and ask for me, she may be angry, but she will come round in time."

"She has other views for you."

The sadness that had held her in its grip the whole day vanished as if by magic: a smile crossed her lips, and rippled into a merry laugh.

"Perhaps; but I will keep to my own views. I am not the first girl the laird of Ballathie has devoted himself to and I won't be the last. I am only getting my turn."

How serious that turn was she had yet to prove.

CHAPTER IX

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE

THE story that it was Mollie Wedderburn, not her mother, who had sent Rosa Middleton abroad to study music spread like wildfire. Gilbert Barclay had the honour of being the first to tell it authoritatively, and he added one or two interesting items at the same time, with the result that before the week was out the whole neighbourhood was aware that Lyall Galbraith was not to be received again at Greystone, and there were varying reports as to the part he had taken in helping Mollie to arrange for Rosa's going.

Everywhere conflicting rumours and tales were heard, and Barry's name got little rest. Some people would allow no doubt to be cast on Mrs. Wedderburn's assertion that Barry and Faith Emerson were to have been married. As many more held to the belief that he would not have paid attention to Rosa Middleton so long had he not intended to make her his wife, and

that his sister must have had good reason for thinking he had intended to do so, else she never would have acted as she had done. A small minority declined to commit themselves, but vowed scornfully that he was a young blackguard, as treacherous in his dealings with girls as he had been in the other affairs of his life.

Altogether, even the scandal concerning his doings at Aldershot and the shock which the news of his death had caused had not given rise to such gossip and excitement, so much casting of aspersions, and tearing to pieces of characters as was occasioned by Barry's love affairs.

Whatever others might feel—and there were a few who asserted that when the theme was exhausted, and they had not Barry Wedderburn's misdeeds and shortcomings to discuss, life for certain members of the community would become flat, and stale, and unprofitable—at least, two persons fiercely resented every word that was being uttered regarding him. His mother and Ann Campbell were at one accord in that.

Mrs. Wedderburn was haughty, proud, cold, and distant; freezing any one who dared to comment on the subject in her hearing, but never

losing an opportunity of emphasising with curt directness the fact that Faith Emerson had been Barry's sweetheart, and intimating by her chillingly lofty manner that any other attachment was too utterly impossible to be even glanced at.

Ann, however, had no belief in chilly silence. Her temper was at boiling point continually, and if any one spoke of Rosa Middleton in her presence it was generally the signal for an outburst. Rosa's name was to her as a red rag to a bull, and had the girl been within reach, no power on earth would have kept Ann from going to her and treating her to what she termed a piece of her mind. To have given Rosa that would have afforded Ann Campbell infinite satisfaction.

No blame for either one thing or another would she lay upon her boy. If she had idolised him in life, since the news of his death had come to her she had looked upon him as a saint.

Touch the regimental money! The people who had said that he had done such a thing ought to be hanged for their vile slander! He never fingered a penny of it that was not his own—never! Not one penny! He was being made a scapegoat to save some one else. The

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men who charged him had his death at their door, she honestly believed, and she hotly demanded of Robert why they were not being punished for it.

Robert's answer had been a soothing one. Not to Ann would he condemn Barry, and the very quietness of his words and manner had roused her wrath against him. Things were come to a pretty pass when a man was content to let his own brother lie slandered in his grave!

Mollie she was vexed with, but all her anger in regard to what she had done was directed against Rosa. That base hussy had got round Miss Mollie with her plausible tongue and her lying tales. Miss Mollie was always soft-hearted, and that brazen, shameless clip had played upon her feelings.

"She was just anxious to get awa' to that outlandish place so that she could hae a fine carry-on whaur naebody kens her," she affirmed explosively one day. Mrs. Wedderburn, in speaking to her, had been betrayed into uttering a caustic word or two regarding her grievance against Mollie, and Ann instantly launched into a dissertation on Rosa. "Sing! I would like to hear her! It's my belief, ma'am, she has nae mair music in her than I have mysel', and that's

no' muckle. I have never kent but twa tunes a' my days—the ane is 'Duncan Gray' and the ither the 'Auld Hunder,' and if they were baith played n the kirk I couldna tell which was which! Very likely she's muckle the same, if you could get at the truth."

"I wonder if I have ever got the truth about anything?" was her mistress's bitter remark.

"The truth about this onyway is that the hale story is a pack o' lies," Ann assured her. "She kent there are some folk that'll believe onything, an' for the sake o' what she could get an' to mak' hersel' big among her ain kind, she set hersel' to get round Miss Mollie. A fine thing it was for her to be paradin' the town makin' out that Mr. Barrington was takin' wi' her! Mr. Barry seek her! If I could get my tongue over her for five minutes, ma'am, I wad lat her ken what I think o' her for havin' the darin' impudence to even hersel' to him."

Mrs. Wedderburn set her teeth on her underlip. It would be a relief to her also to open her mind to Rosa, she felt, but she did not say so. Ann was the only person whom she ever permitted to mention the girl's name to her, but not even to Ann would she give an inkling of what was passing through her brain.

Rosa had sent her a brief note in reply to her letter, passably written, and clearly enough expressed to add fuel to the flame of Mrs. Wedderburn's passion.

She had been guilty of no untruths, Rosa wrote. Barry had courted her for more than a year before his death. As for the spreading of the report that he had done so, she was not at fault; she could not prevent people talking of what they had seen and learned for themselves. She had said nothing, and had nothing to deny.

Regarding the money Mollie had advanced to her, she made no remark, and the mistress of Greystone characterised that omission as more of her insolence.

That the whole matter had taken an extraordinary hold of Isabel Wedderburn was perfectly plain to every one. The charge of fraud against the best loved of her family she could not refute; the knowledge that he had committed suicide had turned her heart to a stone, and lay upon her day and night with a horror that was threatening to play havoc with her reason: in this one direction only was there a chance of throwing back the slander in the teeth of those who uttered it, and to do so was rapidly becoming a mania with her.

She had gone to her solicitor, imperatively commanding him to take proceedings to stop the calumny, and had been strenuously advised to ignore it entirely. That would be the last thing she would do, she told him angrily, but despite that assertion she was being slowly forced into acknowledging to herself that, for the present at least, she was helpless, and the growing conviction added to her inward fury.

"She has succeeded in getting a good holiday at any rate," she said shortly, after giving a minute or two to unpleasant reflections. "I only hope she does not come back here after she has tired of it."

"Let her try," was Ann's grim comment as she lifted some lace which she had been summoned to receive instructions about. "She will soon wish hersel' awa' again if she does."

She quitted the room then, and making her way to the back premises went along the passage to the kitchen door. One of the maids, a bright-faced Strathbog girl, who was down on her knees washing the floor there, drew aside her pail, and straightened her back when she saw her.

"What kind of a temper is the mistress in now, Ann?" she inquired, busying her hands

with the adjustment of her cap. "She has been like a bear wi' a burned foot the whole mornin'."

"Did ever ye see a bear with a burned foot?" was the snappish rejoinder. "If ye did, ye have seen mair than I have. Get on wi' your wark, and never mind the tempers o' yer betters. They are nae concern o' yours."

"That's a' you ken!" Effie Cuthbert answered pertly. Ann had no authority over any of the servants in the house, and Miss Effie did not stand the least in awe of her. "You just stay in here for a day, and see whether folk's tempers dinna affect you. 'Liza Balsillie says she is to leave at the term."

"That will be a loss!"

"Maybe it will and maybe it winna, but the mistress winna like it. She's no' fond o' changin' her servants, and there is plenty being said about Greystone without everybody comin' to ken that some o' us canna get peace to live. If it wasna for Mr. Robert and Miss Mollie, I'd pack my box and be off this very night, for there's nae pleasin' the mistress now. Kick ower that bit soap, will you, Ann? It's lyin' at your tae."

Ann, feeling strongly inclined to apply her foot to the pail of water, and send it over also,

did as she was asked, then made a movement to pass. Effie's free tongue arrested her, however.

"I say, Ann, there's nae use folk denying that Mr. Barry was in love wi' Rosa Middleton. He was! Seein's believin', and I've seen them together often enough, but that's no' what I'm gaen by. He had her photograph, and he used to carry it about wi' him constantly."

Ann's mouth twitched ominously.

"Wha tell't ye that?" she demanded.

"My cousin writes to the young man who was his servant in the army, and he tell't her. I met her last nicht, and she showed me the bit o' his letter whaur he mentioned it. He said——"

"Look here, Effie Cuthbert, if I hear anither word o' that from you or ony ither body I'll walk straight to the mistress, and I'll guarantee yer box will be packed within half-an-hour after that, whether you like it or no'!" came the sharp interruption. "Out of this house you'll march in double quick time, I promise you, and I hope you'll like the character you'll get!"

"Oh, ye can flee up as ye like, Ann, but it's my opinion he was in earnest wi' her."

"You keep your opeenion till it's asked for,

and get on wi' your wark," Ann commanded tartly, stalking down the passage. "If I idled and gossiped as you do, I would be ashamed to show my face among hard-workin' Christian folk. You'll be the next ane to be takin' it into your crazy head that some gentleman is wantin' you."

"She's a thrawn auld sinner that!" was Miss Effie's flattering mental tribute, as her eyes followed the upright, wiry figure. "It's a mystery to me how ony man ever asked her at ony rate. I believe she terrified him intae it! My word, he had been happy the day she took French leave!"

As Ann went across the kitchen garden, Gilbert Barclay, riding a big brown horse, cantered up to the front entrance of the house, and inquired of the butler who admitted him whether Mrs. Wedderburn was at home. The man, accustomed as he was to hearing him ask for the young ladies, thought he had not heard correctly.

"Mrs. Wedderburn did you say, sir?"

"Yes. Must give the girls a rest sometimes you know, Fleming," was the answer given with an air of jocularly. "I am going to have a talk with your mistress first to-day."

Fleming ushered him into the drawing-room, and in a few minutes Mrs. Wedderburn joined him. Perhaps she guessed his errand; at all events, she was quick to detect an unusual tinge of nervousness in his manner, and did her best to set him at his ease; and after one or two desultory attempts at conversation had failed, and he relapsed into silence, she gave him his opportunity.

"I think the girls are in their sitting-room," she said. "I don't suppose they know you are here. Shall I send for them?"

She moved towards the bell as she spoke. He had been twisting and tugging at his moustache, but his fingers abandoned their task now, and he put out his hand to stop her.

"No, don't. Not yet," he said hastily. "The fact is, Mrs. Wedderburn, it is Mollie I have come to speak about." He twirled his moustache again, and hitched his chair nearer hers. "I—I—well, I am wanting her to come to Ballathie, and take me in hand. I am needing a wife to look after me."

Castle Morven was the great house of the neighbourhood, and concerning it and Sir Frank Galbraith Mrs. Wedderburn's ambitious soul had indulged in day dreams once upon a time,

but Sir Frank went away, and stayed, and the dreams died a natural death. She had cast longing eyes on Ballathie then; for after the Morven estate, Ballathie was one of the finest properties in Fife. It had pleased her well when she first suspected that Gilbert Barclay's wandering fancy was turning towards Mollie, and a satisfied smile broke over her face now.

"Tired of your bachelorhood?" she queried. "Most men come to that in time, but it is a state of affairs that is generally not difficult to remedy. Have you said anything to Mollie?"

"No. I thought I had better come to you first. I know you can help me if you care to; and, fact is, Mrs. Wedderburn, she may not be any the worst for a word of advice." His nervousness was wearing off; he sat up and laughed jauntily. "You impress upon her that she will get all that she wants at Ballathie—no beggarly screwing down to a country bank manager's salary there!" he said boastfully. "She will be able to hold up her head with the best when she is Mrs. Gilbert Barclay."

Mrs. Wedderburn understood his allusion, and her brows met in a haughty frown.

"The salary of any bank manager will never

be of the slightest interest to her," she said stiffly. "My daughter is above that, I trust."

"Oh, I'm not afraid it will be." He saw his mistake, and hastened to gloss it over. "I was only joking," he explained. "Galbraith cannot help admiring her—no man could—but, of course, the line has to be drawn there. Mollie has as much sense as the next one, and I'm going to be the winning man, I hope. If I persuade her to say she will have me, I suppose I may take it that you will not raise any objections?"

She laughed graciously. Her countenance had smooched itself out again.

"I certainly shall not. You have my best wishes, and seeing you have not mentioned the subject to her as yet, perhaps it might be advisable that I should prepare her. I shall speak to her to-day."

CHAPTER X

"I WILL NOT"

THE afternoon was well over when Mrs. Wedderburn found an opportunity of telling Mollie of the honour that had been paid to her.

They had had tea in the drawing-room, and Gilbert Barclay, who had been as Mollie's shadow for a couple of hours, having established himself in a chair by her side, evidently with the intention of remaining there, Faith determined to remove him. She wandered over to one of the long windows, and called to him.

"Mr. Barclay!"

He was expatiating to Mollie regarding a lapse from temperance that he had heard a neighbour of his had been guilty of, and concerning which he had been anxiously seeking particulars. He pretended not to hear Faith, but she was not to be put off.

"Mr. Barclay! I want you. Do come here, please."

There was no ignoring the second appeal. He turned in his seat, but did not rise.

"What is it?"

"How very ungallant you are! Please come and see! I am to show you something to feast your eyes upon." She beamed on him as he crossed the floor unwillingly, and sweeping aside the curtains drew him close to the glass. "Look at the sun on the towers and windows of Castle Morven, and the woods! Isn't it a picture? You told me, I remember, that you cannot see the Castle from Ballathie, and when I looked out just now, I thought the sight was too good for you to miss."

"It's well enough," he admitted grudgingly, a suggestion of ill-temper in his voice. Scenery was not in his line, and he felt annoyed at being disturbed. "But much the better we are of it," he added. "Galbraith ought to be ashamed of himself for staying away as he does."

"He has gone abroad somewhere," Faith remarked carelessly. "So the Castle housekeeper says at any rate. It's too bad of him, of course, when he might be helping to make things lively here; but he has only his own inclination to consider. Wait till there is a Lady Galbraith, and perhaps she will keep him in better order."

She opened a window, and stepped across the sill, talking all the while.

"Come along to the corner of the terrace, and you will get a peep at even a lovelier bit," she said. "I pay this particular spot a visit every day, and I was telling Robert this morning that when I am numbered at Greystone with the things that are past and gone, he can christen it 'Faith's View.'"

"I have seen every scrap of the country round, from every conceivable point, times without number," the laird of Ballathie objected. "You can't show me anything new."

"Can't I?" Faith laughed lightly; she had him out now, and would not let him go back till she was ready, object as he might. "Just wait till you see how many beauties my southern eyes have discovered," she said with a nod. "It's my opinion some of you Scotsmen don't half appreciate your native land—you take all the good things that have been showered upon it as a matter of course, and are scarcely conscious that they are there."

"We had better call to Miss Wedderburn to come," he proposed. "She will think we have deserted her."

"Oh, she won't mind," was the candid answer,

given with the utmost sweetness. "She knows we shall go back. Now, look at that ivied tower and the sun gleaming on the diamond-paned windows, and glinting down on Morven water! If I were an artist, I should paint that scene, but I haven't been endowed that way. My sketches have always a charmingly mystical sort of appearance—no one is ever very sure what they can possibly be intended for."

She laughed again gaily, and the sound, somewhat faint, floated back to those they had left. The faintness proclaimed to Mrs. Wedderburn that they were at a safe distance, and she closed a book she had picked up, and levelled her clear, hard eyes at her daughter's face.

"Gilbert Barclay has been speaking to me about you," she began, and her voice thrilling with triumph was more conciliatory than it had been to Mollie for weeks. "He will have something to say to you presently, but I thought it better I should give you a hint. He has made up his mind to set down at last, and he wishes to marry you."

A wave of colour surged up over Mollie's neck and cheek and brow, dyeing them scarlet; an expression of vexation, of fear almost, came into her eyes. For a moment she sat in dismayed

silence, then an odd, unsteady laugh broke from her.

"He could not have a wish less likely to be gratified," she said, trying to speak lightly.

"When I marry I shall care a great deal more for the man than I do for Gilbert Barclay."

Mrs. Wedderburn shrugged her shoulders.

"It is time enough to begin to care for him now. You could not make a greater mistake than to think too much of any man before being certain that he wishes you to be his wife. And you might go farther and fare a great deal worse. Gilbert Barclay will give you everything in reason, and out of reason, too, I fancy, if you take him the right way. I could not desire a better settlement for you."

The flush on Mollie's face had gone now, leaving her very white. She smiled a trifle uncertainly, and shook her head.

"I shall not marry for a settlement, mamma. You can thank Gilbert Barclay, and tell him that, with all due deference to him, I can't think of going to Ballathie. And ask him not to say anything to me on the subject, please—to forget all about having mentioned it. I don't want to hear anything more of it."

"Don't be childish! You have the years of

a woman at all events, and I wish you would occasionally try to have the discretion of one. You talk as if you had no sense of responsibility or of the fitness of things." Mrs. Wedderburn spoke irritably; the touch of conciliation in her manner had been as brief as it was unusual. "Not that I have had any cause to suspect you possess very much of either," she added bitterly. "Whether there is something deficient in your nature, and you can't help it, or you behave as you do with the deliberate intention of provoking me, I don't know: but I am tired of it, and I am not to be treated in this as I have been in other matters. You are my daughter, and so long as you are under my roof I will have obedience. You cannot do everything in an underhand way."

Mollie's eyes filled, but she struggled to keep back her tears. The last taunting sentence only made more plain what was conveyed to her in some form every day—that whatever might happen to please her mother, her offence with regard to Rosa Middleton would remain unforgiven, and would come uppermost always.

"I don't oppose you willingly, mamma; you know that," she said very low. "I try to please you in everything so far as I can, if I can do right at the same time."

Isabel Wedderburn set her lips as she scanned the white face and noted the quiet resolution that, despite the quivering mouth, was very manifest. If ever woman born was tried with her family, she was, she thought passionately.

"I intend you shall please me in this at all events," she said shortly. "Gilbert Barclay is a very suitable match for you, and when he asks you for a definite answer you are to give him a favourable one. I insist upon it."

"I will not, mother. I will not marry him."

There was a moment's silence, in which the troubled, tearful eyes met the hard, determined ones bravely. Mrs Wedderburn was the first to break it.

"Can you give me any good reason why?" she demanded icily.

"I have given you one that ought to be sufficient." Mollie's colour began to rise again, and her sweet, clear voice came unfalteringly. "I do not love him; I do not even like him. I expect a man to be manly, and he is not; there are times when his inquisitiveness and his gossiping get on my nerves, and I can barely tolerate him."

"If you would disabuse your mind of a few of your ridiculous ideas as to what constitutes a

manly man you might realise what is necessary in a husband," was the scathing retort. "Gilbert Barclay has money, he has position, he owns a house which any woman might be proud of, and he is in love with you. What more do you want? How much more can any girl ask for?"

"He has been in love with a dozen girls before me. I am not the first."

"Be very thankful if you are the last. It is easy enough being a man's first fancy, but it's being the last that counts. He was amusing himself with the others; he is in earnest about you. I shall tell him you are considering the matter, and I have no doubt after you have had time for reflection you will see the advantages as clearly as I do. And try to remember one thing. If you have the slightest desire to atone for the disrespect you have shown me, you have the opportunity. No, not another word, please! He has my sanction to pay his addresses to you, and I require you to receive them with courtesy."

She picked up her book and opened it again as an intimation that she had said her say, and Mollie went out by the open window and struck across the park to where the Morven water cut its way through the lands of Greystone.

Her heart was very sore. Her mother's taunts and reproaches grew keener with every passing day, and the patience with which she bore them appeared to be utterly wasted, utterly useless; while in the face of this new development the determination not to add to the elder woman's bitterness which she had expressed to Lyall was worse than idle. If she was to stand firm and claim the right to choose for herself she could only do so at the cost of making her mother more resentful towards her, more bitter in regard to Providence.

None but Mollie Wedderburn herself knew what the past days of misery had meant to her. She had been more than passing fond of the proud, handsome woman who had been both father and mother to her, and the strained relations between them, the knowledge that she was hopelessly under her mother's ban, had given her pain such as no words could express.

The thought of writing to Lyall occurred to her, but she put it from her. She had told him her place was at home, and it was none the less so because of this added difficulty. She was not to show herself a coward. Her mother might make life even harder for her, but she and Gilbert Barclay combined could not make

her marry him against her will. No; they could not do that. And in time they would grow tired of trying.

She had seated herself on a fallen tree, and she was sitting there still when, more than an hour afterwards, Faith came to seek her. The younger girl saw her before she came close, and called out gaily.

"Found at last! I was meditating sending to Strathbog for the bellman! Our newsy friend has taken his departure, my child, so the coast is clear for your return."

"Is it?" Mollie moved farther up the gnarled old trunk and drew aside her dress to make room. "Long ago?" she asked.

"About twenty minutes. You ought to style me your benefactor-in-chief, Mollie, darling, whenever you think of that man's visits. I kept him on a string in the garden telling him tales of his neighbours, and delicately hinting that I could reveal more if I chose. That chained him! Aren't you duly grateful to me for taking him off your hands?"

"You don't know how grateful I was."

"Was?" Faith cast a searching glance at the still face as she repeated the word; the next instant she dropped down on the soft turf and

laid her folded arms on Mollie's lap. "What is the matter, young lady?" she asked. "What has happened? Oh, don't say, nothing! I can read you like a book, and I know something has vexed you. Is it anything in connection with Mr. Barclay? Shouldn't I have taken him away? Or was it your mother? Tell me, Mollie. Was she—saying things?"

A minute or two given to controlling her voice and checking the tears which had risen at the loving, anxious questioning, then Mollie told her. She had learned much of the quick insight and warm sympathy which underlay Faith Emerson's gay, light manner during the weeks which the English girl had spent at Grey-stone, and the sympathy did not fail her now.

"Don't you distress yourself over him or his proposal either, Mollie, darling; he isn't worth it," Faith counselled, her cheeks aflame with indignation. "He didn't require to carry his story to your mother; you're not a child, and you could have given him your answer yourself. It's you who would have to live with him if you were willing to take him, and a nice life it would be! I wish I could serve him out!"

"I suppose he wished to make sure of having my mother on his side."

Faith nodded.

"Yes; and the man who needs his girl's mother to help him with his courting can't get a fall too soon," she said decisively. "He deserves it. And I'm very glad Gilbert Barclay will get one in this case!" she added with a spice of rare viciousness. "He knew quite well he hadn't any chance with you, or if he didn't he ought to have known, for you have been cool enough to him, and it was horribly low down to go to Mrs. Wedderburn behind your back. Mind you tell him so! I should, I know. And I wouldn't wait for him to ask me; I should tell him straight away that I would not have him, and that I should be obliged by his not coming here again."

"I can't do that. The house is my mother's, not mine."

"Oh, well, you can make yourself scarce when he does come, then. And won't I make him sick of my small self before he is done! I'll stick to you like glue, and a Siamese twin won't have a share with me! If he makes love to you, he will have to do it while I am looking on. Robert will be angry."

"About more trouble being made in the house? Yes; he won't thank Gilbert Barclay,

but you have not been so long with us, Faith, without finding out for yourself that Robert's opinion, good or bad, has little influence with my mother," Mollie said, and a flash of anger, not on her own account, made her clear voice quiver. "Robert deserves a better fate than he has got. There are not many like him, and it is hard to know that his own mother is more blind to that than any one. Barry is in his grave, but if he had lived, everybody's favourite though he was, he never would have been one half as good a man as Robert."

The reference to Barry slipped out unwittingly. The avoidance of his name which Faith had shown at the beginning of her stay had been maintained; she never voluntarily mentioned it, and those about her were careful to respect her evident desire for silence concerning him. A flush rose to the roots of her pretty hair now, and, conscious of it, she swiftly turned away her face so that it might not be seen.

"Perhaps Robert will get his reward some day," she said after a moment's pause, and a whimsical smile curved her lips for a second as she uttered the last two words.

CHAPTER XI

DISAPPOINTMENT

"ANY word of that Edinburgh appointment yet, Lyall?"

"None whatever."

"Hasn't Frank written?"

"Not a line."

"That's odd." Robert Wedderburn, who had dropped into the bank for a few minutes' chat with Lyall, spoke in perplexity. "Surely he could not have received your letter. Do you know where he is?"

I know where he was a fortnight ago—he drew some money from Marseilles. As for my letter, there's no doubt it reached him safe enough. There were some documents sent on with it for signature, and he completed and returned these all right."

"And never said you had written to him?"

"He said nothing at all. The papers were not accompanied by so much as a remark. So far

as I know, he has not written to a soul since he left London."

Robert helped himself to a cigar from a box which was on the table of the private room in which they were sitting, and cut the end off it meditatively. Various stories regarding Sir Frank Galbraith were current in Strathbog, and several of these floated through his mind now.

"You are good enough friends, I suppose?" he questioned slowly.

Lyall laughed.

"I couldn't imagine Frank and myself being any other. I hope the day will never come when there will be anything but friendship between us," he said. "When I saw him last, his views and mine were not the same on one particular point, and I tried to convert him: he would not be converted, but that didn't make any difference."

"He was to have been married before now, according to Strathbog."

"According to himself also—at least, he hoped to be, but lots of us get disappointments on that same score," was the answer, given quietly. "That's the real reason of his being abroad and cutting himself off from everybody, I expect.

The girl who was to have been Lady Galbraith is married."

Robert looked up sharply.

"And not to him?" he said, after an instant given to taking in the fact.

"No: not to him. But don't spread it, Robert. There's no use in filling people's mouths. I saw the announcement in a London paper else I should not have known. Some time ago I heard that she was simply playing fast and loose with Frank—keeping him and another man, a South African millionaire, on at the same time, and as things turned out the millionaire won."

"Who was she?"

"A Miss Ashmead; a very pretty girl, but as soulless as a doll, and as calculating as girls are made. Frank had been loading her with presents before I went up to town, and she had taken every one, without, I believe, the slightest intention of taking him if the richer man came to the point. I did my best to get him away; I pleaded with him to come home, and when that failed I offered to apply for leave of absence, and go abroad with him, but he would not listen. He believed in her implicitly; and now, I fancy, he is trying to fight down his disappointment

out of sight. He will get over it, and marry yet—he is too young a man not to throw it off; and Castle Morven will easily get a better mistress than Lillith Ashmead would have made.”

“The best thing that he could do would be to come home, and settle down; the Castle needs him,” Robert remarked, putting on his hat. “You would have made a different master of the place, Lyall.”

“Who knows?” Lyall smiled slightly, but there was a sober look on his face. Envy his cousin he did not, but he loved Castle Morven, and Sir Frank’s neglect of it was a sore point with him. “I don’t suppose I should have been a paragon either. Are you going back to the office now?”

“For an hour or two; I have to be at the station at three o’clock. My mother is going to London this afternoon, and I must see her off.”

There was an almost imperceptible pause. On the several occasions on which they had recently met, nothing had been said regarding the cancelled invitation to dinner: Lyall, conscious of Robert’s honest shame, had been very careful not to utter a word which might lead up to the subject, and he was annoyed with himself now for the touch of constraint that fell upon

him at the reference to Mrs. Wedderburn. But in an instant he had recovered himself.

"Is she going alone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"To make a long stay?"

"That's more than I know, but I shouldn't imagine so. She only told us last night that she was going, and I expect it is merely to do some shopping. I hinted to her a week ago that she ought to go away for a time, and take the girls with her, but she was up in arms at once, and her announcement of this trip took me by surprise."

Lyall, balancing a ruler on the edge of a paper-rack with elaborate care, made no comment, and Robert, after a moment's silence, went on again with unaccustomed vehemence.

"It's a real blessing Faith Emerson doesn't know how the place has been ringing with her name—is ringing yet, for the matter of that, for the talk hasn't died down! For every half-dozen who maintain that she would have been Barry's wife had he lived, there are six ready to swear that he would have married Rosa Middleton. It's pretty rough on a girl, Lyall, when, after a man she has been as good as engaged to is dead and buried, people get the chance of saying he never meant to take her."

"It is a pity any report regarding Miss Emerson and Barry ever got abroad here at all," Lyall said quietly.

"It is because my mother knows it ought not to have got abroad that she is so angry," was the rejoinder. "She was so proud of the prospect of a marriage between them that she could not hold her tongue, and spoke before anything definite had been arranged, and now, in the face of what had been going on with the girl Middleton, she sees her mistake. There's not much that she wouldn't give to prove that the story about Rosa Middleton isn't true."

"I'm afraid there isn't much chance of that."

"No. And Mollie can't be forgiven for admitting the truth of it. The only consolation is that there is no likelihood of any one discussing the matter with Faith."

"But she knows about Rosa Middleton?"

"She must have an inkling, but I have never heard her make any reference to the subject. Indeed, she very rarely speaks of Barry, and when she does, it is in the most casual manner." Robert paused, his fingers on the door handle, an expression of care on his face. "The strain of the whole thing has been too much for my mother, and if this change does her good we shall

all be glad," he said. "How Mollie manages to endure is beyond my understanding. Her lines are falling in anything but pleasant places just now."

Lyall's mouth set itself.

"Is it true that Gilbert Barclay's horse can find its way alone to Greystone?" he asked.

"Something like it. We can't call the house our own." Robert shrugged his shoulders, and laughed shortly. "The Ballathie folk must be getting free scope for once, for they are not seeing much of him. But Faith is a thorn in his flesh," he added, his vexed look giving place to an amused smile. "He won't make much progress in his courting while she is around. She sticks to Mollie like a leech."

He went out, and Lyall returned to his desk, but the letters and documents which were awaiting his attention lay unheeded.

It was a couple of months since he had posted his unanswered letter, for August was well advanced now, and the surprise he had at first felt at his cousin's silence had deepened to a hurt feeling, which was sharper than he cared to own. Without Sir Frank's intercession, it was hopeless to expect the coveted promotion to Edinburgh, but, apart from that, the fact of

being treated in such a manner was galling in the extreme. The young baronet had always been most liberal with his promises of what, given the opportunity, he would do for his cousin, and Lyall felt humiliated by the thought that he had been so ready to take him at his word, only to have the very first favour he asked carelessly ignored.

Failing to get the transfer to Edinburgh, all thought or expectation of asking Mrs. Wedderburn for Mollie's hand must be abandoned for an indefinite time, he knew. Only once in a very long while did such vacancies occur. Another agency, better than his present one, might possibly be offered to him soon, but that would not help him. So long as he held only a minor position, he would be reckoned as dirt beneath the feet of Isabel Wedderburn. And if he could not go where he might take Mollie with him, he would rather remain in Strathbog.

He had not spoken to her since their meeting on the Emmock bridge. Two or three times he had seen her driving through the town, but her mother had been in the carriage on each occasion; and as their mourning forbade the Wedderburns going into society, and the doors of

Greystone were closed against him, while Gilbert Barclay was monopolising Mollie at every turn, she seemed to be altogether shut off from him.

It was chiefly of his cousin that his thoughts were busy as he sat, pen in hand, but idle. There was a meeting of the Bank Directors in Edinburgh that day, when it was expected the managementship would be filled up, and a few hours would bring him the knowledge whether his last wavering hope that Sir Frank might possibly have written on his behalf to his friends on the Board had been fulfilled or completely crushed.

"It will be a relief to know either one way or another," he muttered at last, drawing a pile of letters towards him. "I wish I had never taken it into my head that there was any chance of Frank writing them after treating me so shabbily. I have let the idea buoy me up, knowing well enough that there isn't the slightest likelihood of such a thing."

A knock at the door, followed by the entrance of a clerk with a telegram, interrupted him. When he opened it, one glance at its contents showed him that his doom was sealed.

"MacMaster appointed; very sorry; better luck next time.—Symington."

Symington was the Bank Secretary, and he and Lyall Galbraith were personal friends. Even in the first keen pang of disappointment, Lyall flashed him a thought of gratitude.

"It was good of him to send me word—better certainty of any kind than suspense," was his inward remark. "I know where I stand now."

He took the blow quietly. A moment was occupied with the realisation of it, then his shoulders squared themselves; his face, slightly paler than usual, became impassive. There was nothing cowardly about Lyall Galbraith: neither man nor woman had ever heard him whine, and though his disappointment was as iron entering into his soul, no murmur of complaint passed his lips.

"I must either see Mollie or write to her," he thought when by and by he fell to work again. "She will have to be told, and then—well, it's a case of keeping silence after that for a good few years to come, I expect."

He plodded on through his letters, trying to concentrate his attention on them, but only partially succeeding. He had reached the last one when the telephone bell rang. The instrument was at his elbow, and lifting the receiver he recognised Faith Emerson's voice as it came

over the wire, asking if she might speak to Mr. Galbraith.

"I am here," he answered. "How are you, Miss Emerson?"

"Oh, you know my voice! I'm glad you're in." There was the sound of a merry, relieved laugh at the other end. "I am speaking from Mr. Wedderburn's office," she explained. "I have just called on him, and as I mean to make him give me some tea I want you to come along. Will you? Don't say you can't, please, because you must. Your bank won't run away."

"Is Robert there?"

"No, but he will be soon. I am waiting for him, and improving the shining moments by having an examination of everything in this room of his, so if you wish to keep me out of mischief, come quickly."

"Are you alone?"

"Quite. I have been in Strathbog since lunch, and as I didn't see any fun in walking home when I might get Robert to drive me, I made up my mind I couldn't do better than pay him a visit. The tea is my own idea, but I have discovered there are cups here, so I rather think it won't be an innovation. Are you ready to come?"

Lyall hesitated. He had no objection to meeting Faith, but he would rather not go to the office owned by Mrs. Wedderburn to do it. Faith, apparently suspecting something from his silence, spoke again.

"Don't be horrid! I really do want you—you can't guess how much Mollie and I have been missing you. Do come! I shall be ever so disappointed if you don't."

There was no resisting the coaxing note in the pretty voice. Lyall wavered a moment, then succumbed.

"I wouldn't disappoint you for the world. I will be with you within ten minutes."

Faith's laugh rang out gleefully again, penetrating to the ears of the clerks in the general office as she requested the exchange to take off the connection, and seated herself in Robert's armchair to wait.

Mollie had told her nothing regarding what was between her and Lyall Galbraith, but her quick intuition had enabled her to arrive at a very clear understanding, and Lyall could have had no more loyal friend than she was.

Robert was the first to appear, Mollie with him. In spite of a curt intimation that she

was not wanted, Mollie had driven to the station with her mother, but the drive had been taken in unbroken silence, and the frigidness of Mrs. Wedderburn's good-bye had brought the tears to the girl's eyes. Faith detected their traces instantly, but she said nothing. She knew well that the burden of life was lying heavily on Mollie just then.

The soft pink colour flooded her cheeks when Faith calmly announced that she had invited Lyall Galbraith there to tea, and the pink deepened to crimson when a minute later Lyall walked in. Faith, watching closely, congratulated herself when she saw the swift lighting up of the sweet face, the softening of the man's, and after the porter's wife had made tea and they had disposed of it, she reminded Robert of something he had promised to show her at one of the pitheads, and they went out together, leaving the other two alone.

Lyall produced his telegram then, and put it into Mollie's hand.

"I got that to-day," he said briefly. "The meeting was this forenoon."

"You have lost the appointment." The words came with a quick indrawing of her breath, as she scanned the pencilled lines.

"Oh, Lyall, I am so sorry! I had almost made sure of it for you."

"I almost made sure of it for myself at one time, but not lately," he answered, leaning his elbow against the mantelpiece, and not daring to trust himself to look at her flushed, disappointed face. "Not since I realised that Frank meant to take no notice of my request. I have hoped against hope, it is true, but all the same in my innermost consciousness I knew."

"What could have kept him from writing?" she asked unsteadily. "Why should he have treated you so?"

Lyall bit his lip.

"Possibly he forgot. The letter may have been thrown aside at the time, and he had remembered nothing more of it. But the why and the wherefore are of no consequence now: it's the result I have to deal with."

Mollie made no reply. Her eyes were riveted on the Turkey carpet; her hands, lying in her lap, were shaking visibly. She comprehended to the full what this meant.

Whatever other obstacles Lyall Galbraith might break down, lack of position was the one bar which Mrs. Wedderburn would never overlook; and unless she could bring her mind to

deliberately leave home and marry against her mother's express desire, she knew his life and hers must henceforth lie apart.

Never until that hour had she contemplated such an act, but the hopelessness of combating her mother's harshness was being borne in upon her; Gilbert Barclay's persistent attentions were tiring her out; and in her sorrow for Lyall's disappointment, her love for him swept over her like a flood, carrying with it her sense of duty. If Lyall should ask her to go to him as he was, let the consequences be what they might, she would say yes at once, she told herself passionately. And the thought of the happiness that would lie beyond seemed to send her heart beating up into her throat.

He did not ask her, however. The words she had spoken to him on the Emmock Bridge were still fresh in his memory, and he could not read what was in her mind. His voice broke in on her thoughts, scattering them to the winds.

"There is only waiting for us," he said, and he forced a cheerfulness he did not feel. "I cannot see a way; but, please God, one will be opened up. Here are Robert and Faith coming, dear—I hear them. Don't look like that, sweetheart! There will be brighter days for us yet."

CHAPTER XII

AN OUTBREAK OF FEVER

FAITH was conscious of a vague sense of dissatisfaction as she drove through the town by Robert's side, Mollie and the groom sitting behind.

As soon as she had heard Mrs. Wedderburn was going away, she had planned the meeting with Lyall at Robert's office as a surprise for Mollie, but Mollie's quietness and something in her still, white face forbade the thought that any special happiness had come of it.

She had proposed that Mollie should send away the carriage from the station; they would get Robert to drive them home in his trap, and that would be ever so much pleasanter, she had declared; but before she made the suggestion the thought had been in her mind that Lyall might wish Mollie to walk, and she had determined that if he did, nothing should stand in the way. She would find some means of inducing Robert to start without his sister.

But no necessity for exercising her ingenuity

in that direction had arisen. Mollie had seemed almost in haste to get away, and Lyall had made no effort to detain her. He had escorted them to the trap, and assisted them into their seats; then, immediately they started, had turned and walked off by the pits, with his long, swinging stride.

Faith drew her pretty brows together and stifled a sigh as she recalled it all, and Robert, finding her unusually silent, cast about for a subject of conversation, and resolved to unburden his mind of something that was troubling it.

"Have you heard that there's another outbreak of fever, Mollie?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

"No!" Mollie turned with a quick, scared movement, and faced him, plainly startled. "Where? When? Not typhoid, Robert?"

"Yes. A couple of cases were reported from Potter's Row a fortnight ago, it seems; and there have been more than a dozen since; and now it is appearing here and there all over the town. I was speaking to Doctor Glennie to-day, and he told me he had three fresh patients in different houses in Elm Street this morning."

"The very places it was worst in before—there were five deaths in Potter's Row and as many in

Elm Street last summer. What did Doctor Glennie say, Robert? What is he blaming for it?"

"Oh, the heat, of course—and the water." Robert was giving his attention to his horse again, and carefully flicked a fly off its flank. "It's the old cry—that they are drinking impurities from one year's end to the other; and will drink them while they have no other water than that they are getting."

"Who are drinking impurities?" demanded Faith. "Are we?"

"No: don't be alarmed." Robert smiled at her as he spoke, glad to hear her voice. "It's the water supply to Strathbog that is supposed to be defective—ours is all right. There was a fever scare, for which the water was blamed, the first year my mother was a widow, and she laid pipes from Tulchan Loch to serve Greystone," he explained. "Strathbog people draw theirs from quite a different source."

Tulchan Loch—a long, smooth sheet of water, over which Mrs. Wedderburn had absolute control—was on the Greystone estate. Faith had walked round it several times, and it seemed to her that it might well supply the whole community if need be.

"And the bad water they are drinking is causing fever?" she asked.

"The doctors have always put it down to that. There was an outbreak last year about this time, and a good deal of strong talking was indulged in, but the question got shelved somehow. The fever spent itself when the colder weather set in, and, as usual when a thing is everybody's business, it was made nobody's, and nothing was done."

"And—will nothing be done now?"

Robert shook his head slowly.

"No, I don't suppose so. Plenty is said about the working man and his demands, but my experience is that he has something like unlimited patience—he wouldn't bear as he does, if he hadn't. He will stand anything if it is only driven hard enough into him that nothing is to be gained by complaining. Glennie was at white heat to-day, vowing he would write to the papers, and go to the County Council meeting and kick up Dublin, but even if he does, that is all there will be of it."

"Did he say that?" Mollie asked eagerly.

"That and very much more. But you know what Glennie is—all fire at the moment, and then off to something else. He is too busy a

man to keep pegging away at any public grievance."

"But surely he can't be the only one who might speak out," Faith expostulated. "There are dozens of others. Why don't you do something, Robert? If the water from Tulchan Loch is better than that they are getting, couldn't pipes be carried into the town? There is plenty for everybody."

"Yes," Robert agreed quietly. "Plenty, and to spare. But Tulchan water does not seem to be available for Strathbog."

Faith's lips parted to ask why, but before they could frame the words Mollie, moving restlessly, broke in with another question.

"Robert, don't you think I had better go back at once? I should like to. If we cannot do anything to keep away the fever we can at least show our sympathy when it comes, and some of them will need things which they cannot easily get. I must see to that."

Robert looked dubious, and made no motion to pull up. Whatever Mrs. Wedderburn's faults were, meanness was not one, and material help was always forthcoming from Greystone for any necessitous case in Strathbog. She herself did not visit where there was distress, but Mollie

was well known in the miners' homes. Fever was fever, however, and Faith was there. They must not expose her to any risks

"Hadn't you better put it off till to-morrow?" he suggested after a moment's pause. "By the time you could be at Potter's Row the men would be home, and you would be going in just when they are at tea. If you are anxious, you can write a note to Glennie, and he will tell you if there is anything specially needed to-night. Or I'll go down after dinner and ask him if you wish."

That would do, if he did not mind going, Mollie said. She had not thought of the men, and was glad he had reminded her. And then she relapsed into silence again, and Faith resumed her inquiries.

Whose fault was it that the water was drawn from an impure source? How often did the epidemics occur? Well, how often had they occurred? Couldn't water be got from anywhere else if not from Tulchan? Couldn't they get up a public subscription to obtain it if it was to cost too much otherwise? If they did she would help; she would make her father send a handsome contribution, and levy a tax on every friend she had, she declared.

Robert answered as best he could, but he was relieved when the house was reached and the questioning had to end. Faith ran upstairs at once to take off her hat, and Mollie, seeing Robert go into the gun-room, followed him.

"Robert, it is murder and nothing else! If there are deaths this year such as there were last, I shall go out of my mind!" she cried desperately, and her voice had a dull sound, as if her heart was thudding in heavy, unsteady beats. "How long is it to go on? Is there nothing—nothing that can be done?"

"If it lay with me, Mollie, what ought to be done should be done without an hour's delay, but I am as powerless as any one," was the grave, pained answer. "My advice has no weight with my mother; nothing I can say will move her one iota. She simply will not give the water."

"And this is to go on year after year! These people—the men who work for us, who make our living for us, and the women and children they care for, are to suffer! Robert, it can't be! Try again," she urged, her eyes swimming in tears, her face showing absolutely colourless against the dark oak panels of the door, beside which she had halted. "Make another effort to

get mother to see things as they are. We have had our own loss, and though it has embittered her to us, it may make her feel for others when it is a question of life and death. She can't help feeling. And the responsibility is ours. We cannot get away from that."

"Glennie didn't stick at telling me so! He wasn't in a merciful mood, and he said what is true—that if the men were not all in our employ they would have been up in arms long ago," Robert answered, his tanned cheeks reddening. "I told him I couldn't help it, but he didn't believe me—at all events he looked as if he did not, and rapped out something to the effect that if it was his mother he would compel her to give what was wanted. Possibly his mother did not bring him up as mine brought me," he added, his lips twisting themselves in a queer, bitter smile. "To allow me to compel her to do anything has never been exactly a habit of hers."

The question of the water supply to Strathbog was an old one, but not until some five or six years before had it reached the vexed stage. As Robert said, the men were patient, not given to making any great outcry so long as things were bearable, and, though they grumbled a good deal when the water was at its worst, they made no

real effort to have their grievance remedied. But three outbreaks of fever in three successive summers, each one after a spell of sultry weather, had roused them at last, and a demand for purer water was put forward.

Who was at fault in offending their mother neither Robert nor Mollie very clearly knew, but offended she was. Tulchan Loch was the nearest; pipes were already laid from it to Greystone, and, as the greater part of Strathbog belonged to Mrs. Wedderburn, it was naturally towards Tulchan the thoughts of the inhabitants turned. A letter was sent to the mistress of Greystone; a letter of request those who formulated it called it—but she, taking umbrage at some of the expressions, gave it another name. Nothing less than a command she deemed it.

Her haughty temper rose at the idea of any one presuming to dictate to her, and, hearing that the men were declaring freely that it was no more than her duty to give what was asked, she answered with a curt, cutting refusal. Tulchan Loch was reserved for the private use of Greystone, and under no circumstances whatever could the water from it be supplied to Strathbog, she wrote.

Letter followed letter; one appeal after

another was made to her. Robert remonstrated and reasoned; Mollie pleaded and told her tales of illness and distress, but it was all of no avail: she remained obdurate. She believed she had not been shown proper respect, and she prided herself on never forgiving impertinence.

Things had gone from bad to worse since then. For one or two summers there had been but a few mild cases of fever, but last year it had broken out again in a serious form, and there had been in all fifteen deaths. That epidemic had left its mark on Mollie Wedderburn; and, young man as he was, Robert's first grey hairs had appeared then.

"I might write to her, and make one more appeal," Robert resumed after a pause. "There is not one chance in a hundred that it will do any good, but it cannot make things worse than they are. She declined to even discuss the water supply with me the last time I mentioned it."

"She cannot do more than refuse, and it is our duty not to leave undone anything that we can do." Mollie's big eyes looked wistfully at her brother's plain, wholly trustworthy face, and a wish that had been in her heart almost continually since she had reached years of understanding sprang to her lips. "I wish my

father had provided for your having a freer hand after you came of age, Robert. You ought to have had it."

"Perhaps; but I did not get it, you see. He could not tell what sort of a chap I might grow up, and he was as well to err on the safe side," he said quietly. "But for the men and what ought to be done amongst them, I should not greatly mind; it's when I think of them I grow restless." He stopped, took a turn across the floor, then came back, and broke out rebelliously. "I feel a coward when I am amongst them, and that's God's truth! They look to me to make things right for them, and when I don't they imagine it is because I don't want to. Don't want to! I would give twenty years of my life gladly if that would lift this scourge from them or bring back those they have lost!"

Very rarely was Robert Wedderburn betrayed into talking of his feelings, and he turned away again sharply as if ashamed of the emotion he had displayed. Mollie opened the door.

"I would make any sacrifice, too—I would do anything to put the wrong right," she said tremulously. "Only I am in even a worse position than you, Robert; I did my best before, and now I need not even try."

She passed out then, but on the threshold she paused and looked back.

"You will write?" she asked.

"Yes," he promised; "I will write."

"And don't trouble going to Doctor Glennie; I will telephone to him or send some one with a note."

The doctor was not at home when she rang him up, so she wrote a note, and was crossing the hall with it in her hand, meaning to despatch it by one of the grooms, when Effie Cuthbert, neat and smart in her black afternoon dress and snowy cap and apron, came along one of the corridors. At sight of the girl Mollie changed her mind about a groom and intercepted her.

"Effie, you never object to a walk, I know. You might take this letter to Doctor Glennie's for me and get an answer, please. You can run in and see your sister when you are in Strathbog, but don't stay too long, as I may have to send another messenger to the town after you come back."

Effie departed with alacrity, her face beaming, and within ten minutes was hurrying down the avenue. By such simple acts Mollie won and held the hearts of the dependants at Greystone.

More than two hours had elapsed before Effie reappeared, bringing a verbal message only.

"The doctor bade me tell you that he would let you know to-morrow morning what would be needed, Miss Mollie," she said respectfully. "He hadn't time to write it all down to-night. I had to wait for him ever so long, and when he did come he hadn't a minute to speak to me. He read your letter while he was swallowing a cup of coffee, and started off again right away. He came up the street with me."

"Going out professionally?"

"Oh yes, miss. He said he had got the fever to deal with again, and he wished he could be in half-a-dozen places at once. I heard him saying to his wife that in one house in Elm Street he has got three patients."

"Three!" Mollie repeated, startled. "Whose house is it?"

Possibly Effie had expected the question; certainly her reply came with a glibness and innocence which told of preparation.

"Middleton was the name, Miss, — David Middleton and two of his children were ill, he said."

Rosa's father! Some of the children Rosa was so fond of! Mollie's heart stood still, then

bounded on again with sickening speed. Any one but Rosa's people! Any one rather than those she held dear.

All three were seriously ill, she learned next morning, and her heart went out in sympathy to the absent girl. She did not go to Strathbog; Robert's fear for Faith made her relinquish that intention, and she spent the day at home, wondering anxiously what her mother's reply to Robert's letter would be.

Her hopes rose high the following day when a telegram from Mrs. Wedderburn announced that she had cut her visit to town short, and would arrive at Strathbog with the evening train. Robert went to the station to meet her, and was agreeably surprised when she inquired minutely regarding the fever, and of her own accord spoke of the water.

"It looks as if they must get other water from somewhere," she said. Then she turned her penetrating eyes full upon him. "What is Mollie saying about it?" she asked. "Is she taking it as much to heart as she did last year?"

"I am afraid she is," he said frankly, marveling at the questions no less than at the eager tone of her voice. "If you can see your way to

give Tulchan water to the town, mother, no one will be more grateful than Mollie."

Mrs. Wedderburn smiled oddly, a satisfied expression on her face, and her answer made Robert marvel still more.

"I will talk it over with her."

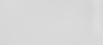
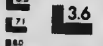
She did so before going to bed; or, rather, she did the talking; Mollie sat dumbly listening, feeling as if the world was slipping from beneath her feet.

Mrs. Wedderburn was willing to give Tulchan water to Strathbog on one condition. That condition was that Mollie should marry Gilbert Barclay.



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CHAPTER XIII

HER ONLY CHOICE

THERE was no sleep for Mollie that night ; to go to bed never occurred to her. She sat in an armchair, her face hidden, and when, in the early hours of the morning, stiffness and cramp added themselves to her torture, she dragged herself to the window, and, kneeling down by it, rested her folded arms on the sill and stared over the tree tops to where the smoke from Strathbog rose faintly against the sky.

The little town itself was not visible from any part of Greystone, but she saw it all in her mind's eye as she gazed. The flat ground where the pits yielded up their rich store, the straight rows of miners' dwellings, the brae leading up to the long, straggling High Street, the irregular bye-streets and squares, where tenements stood side by side with red-roofed cottages, and old-fashioned gardens abutted on cobble-stoned foot-paths.

She saw the people, too—"our people," as she

had always loved to call them—the men, some of them rough at times, but all unflinchingly respectful to her, showing the true courtesy of kindness when she came in contact with them; the women, hard-working and patient, most of them with that brave light in their eyes which seems to belong peculiarly to the womenkind of men who daily go down into the bowels of the earth, carrying their lives in their hands.

The suffering they had endured rose before her—the weeks and months of ill-health, the poverty that in many cases illness had brought, the empty chairs, the struggle to clear their feet and pay their way which death so often added to the breaking hearts that were left behind.

She understood it all; she pictured it with the realism which only knowledge and perfect sympathy can give. She thought of the mine accidents which no man could avert, but though she had sorrowed for these they did not lie upon her conscience. It was not in human power to bring back life, but the widows and orphans of breadwinners whom the pits had claimed had always been liberally helped; Mrs. Wedderburn had been no niggard in that respect, and everything that could be done for them had been done. Mollie did not require to have reflections

on that score. And it was well she did not. Her burden, as it was, was almost beyond her strength.

Had ever girl such a choice? she asked herself dazedly. It was no paltry question of money this, no mere pitting of a rich man against a poor one. It was human lives against her life's happiness, and, what was infinitely more to her, the happiness of the man she loved.

Was it only days since she had said to Robert that she would make any sacrifice, do anything to right the wrong—said so with never a doubt in her mind? Was it less than twenty-four hours since her mother's telegram had uplifted her? She seemed to have lived years since that stunning intimation had been made to her. Faith and trust and anticipation were things of some far-off past; hope was dead, and belonged neither to the present nor to the future.

In the first shock of her despair last night she had cried out the truth concerning Lyall. She loved him, and could be no other man's wife. He cared for her, and trusted her to wait for him; and her mother's supercilious, sneering smile was haunting her persistently, her mocking "I thought as much!" was ringing steadily in her ears.

"You may please yourself," Mrs. Wedderburn

had said then, face and voice alike hard as the nether millstone. "You have talked a great deal of what you would cheerfully do to rid the place of the fear of fever, and you have the opportunity now of proving whether you meant what you said, or were treating us all to idle chatter. But understand one thing clearly. No matter what happens, you never shall marry that upstart of a bank clerk and keep up any semblance of friendship with me. Never! If you prefer to let Strathbog remain as it is, and decline to marry Gilbert Barclay, you may go to Lyall Galbraith as soon as you please. I shall not raise one finger to prevent you, but from that hour you shall cease to be my daughter, just as completely as if you were in your grave. I mean that, and you know me better than to imagine I will not keep to it."

"Mother, have pity—have some pity!" Mollie had sobbed. "If you force me to go to Ballathie you will kill me."

"I am not forcing you; you are quite free in the matter. The desire to give Strathbog Tulchan water is yours, not mine, and I simply state my conditions; that is all. You may accept them or not as you think fit. I told Gilbert Barclay I would let him know when he

might speak to you, and I intend to tell him to-morrow either that his proposal is off or on, so you can make up your mind between now and then. But to-morrow evening I must have your answer."

Make up her mind! How could there be any making up about it? She was hemmed in; she had no choice; only one course was open to her. Almost before her mother's decree had left her lips, she had known that she might have given her decision then could her tongue have uttered the words.

If she could keep from thinking of Lyall just for one half hour, perhaps she would realise the joy and comfort her sacrifice would mean to others, the blessed relief and thankfulness that would be in so many simple hearts at Strathbog. But she could not. His true face, the tender ring in his voice, the absolute trust in his eyes rose above all else. And now that trust would be wrecked; his faith would be killed.

"Oh, God grant that he may understand! Grant me that! Grant me that!" she prayed wildly. And then she broke into bitter, agonised weeping, and, sobbing until she was utterly exhausted, fell asleep where she knelt, her head resting on her folded arms.

When she awoke the breakfast bell and the stable clock were ringing simultaneously; it was nine o'clock. She sat up, confused for a moment, then rose and commenced to change her dress and make ready to go downstairs. She would not wait till evening; she would tell her mother at once that she agreed to do what she wished, and Robert would know before he went to the office that his burden of shame was lifted. He would be able to look his men openly in the face to-day.

"If I had been a man I don't think I should ever have won the Victoria Cross," she said to herself with a pitiful attempt at lightness, as, having left her room, she had to stop in the corridor outside to try to still the shaking of her limbs. "Courage isn't my strong point evidently! And yet I have often scorned other people for not being brave!"

She went on then, across the wide landing and down the broad, richly-carpeted stair, and had almost reached the foot when Mrs. Wedderburn came out of the breakfast-room. She left the door open behind her, and Mollie saw Robert and Faith at the far end of the perfectly appointed table—Robert talking with the ease which characterised his intercourse with Faith

Emerson—and which would have considerably astonished most of the ladies of his acquaintance could they have witnessed it; Faith wholly engrossed in what he was saying, her bright, animated face dangerously attentive and sympathetic. They would not hear her, Mollie knew.

“I was coming to you.” She stood still, facing her mother, and spoke in a low voice, from which every tremor, every note of feeling had suddenly gone. “If the water is to be given, it had better be made known immediately. There is no need to waste another day.”

Isabel Wedderburn’s eyes flashed triumphantly.

“Then you agree to what I suggested?”

“Yes; I agree.”

“You will marry Gilbert Barclay?”

An ominous quiver of the white lips, a momentary shrinking of the slender figure, then the answer came, if less steadily than before, sufficiently clear and assuring.

“Yes.”

“I am very glad; I thought you would be sensible,” the elder woman smiled graciously, her gratification and elation showing in every line of her countenance. “Gilbert will be very proud, and there will be universal rejoicing at

Ballathie and Strathbog. Each place will have its own motive! I suppose I had better send him word," she added with a laugh, glancing at the tall grandfather's clock in the corner of the hall. "No doubt he will be here in the afternoon even if I don't, but he won't forgive me in a hurry if I keep him out of his happiness an hour longer than is necessary."

"You will have the work commenced without delay?"

"I shall take the first steps now." She turned back into the room and swept up to the table. "Robert, as you go through the town, stop at Mr. Macdonald's office, please, and ask him to come out to see me. I should have gone to him, only I must be at home to-day, and I wish to give him some instructions immediately. I have decided to grant the water."

Robert, who had paused in his conversation with Faith when he was addressed, flushed like a boy.

"You will grant it! That's good news, mother!" and though he strove to be his usual calm, quiet self, Faith's quick eyes detected the excitement he was trying to suppress. "There isn't a soul in Strathbog but will bless you for it," he said heartily. "I will send Macdonald

out with pleasure ; you couldn't have asked me to go on a more agreeable errand. And he will be delighted, too."

"Tell him not to put it off."

"No fear of his doing that! He won't be longer than it takes me to drive in and him to drive out. It isn't a secret, mother?"

He had heard the wheels of the trap crunching the gravel outside as it came round from the stables for him, and was crossing towards the door as he spoke. His mother stared haughtily.

"A secret?" she repeated coldly.

"From outsiders, I mean. Do you wish it not to be spoken of yet, or am I at liberty to tell any one?"

"Perhaps you will be good enough to allow me to make my arrangements before you proclaim them to all and sundry," was the curt reply. "You may send round the town crier after that if you have any desire to do so. Mollie, where are you going?"

A rustle of skirts had attracted her attention, and she wheeled round. Mollie, who had been standing leaning against the side of the doorway, her face averted, but listening to every word, had moved across the hall, anxious to avoid Robert, but the sharp question arrested her.

"Upstairs," she said quietly.

"Come and eat your breakfast and don't be foolish! Faith, do you mind touching that bell? Fleming will have to bring fresh tea. I have no patience with people trying to starve themselves into illness."

Mollie, deeming obedience easier than refusal, came to the table, and Faith, after doing as she was asked, followed Robert out to the steps. After she had seen him depart she strolled off through the grounds, for she knew Mrs. Wedderburn was still in the breakfast-room, and there would be no chance of finding Mollie alone for at least an hour.

"I wish she had stayed away something like a decent time," she thought, standing at the corner of the house to wave a hand to Robert as he disappeared round a bend in the drive.

And I cannot think what she has come home for! If she only wanted to say she was to give that precious water she could have written; she didn't require to travel post-haste from London when a penny stamp would have carried the information!"

Robert was out of sight now, and she walked on again, her pretty brows meeting in a puzzled frown. Though Mrs. Wedderburn was invari-

ably kind to her, those days in which she had been absent had been delightful ones for Faith, and she was feeling slightly aggrieved by her sudden return.

"When daddy comes home again I'll claim Mollie for a long visit, and we will have a real, downright good time together," she decided presently. "And I'll get daddy to invite Mr. Galbraith at the same time. 'A beggarly bank clerk' may not be class for Mrs. Wedderburn of Greystone, but Major Emerson, V.C., knows a gentleman when he sees one."

A groom passed her just then, taking a short cut towards one of the side gates, and when he had reached the road she noticed that he went in the direction of Ballathie. Gilbert Barclay's summons was already on its way, and within an hour he was at Greystone, as elated as Mrs. Wedderburn herself.

Mollie was sent for to come to the drawing-room after he had an interview with her mother, and Isabel Wedderburn immediately quitted the room, leaving them alone.

He fidgeted in his chair for a minute or two, then came to the point without any beating about the bush.

"So you think you and I will manage to run

in double harness?" he said, making one of his heavy efforts at pleasantry. "By Jove! I feel like a benedict already at the very thought of it. Upon my word, I do! I've wanted to ask you for a long time, but I had to do as the old lady told me, and, after all, 'Slow, but sure' isn't a bad motto, is it? It has landed me all serene anyhow."

Mollie looked straight at him, something like disgust in her gaze.

"Why did you not ask me before you went to my mother?" she inquired with a cool scorn that would have gladdened Faith's heart. "Was my consent not of more importance than any one's?"

"Oh, come now, Mollie, don't be hard on a chap! I haven't been through the mill before, you know." The direct question had taken him aback, and the brick-dust hue of his complexion deepened as he stammered out his reply. "How was I to know what was the correct thing to do? And you kept me at arm's length any way. You couldn't mistake what I was after, but you never gave me a chance of speaking to you."

"And you thought it better that my mother should help you in any case?"

"Well, not much good my getting even your consent if I wasn't sure of having hers! I know how many beans make five, my dear, and I don't need any one to tell me that," he said with a grin. "However, she is safe, so I only want you to say the word now. Ballathie is waiting for you."

Mollie shrank back; the hand which she put up to screen her face shook.

"I cannot go yet—not for a long time," she breathed. "I—I will marry you, but you must wait."

Gilbert Barclay stopped fingering his moustache and eyed her sharply.

"A long time? What does that mean? This side of Christmas?"

"No—oh no, no!" Christmas was almost four months distant, but to Mollie Wedderburn at that moment it seemed very close, and her cry had a sound of fear. "I—I could not be ready," she murmured hurriedly. "Let our engagement be for a year, say,—a year from now."

"Oh, that's coming it too thick! What would be the use of waiting a year? We'll make it the spring if Christmas won't suit—early in the spring, but I don't see the force of

wasting any more time than that. And your mother will agree with me, I know."

Yes; her mother would agree with him in anything. Mollie bent her head.

"Very well, the spring be it," she said.

CHAPTER XIV

A MEETING ON THE ROAD

“ You like it, Rosa ? ”

“ I couldn't tell you how happy I am in my work, father. I never imagined anything could bring me the happiness I have got from it. I wouldn't change places with any one living.”

“ You have the gift, you see, my lassie,” David Middleton murmured weakly, his sunken eyes, a world of pride in their depths, resting on his daughter as she sat by his bed. “ Singin' has aye come to you as nait'ral as it comes to the lark. You are keepit busy, I suppose ? ”

“ I never have an idle minute. I have been trying to improve myself in other things, too,” Rosa said shyly. “ There is a Scotsman, a Mr. Murray, who lives in the same house as I do, and he lends me books and helps me in lots of ways.”

“ A young man ? ”

“ No ; he is white-haired. So is his wife.” Rosa added the last sentence quickly, as if she

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guessed the covert suspicion that lay behind her father's question. "He was a minister; he had been educated at Edinburgh, and had a West Country kirk, and both he and Mrs. Murray are of very good birth, but they are poor, and he has been teaching English in Milan for twenty years. If he has helped me in one way she has in another, and I have learned very much from her."

That she had learned much from some one was very evident. Her voice and manner, her quiet movements and slight acquisition of dignity, the refinement of everything about her demonstrated that.

The simple lilac cotton skirt and blouse which she was wearing—part of the outfit Mollie had given her—were exquisitely fresh and neat; her collar and trim white waist-belt were spotless, her wavy hair, burnished by much brushing, was arranged with a simplicity that had been unknown to it in the days when she had stood behind Peter Birrell's shop counter. She had been bewitchingly pretty then; she was rarely beautiful now.

Four days ago she had arrived in Strathbog. When the news reached her in Milan that her younger sister and a brother were down with

fever she had been anxious and unsettled, craving to see them, but entertaining no serious thought of going home. The distance was too great, the expense too heavy, to dream of that. When she learned of her father's illness, however, and later was informed that his life was in danger, her smouldering longing had blazed into a desire that would not be restrained.

She had saved a little from the money Mollie sent her—keeping it as a stand-by in case of emergency—and delaying only long enough to make arrangements with the Professor who was training her, and write to Mollie, she had started off.

David Middleton was better now; the sight of her had pulled him round the corner, he declared, and by the end of the week she would be on her southward journey again.

"If they're braw folk an' a' that you ca' them, what's adae that the man is teachin' there?" he asked presently, when he had slowly revolved in his own mind the information concerning Mr. and Mrs. Murray. "He doesna drink, does he?"

"No; his health broke down, and he had to resign his charge and go abroad. It was his one chance, the doctors said. When he grew a

little stronger they settled in Milan, and he commenced teaching, but it has been an unending struggle all these years. The first thing Mrs. Murray taught me was contentment—and gratitude,” Rosa said, a far-away look in her lovely eyes. “She devotes her life to her husband, and counts herself blessed in doing it. She asks for nothing more than to keep him on his feet.”

“Poverty comes harder on the like o’ those folks than on us,” Mrs. Middleton broke in, appearing in the doorway. The room in which her husband was lying opened off the kitchen, and she had been listening to the conversation while she washed up the dinner dishes. “He has spoken plenty noo for a while,” she said glancing towards the bed. “Come awa’ but the hoose, Rosa, and let him get a sleep. He winna shut his een as lang as you are there.”

“I’m no’ sleepy,” the sick man protested.

“But a sleep will do you guid. Come awa’, Rosa.”

“I will bring you your tea, father, and we shall have another gossip then,” Rosa promised, smiling down at him and setting his pillows comfortably. “Mother will be picking me off by the first train if I hinder your getting better.”

She passed into the kitchen and closed the door, then astonished her mother by removing her slippers and putting on a pair of walking shoes. She had not been outside the house since she came—had steadily refused to go, though Mrs. Middleton, in her proud desire to show her off, had invented various errands for her. She had come to be with her father, she said, and wished to stay with him, but her mother shrewdly suspected there was another reason, and she was right. To calmly face the people who knew her and her story was an ordeal Rosa did not feel equal to yet. It had to be risked to-day, however.

“I am going to meet Miss Wedderburn, mother,” she explained. “In that note I had from her this morning she said she would have liked to call, but seeing they have a young lady staying at Greystone, Mrs. Wedderburn objects to her coming near any of the infected houses.”

“That’s but richt. Are you gaen through the toon?”

“No; she is to wait for me at the Emmock bridge. I’ll not disturb the children, mother. If they ask for me tell them I shall soon be back.”

She was conscious of an inward shrinking

when she stepped out of doors into the clear sunshine of the September afternoon; a shrinking which increased as she went along the street and noticed eager, curious faces appearing first at one and then at another of the windows. It was a relief when the houses were left behind, and she was out on the open road, with only hedges on either side.

There were signs that the preparations for the new water supply had already been set on foot. Along one side of field after field short stakes driven into the earth marked the route by which the pipes would be carried. Far away on a bit of upland ground a couple of men, stooping, examining, measuring, were silhouetted against the sky.

The surprise that had been occasioned in Strathbog by the announcement that the water was to be given had been equalled only by the thankfulness with which it was received. The belief that Mrs. Wedderburn had granted it to show her pleasure at her daughter's engagement had made Mollie more popular than ever.

Rosa had been puzzling over that engagement ever since she heard of it. Barry had been wont to talk to her freely of his home affairs, and she knew the light estimation in which the younger

members of the Greystone household had held the master of Ballathie; she also knew that Barry had believed that his sister and Lyall Galbraith were fond of each other, and to her idea Mollie was not a girl likely to change.

A report had got abroad—through one of the servants—that Mr. Galbraith had gone to Greystone when he heard the news, and, after a short interview with Mrs. Wedderburn, had been shown the door. If life was going wrong for Mollie nothing could be more unjust, Rosa thought rebelliously.

She was nearing the gate of Greystone when a landau drawn by a pair of bays passed her. Mrs. Wedderburn was in it alone, and her impassive face crimsoned when, after a searching look at the graceful figure on the footpath, she recognised the girl whose very name was anathema to her. Without a moment's hesitation she ordered the coachman to stop, and alighted.

"Drive on to the house," she commanded; "I shall walk the rest of the way."

Fisher obeyed, he and the footman, both suspecting what the stoppage was for, feeling they would give their ears to look behind. Mrs. Wedderburn stood waiting till Rosa came up, then stepped in front of her.

"You are the girl who wrote me that insolent letter some time ago, I believe," she began coolly, staring with reluctant wonder and amazed admiration at the lovely face. "I am glad I have met you. Perhaps you will give me the denial now which you thought you were safe in refusing then."

"I have nothing to deny," Rosa answered, and though her heart was beating furiously her manner was as calm as Isabel Wedderburn's own. "And if there was any insolence in the letter I wrote to you, I am not aware of it. I certainly did not intend any."

"Possibly in the class to which you belong insolence is not very clearly defined," was the rude retort. "The whole thing was a tissue of untruths and impertinence. You know that there never was any understanding between you and my son; you manufactured that tale to suit your own ends, and I want a retraction from you. The lady who was Lieutenant Wedderburn's intended wife is my guest, and for her sake, as much as for my own and his, I have a right to insist upon getting it."

Rosa's dark, velvety eyes met hers unwaveringly.

"I neither raised the story nor spread it, and

I will not contradict what is true," she said with quiet dignity. "Maybe I was foolish to believe all that Barrington said to me, but that doesn't alter the fact that he sought me out when he was here and wrote to me while he was away."

"Had he been alive you never would have dared to make such an unfounded assertion!" Isabel Wedderburn blazed fiercely. "Do you know that you are in my power? Do you forget that I can prosecute you for getting money from my daughter on false pretences? It suited you to ignore that when you wrote to me, but if I choose to say the word you will not leave Strathbog free."

A faint smile, stinging in its indifference and scornful contempt, flickered across Rosa's lips.

"Try, if you like," she said shortly. "I took no notice of that part of your letter because I considered that I should lower myself if I did, and I would think the same if I discussed it with you. It is a pity you stopped me. Good-afternoon."

She made a movement to pass on, but Mrs. Wedderburn, her face grey and distorted with passion, barred the way.

"Yes, a pity for you!" she cried, the deadly

bitterness and wild hate in her shrill voice turning the girl's soul sick "It was easier to defy me at a distance! But I will tell you one thing, Rosa Middleton, before I am done with you—to-day, for the first time, I am thankful that my son is dead! Better, a thousand times better, that he should have died as he did than have lived to become the prey of such as you. Even a suicide's death was preferable to that! Whenever you think of him, remember that I, his mother, said that, and will say it so long as I have breath to draw. And he was the best loved of my children."

She stepped aside, gathering her rich silk skirts round her as if she feared contamination from the simple lilac dress, and Rosa walked on, her head held very erect. The tears came raining down her cheeks, however, before she had gone many yards, and she had to make her way into "The Roundie" to have her cry out, so that she was late for her appointment, and Mollie had been waiting fully a quarter of an hour when she reached the Emmock bridge.

Mollie came forward quickly, her hand outstretched.

"Rosa, I am so glad to see you! I had nearly given you up," she said, and there was no mis-

taking the warmth of her welcome, nor her keen appreciation as she surveyed the younger girl from the crown of her sailor hat to her neatly shod feet. "How you have improved!" she exclaimed involuntarily. "You look an altogether different being from what you were when you went away."

"I am different," Rosa answered gravely, but it was not of her appearance she was thinking. "Are you quite well, Miss Wedderburn?" she asked, shyly returning the scrutiny. "You are very white."

"Am I?" A tinge of colour crept into Mollie's wan cheeks, the mouth which had been so sad of late quivered. "The heat has been trying me," she said evasively. "Shall we walk on while you give me all the news? One talks better walking than standing. You did not expect to be in Strathbog so soon."

"You were not annoyed when you knew I was coming, I hope," Rosa asked quickly. "When I heard father was so ill I felt I must come. And I am not losing anything," she added eagerly. "Professor Lugani has promised to make up my lessons."

"I should have done the very same had I been in your place," Mollie assured her promptly.

"And a promise like that speaks volumes for Professor Lugani's belief in his pupi'. You must be pleasing him."

They went along the Thornton Road, returning by the old quarry and down the hill—Barry's favourite walk in days gone by, every inch of it redolent with happy memories for Rosa.

All their talk was of her work, her busy life in Milan, of Professor Lugani's encouragement, of her aims, and Mr. and Mrs. Murray's friendship, and it did Mollie's aching heart good to see her enthusiasm. Difficulties she had in plenty undoubtedly, but she was encountering these bravely, surmounting them one by one, never admitting the possibility of defeat. She was a born musician, and now that she had got her opportunity it was easy to see she would make the most of it.

"You don't regret now going in for your training?" Mollie asked with a smile.

"Regret!" Rosa gave an answering smile, remembering the scene in Sauchiehall Street when Mollie first proposed to help her. "Anything but that! I am thankful every hour that you did not take me at my word and leave me to my own devices."

Then, moved by a sudden impulse, she spoke words she had not intended to utter.

"If you want a proof of how much it is to me, I will give you one," she said. "Your mother wrote to me about it—said I had swindled you out of money to take me abroad, and—and other things; but even a taunt like that could not make me give it up. I felt I could bear to have anything thought of me rather than do that."

Mollie had heard nothing of her mother's letter before. Rosa had made no reference to it in any of her notes, and the knowledge that Mrs. Wedderburn's threat had been carried out brought a startled look into her face.

"When was that?"

"Weeks ago. I replied to the letter, but I did not take any notice of what she had said about the money, and she stopped me on the Thornton Road this afternoon, and raked up everything again."

"About Barry?"

"Yes. She wanted me to deny that I ever knew him." Rosa smiled tremulously, and bit her lip to still its quivering, then threw back her head. "I haven't told any lies about him yet, Miss Wedderburn, and I'm not going to begin, but I'll never willingly show myself in Strath-

bog again. If I can help it, she shall not get the chance of repeating what she has said."

Neither spoke again for a few minutes. Rosa, crying silently, could not, and Mollie lost herself in wondering miserably whether her mother was wholly dead to the knowledge of what mercy meant. And so they came to the stile where their ways separated. Mollie held out her hand then, and Rosa looked up at her penitently as she took it.

"I am sorry I told you, Miss Wedderburn," she said. "I did not intend to, but it slipped out. I wish now I had kept it to myself."

"Never mind. I knew she wanted to get your address, but when things seemed to go on all right, I thought she had not succeeded." Mollie's eyes smiled faintly into the lustrous brown ones in an attempt to hide the shame she was feeling. "I'm glad you did not lose your temper and throw up everything—that would have meant having to persuade you all over again, and I know too well how hard a task that would have proved," she said with forced lightness. "Do you go back on Saturday?"

"Saturday morning. Will you let me wish you joy, Miss Wedderburn? You will be married long before I can hope to see you again, and——"

“Rosa, don’t!” The interruption came with a sharp indrawing of the breath that sounded like a sob of pain. “Don’t waste time wishing for what I cannot have. If I am ever mistress of Ballathie, you will know that I am not a happy woman.”

“It is her mother who has done it—Mr. Galbraith won’t be rich enough for her,” was Rosa’s mental summing up as she went home, haunted by the despair in the face of the girl who had done so much for her. “But it will break Miss Wedderburn’s heart. And she deserves better than that if ever any one did!”

On the following Tuesday she was back at her studies, tired with travelling, but keen to begin again. Professor Lugani welcomed her gladly. A friend of his, one of the professors of the Paris Conservatoire, was spending a few days in Milan, and the Italian, anxious that he should hear his Scottish pupil, had arranged that she should sing before him.

“He leaves to-morrow morning, and I was afraid you would not return in time,” he said. “We shall go to his hotel this afternoon.”

To the hotel they went accordingly, and after receiving the Frenchman’s kindly criticism and warm praise, Rosa said good-bye, and left the

two musicians together. She was standing in the vestibule, fastening her roll of music more firmly, when two Englishmen who had just come in from a ride stopped beside her to light their cigars, and looked back.

"I wish I saw the beggar in," one said. "He can sit; by Jove, he can! but he shouldn't be up there alone with that vicious brute. Ten to one it will pitch him over its head."

"Who did Antonio say he is?" the other asked. "A Scotsman?"

"Yes; Sir Frank Galbraith of Castle something or other. Come and have a drink. If he doesn't come soon I'll go out on the Simplon Road, and look for him."

They passed out of earshot, and Rosa's eyes, a surprised smile in their depths, wandered over the sunny square.

"Fancy seeing a Strathbog face here!" she thought. "He can't know me, but I should recognise Sir Frank Galbraith anywhere. I'll wait till he comes."

CHAPTER XV

RECOGNISED

FOR a few minutes more, Rosa stood where she was ; then she moved down the steps, and commenced to walk leisurely across the square. If Sir Frank was coming from the Simplon Road there was only one street by which he could come, and she made for it.

How odd it was to have heard his name like that ! What a very small place the world was after all ! Some day perhaps, when she was a great singer, she might come to know him, and she would tell him then how she had lingered in this old Italian square to watch him ride by, merely because he belonged to the dear homeland. Simply because his was a "kent" face.

Sit ! She should think he could ! Hadn't he and Barry the reputation of being the most daring riders after the hounds in their own county ? These Englishmen need not have had any fear for him ; it was said at home that there was nothing

in horseflesh that the laird of Castle Morven could not master.

And he had always been the same. She could remember how, when they were lads home from school on holiday, Barry Wedderburn and he used to tear through Strathbog on horseback, bringing the folk running to their doors and windows to stare and wonder how long they would "carry on" before they broke their necks. Maybe it had been better for Barry, at least, if his career had come to an end then; if—ah!

Her speculations were cut short, swept aside by a sudden thrill of alarm. Round a corner of the square a restive horse, riderless, led by a dark-faced Italian lad, had come, and instinct told her that it was the vicious brute of which the Englishmen had spoken. The next instant, however, her fear died away as swiftly as it had arisen, for a young man in riding garb appeared in their wake, his head bent, as with his handkerchief he vigorously brushed a coating of dust from his jacket.

That he had been thrown was very evident, and an amused smile played about Rosa's mouth. That must be an unusual experience for Sir Frank Galbraith!

The smile was still on her lips when he raised

his head and she saw his face. The earth seemed to rock beneath her feet then, the old fountain in the middle of the square swayed and spun round dizzily, so did the houses, and the blue sky above seemed to be coming down, down, closing in upon her.

She flung her hands up over her eyes, crying out, and when she took them away the man had come quite close to her, and she knew it was not the face of the dead she saw, but Barrington Wedderburn in the flesh.

He was staring at her when she uncovered her face. The lad and the horse had passed on, and no one else was near, but for the moment Barry Wedderburn was utterly unconscious of his surroundings. For one brief second he believed his senses were playing him a trick, then the recognition, the dumb, terrified appeal in her wide open, staring eyes told him he had made no mistake. The discovery which he had evaded so long had come.

"My God! Rosa Middleton!"

The words broke from him in a hoarse whisper. Rosa shrank back against the wall, her hands thrown out in front of her, seemingly to keep him off, but he made no effort to touch her. He pushed his hat off his forehead as if its weight

oppressed him, and stood petrified, his fingers clenched like a vice on the riding switch he carried, and for what appeared like an eternity, though it was only some thirty seconds, they confronted each other thus.

All through her life Rosa Middleton kept the memory of every detail of that scene—the sunny square, the buildings shutting it in, the fountain with its spraying water sparkling like diamonds, the church on the far side, a couple of flower-sellers by the steps making a vivid spot of colour with their wares; and here before her, on this bit of shady pavement, the man who had been all the world to her, and whom she and all belonging to him had mourned as dead.

“Rosa!” he repeated thickly. “Heavens! I cannot believe yet that I am not dreaming. Where have you come from? What has brought you here?”

“You—did not die!” She had found her voice at last, but it sounded faint and husky and strained. “They think at home—you did. They—they——”

“They were meant to think that; they had got to think it!” He moved forward now and laid hold of her hands. “We can’t stand here like this, Rosa; let us go somewhere or other,”

he said more gently than he had spoken before. "Which way are you going? Only don't take me where there are any other Strathbog people, mind! You are all right, but my ship is scuttled if I meet any one else who knows me."

Rosa shivered. Despite the warmth and the brightness of the day she was icy cold; the blood in her veins seemed to have frozen.

"Sir Frank Galbraith is staying at the Hotel d'Europe. Do you know that?" she breathed. "He may come this way at any moment and see you."

"Sir Frank Galbraith won't hurt me," he answered jerkily. "Are there any Strathbog people with you?"

"No; none. I am alone."

"Come along then. We will go over to the gardens and sit down; you don't look fit to keep your feet. This surprise has been too much for you."

He had taken her arm and was trying to draw her away, but she stood still looking up at him, her burning eyes searching his, a hundred questions beating on her brain. Who was lying in that suicide's grave? Who was providing Barry with money? He was as well dressed and prosperous looking as he had ever been,

and penniless men do not indulge in horse riding and Continental travel. Was she really in her senses? Was this not Barry at all?

"You know that they buried some one whom they thought was you?" she panted. "That your brother and Mr. Galbraith identified—the body?"

"Yes; I learned that from the papers. But that is all I do know, so you will have to tell me the rest, but it's of yourself I want to hear first. To meet you—you above everybody—here! I can't take it in yet; it doesn't seem possible."

She moved on with him now, but words were slow to come, and her silence suggested a new idea to him. He turned upon her sharply.

"You are not married?"

"No; I am not married." The question was reasonable enough perhaps, but it hurt her, and she gave the reply in a stifled tone. "I am here for musical training," she explained briefly. "Your sister is lending me the money"

"My sister? Mollie?" He gave an amazed whistle. "How has that come about? Have my people made friends——"

He stopped, interrupted by a burst of coughing, coughing such as Rosa Middleton had never

heard, and which made her shudder as she listened. When it had spent itself he wiped his lips with his handkerchief, and she saw a dark stain on the white linen.

"Have you had that cough long?" she asked quickly.

"Months; it's quite an old friend," was the light answer. "I caught a cold the last time I travelled from Strathbog, and it has liked me so well that it won't leave me. I should miss it now if it did."

He was thinner than he had been, and the flush which the racking of his body had brought to his face was dangerously bright, but, save for that, he was looking well enough, or at any rate no worse than might be accounted for by the dread which must have been his constant companion for long. Rosa did not press the subject. It would keep, and she could return to it later, she thought.

They found a seat beneath the trees in the gardens, and, sitting there side by side, she told him of how true a friend to her his sister had proved. But she told it constrainedly, for with the thought of Faith Emerson in the background she could not speak freely of the grief that had wrung her heart. It was for Barry to

say if he had honestly cared for her, not her part to inform him unasked that she had loved him above anything or any being on earth.

"Mollie always was a brick!" he commented, moodily studying the mosaic of light and shade which the sunshine filtering through the trees was making on the green turf. "She is as straight as a die; so is Bob. It never cost them any trouble to keep on the rails; I was the one to skid! 'Be good and you'll be happy, but you won't have any fun.' I chose the fun, Rosa."

And had included her in it, she thought, but she would not say anything which might put him off talking of himself. Her brain was beginning to settle to its normal state, and a dim suspicion was making itself felt—a suspicion that she must have verified.

"You got it, too," she said briefly. "Has Sir Frank Galbraith known all the time that—that the man they found was not you?" she asked after a moment's pause to gather courage. "Did he come here with you?"

She was watching him closely, and she saw a dull flush mount to his face, saw the fingers which were playing restlessly with his whip suddenly stiffen and remain still. Since he had

encountered her eyes in the square he had known this must come, and though the idea of denying the truth had crossed his mind he had put it from him at once. To her at all events the truth would be best, but for the moment he could find no words for his confession, and Rosa, mistaking his silence, spoke again.

"Barry, tell me," she pleaded. "Is he here?"
"No."

The monosyllable was muttered shamefacedly, and very low, but she heard—and understood. For the second time that afternoon the world rocked beneath Rosa Middleton's feet, yet Barry Wedderburn, acutely sensitive in his humiliation, was shown nothing of the horror that rose within her. Her face blanched, her very lips, white already, grew even more colourless, but she did not draw away from him one hair's breadth, and she did not trust her voice till she was sure she could command it.

"You are passing as Sir Frank?"

"I am all that's of him."

"He is dead?"

"Yes. It was Galbraith who shot himself—almost before my eyes, and I left him in my place and took his."

"And nobody suspected?"

"No. I cleared out instantly, and have been dodging in unheard of holes and corners ever since. I have been safe enough, but it has been as near to purgatory as any man can go, short of getting a trip to that delectable region. I have been staying at Monza the last three weeks, but I grew sick of it, and made up my mind to risk Milan for a few days. Seeing it isn't the season I believed that there wasn't one chance in a thousand of meeting any one who knew me. I didn't think the odd chance would turn up."

Was he glad or sorry? Rosa wondered. Not a word he had uttered, not an accent in his voice had been one degree warmer than he might have used to any ordinary acquaintance. Only he trusted her. She felt sure of that, and within the next half hour he gave her ample proof that he did. All the details of his escape he told her, all his wanderings, the restless moving from place to place, harassed and driven on by continual fear.

He had to keep Frank Galbraith's name after having once adopted it, for letters and papers were always being sent after him, and any disappearance of the laird of Castle Morven would have caused inquiries to be set on foot immediately. The letters he had for the most

part ignored; one or two imperative ones he had replied to by telegram, but in no other way; documents that had required signing he had signed; the copying of Frank Galbraith's boyish signature had been a matter of no great difficulty, but he had carefully avoided writing even a single line.

It was a relief to him to tell; and to be listened to without having one reproachful or condemning word cast at him was what he had not dared to hope for. He had believed he might sway Rosa as he willed, but he anticipated blame. None came, however.

"Who ought to have succeeded Sir Frank?" she said quietly when he had finished.

"Lyall Galbraith; he was the heir. Didn't you know that?" he asked in surprise. "They were cousins."

Lyall Galbraith—the man who was in love with his sister—the man for whose sake she suspected Mollie Wedderburn was breaking her heart! The significance of the statement came upon her with full force, but she could not cope with any more—not yet. She rose slowly, her tired eyes, heavy with pain, mechanically watching a group of olive-skinned children who were playing near.

"I dare say I may have heard they were, but if I did, I hadn't paid any attention; and I had no idea Mr. Galbraith was nearest to the title," she said. "I am going home now, but you need not come with me, Barry; you are quite close to your hotel here."

"What should hinder me from going with you?" he demanded bluntly. "I should rather think I'm going! Seeing there is no one there who knows me, there's no reason why I shouldn't." He had risen also, and possessed himself of her music now as a matter of course. "It is the first time you have ever told me you didn't want my company, Rosa. Did I sin beyond forgiveness when I made a mess of things?"

His voice had taken its old caressing tone. Barry had never hugged trouble, and his nature was unchanged. Now that his confession was made he could spare thought for other matters.

Rosa's eyes filled.

"I have never judged you," she said simply. "It was not for me to do that; you know best yourself how you were tempted. But we won't talk of it any more to-night, Barry. I want to think it all over first."

"Rosa, I've trusted you. You won't betray

me!" he cried in a sudden panic of fear. "You won't tell any one? You won't write to Mollie?"

No; she would not do that, she assured him, wondering if he did not understand that his safety was as much to her as it was to himself. And then his cough attacked him again, and after the paroxysm had passed she questioned him about it.

It was nothing, he declared slightly; only a cold. If the Continental doctors were not a pack of muffs they would have cured him of it long ago. He had gone to one after another, and they had done nothing for him but give him a lot of beastly drugs—as if he was to swallow medicine like an infant! A cold had just to run its course, and his would take itself off in time.

He left her at the door of the house in the Place Duomo in which she stayed, and her kindly friend, Mrs. Murray, noticing them from a window, wondered who he could be, and waited expectantly for Rosa to come in and tell her. But Rosa did not go near her that night.

CHAPTER XVI

BARRY'S LOVE

"You must go back, Barry."

They had come in through one of the city gates—the Porte Sempione—and were walking slowly homewards. Every day for a week they had met. Each afternoon when Rosa quitted the Professor's rooms Barry had been hovering somewhere near, and each evening after tea he had been waiting to join her when she went out for her walk, but this was the first time the subject of his own doing had been reopened.

She had told him nearly every scrap of Strathbrog news: all about Mollie's engagement; the fever, which was abating now that cooler weather had set in; the new water supply, and the general rejoicing in regard to it; as well as all the odds and ends of gossip which had helped to swell her letters from home or which she had heard when she was there. One or two items she had kept silence about—the talk concerning himself and Faith Emerson, and his mother's attack on

herself. Barry knew nothing of these as yet, and only that afternoon had he learnt of Lyall Galbraith's reported visit to Greystone and the reception accorded to him there.

"I cannot vouch for the truth of it; there are some folk in Strathbog who could not be happy unless they were busy with somebody's private affairs, and what they cannot find out they invent," Rosa had said, with the ring of bitterness which any reference to scandal-mongering invariably brought into her voice. "That is the story that is going, but whether it is true or not, your sister is not happy. That was not hard to see."

"Oh, it's true enough, I dare say! My mother would not stick at showing him the door if she had a mind to, and he certainly wanted Mollie." Barry took out a handsome pocket-book of green crocodile leather, gold-mounted, and bearing the Galbraith crest, and after searching through it produced a letter. "Read that and you will see. It was amongst the first of the letters that reached me, and I've carried it about with me simply because Mollie's name is mentioned in it."

It was the letter Lyall had written asking his cousin for his help, and the ignoring of which had caused him such keen disappointment. He

had been very straightforward in it ; his principal reason for being so anxious to get the coveted promotion was that he might marry, he admitted. Frank would remember he told him in London that he hoped to win Mollie Wedderburn for his wife, and though he knew Mollie would not let his circumstances be a bar, he could not ask her mother for her till his position was improved.

It was the frank, confident statement of one man to another whom he believed ready and willing to help him, and the guidance which Rosa Middleton had prayed for night and day during the past week came to her as she read. She had asked to be shown what to do, and this letter was as a beacon light.

"You did not do anything?" she questioned as she handed it back.

"I couldn't. I hadn't the faintest notion of the names of the Directors he referred to, and even if I had managed to get these, a nice bungle I should have made of writing to men I didn't know. I hoped all along that Lyall would have a stroke of luck and land in on his merits, and confoundedly vexed I was when I saw in a home paper that another man had been appointed. I am precious sure he wasn't smarter

than Lyall, but it just shows what some of these Johnnies are. Influence is everything. They don't know what fair play means."

"Influence would have made a great difference to Mr. Galbraith in this case at any rate," Rosa answered quietly. Did he take no blame to himself at all? she wondered. Very little, judging by his manner and conversation, and the knowledge made her task the harder, but she did not falter. "But if he and Miss Wedderburn want each other, and only his position is standing between them, your duty is very plain, Barry. You must go back."

She had first said that outside the Sempione Arch; she had repeated it now after an interval of silence. Barry's face had darkened; the hot temper lying beneath his gay exterior had betrayed itself for an instant in the angry gleam which came into his eyes, then his mouth set in stubborn lines, and these lines showed no relaxing when he spoke.

"Thanks! I've done many a mad thing, but I'm not likely to crown my folly by doing that," he said drily. "I have not quite taken leave of my senses."

"Neither have you quite taken leave of knowing what is right. She is your sister, and if

holding your tongue means ruining her life you cannot do it," Rosa returned steadily. "And it will be nothing short of that if she is forced to marry Mr. Barclay. She knows she will be miserable."

"She shouldn't have promised to marry him."

"Maybe not, but it's questionable if she had any choice. And whether she had or not, doesn't alter the fact that Mr Galbraith is Sir Lyall now, and every hour you keep him from knowing it is so much added wrong. And this cannot go on for ever, Barry; you know that. What about the future?"

"I never think of the future. And don't you worry your pretty head over it either, Rosa. I don't see any fun in supping sorrow with a long spoon."

"But it has to be thought of," she persisted; "and the longer the truth is hidden the worse the exposure will be. If you would go back now, Barry, or if you would write and confess, I don't believe Mr. Galbraith would be hard on you; but if you wait until you are found out, and Mollie perhaps is married, and everything for which he would have valued the title and Castle Morven is gone——"

"He'll not get me to punish, if that's what you are troubling yourself about."

"I am troubling myself about a great deal more than that." She paused a moment. She had been an apt pupil, and had learned much, but she did not always find it easy yet to put her thoughts into proper language, and she had a sensitive dread of making herself ridiculous by mistakes. "Sometimes it isn't the punishment that is the worst," she went on after she had thought out her point. "The punishment the law gives, I mean. It is all the suffering and misery that is brought on one's own folk that must hurt most. Blood is thicker than water, and you cannot help feeling it. If you will not go, you can write."

"I'll do neither the one nor the other, so you needn't suggest it. I have taken Frank Galbraith's place, and I am going to stick to it," was the determined answer. "Lyall might be as generous as you say, but it wasn't because of him I had to leave home, and what sent me out of the country will keep me out. I'll never go back unless I'm taken, and then it won't be alive."

"Well, write," she urged. "Every one at home will be as anxious to keep your secret as

you are yourself. It will be a crushing load off their minds to know that you did not take your own life, and it will be easier for you in the long run."

No; writing or going were the same so far as Barry was concerned; he would do neither. It was like moving in a circle. All the way home-wards Rosa entreated, reasoned, argued. She told him bluntly that the fraud he was committing day after day was a great deal worse than the sin to which he had yielded in a moment of temptation; she urged Lyall Galbraith's rights, she pleaded for Mollie's happiness, but not one word she uttered moved him in the slightest. Talk as she would, she got nothing but unqualified refusal. Face the danger that might accrue from confession he would not.

"Lyall Galbraith would not want Mollie if he knew what I have done," he said. "At any rate it is not likely, and supposing he did, how much better would he be? She is engaged to Barclay, and my mother will see that that isn't broken off."

"If she was to be made Lady Galbraith, Mrs. Wedderburn would not let Mr. Barclay be an obstacle," was the shrewd reply. "Mr. Galbraith would not be shown the door if he had a title."

"Mollie will settle down at Ballathie all right. Barclay is such a fool that she will be able to do what she likes, and Lyall will get some one else. Even if he is never anything more than bank agent at Strathbog, he will find plenty of girls willing to take him."

"But he is not to remain agent at Strathbog. He is Sir Lyall Galbraith, and he will have to get his rights. Barry, for the sake of your own conscience, you must do it."

"Oh, I squared accounts with my conscience long ago! It doesn't make me uncomfortable now."

She could make nothing more of him that night, but she renewed the attack the next day and the next. The result was the same, however, and when, on the third afternoon, she came out of Professor Lugani's house and missed his familiar figure from the street, she concluded he had tired of her persistency.

A whole week passed, and she had almost given up hope of either seeing or hearing from him again, when one evening she was interrupted in the midst of her studies by a knock at the door of her room. She wheeled round from the piano in surprise, for Mr. and Mrs. Murray were out, she knew, and they were her only

visitors ; then she rose to her feet, her cheeks crimsoning, for it was Barry who stood in the doorway smiling across the room at her.

"I have come to see you. May I come in?" he cried cheerily. "I have been standing on the landing listening to your singing for the last ten minutes. How are you?"

"Very well, thank you. You are a stranger!" Rosa shook hands and drew forward a chair for him. "I am very glad to see you," she said. "Sit down."

"I have been in bed," he announced abruptly. "Had to call in a doctor, and he wouldn't let me get out of it; it's my opinion he gave me fancy doses just to keep me there. I knew you would be wondering, but I was tied up. I will never let a doctor within yards of me again."

"What has been the matter?" she asked gently

"More doctor's humbug than anything else. I was a fool to let him near me, but that beastly cough of mine was so bad last Tuesday I thought I would see if something couldn't be done, and sent a waiter for him. Much good he has done me! I chucked out the whole array of his bottles this morning, and got up and dressed as soon as I was sure that I had seen the last of

him for the day. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Working hard," Rosa answered, still surveying him gravely. "Did the doctor tell you to remain in bed?"

"Oh, never mind him! He had to do something for his money, so he talked. And wasn't his English a treat!" Barry lay back in his chair and roared at the recollection as heartily as though he had not a care in the world. "I never heard an attempt like it! Come on, Rosa, and sing to me; that will do me more good than all the drugs he has poured down my throat."

She could not play—her piano practice was in an elementary stage—but without demur she lifted some Scotch songs which she had brought from home with her, and, selecting one, began to sing. And when the sweet, pure notes of her voice rang through the room in the words of "My Ain Folk," Barry, settling himself to listen, caught his breath.

He sat staring into space then, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, seeing nothing of the barely furnished room and the graceful, girlish figure, with the soft lamp-light falling on her shining hair. The words had carried him

away to the little Fifeshire town with its great black coal pits, its irregular streets and quaint houses, and Greystone—Greystone with his mother and Robert and Mollie, and all the known faces and familiar objects around them. His "ain folk" were not "Lowly, puir, and plain folk," but they were his "ain folk" all the same, and Barry had not forgotten them.

He got up abruptly when she finished, throwing back his shoulders with an impatient jerk, and quietly confiscated another piece of music which she had taken up.

"Not to-night, Rosa; the memory of that is worth keeping by itself," he said, and his voice was husky. "Besides, I want to speak to you: I know I had no business to come here, but I have been thinking over things while I have been caged up, and I couldn't rest."

Had he come to say he would yield? Rosa's heart beat faster as she looked up at him.

"Yes?"

"It is just this: I have been long enough in Milan." He sat down on the arm of her chair, fixing his eyes on her face, but she leaned forward suddenly, and resting her elbows on her knees buried her chin in her hands. "I must move on——"

"Are you going to Scotland?" she interrupted.

Barry laughed.

"It isn't the time of year for travelling north," he answered with good - tempered mockery. "A warmer climate is more congenial." He slipped his arm round her, and tried to draw her to him. "Look here, Rosa, I am needing you. It isn't safe for me to stay in this place any longer, and I cannot go without you. Will you give up your training, and come with me?"

A wave of wild delirious joy, like unto no other feeling she had ever experienced, swept over Rosa Middleton. Whatever he was, despite all his careless cruelty, his folly and sin and disgrace, with all the strength of her deep, passionate nature she loved him; loved him the more intensely because of the scorn others had heaped upon him and the agony he had caused her, and to hear him say he needed and wanted her, turned the world for one brief moment into paradise.

She raised her head slightly, and half turning towards him waited with parted lips for his next words.

"We can be married at once, dear, and get

away," he went on eagerly. "There will be formalities, of course, but we can get through these all right, and all you need do is tell your professor you are not going back to him. Only say you are ready, and I'll see about the licence or whatever is needed. You choose where we'll go for our honeymoon, and by the time your people know you are a lady of title we will be a long way distant from Milan."

A lady of title! The words struck at her happiness, shivering it to atoms.

"What would I be?" she asked.

Barry laughed, met her eyes for a second, then avoided them.

"Be? Why, Lady Galbraith, of course! If you are my wife you cannot be anything else."

Rosa's head drooped again to its former position. Other memories, forgotten in her ecstasy, were crowding in upon her, and his mother's bitter, vindictive words—"Better, a thousand times better, that he should have died as he did than to have lived to become the prey of such as you. Even a suicide's death was preferable to that"—echoed in her ears. She answered him presently, her hands screening her face.

"It is not possible, Barry; it could not be. I

never was your equal, and though we have been good friends——”

“Friends! Not my equal! Good heavens, what are you talking about?” Barry took forcible possession of her now, and drew away her hands. “In the name of all that’s good, whatever has got into your head? Is a chap in the habit of treating his girl friends as I have treated you? And my equal! If I were as good as you, there are a few who might be saying, ‘Thank God’ to-night.”

Rosa burst into tears.

“You were to have married Miss Emerson,” she sobbed.

Barry’s face darkened, and he muttered something below his breath.

“Who said that?”

“Your mother told me. And every one in Strathbog knew. They said you only amused yourself with me.”

“They said wrong then, and you have proof of that now. You are more to me than Faith Emerson and all the girls in the world put together. I’ll own up, Rosa; I did put it on to Faith, but I was only flirting; I never meant to marry any one but you, no matter what my mother wished. I have loved you since the

first day I saw you, and now you are all I have. Say you will take me, Rosa, darling. Don't send me away alone."

It was the supreme temptation of Rosa's life. Resting against him, his arms round her, his face laid against hers, Love fought for its rights. They were all the world to each other, and her woman's heart cried out against being trampled upon. Barry, feeling the trembling of her body, clasped her closer.

"Will you, dearest?" he whispered.

She answered his question by another.

"If I do, will you go home?"

CHAPTER XVII

HOMESICK

“No, I will not.”

There was no hesitation over the uncompromising refusal: it was given with the decision of a mind irrevocably made up. Barry's tone was as firm as it was short, and Rosa, feeling his clasp relax, slowly disengaged herself.

“Then that ends it,” she said, turning away from him. “I could face any trouble with you, Barry, but I can't help you in doing what you will be sorry for some day.”

“You mean you will only marry me if I own up to Lyall Galbraith?” His voice was tense.

“Yes. At any rate, I can't marry you until you have done that.”

“In that case we won't require a parson in a hurry.” He laughed abruptly and stood up, every muscle set. “If you won't take any risk that ends the matter, as you say. It is a pity I asked you, but—well, you let me believe once that when I was ready you would be, and I was

fool enough to imagine that I could always count upon you. But I hadn't disgraced myself then, of course!"

He lifted his hat from the table, and turned it aimlessly round in his hands, waiting for her to speak, then moved towards the door when no answer was forthcoming. But he could not go, and the next instant he was beside her again, his anger gone, pleading with her as a man pleads for dear life. That it was high time he was out of Milan, he knew, but at that moment to go without her seemed utterly beyond him.

"I will do anything—anything you ask me, Rosa, except that," he promised passionately. "Just keep off that subject, and you won't have a wish ungratified. I will devote my life to making you happy, dear; you shall never miss father nor mother, nor career, nor anything else! I will make Lyall an allowance—I can fix that up easily through the lawyers, and I'll make you all right in the event of anything happening to me. I swear you won't suffer!"

"Hush!" Rosa emphasised the word with a quick gesture, and raised her face, strained and desperate, to his. "Barry, why won't you see? Two blacks cannot make a white: you cannot make your sin any less by giving Lyall Galbraith

his own money. And what is my suffering? Do you imagine it troubles me? It is you and other people I am thinking of."

He argued the point. He had half-a-dozen schemes for giving Lyall a handsome income from the Castle Morven estates, but she was as obdurate as he was, and finally he went off in a temper, vowing he would leave Milan that night.

Two days later, however, he appeared again. He had quitted the hotel, and had gone to private apartments in a roomy old house in an unfashionable quarter of the city, and there he would stay, he declared, till she gave in. He would stay for ever then, she told him, unless he did what she had asked him to do: and so, week in, week out, till October and November had passed, matters between them remained at the same deadlock.

His cough grew worse during these weeks. Sometimes he would be confined to his rooms and his bed for days on end, but the idea that anything serious was wrong with him was one which he flatly refused to entertain. In spite of his avowal to have nothing more to do with medical men, he yielded to Rosa's urging, and consulted first one doctor and then another, but

he grew angry at their gravity, laughed at their advice—foreign quacks, he called them—and threw out their medicine after tasting it perhaps once.

One week he would blame sleeplessness for his increasing weakness: the next he was sure it was the Continental food that was playing havoc with his system: then, early in December, when he was laid aside with a sharp attack, a new idea took possession of him.

If he was in Scotland he would soon be well; Scottish air and Scottish living would very quickly make him the man he used to be. And from that his mind wandered to Greystone. If he was once in the dear old country he could steal to Strathbog some night and feast his eyes on the home that would not be forgotten. One glimpse of it would be worth all the risk he could run.

So he thought and dreamed, and with every hour the desire increased. While he was able to be out and about thoughts of home could be crushed; but lying in bed, seeing none but foreign faces, hearing nothing save Italian tongues, his eyes resting on objects that had no homeliness about them, they would not be stifled. Nor had he the strength to combat

them. He pictured Strathbog and Greystone in their every aspect till the insidious temptation gained mastery of him, and the stealthy look at them which he had at first idly imagined became the most desirable thing under the sun.

Come what might, he would go as soon as he was able to travel, he determined at last; and the first day he got out of bed, with the assistance of a servant, he packed his belongings, then drove to see Rosa. He had written to her telling her he was laid up again, but saying nothing of the home-sickness which had him in its grip.

They had met every day when he had managed to go out, and though gradually the question of marriage had been dropped, Rosa had lost no opportunity of pleading with him to write to Lyall. For his own sake, too, she had been urging him of late. She apprehended no real danger from his illness, but she saw he was worse than he would allow himself to believe, and she was shrewd enough to guess that the ignoring of the past and present, the resolute shutting of his eyes to the future, was not the light matter to him that he pretended it was, and she knew the strain must be telling against him.

She made her own tea always, and she was

taking it when he went in that afternoon. Scrupulously neat the tray was, and the cloth was spotless, but two or three dry biscuits were the only eatables, and Barry eyed these with disfavour.

"Is that all you are having to eat?" he demanded brusquely.

"It is all I want." She blushed vividly, and pushed away the tray, then remembering her hospitality, drew it towards her again. "Will you have a cup of tea?" she asked. "It is newly made."

"Thanks! I'll be glad of it, for I'm tired." He lay back in his chair and scowled at the offending biscuits. "If Mollie keeps you, she might keep you properly," he grumbled. "You would have been better with me, though you haven't thought it."

"She gives me plenty, only I am always buying music and books, and they cost a good deal; and I don't care to spend more than I can help, because it has all to be paid back." She carried his cup to him, her cheeks burning still, and changed the subject hastily. "What has this new doctor said to you?" she asked. "Has he done you any more good than the others?"

"Not a bit; they are nothing but a lot of

humbugs: not one to mend another. I tell you what it is, Rosa: it's the confounded messes I have had to eat that have played the mischief with me: I should soon be all right if I got decent food. And I am going to have it," he added. "I am leaving to-morrow morning for Scotland."

"Barry!"

She had been lifting her cup to her lips; it went down into the saucer with a little thud, and she stared at him unbelievably. He returned her gaze and laughed.

"Not to see Lyall Galbraith or any of my people—don't imagine that! I am going to bury myself in some remote corner till I am strong again, and then I'll come back here. But I'll have a look at Strathboor and Greystone. Catch me leaving Scotland without that!"

He had his plans all cut and dry, and she listened silently while he unfolded them, making neither remark nor protest. Her heart ached for him, but she would not bid him either go or stay.

She went to the station next morning to see him off, and just before the train started, when he was leaning from the carriage window promising to return very soon, she made her last appeal.

"Try to do what I want you to do, Barry," she whispered. "Do it while there is time to save your sister, and make Mr. Galbraith a happy man."

"And go and scare my old Colonel into fits when I am at it, and ask him to do me the honour of having me arrested!" he mocked laughingly. He was in as high spirits as any schoolboy off for a holiday, and everything was a joke in this last five minutes. "A nice bargain you would get after they were done with me if I kept you to your promise, and said you would have to take me."

"I would not fail you," she said steadily, wincing under the close pressure of his fingers on her hand. "Go and tell, and whatever punishment you have to bear, I will be waiting for you when it is over."

"Wait for me till I come back; that is all I ask meantime."

He leant far out to watch her upright figure and bright smiling face as long as he could, conscious that despite the smile her lustrous eyes were wet; then he settled himself comfortably for the long journey.

Afterwards he marvelled at the coolness with which he took the risk, but just then and during

all the succeeding hours in train and boat the risk did not come uppermost. From the moment his determination was arrived at, it seemed as if he had been lifted out of himself, and no deterring thought was allowed to cross his mind.

He stopped in Paris a few hours, but in London he spent no more time than was required to drive between Victoria and St. Pancras. It was the middle of December, and London was shrouded in a thick fog, so that few people saw him while the cabman negotiated a passage through the streets, and in the dimly lighted station none wondered at the close wrappings and the down-drawn cap which hid almost the whole of his face.

He booked to Carlisle only; he would stay the night there, he resolved, and decide as to his final stopping-place, which must be somewhere he had never been. Not a large town, and yet not so small a place that the presence of a stranger would excite curiosity.

He was doomed to spend more than a night in Carlisle, however. He felt ill when he alighted from the train, and in the morning was forced to acknowledge to himself that he could not proceed. He remained in his room, but not in bed, coughing and shivering over the fire, and

having his meals brought to him, and thus four days passed before he was able to move on again. And in these days he realised that it was not Scotland as a whole his very soul was thirsting for, but the broad acres in Fife which for him bore the name of home. It was to Greystone he must go, well or ill.

He put all the papers and letters he possessed into his pockets, tied the contents of his two portmanteaus—which were all his luggage—into a parcel, and addressing it to Mrs. Campbell, The Cottage, Thornton Road, Strathbog, gave a friendly waiter a sovereign with instructions to despatch it three days after he left the hotel. He went on then, and Ann Campbell, working both late and early that week getting forward her work for Christmas and the New Year, little thought how largely her tiny cottage was bulk-ing in the mind of one man. Effie Cuthbert, running down from the house with a message to her on the Tuesday before Christmas, found her busy pinning out some lace on a covered board, a pile of curtains, ready for ironing, on the table.

“I cam’ doon to tell you, Ann, that I’m comin’ to help you the morn’s mornin’;—the mistress said it,” Effie informed her, making her way to the little mirror which hung by the side of the

window, and admiring her rosy-cheeked reflection while she spoke. "So you can put up irons for me when you put up your ain; I'll be here as sune as they are hot."

"You can bide at hame—I hinna time to be hindered wi' the like o' you," Ann snapped, not lifting her eyes from her work. "Are you in the road o' a'body in the hoose that they're tryin' to put you in mine?"

"The Christmas cleaning is nearly dune, an' they'll be waitin' for some o' the curtains the morn; that's why I'm bein' spared to you," Effie answered glibly, still intent on what she saw in the mirror. "An' you ken fine I can iron, Ann."

"You singed a towel the last time you were here."

"Oh, a towel's no' worth speakin' about." Effie turned round reluctantly, not one whit abashed, and crossing to the cosy fireside, sent a roving glance over the room. "I say, Ann, you have a real auld maid's house," she observed with her usual freedom. "There's never a thing in it out of place."

"Naething but your remarks!" was the cutting retort. "An' I'll guarantee this muckle—if ever ony man is fule enough to gie you a hoose

o' yer ain, there will never be a thing belangin' it in its place."

"Exceptin' the man—I'll keep him in his!" Effie said with a gay laugh. "But if I'm no' to look happier than Miss Mollie is doin', I'm sure I dinna want ane. Mr. Barclay is up at the hoose at his denner the nicht, an' she hasna spoken a dizzen o' words to him."

Ann raised her head now, and glared angrily at the pretty, impertinent face.

"If you've said a' you were sent to say, you had better tak' the road again," she commanded, pointing to the door. "You an' me will 'gree better if you are on the ither side o' that. Awa' you go!"

"A' richt." Effie had unfastened her cloak. She slipped in the hooks again with alacrity, and gave her Tam o' Shanter a coquettish tilt. "There's a nip in the air ootside the nicht, an' I doubt it's been creepin' in. Gude-nicht. I'll be down in the mornin', an' you'll maybe be better natured then."

She laughed softly to herself in the porch, hesitated for a moment, then ran down the path by "The Roundie." A good-looking young foreman, who was engaged in the work of laying the pipes for the new water supply, had been

smitten with Effie's charms, and had taken to haunting the vicinity of Greystone, and she thought she could not do better than take the air on the road when she had the chance.

Ann heard her light steps as she sped away, and knew she was off where she had no business to go, but she paid little heed; her mind was engrossed with something else, and her lined face grew even harder and more set as she went on with her work.

"It has been the warst year they have ever had! The very warst!" she muttered presently, smoothing out the points of the lace and pinning them securely. "First, there was Mr. Barry's trouble, next there was his death, and a' the wey o' doin' ower that limmer o' a lassie Middleton—an' like's a' that wasna enough, Miss Mollie had to tie herself up to the biggest auld wife in Fife! What possessed her is beyond me, and how she is ever to mairry him and bide wi' him I dinna ken. Wha's this now?"

Some one was knocking at the door—a low, uncertain tapping. Ann's fingers stopped instantly, and for a couple of moments she sat motionless, listening intently; then with quiet deliberation she put aside the board, and crossed the floor. Her erring husband, when

he paid her a visit, generally chose a late hour, and his knocking, like his gait, though not usually low, was invariably characterised by irregularity. That she would find him outside she did not doubt, and she compressed her lips grimly.

“He has been ower lang awa’, but he’ll wish he had bidden a while langer afore I’m dune wi’ him,” she said to herself with decision. “I’m no’ in a mood to be prankit wi’. I hope he’s loungin’ against the door—he’ll get a fine coup if he is!”

She drew back the bolt noiselessly, and flung the door wide. But the figure that stumbled in was not that of her husband: the voice that fell on her ears, husky though it was, was very different from Duncan Campbell’s strident tones.

“Don’t cry out, Ann, for heaven’s sake! Thank God, I’m in! I am starving!”

CHAPTER XVIII

A HAVEN OF REFUGE

“LADDIE!”

“Yes; it's I right enough.” She had sunk down in the nearest chair, shaking in every limb; Barry, after bolting the door, laid one hand on her shoulder, and with the other turned down the wet collar of his coat, and pulled away the muffler which had been swathed about the lower part of his face. “I came last night, but you were sleeping; I could not make you hear, and I have been hiding in ‘The Roundie’ ever since—lying in the ditch. I am frozen both outside and in! Have you any whisky?”

Ann rose mechanically, and taking a bottle and a tumbler from a cupboard, regarded him dazedly while he poured out a stiff dose of the spirits, and swallowed it at a gulp. That he was in sore need of it was evident. His face, save where it was pallid, was purple with the cold; his hands also were purple, and chapped

and bleeding; his fingers would scarcely bend to grip the tumbler. He looked what he had said he was—frozen both outside and in.

“That will thaw me; I never thought before that whisky could be so good. Another hour out there, and I would have been past crawling up the path.” He sat down in front of the fire, and bent towards it shivering, his teeth chattering. “There will be nobody down here to-night, Ann?”

“There will be naebody in here so lang as they need to be kept out,” she said in a queer, trembling voice that yet had firmness in it despite its agitation. “Have you had onything to eat the time you have been out there?”

“I’ve tasted nothing since my breakfast yesterday morning. I couldn’t eat all day, and I was so sure of being here at night that I never thought of providing myself with anything.” He commenced to cough, and cowered lower over the blazing logs. “Will you put me up, Ann?” he asked. “You can keep me out of sight, can’t you? All the time I have been craving for Greystone I have had your house in the background of my mind: it has been looming up like a haven of refuge.”

“How has this come about, Mr. Barry?”

She had put on the kettle, and knelt down to unlace his boots; she paused in her task, and looked up at him now, the tears running down her rugged cheeks. "Oh, I am thankful to my Maker that you are in the land o' the livin'; but wha was it that shot himsel' an' was mista'en for you?"

"I'll tell you all about it afterwards, Ann; don't speak of it to-night. I'm played out. I have been ill, and I thought I could get better if I was here, so I came. But these last twenty-four hours! My God, they have been awful! And if I am caught now! Ann, you will be careful,—mind, I'll shoot myself if they try to take me. Are my feet still on? They are like blocks; I haven't any feeling in them."

Exhaustion, the strong whisky, and the heat of the fire were all telling upon him; he was nodding sleepily, bringing out the sentences piecemeal. Ann, crying silently, slipped a cushion under his head, and let him doze, then filled a hot-water bottle, and put it to his feet; and presently, when she had prepared a bath in the laundry and made tea, she awoke him, smoothing the hair back from his forehead with her toil-worn hand as tenderly as any mother could have done.

“Sit up and drink some tea, Mr. Barry, and then you’ll get a bath; it will help to do awa’ wi’ ony cauld you have got,” she said gently. “I have lichted a fire up the stair, and your bed will be ready for you in twa-three minutes. If naebody recognised you comin’, you’ll be safe there, for neither man nor woman will get up without my leave.”

He would finish everything on the table, he declared; but his appetite failed him ere he had well begun, and he ate very little after all. And when he had had his bath, and climbed the steep stair to the cosy attic bedroom, where everything was spotless, and the sheets were fragrant with lavender, he fainted, and Ann, running up when she heard him fall, had to put him to bed as she had done every night when he was a baby.

“It’s just sleep you’re needin’, laddie—just sleep an’ a lang rest,” she murmured soothingly. “An’ guid feedin’. I dinna ken what you have been livin’ on, but your banes are fair pickit. But we’ll sune mak’ ye richt now that ye’re here.”

“You have done me good already, Ann,” he said gratefully. “I will be better in the mornin’; I am done to-night.” Then he shut his eyes weakly. “I am amongst ‘my ain folk’

—that will put me right; that's what I have wanted since she sang about them. Sing to me, Ann—sing 'My ain folk.' Go on! I am waiting!"

Was he growing light-headed or merely drowsy? Ann could not tell.

"In a wee while. After I have you settled comfortably." She could not have sung a song though she had been offered her weight in gold, but to humour the patient was her first principle in nursing. "Just let me shift this pillow. There—you will be cannier now. It's yer fill o' rest and sleep you are needin', puir laddie! After you have gotten that you will be fine."

"It isn't my lungs, Ann; don't you believe it! Those foreign idiots of doctors tried to scare me; they thought I wouldn't know any better, but I did. My lungs! Good heavens, the rot they talked was sickening!"

He tossed restlessly, flung out his arms, then quietly submitted as she gently forced them under the clothes again.

"Where should I get lung disease?" he demanded. "It has never been in our family—never! Neither on my father's nor on my mother's side. I am as sound as a bell! They are a pack of fools!"

"Of course they are," Ann agreed cheerfully.

"It's only a cauld ye have, and that'll be easy cured. We'll mak' short work of it. Lie still now like a good laddie, an' I'll get something to help your cough. A cauld is naething when it's ta'en the richt wey."

He murmured a sleepy assent, and turned on his side. Ann stole noiselessly away from the bed then, and after lowering the light and bringing from the kitchen a simple cough remedy which she always kept in the house, sat down by the fire, beginning to shake and quiver again now that the demand on her for active service had momentarily ceased.

As yet she had had no time to think, but there was no wonder in her mind. The instant Barry stepped across the threshold of the porch and spoke, she knew that somehow a great mistake had been made; and simultaneously with that knowledge had come the understanding that the intervening months since his supposed death had been spent in hiding; but it was not with these facts she was concerning herself. It was the ensuring of his safety and welfare that claimed her attention. And the thought of his mother.

Her gnarled hands, through the brown skin of which the dark veins showed, had never lain

so helplessly in her lap as they lay while she tried to plan how she could act; her rugged countenance had never looked so perplexed. She had faced many problems in her life, but none so difficult as the one that presented itself to-night.

To keep Barry out of sight would be a simple enough matter; it would be a bold-mannered man or woman who would seek to penetrate to that attic room without her permission; but to prevent his cough from being heard by any one within the four walls of her dwelling would be impossible. Though she had talked lightly of his cold to him, Ann did not deceive herself. That he was seriously ill she saw only too clearly, and she knew it would be days, and might be weeks, before he was able to rise from his bed.

The first necessity, therefore, was to exclude everybody from the house. The servants, who were in the habit of running down at all hours on errands connected with the laundry work, must be kept outside the door in future; and the preliminary step must be to send Effie Cuthbert away when she presented herself next morning. And that meant that Mrs. Wedderburn, as soon as she knew, would either send

for her or come down and ask for an explanation. Ann's thoughts would go no further than that. Imagination refused to help her in picturing what would happen then.

"I'll just need to be guided," she said to herself at last, rising stiffly to her feet, as the wag-at-the-wa' downstairs struck twelve o'clock. "I'll go and put up my irons, and start to the curtains; if I work hard a' nicht they can be finished by mornin', and that'll leave me free to be wi' him a' day. And he'll need me," she added, her eyes wandering wistfully to the bed, the slow, heavy tears dropping down her cheeks. "I wish I wasna so sure he would need me for a lang time to come."

He had been in a deep sleep until then, but he tossed restlessly as she looked, and began to mutter incoherently. She caught something about "an odd chance" and "not owning up; not for any one," but that was all she could make out till suddenly he sat up, clutching the coverlet with both hands, and bent forward eagerly, speaking in a clear, pleading tone.

"Lyall, don't slay me quite, old chap! It has been beastly rotten to you, I know; but you can't guess what it has been for me. Days and weeks and months of horror! I only

shammed I was shutting my eyes! It has been killing me by inches all the time. I didn't know it was going to hit Mollie so hard—that has been the worst of it all. But you won't let that blessed fool get her, Lyall, though she is my sister? Lyall, do you hear? Lyall! You are not to cast scorn at her because of me!"

The last words came in a sharp cry, loud enough to be heard outside. Ann's stout heart quailed, and the hands with which she gently pressed him back on the pillows were far from steady.

"It's a mercy I hinna neebors," was her mental thanksgiving. "If he cries out like that through the day, I pray that there will be naebody near to hear. God help us!"

She sank into a chair in sudden dismay. In reckoning the risks that must be encountered, she had forgotten the laying of the water pipes. The route for these passed the end of her bleaching green, and skirted the edge of "The Roundie," and the men expected to break the ground beside the green a' the end of the week.

A crowd of them would be swarming round her house the whole day long then, measuring, digging, laying, hammering; all the idle men

and schoolboys from Strathbog looking on. Each evening the watchman's box would be the rendezvous of his cronies, his fire an attraction for every passing tramp. Of tramps she was not afraid, but Strathbog natives, who knew she lived alone, were different. As Rosa Middleton had prayed in her sore indecision, so Ann Campbell prayed now.

"Oh, Lord, help me! Make my way plain to me!"

She ironed industriously till four o'clock, then she had to stop, for Barry awoke, and when she went to him he did not know her. The long exposure he had endured had done its work very thoroughly, and in the weakness of his collapse he was delirious.

Effie Cuthbert, finding the door locked when she arrived on the scene at half-past six, beat a smart rat-tat on the panels. The knock elicited no response, and standing back to reconnoitre, laughing delightedly at the conviction that she had caught Ann sleeping, she nearly jumped off her feet when a sharp voice sounded through the grey darkness of the morning.

"When you are sent here efter this, you'll maybe mind that it's the laundry you have to come to, no my private hoose. What are you wantin'?"

"Mercy, Ann! How you frightened me!"

In addition to the door opening off the kitchen, the laundry had an entrance from the path in front of the cottage. This latter door was little used, however; the other was more convenient for Ann herself, and the servants had always used it without ceremony. But the outer door was open now, and the light within showed Ann standing on the step, a big wicker basket under her arm.

"I hope it has waukened you up," she said tartly. "There's the curtains you were in sic a state about; they're ready, so I'm no' needin' you. Tak' them to the hoose."

"But I was sent to help you," Effie protested. She had no particular desire to spend half the day in Ann's company, but the extra Christmas cleaning at Greystone was completed, and she had been promised a half-holiday that afternoon if the laundry work also was finished. "It's no' the curtains only that have to be done. There's a lot mair."

"Whether do you or me ken my wark best?" was the stormy interrogation. "Do what I bid you, Effie Cuthbert, an' if the mistress says onything, tell her I wadna be bothered wi' you i' my road."

She had deposited the basket on the ground ; she went in now, and shut the door, and Effie had perforce to lift the burden, and trudge to the house with it. And no more articles were received from the laundry cottage that day. A scullerymaid, who was sent down to inquire, returned with the message that there was nothing ready ; and Effie, despatched later, met with as scant courtesy as she had been treated to in the morning.

Mrs. Wedderburn, hearing of the trouble, sent for Ann, but her messenger brought back a note, carefully sealed. She was in the drawing-room when it was handed to her, and Mollie, happening to glance at her, noticed her face flush slightly when she read it.

“ Please come down. Don't let anybody come with you. There is something you must know, and I cannot leave here.—Your respectful servant,
“ ANN CAMPBELL.”

What could the woman mean ? Isabel Wedderburn was staring at the paper perplexedly when Mollie put a question.

“ Who is your correspondent, mother ? ”

“ No one of any consequence.” She threw the

note on the fire, and watched it burn. "Are you to give us any music?" she asked.

"No. Faith is."

Robert was helping Faith to search for a song in a music cabinet near the piano: Gilbert Barclay was lounging in a chair by Mollie's side, looking decidedly sulky. Faith had laughed at him because he had a cold in his head, and Mollie, after joining in the laughter, had added to her offence by skilfully resisting his attempts to inveigle her into the library, which they would have had all to themselves.

"I'll go before she begins," he broke in sourly, catching what Mollie had said. "Good-night, Mrs. Wedderburn. I'm off, Robert."

He shook hands with Faith, stopped by Mollie's chair again to remind her that the hounds were to meet next morning at Millhall, and that he would ride along the road to meet her, and took his departure. Faith rattled into a lively French piece then, and Mrs. Wedderburn slipped away under cover of the music.

Two hours later Mollie knocked at the door of her mother's bedroom to say good-night, but receiving no answer concluded she was asleep, and passed on. She did not guess that the room was untenanted.

CHAPTER XIX

HEARD IN THE NIGHT

THE nip in the air had disappeared next morning, giving place to the southern wind and cloudy sky beloved of huntsmen. Robert Wedderburn, who had promised himself a day off, walked into the breakfast-room dressed for the meet, and found that Mollie also had come down ready to start. She was standing by the fire, the severe lines of her riding habit setting off her graceful figure to perfection, the black material of which it was made accentuating the fairness of her skin and the satiny gloss of her smooth hair.

"First, Mollie?" Robert paused at a side table to annex a newspaper, then joined her on the rug. "The scent will be keen to-day," he remarked cheerily. "We ought to have a fine run."

"Yes." Mollie withdrew her gaze from the glowing coals, and glanced through the window at the grey sky. "There will be a big turnout, I fancy," she said. "It is the best hunting

morning we have had this season. Last night I felt I did not care to go, but sleep has brought wisdom."

Robert looked at her narrowly, the thought passing through his mind that if he was engaged to any girl, he should like her to show a little more enthusiasm at the prospect of being with him than Mollie displayed in regard to spending a day pretty much in Gilbert Barclay's company. And within a few months of their wedding too!

She had not taken him into her confidence, and though he suspected how the engagement had been brought about, he could see no way out of the difficulty, and therefore had not attempted to interfere. Perhaps the knowledge that to do so would be useless in any case had also helped to make him keep silence.

"You will enjoy it," he said. "Lyall Galbraith is going; I saw him yesterday, and he told me Gibson of Millhall had persuaded him to accept the loan of a horse," he added carelessly. "Do you know that he is expecting to say good-bye to Strathbog very soon? In February, probably."

"No." Her cheeks suddenly burned; she looked at him with startled eyes. "For altogether?" she breathed.

"Yes. Some little time ago he asked his Directors to transfer him, and he thinks he may be appointed to an agency in the South of Scotland, to begin duty in April. If he should be, he will ask to be relieved of his work here at the end of February. He wishes to go abroad, and look up Frank Galbraith."

And be out of the way before her marriage, Mollie thought, her heart beating wildly.

"Does he know where Sir Frank is?" she asked after a moment's pause.

"Not exactly. Frank's bankers never get the same address twice, but Lyall believes he could trace him. He is fearing he may be getting into mischief, and though Frank treated him shabbily, Lyall is fond of him. It would be a boon to Castle Morven if——"

"Good-morning!" The door had been opened again, and Faith's merry voice sounded across the room. "Such a scramble I have had! I slept too long, and I thought I was going to be shamefully late," she announced as she hurried in. "All my things were lost, and my hair wouldn't go up. Is Mrs. Wedderburn not down?"

"Not yet," Mollie answered, making room for her. "We are waiting for her."

"I am thankful I'm not last; I always feel

such a miserable culprit when the bell rings before I am nearly ready!" Faith, who was wearing a brown habit, poised her little, smartly-shod feet on the brass rail of the fender, and balancing herself by clinging to the mantel-board, critically examined her hair in the mirror. "I hope my hairpins stay in, but I have my doubts," she observed gaily. "It is in the morning we learn how nimble we can be! Does this sort of a day satisfy you, Robert?"

"It ought to," he said, with a smile.

"Didn't the rain pour during the night! I lay and listened, and comforted myself with the thought that if any of us should be thrown, we should get a nice soft fall!" She laughed, descended to the rug again, and stretched out her hands to the blaze. "All the same, I hope we are not to have a rainy Christmas. Did it get on your nerves?"

"On my nerves!" Robert, leaning against the mantelpiece, was struggling with an insane desire to touch the pretty auburn head so near his shoulder, and answered abstractedly. "No, I never heard it."

"Wasn't it you?" Faith lifted her eyes to his in surprise. "Were you not downstairs at four o'clock this morning?"

Robert looked astonished at the question.

"Not I. Did you dream I was?"

"Some one was, and I imagined it must be you. I heard steps going along the corridor." She paused, looking from one face to the other in perplexity. "It could not have been any of the servants; none of them would have come up to our side of the house," she debated. "Mollie, do you plead guilty? Confess, my dear, and I'll forgive you on the spot for the creepy feeling you gave me."

"I cannot." Mollie shook her head as she gave the denial. "You must have been dreaming," she declared laughingly. "I am afraid we are all too fond of our beds to go out to study the weather at four o'clock on a December morning."

"But I heard the footsteps distinctly," Faith persisted. "The rain awakened me about three o'clock, and I did not sleep for ever so long; not till after four. I began to think about papa, and the hunting, and one thing and another, and I was as wide awake as I am now when I heard some one come upstairs and along our corridor. I was scared for a moment till it struck me that probably you had been downstairs, Robert, or had been reading, and had

only just come up. I did not worry then, but I prepared a nice little scolding for you."

"Well, for once I don't deserve it." Robert did not doubt her assertion that she had been awake, but he believed the steps were imaginary all the same: a sensitive girl would be only too ready to fancy all sorts of things in the stillness of the night, he reflected. "Perhaps my mother may have rung for one of the servants: some one may have been going to her," he suggested. "Surely she does not intend to come down to breakfast," he added, glancing at the clock. "Did you ask, Mollie?"

No; Mollie had not, but she would run up and do so now, she said, and she left the room instantly. She had got no farther than the bottom of the stairs, however, when she met Effie Cuthbert coming down with a message to her. Mrs. Wedderburn was to breakfast upstairs.

"Is she quite well, Effie?" Mollie asked.

"Yes; I think so. Well, that is, I don't know, Miss Mollie." Effie, very plainly in doubt as to what she ought to say, shuffled. "She is queer and excited like, and she has been up a long time, I think. She has been writing letters. I have to go and get one of

the lads to come and take them into the town. Oh, but you haven't to go up, Miss Mollie! She bade me say you wasn't to go!"

Her voice quickened at the last sentences, for Mollie had made a movement to pass her, and Effie, in spite of her boasted independence, had no mind to get into trouble with her mistress when she could keep out of it.

"Nonsense! I must go." Mollie ran up the stairs, speaking over her shoulder as she went. "But don't be afraid, Effie! I shall let her know it was not your fault."

Mrs. Wedderburn was hanging up something in the wardrobe when she went in—the black silk dress in which she had last seen her, Mollie noticed. The fire was but newly lighted, and the room was chilly, but there was no sign of cold about Isabel Wedderburn. An unwonted colour was in her usually pale cheeks, and her eyes were blazing as if she was in a fever.

"What do you want?" she demanded, shutting the wardrobe door hastily, and turning round. "I sent word that you were not to come up."

Mollie was swift to observe a strong under-current of excitement in her voice, and she looked at her flushed face uneasily.

"Effie told me what you said, but I wished to make sure for myself that you were not ill. Are you all right, mother?" she asked searchingly. "I will not go with the others, of course, if——"

Her mother interrupted her with an impatient gesture.

"There is nothing to stay at home for; absolutely nothing," she declared with curt decision. "Don't be imaginative, Mollie! I am quite well, and am going out as soon as I have had breakfast: I simply did not wish to go down. Go and get yours. You will never be in time for the meet if you idle the whole morning."

"I won't be late." Mollie gathered up her habit, and prepared to do as she was told, but stopped again, her fingers on the door handle. "Mother, were you downstairs during the night, or had you any of the servants up?"

The colour ebbed slowly from Mrs. Wedderburn's face, leaving it ghastly; her hand went up suddenly to the neckband of her dress, and unfastened it, as if she had a difficulty in breathing. But she was the last woman on earth to lose her presence of mind.

"During the night?" she repeated. "I do

not think I have taken to walking in my sleep, and I certainly never rang for any one. Why should you fancy so?"

"Faith has been telling us that she heard footsteps, but I was sure she was mistaken. I shall try to convince her now that she was not awake at all. Here is Effie coming with your tray. Oh, my handkerchief!"

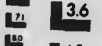
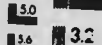
A tiny square of cambric and lace was lying on the floor where she had stood a minute earlier. She went back for it, and in stooping to pick it up her eyes fell on a pair of slippers which had been thrust half under the dressing-table. They were the pair her mother had been wearing the previous evening, and heels and soles alike were encrusted with mud; dry, and all the more noticeable because of that. And nowhere close to the house had there been mud last night. The ground had been very hard till the rain came.

She was thoughtful all through breakfast, and the grave, sad expression that had grown habitual to her of late was intensified as she cantered along the muddy road to Millhall, answering only in monosyllables the remarks which Gilbert Barclay made after he met her, and he, sulky still, soon relapsed into silence.



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To Faith he had not spoken at all, very much to her amusement.

"Isn't he a great baby?" she said to Robert. "I don't know what Mollie will do with him when they are married; the martyrdom beforehand is bad enough! I should run away if I were in her place. But Mollie will never think of doing that. She will do her duty, though it crushes the life out of her."

"No, she won't run away," Robert answered in his quiet manner. "She will stick to her bargain."

An array of traps and bicycles lined each side of the road when they reached Millhall. Little knots of people who had come on foot to the meet pressed back against the leafless hedges to make room for the riders, and to avoid being bespattered with the mud which the horses' hoofs sent flying. In front of the house itself a crowd of men, women, and horses had assembled, the scarlet coats of the huntsmen making gay splashes of colour amongst the more sombre hues. The turnout was the largest of the winter, and the Wedderburns and Faith were greeted from all sides as they rode up.

Mollie saw Lyall at once. He was talking to the master and one or two other men, his back

towards her just then, and though she was conscious that he altered his position a moment later and must be seeing her, she did not look in his direction again.

The story Strathbog had got hold of regarding his going to Greystone and asking her mother for Mollie after her engagement to Gilbert Barclay was quite true: he had gone, and had been dismissed with scant courtesy by Mrs. Wedderburn, but though in her desire to humiliate him the Mistress of Greystone had helped the facts to leak out, the sequel to his visit was known only to Mollie and himself.

She had intercepted him in the park when he left the house, and told him the truth—told him of the price she had been called upon to pay that the fever might be swept from Strathbog; and, like herself, he had seen that she had no choice. But something had changed in Lyall Galbraith since that night. His kindness had not abated in the slightest degree; those who needed help never appealed to him in vain, but his old cheeriness was gone, so was his old happy manner. As he talked now, his face was that of a grave, self-contained, thoughtful man.

The start was made presently, and first one covert and then another was drawn, but proved

blank, and it was not till early in the afternoon that a fox was found, and the hounds were off in full cry, the horses thundering after them. Past the long stretches of Morven woods they flew, across field after field, along the bank of Morven water, and under an ancient, moss-grown bridge. Reynard swam across the stream then, and the riders forded it dauntlessly, sweeping on over ploughed fields again, over the grounds of a ruined abbey, then careering downhill at break-neck speed, and leaping a wide ditch that yawned black and ugly at the foot.

Lyall Galbraith, who had dropped his crop while passing the abbey, and had dismounted to get it, came pounding down the hillside in time to catch a glimpse of Faith going over the ditch like a bird, a strand of her bright hair flying behind her in the wind, Robert at her heels.

A minute later Mollie, who had separated from Gilbert Barclay long before, set her horse at it, and went over, but Tartar stumbled as they landed on the opposite side, and Lyall's heart seemed to stop as he saw her slim body shoot forward, and fall in a heap on the ground. His horse had been galloping at a tremendous pace, but he spurred it to an even greater effort now,

and, clearing the ditch, he was beside her in an instant.

"I am not hurt." She sat up and pulled her hat straight as he flung himself from the saddle. "I could not realise for a minute where I had got to," she said with an unsteady laugh. "Poor Tartar! He is looking as bewildered as I am. We never played each other this trick before! Thank you!"

Lyall had taken her hand, and drawn her to her feet, his eyes searching her face anxiously.

"You are sure you are not hurt?" he asked.

"Quite sure." She bent down, shaking the dead leaves and bits of grass from her habit as she spoke. "Faith said this morning that if any of us were thrown we should get a soft fall, and I remembered her words when I found myself on the ground. It was a soft fall!"

"Did Tartar's foot go into a hole, or what?"

"I don't know. I am afraid it must have been my own fault; I really was not giving much thought to what I was about," she confessed tremulously, stooping still lower to hide the tears which had suddenly sprung to her eyes. "He is none the worse, however, and I am glad of that," she added, giving her skirt a final shake. "But I won't go on: I could not

catch up though I tried, and I have had enough of it in any case."

Lyall nodded. The riders were all out of sight.

"The fox is nearly spun out any way, and you never could bear to see one killed," he said. "There is a footbridge down beside that plantation; I will lead the horses over it, and we will get on to the road."

The rich colour flooded her wan cheeks.

"You are going back too?"

"Yes."

It was only the second time they had spoken to each other since the night that he had gone to Greystone, and the memory of their meeting then was uppermost in his mind. Mollie's thoughts were occupied with the information concerning him which Robert had given her, and presently, when they were riding side by side along the winding road, she spoke of it.

He repeated what Robert had told her—nothing was definitely settled yet, but he expected to leave Strathbog at the end of February. She knew why he was going, and he knew that she understood, but they did not speak of the reason. Both were brave; though they were both unconscious of it, they had the

grandest courage of all, the courage that can face a shipwrecked life, and say nothing.

He rode with her to the gates of Greystone. The grey dusk of the short, wintry afternoon was closing in then; under the trees it was almost dark, and the horses drew close together in friendly fashion.

"You will come back some day?" Mollie faltered, as he leaned from his saddle to clasp her hand.

"It is not likely," he said briefly. "I shall have nothing to return for."

"Frank's home is here."

He shook his head, and gathered up his reins.

"I shall not come to it. Good-bye, Mollie. May God bless you for ever and ever."

CHAPTER XX

A BROKEN BARGAIN

THE butler was in the hall when Mollie went in. She had been crying silently all the way up the avenue, and she tried to hurry past in the hope that he might not see her face, but he approached her, and she had to stop.

“Is Mr. Robert coming, Miss Mollie?”

“No; not that I am aware of. He won't be here for some time, I fancy: I left before the run was finished.” She busied herself taking off her gloves while she spoke. “Does any one want him?” she asked.

“It's Mr. Elder, the engineer. He has been waiting for two hours. He was in twice before, in a great way seemingly, asking for the mistress, and when I told him the third time I did not know when she would be home, he said he would not go until he had seen her or Mr. Robert.”

“And is my mother out still?”

“Yes.”

She hesitated a moment, debating whether she should go and speak to the engineer or not, then decided not to go. He could only be waiting for some instructions or to enter into business details, and she could not give the one nor help him in any way with the other. But it was unlike a busy, energetic man to waste a whole afternoon in sitting still when his work was so near, she reflected.

She heard Faith come in nearly an hour later ; heard her laughing gaily, and calling to some one as she ran upstairs, and she knew Robert must have returned with her. She had been sitting over the fire, deep in thought, but she got up at once, and, taking off her habit, began to prepare to go down. Hearts might break, but the usual daily routine had to be gone through.

She was almost ready, when some one knocked at the door, and, in answer to her "Come in," Robert appeared. He was still in riding garb, and was splashed with mud.

"Robert! I thought it was Faith." She turned from the dressing-table fastening a bracelet on her wrist, and indicated a seat. "Sit down," she said. "You are looking tired. Have you seen Mr. Elder?"

"Yes, I have seen him." Robert ignored the chair she had motioned him to, and seated himself on a couch, with his back to the light. "And I have got news," he added.

"News?" The tone of his voice struck her, and she repeated the word with a sharp accent of alarm. "Of what?" she asked.

"The work out there is all stopped." Robert jerked his head in the supposed direction of the watercourse. "My mother stopped it this morning. The water is not to be given to Strathbog after all."

Mollie's limbs seemed suddenly to give way under her; she sat down in a chair by which she had been standing, her hands gripping the arms of it, her lips parted, incredulity and fear showing in her face. A flash of joy showed too, but only for a second. It was driven back as quickly as it had come.

"Robert! That cannot be true!"

The words were uttered in consternation when she found speech. Robert stared past her at the fire.

"It's true enough. She wrote to Elder this morning, ordering him to withdraw his men without an hour's delay; he gave me the note to read. She also telegraphed to his firm. The

workmen began as usual after the breakfast hour, but everything was at a standstill by midday”

“Why?” Mollie breathed. “What is her reason?”

“She hasn’t given any; the only excuse that she makes is that she has changed her mind. When Elder’s people got her telegram they wired to him to see her at once, and try to persuade her into letting the work go on, but it seems she has been away from home all day. Did she say anything to you in the morning about going anywhere?”

“Nothing. She said she was going out; that was all. I understood she was merely going to Strathbog.”

“She was there; she drove in, but immediately after she returned she went out again on foot. Elder thought I might influence her, but I had to tell him there is not the slightest hope of that. No power on earth will move her if she has made up her mind to this.”

“What will be said in Strathbog?” Mollie whispered, twisting her nervous hands. “Robert, I thought I had saved them! And now the old dread will be on them again, all the old suffering will have to be endured!”

“The town is in a ferment already, Elder says.

Apart from the consequences to those depending upon us, my mother never did a more ill-advised thing for herself. It will be the scandal of the whole county, and shame us till the last day of our lives."

Strong man as he was, Robert's voice had a break in it. In these past months since the new water scheme had been set on foot, for the first time for years he had gone amongst his men feeling they were casting no reproach at him. His mother was doing her duty to them at last, and he could look into their faces without shame. True, the thought of Mollie had lain heavily upon him, but that had not prevented him from feeling glad for their sakes, and the information he had just received had come upon him with the force of a blow.

It was long since he had learned to patiently bear injustice to himself, but even after years of standing between his mother and her employees, injustice to them cut into his very soul.

"I will see her, but I know better than to delude myself for a moment with the idea that I shall do any good," he said presently, getting to his feet. "And it isn't likely she will give me a reason even if she has one."

"Let me speak to her, Robert ; first, I mean."

Mollie rose also, and laid a detaining hand on his arm, a quiet, steady light shining in her eyes. "If any one can influence her in this, I can, and I am willing to try. I will go to her as soon as she comes in."

"No; I'd rather do it myself." Robert freed his arm and moved away. "It won't be pleasant, and you have done enough."

"Please, Robert," she put herself between him and the door, leaning her back against it, "I want to do it: I must! I—I shall despise myself all my life if I do not."

Robert fell back a pace impressed by her tone and manner, the earnestness of her pleading voice. He would gladly have borne the brunt of his mother's displeasure at all times, but he saw it would be inadvisable to urge the point in this case.

"Very well," he agreed reluctantly. "There she is," he added, as a swish of silken skirts was heard outside, and footsteps, slower than Faith's dancing feet ever permitted themselves to tread, passed along the corridor. "Fleming will have told her that Elder has been here. Will you go to her now?"

"In a moment."

She returned to the fire when he had left her, and sat down, trembling from head to foot.

If her mother had deliberately broken their compact, her promise to marry Gilbert Barclay need not bind her—that thought had been the first to flash through her mind, but she turned resolutely from the prospect it brought in its train. It was of Strathbog and its needs she had to think, of the people who had been uplifted and grateful because they believed a great danger was being removed from their midst. For their sakes she must insist on the bargain she had made being carried out.

“The insistence has always been on the other side,” she thought with a weary sigh. “I did not imagine it would ever be on mine—in this, at any rate!”

Mrs. Wedderburn’s room was empty when she went to it, and a maid who was passing said she had met the mistress on the stairs a minute or two before.

Mollie, hoping she might find her before Faith or Robert joined her, followed her quickly. She could not sit through the dinner with her anxiety upon her, she felt.

She turned aside when she came to the library, and glanced in. The long book-lined room was almost in darkness; only one shaded lamp near the fireplace at the far end illumined it, and in

the circle of light which it cast Mrs. Wedderburn's figure showed, resting in an easy-chair, bent and drooping, her head leaning on her hand. She had not heard the door open, and she sat up with a start when Mollie spoke.

"Don't you want more light, mother? A solitary lamp is lost in here."

"It is enough for all I am doing." There was a subdued note in Isabel Wedderburn's haughty voice, and her white, heavily-ringed fingers, raised on pretence of smoothing her hair, surreptitiously brushed her eyes. "I am merely resting. Had you a good run to-day?" she asked.

"Very—when we got a fox started. I did not keep up till the finish, but Faith and Robert did." Mollie had observed the furtive movement of the fingers, and only gave half her mind to her answer. "Are you tired, mother?"

"A little. I have caught a slight touch of cold, I think." Mrs. Wedderburn passed her handkerchief across her face and cleared her throat, obviously anxious to account for the redness of her eyes. "Not that it is anything to speak of; it will be gone by to-morrow. Did Gilbert ride back with you?"

"No. We were over at Castleton when I

turned; he was well on ahead then." She twisted her engagement ring round and round on her finger, and nerved herself for her task. "Mr. Elder was here when I came in—did you see him?" she asked.

"No. Are you never to leave off those black dresses of yours, Mollie? Have you nothing else to wear?"

The questions, wholly irrelevant as they were, brought a slight flush of annoyance to Mollie's cheeks, but it receded instantly as she became subtly conscious that they were not put in order to break away from the subject, but were rather the outcome of a train of thought in which her mother appeared to be absorbed.

"I have not thought of laying them aside yet," she answered quietly, with a glance at her simple *crêpe de chine* gown. "Wearing mourning may not do any good, but at any rate it is a sign of regret. I came to speak to you about the note you wrote to Mr. Elder this morning," she went on pointedly. "What did it mean? You do not really intend to stop the work?"

"I have stopped it."

"But, mother, you cannot! You cannot draw back! It is impossible." Mollie's clear voice rose high in her agitation, her dark eyes flashed

mutinously. "It would be one of the most cruel acts ever perpetrated if you did!" she cried. "And why should you wish to do so? What is your reason?"

"I have changed my mind."

She uttered the words as if they were a formula which had been learned by heart. Mollie's gaze remained riveted on her face.

"What has caused you to change your mind? Only yesterday afternoon you were calculating how long the work might take, and spoke of its completion, and this morning you wrote that letter! Nothing happened in between—nothing could have happened! No one came here to say either good or bad concerning the scheme."

"And no one need come to say either good or bad concerning it!" The hard mouth took its firmest curve. "I have given orders that the work is to be abandoned, and that is sufficient. My reasons are my own. No one has any right to interfere."

"I have. You made a bargain with me, and if I am to keep to it, you must do the same," Mollie said, striving for calmness. "I am going to insist upon this, mother. The work must go on."

"It will not." Mrs. Wedderburn gave the reply unhesitatingly.

"Then—you know what that means so far as I am concerned?" Mollie was twisting her half-hoop of diamonds round her finger again. "If my engagement is to go on, so must the work. If the one ceases, so shall the other."

Had that aspect of the case not occurred to Mrs. Wedderburn? Apparently not, judging by the change in her expression. Her face darkened, then a red spot rose to each cheek, and the strange light which had been burning in her eyes was suddenly quenched in dismay. But there were few occasions to which she was not equal, and in a moment she recovered herself.

"I have not said the stoppage is final—it may not be," she said shortly. "That depends on circumstances. And unless you are specially anxious that it shall be, you will be wise to say nothing about breaking off your engagement. Whatever chance there is of the water supply yet being given, will certainly be destroyed if you attempt anything of the kind. Your beloved Strathbog people, who are always put before me and my wishes, will know then what you have done for them."

There was no getting the better of that masterful nature. Mollie, conscious of defeat, turned aside that her face might not be seen, then her head went up proudly.

"You have more power than has been put into the hands of most women, mother: perhaps the day may come when you will wish that you had used it differently," she said, and though her voice was laden with tears, every word was clear. "But I am not to be cheated; remember that. I will not ruin my life if nothing is to be gained by it. I will not act hurriedly: you can think over what you are to do; but unless the work is begun again, and I have your word of honour that it shall be completed, I will not marry Gilbert Barclay. Not though I should draw back at the last moment."

She left her then, and went in search of Robert, but the gong sounded when she was in the hall, and it was not till nearly bedtime that she found him alone in the smoking-room, and told him how ill she had fared. She did not give him details, and Robert did not ask for any; it was sufficient for him to be told that she had done her best, and, knowing that, he knew also that it was futile for him to make any appeal. Nevertheless he resolved to try.

"Perhaps enough has been said for to-night, but I will not leave the house to-morrow morning till I have endeavoured at any rate to get to the bottom of it," he said. "I don't put much faith in the stoppage being temporary, but a chance of any kind is better than none. If we could get her to say definitely that this is nothing more than a break, the trouble would be allayed."

"I shall miss the watchman's fire; I had got into a habit of looking at it always before I went to bed," Mollie said, crossing to the window and pulling up the blind. "He has been dismissed too, I suppose. Robert!"

She spoke his name in a startled tone, under her breath, standing as if petrified, the cord of the blind in her hand.

The window overlooked the gardens, and dark though the night was, a moving object, gliding along under shelter of the trees, and going in the direction of Ann Campbell's cottage, was distinguishable. Robert, quick as thought, put out the light, and for a minute they stood side by side in silence, Mollie's heart beating almost to suffocation. Then Robert spoke.

"It is a woman," he said.

Mollie lowered the blind with a shaking hand.

"It is my mother," she said.

CHAPTER XXI

VISITORS FOR ANN

ANN CAMPBELL was suffering from a sore hand: whitlow in one of her fingers it was said to be, though she had not condescended to give any definite information regarding it.

For a week she had been unable to work, and the washing and ironing were being done in the house, very much to the disgust of the two servants—of whom Effie was one—who had been called upon to do it. Both had displayed an anxious solicitude for Ann's welfare, and had made repeated pilgrimages to the cottage to inquire how the finger was progressing, but on the third or fourth occasion her orders to them not to come back had been so peremptory that they dared not disobey.

The cook, a big-hearted, kindly woman, who went to express her sympathy, was not admitted beyond the porch, and got such a grim reception that she retired discomfited and offended: and Fleming, also calling in a spirit of friendli-

ness, received no better treatment, and went home in high dudgeon. Ann would wait a long time before she saw them at her door again, each vowed.

"A body would think we had sent her the whitlow as a Christmas present!" Effie declared, with a resentful toss of her head. "It's maybe her ill nature comin' oot, an' if it a' comes, her finger winna be better in a hurry."

Ann was looking ill, as well she might, for her clothes had not been off since Barry had found a refuge under her roof, and she had allowed herself to take brief rests only when his mother was there to take her place.

Never, till the last day of her life, would Ann forget the breaking of the news to Mrs. Wedderburn, who had acceded to her request, and had gone down to the cottage, believing it was some fresh news concerning Rosa Middleton she was to hear.

Ann had taken her up the steep, narrow stair, and, standing on the landing, whispered in two or three agitated, incoherent sentences that somebody was here, somebody they had all thought dead; then she had pushed her into the attic, closing the door upon her instantly, and fallen back against the wall, wringing her

hands and covering her face alternately, muttering disjointed words of prayer the while.

How long she waited she could not tell. Hours it seemed to her, but in reality not many minutes had passed when, unable to stay out any longer, she entered the room.

Mrs. Wedderburn was on her knees beside the bed, one arm clasping Barry to her, his head on her shoulder, her free hand tenderly stroking his hot face, her white lips murmuring the same words again and again—"My boy! My boy! Not a suicide! God be thanked! God be thanked!"

She would not rise up: he could not hear though they spoke close to him, she said, when she commanded Ann to tell her of his coming; and it was not till the faithful serving woman urged that she might be doing him harm that she was persuaded to relinquish her hold. They took counsel together then, and after midnight Ann walked into Strathbog, and, ringing up Doctor Glennie, brought him back with her. A doctor had to be got from somewhere, and they knew he could be trusted.

"It's a bad case," he summed up gruffly when he had examined Barry. "Not much chance of his putting his feet to the ground for weeks to

come. You have got him, and you'll have to keep him."

"What are we to do about your visits?" Mrs. Wedderburn asked. "You cannot come without being seen."

"We'll just have to give out that Mrs. Campbell is my patient; there's nothing else for it," he answered brusquely. "She will have to stop her work anyhow, and that is the most plausible explanation that can be offered."

"I've been grumlin' awa' about a sair finger; I'll wrap a rag round it, an' mak' it the excuse," said Ann. "I canna lie i' my bed, but naebody will ken what's below the cloot."

Mrs. Wedderburn followed him to the landing when he was leaving. She was quite composed; outwardly at any rate, whatever her inward feelings might be, and the question she detained him to ask was put in a perfectly steady voice.

"Will he get better, doctor?"

Doctor Glennie looked at her gravely.

"He is very ill," he said. "A whole night's exposure at this time of year would have told seriously on a strong man, and he was far from that evidently. He will get over this attack, I hope, but——"

He stopped. Mrs. Wedderburn's eyes seemed to pierce him through and through.

"But—what?"

"We have the lung trouble to fight." She must be told the truth, he knew. She was not a woman to be satisfied with less, and even if she had been he would not have attempted to keep anything back. Barry's disease had run too far on its course for that. "If we had had him here at the beginning of it, the cure would have been a simple matter, but it has taken a firm hold now."

"You mean that he has been given back only—to be taken from me?"

"You may have him for a little while." The proud lips had faltered ever so slightly over the last words, and the doctor was quick to offer what consolation he could. "And you can at least be grateful that you have him here, Mrs. Wedderburn, and that his end may be very different from what you believed it was. That is much to be thankful for."

"Will it—be long?"

Doctor Glennie shook his head.

"I cannot tell yet. Only don't build your hopes too high. The fever won't go down for a day or two; when it does, I shall be better able

to judge. I'll make this my first call in the morning. Good-night."

He took his departure, and Mrs. Wedderburn returned to the bedside. Barry was tossing and twisting again, and about four o'clock, thinking that eau-de-Cologne might help to cool his head, she went to the house for it, entering by the library window. Faith's ears had not deceived her. Had she lain awake a little longer she might have heard the footsteps go back as they had come.

Mrs. Wedderburn had spent her nights in the cottage since then, stealing out of her own house when she was supposed to be in bed, and stealing back in the early hours of the morning. Only occasionally had she dared to come during the day; not often could she slip away unobserved.

Barry had never had the faintest glimmering that she was near him. Sometimes he lay in a stupor; at other times delirium would supervene, and she listened in bewilderment to his ravings.

Lyll Galbraith's name was often mentioned; Mollie's sometimes; now and again he was pleading with some one to sing or to "risk it" with him, but his talk was all a confused jumble, and she could make nothing of it.

Nothing he said helped her to understand how he had lived since his supposed death.

The clothes he had directed to be sent on from Carlisle had been delivered, and their quality had shown her that money must have been plentiful with him. How it could have been earned or obtained puzzled her, but she could find no clue. Ann had carefully locked up his watch and papers, and she never saw them.

One night he seemed better. He had fallen into a deep sleep in the afternoon, and Doctor Glennie had expressed the hope that when he awoke he might be conscious. She and Ann were watching anxiously now, holding their breath at every movement on the bed.

About twelve o'clock he stirred, stretched his arms, then opened his eyes, and looked up. His mother, afraid of startling him, had drawn back, and it was Ann's face his gaze encountered. Before he spoke his faint smile told her that he knew her.

"Halloa, Ann! So I got here all right! I say! What has happened to my voice?"

It was feeble and husky. Ann patted his shoulder encouragingly.

"It'll come a' richt, Mr. Barry; just you gie it time," she said. "Are you feelin' rested?"

“Rested!” He tried to raise himself on his elbow, but fell back. “I’m like a wet wick! Oh, I remember now! It was lying in that blessed ditch—that’s what has played the mischief. How long have I been asleep, Ann? What is the time?”

“It’s five minutes to twel’—at night,” she answered, ignoring his first question. “Mr. Barry, your mother is here. She kens, and, oh! she’s glad!”

She moved aside, and Mrs. Wedderburn came swiftly forward, and threw herself on her knees by the bed. For the first time in his life Barry Wedderburn saw his mother in tears, and his own eyes were wet. But though his body might be spent, the old gay spirit was there still, and when he could speak his greeting was characteristic.

“Twice dead! That’s what you will be saying about me some day, mother mine,” he whispered feebly. “How did you find me out?”

She told him Ann had sent for her. When she added that they had had to bring Doctor Glennie to see him, the fingers which were clasping hers loosened their grip, and he started up in excited alarm.

"Mother! How could you? You have ruined me!" he cried sharply. "Does all Strathbog know I am here? Have you told every one?"

"No; no one but the doctor, and he is safe." She made him lie down again and drew the quilt closer about him. "We have taken every precaution, and you have nothing to fear. Nobody dreams that you are alive."

"Lyall Galbraith—he doesn't guess?"

"Lyall Galbraith?" What could he have to do with it? she wondered. "Certainly not," she assured him. "Why should he? Our affairs are no concern of his."

No, he supposed they were not, Barry murmured drowsily. And then, fearing that he might excite himself talking, she curbed her desire for information, and, after making him drink some beef tea, she coaxed him to try to sleep again. He would, if she sat beside him, he said, and when he got her promise he lay still with her hand in his.

The next few days saw but little alteration. Though Barry knew what was going on he was able to speak only occasionally, and there could be no thought of questioning him.

Doctor Glennie came every morning, paying a

later visit when he could do so without attracting attention. Ann nursed the sick man with unremitting care and tenderness; and Mrs. Wedderburn stayed out of the cottage only when she was compelled to. Every night she was there, and whenever she could make an opportunity during the day she went. Mollie, troubled and distressed regarding her, soon became aware of these comings and goings in the daytime. And her uneasiness increased by leaps and bounds.

One afternoon—the afternoon of Hogmanay day—Ann was in the kitchen making the tea when some one knocked at the outside door. Setting down the teapot she went, ungraciously enough, to answer it, and was confronted by Faith's smiling face.

“Good afternoon, Ann. May I come in? I have brought you some flowers to make you gay for the New Year. You will imagine it is the middle of summer when you have them all around you!”

Without waiting for permission Faith had stepped inside. She gave an exclamation of pleasure when she entered the warm kitchen.

“How delightfully cosy! It is after being out on a day like this one appreciates being in.

And you are making tea! I am in luck! You will give me a cup, won't you? If I don't get any till I go back, I shall have to take it all by myself, and I hate that."

She deposited her muff and a big bunch of snowy chrysanthemums on the table, and calmly established herself in the easy-chair by the side of the fire. Ann, terrified nearly out of her senses, lifted the kettle off the fire, swung it on again, then made another grab at it and raised the lid.

"There's no' enough water in it," she stammered desperately. "An' if you have to wait till mair boils, that will be hinderin' you maybe langer than you can bide. I didna expect——"

"Oh, I am not in a hurry!" Faith held up one of her little feet to the fire to warm and lay back in her chair. "It is lovely here, so you can fill your kettle to the brim if you like; I don't mind though it takes an hour to boil. How is your finger getting on? Is the doctor always visiting you?"

"He was here the day," Ann said, repenting of her assertion regarding the kettle, for it entailed adding more water now.

"Don't let him come to-morrow. I shouldn't

begin the year with a doctor if I were you. Will you sit up till the New Year comes in, Ann?"

"That depends," was Ann's cautious answer.

"I am going to." Faith laughed softly. "At home we haven't any New Year customs, but Mr. Wedderburn has been telling me all the Scottish ones. He says the bells in Strathbog will be ringing at twelve o'clock, and the people will be going about till early in the morning calling on each other—*first-footing*, he called it. Do you think you will have a *first-foot* at midnight, Ann?"

Ann, saying "God forbid!" below her breath, pretended not to hear. Faith, having warmed one foot to her satisfaction, put up the other.

"I'll tell you what I shall do, Ann! I'll get Mr. Wedderburn to bring me down to *first-foot* you; I know he will if I ask him. And I should love to be some one's *first-foot*. I'll bring you all the lucky things I can think of. Oh, Ann! And all over your nice clean hearth!"

She sprang to her feet as she uttered the cry of dismay. The brown teapot into which Ann had been pouring boiling water had dropped from her hand to the hearth with a crash, going to pieces on the whitened stone,

and the water was running in a dozen directions. Ann laughed grimly.

"That was a handless thing to do; you would think my fingers were a' thooms! It's a blessin' your feet didna get it, Miss Emerson. They cam' gey near, and a bonnie scald it would hae been."

"You would have had to turn your house into an hospital then," Faith said, with her sunny laugh, watching the capable hands as they gathered up the broken ware and wiped the hearth dry. "I hope that teapot wasn't a cherished one."

"It was just fourpence-ha'penny worth! The brakin' o' it doesna maitter."

"I must not bring you any more luck of that kind! Is there any special charm for preventing smashes? I'll go and search for it if there is," she declared gaily. "When we come at twelve o'clock——"

"You maunna come." Ann, laying the table with all speed now, her ears strained to catch the faintest sound above, spoke with curt decision. "I dinna believe in first-fittin', and I wadna like to hear what the doctor would say if he cam' to ken o' ony such ongaens."

"But sitting up couldn't hurt your finger,

Ann ; and you can stay in bed to-morrow and make up your loss of sleep. Oh, I am coming, so don't you open the door to any one before I arrive. I don't know when I may spend another New Year in Scotland. Perhaps I shall never."

Her pretty face clouded for an instant, then a soft blush rose to it, and her eyes sparkled again. Ann, her preparations completed, invited her to the table.

"Tak' this chair. It's to be on snaw, I think, so if you are to get up to the hoose dry, you'll be as weel to hurry."

Scarcely another remark did she make during the meal. Faith, chattering gaily, thought her very quiet, and noticed that she ate nothing, but she had no suspicion that she was sick with terror.

Not until the girl had gone did she breathe freely, and then she had to wipe the cold perspiration from her face before she went upstairs to Barry.

"If he had coughed, guidness only kens what I should hae done," she said to herself. "I'll no' be caulder when I'm in my grave! But there's ae thing—they'll knock doon the hoose afore they get in here at twel' o'clock."

Some one else made a passable attempt at

knocking it down before twelve o'clock. Duncan Campbell, Ann's erring spouse, had taken it into his muddled head to pay Strathbog a visit, and, having arrived in the town that afternoon, had proceeded to enjoy his Hogmanay, until, at closing time, the landlord of the "Masons' Arms" assisted him to the outside of his premises. He started on an erratic progress towards the laundry cottage then, and on reaching it made his presence known by a series of kicks at the door.

The noise awoke Barry, and sent Mrs. Wedderburn into a panic of fear. Ann, guessing readily who the visitor was, put a half-sovereign in her pocket, opened the door a few inches, dexterously squeezed herself through the aperture, and, after impressing a few plain truths upon Duncan, gave him the money upon condition that he should go away at once.

Go he did, as far as "The Roundie," then he tried to return, but, his legs giving way before he gained the porch, he established himself on the top of a steep bank which sloped from the foot of Ann's little garden to a ditch at the back of the wood. There he sat, singing and shouting between intervals of sleep, and at last his wife, grim determination on her face, appeared

again. She tried threats, she tried persuasion; driven to it, she even attempted coaxing, but each was ineffectual. From his seat Duncan Campbell would not move. She shook him then, and tried to haul him to his feet, but he was like a block of stone.

She stopped at last to take breath, exasperated, but not beaten.

"What I canna do wi' my hands I can do wi' my feet," she said.

The next instant Duncan rolled down the slope.

CHAPTER XXII

MOLLIE'S DISCOVERY

"I WISH I knew what is taking my mother so often to Ann's cottage! It is inexplicable. If Ann was ill I could understand it, but she isn't. There is no occasion for any one going three or four times each day to inquire after a sore finger."

Mollie, standing by the table in Robert's den, spoke wearily. Her brain was tired out, and even the longing for a respite from harassing care had become blunted in these latter days. She had grown so accustomed to the companionship of an aching heart that to be rid of it seemed impossible. Robert, who was smoking, puffed at his pipe for fully a couple of minutes before he answered.

"What do you think she goes for?" he asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea. But there is something going on in Ann's house, Robert." They had the room to themselves, but she glanced round, and though the door was closed she dropped her voice. "Mother went out again

last night," she said. "I saw her from one of the back windows."

"I know she did." Robert removed his pipe, and knocked the ashes from it slowly. "She has gone every night since the first time we saw her. When she was in the habit of returning I don't know, but yesterday morning she came in at seven o'clock, and she was only a quarter of an hour earlier this morning."

"Robert!"

"That's true. I have been keeping a look-out at nights, but seeing her yesterday morning was quite accidental. I was up early, doing some calculations in connection with a contract that we have on hand, and had to run down to the library for the draft of our offer. I left it on the writing-table there the afternoon before when I came home, and as I knew exactly where to get it I did not trouble with a light. I just went in and lifted it, and was coming away when the west window was pushed open and my mother walked in."

"Did she see you?"

"No. I stood still, and she passed through the room without knowing I was there."

"And she came in in the same way this morning?"

"Yes."

Mollie shivered, and, kneeling down on the rug, cowered over the fire. The year was a week old now, and if it was to go on as it had begun, she hoped passionately that she would not see the end of it.

The indignation in Strathbog was none the less strong because it was smouldering. The men were sullen, held in check only by the fear of consequences; the women, not having the same fear, vented their feelings freely; and a small band of lads, reckless and irresponsible, were openly threatening to burn Mrs. Wedderburn's effigy.

Mollie, calling at one of the miners' houses on New Year's Day, had had the door shut in her face, after having been curtly told by the mother of the sick girl whom she had gone to see, that "Folk that dinna ken the meanin' o' either justice or mercy, shouldna try to cloak their sins by paradin' charity." She for one had had enough of that, and there were more in the town like her, she said.

Mollie had not gone near Strathbog since. She did not resent the woman's speech or her action—very probably she would have behaved in exactly the same manner had she been in the

woman's place, she thought, but she would not face a repetition of the insult.

So she had remained at home, going neither to the town nor to any of her friend's houses, and had therefore seen more of her mother's movements than otherwise she would have done.

"Was that why you would not take Faith to first-foot Ann?" she asked presently.

He nodded. "I knew my mother had gone down, and I was afraid we might meet her coming back."

"I almost wish you had made yourself known yesterday," Mollie said wistfully. "She would have had to give an explanation of some sort. But perhaps that was not her first return," she suggested more hopefully. "She may have come back at night, and have gone out again early."

Robert, commencing to refill his pipe, made a negative gesture.

"She didn't. I was up all last night," he said, his face reddening as he made the admission. "When I saw her come in yesterday morning it dawned on me that there must be something even further wrong than I had been imagining, and I walked between the house here and Ann's garden from half-past eleven last night till a quarter to seven this morning."

"In all the sleet! Oh, Robert!"

"Oh, I've been out in worse. I was warmer tramping about than I would have been sitting at a draughty window, and I couldn't stay indoors knowing that she was out."

He struck a match, let it burn down to his fingers, then threw it into the fire without using it.

"I can't see any clue to the mystery, and we wouldn't be told anything if we asked," he said. "The best thing we can do is to say nothing in the meantime. So long as she does not go beyond Ann's cottage she cannot come to harm; and if she should find herself in need of protection I won't be far away."

"You cannot stay out of bed every night."

"A week of it won't hurt me. That is surely Barclay! Will he be coming in here?"

Gilbert Barclay's loud voice, talking familiarly to the butler, had suddenly broken the stillness of the hall. Mollie shivered again and rose.

"I will go to him. Faith is writing letters, and my mother is lying down."

Matters between her and Gilbert Barclay were on a far from lover-like footing. On the day she accepted him she had told him her reason plainly; and determined not to be beaten, he

had been willing to take her on any terms. But her intimation, galling at the time, had rankled ever since, while her steady resistance of his attempts at love-making kept him in a chronic state of sulkiness. A certain young lady, named Miss Flossie Russell, who lived near St. Andrews and whose acquaintance he had recently made was helping on his dissatisfaction. That was his own secret, however. Though he met Miss Russell often she was at a safe distance, and nothing had been heard of her at Greystone.

There were odd moments, grown increasingly frequent of late, when he meditated "getting quit of the whole show," as he elegantly expressed it; but the feeling that it might be thought that Mollie had taken the initiative and it was he who had been jilted, coupled with a stubborn pleasure he felt in keeping her to her word, restrained him.

The same feeling also was keeping him from mentioning the trouble which had arisen in connection with the water supply. That she must expect him to speak of it he knew, and therefore he held his tongue. What had occurred need not make any difference to him. Though Mrs. Wedderburn had failed in her promise, she would see that Mollie fulfilled hers. If he gave

her the chance. He generally added that qualification.

Mrs. Wedderburn who, as Mollie said, had been lying down, rose when she heard his horse coming up the avenue, and slipping on a cloak, left the house unnoticed.

Her face as she walked across the bare garden was strangely disturbed; it was indeed the face of a woman who was suffering an upheaval of her soul.

For the last two days Barry's constant cry had been for Rosa Middleton. He had vouchsafed little information, but she knew now that he had met Rosa in Milan, and had lingered in that city because she was there, and the craving he was evincing for her left no room for doubt as to his feelings. That morning Doctor Glennie had said something must be done to gratify him, and every torture that can be inflicted by humiliated pride and baffled hate had been Isabel Wedderburn's portion since then.

Ann, looking harassed, opened the door in answer to the low double knock she gave.

"I'm glad you've come; he has been gettin' fair impatient," was the greeting she received.

"He has been up."

"Up!"

"It wisna my blame." Ann, fancying she detected reproach in the sharp exclamation, spoke tartly. "He wanted to write a letter, an' when he got me doon the stair, up he got to look for paper an' a pencil. I bundled him back in a hurry, but he is sittin' up now, writin'."

"To whom?"

"Oh, ye needna ask! I didna, but I ken. He's aye harpin' on the same string. He'll speak o' naething else."

Mrs. Wedderburn compressed her lips, and mounted to the attic. Barry, propped up in bed with pillows, a book, on which was a sheet of notepaper, resting on his knees, welcomed her with a gay smile.

"What do you think of me, mother? Am I not improving? I'll soon be on my legs again."

Would he? The flush on his cheeks made him look almost well, and he was so bright that for one brief moment, Doctor Glennie's plain speaking notwithstanding, she almost believed he might. The next he commenced to cough, and she remembered the deceptiveness of his disease.

"Do you think this is wise?" she asked.

"It's all by way of testing my strength, and I'm nearly well, if you ask me! This is the first

time I've coughed since morning." He lay back exhausted for a moment, then sat up again. "You will have to smuggle out one of Bob's razors, and let me get rid of this growth," he said, touching the hair on his chin. "Unless I stick to it till I get away," he added. "It might help me."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"You are very anxious to get away, Barry. Are you tired of us?"

"Tired? Hardly, mother mine! But all the same, I'll have to make a shift: I can't stay here for ever. I must get back to Italy."

"Barry, you will never go to Italy—never! Doctor Glennie would not allow you to start: you would never live through the journey!" The words were wrung from her in her fear; she scarcely knew what she was saying. "Cannot you be satisfied without that girl?" she cried wildly. "Is she to come between you and your peace and safety at the very last?"

At the very last? Barry stared at her intently, then broke into a laugh.

"What rubbish has old Glennie been putting into your head?" he demanded. "Has he said to you that I'll never travel again?"

For answer she buried her face in the bed

clothes. and began to sob. For many a year her self-control had been invincible, but since the breaking-up process had commenced it had gone on very swiftly. Barry stroked her hair.

“Don’t you alarm yourself, mother — if Glennie said that, he is a dolt! I’m nearly as well as ever I was, thanks to you and Ann. I think I will be able to start next week: I’ve just been saying so in this letter. I mean to be in Milan on the Saturday after next.”

Not a doubt seemed to be in his mind, but his confidence did not communicate itself to her. She withdrew from the bed, and walking across to the fire stood with her back to him.

Months ago, when she had driven Mollie into a corner, and gloated because she knew there was only one choice for her, she had not dreamed there was a possibility of ever finding herself in a similar position. But as Mollie had had to choose then, so must she now. That Barry would never leave Ann’s house till he was carried out, she believed, and she must either send for the girl who was so much to him, or carry to her life’s end the knowledge that through her he had gone to his grave unsatisfied. And, as she had told Rosa Middleton, he was the best loved of her children.

All she had said to Rosa came back to her ; all she had said of her, every taunt and sneer cutting her like a two-edged sword.

Barry's voice, grave for once, broke in on her seething thoughts.

"Mother, don't be angry with me for wanting to see Rosa," he pleaded. "You don't know what she was to me in Milan. I was fond of her here, but there she was my all, and I can see now that if I had got her at the commencement I wouldn't be as I am to-day. She would have kept me straight."

"What of Faith Emerson?" she asked chokingly without looking round.

A hectic flush rose to Barry's face.

"Faith could have told you I didn't use her well," he said in a shamed tone. "I went as far as I dared with her, and then when she left Aldershot I promised to write to her, but I didn't. I made her believe I was in earnest, but I wasn't, and I had a bad half-hour when I knew she was coming to Greystone."

"And I suppose that girl Middleton was trying to get you to marry her in Milar?"

"She would not have me, mother. I tried hard to persuade her, but she refused."

"She refused you?"

Mrs. Wedderburn wheeled round in her astonishment. Barry, beginning to feel tired, moved restlessly.

"Yes; unless I would make a clean breast of things; own up to—to the friends of—the chap who shot himself, and I couldn't do that. But marriage or no marriage, I must go where I can be near her, mother. I can't live without her, and though I die at the end of the journey, I shall set off next week."

"Is that letter for her?"

"Yes. You might address it, mother; my hand is shaky yet. And perhaps you will post it."

She stood with it between her fingers. The end of the struggle had come, and she was ready to give in.

"Would she come here if you asked her?"

"No," he said unhesitatingly. "She would not."

"If I asked her?"

Again the hectic flush rose, and the wistful yearning that gleamed in the sunken eyes laid bare for an instant the starving heart within.

"Mother! If you would! Though it was but for one day!"

"I will write to her now."

The writing of that letter was the hardest task Isabel Wedderburn had ever undertaken. Apart from humbling herself to the girl she had insulted and scorned, she was at her wits' end to know how it would be possible for Rosa to arrive in Strathbog and come to Ann's house without being recognised. She put off the difficulty for the moment by instructing her to wire from Edinburgh, and she would telegraph directions to her there, but even while she penned the words, she had no conception what form these directions could take.

She had not to sit up with Barry that night; he was so much better that he did not require any one, and Robert was spared his self-imposed vigil. In the morning the improvement was still maintained, and she went back to see him in the afternoon, resolved to question him more closely than she had done yet.

A little later Mollie, who had been out for a walk, was caught in a shower when she was passing "The Roundie," and ran up to the laundry cottage for shelter.

By some rare oversight, the door was unbolted, and she walked straight in. The kitchen was empty, so was the laundry, and while she stood wondering where Ann could be, a strange

wailing cry, followed by a moan, sounded from the attic above. For an instant she stood rigid, then she sped up the stair, and flung open the door.

She stopped on the threshold, staring at the man on the bed, at her mother kneeling beside him, at Ann standing near, as motionless as herself. In that instant the mystery became clear, and she uttered one word in a husky whisper.

“ Barry ! ”

Mrs. Wedderburn, after one paralysed moment, spoke with the calmness of despair.

“ He has been personating Frank Galbraith,” she said. “ It was Sir Frank who died. God be merciful ! What will Lyall Galbraith say ? ”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST OF BARRY

"THAT'S quite comfortable, old chap?"

"Quite."

"You see the house?"

"Ay."

Barry's tone was full of gratitude. But it could not be any other when speaking to Lyall Galbraith, and it was Lyall who had just moved his bed to the window so that he might feast his eyes on the house that had been his boyhood's home. Barry was dying. He himself knew that now, and those who had loved him and suffered through him were doing their utmost to make his last hours peaceful. The short spell of strength that had been vouchsafed to him had been but a flicker, and the end was very near.

After making her discovery, Mollie, asking no one's permission, had run to the house for Robert, and almost from the moment he entered that little room fear had been swept away, and peace had reigned.

Good, patient, upright Robert, who had never done aught to be ashamed of himself, and yet had had so often to face shame and humiliation, had gone straight to Lyall Galbraith, and after disclosing the truth to him, had travelled that very night to Aldershot, and there presented himself to Barry's old Colonel.

"I know there can be no question of removing him or of punishing him now," he said when he had told the whole story to the stern soldier, who was the terror of his men and known as "Old Nails" because of his hardness. "But to let you know he is alive was my only honourable course, and if you could see your way to—to give me an assurance that he will not be—troubled, my gratitude would know no bounds. Just for the sake of my mother."

"I will give it to you for your own sake, Mr. Wedderburn. Your brother will not be interfered with by us." "Old Nails" put out his hand and gripped Robert's fiercely, choking down something in his throat the while. "You may keep your mind easy regarding that. And tell him from me that his country has lost a grand soldier. Never a smarter lad wore the King's uniform."

He made Robert breakfast with him, then

drove him to the station, and saw him off, and the fiery old eyes were suspiciously dim as they watched the train glide away. Had Barry Wedderburn had a nature like his brother's, life for himself and all connected with him would have been widely different, the Colonel thought.

There was no need for continuing the secrecy then, and before another twenty-four hours had passed, Strathbog was aflame with the news. The women gathered in the houses and the doorways to discuss it, the men at the street corners and the pitheads; and in their ready sympathy and generous pity, their bitterness on account of their own wrongs was forgotten, and with warm-hearted unselfishness they blamed themselves for the resentment they had shown towards the Greystone family during the past weeks.

There was not one of themselves but would have done just the same as Mrs. Wedderburn had done, they said, speaking of the stoppage of the pipe laying: it was but natural that she should put her son's safety first. And then they added regretfully that they might have known better than to have cast reproach at Mr. Robert and Miss Mollie. They, at any rate, had always

been good friends to those poorer than themselves.

And poor Mr. Barry! The tears ran down the women's cheeks when they spoke of him; and though the men, perhaps because they were stronger minded, could not altogether forget his shortcomings, they were pitiful too, and only in kindness was his name spoken.

Faith had been to see him once or twice: Lyall called morning and afternoon each day.

Whatever bitterness Lyall might have felt, he had shown none. At their first interview there had been a stammering, shamed word or two from Barry; a hearty hand-clasp and an earnest assurance of forgiveness from Lyall; Frank Galbraith's last letter had been handed over, and then, so far as they two were concerned, the subject was shut away with the things which are not spoken of.

Only Robert had been a witness to what had passed then, and it had surprised Lyall to-day to find Mrs. Wedderburn in the room with Mollie, when, at Barry's request, Ann had asked him to go upstairs. She had always been invisible when he called before.

She was looking ghastly, and had not spoken a dozen words, but Lyall thought he under-

stood. Robert had gone to Edinburgh to meet Rosa, and he knew the prospect of welcoming the girl she had hated so deeply must be weighing upon her intolerably. Possibly his presence was getting on her nerves also, he reflected; and he decided to cut his visit short.

"I had better go now; Ann gave me five minutes as my limit, and I have taken ten," he said. "Good-bye, Barry. I hope you will sleep better to-night."

"Tell me the exact time, Lyall; I don't believe that clock is right. It must be slow!" Barry, turning impatiently as he spoke, looked at the old-fashioned timepiece for the twentieth time in as many minutes. "They ought to have been here long ago."

"The train is only due now; they haven't had time yet," Lyall answered, glancing at his watch. "The clock is a minute fast if anything. Robert won't fail you, Barry."

He shook hands with Mollie and her mother, and went quietly downstairs. Outside the porch he paused to button his overcoat, and while he was doing so the door opened, and Mrs. Wedderburn came out.

"I hoped I should overtake you," she said, and he saw that her ghastliness had increased,

and her pallid lips were twitching. "I have not had an opportunity of speaking to you regarding what my son has done, or of thanking you for the kindness you have shown to him, but I am deeply grateful. I know that few men would have acted so generously as you have done."

She spoke with difficulty and with a humility very strange to her. Lyall could not have helped pitying her if he had tried.

"Barry and I are old friends, and even if we had not been I could not have shown harshness to him," he answered quietly. "The time for that was gone, Mrs. Wedderburn."

"For him—yes," she said, her mouth twitching again. "I will repay the money he used as soon as you tell me what the amount is: you will not lose what he took, but that cannot blot out the forgeries. They are on my mind night and day. He cannot be punished, but—we can."

The last two words were uttered almost inaudibly. Lyall heard them however, but he did not comprehend their meaning. He looked at her in perplexity, and she, mistaking his silence, pressed her hands together in desperation; her breath came gaspingly.

“I—I know I have no claim on your mercy ; to ask for it comes ill from me to you, but he has been my best loved always, and I would give my life to save what little of his name I can,” she panted. “That little is not much, I know, but it means very much to me. He will not care ; he will be beyond it all, but——”

Her voice broke ; the haughty head that had been held so high before friend and foe alike bent itself in grief and shame. They had stopped by the end of the cottage, and the wintry sun striking clearly across the open space there showed Lyall the many silver threads which had made their appearance in her dark hair since he had last met her.

“What is it you wish me to do ?” he asked with grave kindness. “I am afraid I do not understand.”

“If—if you would keep the knowledge of the forgeries from getting abroad—Barry’s forgery of Sir Frank Galbraith’s name to cheques,” she whispered painfully. “If you would promise not to let it be known that he drew your money ! People know that he gambled and embezzled, but if you would consent to allow that to be hidden ; so that he might lie in his grave without the stigma of forgery being added.”

“Do you fear that I shall ever tell that?” The gentleness in Lyall’s voice was only equalled by the sincerity. “Mrs. Wedderburn, though it should cost me Castle Morven and all its revenues, Barry’s name, the name of any Wedderburn, will never suffer through me. You need have no dread on that score. The public know that Barry borrowed my cousin’s name, but that is all they ever shall know. The rest lies between him and me. So does the money. There is no question of repayment: I would not have it.”

They walked on then, but once or twice she stumbled, for she could not see the path. At the gate she stopped and looked up at him, her eyes swimming in tears.

“I have been a wicked woman, Lyall Galbraith, and, God knows, you have made me feel ashamed of it this day,” she said with a choking sob. “I would undo the past if I could, but it is not given to any of us to do that, so I can know only repentance till the last day of my life. I made pride my idol, and it has broken my heart at the end.”

She passed through the gate without another word, leaving him standing by it. He watched her disappear, then went down to the road, and

as he passed the lodge the Greystone carriage swept in at the entrance to the park, and he caught a glimpse of Rosa sitting by Robert's side.

There had been no cringing in Rosa's reply to Mrs. Wedderburn's letter. She had wired that she would travel to Edinburgh, but would go no farther without a personal interview; unless Mrs. Wedderburn met her there she would return immediately to Milan. The elder woman had offered no apology for her past behaviour when she wrote, and Rosa had made up her mind that she would not go to Greystone to be insulted, possibly to be humiliated in Barry's presence.

It had been impossible for Isabel Wedderburn to leave Barry, but Robert had quietly undertaken the duty, and by his tact and kindness had succeeded in convincing Rosa that there would be no recrimination, and she would be treated with respect. She was feeling nervous when they drove up the avenue, but she had no fear, and she was thinking more of Barry than of her reception.

Robert led her up the steps, and she had a confused impression of a spacious hall, of the butler murmuring, "In the drawing-room, Mr.

Robert," and then she found herself in a room more beautiful than any she had ever pictured in her imagination, and Barry's mother came forward to meet her.

"I thank you for coming," Mrs. Wedderburn said, and if the words were constrained they at least marked her surrender to the inevitable. "Barry is impatient to see you, and we will go to him as soon as you have had a cup of tea;—unless you wish to change your dress first? You brought your luggage in the carriage?"

Yes. But she would not change her dress, nor wait for tea, Rosa said. She would rather go to Barry at once. So a couple of minutes later, Effie Cuthbert and one or two of the other servants, who were keeping a strict look-out from one of the upper windows, had the gratification of seeing them going together across the gardens to the red-roofed cottage where Barry waited for them.

"I could wager onything the mistress is grindin' her teeth!" was Effie's remark, as she craned her neck to get a last glimpse of them. Then she burst into a ringing laugh. "My word, I would gie a shillin' to see Ann Campbell's face! Willna she be roused?"

"Maybe no'," a girl beside her observed soberly. "Ann's no' so bad as some o' us have thocht her. I hope if I ever need a friend, I'll hae as guid a ane as she is to turn to."

"Oh, I believe that, but she's a Tartar a' the same. When Rosa Middleton was hame in September, Ann was like to eat hersel' because she never managed to come across her. Wait till I see her—I'll tell her she has gotten Rosa this time without gaen to look for her. That'll provoke hēr!"

Ann, at that precise moment, was looking as if very little would provoke her into an outburst. Her mouth had its grimmest set when she opened the door to her mistress, and she did not deign to let her eyes light on Rosa. Not even for Barry's sake would she acknowledge the need for the girl's presence, and though she dared not refuse her admittance, she did not attempt to hide that she disapproved of her being there.

She was standing, her arms akimbo, glaring out fiercely at the frosty landscape, when Mollie—who, after giving Rosa a warm welcome at the top of the stair, had slipped away—came into the kitchen.

"Barry's heart will be at rest now," she said,

her eyes shining with a sweet thankfulness. "I scarcely believed until I saw Rosa and my mother together on the stair that this could ever come to pass."

Not one word said Ann. Her lips were closed as tightly as if she never meant to open them again.

"I am glad for both my mother's and Rosa's sake," Mollie went on. "It will be my mother's greatest comfort some day to remember that she gratified Barry in this, and it will be something for Rosa always to know that he could not die without her. Did you see her as she came in, Ann?"

"I'd nae particular notion o' seein' her!"

"She is looking very tired and wan, as if she had not slept for several nights. The thought of this must have been trying to her, and it will try her more to see Barry as he is. Life is very hard, Ann. I wonder why there is so much tragedy in it?"

"Because folk mak' it!" Ann snapped. "Not that Mr. Barry ever did," she corrected hastily. "He was drawn in. But she did her share."

And to that belief Ann stubbornly adhered.

Two days after Rosa's arrival Barry died, and she stayed on at Greystone till he had been laid

to rest in the peaceful God's acre where Strathbog people buried their loved ones who had gone on before.

It was a very quiet funeral. Lyall, known by his title now though he had not yet quitted the bank; Dr. Glennie, and Mr. MacDonald, the family lawyer, comprised the little company, who, along with Robert, followed the hearse. Gilbert Barclay, who had taken offence because a host of inquisitive questions which he had put to Mollie regarding Barry had been answered by a well-deserved snub, had been invited, but did not appear, and while the mourners were still at the cemetery a letter from him was brought to Mollie.

Believing it to be an explanation of his absence, she opened it, and Faith and Rosa, who were sitting near her, saw the hot blood come into her face with a rush, dyeing it crimson to the roots of her soft hair. For an instant she sat quite still, then the blood slowly receded, and rising, she left the room.

Lyall returned with Robert. Some letters which had been found amongst Barry's belongings required looking over, and Robert had insisted on his coming. They had tea together, and after their business was over went to join

the girls, but only Faith and Rosa were in the drawing-room, and Lyall did not stay long. He would call again in a day or two, he said.

He was taking a short cut across the park, when through the grey, frosty air of the afternoon, he saw Mollie at a little distance coming slowly in his direction. She caught sight of him at the same moment, and the wild-rose colour leaped into her cheeks.

"Have you been home with Robert? He did not tell me you were coming," she said as they shook hands. "I had to come out—I could not stay in the house."

"You have had a trying time," he said gently, turning with her. "A change would do you all good if you could persuade your mother to go away."

"She is speaking of it. We shall see," she said indifferently. Then her voice quickened. "Now that your home will be at Castle Morven, there will be no thought of leaving Strathbog for you, I suppose?"

A shadow crossed Lyall Galbraith's face.

"No; I shall not be an absentee landlord," he answered quietly. "I love the place too well for that."

He stood still then, for all at once his self-control had deserted him, and catching hold of her hands he drew her round to face him.

“Mollie, cannot things be straightened out?” he asked passionately. “Won’t your mother give the water to Strathbog independent of your marriage with Barclay? She cannot object to my position now, and you can never be happy with him. I know you cannot deliberately wish to make a fool of any man, dear, but——”

She lifted her clear eyes, in which there was a dancing light, and looked him straight in the face.

“It is the other way about—Gilbert Barclay has made a fool of me,” she said with a tremulous smile. “I had a letter from him to-day. He was married in Edinburgh this morning.”

CHAPTER XXIV

SUNSHINE

IT was a warm day in May, almost a year after that bright morning when Barry, a gay smart young officer, had come north from Aldershot on his last week-end visit to his home. Greystone was at its fairest. Fresh and green and lovely, it looked this afternoon the very abode of peace. And there was peace within its walls. The peace that comes after great tribulation.

The grass was growing green over Barry's grave, Rosa Middleton was hard at work at her studies in Milan, and in the musical world rumours were already rife regarding the marvellous voice of the young Scottish singer, of whose brilliant future there was now no doubt. Lyall, who had taken up his abode at Castle Morven, was a daily visitor at Greystone. The Castle was being made ready for its mistress, and Mollie was to be married in June.

When Lyall had gone to Mrs. Wedderburn, and, for the second time, asked if she would give

him Mollie, his reception had been widely different from the one he had received on the first occasion. The shame which his generosity had stirred within her, together with her anger against Gilbert Barclay for daring to jilt *her* daughter, to say nothing of the fact that he was Sir Lyall Galbraith of Castle Morven, had made her eager to acquiesce, and she had given her consent with a cordiality that had surprised even herself.

When he had broached the subject of the water, she had informed him stiffly, but nevertheless definitely, that as soon as possible the new supply would be an accomplished fact. When Barry had learned that she had stopped the work on his account, he had told her to be sure to go on with it again after he was away, and having promised him she required no one to urge her, she said coldly.

The work had been pushed on briskly since then, and was nearing completion now. The contractors had instructions to have it finished for the date which was fixed for Mollie's wedding, and night and day shifts of men were on.

Faith was still Mrs. Wedderburn's guest, but her stay would soon be at an end, for Major Emerson was on his way home, and was ex-

pected to reach Scotland in about a fortnight's time. He and Faith would stay for the wedding, of course, for she was to be chief bridesmaid, but probably they would leave immediately after.

Once, after she had received Rosa Middleton under her roof, Mrs. Wedderburn had forced herself to speak to Faith regarding Barry's treatment of her, and the girl's answer had been candour itself.

"I really did not know then what it was to care," she said with a vivid blush which seemed to indicate that her knowledge had been subsequently improved. "Of course, I liked to be flattered and to get attention, but it was only my vanity that got a nasty knock when Barry dropped me. And afterwards, when my father told me that he had arranged with you that I should come here, pride would not let me object."

"You never hinted at anything."

"No." Faith's merry eyes grew grave. "By the time I arrived here he was in disgrace, and supposed to be dead, and I could not kick a man when he was down. Besides, you never asked me," she added with a droll little smile. "You had a rooted conviction that he had intended to propose to me, and although by then I had a rooted one that he hadn't, I could not

impress that upon you without giving him away. So I held my tongue."

She would miss Faith, Isabel Wedderburn knew, though she never unbent to say so. She had no desire for gaiety, but the house would be dull when only Robert and herself were in it. Robert was such poor company for any one! And if Faith was once away it was unlikely that they would ever see anything more of her. Already half-a-dozen of her aristocratic relatives were clamouring for visits from her and her father, and there was nothing at Greystone to make her long to return.

She was thinking so as she stood by one of the windows of the drawing-room now, looking out over the park.

The troubles that had been laid on Isabel Wedderburn had sadly altered her. The figure which had been so upright, stooped; her hair was almost white, and on her forehead and round her mouth deep lines were graven. And not only in appearance had she altered. She could not change her nature, and gentleness would never be one of her traits, but she had learned something of the need for charity and pity, and her tongue had lost much of its bitterness.

"I wonder where she has gone to? She has

been away more than a couple of hours," she said half aloud, her mind still running on Faith. "She said she might walk to Strathbog, but I don't like her going out so much alone. Oh, here she comes!"

Faith had appeared round a bend in the avenue, Robert escorting her. She waved her hand gaily when she caught sight of the face at the window, but she did not come into the room when they entered the house. Mrs. Wedderburn heard her run upstairs, and a moment later Robert walked in.

There was something unusual about Robert to-day—an air of happiness and pride, of heartfelt thankfulness, such as comes to a man when he has been made sure of the best that the world has to give. Without sitting down, without preliminaries of any kind, he told his mother the reason. Faith had promised to be his wife.

Faith! Faith Emerson with her beauty and her money, and her blue blood, to marry him—him! Steady, grave Robert Wedderburn, the son she had always despised, plain in looks and shy in manner, who had never been good for anything but work!

The first conclusion Mrs. Wedderburn came to was that the girl must be making fun of him.

She could not be in earnest! But Faith left her in no doubt concerning that when she sent for her and expressed her belief.

"I am so much in earnest that if it meant living in a couple of rooms and scrubbing my own floors I would marry Robert just the same, and call myself blessed for getting the chance," she said, her eyes shining. "He is the best man in the world, and I am the luckiest girl."

"What will your father say?"

"The same," Faith returned promptly, with a happy laugh. "He has always said he hoped I would marry a 'dependable' man, and he won't be here long without finding out that Robert is that."

And so it proved. When Major Emerson first visited Greystone he had liked Robert, but he was not a hasty man, and before giving his consent to the engagement, he made quiet but very minute inquiries in Strathbog regarding him. What he learned was eminently satisfactory, and he gave Mrs. Wedderburn the benefit in a few terse sentences.

"There isn't a man who serves him but has a good word to say of him, and that's the kind of testimony I like. It's those who work for people who know what they are," he said. "Duty first

and self last has always been his motto seemingly. You ought to be proud of him, Mrs. Wedderburn. I know I'm glad to think my little lass is going into such good keeping."

"I thought you would have looked higher for her," she murmured, almost humbly.

The brave old V.C. smiled half sadly.

"I don't want anything higher than a good man. To feel Faith has got that will give me most ease when my last call comes," he said simply. "It wouldn't help me then to know that she had a grand position, if her husband chanced to be a scoundrel."

They fixed their wedding for September—that would give Mollie and Lyall time to be home, Faith said—and Robert decided to take Millhall, which was to let, the tenant having died in the spring. His salary was not an extravagant one, but Millhall was a small place, and within his means, and Faith liked it. But before he had done anything definite, his mother gave him a great surprise.

She thought of taking Millhall for herself, she announced. Greystone would be too large for her when she was alone, and he might as well have it. And she had decided to retire from the business, and hand it over to him unreservedly.

She had more money than she would ever spend, and—well, perhaps it was time he was more than a servant. He could make the place pay, and evidently he understood the men—or, at any rate, they imagined he did, which amounted to the same thing.

That was the one meagre and ambiguous tribute she paid to him for his years of devoted service. Faith was indignant, but Robert said it was only her way, and he was too happy to mind much. His cherished ambitions for his men could be fulfilled now, and the years ahead held royal compensation for those that lay behind.

“I did not think six months ago that so much happiness could ever come to any of us,” Mollie said to Ann one day, when she had run down to see her. “I feel so ashamed sometimes now, for, oh! I did rebel! No one knows how I rebelled!”

“You tried to dae richt ony wey, whether it gaed against the grain or no’, an’ I think that’s hoo we’ll a’ be judged,” Ann answered, a momentary softness in her voice. “An’ it wisna muckle winder though ye rebelled,” she added. “I dinna ken ony wyse body that would hae dune onything else at the prospect o’ bein’ tied to the Laird o’ Ballathie. It wis a bricht ane!”

“It was bright for one girl,” Mollie said with a

smile. "If the wife he has got hadn't thought so, she would not have taken him in such a hurry."

"She was far left to hersel'. I heard no' lang syne that she said she couldna suffer the sicht o' him, but she kent she would get a guid hame. Here's Mr. Robert an' Miss Emerson. Oh, and Sir Lyall as weel!"

He guessed Mollie would be there, and had come for her: he met Robert and Faith on the way, Lyall explained as they all came in. And then Faith begged Ann to give them tea and scones, and for an hour they sat in the little kitchen, talking and laughing, and gladdening Ann's heart.

She went with them to the porch when they were taking their departure, and while they were standing there Robert's eye fell on the ditch at the bottom of the slope.

"I think I'll have that filled up, Ann," he said. "It isn't ornamental."

"What?" Ann's gaze followed his. "The ditch? Na! Ye maunna do that, Mr. Robert!" she exclaimed hastily. "If it's no bonnie, it's whiles usefu'."

"But it would be safer if it was filled up," he urged, his eyes twinkling. "You put Duncan into it, you know."

Ann smiled with keen relish.

“ Ay! An’ he liket it that ill that he’s vowed he’ll never come back here fou, an’ as there’s nae fear o’ him ever bein’ sober, I’m a’ richt sae lang as it’s there. Dinna meddle the ditch in my time, Mr. Robert. Better a dirty ditch than a pest o’ a man!”

Strathbog was *en fête*. It was Mollie Wedderburn’s wedding day, and everywhere there was brilliant sunshine—over the strings of flags stretched from one side of the High Street to the other, on the bunting that was displayed at every available point at Robert’s offices and pits; on the crimson cloth which was laid down the steps of the parish church and right out to the street. Inside the grey old building, gay with stately palms and innumerable roses, an attempt had been made to exclude it by pulling down the blinds, but it had made its way in at the edges, and flickering over the pews, and, falling athwart the space beside the choir rails, made a blaze of light on the spot where bride and bridegroom would stand while they took each other for better or worse, for richer or poorer.

Every one was astir, every one was excited. The church was packed to suffocation when Lyall and his best man walked up the aisle, and

Robert led in Mollie, a vision of white in her long trailing gown and floating veil. Every neck was craned to see, and every heart rejoiced with both bride and bridegroom.

The brief ceremony was soon over, and they were out in the street again; the carriages bowling in a long procession to Greystone; the crowd to hurry to Loch Tulchan on foot. For all were guests to-day. Beside the loch big marquees had been erected, and there employees, tenants, and townspeople alike were being entertained. The contractors had everything ready, and the carriage which was to bear Sir Lyall and Lady Galbraith on the first stage of their honeymoon was to come round that way, so that the bride might turn on the water.

It came at last—one of the Castle Morven carriages this time—and when Lyall helped his wife to alight, the cheers that rent the air might have been heard a mile away. And when the little ceremony was over and she stood looking down at the people who had been so much to her, and at the man she loved standing by her side, she saw them all through a mist of happy tears.

“I don’t know why so much has been given to me,” she said.

But Lyall thought he knew.

