Tales of my own Country

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TALES OF MY OWN COUNTRY

BY VIOLET JACOB

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TO

HELENA MARIOTA CARNEGIE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wish to say that, though all the scenes of the following tales are portraits of places, the characters—with the exception of Neil Gow, who is portrayed as history records him—are in no case portraits of individuals.

Two of these stories have appeared in *The Cornhill Magazine*.

V. J.

April 1922

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‘THIEVIE’

The side street of the Angus town was as grey a thing as could be seen even on this grey dripping day. The houses, thick-walled, small-windowed, sturdily uniform and old-fashioned, contemplated the soaking cobble-stones and the ‘causeys’ which ran like rivers on either side; the complacent eyes of their dark panes, made yet darker by the potted geraniums whose smouldering red gave no liveliness to a reeking world, stared out, endlessly aloof, upon the discomfort of the occasional passer-by. Under their breath they seemed to be chorusing unanimously the words of St. Paul and saying, “None of these things move me.” The dried haddocks, which usually hung on their wooden ‘hakes’ nailed to the walls, had been brought in, as had the small children whose natural playground was the pavement; chalk-marks made by schoolboys in their various evening games had been obliterated from the flags. Newbiggin Street was a featureless place given over to the sulky elements.

All night it had rained steadily, for with evening the fitful drizzle of the day before had settled down to business. The woman who stood framed in the only open doorway of the street looked up and down, frowning. She was a thickset, bony woman, one of those who, unremarkable in feature, are yet remarkable in presence, and though in daily life she made no bid for attractiveness, it was because she did not happen to know where, or in what, attraction lay. Her eyes were steady, and full, at times, of a purposeful though not alluring light. Her hair was dark and thick, her skin sallow, and her head well carried. She was dressed tidily, in stout, ill-fitting clothes, in strong contrast to which she wore a cheap, new hat with a crude blue flower; this was a recognition of the occasion, for she had walked yesterday from her home, five miles away, with her bundle in her hand, to see an aunt whose voice could now be heard in conversation behind her. She was not paying the smallest attention to the old woman’s talk; her return journey was before her and the prospect did not please her.

A lad came up the street with his hands in his pockets and his head ducked into his collar under the downpour.

“Bad weather,” she observed, as he passed the doorstep.

“Bad weather!” he exclaimed, with a half-contemptuous laugh; “wumman, hae ye seen the river?”

Her face changed. She stood hesitating, staring; then, without a word to the unseen aunt within, she gathered up her bundle and stepped out.

Soon she was in the movement of the main street which declined in a steep hill to the lower levels; there were many others making in the same direction and as she went along she could hear, above the noise of wheels and footsteps, a steady roaring. Not a breath of wind was stirring to make the sound fluctuate, and the even relentlessness of it awed her a little. She crossed the way that lay at right angles to the bottom of the street and stood looking down over the iron-railed wall which held up the road at the riverside. The grey, moving mass that slipped by was almost up to the railings.

Beyond her and all along the row of houses, the people were gathered to watch the rising water. The doors of the one-storied dwellings were choked with furniture that was being lugged out and carried away. Chairs, tubs, tables, birds in cages appeared and disappeared up the hill; women screamed angrily to venturesome children whose curiosity had lured them from the maternal skirts, frightened infants cried, men pushed about laden with cooking-pots and bedding; boys shouted to each other, running about in the crowd, the thud of their bare feet lost in the changeless, covetous voice that rose from between the banks. A blind man was being led towards the rise of the hill; he too was playing his part, for he carried a ‘wag-at-the-wa’ ’ clock with a gaudily-painted face clasped in his arms. She paused a few minutes to look up and down the torrent and then struck away from the crowd, seeking through the outlying streets for her straightest line home.

Janet Robb’s life had been much concerned with the elements. The house for which she was making at her steady, uncompromising tramp was a waterside cottage just above the spot where the river wound into a lake-like estuary on its way to the North Sea. Here she was born, here she had lived out her thirty-four years, for her father had been ferryman until the building of a new bridge a short distance up-stream had shovelled his trade into the limbo of outworn necessities. She had kept house in it almost ever since she could remember; for her mother, who had been an invalid, died when her girl was thirteen, and the ferryman, in spite of the prophecies of his neighbours, did not marry again. Women had no attraction for him, and the need of a housekeeper, which, more than any other cause, drives middle-

aged working men into matrimony, did not exist while he had a daughter like Janet, so well able and so well accustomed to grapple with domestic needs. She was a hardy woman now, close-fisted and shrewd. She had been an invaluable help, both in the house and out of it; the two had worked the ferry between them, for the river was not wide and the traffic was small. Carts and horses had to go round to a point about a mile westward, and only foot-passengers on their way to the town troubled that part of the shore; when her father was out she could leave her house-work to put them across to the farther bank without much interruption to it.

The ferryman was not an inspiring acquaintance. Though he belonged, in company with publicans, barbers, and blacksmiths, to a trade eminently social in its opportunities, he cared nothing for that part of it. He could put over a boatful of people without addressing a word to any of them and with scarcely an answer to any man enterprising enough to attack his silence. He was not popular, and, as those who give nothing of their mind to the world must perforce submit to have the gaps they create filled up according to the taste of their neighbours, a whole crop of tales sprang up at the waterside like so much duckweed. He was a secret drinker; he was worth ten thousand pounds; he kept a woman in the town whom he ill-treated—had she not been seen with her head bandaged, crying ill names after him on the public road?—he starved his daughter; she starved him—all these whisperings surrounded his unconscious head. He was a spare man, smaller in build than Janet, lined and clean-shaven. Besides his recognised business he had a cart and an old horse by means of which he did a little carrying, going townwards three times a week, whilst she took charge of the boat; and though nobody outside the cottage knew anything about it, he received substantial help from a son who had left home early and was making a good income in Canada. While the neighbours went wide of the mark in most of the rumours they set afloat about him, one of these had a fragile foundation of truth. Davie Robb kept no woman and cared as little for drink as he did for company; there was only one thing that he cared about at all, and that lay in a box under his bed. The contents of this box did not amount to ten thousand pounds, but they went into several hundreds. They were his soul, his life. Waking, he thought of them; and sleeping, they were not far from his dreams. When he opened the lid to add to the hoard he counted and re-counted them, running up the figures on paper. It mattered not to him that he knew them by heart; he would roll them about in his brain as a child rolls a sweet about in its mouth.

Not even Janet knew the amount of these savings, though she made many guesses and was, perhaps, near enough to the truth. The box was never

spoken of between father and daughter. It was the ferryman's god, and in one sense it had the same place in their household as God has in most others: it was never mentioned, even when taken for granted. In another sense, its place was different: for it was continually in the mind of both.

Janet thrust along the road, leaving the country town quickly behind her, urged on by strong necessity. Her father was now permanently disabled, for some years almost crippled by rheumatism. He was an old man, shrunken and very helpless. The cottage was two-storied, and its upper floor was approached by an outside staircase running up at the gable end. There was a stair inside, too, which had been added later because of the occasional spates in the river, to allow the inmates to move to the upper room without opening the door when water surrounded the walls. Old Robb slept upstairs and was just able to get down by himself, though he could never manage to get up again without assistance; and yesterday, before leaving home, Janet had arranged with a boy who lived up-stream near the new bridge that he should come in the evening to convey the old man to his bedroom. The lad had consented reluctantly, for, to the young, there was something uncanny about 'Auld Thievie.' Scottish people are addicted, perhaps more than any others, to nicknames, and the ferryman's surname, combined with his late extortions as a carrier, had earned him the title by which he was known for some miles round. Nobody liked Thievie.

Not even Janet. It was scarcely affection that was hastening her. Perhaps it was duty, perhaps custom. Something was menaced for which she was responsible. That, with capable people, is generally all that is wanted in the way of a key to wind them up and set them going. The rain had stopped and she put down her dripping umbrella. The blue flower in her unsuitable hat had lost its backbone and flagged, a limp, large thing; there was a fine powdering of wet on her thick eyebrows and the harsh twist of hair at the back of her head. Mist was pouring in from the sea, the wind having sat in the south-east—the wet quarter on the east coast—for three days; and though it had dropped like lead with last night's tide, the 'haar' was coming miles inland as though some huge, unseen engine out seaward were puffing its damp breath across the fields. The cultivated slopes of the Sidlaws, a mile on her right, diminishing in height as they neared the estuary, were hidden. The Grampians, ten miles away on her left, were hidden too; that quarter of the horizon where, on ordinary days, they raised their blue and purple wall, being a mere blank. The river whose infancy they cradled had

burst from them angrily, like a disobedient child from its parents, and was tearing along, mad with lust of destruction, to the sea.

When she was some way out of the town a figure emerged from the vapour ahead, growing familiar as the two wayfarers approached each other. Her expression lightened a little as she recognised the advancing man. He was smiling too.

"Hey, Janet!" he cried, "I was wond'rin' what-like daft wife was oot on sic a day."

His face was red and moist with the mist.

"I've been at Newbiggin Street. I'm just awa' hame," said she.

He was a connection of the Robb family, so her words conveyed something to him.

"An' foo's auntie?" he inquired.

"Weel eneuch—but I maun awa' back. There's an awfae spate, ye ken."

"Tuts, bide you a minute. I haena seen ye this twa weeks syne."

She made no move to go on. Willie Black had a different place in her mind from anyone else. It was not easy to deflect Janet Robb from her way, but she would do more for this man, a little younger than herself and infinitely her inferior in will, than for any other person. He was the only male living being who approached her from the more easy and lighter standpoint from which such men as she knew approached girls, and their quasi-relationship had brought them into a familiarity which she enjoyed. He was one of those who looked upon women in a general way with a kind of jocose patronage, always implied and often expressed. He meant no harm by this manner; it was natural to him, and he was not nearly so bold a character as his attitude would suggest. Janet was so much unlike the other women he knew that he would have thought it right to assume superiority even had he, in her case, not felt it. She attracted him, not through his heart and certainly not through his senses, but as a curiosity to be explored in a mildly comic spirit. He knew, too, that Thievie was well off; for once, in a moment of confidence, Janet had hinted at her father's savings, and Black felt vaguely, but insistently, that in the fullness of time he would be wise in proposing to her. The day was distant yet, but meanwhile he sought opportunities of considering her and discovering how far she would be endurable as a wife.

Janet fidgeted from one foot to the other. By one half of herself she was urged to continue her way; the other half being impelled to stay by the invitation in his eyes. She did not know for how much this counted, so great was her ignorance of the amenities of men. Black was the only man who had ever come nearer to her life than the baker's cartman from whom she took the bread at her door or the cadger from whom she bought the fish. She had a great longing to be like other women, a factor in the male world. She was too busy to brood over the subject, and had inherited too much of her father's love of money-making to be deeply affected by any other idea. But when she was with Black she was conscious of all she lacked and was lured beyond measure by her perception of his attitude. It suggested that she took rank with the rest of her sex.

"I'll need awa'," she began, "feyther's himsel' i' the hoose. There's an awfae water comin' doon an' he canna win up the stair his lane. I maun hae tae gang on."

"I didna ken ye thocht sic a deal o' Thievie. Ye micht think o' me a bittie," he added, with knowing reproachfulness.

She looked away from him into the blankness of the mist.

"Heuch!—you?" she exclaimed.

"He's an auld, dune crater. Ye could dae weel, wantin' him."

"Haud yer tongue!" she cried, actuated purely by a sense of what was fitting.

"Weel, what's the advantage o' him sittin' yonder, an' a' that siller just nae use ava' till him—an' nae use tae ony ither body?"

She made no reply. There is something silencing in hearing another person voice an idea one believes to be one's own private property.

"Ye'd be a real fine lass wi' yon at yer back," he continued; "it's a fair shame ye should be dancin' after the like o' yon auld deil when ye micht be daein' sae muckle better."

She withdrew her gaze from the mist and met his eyes.

"What would I be daein' better?" she inquired, rather fiercely.

He gave a sort of crowing laugh.

"What wad ye be daein'? Gie's a kiss, Janet, an' maybe I'll tell ye."

Before she had time to think he had flung his arm about her and the roughness of his dripping moustache was on her lips.

She thrust him from her with all her very considerable strength. He laughed again.

It was the first time that a man had ever attempted such a thing and her heart almost stopped. She was torn between wrath and a thrilling, overmastering sense of something achieved. She stood panting, her bundle fallen into the mud. Then she snatched it and dashed into the greyness. It took but a moment to swallow up her figure, but he stayed where he was, staring, his coarse shoulders shaking with laughter. She could hear his jesting voice calling after her as she went. When she had gone a little distance she paused, listening to discover whether he was following; but there was no sound of footsteps.

She hurried on though she had ceased to think of her goal. Her thoughts drove her, rushing and tumbling like birds with beating wings, crowding and jostling and crying in her ears. Black's words had let them loose, stirring her as much as his action. Yes, it was quite true. She was tied, as she had been all her life, to her father and his box. She drudged for him, year in, year out, and got nothing by it, while he clung like an old dog in the manger to the thing he would neither use nor share. She would be a wife worth having for any man with the contents of that box to start housekeeping on! Willie Black would realise that. She remembered her years at the ferry in fair weather and foul, the picking and scraping she had done and suffered in the house, that the hoarding might go on that was no good to anyone. There had never been any love lost between herself and Thievie, and though he was her father she had long known that she hated him. Yes, she hated him. She had no fear of work and had taken it as a normal condition, but it had come between her and all that was worth having; the toil that had been a man's toil, not a woman's, had built a barrier round her to cut her off from a woman's life. All this had lurked, unrecognised, in her mind, but now it had leaped up, aroused by a man's careless, familiar horseplay.

Her breath came quick as she thought of her own meagre stake in the world. She knew herself for some kind of a power, and that was awaking the dormant realisation of her slavery, all the more bitter for its long sleep. She pushed back her hat and the drops came tumbling to her shoulder from the draggled blue flower, now a flower in name only, a sodden streak of blackened colour. She found herself shaking all over and she longed to sit down, but the milestone, which had often served her for a seat on her walks to and from the town, was a good way on.

The roadside landmarks were growing a little clearer. It was almost noon, and the flash of false brightness which that hour will often bring hovered somewhere in the veiled sky. She heard the ring of a hammer coming muffled from the smithy ahead, and pushed on, thinking to sit a little in some corner behind the ploughs and harrows. She was unnerved by the tumult in her; anger and self-pity were undermining her self-control; she was a self-controlled woman, and the agony of disorganised feeling was, in consequence, all the worse. It seemed that she had never been aware of the large injustices of life till now. Her difficulties had been small, physical ones and she had known how to scatter them with a high hand; but these new ones pressed round her like a troop of sturdy, truculent beggars, clamouring and menacing. Another woman might have wept but she only suffered.

She reached the smithy door and looked in. The smith was at his anvil, holding a red-hot horseshoe with the tongs. The blowing had ceased and in the dimness of the shed a pair of huge, patient Clydesdales were in process of being shod. A young ‘horseman’ was standing by, his hands in his pockets, watching the sputter of flaming sparks that rose with each blow and fell here and there. The hot scent of horses and leather and scorching hoof seemed one with the rich browns and warm shadows that hang about smithy fires. Behind the mysterious limbs of the bellows the elf-like face of the smith’s ’prentice-lad peered at Janet, though both the men’s interest in the matter in hand made them unaware of the woman who slipped noiselessly in.

She laid her bundle down behind a cart that stood jacked up with a wheel off, amid a medley of implements, and sat down, concealed by the litter, in a cobwebby corner of the long building. The hammering stopped and one of the carthorses shifted its feet and blew a shattering sigh into the rafters; the horseman gave one of those sudden expostulatory cries that his profession addresses to its charges, and all was still again. The smith threw down his hammer and left the shoe to cool a little.

“They’ll be haein’ a bad time doon at the hooses yonder,” said he, nodding his head backwards in the direction of the low ground.

“Aye, coorse,” said the horseman.

“I wad believe that,” continued the smith, whose noisy trade gave him less opportunity of hearing his own voice than he liked. “I mind weel eneuch when we got a terrible-like spate—saxteen year syne, come Martinmas. I was doon aboot Pairthshire way then, an’ I wasna lang merriet, an’ the wife was that ta’en up aboot it. She was frae the toon, ye understan’, an’ she

didna like tae see the swine an' the sheep jist rowin' past i' the water. Ah weel, ye see, we'll jist hae tae dae oor best."

"Aye," said the horseman.

"There'll be big losses. Aye, weel, weel, we canna control the weather, ye see."

"Na," said the horseman.

"An' I doot auld Thievie doon at the ferry'll be swampit. Aye, ye see, ye canna tell when yer time's tae come."

"The auld scabbit craw," said the horseman.

The smith took up his tools, and approaching one of the horses, laid hold of an enormous hind foot and began, strenuously, to pare the hoof. The beast looked round with an all-embracing toleration. The horseman spat.

Janet sat still, trying to quell the storm within her and to think connectedly. There had been no need for the blacksmith's words to bring her father's plight before her. In all likelihood the riverside cottage was already surrounded, and the fact that the few neighbours were well aware that none knew better than she how to handle oars might easily make them slow to bestir themselves on Thievie's behalf. The old ferry-boat, still seaworthy, lay in its shed some way up the bank, ready for the occasional use to which it was put; and no one but the little boy who had been in to help the old man on the preceding night knew that Janet was absent; and the boy was probably at school.

Even now her freedom might be coming to her on the rising spate! She shivered, chilled after her excitement and her transit from hot heart-burning to the cold horror upon which, with the inward eye, she looked. Thievie could not get up the ladder-like stair—not even with the gurgling water behind him—without a helping hand. It was years since he had even been willing to try. Perhaps she had only to stay where she was and to take what gift this day might bring! Her hands were shaking, though she had clasped them tightly on her lap, and she set her teeth, almost fearing that their chattering would betray her to the smith and his taciturn companion. Of what use was that old withering life by the riverside to itself or to any other living thing? It was as dead, already, as the dead money in the box below the bed. But the money would be dead no longer. Willie Black would not think it dead. She would wait where she was; the smith might go to his dinner when the shoeing was done, but the smithy door stood always open and she would sit, unmolested, till such time as she judged . . .

Her thoughts stopped there and she closed her eyes, leaning her head against the wall.

She could not hang about the road in such weather, waiting. She had not the courage to do that, for fear of drawing attention and making her neighbours ask inconvenient questions . . . afterwards. Though she assured herself that no one would guess, or be sufficiently interested to try to guess, what was causing her to loiter, her nerves would not allow her to face so much as an innocent stranger. She wished the lad behind the bellows had not peered at her in that way. Suppose he should tell the smith—but anything was better than the public road! She tried to force herself into composure.

All at once a loud voice sounded at the door. She opened her eyes and recognised a local carrier through her screen of lumber. He took off the sack which enveloped him and shook it till the drops flew.

"No muckle daein' the day," he began. "Dod aye, the water that's oot! Whiles I couldna get forrit."

The smith looked up from the hairy foot gripped between his knees.

"Queer times, queer times," he said. "Weel, we canna change it, ye see."

"How's a' wi' you, Ake?" said the carrier, turning to the horseman.

"Whoa. S-ss-ss!" cried the latter, for the horse, feeling the smith's movement, tried to release its foot.

"I was thinkin' Thievie wad be drooned," continued the carrier, grinning from ear to ear and remembering the days when they had been rivals on the road.

"And is he no?" inquired the horseman, roused to interest at last.

"No him. I'm tae hae a word wi' some o' they folk by the brig. I saw the river-watcher's boat gaein' oot nae lang aifter it was licht, an' I cried on him, whaur was he gaein'? Dod, when he tell't me he was awa tae seek Thievie, I was fair angert. 'Let him be,' I says, 'wad ye cast awa' the Lord's maircies yon way?' But there's the auld thrawn stock safe an' soond, and folk lossin' their guid cocks an' hens. Fie!"

The horseman gave a loud shout of laughter and relapsed immediately into gravity.

"Aye, the ways o' Providence," observed the smith.

"Weel, I maun be movin'," said the carrier. "Thievie'll be on the pairish yet. There's mair water tae come doon frae the hills afore it's finished.

There'll be naething left o' the sma' hoosies on the bank. A thing'll just gang traivellin' tae the sea. There was naebody believed it wad be sae bad the mom, airly, when I was doon by the auld ferry, but lord! they tellt me an hour syne that there's no been onything like it this aichty year past. An' the tide's comin' in, ye ken."

He called the last sentence over his shoulder as he turned from the door.

Janet had all but cried out aloud during the carrier's speech. Her father was gone—sitting safe now under some sheltering roof above the reach of the insurgent river!

But it was not the thought of this which overwhelmed her. She knew from long experience that there was hardly anything he would not do to prevent anyone, even herself, from seeing his precious box, and she could swear that he would never consent to expose it to a strange human eye while there was the smallest possibility of keeping it hidden. At that hour, soon after daybreak, when the carrier had seen the boat go for him, the torrential rain which was to follow had not yet turned the ordinary spate into something unknown for half a century. That being so, it was plain to her that, sooner than disclose the box to his rescuer, Thievie would leave it in what had been, at other spate-times, the perfect security of the upper story. So completely was she convinced of this that she would have staked everything she had on it. But she had nothing; and all that she had a prospect of having was surely lying in the rickety upper room waiting for the abnormal torrent to wreck the little house and carry its precious contents to the fathomless recesses of the sea.

She sprang up, the frantic idea banishing all else; and she had dashed boldly out of the smithy under the astonished gaze of the two men before it struck her with measureless relief that she had now nothing to fear from the most suspicious eye. Her father was safe; her secret design thwarted by the river-watcher; the reason for anything she did was of interest to no one. She saw now how futile her fears had been; the outcome of disorganised nerves. Conscience had almost made her believe that she carried her thoughts outside her body like her clothes.

At last, breathless, the perspiration on her face mingled with the wet, she reached the diverging road that led to the river, and as she turned into it the mist began to lift. It grew brighter behind the cloud-wrappings that veiled the world. She stopped, listening for the river's voice. The noonday gleam had strengthened and she came out suddenly from a belt of vapour into comparative clearness and saw the submerged levels lying some little way

before her. The broken water above them was all that told her where the banks were, and here and there she could recognise certain tall clumps of alder above the swirl. She redoubled her pace till, at the place in the road from which Thievie's cottage could be seen, she noted with rising hope that the flood had not yet reached the tops of the ground-floor windows. The outside stair was still practicable.

At the water's edge, at the nearest spot to the little house, she stood still. She had hung her bundle and her umbrella on a stout thorn-tree growing on a knoll by the wayside. She would need both hands for what she was going to do. The boat-shed was safe, but she would have to wade almost to the knees to reach it. She drew up her skirts and walked into the chilly water.

She felt its steady push against her legs, and her riverside knowledge told her that the tide at the estuary's mouth had turned and was coming in. It was thrusting the overflow out from the banks on either side and the area of dry fields was diminishing. She looked up apprehensively, for the gleam of brightness had paled in the last few minutes and she dreaded lest the mist should close in again before her task was done.

At last she reached the shed. The oars were afloat inside, kept from sailing away by the pressure of the incoming tide on the flood-water. She waded through the doorway and mounted, hampered by the weight of her soaking boots, on a projecting wooden ledge; then as she clung to an iron hook in the wall, she stretched out her foot and drawing the old craft towards her, stepped in. When she had secured the oars, she loosed the painter from its ring and guided herself out between the narrow walls.

It was easy work rowing, in spite of the slight current against her. The boat was not a heavy one, and only built to carry a few people at a time across fifty yards of water. She rowed as fast as she could, for the damp vapour was drifting in again, and the sun's face, which had looked like a new shilling above her, had now withdrawn itself, leaving a blurred, nebulous spot in its place. Pulling across the shallows on the skirts of the spate, she refused to picture what might happen should she find, on emerging from the cottage with the box, that all landmarks were lost in the mist. Her only guide would then be the sound of that menacing rush from which it would take all the strength of her arms to keep clear.

When the boat's nose bumped against the outside stair she made the painter fast to the railings and stood up, wringing the water from her petticoats. As she clambered out and ascended to the stairhead, small streams trickled down the stone steps from her boots. The door of the upper

room was locked inside, but she was not much perturbed by this, having expected it, and moreover she knew the old crazy wood could not stand much ill-usage. Its thin boards were gaping inside and had been pasted up with brown paper by her own hands. She drew back to the outer edge of the stairhead and flung her whole weight against them. The door cracked loudly, and though the lock held, she saw that another couple of blows would split it at one of its many weak places. Again and again she barged into it, and at last the wood parted in a long, vertical break. She was down the steps in a moment and dragging one of the short, stout oars from the boat. She stood on the stairhead, looking round. She could still see the boathouse, a dark blur, no more, but from the south-east there came a splash of rain. She struck the door with the butt end of the oar, once, twice. It gave suddenly, almost precipitating her into the room. She recovered her balance, and then, with that boatman's prudence which never left her, carried her weapon down and threw it into its place.

In another minute she had thrust her way in and was face to face with her father.

Thievie was sitting crouched under the tiny window with his box in his arms. His nostrils were dilated, his eyes looked as though he would strike, though his hand was still. He had sat listening to the bumping of the boat below and to the blows that burst in the rotten door; humanity seemed to have gone from him, leaving in its place the fierce, agonised watchfulness of some helpless, murderous thing, some broken-backed viper. His eyes fixed Janet, unrecognising. Not a word came from his lips.

"What are ye daein' there?" cried Janet hoarsely.

Her knees were shaking, but not from her exertions at the door.

His tongue passed over his lips. He looked as though he would bite. She sickened, she knew not why, but revulsion passed shuddering through her.

"Foo is't ye're no awa'?" she exclaimed, mastering herself.

"I wadna gang."

He smiled as he said this and held the box tighter. As she looked at it in his grasp, some inherited instinct rose in her, and though it had been mainly valuable to her for what it would bring, should it pass from his drowned hands into her living ones, it became, at that moment, a thing desired and desirable for itself. She did not know what sum was in it, but the rage for possession of it came to her.

He laughed quietly, his toothless mouth drawn into a long line. She pounced on him, shaking his arm.

"Weel, awa' ye come noo—the boat's waitin' on ye!"

He shook his head.

She had never laid rough hands on him before, but she gripped him now. She was strong and he was helpless; and he knew, in his helplessness, that she had come for the box. He had feared the river-watcher, and he now feared her. He did not know what she meant to do to him; his mind was obsessed by the box and the fear of its loss, and unhinged by the flood. He would have liked to resist her, but he could not, should he dare try. His concentrated hate shot at her like a serpent's tongue.

"I ken what's wrang wi' ye!" she shouted. "Ye're feared for yer box! Ye're feared yon man gets a sicht o' it! Aye, but he'll be here syne—he's aifter ye! I saw his boat i' the noo, an' him in it—ye'd best come."

His face changed. On the dusty window-pane the drops beat smartly.

"Ach, ye auld fule!" she cried savagely, "wad ye loss it a'? Div ye no see the rain? Div ye no ken the water's creepin' up? Muckle guid yer box'll dae ye when the spate's owre yer heid an' you tapsalterie amang the gear the water's washin' doon! Haste ye noo. We'll need awa' frae this."

She dragged him to his feet and he leaned on her, clutching his burden and unable to resist her violence.

They struggled across the floor and through the broken-down door. It was raining pitilessly. Thievie took no notice of it. He, who had known the river in every phase of drought or flood, should have had small doubt of the danger in which they stood. The roaring of its voice was increasing and there were fewer stone steps to be seen than when Janet made her entrance. It was pouring in the hills and the tide had yet a few hours to rise before it turned. Thievie looked this way and that. What he feared most was to see the river-watcher slide out of the mist in his boat; for the elements, the world and all the men and women in it were, to his disordered imagination, intent on one thing—the box. He would never sleep peacefully again should a strange eye see it. He would be robbed. He had long since been the slave of this one thought, and now it overwhelmed his dim, senile mind, even as the resistless water was overwhelming the land about them.

It took all her force and resolution to get him into the boat; he was so crippled and his arms so much hampered by the burden he carried. Though

he cursed her as they went down the stair, his thoughts were of the river-watcher. In the middle of their descent he laughed his mirthless laugh.

"God-aye, but he'll be comin'!" he said, "but it'll no be there—he'll no get a sicht o't!"

At last she got him safely afloat, and having loosed the boat, rowed away from the stairs. The surrounding floods were peppered by the onslaught of heavy drops from the low sky, and then, as though a sluice-gate had been pulled up in the firmament, a very deluge was upon them. The little they could see was washed out and they were isolated from everything in a universe without form and void, at the inmost heart of the hissing downpour. The river's noise was lost in it and all sense of direction left Janet. She pulled blindly, believing that she was heading for the boathouse. Soon they bumped and scraped against some projection and the stern swung round. She felt the boat move under her, as though drawn by a rope. She tried to straighten it, but the blinding descent of the rain bewildered her; a branch of an alder suddenly loomed out of it, the lower twigs sweeping her face. Thievie cried out and crouched, clinging with frenzy to his box, and she guessed they had drifted above the deep, wide drain whose mouth was in the river. Her blood ran cold, for its swollen waters must inevitably carry them into the very midst of the tumult.

The drain was running hard under the flood-water and she despaired of being able to struggle against it. They were broadside on; besides which she dreaded to be swept out of her seat by another branch, for there were several alder trees by the edge of the channel. The rain began to slacken.

As its fall abated, the river grew louder and the sky lifted a little and she could see the large alders, gaunt and threatening as spectres, blurred and towering over them. With that strange observance of detail, often so sharp in moments of desperate peril, she noticed a turnip, washed out of the ground and carried by the torrent, sticking in a cleft between two straggling branches, just below water-level. She made a tremendous effort and slewed the boat straight; and working with might and main at her oars, got it out of the under-tow that urged it riverwards.

All at once the river-watcher's voice rang out from the direction of the boathouse, calling the old man's name. She answered with all the breath she had left.

"Yon's him! Yon's the river-watcher!" shrieked Thievie, from where he still crouched in the bottom of the boat.

She ignored him, tugging at her oars and pulling with renewed strength towards the sound.

He raised himself, and clinging to one of them, tried to drag it from her. She wasted no breath but set her teeth, thrusting out at him with her foot. He clung with all his weight, the very helplessness of his legs adding to it. She dared not let go an oar to strike at him. She could not have believed him able to hamper her so—but then, neither had she believed he could get himself up the inside stair of the cottage unaided; and yet he had done it. It was as though the senseless god of his worship, lying in the box, gave him the unhallowed tenacity by which he was delivering them over to the roaring enemy they could not see, but could hear, plain and yet plainer.

She was growing weary and Thievie's weight seemed to increase. Could she spare a hand to stun him she would have done so for dear life. She had heard of the many-armed octopus of the southern seas, and she remembered it now in this struggle that was no active struggle because one would not, and one dared not, lose grip.

The boat, with one oar rendered useless, swung round and drifted anew into the channel between the trees. Again the river-watcher was heard calling and again Janet tried to answer, but her breath was gone and her strength spent. The current had got them.

Thievie relaxed his grip as he felt the distance increase between himself and the voice. A branch stayed their progress for a moment, whipping the sodden hat from Janet's head; her clothes were clinging to her limbs, her hair had fallen from its ungainly twist and hung about her neck. They went faster as they neared the racing river. Then the swirl caught them and they spun in its grip and were carried headlong through the mist. Janet shut her eyes and waited for the end.

Time seemed to be lost in the noise, like everything else. They sped on. At last they were not far from the estuary and the river had widened. Once they were all but turned over by a couple of sheaves, the spoil of the late harvest, which came driving alongside; once they passed within a foot of a tree which rode the torrent, plunging, its roots sticking up like gaunt arms supplicating mercy from the shrouded sky.

Finally they found themselves drifting in the comparative quiet of the broad sheet of tidal water, among the bits of seaweed carried inland above the deeps of the river-bed. The terrors of death had blinded Janet as they were swept along, and she now awoke as from a nightmare. An oar had been reft from her grasp in the stress of their anguished journey. Thievie was

staring at her like an animal; his sufferings, as they were battered between one death and another on the boiling river, were nothing compared to hers. His god had upheld him. He had crawled back to his seat in the stem.

"Aye, he micht cry on us," he said. "We're far awa' frae him noo—he'll no ken what I've got here!"

He began to rock about, laughing as he thought of the river-watcher's fruitless attempt to find him.

"Haud still," said Janet sternly. "God, hae ye no done eneuch mischieve the day? Gin yon mist doesna lift an' let them see us frae the shore we'll be oot tae sea when the tide gangs back."

"Naebody'll see us, naebody'll see us!" he exclaimed, hugging the box and rocking himself again.

Janet rose to her feet, fury in her eyes; she could no longer keep her hands off him.

As he saw her movement, he snatched the box from where it lay at his feet.

"Stand still, or I'll tak' it frae ye!" she cried loudly, making towards him.

He gave one cry of horror and, with the box in his arms, hurled himself sideways into the waters that closed over him and his god.

The tide was on the turn and the rain had ceased. A wind had sprung up in the west, driving the 'haar' before it back to the sea whence it came. Some men from the fishing village near the lighthouse were rowing smartly out into the tideway where a boat drifted carrying a solitary human being, a woman who sat dazed and frozen and who had not so much as turned her head as they hailed her.

As they brought her ashore one of them took off his coat and wrapped it round her. She seemed oblivious of his action.

"Hae," said he, with clumsy kindness, "pit it on, lass. What'll yer lad say gin ye stairve?"

Janet thrust the coat from her.

THE DISGRACEFULNESS OF AUNTIE THOMPSON

Auntie Thompson came round the corner of her whitewashed cottage with a heavy zinc pail in either hand. The sun beat hot upon her back and intensified the piercing scarlet and yellow of the climbing nasturtiums which swarmed up the window-sills and seemed likely to engulf the windows of her dwelling. The whole made a strident little picture in the violence of its white and scarlet and in the aggressive industry of its principal figure; and the squeaking of one of the pails, the handle of which fitted too tightly in its socket, seemed to be calling attention to Auntie Thompson all down the road. There lacked but one further touch to the loud homeliness of the scene, and that was added as the two immense pigs in the black-boarded sty for which Auntie Thompson was bound raised their voices to welcome their meal. There is no sound so unrelievedly low as the gross and ignoble outcry by which a pig marks his interest in the events which concern him.

Perhaps there was something appropriate about the unseemly noise with which Auntie Thompson was hailed, for in this quiet neighbourhood she was not far from being a public scandal. Her appearance, which was intensely plebeian; her tongue, which was very outspoken; and her circumstances, which were a deal better than her habits warranted—all these disagreed in some undefined way with the ideas of her small world. A woman who had laid by as much as she was reported to own had no business to keep no servant and to speak her mind on all subjects to those who did, as if she were on the same social level as themselves. She was unabashed and disgraceful; she did not deride convention, because she seemed to be unaware that it existed. She kept her fingers out of everyone else's affairs, and though she expected other people to take the same line, she met their interference without malice, for she was perfectly good-tempered. But her disregard of them being instinctive and complete, it was more effective than mountains of insult. At this moment the censuring eyes of several of the dwellers down the road were upon her as she heaved the pails on to the top of the pigsty fence with her strong red arms and tipped their gushing contents into the troughs.

Auntie Thompson was no beauty. She had a large, determined pink face and her tiny eyes looked out under fierce, sandy eyebrows set close on either side of her rather solemn-looking nose. Her hair was sandy too, and was brushed tidily from her parting and given a twist just over her ears before it was gathered into an old-fashioned, black chenille net at the back of her

head. She was of moderate height and solid, with the bursting solidity of a pincushion. On every conceivable occasion she wore a grey wincey dress short enough to reveal her stout ankles. Her hair was beginning to grizzle, and now, as the sun struck on it, bits of it shone like spots of mica on a hillside. She had only two feminine weaknesses; one was a tender heart and the other was a consuming horror of bats.

Whilst she stood watching her pigs, a neighbour passed up the road and sent a cold glance in at her over the low wall, patched with stonecrop, which enclosed the garden. Auntie Thompson turned her head and nodded with an impersonal smile, as though in answer to a greeting; she did not notice that there was none to answer. Had she lived on a desert island, she might not have observed that there was no one else present.

Only one being stood out against the background of thrift, pigs, healthy work and placidity in which she revelled, and that was her nephew, Alec, whom she had brought up since his sixth year. Twenty years ago he had come to her as an orphan and he was with her still. The pair lived together in great peace by the roadside.

'The Muir Road,' as it was called, connected two important highways and ran across the piece of heathy land which had once been the muir of Pitairdrie, but which was now enclosed and cultivated and cribbed in between fences and dykes. It had not lost all its attractions, for stretches of fir-wood broke its levels; and, as it stood high, with the distant Grampians on its northern side, the back of Auntie Thompson's cottage looked over a sloping piece of country across which the cloud-shadows sailed and flitted towards the purple of the hills.

Auntie Thompson turned from her swine and re-entered her house without looking up the road, or she would have seen Alec Soutar, who was stepping homeward with an expression of deep content on his face. No wonder he was contented; for on this Saturday afternoon he had seen the end of his long courting and was coming home with Isa's consent fresh in his mind.

It had been uphill work. Isa was the only daughter of William MacAndrew, and as everybody was well aware, MacAndrew, who had, by reason of a timely legacy, transformed himself from a cottager into a small farmer, was a man full of vainglory and the husband of a wife who matched himself. They were not a popular pair; and though they lived far enough from Auntie Thompson to be surrounded by a different community, their fame had spread to the cottage. It was rumoured that they drove their four

miles to Pitairdrie kirk every Sunday so that the world might see that they could afford to arrive there on wheels. There was a church so near MacAndrew's farm that, when its door was open, a man could follow the sermon from the stackyard; but only chronic invalidism, or the fact of being overturned, can make it possible to ascend and descend from a vehicle within the same fifty yards. Isa had been to a boarding school in Aberdeen, and her dress and manners were the envy of every young lass who beheld her as she sat in her father's high-backed pew with her silk parasol beside her. It had taken Alec Soutar a long time to make himself acceptable to her and a longer one to get her parents to give the reluctant consent that he was carrying home. "Pridefu' folk," Auntie Thompson had said.

Alec, who worked on a farm half-way between his own home and that of his love, was very honest, rather stupid, and extremely good looking. He had Auntie Thompson's sandy hair, but his head was set finely on his broad shoulders, and the outline of his bony face had some suggestion of power that made observant people look at him with interest as he stood on the half-made stack against the sky or sat on the dashboard of a cart behind the gigantic farm-horses. He loved his aunt sincerely and without the slightest suspicion of the real originality of her character, for he had no eye for her quaintnesses and would have been immensely surprised had he been told that he lived with a really remarkable person. But he needed no one to tell him of the gratitude he owed her; and mere gratitude will carry some people a long way.

He was too happy even to whistle as he swung along the road, for he grudged anything that might take his thoughts from Isa. She had walked along the field with him as far as the road and had only turned back there because she said that she could not risk being seen by strangers in her working-clothes. Alec did not quite understand her reasons, but he had a vague feeling that they must be right, though they were of so little profit to himself. Her 'working-clothes' struck him as being very different from those of Auntie Thompson—as indeed they were—but then Isa's and Auntie Thompson's definitions of work were hardly identical. He thought she looked beautiful in them and he told her so.

"Mrs. Thompson is very thrifty," she had observed, disengaging herself from his arms. (They were still in the field.)

"Aye, is she," he replied heartily. "There's no very mony like her."

"No, indeed," simpered Isa, with a sidelong look that he did not see; "but, Alec, we'll no need to be a burden to her. I was thinking it would be

better if we could go nearer to Aberdeen. There's plenty of work to be got thereabout. And it's no so far off but I could go back and see mama when I like," she added, in the genteel accent she had cultivated so carefully.

She pronounced 'mama' as though it rhymed with 'awe.'

"Oh, we'll dae weel eneuch here," said he. "Ye'll niver need tae gang far frae yer mither, ye see, Isa."

"No," said Isa faintly.

It was her future distance from Auntie Thompson that she was considering.

But Alec did not suspect that, any more than he suspected that this aunt supplied the reasons both for and against his marriage. The MacAndrew family were fully alive to the disgracefulness of Auntie Thompson, but they did not forget that she had solid savings and that Alec was her adopted son.

When he turned into the cottage garden his aunt had gone out again and was wheeling a heavy barrow of manure from the pigsty to the midden at the back of the house. It was Saturday, and she liked to have everything clean for the morrow. Alec followed her retreating figure.

"Weel," he said plainly, "a'm tae get her."

She sat down on a shaft of the empty barrow.

"Ye'll be fine an' pleased," she said, looking up at him.

His own good fortune obliterated everything else from his mind. He did not ask what she thought about it and she gave no opinion. She looked neither glad nor sorry. At last she rose.

"A dinna think vera muckle o' MacAndrew," she observed as she took up the shafts of the barrow again.

They sat very silent over their supper that evening. Experience had made the young man so well aware of her support on every occasion that he needed no outward sign of it. He, himself, was not given to talking.

Next morning he awoke to the prospect of a day of happiness, and everything he saw seemed to reflect his own spirit as he went out bare-headed to contemplate the world in the light of his good fortune. The warm mist of the morning lay like a veil of faint lilac colour in shady places and the sun sent its shafts slanting across the wide fields that dipped and rose again in their long slope to the hills; the fir-woods stood as though painted on the atmosphere in blurs of smoky green with patches of copper-red

gleaming through where the light caught their stems; the dew that had fallen on the sprawling nasturtiums rolled in beads on their leaves. Through the open door of the cottage the sound of Auntie Thompson's preparations for breakfast made a cheerful clinking stir of cups and homeliness. Sunday, that day on which Isa revealed herself to an admiring world, was always the main point of Alec's week, yet it was not often that he looked forward to the church hour with the excitement that he felt to-day. He glanced continually at the 'wag-at-the-wa' ' whose sober pendulum swung to and fro, scanning its matter of fact dial and thinking that its hands had never moved so slowly. For the whole length of the service he would be able to gaze upon Isa, as she sat, like a beautiful flower among vegetables, between her father and mother.

Pitairdrie kirk was a small, box-like building squatting at the roadside a mile and a half away, with its back to the line of the fir-woods and its iron gate set in a privet hedge. The latter gave access to a decent little gravel sweep on which the congregation would stand talking until the minister was reported to be in the vestry and the elders entered to take their places. Inside, the church had no great pretensions to beauty, and even the gallery which ran round three sides of it was innocent of the least grandeur; for the laird, who was the chief heritor, being an Episcopalian, his family did not ornament it by their presence; and the 'breist o' the laft,' as the front gallery pew was called, was occupied by that portion of his tenants which dwelt on the Muir Road. In the very middle of it was the place sacred to Auntie Thompson and Alec sat at her right hand. It was a splendid point of vantage for the young man, who could look down and have an uninterrupted view of the MacAndrew family.

As time went on, Alec grew more restless. Never had he known his aunt so slow in her preparations; never had there seemed so many small jobs to be done before she was ready to lock up the hen-house and proceed to her toilette. There were not many concessions that she was prepared to make to Sunday, but at last she disappeared into her little room to make them. She divested herself of her apron and took from her box the Sunday bonnet that had served her faithfully for the last ten years. It had a high crown of rusty black net, and its trimmings, which consisted of a black feather, a band of jet and a purple rose, added to the height at which it towered over her shining face. Above the short wincey dress it looked amazing.

She had taken her corpulent umbrella from behind the door and was tying her bonnet-strings in a long-ended bow under her chin, when Alec,

standing in the garden and cursing fate, saw a sight that made his blood run cold.

The pigsty door stood open and the two pigs, which had pushed through a hole in the hedge, were escaping at a surging canter into the field behind the cottage. In another moment Auntie Thompson would come out and summon her nephew to help in the chase. Alec knew pigs intimately and he foresaw that their capture might be a matter of half an hour. He stole one wary glance at the house, set his hand upon the low garden wall, and vaulting into the road, ran for quite a hundred yards before he fell into a brisk walk; for he dreaded to hear some sound of the chase borne on the warm breeze that followed him.

He had stepped guiltily along for a few minutes when he heard the sound of trotting hoofs behind him and turned to look back. His heart gave a bound when he realised that the MacAndrew family had reached the last stage of their four-mile drive and were overtaking him at the steady jog of the hairy farm pony whose duties extended over the Sabbath day.

He redoubled his pace, for he did not want to lose one fragment of Isa's company. Pitairdrie kirk was not three-quarters of a mile ahead.

As the MacAndrew conveyance passed him his eyes met those of his promised bride and she smiled at him with a kind of reserved approval. The tiny seat on which she sat with her back to the pony was hidden by the frothy flounces of her blue Sunday gown, and the feather in her Leghorn hat curled downwards towards her shoulder. She managed to look graceful even in her cramped position. Opposite to their daughter, Mr. and Mrs. MacAndrew sat stiff and large; they could not enjoy very great ease of body because the ancient basket carriage was extremely low at the back and hung so near the ground that the boots of its occupants were a bare half foot from the ground. MacAndrew and Mrs. MacAndrew knew in their hearts how much discomfort they would be spared if they were but stepping the road like other people, but they would have perished where they sat sooner than admit it to each other. The reins in MacAndrew's hands went up in a steep incline to the fork-like contrivance above Isa's head before beginning their even steeper descent to the pony's mouth on the other side of it. Neither husband nor wife had any idea of the oddity of their appearance. They were 'carriage people,' and that was enough. Their response to Alec's greeting was tempered by the view they had just had of Auntie Thompson in her grey wincey and towering bonnet in full cry after the pigs.

The bell had not yet begun to ring when Alec entered the kirk gate and saw Isa standing a little apart by her mother upon the gravel; MacAndrew was in conversation with a knot of acquaintances by the vestry door. Quite by himself was a pale young man in a black coat, who looked rather out of place among the strictly countrified men of the congregation; he had a gold watchchain and he wore gloves. He was good looking in a townish way and he seemed to be scanning his surroundings with some interest. It was evident that Isa's curiosity was aroused by him.

"I don't know who that gentleman can be," she said to her lover, almost in the same breath in which she greeted him.

As she spoke she adjusted a ribbon she wore at her throat.

"A'm no carin' vera muckle wha he is," replied he. "It's yersel' a'm thinkin' about, Isa."

"Everybody will hear you if you speak so loud."

"And what for no? A'm fine an' pleased they should ken. Isa, will ye no walk back wi' me aifter the kirk's skailed?"

"Maybe," said the girl.

"Isa'll be tae drive i' the carriage," broke in Mrs. MacAndrew, who stood by watching her daughter like an overfed Providence.

Alec looked at her with a sudden misgiving. He had never thought much about a mother-in-law. His experience of elderly women began and ended with Auntie Thompson, whom he had so shamefully deserted in her need this morning.

The bell began to ring over their heads, and MacAndrew left his friends and joined his belongings.

"D'ye see yon lad yonder?" said he, nodding his head backwards over his shoulder towards the stranger.

Both his wife and his daughter closed in on him eagerly.

"He's just newly back frae Ameriky wi' a braw bittie money; he's no been hame since he was a bairn an' syne he's come back tae buy a fairm. He's got fowk he's seekin' hereaboot, they tell me, but a dinna ken wha they'll be. James Petrie couldna tell me, nor ony ither body."

Mrs. MacAndrew's eyes were running over the strange young man as though she were pricing every garment he wore.

“Aye, aye,” she murmured, twisting her mouth appreciatively, “a’ll no say but he looks weel aff.”

There was a general move into the kirk, and Mrs. MacAndrew pushed in and squeezed into her seat, which was on the ground floor at right angles to the pulpit. It gave a good view of ‘the breist o’ the laft,’ from end to end. Isa was swept from her lover, who made his way up to his own place. The strange young man went in after everybody else and stood looking round to see where he should go. A genial-looking old labourer beckoned him to a place at his side.

The minister was ushered up the pulpit steps by the beadle, and the ensuing psalm brought the minds of the congregation together. The stranger shared a book with his companion and contributed to the singing in a correct tenor which drew general attention to him once more. Isa observed him from under the brim of her Leghorn hat, noticing his trim hair and the gold tie-pin which made a bright spot in the sunshine that streamed from a window near him. She did not once look up at Alec, who sat in the gallery with his eyes riveted on her. Mrs. MacAndrew’s thoughts were flowing in the same direction as those of her daughter. She was wondering what farm the stranger might have in his mind; there was one to be sold shortly, not a mile from her own roof. If only he had returned a Sunday earlier! Still . . .

She lost herself in speculations during the prayer that followed, and was only roused from them by the opening of the kirk door and the tramp of heavy boots climbing the gallery stairs. Up they came, and step by step the head of Auntie Thompson rose in a succession of jerks and was revealed to the worshippers below. Her glistening face was scarlet, for she had been engaged in a grim chase before starting on her walk and the steep stairs were the culmination of the whole. She stood still, panting audibly, while Alec held open the door of their pew, her grey wincey shoulders heaving and the monstrous erection, with its nodding feather and purple rose, pushed to one side. Most of those who looked up and saw her grinned. Mrs. MacAndrew turned her head away.

When the temporary distraction was over, quiet fell on the kirk again and the service went on decorously. The sun shifted from the window near the stranger and the gleam of his tie-pin transferred itself to the spectacles that lay beside his neighbour; the sermon began and one or two settled themselves for covert sleep. The rustling of the Bible leaves which followed the giving-out of the text was over when a tiny black shadow darted across the ceiling of the kirk and dived with incredible swiftness down to the floor, across to a corner below the gallery, out and up again, whisking past the

sounding-board of the pulpit. Finally it flew up and disappeared into one of the gaping ventilators overhead. Only Alec and a few occupants of the side galleries noticed the awful change that had come over Auntie Thompson's countenance.

She was looking at the ventilator that had swallowed the bat with an expression of concentrated dismay. Her red face had lost its colour and her eyes stared. Her breath came in gasps. Alec, who knew her weakness, stared at the ventilator too, for he did not know what might happen if the creature should come out. For one moment she seemed petrified, and he was too slow at grasping an emergency to whisper to her the suggestion that she should leave the kirk. Some girls in the gallery who were watching the situation stuffed their handkerchiefs into their mouths as they looked at Auntie Thompson. The minister, who, though exactly opposite and on the gallery level, was short-sighted, preached on undisturbed.

The bat shot out of the ventilator again like a flash of black lightning, and this time circled round the upper part of the building. Sometimes its circles were narrow and sometimes wide; once the angular wings almost brushed Alec's face; the wind of them lifted a stray lock of his hair, and Auntie Thompson leaned back with a convulsive noise, like a sob, in her throat. It was loud enough to attract the people below and many looked round. MacAndrew, who was asleep, awoke. His wife and Isa were looking up at Auntie Thompson like a couple of cats watching a nest of young birds.

The bat gave one of those faint, fretful chirrups peculiar to its kind and shot straight at the spot where the purple rose bloomed over Auntie Thompson's agonised face. As an armed man draws his revolver in defence of his life, she snatched her umbrella and put it up.

A smothered giggle burst from the gallery. Downstairs, the congregation, with a few exceptions, gazed up in horrified surprise; but the young stranger's friendly neighbour, having put on his spectacles, sat wearing a delighted grin that displayed his one remaining front tooth. The minister paused in his sermon; he did not know what had happened, but he could see clearly enough that the rigid image in the middle of the gallery which weekly experience told him was Auntie Thompson had changed its shape, and that a dark blur enveloped the spot where a face had been. He went on manfully, raising his voice.

Then the bat, in one of its wide sweeps, struck against the open umbrella. Auntie Thompson sprang up, and holding it slanting before her face, made stiffly, blindly, for the door. Her nephew opened it, and she

passed out and disappeared from the public eye. Her heavy tread descended the stairs, and the tension which bound the assembly, as the plod of her boots marked each step of her descent, was only broken by the slam of the kirk door as she drew it to behind her. The sweat broke out on Alec's forehead.

At last the congregation got back its composure. The old man shut his mouth and the young suppressed their mirth. The faces of the MacAndrew family were set like stone; their sense of the outrage committed radiated from every feature and laid its chilly shadow on poor Alec across the whole space of the kirk.

When the last paraphrase was sung he hurried downstairs. Not a look had Isa given him. She hurried out with her father and mother, and by the time the young man had reached the gate MacAndrew had grasped the reins from the boy in charge of the pony and the carriage with its load was starting homewards. The girl turned away her head, so that he saw nothing but the outline of her cheek and the drooping feather as they drove away. Mr. and Mrs. MacAndrew looked steadily at the horizon in front of them. Alec's heart was hot with grief and wrath as he watched the absurd conveyance grow smaller and smaller in the distance.

He did not wait to speak to anyone. His pride was bitterly hurt and his sense of injury was forcing him to action of some kind; he was not clever, but his instinct told him that matters could not stay as they were. They must either go forward or back. It was lucky for him that the insolence of his future family-in-law was so marked that it helped him to act and to forget the ache in his heart in healthy anger. A mean-minded man might have blamed Auntie Thompson for her innocent share in the catastrophe, but Alec had no meanness in him.

He went past his own door without turning in, and on, up the Muir Road, until at the end of the four miles MacAndrew's little farm, with its varnished gate and perky laurel bushes, came into sight. The house was like a child's drawing in a copy-book; it had one window on either side of the door and three above. He approached boldly and knocked with his fist instead of pulling out the brass handle. He was not accustomed to bell-handles. Isa and Mrs. MacAndrew were watching him from behind a blind.

"The impidence o' him!" exclaimed the latter, "aifter this mornin'——!"

"If it was not for Mrs. Thompson, I'd like him well enough," sighed Isa, whose resolution was beginning to be a little affected by the sight of her lover.

“He’ll need tae be done wi’ yon auld limmer afore he can hae vera muckle tae say tae *us*,” rejoined her mother. “Isa, ye’ll no——”

But she was cut short by the servant, who opened the door and thrust Alec forward.

“Robina-Ann, a seat for Mr. Soutar,” said Mrs. MacAndrew, determined to put all possible distance between herself and the visitor by her knowledge of worldly customs.

The maid was bewildered. The room was full of chairs. There was a whole ‘suite’ of them in walnut.

“Wull a be tae hurl yer ain chair in-by frae the kitchen?” she inquired loudly.

Confusion smote the party, only missing Alec, who took no notice of any chair, but stood in the middle of the room.

Robina-Ann retreated before the eye of her mistress. The latter turned upon the young man. She meant to avenge the discomfiture dealt her by her servant on somebody.

But he forestalled her.

“Isa, what way would ye no speak tae me at the kirk? What ails ye at me?”

“A’ll tell ye just now!” exclaimed Mrs. MacAndrew, her gentility forsaking her. “A’ll warrant ye it’ll no tak’ me lang! A’m seekin’ tae ken what-like impidence brings ye here aifter the affront that Mrs. Thompson put upon the hale congregation!”

“A’ve come tae see Isa,” said Alec, the angry blood rising to his face.

“Weel, yonder’s Isa!” cried Mrs. MacAndrew, pointing a finger that shook with rage, “but ye’ll no get vera muckle guid o’ Isa! A’m no tae let a lassie o’ mine waste hersel’ on a plough-laddie—a fushionless loon that maybe hasna twa coats till his back—a lad a’d be fair ashamed o’——”

“O mamawe——!” began Isa.

“I’ll mamawe ye!” shouted Mrs. MacAndrew, gathering rage from the sound of her own voice, “hey! gang awa’ oot o’ this, you that’s got nae richt tae speak till a lassie like mine! Gang awa’ back tae yer auld besom o’ an aunt that’s nae mair nor a disgrace tae the parish!”

He stood looking at the coarse-grained, furious creature, astonished. Then he turned to Isa, prim and aloof, in her flounces.

"Isa——"

Mrs. MacAndrew opened her mouth again, but Alec stepped towards her. His eyes were so fierce that she drew back.

"Haud yer whisht, woman," he said hoarsely, "dinna get in my road. Isa, what are ye tae say? Ye wasna this way, yesterday."

The girl looked rather frightened, and the corners of her small mouth drooped. She liked Alec, but she liked other things better. She was weak, but she was obstinate, and she had never overcome the feeling that she was throwing herself away. Before her mind's eye rose the vision of the stranger in church.

"What's wrang wi' me that wasna wrang yesterday?" he demanded.

Isa's vision, the vision with the trim hair, a gold tie-pin and a prospective farm, was making her feel rather guilty. It was so real to her that she felt she must hide it.

"It's—it's Mrs. Thompson," faltered she.

"*What?*"

"Ye'll need to have no more to do with Mrs. Thompson if you're to marry me," said she, plucking up courage.

An angry exclamation broke from him.

"Awa' ye gang!" cried Mrs. MacAndrew.

"Isa," said Alec, "d'ye mean that ye're seeking tae gar me turn ma back on m'Auntie Thompson?"

"Aye," said the girl, nodding stubbornly.

He turned and went. On the threshold he looked back.

"Ye can bide whaur ye are," said he. "*A'm* no wantin' ye."

Not many days afterwards Isa walked down the Muir Road with a little packet in her hand. The hairy pony was at work on the farm, or she would have had herself driven in the basket carriage. But although she was on foot, she wore her best hat with the drooping feather and her blue flounced dress.

She had two excellent reasons for this extravagance. She was going to the very door of the white cottage, and she was anxious that Auntie Thompson's neighbours should have a good chance of observing how superior she was to Alec; also, she hoped that some happy stroke of fortune might throw her against the interesting stranger. She had heard nothing about him since the last eventful Sunday, when he and Auntie Thompson respectively had produced so much effect. Though she and her mother would have maintained with their last breaths that it was the woman who had brought about the change in Isa's situation, each knew in her secret heart that it was the man. As she stepped along the girl told herself that he must surely be somewhere in the neighbourhood. Why had he come to Pitairdrie kirk if he had no connection with Pitairdrie parish?

The parcel she carried contained some little presents her lover had given her—a silk handkerchief, some strings of beads, a pair of earrings.

She could not forgive him for his last words to her; her vanity smarted and she longed to repay him for them. There was something of her mother in her, for all her elegant looks and refined aspirations. The pair had agreed that the returning of the gifts by her own hand would be an effective means of showing how little the parting from Alec troubled her. If he should come to the door she would hand him the packet with a few scornful words, and if Auntie Thompson came, she would know how to crush her by her manners and appearance. She had never spoken to Auntie Thompson.

She turned into the little garden path. The tangle of nasturtiums by the kitchen window prevented her from seeing the two people who were observing her approach from the hearth at which they sat. She knocked at the door.

Words almost forsook her a moment later when it was opened by the stranger, the object of all her day-dreams and speculations. This time he was not dressed for Sunday. But he had lost little by the change.

She was absolutely bewildered. He made no offer to admit her; he did not even ask her business. She gathered her wits as quickly as she could and addressed him, smiling and gracious. Her heart was beating.

"Does Mrs. Thompson live here?" she inquired, snatching, by the unnecessary question, at the chance of conversation.

"Yes."

He had a strange accent.

"Perhaps you will kindly give this to Mr. Soutar?"

She held out the little packet.

“Thanks.”

He took it and shut the door in her face. The blood rushed to her cheeks. He had looked at her as though she were a puddle to be avoided in the road. There was nothing to do but to walk away with what dignity she could command.

Just as she went through the little gate an elderly woman passed. She was presumably a neighbour, for she had come from a house close by.

She overtook her in a few paces.

“What is the name of the gentleman who lives there?” she asked her, pointing back to the nasturtium-covered walls.

“Alec Soutar,” said the woman.

“I don’t mean *him*,” said Isa, whose wits were coming back. “I mean the *gentleman* I was speaking to.”

“Have ye no heard? Yon man’s newly come frae Ameriky wi’ a fortune. He’s seekin’ a wife, they tell me,” added the other, with a twinkle in her eye.

“But who is he? What is his name?”

“Dod, that’s just Mistress Thompson’s ither nephew, John MacQueen, that gaed awa’ when he was a sma’ laddie,” said the woman.

THE DEBATABLE LAND

Of the birth and origin of Jessie-Mary no one in the parish knew anything definite. Those who passed up the unfrequented cart-road by her grandmother's thatched hovel used to see the shock-headed child among the gooseberry bushes of the old woman's garden, peering at them, like an animal, over the fence.

Whether she were really the granddaughter of the old beldame inside the mud walls no one knew, neither, for that matter, did anybody care. The hovel was the last remaining house of a little settlement which had disappeared from the side of the burn. Just where it stood, a shallow stream ran across the way and plunged into a wood in which Jessie-Mary had many a time feasted on the plentiful wild raspberries, and run, like a little squirrel, among the trees.

It was not until she was left alone in the world that much attention was paid to her existence, and then she presented herself to the parish as a problem; for her life was lived a full half-century before the all-powerful Board School arose to direct rustic parents and guardians, and she had received little education. She had grown into a sturdy girl of twenty, with brown hair which the sun had bleached to a dull yellow, twisted up at the back of her head and hanging heavily over her brows. She was a fierce-looking lass, with her hot grey eyes. The parish turned its mind to the question of how she might earn a living and was presently relieved when Mrs. Muirhead, who was looking for an able-bodied servant, hired her in that capacity. She was to have a somewhat meagre wage and her clothes, and was to help her mistress in house and yard. When the matter was settled she packed her few possessions into a bundle and sauntered up the green loaning which ran between the hovel and Mrs. Muirhead's decent roof, marking where one fir-wood ended and another began.

Mrs. Muirhead was the widow of a joiner, and she inhabited a cottage standing just where the woods and the mouth of the loaning touched the high road that ran north to the hills. She was well to do, for a cottager, and her little yard, besides being stacked with planks which her son, Peter, sawed and planed as his father had done before him, contained a row of hen-coops and a sty enclosing a pig whose proportions waxed as autumn waned. When the laird trotted by, he cast a favourable eye on the place, which was as neat as it befitted the last house on a man's property to be. When he had

passed on and was trotting alongside the farther wood he was no longer on his own ground, for the green, whin-choked loaning was debatable land lying between him and his neighbour.

As Jessie-Mary, with her bundle, came through the whins and opened the gate, Peter Muirhead, who was in the yard, heard the latch click and looked up from his work. At sight of the yellow head by the holly bushes he laid down the spoke-shave he was using and came round to the front. The girl was looking at him with eyes whose directness a youth of his type is liable to misunderstand. He began to smile.

"Will Mistress Muirhead be ben?" said Jessie-Mary tentatively.

Peter did not answer, but approached, his smile taking meaning.

"Will Mistress Muirhead be ben the hoose?" she inquired, more loudly.

It occurred to her that he might not be in his right senses, for the mile or two of debatable track which separated her old home from her future one might as well have been ten, for all she had seen of the world at the other end of it. She knew very well that Muirhead the joiner had lived where she now stood, and she had seen the old man, but the shambling figure before her was entirely strange. Once, at the edge of the wood, she had listened to the whirr of sawing in the vicinity of the road and had gathered that the work went on, though Muirhead himself had departed.

"She's no here. Ye'll just hae to put up wi' me," said Peter jocosely. His mother was in the house, but he saw no reason for divulging the fact.

Jessie-Mary stood silent, scarcely knowing what to say.

"Ye're a fine lassie," observed Peter, still smiling alluringly.

She eyed him with distrust and her heavy brows lowered over her eyes; she began to walk towards the cottage. He sprang forward, as though to intercept her, and, as she knocked, he laid hold of her free hand. Mrs. Muirhead, from within, opened the door just in time to see him drop it. She was a short, hard-featured woman, presenting an expanse of white apron to the world; a bunch of turkeys' feathers, in which to stick knitting needles, was secured between her person and the band of this garment, the points of the quills uppermost. She looked from one to the other, then drawing Jessie-Mary over the threshold, she slammed the door.

"Dinna think a didna see ye, ye limmer!" she exclaimed, taking the girl roughly by the shoulder.

And so Jessie-Mary's working life began.

The little room allotted to her, looking over the yard, was no smaller than the corner she had inhabited in the mud cottage, yet it had a stifling effect; and its paper, which bore a small lilac flower on a buff ground, dazzled her eyes and seemed to press on her from all sides. In the cracked looking-glass which hung on it she could see the disturbing background behind her head as she combed and flattened her thick hair in accordance with Mrs. Muirhead's ideas. In leisure moments she hemmed at an apron which she was to wear when completed. Mrs. Muirhead was annoyed at finding she could hardly use a needle; she was far from being an unkind woman, but her understanding stopped at the limits of her own requirements. Jessie-Mary's equally marked limitations struck her as the result of natural wickedness.

Wherever the yard was unoccupied by the planks or the pigsty, it was set about with hen-coops, whose inmates strayed at will from the enclosure to pervade the nearer parts of the wood in those eternal perambulations which occupy fowls. Just outside, where the trees began, was a pleasant strip of sandy soil in which the hens would settle themselves with much clucking and tail-shaking, to sit blinking, like so many vindictive dowagers, at their kind. Through this, the Dorking cock, self-conscious and gallant, would conduct the ladies of his family to scratch among the tree-roots; and the wood for about twenty yards from the house wore that peculiar scraped and befeathered look which announces the proximity of a hen-roost. At night the lower branches were alive with dark forms and the suppressed gurgling that would escape from them. It was part of Jessie-Mary's duty to attend to the wants of this rabble.

There were times when a longing for flight took the half-civilised girl. Life, for her, had always been a sort of inevitable accident, a state in whose ordering she had no part as a whole, however much choice she might have had in its details. But now there was little choice in these; Mrs. Muirhead ordered her day and she tolerated it as best she could. She hardly knew what to do with her small wage when she got it, for the finery dear to the heart of the modern country lass was a thing of which she had no knowledge, and there was no dependent relative who might demand it of her.

The principal trouble of her life was Peter, whose occupations kept him of necessity at home, and whose presence grew more hateful as time went on. There was no peace for her within sight of his leering smile. There was only one day of the week that she was free of him; and on these Sunday afternoons, as he went up the road to join the loitering knot of horsemen

from the nearest farm, she would thankfully watch him out of sight from the shelter of the loaning. She hated him with all her heart.

He would lurk about in the evenings, trying to waylay her amongst the trees as she went to gather in the fowls, and once, coming suddenly on her as she turned the corner of the house, he had put his arm about her neck. She had felt his hot breath on her ear, and, in her fury, pushed him from her with such violence that he staggered back against a weak place in the yard fence and fell through, cutting his elbow on a piece of broken glass. She stood staring at him, half terrified at what she had done, but rejoicing to see the blood trickle down his sleeve. She would have liked to kill him. The dreadful combination of his instincts and his shamblingness was what physically revolted her, though she did not realise it; and his meanness had, more than once, got her into trouble with his mother. She had no consideration to expect from Mrs. Muirhead, as she knew well. To a more complicated nature the position would have been unendurable, but Jessie-Mary endured stubbornly, vindictively, as an animal endures. She was in a cruel position and her only safeguard lay in the fact that Peter Muirhead was repulsive to her. But neither morality nor expediency nor the armed panoply of all the cardinal virtues have yet succeeded in inventing for a woman a safeguard so strong as her own taste.

It was on a Sunday afternoon towards the end of September that Peter emerged from the garden and strolled up the road. The sun was high above the woods, his rim as yet clear of the tree-tops, and the long shadow from the young man's feet lay in a dark strip between himself and the fence at his side. He wore his black Sunday suit and a tie bought from a travelling salesman who had visited Montrose fair the year before. In his best clothes he looked more ungainly than usual, and even the group of friends who watched his approach allowed themselves a joke at his expense as he neared them. He could hear their rough laughter, though he was far from guessing its cause. Nature had given him a good conceit of himself.

Jessie-Mary drew a breath of relief as his steps died away and she hailed the blessed time, granted to her but weekly, in which she might go about without risk of meeting him. Everything was quiet. Mrs. Muirhead was sitting in the kitchen with her Bible; the door was ajar and the girl could just see a section of her skirt and the self-contained face of the cat which blinked on the hearth beside her. She had accompanied her mistress to the kirk that morning and had thought, as they returned decorously together, that she would go down the loaning again to see the thatched cottage by the burn—perhaps stray a little in the wood among the familiar raspberry-stalks. She

had not seen these old haunts since she left them for Mrs. Muirhead's service.

She took off her apron and went out bare-headed. On the outskirts of the trees the hens were rustling and fluttering in the dust; as she passed, they all arose and followed her. She had not remembered that their feeding-time was due in half an hour and for a moment she stood irresolute. If she were to go on her intended way there would be no one to give them their food. She determined to make and administer it at once; there would be plenty of time afterwards to do what she wished to do.

She was so little delayed that, when the pail was put away and the water poured into the tin dishes, there was still a long afternoon before her. She threaded her way slowly through the fir-stems, stopping to look at the rabbit-runs or to listen to the cooing of wood pigeons, her path fragrant with the scent of pine. After walking some way she struck across the far end of the loaning into the road which led to the mud hovel.

Autumn was approaching its very zenith, and the debatable land offered gorgeous tribute to the season. Like some outlandish savage ruler, it brought treasures unnumbered in the wealth of the more civilised earth. Here and there a branch of broom stood, like a sceptre, among the black jewels of its hanging pods, and brambles, pushing through the whin-thickets like flames, hung in ragged splashes of carmine and orange and acid yellow. Bushes of that sweetbrier whose little ardent-coloured rose is one of the glories of eastern Scotland were dressed in the scarlet hips succeeding their bloom, and between them and the whin the thrifty spider had woven her net. Underfoot, bracken, escaping from the ditches, had invaded the loaning to clothe it in lemon and russet. Where the ground was marshy, patches of fine rush mixed with the small purple scabious which has its home in the vagabond corners of the land. As Jessie-Mary emerged from the trees her sun-bleached hair seemed the right culmination to this scale of natural colour; had it not been for the dark blue of her cotton gown she might as easily have become absorbed into her surroundings as the roe-deer, which is lost, a brown streak, in the labyrinth of trunks.

The air had the faint scent of coming decay which haunts even the earliest of autumn days, and the pale, high sky wore a blue suggestive of tears; the exhalations of earth were touched with the bitterness of lichen and fungus. Far away under the slope of the fields, and so hidden from sight, Montrose lay between the ocean and the estuary of the South Esk, with, beyond its spire, the sweep of the North Sea.

A few minutes later she found herself standing on the large, flat stone which bridged the burn where the footpath crossed it by her grandmother's hovel. She remained gazing at the walls rising from the unkempt tangle to which months of neglect were reducing the garden. The fence was broken in many places, and clumps of phlox, growing in a corner, had been trodden by the feet of strayed animals. Beneath her, the water sang with the same irresponsible babble which had once been the accompaniment to her life; she turned to follow it with her eyes as it dived under the matted grasses and disappeared into the wood.

All at once, from beyond the cottage, there rose a shout that made her heart jump, and she started to see two figures approaching through the field by the side of the burn; the blood left her face as she recognised one of them as Peter Muirhead. She sprang quickly from the stone and over the rail dividing the wood from the path; it was a foolish action and it produced its natural result. As she did so, a yell came from the field and she saw that Peter and his companion had begun to run.

Through the trees she fled, the derisive voices whooping behind her. She was terrified of her tormentor and the unreasoning animal fear of pursuit was upon her. As she heard the rail crack she knew that he had entered the wood, and instinct turned her towards the loaning, where the cover was thick and where she might turn aside in the tangle and be lost in some hidden nook while they passed her by. It was her best chance.

She plunged out from among the firs into the open track. For a hundred yards ahead the bushes were sparse and there was no obstacle to hinder her flight. She was swift of foot, and the damp earth flew beneath her. Through the whins beyond she went, scratching her hands on protruding brambles and stumbling among the roots. Once her dress caught on a stiff branch and she rent it away, tearing it from knee to hem. The voices behind her rose again and her breath was giving out.

Emerging from the thicket, she almost bounded into a little circle of fire, the smoke of which she had been too much excited to notice, though it was rising, blue and fine, from the clearing she had reached. A small tent was before her, made of tattered sail-cloth stretched over some dry branches, and beside it a light cart reposed, empty, upon its tailboard, the shafts to the sky.

In front of the tent stood a tall, lean man. His look was fixed upon her as she appeared and he had evidently been listening to the sound of her approaching feet. His face was as brown as the fir-stems that closed him in on either side of the loaning, and his eyes, brown also, had a peculiar,

watchful light that was almost startling. He stood as still as though he were an image, and he wore a gold ring in either ear.

To Jessie-Mary, a living creature at this moment represented salvation, and before the man had time to turn his head she had leaped into the tent. Inside, by a little heap of brushwood, lay a tarpaulin, evidently used in wet weather to supplement its shelter, and she flung herself down on the ground and dragged the thing over her. The man stood immovable, looking fixedly at the bushes, from the other side of which came the noise of jeering voices.

As Peter Muirhead and his friend pushed into the open space, red and panting, they came upon the unexpected apparition with some astonishment. Tinkers and gipsies were far from uncommon in the debatable land, but the tall, still figure, with its intent eyes, brought them to a standstill. Peter mopped his forehead.

"Did ye see a lassie gae by yon way?" he inquired, halting dishevelled from his race through the undergrowth, the sensational tie under one ear.

The brown man nodded, and, without a word, pointed his thumb over his shoulder in the direction in which they were going.

Peter and his companion glanced at each other; the former was rather blown, for he was not naturally active.

"Huts! a've had eneuch o' yon damned tawpie!" he exclaimed, throwing his cap on the ground.

The brown man looked him carefully over and smiled; there was a kind of primitive subtlety in his face.

Like many ill-favoured persons, Peter was vain and the look displeased him, for its faint ridicule was sharpened by the silence that accompanied it.

"A'll awa' to Montrose an' get the pollis tae ye the nicht," he said, with as much superiority as he could muster; "the like o' you's better oot o' this."

"Ye'll no can rin sae far," replied the other.

The answer was a mere burst of abuse.

"Come awa' noo, come awa'," said Peter's friend, scenting difficulties and unwilling to embroil himself.

But Peter was in a quarrelsome humour, and it was some time before the two young men disappeared down the track and Jessie-Mary could crawl from her hiding-place. She came out from under the sail-cloth, holding together the rent in her gown. The brown man smiled a different smile from

the one with which he had regarded Peter; then he stepped up on a high tussock of rush to look after the pursuers.

"Are they awa'?" she asked, her eyes still dilated.

"Aye," he replied. "A didna tell on ye, ye see."

"A'd like fine tae bide a bit," said the girl nervously, "they michtna be far yet."

"Just sit ye doon there," said he, pointing to his tattered apology for a dwelling.

She re-entered the tent and he seated himself before her on the threshold. For some minutes neither spoke and he considered her from head to foot. It was plain he was one chary of words. He took a short pipe from his pocket and, stuffing in some tobacco, lit it deliberately.

"A saw yon lad last time a was this way," he said, jerking his head in the direction in which Peter had disappeared.

As she opened her mouth to reply the snort of a horse came through the bushes a few yards from where they sat. She started violently. There was a sudden gleam in his face which seemed to be his nearest approach to a laugh. "Dod, ye needna be feared," he said. "Naebody'll touch ye wi' me."

"A was fine an' glad tae see ye," broke out the girl. "Yon Muirhead's an ill lad tae hae i' the hoose—a bide wi' his mither, ye ken."

As she spoke the tears welled up in her eyes and rolled over. She was by no means given to weeping, but she was a good deal shaken by her flight, and it was months since she had spoken to anyone whose point of view could approach her own. Not that she had any conscious point of view, but in common with us all she had a subconscious one. She brushed her sleeve across her eyes.

He sat silent, pulling at his pipe. From the trees came the long-drawn note of a wood-pigeon.

"A'll need tae be awa' hame and see tae the hens," said the girl, at last.

The man sat still as she rose, watching her till the whins closed behind her; then he got up slowly and went to water the pony which was hobbled a few yards off. When evening fell on the debatable land, it found him sitting at his transitory threshold, smoking as he mended the rabbit-snare in his hand.

For Jessie-Mary, the days that followed these events were troublous enough. The tear in her gown was badly mended, and Mrs. Muirhead, who had provided the clothes her servant wore, scolded her angrily. Peter was sulky, and, though he left her alone, he vented his anger in small ways which made domestic life intolerable to the women. Added to this, the young Black Spanish hen was missing.

The search ranged far and near over the wood. The bird, an incorrigible strayer, had repaid previous effort by being found in some outlying tangle with a 'stolen nest' and an air of irritated surprise at interruption. But hens were not clucking at this season, and Mrs. Muirhead, in the dusk of one evening, announced her certainty that some cat or trap had removed the truant from her reach for ever.

"There's mony wad put a lazy cutty like you oot o' the place for this!" she exclaimed, as she and Jessie-Mary met outside the yard after their fruitless search. "A'm fair disgustit wi' ye. Awa' ye gang ben the hoose an' get the kitchen reddit up—just awa in-by wi' ye, d'ye hear?"

Jessie-Mary obeyed sullenly. The kitchen window was half open and she paused beside it before beginning to clear the table and set out the evening meal. A cupboard close to her hand held the cheese and bannocks but she did not turn its key. Her listless look fell upon the planet that was coming out of the approaching twilight and taking definiteness above a mass of dark tree-tops framed in by the window sash. She had small conscious joy in such sights, for the pleasures given by these are the outcome of a higher civilisation than she had yet attained. But even to her, the point of serene silver, hung in the translucent field of sky, had a remote, wordless peace. She stood staring, her arms dropped at her sides.

The shrill tones of her mistress came to her ear; she was telling Peter, who stood outside, the history of her loss. Lamentation for the Black Spanish hen mingled with the recital of Jessie-Mary's carelessness, the villainy of serving-lasses as a body, the height in price of young poultry stock. Like many more valuable beings, the froward bird was assuming after death an importance she had never known in life.

A high-pitched exclamation came from Peter's lips.

"Ye needna speir owre muckle for her," he said, "she's roastit by this time. There's a lad doon the loan kens mair aboot her nor ony ither body!"

"Michty-me!" cried Mrs. Muirhead.

“Aye, a’m tellin’ ye,” continued he, “the warst-lookin’ great deevil that iver ye saw yet. He gie’d me impidence, aye did he, but a didna tak’ muckle o’ that. ‘Anither word,’ says I, ’an’ ye’ll get the best thrashin’ that iver ye got.’ He hadna vera muckle tae say after that, I warrant ye!”

Seldom had Mrs. Muirhead been so much disturbed. Her voice rose to unusual heights as she discussed the matter; the local policeman must be fetched at once, she declared; and, as she adjured her son to start for his house without delay, Jessie-Mary could hear the young man’s refusal to move a step before he had had his tea. She was recalled to her work by this and began hurriedly to set out the meal.

As she sat, a few minutes later, taking her own share at the farther end of the table, the subject was still uppermost, and by the time she rose mother and son were fiercely divided; for Peter, who had taken off his boots and was comfortable, refused to stir till the following morning. The hen had been missing three days, he said, and the thief was still in his place; it was not likely he would run that night. And the constable’s cottage was over a mile off. The household dispersed in wrath.

In the hour when midnight grew into morning, Jessie-Mary closed the cottage door behind her and stole out among the silent trees. The pine-scent came up from under her feet as she trod and down from the blackness overhead. The moon, which had risen late, was near her setting, and the light of the little sickle just showed her the direction in which she should go. In and out of the shadows she went, her goal the clearing among the whins in the debatable land. As the steeple of distant Montrose, slumbering calmly between the marshes and the sea, rang one, she slipped out of the bushes and, going into the tent, awakened the sleeping man.

It was some time before the two came out of the shelter, and the first cock was crowing as the pony was roused and led from his tether under the tilted shafts. The sail-cloth was taken down and a medley of pots and pans and odd-looking implements thrown into the cart; the wheels were noiseless on the soft sod of the loaning as, by twists and turns, they thrust their way along the overgrown path.

Day broke on the figures of a man and woman who descended the slope of the fields towards the road. The man walked first.

And, in the debatable land among the brambles, a few black feathers blew on the morning wind.

THE FIDDLER

Dalmain village lies a few miles from Forfar town in that part of western Angus where the land runs up in great undulations from Strathmore towards the Grampians; and it is tucked away, deep down in a trough between a couple of these solid waves. A narrow burn slips westward to the Isla through this particular trough with the roughest of rough country roads alongside it. The two together pass in front of a small collection of low cottages which forms the village. There is just room, and no more, for the little hamlet, and from their southern windows the dwellers in the kirkton of Dalmain can see their kirk perched on the bank above them where the shoulder of the next wave rises in their faces. In the dusky evenings of late autumn it looks like a resident ghost with its dead-white sides glimmering through the trees that surround it. It is the quietest place imaginable, and no doubt it was quieter still in the days of which I am writing; for the 'forty-five', with its agonies and anxieties, had passed by nearly forty years back; and though the beadle was still lame from a sword-cut, the old man's limp was all that was left to show any trace of that convulsion of Scotland to the outward eye.

It was on one of these October afternoons of 1784 that two men sat talking in Dalmain manse; one was the minister, Mr. Laidlaw, and the other was an Englishman who had arrived a few hours earlier. The latter had never seen his host before, and had crossed the Tweed a few days before, for the first time. He had just started upon the business which had brought him from Northumberland and the stir of Newcastle into this—to him—remotest of all possible places.

The minister was a plain, elderly man with pursed lips which gave him the look of being a duller person than he actually was, and his companion, a good many years the younger of the two, alarmed him by his unfamiliar accent. The Englishman had a pleasant, alert expression. He was leaning over the table at which both were sitting, one on either side.

"I know that his name was Moir," he was saying, "and that is all I know, except that they were seen together in Glen Aird soon after Culloden, and that my cousin Musgrave was badly wounded in the side. I have discovered from the records of his regiment that there was a Moir in it, a native of Dalmain. I can only guess that this man is the same. No doubt I have set out

on a wild-goose chase, sir, but I thought it might be worth while to make the experiment of coming here."

"It is a matter of an inheritance, you say," said Mr. Laidlaw, pursing his lips more than ever and raising his eyebrows, "I got that from your letter, I think?"

"It is. We are a Jacobite family, though we are not Scots—there are many such in the north of England—and this officer in the Prince's army, whom, of course, I never saw, made my father his heir. He had nothing to leave, as a matter of fact," he added, smiling.

"Then, sir, I would remark that it is not very easy to see your difficulty," observed Laidlaw drily.

"There's an answer to that. It has only lately been discovered that he had an interest in a foreign business which has never paid until now. His share of the profits should come to me, as my father is dead and I am his only surviving child. But it appears that I cannot claim the money until my cousin Musgrave's death is legally proven. It is barely possible that he is still alive, for it is about forty years since he disappeared, and he has made no sign, though his wife was living until six months ago."

"He would be an old man too, no doubt?"

"He would be nearing eighty by this time."

There was a pause.

"You tell me there are still some of the Moir family left in this parish," continued the Englishman.

Laidlaw cleared his throat. "I doubt you may not find much to help you," he said. "It is curious that you should choose this time for your search. It is not just a fortunate one; for though, as I have said, I shall be happy to serve your interests, I fear it is little I can do. There are two persons of the name of Moir in the parish, two elderly bodies. One is at this moment dying—indeed she may be dead by now. She has been unconscious these few days, and it is for that reason that I am not beside her; my ministrations are useless."

"I see," said the Englishman, his face falling; "of course I could not trouble her sister in the circumstances."

"It is not that, sir, for I should be glad to give you what hospitality I can till she was able to see you; but she is a strange creature—both are strange. The dying one has been slightly deranged in her mind since she was a young lass—for the last twelve-month she has been completely so—and the

younger sister, Phemie, is a very extraordinary character. The bairns are feared of her, and some of the more foolish of my congregation take her for a witch, though I tell them such things are just havers. She seems to have no ill-will at anybody."

"But what is wrong with her, then?"

"She will speak to nobody. Months at a time she will keep the house. I have only been a short while in this place, just three years past, and in that time she has been twice at the kirk on the Lord's Day, no more."

"There must be madness in the family, sir, I should think."

"I believe not," replied the minister. "She is thrawn, that's all—twisted, I suppose you might say in England."

"And are there no male relations?"

"I understand there was an older brother, but he left Dalmain long ago. I have heard no more than that."

"If my cousin and the man Moir fled together after the battle of Culloden, the same fate may have overtaken them both. I admit that my chances of discovering the truth are not promising."

"That is true enough," said Laidlaw, "but we should wait awhile before we despair."

"But I cannot trespass indefinitely on you, Mr. Laidlaw——"

"You'll need to bide a day or two, sir; I shall be happy if you will. I am not much company for you, I know," he added diffidently.

"You are only too kind!" exclaimed the other. "I have heard many a time that Scotland is a hospitable country and now I see it. I am very fortunate to be here with you instead of hunting a dead man by myself."

Laidlaw coloured a little. He was a shy man and a humble one.

"And now," said his companion, rising, "I will not waste your time with my affairs. You are probably busy at this hour. I will go for a stroll and see something of this place before dark sets in."

He walked to the window, which was open to the still October air.

"Surely that is someone tuning a violin," he said, turning round to the minister. His face was bright. "I am something of a musician myself," he added.

“Oh!” exclaimed Laidlaw, jumping up, “I had forgotten! You have come at a good time, sir—the great Neil Gow is here!”

“And who is he?”

“Presairv’s!” cried Laidlaw, growing, as he always did, more Scottish under astonishment, “did ye never hear o’ Neil Gow?”

“I have not had that advantage,” replied his guest, becoming correspondingly English.

“He is the greatest fiddler in Scotland!”

“Indeed.”

The minister was oblivious of any humour but his own. “This is a chance an English body might not get in a lifetime! It’s many a long day since he was here. It was the year of Culloden, they tell me, before they had put the plough on thae fields west o’ the kirkton. There was a green yonder, below the braes o’ broom, that was a fine place for dancing. The English soldiers were about these parts then at the foot of the glens, waiting for the poor lads that were seeking their homes after the battle, but they danced for all that. Neil was a young lad himsel’ then. There’s nobody here but the beadle minds of it. But he’ll never forget yon days till they take him to the kirkyard.”

“Indeed,” said the Englishman again.

“Aye, he was lying in his bed in a house that looked on the green with a wound in his leg, though his wife tellt everybody it was typhus, to keep folks from going in. It was June-month, and the broom was out on the brae. They said Neil was daft; the beadle could hear him from where he lay, skirling and laying on the bow. He kept them dancing till it was too late for a man to see the lass he danced with, and Neil’s arm was that stiff he had it tied up next day when he left Dalmain; and a callant had to go with him to carry the fiddle. But time flies, sir. Likely there’ll no be a lad dancing to it the night that ever heard him play before. I am a Dunkeld man mysel’, so I am well acquaint with him. He’s playing at a dance at the Knowes’ farm. Knowes’ wife is a niece o’ Neil’s.”

“Then you do not disapprove of dancing?”

“Toots, no! And suppose I did, what would it avail me in Perth or Angus?”

“Are they great dancers here?”

Laidlaw gave an impatient snort. There seemed to be so many things his travelled-looking guest had not heard of.

"I will certainly go and hear your fiddler," said the Englishman. "But sir, you must come with me."

Laidlaw sighed. His sermon lay heavy on his mind. "I must follow you later—but it's a pity," said he.

While this conversation was going on in the manse, a little group was assembled in the kitchen of Phemie Moir's cottage, where the beadle of Dalmain kirk stood with open psalm-book in the middle of the room. He was a lean, lame old man with aquiline features set in a fringe of white whisker, and he was sending his stentorian voice into the faces of the men before him. The place was full of rough figures, roughly clothed. Two women were in the kitchen, but only one was visible, and she sat by the hearth. The other lay behind the drawn curtain of the box-bed let into the wall; for she was dying, and had nearly got to the end of what was proving to be a very easy business. The elders had gathered together this evening to give point to Margaret Moir's passage into the next world, and were well embarked on the psalm that was following the prayer they had offered. A shadow of officialdom impelled the singers to hold their books breast-high and to keep their eyes fixed upon the page, though the dimness of the cruisie at the wall turned their action into a pure piece of romance. It was romance and officialdom mixed that made those who had no books look over the shoulders of those who had; for none could see and all had the metrical psalms by heart. They went about their work with a disinterested unanimity that levelled them all into a mere setting for the beadle, Phemie, and the unseen figure behind the curtain.

No stir nor sign came from the drawn hangings of the box-bed, and though the most tremendous event of human life was enacting itself in that hidden space sunk in the wall, the assembly seemed to be entirely concerned with keeping up the gale of psalmody. Even Phemie, who neither sang nor prayed, and to whom the approaching loss must convey some personal significance, remained detached and impassive, with the tortoiseshell cat at her feet. The animal alone appeared to be conscious that anything unusual was going forward, for it sat bolt upright, looking with uneasy, unblinking eyes to the bed.

In the middle of the fourteenth verse, the last but one of the dragging psalm, the cat rose and walked with slow, tentative feet towards the wall. It sprang up on the seat of a chair at the bedside and disappeared behind the

short curtain; whilst the singers, aroused from their preoccupation by the movement of the stealthy creature across the flags, wavered a moment in their tune.

Before a man had time to do more than nudge his neighbour the cat had leaped back into view and made frantically for the door, where it crouched, miaowing and scraping at the threshold.

The verse faltered and fell and a faint breath of disquiet went over the singers; they were dumb as the beadle limped across the kitchen and, drawing back the wisp of hanging stuff, peered into the dark, square space that opened behind it like a mouth. There was a moment's silence; then he turned to them again.

"Sing on, lads," he said, "anither verse'll land her!"

The elders struck up once more. They sang steadily to the end and then stood back with closed books and shuffling feet. The beadle released the terrified cat. The company filed solemnly out, leaving him and Phemie in the kitchen—only two now; that hidden, third presence was gone.

The woman stood by the bed.

"Aye, she's awa'," she said.

Her sister had been practically dead for the last twelve months, a mere mindless puppet to be fed a little less regularly than the cat, a little more regularly than the hens.

The beadle looked on, silent, as his companion drew the sheet over the dead woman's face. His legitimate part in the event was to come later. Then he also went out, crossing the small, rapid burn which divided Phemie's cottage from the road. Under the overhanging weeds it was gurgling loud, for it had rained in the hills and the streams were swelling.

He stood looking up and down the way. Voices were floating to him from the Knowes' farm. He had done what he considered was required of him as an official and relaxation was his due. Also it was unthinkable that anything, from a kirk meeting to a pig-killing, should go on without him at Dalmain. He clapped his psalm-book into his pocket and turned towards the Knowes', for, like the Englishman, he heard the fiddle tuning. He had worn a completely suitable expression at the scene he had just left, and as he drew nearer to the steading it changed with every step; by the time he had kicked the mud from his feet at the threshold of the big barn, which was filling with people from all corners of this and neighbouring parishes, he wore a look of

consistent joviality. His long mouth was drawn across his hatchet face and grinned like that of a sly old collie dog.

The barn was roughly decorated with branches of rowan nailed here and there against the walls, and the scarlet berries of the autumn-stricken leaves were like outbreaks of flame. The floor was swept clean and a few stable lanterns were hung from rafters, or set on boxes in the angles of the building; the light from these being so much dispersed that it only served to illuminate such groups as came into the individual radius of each. The greater part of those who stood about waiting for the dancing to begin were dark figures with undistinguishable faces. There was a hum of talk and an occasional burst of laughter and horseplay. At the further end of the place a heavy wooden chair was set upon a stout table. 'Knowes,' the giver of the entertainment, loitered rather sheepishly in the background; he was of no account, though he was a recent bridegroom; for it was his wife's relationship to the great fiddler who was to preside this evening which shed a glory on his household and turned their house-warming into an event. He was an honest fellow and popular, but the merrymakers had no thought for anyone but Neil.

The position that Neil Gow had made for himself was a remarkable one. There was no community in Perthshire, Angus, or the Mearns, that did not look on him with possessive affection. He played alike at farmhouse dances, at public balls, in villages and bothies, at the houses of lairds and dukes; he met every class and was on terms of friendship with the members of each. He had humour and spirit; and though he was entirely outspoken and used a merry tongue on every rank and denomination among his friends, his wit and good sense and the glamour of a fine personality allowed him to do so without offence. He was accustomed to speak his mind to his great friend and patron, the Duke of Atholl, as well as to his guests. "Gang doon to yer suppers, ye daft limmers," he had once cried to the dancers at Atholl House, "an' dinna haud me here reelin' as if hunger an' drouth were unkent i' the land!" Many a poor man knew Neil's generosity and many a richer one in difficulties; out of his own good fortune he liked to help those less happy than himself. He had an answer for everybody, a hand for all. He was a self-made king whose sceptre was his bow and whose crown was his upright soul and overflowing humanity.

At last the group inside the barn-door dispersed, and Neil, who had been the centre of it, shook himself free and went over, his fiddle under his arm, to the table beside which a long bench was set that he might step up to his

place. He would begin to play alone to-night, for his brother Donald, who was his violoncello, had been detained upon their way.

"Aye, sit doon, twa-three o' ye, on the tither end o't," he exclaimed to a knot of girls who were watching him with expectant eyes; "ye'd nane o' ye get yer fling wi' yer lads the nicht, gin a was tae turn tapsalterie!"

They threw themselves simultaneously upon the bench, tittering, and he stepped up on the table, a tall, broad figure in tartan breeches and hose. His hair was parted in the middle and hung straight and iron grey, almost to his great shoulders, and his cheekbones looked even higher than they already were from the shadows cast under them by the lantern swinging above. There was no need for the light, for he carried no music and would have scorned to depend upon it. His marked eyebrows rose from his nose to the line that drew them level along the temples above his bright and fearless eyes. His large, finely cut mouth was shut, his shoulders back, as he surveyed the crowd below him. A subdued murmur rose from it. The company began to arrange itself in pairs. He smiled and stood with his bow hand raised; he was just going to drop it to the strings when Donald Gow came in.

When the Englishman had left the minister to his sermon he made his way slowly to the village. He was in no hurry, for though Laidlaw had stirred a slight curiosity in him about the fiddler, he was principally interested in seeing what it was that this unsophisticated little world, of which he knew nothing, had magnified into a marvel. The thought of it amused him. It was a kindly amusement, for he was a good-hearted man who liked his fellow-creatures as a whole. The rotting leaves were half fallen and their moist scent rose from underfoot, a little acrid, but so much mixed with earth's composite breath that it was not disagreeable. A robin hopped along at a few yards' distance with the trustful inquisitiveness of its kind. The fiddle had begun, but he was too far from it to hear plainly, and it sounded muffled, as though from the interior of some enclosed place. One or two faint lights were showing in cottage windows across the burn. The gurgling voice of the water made him feel drowsy. He was in the humour which makes people lean their folded arms on gates, but he could not do that, for there were no gates here; rough bars thrust across the gaps in unpointed walls were the nearest approach to gates that he could see. How much poorer it all looked than England, and how different! He knew that it was a wilder place over which his cousin had fought, and he thought of the wounded fugitive tramping this comfortless country with the vanished and

problematical Moir. He feared, as he had said to Laidlaw, that he was on a wild-goose chase. He felt a stirring of pity in him for the dwellers in this lost, strange backwater; and it seemed no wonder to him that a common fiddler should arouse so much delight, even in a moderately educated man, such as he took Laidlaw to be. As the dusk fell it grew chilly, so he went to the Knowes' farm and found his way among the stacks to the barn-door. The dancing was now in full swing, so he stood unnoticed by the threshold, looking in.

The lights were flickering in the draught created by the whirl of the reel which was in progress, and men and women of all ages between sixteen and sixty seemed lost to everything but the ecstasy of recurrent rhythm that swayed them. The extraordinary elaboration of steps and the dexterity of feet shod in heavy brogues amazed the Englishman. He could not follow any single pair long enough to disentangle their intricacies of movement, for no sooner did he think he was on the way to it than the whole body of dancers was swallowed up in collective loops of motion, and then were spinning anew in couples till the fiddle put them back in their places and the maze of steps began again. The rhythmic stamping went on like the smothered footfall of a gigantic approaching host; not so much a host of humanity as of some elemental force gathering power behind it. It gripped him as he listened and felt the rocking of the wooden floor. His eyes were drawn across the swinging crowd, the confused shadows and the dust of the thickening atmosphere, to what was the live heart of it all.

The largest lantern, high above, hung direct from its rafter over the head of Donald Gow as he sat on his chair with the dark, dim-looking violoncello between his knees. Before him on the broad table stood Neil, the light at his back magnifying his size. His cheek was laid against his violin, his right foot, a little advanced, tapped the solid boards, as, pivoted on his left one, he turned to and fro, swaying now this way, now that, his eye roving over the mass that responded, as though hypnotised, to the spur of his moving bow. It was as if he saw each individual dancer and was playing to him or to her alone; as if his very being was urging each one to answer to his own abounding force and compelling the whole gathering to reflect every impulse of his mind. The stream of the reel poured on, throbbing and racing, leaping above the sonorous undertone of the violoncello, but never, for all the ardent crying of the string, leaving the measured beat of the matchless time. Now and again, at some point of tension, he would throw a short, exultant yell across the barn, and the tumult of ordered movement would quicken to the sharp inspiration of the sound.

The Englishman stood, with beating pulses and every nerve and muscle taut, gazing at Neil. He loved music and had toiled patiently, and with a measure of success, at the violin. He knew enough to recognise his technical skill, yet the pleasure of that recognition, so great even to one with less knowledge than he possessed, was forgotten in the pure rush of feeling, the illumination cast upon his mind by which intangible things became clear. He seemed to understand—perhaps only for a moment—the spirit of the land he was in, and the heart of the kinsman whose track he was trying to follow, whose body lay, perchance, somewhere among those hills he had seen before him guarding the northern horizon, as he neared Dalmain. For a moment he could have envied him his participation in the forlorn cause he had espoused. The love of country, which was a passion in the race around him, which, unexpressed in mere words, poured out of the violin in this master-hand, was revealed to him, though he could only grasp it vicariously. As he stood, thrilled, on the brink of the whirlpool, its outer circles were rising about his feet. The music stopped suddenly and Neil threw down his bow.

The Englishman awoke as from a dream and drew back. One or two people, aware for the first time of a stranger's presence, looked at him curiously, but most of the dancers were crowding round the table where Neil was now sitting in his brother's place.

"Na, na," he was saying, "a'll no win doon till a hae a drink. Man Donal', awa' wi' ye an' get a dram till us baith."

The Englishman went back to the stackyard; he wished Mr. Laidlaw had not stayed behind, for he did not mean to return to the manse till he had heard Neil play again. He was an intruder, which was a little embarrassing to him, and he felt his position would be bettered if he had someone to speak to. But the scraps of talk he heard did not encourage him to address anyone, because he was not sure of understanding any reply he might get. Soon a small boy came out of the barn and paused in surprise to look at him; he was apparently of an inquisitive turn of mind, for he hung about examining every detail of the stranger's appearance. He bore the scrutiny for a few minutes.

"What is your name, my lad?" he inquired at last, reflecting that it would not matter if he *did* look like a fool before this child.

The boy made no answer but backed a step, open-mouthed. The question was repeated, and this time produced an effect, for he turned and ran, as though accosted by an ogre.

He did not stop till he was clear of the stackyard, but when he reached the road he stood still. He had been told by his mother to come home before dark, and when he had first caught sight of the Englishman he was debating whether or no he should obey her. He was now put out at finding himself on the way there, and stood undecided, pouting and kicking his heels in the mud. Looking back, he saw a figure moving among the stacks, and the sight decided him. He set off resentfully, cheated into virtue; a situation that was hateful.

He had no mind to hurry. If he was diddled by an unfair chance into respecting his mother's orders, he was not going to interpret them literally. Everything was close together in the kirkton of Dalmain, and though he was not a dozen yards from the farm-gate he was abreast of the first cottage in the row. The fiddle had begun again and he could hear it very plainly and the shouts and thudding of feet. It was almost as good as being in the barn, if only there was something to look at. He began to amuse himself by building a little promontory out into the burn with the biggest stones he could collect. He had often been forbidden to do this, and he was glad of the opportunity of being even with fate. When he had been at it for some time, and even disobedience began to pall, he noticed that a bar of light was lying on the water, falling on it from the window of a cottage down stream. Bands of shadow were crossing and recrossing this in a strange way, as if some movement were going on behind the window panes. He jumped over the burn, crept along by the harled wall and, crouching by the sill, peered in.

When the elders had left the Moirs' house and the beadle had betaken himself to the Knowes', Phemie sat on by the fire, like some commonplace image of endurance, seemingly stupefied. Another woman might have been aroused by the entrance of neighbours drawn by the news of what had happened and ready to help in those duties necessitated by a death that the poor share so faithfully with one another. But she had no neighbours in the fuller sense of the word, and the few with whom she had even the slightest communication were enjoying themselves not a furlong from her door. Her thoughts had gone back—far back; years and years back—to the turning-point of her obscure life. She saw it dimly, across the everlasting monotony that had closed down on her and hers at that last time upon which she had taken her place among her land. Secrecy and servitude to the stricken creature who now lay rigid upon the box-bed; these had been her lot. Servitude was over, but her tardy freedom conveyed little to her, and secrecy —long since unnecessary, though she had never grasped the fact that it was

so—clung to her as a useless, threadbare garment. Her solitariness would be no greater. The doors of her prison had opened, but she could not go free because of the fetters she wore.

She got up at last and threw some fuel into the grate. The flame rose and she tried to collect herself. There were things she must do. She went to the outhouse that opened from the back of the kitchen and got a bucket to fill at the burn. This she carried out to the water, but as she stooped with it, it dropped from her hands. The sound of leaping, compelling reel-music cut its way from the Knowes' farm to her ears. A blind fiddler had once said that he could tell the stroke of Neil Gow's bow among a hundred others, and Phemie Moir knew who was playing. She clasped her hands over her face and fled indoors.

The lethargy that had enveloped her was gone, snatched away as a wayfarer's cloak is snatched from him by the wind. She began to run to and fro, crying out, now lifting her arms over her head, now thrusting them forward; her sobs filled the kitchen though her eyes were tearless. She had slammed the door behind her that she might not hear the fiddle. Once she paused by it, not daring to open it, but laying her ear to the edge of the jamb, in the hope of finding that it had ceased. It was going on steadily, and she turned the little shawl she wore up over her head and ran back into the outhouse to get farther from the sound. But a broken plank in the thin wooden walls brought it to her afresh, and she rushed back again and sank upon the chair she had left by the hearth.

When she was a little quieter she returned to the door to listen, the tension of fear upon her. It was at this moment that the urchin, creeping along outside, stumbled over the fallen pail. The sudden noise shattered the temporary quiet of her strained nerves and let loose the unreasoning demon of her terror again. She ran up and down between the walls like a frenzied thing.

The boy crept nearer. It was now dark enough to conceal him from the inmate of the house so long as he did not approach his face to the deep-set panes. He was having his fill of wonders to-night and he watched her, fascinated. He had heard no word of Margaret Moir's death. Phemie was a person he had seldom seen at close quarters, because his home was at some distance from the kirkton, and the garden of her cottage, beyond which she rarely ventured, lay behind it, out of sight of passers along the road. But he knew from the children he played with that there was something disquieting about her, and that the minister had rebuked a friend of his mother's for saying that she was a witch. What he now saw woke the horrid suspicion

that it was the minister who was in the wrong. His sense of adventure in gazing at her thus was great; only the wall between them gave him the courage to indulge it. The cat, which, since the beadle had let it out, had been skulking restlessly about the roadside, came, a parti-coloured shadow, out of the darkness and thrust itself between his feet. He was not sorry to have a familiar living creature so near him. He was about to touch its warm head with his fingers when his eye fell upon the bed. There was no more to see on it than the square space revealed, but that was enough. There is something about the lines of a dead figure not to be mistaken, even by a child, particularly by a child bred up among the plain-spoken inhabitants of a country-side. Panic-struck, he plunged through the burn and made as hard as he could for the cheerful commotion of the Knowes'. The cat stood looking after him, its back arched, recoiling a little, like a gently bred dame from some unforeseen vulgarity.

The fiddle had stopped and Neil had gone out to get a breath of fresh air and to gossip with his niece, whom he had not seen since her wedding. Several of the guests were in the stackyard cooling themselves, but the hostess and the fiddler sauntered out to the roadside where it sloped to the kirkton. The boy almost ran into them, weeping loudly; blaring, after the fashion of unsophisticated childhood.

"Maircy, laddie! What ails ye?" exclaimed the young woman.

"Phemie's daft! Ragin' daft—the wifie's deid!"

His words came out with an incoherent burst of blubbering, and to Knowes' bride, who had been a bare ten days in the place, the name conveyed nothing.

"Lord's sake!" she cried, "what is't? wha is't?"

He pointed down the road.

"Ragin'—roarin' daft doon yonder—whaur the licht is—gang doon the brae an' ye'll see't yonder!"

"But wha's deid?" cried the woman. "Is't a murder?"

"Aye, aye—she's deid! Phemie's ragin' mad!" bawled the boy, gathering excitement from his companion's trembling voice, and only concerned for someone to share his emotions.

She poured out a string of questions, and as she grew more insistent, his tale grew more difficult to follow. She looked round for her uncle, but by this time he had started for the village to investigate for himself.

“Oh, Uncle Neil! dinna gang!” she wailed; “like as no ye’ll be murder’t yersel’—come awa back, Uncle Neil!”

Hearing his steps die away in the darkness, she rushed through the stackyard with the headlong run of a startled fowl. “There’s a puir body murdert i’ the kirkton!” she shouted as she went.

The words ran from mouth to mouth. In a few minutes the main part of the company was on its way down the brae, leaving behind it a handful of nervous women, some men who had discovered the fountain-head of the whisky, and Donald Gow, whose instinct, probably from years of attendance on a bigger man than himself, was always for the background.

Neil strode into the kirkton, making for the light pointed out by the boy. Most of the cottages were darkened, but Phemie’s uncurtained window shone like a beacon. He did not stop to look through it, fearing that he might be seen and the house barred against him. He pushed open the door and stood still, completely taken aback. There was no sign of disorder, nothing to suggest a struggle. Phemie, exhausted by her own violence, was sitting at the hearth, her body turned from the fire; her elbows were on the chair-back, her hands clasped over her bowed head. At the click of the latch she looked up and saw him in the doorway. She gave a terrible cry and ran towards him.

“Neil Gow! Neil Gow! Div ye no mind o’ me?”

His amazement deepened. Death, whose presence he realised as he looked about him, had come quietly here, as he comes to most houses; but he supposed that bereavement must have turned the brain of the desperate creature who clung to him.

“Whisht, wumman, whisht!” he exclaimed, “whisht noo, puir thing.”

“Hae maircy on me, Neil Gow!”

“Whisht, whisht—a’ll awa’ an’ get the minister tae ye.”

But she only held him tighter; he had not believed a woman’s hands could be so strong. He did not like to force them open.

“Ye mauna seek tae tell him—ye winna! Ye winna hae me ta’en awa’?”

“Na, na, na. Wumman, what ill wad a dae ye?” he cried, bewildered; “a dinna ken ye—a’m no seekin’ tae hurt ye.”

“Oh, Neil Gow, div ye no mind o’ playin’ on the auld green o’ Dalmain? It’s me—it’s Phemie Moir!”

The name ‘Moir’ arrested him. He turned her round to the firelight, gazing into her face.

“Moir?” he said. “Is it yersel’?” He could hardly trace in it the features of the girl he remembered.

“Moir,” she said. “Jimmy Moir was the lad ye saved frae the sodgers—him an’ the ither ane—ma bonnie brither. Neil Gow, ye’ll save me—ye winna speak o’t—ye winna let them tak’ me noo?”

“Hoots!” he exclaimed. Then looking into her anguished eyes, he realised the depths of her simplicity; the cruelty of that ignorance whose burden she had borne these two score of years. He was silent, seeking for words with which to bring conviction to her warped understanding, to overthrow the tyranny of a fixed idea. There was a sound of feet outside, and both he and she looked towards the window. Beyond the narrow panes a crowd of faces were gathered, pressing against them. She tore herself from him and ran to the door. She turned the key just as a hand outside was about to lift the latch.

Neil drew the curtain across the casement, and, taking her by the arm, led her to the hearth.

“See noo,” said he, “sit ye doon. There’s naebody’ll touch ye. They’re a’ freends. Will ye no believe me?”

“A hae nae freends, Neil Gow—man, ye dinna understand.”

The tears came at last and she rocked herself to and fro.

“Ye fule!” he exclaimed, “is there no me? Was a no a freend tae ye, yon time ye mind?”

“Ye was that—ye was that,” she murmured.

“An’ wad a tell ye a lee?”

The latch rattled again.

He went to the door and opened it. Someone pressed up against him and would have entered. He was flung back.

“Awa’!” he cried, “awa’ wi’ ye a’! There’s nane murdert here. There’s just a done body that’s deed in her bed. There’s nane o’ ye’ll hear the sound o’ my fiddle the nicht gin ye dinna leave the puir cratur’ that’s greetin’ in-by in peace. There’s just the minister’ll win in, an’ nae mair!”

There was an irresolute collective movement, but the beadle pushed himself forward.

"Na, na," said Neil simply, filling the doorway with his bulk. The beadle was pulled back by several hands. The sensation was dying down, and a dance without music was a chill prospect.

"We'll see an' get Donal' tae play," said the beadle angrily.

"No him," replied Neil.

"Here's the minister," said a voice.

Phemie's dread seemed to have left her. She sat quietly listening to what was going on round the doorstep; an unformulated hope was glimmering in her mind like dawn on a stretch of devastated country. She could hear the people dispersing and returning to the Knowes' and the minister's subdued murmur of talk with the fiddler outside. It went on till the two men came in together. She was dumb and still.

"Ye've naething to fear i' this warld," said Laidlaw, dropping into the vernacular. "I'd tell ye the same, if I was to tell ye frae the pulpit."

And he put his hand on her shoulder. She laid her head against his arm, like a child.

It was a full hour later that Laidlaw returned to the manse. He had stayed some little time at the cottage after Gow went back to the Knowes' to finish his evening's work. One half of his mind was full of the story he had heard pieced together by Phemie and the fiddler. He was a thoughtful man, with sympathies stronger than many who knew him were inclined to suspect, and he was deeply stirred by the obscure tragedy which had dragged on, unrealised by himself, ever since he had been called to Dalmain. He blamed himself. His sense of his own limitations, a healthy quality in most people, had been a stumbling-block to him; for he had taken the discouragements received in his timid efforts to know more of Phemie as proofs of how little he was fitted to deal with her. He envied people like Neil Gow; people whose masterful humanity carried them full sail into those waters where their fellow-men were drowning for want of a rope. The other half of his mind was amazed by the prank of a coincidence that had brought the Englishman here to meet the one man necessary to him in his quest.

He hurried home, hoping that his guest would soon return; in the crowd at the farm he had noticed his presence, but lost him in the sudden scare

which dispersed the party. He entered the little living-room to find him.

"You look perturbed," said the Englishman. "Certainly you have no lack of incident in Dalmain. I'm truly glad it was a false alarm."

"I have much to say to you," began Laidlaw, sitting down.

"Well, before you begin, let me have my turn. Perhaps you thought me sceptical when you spoke of Neil Gow, and I will not deny that I was. I was a fool—since I have heard him I know how great a fool. And now, sir, go on, and I will listen. My mind has been lightened of a little of its conceit."

His frankness struck some sensitive chord in Laidlaw. Perhaps the minister's reserve was shaken by the sharp contact with realities to-night, perhaps stirred by sympathies he saw in others.

"I am glad you came here," he stammered. "I should be glad to think—to hope—I have got some information for you, sir. Your cousin was lost sight of here; he reached Dalmain."

"You have got news of him?"

"Something. Little enough; but I have heard a strange tale from Neil Gow."

"From Neil Gow?"

Laidlaw nodded.

"Margaret Moir died this evening, and a little laddie saw her through the window and came crying some havers to the Knowes'. Her sister was nearly wild, poor soul, and the bairn got a fright—but you were there, no doubt?"

"I saw there was a disturbance, but I stayed where I was."

"The door was locked when I arrived," went on Laidlaw, "and Gow was with her. But he got her quiet and I went in-by. You'll mind that I told you he was here the year of Culloden, playing on the old green? It was three nights before that dance that Jimmy Moir, who was the brother of these two lasses—as they were then—Margaret and Phemie, came to Dalmain with a wounded officer—likely the man you are seeking—and they hid themselves on the brae in a cave that is there, in amongst the broom. You can see it still; the bairns play at the mouth of it often enough, though I do not think they go far in. I have never been to it myself, but they say it runs a long way into the hill-side. Moir got into the kirkton, without being seen, to tell his sisters, and Phemie and Margaret went out in the dark to bring them food and water; but there was no one in the place knew they were there, not even the beadle, that

had been fighting himself, for he was lying ill in his house. The English soldiers were all about the country. The officer was so bad with his wound they could not get forward to the coast, and the day Neil came he was shouting and raving in a fever. You could hear him at the foot of the brae, Phemie says, just where the dancing was to be, and the lasses made sure the poor fellows would be discovered. They got short shrift in those times, you see, sir."

"But would anyone have given them up?" asked the other.

"Aye, well," said the minister, "whiles a man's foes are they of his own household, and they said there were some in the kirkton that favoured King George. But Phemie was bold and went to seek Neil Gow. He was a young lad then, but she told him the truth and he said he would play till he had no arms left before anyone should hear aucht but his fiddle. When I spoke to you of that dance, not a couple of hours syne, little I thought how much it concerned you."

"Nor I, indeed."

"Margaret was a puir, timid thing and Jimmy was all the world to her. She stopped at home her lane, but Phemie went out and danced till the most o' them were fou with whisky and Neil had played them off their legs. She waited till the last were gone. There was no crying from the broom when she went home. It was an awesome night for her, but it was the ruin of Margaret. She lay ill a long while, and when she rose from her bed her mind was never the same again."

"But the men—what became of them?" asked the Englishman, getting impatient to reach what was, for him, the main point.

"The days were long in June-month and Phemie had to wait for dark to go back. She found the place empty."

"And did no news ever come? Was nothing more heard?"

"Nothing, sir. Nothing."

The other made a sharp exclamation of disappointment.

"It has been a wild-goose chase after all," he said at last.

The progress of Laidlaw's detailed history had raised his expectations and he was half resentful at finding it end, for all the difference it would make to him, where it had begun. But he was too just a man to let the other see it.

“I am greatly to blame!” cried the minister, with sudden vehemence. “Here am I, a servant of men’s souls, and it was left for Neil Gow to loose Phemie Moir from her martyrdom while I went by on the other side! Aye! but I am an unprofitable servant!” he exclaimed, seeing the other man’s astonished face; “that poor creature shut herself up with her sister and would thole nobody near them for fear some word should slip from the daft body and Moir be traced. Then, as time went by, her heart failed her and concealment grew in her mind like some poisonous weed, and she took the notion that, if word got out, the two of them would have to suffer for what they had done. Fear sat down with her to her meat and fear lay down with her in her bed. The years passed on, but she was too ignorant to ken that the world changes with them and old things go out of mind. People wonder that she’s not like other folk; they wouldna wonder if they knew! She was feared that Gow, who had stood friend to her, would let out what he kent, and fail her. Poor foolish wife to think such a thing of Gow! And the man had forgotten her till he saw her, and then she had need to tell him before he remembered! But when she heard his playing again she was fairly demented.”

His face changed and he turned away. “*Mea culpa*,” he faltered. He had little Latin, but he understood that much.

“I fear the burden has shifted to you, my poor friend,” said the Englishman gently.

It was on the forenoon of the morrow that Laidlaw, the beadle and the Englishman stood up to their middles in the broom. The pods were black in the green mist of stems. About their feet rabbits had riddled the earth. The outcrop of rock had broken open in the hill-side, to be roofed with the turf of the overhanging brae and swallowed by the sea of broom and whin and the ash-coloured blur of seeding thistles. Interlacing whin-roots lurked about the burrows, traps for human steps. When they had climbed to their goal the three men stopped to get breath, and turned to look at the kirkton below them. Westward, through the creek cut by the burn to the Isla, they could see the indigo-blue Sidlaws with such lights as seem only to fall on Angus bathing their undulating shoulders.

Each man carried a lantern, and when all were lighted they went crouching, one after another, into the cave. In a few paces they were able to stand up and look about them.

Both Laidlaw and the Englishman had gone late to sleep on the preceding night, and the latter, lying thinking in the dark hours, turning over in his mind all he had heard, had come to a definite conclusion. He told himself that no man with a serious body-wound, exhausted by days of wandering and ill enough to be shouting in delirium, could escape on foot from a place in which he had once lain down. A man may go till he drops, but when he falls he will not rise again in circumstances like these, far less escape unseen. But Moir could accomplish what was impossible to his companion.

"I believe Musgrave to be lying up there in the hill-side," he had said to Laidlaw that morning.

"But—" began the minister.

"Yes, sir, I know what you would say; I know that the village children play there, in the cave, at times. For all that, Moir left him there. But he left a dead man."

The minister stared at him, incredulous.

"But Phemie went next night. She would have lit a light there," said he.

"She saw no one *above ground*. You said that when Neil Gow had stopped playing and she went home to her sister, all was quiet. Depend upon it, Musgrave died in the small hours, as sick men will; Moir buried him next day and escaped at dusk."

"But he had no tools," objected Laidlaw, unconvinced.

"If the rock is hollowed deep and there is sand and loose earth choking much of it, he did it. A man in his case makes shift to use anything."

"He maybe had his dirk," suggested the minister, his doubts a little shaken.

"He is there, sir; believe me, he is there."

And now Laidlaw was sitting at a short distance from the cave on a bare patch in the tangle. He had come out of its heavy atmosphere to leave room for the Englishman and the beadle, who were working inside with the pick and shovel the latter had brought up from the kirkyard. The opening tunnelled some way into the hill, narrowing as it went, but in one place at which the rock fell back in an irregular recess they had resolved to make their experiment.

The shine from the lanterns had cast up the faint outline of a mound. This decided them, this and the belief that a man engaged in a work like Moir's would get as far from the entrance as he might.

The minister looked a little less harassed. His shyness of the Englishman's accent was gone. Like many people whose days are spent in remote places, he was intensely surprised at seeing the human side of a stranger, and he still doubted that the outer world contained others of a similar sort. His face grew a little wistful as he remembered that they would go down the hill to part at its foot. The Englishman would ride to Stirling to meet the Edinburgh coach. He fell to musing. The early autumn sunshine, warm and very clear, and the healing quiet of the braes were pleasant to him. He could see his small world lying below like a plaything on the floor. In his vigil last night he had burnt his tallow till within a short time of daylight, for his sermon had been interrupted by the clamour that had arisen and he was fain to finish it. He was not much of a preacher and the task of writing it was a weekly load upon him. He had got up early too, and gone to Phemie's cottage; for there was something he wanted to say to her and his self-distrust made him eager to put this also behind him, lest he should lose courage. But his visit was accomplished and he was now more at ease. His eyes closed wearily; they ached this morning from his midnight labours as his heart had ached last night from his own shortcomings. But now he forgot all these as he dozed among the broom and the fluffy thistledown. . . .

He awoke to a touch on his shoulder. The Englishman was beside him. For a moment, bewildered, he could not recollect where he was, nor how he had come to such a place.

"Look," said the other, who was holding out a little discoloured silver snuff-box, "his name is on it. We have found him."

In the kirkton of Dalmain the two men bade each other good-bye, but said it as those do who are to meet again. The Englishman wished Musgrave to lie under the wall of its spectral kirk; and when the necessary steps should be taken to establish the dead man's identity in the eyes of the law, his skeleton, clothed in the rags of his tattered uniform, would be carried from the bosom of the hill that had sheltered it for so long and committed by Laidlaw to the earth.

"I believe you are less troubled than you were last night," said the Englishman, leaning from his horse as they parted. "I should be happy to know it."

The minister's plain face brightened.

"I have seen Phemie already," he replied; "she is to come to me to take care of the manse—my serving lass is just a silly tawpie——"

The rider pulled up a little later upon the southern brae and turned to look back. On the northern one, two dark figures were doing the like. The taller of these, seeing him, took off his bonnet and stood holding it high in air. It was Neil Gow.

A MIDDLE-AGED DRAMA

The house of Hedderwick the grieve was a furlong east of the kirk, divided from it by a country road and a couple of ploughed fields. From its windows the sunset could be seen spreading, like a fire, behind the building, of which only the belfry was visible as it rose above the young larch plantation pressing up to the kirkyard gate. The belfry itself was a mere shelter, like a little bridge standing on the kirk roof, and the dark shape of its occupant showed strong against the sky, dead black when the flame of colour ran beyond the ascending skyline to the farm on the hill. This farm with its stacks and byres would then share importance with the bell, the two becoming the most marked objects against the light.

Hedderwick's house was grey and square, with an upper story and a way of staring impartially on the world. At the death of his wife, three years before the date of this history, it began to give signs, both within and without, of the demoralisation that sets in on a widower's possessions.

Mrs. Hedderwick had been a shrew and there were many who pitied the grieve more during her life than after her death. It was experience that made the bereaved man turn an ear as deaf as that of the traditional adder to the voices of those who urged on him the necessity of a housekeeper. But discomfort is a potent reasoner and the day came when a tall woman with a black bonnet and a corded wooden box descended from the carrier's cart at his door.

Hedderwick was a lean, heavy-boned man of fifty-two, decent with the decency of the well-to-do lowland Scot, sparing of words, just of mind, and only moderately devout—so the minister said—for a man who lived so near the church. In his youth he had been a hard swearer, and a bed-rock of determination lay below the surface of his infrequent speech, to be struck by those who crossed him. He had no daughters; his son Robert, who was apprenticed to a watchmaker in Dundee, came home at intervals to spend Sunday with his father and to impress the parish with that knowledge of men and matters which he believed to be the exclusive possession of dwellers in manufacturing towns.

In spite of his just mind, Hedderwick's manner to his housekeeper, during the first year, showed the light in which he saw her. She was a necessary evil, but an evil nevertheless, and he did not allow her to forget the fact. He wasted fewer words on her than he did on any other person;

when she came into the room he looked resentful; and though he had never before known such comfort as she had brought with her into the house, he would have died sooner than let her suspect it. If obliged to mention her, he spoke of "yon woman," and while so doing gave the impression that, but for his age and position, he would have used a less decorous noun.

"Margaret Burness, a single woman"—so she had described herself when applying for the place—was a pale, quiet person, as silent as the grieve, with the look of one who has suffered in spirit without suffering in character. Her eyes were still soft and had once been beautiful, and her dark, plainly parted hair was turning grey. Though the sharp angles of jaw and cheekbone gave her face a certain austere pathos, it was easy, when looking at her, to suppose that her smile would be pleasant. But she rarely smiled.

When another six months had gone by, Hedderwick's obstinacy, though dying hard, began to give way in details. "Yon woman" had become "she," and her place at the fireside commanded, not his side aspect, but his full face; for he sat no longer in the middle of the hearth, but with his chair opposite to hers. Occasionally he would read her bits from the newspaper. Robert, who had always treated her as though she did not exist, returned one Sunday, and, remarking sourly on her cooking, perceived a new state of things.

"If yer meat disna please ye, Rob, ye can seek it some other gait," observed Hedderwick.

Margaret smiled a little more in these days; she was as quiet as ever, but her eyes, when they rested upon the grieve, seemed to have taken back something of their youth. She was experiencing the first taste of security she had ever known, and, with his dawning consideration, a tenderness she scarcely realised was growing up for him in her heart.

Nothing had prepared Hedderwick to find peace and a woman's society compatible. He began to look on the evening as a pleasant time, and on one occasion, when chance delayed her return from marketing by a couple of hours, he went down the road to meet her, swearing as each turn of the way revealed a new piece of empty track and foreseeing the most unlikely mishaps. He waited for her now on Sundays instead of letting her follow him to the kirk, and her Bible made the journey there in his pocket with his own. No stranger who saw them sitting in the pew below the gallery would have doubted that the grim-looking grieve and the pale woman beside him were man and wife. By the time a few more months had gone by she had become "Marget."

It was early November. Hedderwick, who had business in Dundee, had returned there with his son, leaving her in charge of the house. She was expecting him home, and, her work being over and the tea set in the kitchen, she stood at an upper window looking at the sky which flamed behind the belfry. The four small pinnacles at its corners were inky black, and the bell below them was turned, by the majesty of the heavens, from the commonplace instrument of the beadle's weekly summons into a fateful object. It hung there, dark and still, the spokes of its wheel and the corners and angles of the ironwork standing out into unfamiliar distinctness, and suggesting some appurtenance of mediæval magic. Behind it, the west had dissolved into a molten sea of gold that seemed to stretch beyond the bounds of this present world, and to be lying, at a point far outrunning human sight, upon the shores of the one to come. The farm, with its steadings, was like the last outpost of this earth. The plain darkness of the ploughed fields before the house made the glory more isolated, more remote, more a revelation of the unattainable—a region between which and humanity stood the narrow portal of death. The tops of the larches by the kirk were so fine that in the great effulgence the smaller twigs disappeared like little, fretted souls, swallowed into eternal peace. And above them hung the bell whose sound would one day proclaim for each and all within range of its voice that the time had come to rise up and go out into the remoteness.

As she watched, the figure of Hedderwick turned off the road and came up the muddy way skirting the fields. She went down quickly to make the tea and put the slices of bread she had cut into the toaster. As she bent over the fire she heard him kicking the mud off his boots against the doorstep and hanging up his hat on the peg.

He said little during the meal, but when it was over he went out and returned with a parcel which he laid before her on the table.

"A bocht this tae ye in Dundee, Marget," said he.

She opened the paper shyly. It held a Paisley shawl of the sort worn at that time by nearly every woman of her class who could afford the luxury. The possession of such a thing was, in itself, a badge of settled position. The colour ran to her face.

"Oh, but yon's pretty!" she exclaimed, as the folds fell from her hands to the floor in the subdued reds and yellows of the intricate Oriental pattern. She put it round her and it hung with a certain grace from her thin shoulders to her knees.

"Ye set it fine," observed Hedderwick, from his chair.

Her heart sang in her all the evening. No woman, no matter of what age, can be quite cold to the charm of a new garment; and this one, though it did not differ from those she saw, on good occasions, on the backs of most well-to-do working-men's wives, was, perhaps, the more acceptable for that. It seemed to give her a place among them. As she imagined the grieve entering the Dundee shop with the intention of buying such a thing for her, her cheek kindled again. He had chosen well, too; the fine softness of the gift told her that. She laid her treasure away in her box, glad that it was only the middle of the week, that she might have the more time to realise its beauty before wearing it. But its overwhelming worth, to her, was neither in its texture nor its cost.

She sat in her place on Sunday in the midst of a great spiritual peace. Love, as love, was a thing outside her reckoning, and she would have checked the bare thought that she loved the grieve. But there was on her the beatitude of a woman who finds herself valued by the being most precious to her. She had come into such a haven as she had never hoped to see in the days of her hard, troubled existence, and there was only one point on which she was not quite easy. It stood out now before her, its shadow deepened by the light shining in her heart.

There was a secret in Margaret's life which she had kept from everyone, which lay so far back in the years that its memory was almost like the memory of a dream; and she wished now that she had told Hedderwick the truth. But, sinless as that secret was, she had recoiled from sharing it with all but the few who had known her in youth, fearing, in her sore need of work by which to keep herself, that it would go against her in her quest. And, as the good opinion of the grieve grew, she hid it the more closely, for she had so little to cling to that she could not bear to jeopardise what consideration she had earned. There was not one cloud upon her content and the peace which enfolded her; but that small concealment, a concealment advised by those who had concerned themselves for her after the storm burst, and by whose suggestion she had taken back her maiden name, would rise, at times, to her mind and make her sigh. She wished, as she sat with her eyes on her book and the clean pocket-handkerchief folded beside it, that she had told Hedderwick. She was so much preoccupied that she never looked up, nor settled herself against the pew-back, as did her neighbours, when the sermon began. It was a few minutes before she shook herself from her abstraction and composed herself to listen to the minister's voice.

The kirk was a plain square place with a gallery, supported on thin pillars, running round all but its western side where the tall pulpit stood

between high windows. The minister, under the umbrella-like sounding-board poised over him, was far above the heads of the congregation and on a level with the occupants of the upstair pews, looking across the intervening chasm into the faces of the laird and his family. The north wall, by which Hedderwick sat, was unbroken, but on the farther side of the kirk two small windows under the gallery floor looked out upon the little kirkyard surrounding the building. There were not many tombstones on that side of it, and the light, chilly autumn wind rippled the long grass till it looked like grey waves.

Margaret never knew what made her turn her head sharply and glance across to the diamond-shaped panes. Between her and one of the windows the seats were almost empty, and there was nothing to interrupt her view of a shambling figure that moved among the graves. While she watched, the leaded panes darkened, as a man approached and looked through; the sill was cut so deep in the wall that few of the congregation could see him, and the two or three whose positions would allow them to do so had their attention fixed upon the pulpit. The man's eyes searched as much of the interior of the kirk as he could command, and, stopping at Margaret, became centred upon her.

She looked down at her knee, faint with the suggestion shot into her terror-struck heart by the face staring in at her from outside. Hedderwick, who could have seen what she saw, was drowsy, and his closed lids shut out from him the new act of that long-buried tragedy that was being revived for the woman at his side. When she raised her head again the figure had retreated a few paces from the pane, and its outlines turned her apprehension into certainty.

The preacher's voice ran on through the silence, but it seemed to Margaret as though her heartbeats drowned it; she forced herself to overcome the mental dizziness that wrapped her like the shawl whose fringes lay spread on the slippery wood of the pew. Its warmth was turned to a chill mockery. She closed her eyes that she might shut out the familiar things about her; the accustomed faces, the high pulpit, the red cushion on its ledge, the long, pendent tassels swinging into space; the grieve's bulky shoulders and Sunday clothes, his brown leather Bible with its corners frayed by its weekly sojourns in his pocket. All these things had become immeasurably dear; and now, this Sunday morning might be—probably would be—the last time she should ever see them.

When the congregation dispersed she sat still. Hedderwick would have waited for her, but she motioned him dumbly to go on. After the last shuffle

of feet had retreated over the threshold and the beadle came in to shut the doors, she rose and went out.

The man was waiting there for her among the gravestones as she rounded the angle of the wall. Though he was a few years younger than herself he looked much older; there was white on his unshaven chin, and she saw, as she approached, that he was almost in rags. Whether he were a beggar or not, he had the unmistakable shifting look of mendicancy. But his features were unchanged and she would have known the set of his eyebrows anywhere. She opened her lips to speak, but the pounding of her heart choked her breath.

"A've been seekin' ye," he said, in the thick voice that told of long drinking. "A speired at Netherside an' they tellt me ye was here."

Netherside was Margaret's old home; a village over the county border.

"We got word ye was deid after ye cam' oot o' jail," said she, "but a didna ken whether tae believe it. But when sic a time gaed by——"

"Heuch!" rejoined he, with a flicker of grim humour, "a was fine an' pleased tae be deid; a grave's a bonnie safe place. They canna catch ye there, ye ken."

"And what way was it ye didna send me word? A micht hae gi'ed ye a hand, Tam."

"A tell ye a was deid. An' a wasna needin' ye in Ameriky."

A throb of pity came to her as she saw his shaking hands, and the way he drew his ragged coat together as the wind played in gusts over the grass. It is terrible to see the professional attitudes of the beggar in one we have once loved, no matter how far life may have drifted him from us. Margaret had not a spark of affection left for the wretched creature before her, but she had a long memory.

"Ye're gey an' braw," he said, with a sidelong glance at her tidy clothes and the rich colouring of her fine shawl. "Ye bide wi' the grieve, a'm tellt. Maybe ye've pit by a bittie."

Margaret's lips shook, and, for a moment, her eyes looked on beyond him into space.

"Tam, we'll need to do oor best," she began tremulously, brought back to the present by the mention of Hedderwick. "A've a bit saved. Maybe we micht gang to Dundee an' get work i' the mills——"

“An’ wha tellt ye a was seekin’ work? A’m no needin’ work an’ a’m no needin’ you. Bide you wi’ the grieve—I’ll no tak’ ye frae him; but a’ll be here-about till the new year an’ a’ll come tae the hoose the nicht. Ye can gie me a piece an’ a wheen siller tae gang on wi’.”

“A’ll no let ye near the hoose,” said Margaret firmly.

“An’ a’m no askin’ ye. A’m tae come.”

“But Hedderwick’ll see ye, Tam.”

“Dod, a’m no carin’ for Hedderwick.”

“But a’ll come oot-by an’ bring ye a piece!” she exclaimed in terror. “Ye’ll no need tae come then.”

They parted a few minutes later and she returned home. Her world had indeed grown complicated in the last hour, and the light of duty, for which, in all her troubled life, she had been wont to look, seemed to have gone out, extinguished by some diabolical hand. It was plain that her husband would have none of her, and had no desire that she should throw in her lot with his; he feared respectability as she feared sin, and, while she was in a position to minister to his wants, his present way of living would suit him well. She had promised, before leaving him, to bring him a little money, if he would wait after dusk, where the larch-wood hid the road from the kirk. She refused to bring him food, for though her small savings were her own, every crumb in the house was the grieve’s and she would sooner have died than take so much as a crust. Whosoever might suffer for what had happened that day, it should not be Hedderwick.

It was almost dark that evening as she slipped out of the house and went towards the larches; she had a little money in her hand, taken out of the box in which she kept her savings. The owls were beginning to call and hoot from the wood by the manse, and she hurried along among the eerie voices floating in shrill mockery over the plough-land. Tom Weir was lurking like a shadow at the appointed place, and when she had given him her dole he departed towards the farm on the hill; a deserted cottage which stood in a field over the crest would shelter him that night, he said, and be a place to which he could come back in the intervals of tramping. He was going off on the morrow and would expect her to meet him on his return with a further pittance. Her hesitation brought down a shower of abuse.

Margaret knew well to what slavery she was condemning herself when she put the money into his dirty palm; but she dared not tell Hedderwick, for, besides her dismay at the thought of confessing what she had kept from

him so long, she had a vague dread that the law, were her case known, would force her to return to Weir. Weir did not want her, but she had known of old that his spite was a thing to be reckoned with, and it might be gratified by her downfall, when her savings came to an end. That knowledge and the fear that he might make a public claim on her, were she to refuse him help, bound her hand and foot. She had not the courage to turn her back on all she had grown to love, and she quieted her scruples by vowing that, while keeping the grieve in ignorance, she would not bestow on her tormentor one crust that she had not paid for herself; but she was prepared, were it necessary, to threaten her own departure from her employment and the consequent stoppage of her means of supply, should he approach the grey house. She was prepared, also, to keep her word. It should be her last resource.

And so the final, dying month of autumn went by and winter fell on the land, crisping the edges of the long furrows and setting a tracery of bare boughs against the diminished light. Weir came and went, haunting the towns within reach, and coming back every seven days to take his tithe of her dwindling purse; and winter fell, too, upon Margaret's heart. Saturday brought a sinister end to her week; and her troubles, as dusk set in, were intensified by the presence of Rob Hedderwick, who now returned by the midday train on that day to spend Sunday at his father's house. It was difficult to escape his sharp eye and restless mind—made, perhaps, more intrusive by perpetual prying into the workings of complicated things. It did not take the young man long to notice her absences. In the evenings by the fireside he would look covertly at her from behind his paper, or over the top of his book, as she sat at her knitting; his thoughts were busy with the mystery he scented. Once or twice he had left the kitchen before dark, and, from the shadow of the wash-house door, watched her go silently towards the road with something in her apron. He did not like Margaret. Once, too, he had mentioned his suspicions to the grieve, bidding him look to his money-box; and, angered by the scant encouragement that he got, and by the scathing definitions of the limits of his own business, he determined to justify himself; for his growing suspicion that his father's housekeeper sold the food, or disposed of it in some way profitable to herself, could, he believed, be proved. He was bent upon proving it, for, in addition to his dislike, he had the thirsty rabidness of the would-be detective.

There was a cessation of his visits through January and February, as the master watchmaker was called away and his assistant left for a two months' charge of the shop; therefore it was on a moonless March evening that Rob Hedderwick hid himself in the manse wood. It touched the road just where

the path to the grieve's house joined it, and in its shelter he waited till he heard a woman's step come down the track. Margaret passed within a few yards of him, her head muffled in a woollen wrapper and her apron gathered into a bag and bulging with what she carried in it. He had never yet followed her, but he meant to do so now, for there was just enough of hidden starlight behind the thin clouds to enable him to keep her in sight from a little distance.

Her figure disappeared among the larches by the kirk; he almost came upon her, for the road between them made a bend, and she had stopped, apparently expecting to be joined by someone. Her back was to him and he retreated softly. The cold was considerable and Rob had forgotten to put on his greatcoat; so when, after what seemed to him nearer to half an hour than a quarter, she went swiftly up the hill towards the farm on its summit, he followed again, thankful to be moving.

She never slackened her pace till she had reached the top. Led more by sound than by sight, he trod in her wake; the desolation of night was wide around them, and from the ridge the land was as though falling away into nothingness before and behind. The farm was quiet as they passed it and began to descend, he taking advantage of a scanty cover of hedge to get closer to her. As the ground grew level again, he could hear the gurgle of a small burn crossing their road at a place where a hamlet of thatched mud houses had once stood. There was but one ruin of a cottage left, a little way from the country road, and he was near enough to see Margaret strike off towards it. He went round the roofless hovel till he came to its door, which was still standing. She had entered and closed it after her.

There was a gleam of light inside, and, putting his eye to a gaping crack in the wood, he could see what took place within the walls. A man was sitting on a bundle of straw covered with sacking and a battered lantern beside him shed its light on him and on the woman. As it flickered in the draught, the shadows, ghastly and fantastic, played among the broken beams and the tufts of dried vegetation, springing up where rain had fallen in upon the floor.

Rob held his breath as Margaret unfolded her apron and laid a loaf with a large piece of cheese upon the straw. It was just such a loaf as he had seen her buy from the baker's cart at his father's doorstep. The idea that she might have paid for it herself did not enter his mind, for it was of a type to which such ideas are foreign. It was not easy to distinguish what they said. He pressed nearer in his eagerness, and a brick on which he trod turning under his foot, he slipped, lurching heavily against the rotten panel. The

immediate silence which followed told him that the blow had startled Margaret and her companion, so, regaining his balance, he fled towards the road and made his way home in the darkness. He had seen all that he needed for his purpose.

The grieve was out when he reached the house and his disappointment was keen; he had hoped, his tale once told, to make his father confront the ill-doer as she entered fresh from her errand. But he had to keep his discovery till the morrow, for it was nearing ten o'clock when Hedderwick came home and went to bed in silence with the uncommunicativeness of a weary man. Rob followed his example sulkily. The next day as the two men strolled down the road after their midday dinner, he embarked on the story of what he had seen and done overnight.

Rob Hedderwick drove his words home with the straight precision of a man assured of the convincing power of his case. He could reason well, and the education which the grieve lacked, but had given to his son, clothed his opinions with a certain force. Hedderwick's mind was turned up as by a ploughshare. His anger at the long chain of petty thefts, which seemed to have been effectively proved before the young man's eyes, lay on him like a weight of lead; and that the one who had been forging that chain these many months sat at his hearth and ate of his food made it all the heavier. Treachery was what he could not bear. He was honest himself and dishonesty was a fault to which he was pitiless. The thing, unendurable in an enemy, was doubly so in the woman who had come to be, to him, indispensable. But, as he pictured the house without Margaret, his heart sank. Now, and only now, was he to realise what she had been—what she was—to him. He stood leaning his arms on a gate; Rob, having done his duty, had gone off to spend the afternoon with some neighbours; and he remained, sore at heart, where he was—looking towards his own house and drawn this way and that by resentment, disillusion and another feeling which was perhaps more painful than either. Rob had been right, no doubt, but that did not prevent his father from hating him because he had destroyed his peace, and he was glad that he would be leaving early next morning. What steps he might take in consequence of his hateful discovery should be taken after he had gone; for he suspected a touch of malicious satisfaction in his son that he would be careful not to gratify. He turned grimly from the gate and went home.

The two following days went by and he remained silent. At times he had almost made up his mind to ignore everything he had heard, so great was his dread of parting with Margaret. On the evening after Rob left he opened his mouth to speak, but it was as though an unseen hand closed his lips. He

could not do it. He desired and yet feared to be alone with her; and when, on the second day of his torment, he saw her start for the farm on some business of domestic supply, he stood in the patch of garden and watched her go with a feeling of relief.

The days were lengthening now, and the wistful notes of blackbirds told their perpetual spring story of the fragility of youth and the pathos of coming pain; but Margaret took time to do her business and the light was beginning to fall as she came out of the farm-gate. Somehow, the heavy load she had carried for so many months seemed to press less cruelly in the alluring quiet of the outdoor world. Instead of going back to the house she turned into a rough way that circled westward and would bring her home by the manse.

She wandered on; behind her, at a little distance, a boy was carrying a milk-can, whistling as he went. The road took her past a disused quarry, a place where steep angles of ragged stone struck out, like headlands, into the garment of weed and bush with which the years were clothing it. It was deep, and, through the dusk, she could just see its bottom and a dark object which lay among the pieces of fallen rock. She peered down—for the remnant of a crazy rail was all that protected unwary passengers from the chasm—and then held up her hand to stop the boy's whistle. From the heap below came a sound like a human voice.

Margaret was an active woman. At the point where she stood the earth had slipped in an outward incline, and a few young ashes that had seeded themselves in the thick tangle of wood offered a comparatively easy descent. She began to go down, waist-deep in the dried thistle-fluff, keeping her foothold in the sliding soil by clinging to the undergrowth.

Among the roots and boulders lay a man, face downwards. From the helpless huddle in which he lay, and the moans which struck her ear as she scrambled towards him, she knew that he must be desperately hurt. At sight of the blood on the surrounding stones she paused and cried to the boy who watched her from above to run for help. Then she sat down and raised the unhappy creature to lie with his head on her knee, and saw, through the growing dusk, that she was looking into the face of her husband.

How long she sat with her half-conscious burden she never knew; but the moments till the return of her messenger were double their length to her. The shadow fell deeper about them and bats began to come out of their fastnesses in the creeks and holes of the stone. It was chilly cold. A tuft of thistle, half-way up the slope she had descended, was catching the remaining

light, and the cluster of its blurred, sere head stared on her like a face, with the fantastic attraction that irrelevant things will take on for humanity in its hours of horror.

Weir stirred a little and his eyes opened for a moment.

"It's me," she whispered, bending lower; but she could not tell whether he knew her or not, for he had slipped back into unconsciousness.

Just before the boy came back he looked up once more; this time with comprehension; it seemed to her that he had grown heavier in her arms.

"Ye'll no gang?" he asked feebly.

"No; a'll no gang," replied Margaret.

A minute later the voices of the boy and the men he had brought came to her from above. Her arms tightened protectingly, for the thought of the transport made her shudder. Then she gazed down at Weir and saw that she need fear pain for him no more.

It was the day of the inquiry. Parish details were not so complete forty years ago as they are now and communication with towns was more difficult; so Tom Weir's body lay in an outhouse of the farm. The 'fiscal' was summoned, and Margaret, the whistling boy, and the handful of men who had carried the vagrant from his rough deathbed were on their way to attend at the place appointed.

Margaret Weir walked alone, her face set in the hard-won peace of a resolution long dreaded, but accomplished at last. The time spent in the quarry had merged her dumb patience, her rebellion against the wreck of her content and growing love, into a vast, steadfast pity. The dead man had been thief, jail-bird, destroyer of her youth; but the old, broken bond had been drawn together again by his appeal as he died in her arms among the nettles. "Ye'll no gang?" he had said. "No, a'll no gang," she had replied. And she was not going now; not till all was done. She was on her way to identify his body and to declare herself his widow; and what money he had not taken from her was to buy him the decent 'burying' which, with her kind, stands for so much.

The shadow of disrespectability lying on Hedderwick's household was a thing she would not contemplate, and she was sure that the answer to all difficulties lay in her own departure. She could not, in justice to him, reveal herself for what she had been—the wife of a tramp—and keep her place. So

she reasoned. She was a simple person, in spite of her concealments, and at this crisis she saw her way simply. She had mended all his clothes, put the house in order and packed her box, which would be fetched by the carrier and sent after her. She had written two letters; one to the minister about Weir's funeral, the money for which she gave into his charge, and the other to Hedderwick. In the latter she explained her position as fully as her small scholarship permitted and bade him good-bye. The balance of the sum he had given her for domestic expenses last market day would, she told him, be in a packet under her pillow. The letter was placed on the kitchen table to await him, for she did not expect him in till evening.

It was past noon when she came out of the room where the 'fiscal' sat and went down the hill. She looked neither to right nor left, for she was afraid. She needed all her great courage to reach the station; all her strength to sail steadfastly out of her late-found haven into the heavy weather. Had she raised her eyes she would have seen the tall figure of Hedderwick emerge from his house and come striding towards her across the fields.

They met in the larch plantation, just where she had so often met Weir. He walked up to her and took her by the wrist.

"Marget," said he, "come awa' hame."

She began to tremble. Her strength of purpose was ebbing in this new trial. Was she to be spared nothing? The tears she believed she had left behind with her youth rose and choked her utterance.

"But a wrote ye, Hedderwick," she faltered. Her eyes were too much blinded to see the corner of her envelope sticking out of his pocket.

"Ye'll just come hame wi' me," said the grieve. "Marget, there's naethin' can part you and me, for a canna live wantin' ye."

ANNIE CARGILL

Young Bob Davidson had an odd assortment of tastes. He combined the average out-of-door sporting tendencies with a curious love of straying down intellectual byways. He was not clever and he had been very idle at school; he knew no Greek, had forgotten such Latin as had been hammered into him, was innocent of modern languages, and abhorred mathematics. The more amusing passages of history gave him true pleasure and heraldry was a thing that he really knew something about. He was twenty, and in mortal combat with his father over the choice of a profession. Old Mr. Davidson favoured the law and his son's mind was for a land agency. In the midst of the strife Bob's godfather, Colonel Alexander Lindsay of Pitriven, invited him to spend a fortnight with him and to shoot the dregs of the Pitriven coverts. Bob hesitated, for he had never seen Sandy Lindsay and had at that moment some private interests in Edinburgh; but Mr. Davidson, a Writer to the Signet, had no idea of offending a godfather who was also a well-to-do bachelor. So Bob, grumbling, packed his portmanteau and a copy of Douglas Whittingham's *Armorial Bearings of the Lowland Families* and departed for Pitriven. The young lady who represented the private interests cried a little and desired the housemaid to abstract her early letters, daily, from the hall table.

Pitriven was a small, shabby house with an unlived-in atmosphere that laid hold upon the young man as he entered; a long-disused billiard-table almost choked the hall, and only the comforting smell of tobacco cheered him as the butler led him into his godfather's presence. At any rate, he reflected, he would be allowed to smoke. Somehow, the place had suggested restrictions.

'Sandy Lindsay,' as he was always called, astonished Bob more than anyone he had seen for some time. He was so immensely tall that his head nearly touched the ceiling of the low smoking-room, and in the dusk of the December afternoon his gigantic outline practically blocked up the window in front of which he stood. He had stiff, white whiskers which curled inwards; his brassy voice had the harshness of a blow as it broke the silence. His features were not ill-favoured, but they looked as though carved out of wood with a blunt knife. Bob found him civil, almost cordial, but there was a hint of potential roughness lurking behind voice, words and manner that had a disturbing effect and gave the young man the sensation of knowing neither what to speak of, nor what to do, nor what to think.

But by the time he had been a few days at Pitriven Bob had begun to like Sandy Lindsay, though he would wonder sometimes, as they sat at the hearth in the evening, what quality in the man beside him had attracted the friendship of his father. He could not quite get over his first impressions but he told himself that it was childish to blame his godfather for having a dreadful personality; he had not chosen it for himself. But it was quite clear to Bob that it was a dreadful one. He found himself noting with surprise that Lindsay's dog was not afraid of him. Somehow he had taken it for granted that the red setter which lived in the house and slept at night in the smoking-room would feel what he felt, perhaps more strongly.

He could not fathom his godfather. There was a rude detachment about him that he could not penetrate; he was alien, out-of-date, barbarous. He decided that he was 'a survival,' for he was fond of making definitions in his careless way, and so he put it. He looked him up in a *Landed Gentry* that he found lying about and was mightily astonished to see that he was seventy-one. Certainly he did not look it.

Though Pitriven house had little attraction for Bob, its surroundings held much that he liked. The timber was beautiful and the great limbs of the trees, with their spreading network of branches etched upon the winter skies, dwarfed the mansion and gave it an insignificance that had something mean. The windows were like malignant eyes staring out into the grandeur of trunk and bough.

The parks round Pitriven were cut by a deep 'den' beyond which the ground rose, steeply, to old Pitriven Kirk. Trees choked the cleft and clothed the ground about the building, but now that the leaves were fallen its walls could be seen from the windows of the house, perched above the den and rising from among the gravestones. Bob had passed near it when shooting with his godfather; his eye had fallen upon the armorial bearings which decorated much of the older stonework, and he promised himself a good time spent in the researches dear to his heraldic soul.

One afternoon he set forth with his notebook in his pocket and a veteran scrubbing-brush in his hand that he had begged from the housemaid; for he had seen that the mosses were thick upon the gravestones. When he went in at the kirkyard gates he stood a while looking round upon the place and contrasting the semi-modern stones with the ancient table-topped ones set thick in that corner of the enclosure where the older graves clustered by the low boundary wall. The kirk was in ruins and stood, like a derelict among the masts of a harbour, in the midst of the upright stones; for the modern kirk which sheltered the devotions of Pitriven parish was some little way off.

Bob Davidson, considering the prospect and listening to the soft rush of water in the den below, took in the expression of the place with an interested eye. It was so near to humanity, yet so remote. The kitchen-garden wall flanked it on one side, but its air of desertion and finality set it miles away, in spirit, from living things. The afternoon was heavy and thick, like many another near the year's end. It was as though nature, wearied out, could struggle no more and was letting time run by without the effort to live.

He was not long in choosing a table-topped monument whose square mass had sunk from its proper level, and he set to with his scrubbing-brush upon the layer of moss which, to judge from a piece of mantling that stuck through its green woof, must hide some elaborate design. He foresaw a long task, for the growth was not of that spongy sort which can be ripped back like a carpet, but a close and detestable conglomeration of pincushion-like stuff that defied the power of bristles. He fell to with a blunt stick and worked on and on until his back ached, and he straightened himself, stretching his arms. His eyes were tired and he had bent forward so long that he was quite giddy. He sat down on the stone and looked round again.

The place had been closed for burials for about thirty years and there were no distressingly new monstrosities to spoil its quiet effect. Opposite, on the farther side of the kirk, the local dead of the last half-century were gathered together, herded in a flock according to their generations as they had been herded whilst living. Where Bob sat, the environment was historic, but yonder it was merely dull.

His eye lingered upon the most prominent of those gathered graves, or rather upon its appurtenances, for the headstone was invisible, being surrounded by a rusty iron railing made of chains that hung in a double row, festooned between the uprights. Inside the enclosure there stood up such a nest of Irish yews that nothing could be seen but their close blackness; some leaned on their neighbours, thrust sideways by the east-coast wind, but all were cheek by jowl, a conspiracy of heavy shadows in the dull light of the pulseless afternoon.

Bob disliked their look, suddenly, and for no reason; they were too much dilapidated to be imposing, and the stone which, presumably, they sheltered could not have the dignity of the one on which he was working, for the battered chains of the railing made a futile attempt at pomp that went ill with everything near it. Yet the atmosphere hanging about that enclosed place was not commonplace; it had some other and worse quality. A wave of repulsion, half spiritual, half physical, came over him, so that he was near to

shuddering and he turned to go on with his cleaning; at least the scrubbing-brush was prosaic and therefore comfortable.

While he worked he found that a small, fresh-faced, rather sly-looking old man with a rake over his shoulder was contemplating him from the other side of the low wall. He was smiling too, with a slightly interested and wholly curious smile that uncovered four teeth divided by enormous gaps.

"Guid wurk," said he, with the amused patronage that he might have given to a child at play.

"It's harder than you think," said Bob.

The old man clambered over the wall with deliberation, his heavy boots knocking against it, and stood by Bob. The brush had uncovered a coat of arms, several skulls and crossbones and a long Latin inscription.

"Yon's dandy," observed the new-comer, looking at him with approval, as though he were responsible for the whole.

"It's a pity they're so smothered up in moss," said Bob. "I've no doubt there are plenty better than this one."

But the other was more interested in Bob than in antiquities.

"Ye'll be a scholar?" he inquired, with the same suggestion of suppressed comedy.

"Well—no; but I like these things."

The old man laughed soundlessly.

"Graves doesna pleasure mony fowk owre muckle," said he.

"There's one over there that doesn't pleasure me very much," returned Bob, pointing to the huddled company of Irish yews.

His friend's eye followed the direction of his finger; then his smile widened and his eyebrows went up. He seemed to take a persistently but sardonically jocose view of everything in this world.

"Yon?" said he, wagging his head, "fegs, there's them that'll agree fine wi' ye there!"

"Why, what do you think of it?" asked Bob.

"Heuch! what wad a' be thinkin'?" exclaimed the other, putting his rake over his shoulder again; "a'm just thinkin' it's fell near time a' was awa' hame."

He moved away with a nod which conveyed to Bob that he still took him for a semi-comic character.

"But who's buried there?" cried the latter after him.

"Just a lassie!" called the old man as he went.

When he had disappeared Bob went over to the yews. He would have laughed at the idea of being nervous, but there was that in him which made him keep his eye steadily on the enclosure as he approached it. He found that it was not, as he imagined, quite surrounded by trees, for the foot of the grave was clear and from it he could see into the darkness to where the plain, square stone sat, as though in hiding, like the inmate of a cave. He stepped over the chains and stood above the "lassie" to read her name. There was no date, no text, not the baldest, barest record; only 'ANNIE CARGILL.'

The name lingered in his brain as he went home. It conveyed nothing, but he could not get it out of his head all that evening. The odd feeling that the surroundings of these two carved words had given him stamped them into his mind. Once or twice, as he sat after dinner with Sandy Lindsay and the red setter, he had almost opened his mouth to ask some question about them, but he did not do so. His godfather was the last man to whom he could speak of anything not perfectly obvious, and he guessed that he would not only think him a fool for the way in which he had spent his afternoon but call him one too. Bob always steered clear of conversational cross currents. It was one of the reasons that he was genuinely popular.

He did not go back to the kirkyard for several days, but when the next opportunity came he departed secretly, for Sandy Lindsay had gone to a sale of cattle and the coast was clear for him to do as he would. He had come to accept his godfather's disapproval of these excursions of his as certain—why he could not tell. Also, he hoped he should not meet the old man with the rake, for the subtle mixture of reticence and derisive patronage with which he had been treated did not promise much. He was beginning to be glad that he was leaving Pitriven in a few days, for he was a little tired of being out of real sympathy with anybody and he had not exchanged a word with a creature of his own age since he left Edinburgh.

"I am pleased that you have managed to get on well with Lindsay," his father had written. "He is an odd being and I can understand something of your surprise at our friendship. As a matter of fact, I have seen very little of him for a number of years, but your mother's people were under some obligation to him and she never forgot it, and since her death I have not let him quite slip out of my life. There were strange stories about him in his

youth, I believe, but they were none of my business, nor did I ever hear what they were. . . .”

His father’s want of curiosity was tiresome, Bob thought.

He hurried along, for he needed all the light he could get and he had started later than he intended. There were two stones close to the first one which he wanted to uncover and he stuck manfully to them till both were laid bare. He was interrupted by nobody, but when at last he took out his notebook to make a rough sketch of the complicated armorial bearings which made one of them a treasure, the light was beginning to fail. He scrawled and scribbled, then shut up the book with a sigh of relief. His fingers were chilly and he could hear the wheels of Lindsay’s dog-cart grinding up the avenue on the further side of the den. He would have one more look at Annie Cargill, and go. He had almost forgotten her sinister fascination as he worked.

As he approached across the grass a small bird skimmed swiftly out of a tree, as though to light in one of the Irish yews, but turned within a yard of its goal, with a violent flutter of wings, and flew almost into Bob’s face. Another step took him to the foot of the grave, and there he stepped back as though he had been struck.

A figure was sitting crouched in the very middle of the dank closeness inside the chains, and he knew that it was this that had made the bird change its course. He would have liked to do the same but he stood there petrified, his heart smiting against his ribs and a cold horror settling about him. He could not move for the swift dread that took him lest he should see the creature’s face; he could not make out whether the huddled shape was male or female, for the head was averted and it seemed to him in this desperate moment that, if it turned, his eyes would meet something so horrible that he could never get over it, never be the same again. He felt the drops break out under his hair as he stood, not daring to move for his insane fear of attracting attention.

The dusk was not far advanced, but between the closed-in walls of the yews the outline of the figure was indefinite, muffled in some wrapping drawn about its head and shoulders. It might be an old woman—he thought it was—it might be a mere huddled lump of clothes, though why they should be in that place was beyond his struggling wits to imagine. He tried to take his eyes from the thing—for it had no other name to him—and as he did so, the head turned as quietly and as independently of the rest of the body as the head of an owl turns when some intruder peers into the hollow in which it is

lodged. The young man saw a wisp of long hair and a mouth and chin; the upper part of the face was covered by the hood or cloak, or whatsoever garment was held close about the bodily part of the lurking presence between the yews. It *was* a woman.

The discovery of something tangible, something definite, brought back a little of his banished courage and gave power to his limbs. He walked away swiftly, his face set resolutely to the kirkyard gates, not looking behind. As he trod on a stick that cracked under his boot he nearly leaped into the air, but he went on, stiff and holding himself rigidly together. His notebook and scrubbing-brush lay on the table-topped stone; he had forgotten them, nor, had he remembered them, would he have gone back to fetch them for all the kingdoms of the world.

He hurried out of the kirkyard and through the door of the walled kitchen garden. His heart was beating and the sight of a gardener, a healthy-looking, upstanding young man who was coming out of a tool-shed, was of infinite comfort to him. Here was a human being, young and stirring like himself, a normal creature, and his presence brought him back into the everyday, reasonable world which had receded from him in the last few minutes. As they passed each other he stopped.

"I say," he began.

The other touched his cap.

"Look here," said Bob, rather breathlessly, "there's something so odd in the kirkyard—there!"

He threw out his arm towards the place where the gable of the ruin showed above the garden wall.

The gardener stared at him, astonished.

"What like is it?" he asked, setting down the basket he carried.

"It's—a person," said Bob.

Visions of accidents, poachers, trespassers, swept across the gardener's practical mind. He moved forward quickly, and a chill ran over Bob again at the thought of going back into the kirkyard. But the human personality beside him put a different aspect on everything and he was immediately ashamed of his childishness.

They went out of the garden together and made their way among the stones to Annie Cargill's grave. At the head they paused and Bob went

softly round the trees to the gap at its foot, the other following; and here he stopped in blank astonishment.

The place was empty.

He turned to the gardener, speechless, feeling like a fool.

"It's gone!" he exclaimed at last.

The other pushed back his cap and stood looking at him with a half smile.

"I suppose you think I'm mad," said Bob, throwing out his hands, "but I tell you it was there—not a minute ago—just before I met you!"

"But wha was it?" said the gardener.

"That's what I want to know!" cried Bob. "It was a woman—an old, old woman—I am certain it was a woman. It was there, sitting huddled up in front of the stone."

"There's no auld body comes in hereabouts that a can mind of."

"It looked mad—extraordinary," continued Bob, "not like anyone I've ever seen."

"Well, it's awa now, anyhow," said the gardener.

"But *who* was Annie Cargill?" burst out Bob. "There's something strange about this place—I know there is! An old man I met here told me so—but I knew it myself. He said other people besides me don't like the look of those trees and that chained-in place. He couldn't have been lying—why should he tell me that?"

His companion seemed as non-communicative as the man with the rake, but Bob felt that he would be put off no longer. It was too annoying; also he had a passionate desire to justify himself, to force some admission that he was not altogether childish in his excitement.

"Well, maybe a've heard tell o' things," said the other cautiously; "a'll not say that a havena'. But a've been here just twa year—it's fowk aulder nor me that ye should speir at."

"But *who* was Annie Cargill?" cried Bob again. "That's what I want to know! The old man said she was 'a lassie'."

"She was a lassie, and she wasna very weel used, they say. There was them that made owre muckle o' her, that set her up aboon her place. She was just a gipsy lassie."

"A gipsy?"

"Well, a dinna ken the rights o't, but they say she was left to dee her lane, some way aboot the loan yonder."

"And who left her to die?"

A look came over the gardener's face that made Bob think of the closing of a door.

"A canna just mind aboot that," he replied. "A ken nae mair nor what a'm telling ye. An' they buried her in here."

"Was she pretty?" asked Bob.

"Aye was she," said the other. "But she'll no be bonnie now," he added grimly. "She's been lyin' here owre lang."

"And the trees? Who planted the trees?"

"Well, they were plantit to hide the stane," said the gardener. "It's an ugly thing and ye can see it frae the windows o' the house."

"But they *don't* hide it," rejoined Bob; "you can see it quite well, even across the den."

"Aye, but there's twa trees wantin' at the fit o't. They were plantit, but the wind wadna let them stand. They got them in three times, they say, but the wind was aye owre muckle for them."

"There's no mark of them now."

"Na. They wadna stand, ye see, and the roots was howkit out. It's forty year syne that they did that."

"Well, it's an extraordinary place," said Bob, as they turned to go, "and it's a more extraordinary creature that I saw in there. Come outside and let us look if we can find any trace of her."

They walked through the wood, then ran down to the den, they searched about in the neighbouring byroad and in the fields. No one was to be seen and the gathering dusk soon sent the gardener to lock the garden doors. He was anxious to get back to his tea. Bob bade him good night and they parted.

When the dinner-bell brought Bob downstairs that evening, Lyall, the butler, was waiting for him in the hall. He was to dine alone, it seemed, for his godfather was not going to leave his room. He had got a chill at the cattle-fair, said the butler, for he had refused to take his greatcoat with him, although it had been put in the dog-cart. He had thrown it out angrily—so

Bob gathered—and the butler had been angry too. He was grim to-night and wore the tense and self-righteous face of one who is justified of his words. Bob ate in silence and then betook himself to the smoking-room with the setter and installed himself with a book.

It was ten o'clock when Lyall came in and asked him to go up to Lindsay's room; he had been having great trouble with his master, and, though from the old servant's customary manner Bob believed himself to hold a mean place in his estimation, it was evident that he wished for his support now.

"Hadn't you better send for the doctor?" he asked as they went out together.

The other snorted.

"A doctor?" he exclaimed. "I've done my best, but it's neither you nor me that can make him see a doctor! There's no doctor been in this house since *I* cam' to it, and that's twenty-five years syne."

Lindsay was lying in his solid fourposter with his angry eyes fixed on the door; he looked desperately ill and as Bob approached he sat up.

"What are you doing here?" he cried. "Who told you to come up?"

The butler went quietly out. He had no mind for another scene.

"I came to see how you were, sir," said Bob. "I am sorry you are not well."

"Now look here!" said Lindsay, "let me have none of your nonsense here. That damned old fool outside has been telling me I ought to send for a doctor. I'll have none of *that*! If you have come to say the same thing, out you go, and be quick about it too. I'll see no doctors, I tell you! I'm not going to have one near me. I hate the whole lot! A set of . . ."

His abuse was searching. He shouted so loudly that the dog below in the smoking-room began to bark.

"I'm not going to ask you to do anything," said Bob quietly, "only I wish you would lie down and get some sleep. I can sit here and if you want anything I can get it for you. Then you need not have Lyall up here to bother you."

Lindsay looked at him suspiciously but he seemed not ill-pleased. He lay down again and turned over with his back to the young man.

The shutters were not closed nor the blinds pulled down and Bob was afraid of rousing Lindsay by moving about, so he sat quite still till the breathing in the bed told him that his godfather was asleep. The hands of the clock ticking on the mantelpiece were hard on eleven when he rose and went downstairs, priding himself a little on the success of his methods. He had just time to find his place in his book when a violent bell-ringing woke the house.

He heard Lyall run upstairs and he sat still, waiting. In another moment the man was down again.

"You'll need to go back, sir," said he. "The Colonel wants ye."

Bob ran up.

"Why did you go?" cried Lindsay. "Stay here. You said you would stay! That damned fellow, Lyall, will drive me mad with his doctors. Don't let him in!"

Bob looked at the harsh face and white whiskers of the solitary, uncouth old man in the bed. He pitied him, not so much because he was ill, but because of his rough, forlorn detachment from the humanities.

"It's late, you know, sir," said he, "but I'll get my mattress and sleep on the floor. I will stay, certainly."

The idea seemed to quiet Lindsay and he fell asleep; now and then he tossed his heavy body from one side to another, but Bob made up his shakedown bed and got into it without interruption and was soon lost in the healthy slumber of youth. He was roused from it a short time later by something which was not a noise but which had made appeal to some suspended sense of his own. He sat up.

There was no moon, but the starless night had not the solidity of deep darkness. The unshuttered window gave him his bearings when he looked round wondering, as the sleeper in a strange bed so often wonders, where he could possibly be, though its grey square was almost blocked out by a figure before it. Lindsay had got out of bed and was standing, just as he stood when his godson first entered Pitriven, colossal and still, against the pane.

Bob struck a match quickly and Lindsay turned as the candle-flame rose up.

"Put it out!" he said fiercely. "I tell you, put it out! Do you want the whole parish to see in?"

“Come back,” begged Bob, “for heaven’s sake go back into your bed—why, you will perish with cold standing there.”

He was on his feet and half-way to the window.

“Do you hear me!” roared Lindsay. “Put out that damned candle!”

Bob obeyed and then went and laid his hand on Lindsay’s sleeve. Though the old man was not cold his teeth were chattering.

He shook him off.

“Look at that,” he said, pointing into the night outside.

“Go to bed, sir—please go to bed,” said Bob again.

“But look!” cried Lindsay, taking him by the shoulder.

The young man strained his eyes. The windows looked straight across the cleft of the den towards the spot where the kirk stood high upon the farther bank. The indication of a dark mass was just visible, like a pyramid thrusting into the sky, which Bob knew must be the crowded yews round Annie Cargill’s grave.

“Do you see the light?” asked Lindsay.

“Where?” said Bob, peering out, “I can’t see anything.”

“Are you blind, boy?” cried Lindsay—“it’s there by the foot of the trees, and *she’s* there too! She’s old now—old—old. Not like she was then!”

Bob turned colder. The young gardener’s words came back to him. “She’s no bonnie noo,” he had said, “she’s been lyin’ there owre lang.” It had seemed to him a grim speech, but its suggestion then had been of mere physical horror. His godfather’s words conveyed a spiritual one.

“By the trees,” he said. “Which trees?”

“Good God, can’t you see it, you young fool? There’s a little dim light—at the foot—in the gap.”

Bob was silent. He knew exactly which place Lindsay meant.

“It’s there!” cried the other again—“beside her—round her!”

He seemed to be terribly excited, and Bob, who felt the burning fever of the hand gripping his shoulder, longed to get him back between his sheets. He was quite certain that he was delirious.

“Yes, I see it now,” he said, lying, but hoping to quiet him, “perhaps it is a bit of glass or a shining stone.”

He knew how senseless his words were, but they were the first that came into his head.

"The stone's in there," said Lindsay, "in among the trees. But they won't hide it—they won't hide her!"

"I know," said Bob; "come, sir, you must rest."

"Rest? I can't rest. She knows that. She has known it for years. Ah, she's old now, you see, and bitter. Older—every year older——"

Bob tried to draw him away. To his surprise the other made no resistance. Lindsay lay down and he covered him carefully. He put on a coat that was hanging in the room and sat down by the bed; he wondered dismally if this miserable night would ever end. It was past one o'clock and he resolved that he would send for a doctor the moment the house was stirring. He dared not leave Lindsay and he dared not ring the bell for Lyall, lest he should upset him further. In about half an hour he rose and crept into his shakedown to sleep, for the old man was quiet.

All the rest of his days Bob wondered what would have happened if he had kept awake. How far might he have seen into the mysteries of those fringes of spiritual life that surround humanity, and how far listened to the echoes that come floating in broken notes from the hidden conflict of good and evil?

A faint light was breaking outside when consciousness came to him with the knowledge that he was half frozen. His limbs were aching from the way in which he had huddled himself together. A strong draught was sweeping into the room and when he lit the candle he found that the door was wide open. He leaped up and shut it, and then went softly to see whether Lindsay slept.

The bedclothes were thrown back and the bed was empty.

He dressed hurriedly and ran out into the passage. Lindsay's clothes, which had been lying on a chair at the foot of the fourposter, had disappeared with their owner. When he reached the hall the air blew strong against his face, for the front door stood wide and a chill wind that was rising with morning was heaving the boughs outside. No wonder that he had shivered on the floor. On the inner side of the smoking-room door the setter was whining and snuffling. He turned the handle and looked in, vainly hoping that he might find Lindsay, and the dog rushed out past him, through the house door and into the December morning, with his nose on the ground.

He watched him as he shot away towards the den of Pitriven, and followed, running.

A wooden gate led to the bridge that spanned the den, and here the setter paused, crying, till Bob came up with him. As the gate swung behind them the dog rushed on before, up the flight of steps that ascended to the kitchen garden.

Bob knew quite well where he and his dumb comrade were going, and his heart sank with each step that took them nearer to their goal. But he was a courageous youth, in spite of his spiritual misgivings, and it would have been impossible to him to leave anyone in the lurch. Nevertheless, he remembered, with instinctive thankfulness, that the outer door of the garden would be locked and that he must rouse the gardener in the bothy if he wished to get through it.

The bothy was built against the outer side of the wall, but one of its windows looked in over the beds and raspberry canes. He took a handful of earth and flung it against the pane. The window was thrown up and the face of the young man he had met that afternoon looked out, dim in the widening daylight.

"It's Colonel Lindsay!" shouted Bob, "he is ill—he is somewhere *there*! Come down quick for God's sake, and bring the key of the door, for we must find him!"

He pointed to the kirkyard, and as he did so he noticed that the dog had not followed him across the garden. He could hear him barking among the gravestones. As he waited for the gardener, Bob remembered, what he had forgotten before, that there was a short cut to the place through a thicket. The trail the setter followed must have turned off there.

The head above disappeared. The gardener was half dressed, for he was rising to go to his hothouse fires. He was inclined to think that Bob Davidson was wrong in the head, but he came down with the key in his hand.

They took the same way that they had taken in the afternoon, and passed through the kirkyard gate into a world of shadows and stones. The great black mass above Annie Cargill's head was a landmark in the indefinite greys.

The two young men approached and it seemed to them as though a swift movement ran through the yew trees, as though something they could not define stirred amongst them. They advanced, heartened each by the other's

presence, and paused where they had stood in the falling light of the winter evening. Sandy Lindsay was lying dead on Annie Cargill's grave.

A few minutes later they went to fetch a hurdle on which to carry him to the house. Neither was anxious to remain alone till the other returned, so they went side by side. Bob was asking himself, what was that light, invisible to his own eyes, which Lindsay had seen? God only knew; he could not tell.

The setter stayed behind, but not to watch by his master's body, after the traditional habit of dogs. He crouched by the gap made by the missing trees, staring into the gloom of the enclosure, his feet planted stiffly before him—snarling at something to which the two young men had been blind, but which was evidently plain to him.

‘JULY-MONTH’

Craigtonside, that smallest of small country towns lying among the Braes of Angus, is a pleasant place. There are three mills, but two of them grind meal and the third is a saw-mill; so the smoke that hangs over it and can be seen by the passengers on the fast trains rushing along Strathmore is but a clean, bluish veil that disperses, with evening, among the hills. To enter it from the north-east you come down a steep piece of road, and where the side path begins you will see on either hand the villas and villa gardens of the ‘residential quarter.’ Between these you will reach your goal of bank or post office as a visitor to a princely palace may reach his august host between lines of smug footmen.

But before you go down the hill, whilst you are still among the pasture fields, you pass a plain little stucco house which, though not more than a stone’s throw from the first lamp-post, is yet in the country. It has a certain shabby charm, and its garden, a jumble of flowers, vegetables and wall-fruit, is totally unlike the Wellingtonia-shadowed, Dorothy-Perkins-ridden enclosures farther on. This is Miss Blair’s house.

At the time of which I speak its owner was constantly to be seen in her garden, a tall, elderly woman with a strong face and anxious eyes. Most people’s eyes were anxious in those days and everyone who had a plot of ground cultivated it arduously, for all self-respecting Britons went short in that spring of 1917, and were likely to go shorter, in the way of food. It was a great grief to her that her body was not as strong as her face and that she had not been passed fit for hospital work overseas. She held a Red Cross certificate, no one was dependent on her, and she had been among the first to volunteer; but the medical authorities were inexorable. Finally she had gone out with a friend to do canteen work in France and now she was back again permanently, having done a year’s hard work before breaking down. She settled herself at home, taking any odd jobs she could get and doing part-time work in local institutions.

Miss Blair missed her gardener, both as a servant and as a friend. He was a young man who had joined up long ago and who sent her letters from time to time written from the trenches and billets of the Black Watch. She looked across the cabbages now at all that could be seen of his successor, which was the back of a pair of brown trousers whose owner was weeding. He was

a poor substitute for Willy Keith, whom she had known since he was a callant at school and whose soul dwelt in Angus, even as hers did.

She knew that she was lucky to have got hold of the wearer of the brown trousers; for men of under sixty were hard to come by, especially skilled men. This one had a fair knowledge of vegetable growing, which was all she wanted now, and, though he did not bestir himself overmuch, he was a highly respectable person into the bargain. He was a single man a little over fifty with the longest upper lip she had ever seen. This he kept shaved, reserving all his efforts for a short fringe of grizzled whisker that ran down the outside of his jaw from either ear to join below his chin, leaving a broad expanse of face within the semicircle. He had a perfectly impassive expression and a booming voice. His surname was Doig and his baptismal name Alexander, but the latter had been converted to that strange corruption, 'Elshender,' which is now dying out of Angus. Miss Blair worked among the vegetables too, as far as her strength would let her, and she found when they were on the same job that their acquaintance progressed little beyond a short exchange of the morning's public news. She cultivated that puzzled, perfunctory respect for him which people accord to those of whom they can only say that they have no outstanding fault to find with them. She told herself that she would feel more at home with Doig if she could, but once, see him drunk. Her cook, Isabella, informed her that he was "a very wise man." He lived in a small cottage just outside the garden.

Isabella, who with one other maidservant formed her household, was a simple country body, sandy-haired and entirely good-hearted, the only person whom Elshender Doig favoured with his conversation. When he brought in the vegetables in the morning, Miss Blair, sitting at her writing-table, could hear his booming voice below, unfolding, no doubt, that wisdom of which she had been told. She heard none of it herself, for if she happened to be in the kitchen at the time of his coming he would lay down his basket in silence and depart with scarcely an answer to any remark she might make.

It was Sunday morning and she stood with Isabella at the hearth. She did not visit the kitchen on that day as a rule, but some forgotten detail had brought her now. There was an air of swept-up-ness over everything. The sun was bright outside and the windows open; the range hummed under its breath, when, upon the Sabbatic quiet, the week-day sound of heavy, tramping boots could be heard approaching. Both looked up, surprised, for the vegetables had been brought in overnight. The figure of Elshender Doig, in his working-clothes, stood just inside the doorway, regarding them. Suppressed excitement suffused his wide face; his eyes looked between the

two women, into the range. Something in his appearance arrested their wits momentarily, till Isabella took in his brown trousers and a large piece of mud from his boots which was defiling her spotless flags.

"Losh keep's, Elshender!" she exclaimed, "div ye no ken this is the Sawbath?"

Doig withdrew his eyes from the range to her face and looking, as it were, through her forehead, he slowly raised one arm above his head and held it there, immovable.

"The waur's tae cease on the twenty-furst o' July-month!" he cried, suddenly and loudly.

His booming voice filled the place.

Astonishment made Miss Blair speechless. It might have made Isabella speechless too, but she had noticed a second piece of mud, bigger than the first.

"Dinna mairtyr my kitchen!" she cried, "tak' yer feet oot o' this!"

"The waur's tae cease on the twenty-first o' July-month!" he bawled again, more loudly.

It struck Miss Blair that her untimely wish was being fulfilled and that he was drunk.

"Do you think he is sober?" she whispered.

"Aw, he's a vera guid-livin' man," murmured Isabella, in a reproachful aside—"Tak' awa thae clarty feet o' yours—div ye no hear me cryin' fiech on ye?"

"Wumman, a've had a veesion," said Elshender, turning upon her and dropping his arm. "Last nicht, i' the veesions o' ma heid upon ma beid, a was inform'd o't. There's na use disputin' wi' me. A got word o't."

"But, Doig—how? What did you see?" cried Miss Blair.

"A was inform'd o't," he said again. "Thae things is a must'ry."

"I doot ye've just read aboot it i' the *People's Journal*," remarked Isabella, who was no reader, "the like o' thae papers has a' sort o' nonsense intill them. Oot ye go now, an' I'll get the besom tae my floor!"

"A tell ye——" began Doig.

“Come,” said Miss Blair, fearing a quarrel, “come along, Doig. I’ll write down what you’ve said on a slip of paper and lock it up. Then, if you are right, we shall have it corroborated and no one can contradict you.”

“Isabella’s a heathen—nae better than ane o’ thae blacks,” said he, as they went out.

It was the first time that he had ever addressed her willingly.

She wrote down Elshender Doig’s announcement carefully and put it away in her dispatch-box, and having done this abandoned herself to the laughter she had suppressed below stairs. She knew better than to venture near Isabella, who had removed all traces of the prophet’s entrance and was now angrily dressing herself for kirk.

Miss Blair went out into the early May sunshine. A skylark far above the surrounding pastures was sending his high-pitched, frantic jubilations down on a grieving world. The bells were ringing in Craigtonside and the shops were shut. Lilacs budded and primroses crowded together in clumps under the banks. There was an exaltation, a promise, thrilling through everything; and there, in the town, people wept surreptitiously in their pews or openly at home among what remained of their families. Mirth was as the crackling of thorns under the pot; to those who thought at all, the suggestion of joy to come which rings through the air, the glory of beauty that is revealed with the rising of the year, seemed only to mark the sullen fact that they had no longer the power to enjoy them; the light could only throw up the dark shadow lying on them all.

Next day Miss Blair went away. The Commandant of a Red Cross hospital in Perth had lost her Quartermaster and wired for her to come as stop-gap till she could find another; so she packed her suit-case and went, leaving Doig and Isabella to settle their differences and expecting to be back in a week. As she sat in the train she laughed again at the scene of yesterday. Oh, if Elshender’s words would but come true! But she had seen too many would-be prophets since the war began to do anything but laugh, and there were times when she was grateful to anything that could stir her sense of humour or take her mind from the overshadowing thought of all that she and her country had at stake. She had three nephews fighting and innumerable cousins and friends, to say nothing of Willy Keith. She looked forward to the steady work she was going to and to the companionship of other women whose responsibilities she might share.

It was a fortnight before her successor arrived and she was free to go home; and when she found herself once more in her own sitting-room,

preparing to gather up the domestic reins, there was a knock at the door and Isabella came in, looking mysterious.

"Please, mem," she began, "I wad like to speak to ye aboot Elshender."

"What about him? Is he going?"

"He's no just like himsel'——"

"Not another vision, surely?" broke in Miss Blair, the remembrance of that Sunday morning coming back to her. She had forgotten it in the stress of work.

"Aweel, it's no exac'ly that, but he's disjasket-like. I'm sure I dinna ken what tae dae wi' him. Ye see it was twa-three days after ye was awa' he cam' ben an' says he, 'Isabella,' says he, 'I've been mistaken. I tell't ye the waur was tae end the twenty-furst o' July-month, did I no? Isabella,' says he, 'it's no that. Aye, wumman,' he says, 'it's mair tremanjius news nor that. *It's me.*—I'm tae dee on the twenty-furst o' July-month.' "

Her voice trembled.

"Good gracious!" cried her mistress, "the man must be mad!"

"Na, na, he's no daft, but he's like tae be, sune, I'm thinkin'. He sits yonder i' the kitchen, and gin I speak a word tae him he tells me he's no lang for this world, an' gin I try tae pit sense intill him he tells me he'll hae nane argy bargyin' wi' him."

An exclamation of impatience broke from Miss Blair. She had seen so much of realities of late that she was inclined to think, if Elshender was right, that the sooner the twenty-first of July came round the better. But she refrained from saying this aloud to Isabella, who, kindly soul as she was when there were no dirty boots about, was almost in tears.

"What on earth can have put these ideas into his head?" she exclaimed; "really, what a nuisance the man is!"

"He is that. He comes in an' sits doon i' yon chair, glowerin' frae him. Whiles he winna say a word an' whiles he bids me whisht gin I speak till him."

"Is he there now?" asked Miss Blair, looking at the clock, which pointed to seven.

"He's bedded by noo. He aye gangs awa' airly."

“Well, I’ll see him to-morrow and we’ll consider what we can do. I think I ought to send for the doctor.”

“Likely he’ll no see him. He’s a thrawn body, whiles,” remarked Isabella.

“Indeed, I am sorry for you, Isabella, but don’t let it trouble you too much. He *shall* see him—I’ll arrange that,” said Miss Blair firmly.

Next day she went to the garden, to find no trace of Elshender but his coat which he had evidently just left beside a line of drills with a packet of peas for sowing laid upon it. Seeing this, she went off to confront him in the kitchen. Isabella was busy in the scullery and Doig, wearing, she thought, something of the expression of a sitting hen, was installed by the side of the hearth in an arm-chair.

“I have been looking for you in the garden,” she began; “I expected to find you sowing those dwarf peas.”

“A’m here,” said he.

“I see that,” she rejoined tartly, “but you should be getting on with your work. We are late enough as it is.”

“A’m best whaur a am,” said he, with finality.

For a moment she was nonplussed.

“But what is the meaning of this?” she inquired when her breath returned.

“Is’t the cause o’ it ye’re wantin’? Weel, a’m tae dee on the twenty-first o’ July-month.”

In spite of her impatience and her brisk beginning, she had come prepared to reason with him, to reassure him, if need be; after all, it is not an exhilarating thing to be convinced of fast-approaching death. If the man was in trouble, however mistaken, Miss Blair was the last woman to refuse any help she could give. But there was little suggestion of mental suffering about Doig; rather was there a shade of conscious importance, self-contained, yet assured. She thought again of the sitting hen.

“A was inform’d o’ it,” he went on. “Did Isabella no tell ye? I bid her speak o’t.”

“Aye, Elshender, I spoke,” remarked Isabella solemnly from the scullery.

“It’s a must’ry,” announced Doig, as though addressing a meeting.

“I am sure you are making a very foolish mistake,” said Miss Blair, “and I believe that if you went on with your work instead of wasting your time sitting still you would soon forget all about it. In any case I can’t have Isabella hindered like this. Now go back to the peas, like a sensible man.”

He did not move, but she stood looking at him with her resolute eyes.

He rose at last.

“A’ll gang to the peas,” he said oracularly, “but a assure ye it’ll no be to yer advantage.”

Without further ado she wrote a line to the doctor; though she could see no sign of derangement about Elshender’s appearance, she knew herself to be too little experienced to form a useful opinion and she was determined not to expose her cook to any danger that she did not foresee. Also she hoped that somebody of his own sex might be able to bring him to reason. It would be highly inconvenient to discharge him, as it might be ages before she could find another gardener, nor was she willing to loose him upon the public without being satisfied that he could be left safely at large.

That afternoon, having observed that he was in the garden, she bade Isabella lock the kitchen door lest he should make for his wonted place. When the doctor arrived she directed him to the pea-drill and left the rest to Providence.

“Well?” she said, as the young man returned.

“The gardener is as sane as I am; there is absolutely nothing wrong with his head. It is one of those amazing cases we occasionally come across when people take up a perfectly unreasonable idea. He seems to be a most unusually pig-headed person—an egoist, if ever I saw one—which makes him particularly hard to deal with. You need have no fear of him—I can assure you of that.”

“He does not look to me as if he were in distress.”

The doctor laughed.

“It’s all very well to laugh,” said she, “but what am I to do? I want to do right by him, but I can’t have my cook worried in this way, and if I get rid of him I may get no one in his place—just now, too, when one should grow all one can——”

“Well,” he said, rising, “you must decide as you think best; but if you can manage to put up with him till the date he has chosen, he’ll be all right, no doubt, when he finds himself on the usual side of Jordan, and settle

down. If he shows any real depression when we get near the middle of July, you can send for me again; and it might then be well to watch him in case he should think of proving himself right. But I don't think he'll be quite pig-headed enough for that," he added, smiling.

By the time it was June there was not much work being done among the vegetables, and though Miss Blair had prevented him from inflicting himself upon Isabella, Elshender had adapted himself quietly to circumstances. She did not like to turn him loose, although she was in agreement with the doctor's opinion; and in face of the difficulty of replacing him, she felt that the little he did do was better than nothing. While she was in sight he made a pretence of being busy, but as soon as her back was turned he vanished and it was some time before she could discover what had become of him. The bottom of her garden bordered upon the public road and, through its south wall, a door opened upon it. Just outside this was a bench that the municipality of Craigtonside had set there for the use of foot travellers to and from the town; for this road, with its magnificent view of the Sidlaws, was a favourite Sunday walk with the Craigtonside people. Here he had installed himself and would sit "glowerin' frae him," as Isabella had said, and proclaiming to such of his acquaintance as went by the peculiarity of his position. He had changed his seat and enlarged his audience—that was all.

When this had gone on for some time she spoke to the Free Kirk minister of whose congregation Doig was a member, in the hope of finding in him some influence to which Elshender might be accessible; and one day, in consequence, a black-coated man came up the brae and sat down beside him on the bench.

"I hear you are in trouble," the minister began, "so I have come to see if I can be of any use to you."

"A'm weel eneuch," replied Doig, "but a've had a revelation. A'm tae dee on the twenty-furst o' July-month."

"Yes, I had heard something of that," said the other.

A slow satisfaction crept into Elshender's face.

"I cannot help thinking you are mistaken, my friend. We can none of us tell when the Lord will see fit to take us."

"That's no the way wi' me," returned Elshender, with some hauteur. "A ken vera weel."

"But you look healthy and strong; I cannot believe you are right. You are not ill, are you?"

"Na, a'm at ma usual."

"Have you thought," said his companion slowly, "that there are men, younger and stronger than you are, who are facing death every day and doing their duty in this dreadful time up to the last? Can't you rouse yourself and do something, however long or short your life may be? Everyone is working now."

"An' what wad a dae?"

"Do your ordinary work, like a man, and don't add to other people's troubles. There's enough trouble as it is, I do assure you."

"A'm singularly placed," said Doig, "an' fowk should remember it."

The minister was a man of sensitive instincts, and, like Miss Blair, he had expected to be confronted with someone in need of the sympathy he was always ready to give; but he was a very human person and the man beside him was beginning to rouse his temper.

"I think you will come to regret what you are doing," he said, his voice changing a little; "you will wake up on the twenty-second of July and wish you had not played such a foolish part. I don't wish to speak harshly," he added, noticing Doig's stony expression.

"A'm no seekin' ony mair o' yer conversation," said Elshender.

"Then," said the minister, rising, "perhaps I had better go. If I have said anything I should not, I regret it. But I don't think I have."

He stood a few moments, blaming himself for his failure and for the irritation struggling inside him, while he punched holes in the ground with his stick. Then, seeing that Elshender was fixedly regarding the horizon, he said no more and turned, crestfallen, towards the town.

And so time went on until June was over, and one afternoon, in the first days of July, Elshender, still sitting on his bench, saw a very small woman come up the hill and recognised in her his sister-in-law, the widow of his brother George.

She was a wizened, active person with an eye like a crow and a love of bright colours that showed itself in the many-hued scarf round her neck. A white apron appeared under her cloth jacket and her boots were many sizes too large for her. She kept an unpretentious but very successful fish shop in Craigtonside. Doig fidgeted ever so slightly as she took her place beside him with a short greeting. He nodded distantly. He did not care for Mrs. George Doig.

“There’s fowk speirin’ aboot ye i’ the toon,” she remarked, looking sideways at him with her crow’s eye.

“Likely they wull. They’ll be a’ talkin’ aboot me. They’ll be sayin’ strange things—strange, curious things,” he replied.

“They did that. But, ye see, Elshender, I kent it was my duty tae speak for ye, an’ I wasna sweir tae dae ’t. ‘Ye mauna blame him,’ I says——”

“It’s no for them tae blame me,” he observed.

“Aye, but they did it. There was them that said ye was saft-like, an’ them that said it was the bottle that had maister’d ye, an’ there was a sma’ laddie i’ the causey cryin’ aifter me the noo, ‘Speir you at Elshender Doig, will he let me an’ wee Jimmy Anderson see a veesion, gin we come up the brae till’m?’ I just gie’d him a skelp, for he was rinnin’ ahint me. I dinna mind the like o’ thae weans, but I couldna thole the things fowk was sayin’ in my shop.—But dinna let that upset ye, Elshender.”

“Wha’s upset?” demanded Doig, in a muffled voice.

“The shoppie was fair burstin’ wi’ fowk yesterday—I’d got a lot o’ haddies in wi’ the four-forty train—an’ I was just lashin’ them oot tae this ane an’ that—fegs, I hadna time tae get a bittie paper to row them in—an’ I could hear some o’ thae jauds makin’ free wi’ their tongues—I kent brawly what it was. An’ forbye there was a man, ‘Dod,’ says he, ‘he sits up yonder on the brae like a gangin’ body that’s seekin’ tae ease his feet an’ mebbe ask a bawbee or a piece frae ony o’ the gentry gae’in’ by.’ ‘What’s that ye’re sayin’ there?’ says I. ‘Ye’d best no come this way wi’ yer havers for fear ye get a slap across the neb o’ ye wi’ ane o’ thae haddies——’ ”

“Haud yer gab, wumman!” cried Doig, who was looking as though he would choke.

“ ‘Think shame,’ says I, ‘think shame o’ yersel’s, ye leears! It’s no the bottle that’s brocht Doig tae the pass he’s come till, an’ tho’ whiles he looks daft eneuch, wi’ his een like the een o’ ane o’ thae fish intill my hand, he’s no dementit. The man’s dune—fairly dune, puir stock—weel he kens he canna last. He was aye an ailin’, whingein’ puir crater, an’ noo he’s past his work. He’s nae mair use, an’ he’s ta’en it tae he’rt——’ ”

Elshender had grown purple in the face. He rose, shaking.

“Dinna upset yersel’, Elshender——”

But his hand was on the garden door.

“A’ll hae mind o’ ye for this, ye thrawn mag!” he roared, as he disappeared through it.

Mrs. George Doig heard the key turn as she leaned down to fasten up the lace of one of her enormous boots. Then she also rose and turned her face to Craigtonside.

“I thocht I’d shift him,” she said to herself, with a demoniacal light in her crow’s eye.

“Isabella,” said Doig, a few minutes later, “a’m seekin’ in again. It’s no a genteel place, yon road.”

They were not quite three weeks from the fateful day and Miss Blair told her cook that, if she could endure Elshender’s presence till it came round, she herself had nothing to say against it.

“I see a change on him,” the kindly creature said, “but I dinna think it’s for ony hairm. He seems mair reasonable-like an’ he’s no anger’t when I gar him dicht his boots. I dinna ken what’s come owre him since he cam’ ben frae sittin’ at the roadside.”

“Let him stay, then,” said Miss Blair. She had just had a visit from Willy Keith’s mother who had brought a letter from her son with her. He wrote from a hospital abroad from which he was soon to be discharged unfit for further service. He had expected to lose his leg, he said, but the doctor had just told him that he could save it, though he would never be fit to march again. Would she go to his old place and ask whether he could be taken back, lame? Miss Blair felt that if Doig would continue to be “mair reasonable-like” for a little short of three weeks, she would see light.

At last the twenty-first of July dawned. She kept clear of the kitchen; it was long since she had had any chance of going there at all, for she needed every moment of her time to get through enough garden work to keep the place from becoming a wilderness. She left everything to Isabella, nowadays, and upon this culminating evening she advised her to sit up with Doig till midnight, if she could persuade him to stay where he was; adding that, after twelve had struck, he was never to enter the kitchen again. She went early to bed that night, tired out and hugging the thought that by the morning domestic life would be on a different footing.

All was peaceful as she sat at breakfast next day. When she had finished she sat down by the window expecting, as she had no news of Doig, to see his brown trousers among the peas and scarlet runners, but they were absent.

Isabella's tentative knock fell upon the door. She entered and stood beside her mistress with an extraordinary expression upon her placid face.

"Please, mem, it's aboot Elshender," she faltered.

For one horrifying moment Miss Blair's heart almost stopped.

"He's not dead?" she cried, gripping the writing-table.

"Na, na, but——"

"But what?"

"Weel, ye see, he changed his mind. He didna think he was tae dee—he was no just cairtain it was that. He was that quiet when I gie'd him his supper and he was speakin' aboot the awfaeness o' weemen. 'We've got a fearfae case o't in oor fam'ly,' he says. 'I dinna like weemen.' Then we sat doon tae the fire an' he didna say vera muckle, tho' I tried tae bring him into conversation tae pass the time. 'I'll bide till twelve,' says he, 'but I'll hae a bittie sleep first.' Aye, he sleepit soond, an', nearin' twelve, when the clock gie'd a wee scrape, the way it does when the twa hands is near the hour, he waukened. 'Isabella,' says he, 'I dinna think muckle o' weemen. But gin the Lord spares me anither fowr minutes, I'll ask ye in mairrage—I will that.' "

She paused.

"And when the hand cam' aff the chap o' twelve," she added, "he speired at me, wad I hae him?"

There was another pause.

"And are you *really* going to marry him?" ventured her companion, to whom, for some time past, Doig had become a kind of nightmare.

"I didna say I wadna," replied Isabella—"he's a vera guid-livin' man . . . ."

The wedding took place in August, in the dining-room of the stucco house. Isabella had no near relations, and Miss Blair was anxious that the excellent woman should start in a befitting manner on her married life; when she had seen her turned into Mrs. Elshender Doig, she retired to her sitting-room, leaving the bride to do the honours of the wedding breakfast which awaited the guests in the kitchen. Mrs. George Doig was not among them.

Doig had found a place in a nursery garden near Forfar, and when the shadows were growing long, the bridal party were gathered on Craigtonside

station platform round the door of the carriage containing himself and Isabella. Its open window framed the bridegroom's large face as he looked out upon his friends.

"Ye didna dee on the twenty-first o' July-month," observed one of them, "there was naething happened on that day."

"Man, it was waur nor deith—he proposed!" cried the wag of the party, amid roars of merriment.

"A didna," said Doig, "it was past twelve when a askit her in mairrage."

"Ony way, ye're safe noo," said the first.

"Aye, but a wasna mistaken," said Elshender's booming voice. "The twenty-first o' July-month's tae come yet. It'll be next year. But a'm safe, for a'm informed this time it'll be Isabella."

So saying, he drew up the window.

THE WATCH-TOWER

Finlayson the shepherd came slowly down the glen behind his flock. The sun of a late autumn day had long since disappeared, even from the topmost peaks, and the cold greenness of twilight was settling on Glen Esk; at his left hand the barren hill-sides were beginning to soften into fields lately shorn of their crop, for he was within a couple of miles of the glen's mouth. On his right the land ran down to the North Esk, which was narrowing itself for a rush between high rocks a little farther on; and, across the water, the hills rose again, a barrier between Angus and the west. He could hear the purring kiss of stream and pebble and see the clear, cold glimmer between the alder roots; to his professionally wayfaring mind the growing softness of outlook spoke comfortable words, prophetic of the valley and cultivation.

Though he had been afoot since early morning the distance he had covered was not great; for he had sacrificed a little time that the flock might straggle forward on the wayside turf instead of keeping directly to the road. He did not want to deliver them footsore to their new owner; for they were black-faced, mountain-bred sheep, and road travel was new to them.

As he went he thought pleasantly of his last night's lodging, for he had been well housed by the owner of one of the few hill-farms that lay in his way, and the sheep were penned in an empty yard. A seat at the kitchen hearth had been his portion and a share in the contents of the black, three-legged pot swinging over the blaze.

Like nearly all shepherds, he had a love of books and narrative, born of a solitary life and of hours when the mind, free of effort, longs for food. Books, in those days, were a rarity, reserved for the few; and though he could read well enough, Finlayson seldom had the chance of doing so. But the tongue was as mighty as the pen, in his time and in his walk of life, and his head was full, just now, of last night's fireside talk.

It had run principally on the sheep-stealer whose doings were agitating farmers, and who was even now hiding from the law in the upper fastnesses of Glen Esk. It was scarcely a couple of weeks since "Muckle Johnnie," as he was called, had contrived to escape from the prison in which he lay awaiting his execution; for in those early days of eighteen hundred, sheep-stealing was still a capital offence. Finlayson, listening to the details of his bid for life, had not known what to feel; for he was torn by a constitutional hankering for adventure and adventurers and the grim resentment natural to

a man of his calling. He now looked at the foolish crowd moving before him and his hand tightened on his crook; he loved all sheep, and, as in his mind he grappled with the thief, the radical savagery that lies in every man worth the name rose and made his breath come short.

Though he would so soon emerge from the glen, he could see no dwelling in front of him; but he cared little whether he spent the night under a roof or not, as the air was soft, despite the chill purity of the heavens. As the gold and silver of the birches and their stems began to lose colour in the dusk, he made his way down the slope towards the water, near which he saw one of those walled, circular folds that dot the more accessible parts of the Grampians.

The sheep, with their tacit acceptance of another animal's dominion, poured through the bracken as the dog, trotting now on one side, now on the other, kept them heading for the rude enclosure; and when the last straggler was chivied in and the gate shut, the young shepherd stood looking about with a view to his own shelter. Tay, the dog, turned up a lean face and brilliant eyes tentatively; his mind still lingered on duty, though, at the moment, he did not quite know where it lay.

"Come awa', min," said Finlayson.

The two mounted a knoll which rose a little farther on than the fold. This was the beginning of the steep rocks through the gorge of which the river ran for over a quarter of a mile. A dark mass that the shepherd could not define crowned its summit, and a few stunted trees made a black tracery against a patch of chrysophrase green which lay, like an inland lake, in a bar of smoky cloud.

On reaching the top of the rising ground he was surprised to find himself close to the unknown object, which, like most things seen in the half dark, had lost its perspective and seemed to have leaped suddenly from the distance to the foreground. He saw that this was a ruinous tower-shaped building between twenty and thirty feet high, ragged with clinging brier and clothed by a shock of ivy. There was enough light to show him the windows, which stared one towards each point of the compass; all were widened from their original size by the falling away of stones, and their respective aspects suggested that the tower was less a defensive erection than a vantage-point from which one watcher might command the whole of the glen. To Finlayson it promised very excellent shelter.

It was about an hour later when he looked over the wall at his flock and turned again towards the tower. The stars were out now, and the moon, a

night over her full, was sailing into mid-sky, leaving the eastern horizon blurred behind her. The entrance to the building faced towards the little sheepfold, and the young man reflected, as he stood just inside it and looked out on the country growing each moment plainer in the moonlight, that he could watch every movement of his creatures without leaving his shelter. He had cut a bundle of heather at the brae's foot and he threw it on the floor of the tower for a bed. The purr of the water below was, in itself, an invitation to sleep, and he gave Tay's head a slap, for the dog's uneasy sniffing annoyed him. He was weary and glad to stretch his long legs in peace.

But though his master slept, Tay's eyes never closed; and when at last his nose went down between his paws, they were still fixed upon a spot in the surrounding darkness; now and then a growl escaped him, choked in his throat for fear of Finlayson's hand.

It was almost ten o'clock when the shepherd turned and sat up. It had grown much colder and a touch of frost had crept into the air. His limbs were stiff, so, telling the dog to stay where he was, he went out to collect a few sticks for a fire. But for the running river, the night was as still as death, and the ripple of white wool in the fold below him was like a spot of foam moored in a backwater. He tore up the dry bracken and filled his arms with spoil from a tree, dead and fallen on the slope. Then he heaped it just below a yawning gap in the roof, and kneeling down, set the pile alight. As the spark caught the brittle stuff, man and dog stood illuminated as though by magnesium wire. The flare turned the walls from indefinite black to light brick-colour. Every stone and crevice sprang into importance, and Tay's teeth showed white as he remained standing like the wooden image of a dog, his whole being concentrated on a battered stairway which Finlayson now saw for the first time. The steps ran upwards from the farthest angle of darkness to a staging which had, apparently, been the floor of an upper room. It was now hardly more than a ledge, some six feet deep, which skirted the west side of the wall under one of the windows and supported a few pieces of broken masonry. Behind one of these, the firelight revealed to the young man the outline of a foot.

Tay's loud snarling filled the place and Finlayson, thrusting him back, began to climb the stair. A figure was standing among the heaped-up fragments of flooring—a figure ragged and unshorn. The bare ends of the steps jutted rudely into the glow, for their outer rail had fallen, and the shepherd saw how perilous a road they might be for one who should meet a resolute defender at the top. What suggested this to him was the attitude of the man above.

He paused, and his eyes met another pair—savage, watchful. All at once Finlayson drew back.

"Lord presairv's!" he exclaimed.

An expression ran over as much of the stranger's face as was uncovered by beard. It might have been a wave of relief.

"Nichol!" exclaimed Finlayson again; "gude sakes, Nichol!"

As he spoke there flashed on his brain the memory of a spring morning a couple of years back. He saw a lowland farm set on a slope and the wet road running down from it. Two men were walking side by side, himself and another; and that other stood above him now, haggard and menacing. At the foot of the hill they had parted and he had gone back to his work, heavy-spirited for the loss of the companion who had been his fellow-servant for months. The bothy was dull afterwards and he had soon changed the plough for the crook, drifting away, like Nichol, to find employment beyond the Grampians, farther north.

"Whisht, whisht, lad!" whispered the strange figure, coming a step downwards; "man, haud doon yer dog. Finlayson, there'll no be anither man wi' ye?"

As he spoke he stretched out his hand, and the young man could see, in the light that filled the tower, how emaciated he was. The arm, left bare in many places by the tattered shirt, was so thin that it surprised him. He remembered Nichol a heavy man, for all his uncommon activity.

"Na, na," replied he. "Come awa doon,—Nichol, doon the stair wi' ye tae the fire."

The sight of the stranger approaching his master sent Tay into a frenzy of barking, and it took the roughest side of Finlayson's hand and tongue to quiet him. By nature the shepherd was a merciful man, and the beast was his friend as well as servant, but he cuffed him remorselessly into peace, for he knew that the price of his noise might be a man's life. He guessed that Nichol and the sheep-stealer, the story of whose escape had held him spellbound last night, were the same.

He had always known him bearded, and, standing below in the light, he perceived that he was little changed, but for his emaciation and the restlessness of the hunted creature, which looked from his eyes.

The first burst of flame was dying down and Finlayson added nothing to the fuel; after a careful scrutiny of every approach to the tower, he sat down

to hear the history of Nichol's wanderings.

"Weel," he commented, as his friend's voice ceased, "ye'll dae best tae bide up yonder whaur a found ye; ye maun bide aff the road wi' the mune glowerin' on a'thing, the way she is the nicht. An' a'll gie ye the bit bannock that's in ma poke. A canna gie ye ma breeks, but ye'll get the plaid, an' gin ye tak' yon crook i' yer hand, there's nane'll speir but ye're the same's mysel', an' awa' south, seekin' work."

They sat still as the night went by, the younger man reviewing in his mind the desperate runs by night, the suspense, the hunger, the slow days in wet ditches, the scraps of food snatched in the dark hours from hill-side cots or begged in the dusk.

"Man, but it's an ill job," he said at last.

"It'll be a' that till a'm south o' Edinburgh," rejoined Nichol. "A'body kens me i' they glens, ye see, Finlayson."

The dregs of the short-lived embers were cool, and long silence fell upon the two. They sat side by side, their backs against the wall. Tay, finally satisfied of the stranger's happy relations with his master, had crept close, and slept; sighing, now and then, from the depths of his free lungs and untrammelled conscience. Nichol's elbows were on his knees and he leaned his head on his hands; there are times when there is no such effort as relaxation.

"Tak' a rest," said the shepherd; "the mune'll no be muckle doon or after twa o'clock. Ye needna be fear'd—a'll no sleep, mysel'. Tak' the plaid, an' a'll wauken ye syne it's time for ye tae be awa'."

He gathered it from where it lay and thrust it into his companion's hand.

"Ye micht gie a look round about, Finlayson," said Nichol, fingering the stuff; "a canna lie doon sae easy-like as yersel'."

The young man rose and went to the door. No movement, far or near, troubled the blank serenity of the moonlight. There was nothing within sight to suggest life. As the other drew the plaid over his rags the shepherd felt his way cautiously over the broken steps and stood on the floor above, leaning from the wide gap that had once been a window. Tay stirred below, but, with a mind now at rest, lay undisquieted by the sheep-stealer's feet.

Finlayson would have been glad enough to stretch himself alongside his friend; but in case he should fall incontinently asleep, he resolved to stay on his feet. When the moon should set over the high ground he would rouse

Nichol. From the yawning windows above he could see the whole countryside and could warn him of the approach of any human being. But for the fact that he was drowsy, he was content to watch. That was his profession, and great silences were the background of his working life. His education was small, his mind very simple; he had no consciousness of the possibilities crowding on those who, for days at a stretch, need never open their lips. The influences that may touch the solitary inhabitant of great spaces are outside the suspicions of the western man.

He had been some time at his post when he became aware of a dim figure, a mere moving spot of darkness, which approached the tower and which had come out from the trees, where the rocks overhung the river. It was coming cautiously, dodging among odd bits of bush and stone. He turned to go down the steps, but, in the one stride that it took to reach the top of them, Tay's voice burst on the stillness. He stopped, for two men, who must have advanced on the eastern side of the tower whilst he, intent on the third one, was watching from the western window, were standing in the doorway.

A curse dropped from one of them.

"Ye doited fule, it's a shepherd!" he exclaimed, giving his companion a shove with his shoulder that sent him barging into the wall.

Finlayson heard Nichol spring up.

With relief he remembered the inference that must be drawn from the presence of the dog and the crook lying near the plaided figure below. He crouched quickly down on the flooring, holding his breath.

"What's ado?" said Nichol's voice.

"Div ye no ken, an' you a shepherd?" said one of the intruders with a laugh. "Mind yer beasts, or ye'll ken owre sune! Yon lad they ca' Muckle Johnnie's awa' again—ye canna haud the like o' they folk but wi' the rope. The man that gets him's tae get fifty poond frae the croun'—but a'm feared it'll no be me."

"*Him!*" exclaimed Nichol—and Finlayson could hear no tremor in his voice—"ye'll need tae rin, then; a cam across frae Aberdeen way a puckle o' days syne, an' it's weel kent there that he's no far awa'. A' wouldna wonder gin he was ca' in' nets, a mile or twa oot tae sea."

At this moment the person whom the shepherd had seen from the window came into the tower. It was evident that the three man-hunters had

had some method in their approach. The new-comer stood on the threshold, as though to bar the way.

"Come ben," cried one of his companions; "we've ta'en naethin' waur nor a shepherd! Cry on the dog, man, or he'll hae us a' murder't!"

Nichol's voice rose in a string of abuse at the excited animal, but Tay cared nothing for him, and one of the men, whose eyes had grown accustomed to the dimness of the building, picked up the crook. Finlayson heard a heavy blow and a yelp; in a moment a wet nose was thrust against his hand. The sweat broke out on his forehead as he threw his arms round the collie's neck and dragged him down behind the stones and rubbish.

Nichol had always been a man of ready wits, but the listener overhead wondered afresh at them and at the boldness with which he turned his position to account. Two of the intruders sat down on the heather couch; their jests and gossip rose with sinister suggestion to the upper floor as time went by. Only the last comer remained silent, standing in the white patch that the moon had laid inside the doorway.

Suddenly he turned towards the dim group, holding out his pipe. "A'm needin' a licht, Jock," he said.

Finlayson had dragged himself near the edge, and, still smothering the dog's head against his breast, was peering through a chink.

The click of flint and steel followed, and, hard upon it, a violent flame—as bright, almost, as the flame of the bracken now lying in ashes. The man stood holding the frayed and lighted end of a piece of rope which protruded in a loop from his pocket, and he stepped forward and held the burning thing before Nichol's face.

Then came a shout, a scuffle of hands and feet against the wall, and the sheep-stealer struck his enemy to the ground. The light went out under the fall of a heavy body.

There was a moment of confusion, of groping hands, of inarticulate words; the darkness below the shepherd was alive with blind struggle and the hard-drawn breaths of those whose primitive instincts had risen above all others. It lasted scarcely a minute, but, to him, it seemed as though he were looking down into a pit of wolves. Tay burst from him and bounded down the steps, leaping and snapping indiscriminately. Before he could feel his way after him, Nichol had dashed past the man who was now gathering himself up from the ground, and his gaunt figure crossed the threshold into the moonlight and was gone.

By the time Finlayson reached the bottom the place was empty, but for the collie who darted back to him, whining and springing. He ran out on to the bareness of the hill-side. To follow was useless, for Nichol had doubled round the tower, making for the trees above the river. In their talk that night he had spoken of a crossing which he knew among the boulders, and his friend suspected that his goal must be that hidden spot. If his pursuers did not know of the place, and were to lose sight of their quarry, they might take some time in finding shallow water for wading, as the current ran deep and strong, boiling below the height on either side of it. The shepherd turned and climbed again to the window. By leaning out, he could see the whole loop of the Esk, as a man watches from the stand of a racecourse. He was in time to see Nichol disappear among the trunks. Two of the men were hard on his track; the third, still giddy from his fall upon the stony floor, staggered along far behind his comrades.

All had vanished out of sight, but Finlayson stood fixed at his post. His eyes, trained to long scrutiny of the crevices of the hills, scoured the ground across the river, for, on this side and on that, the scrub left the lips of the heights unclothed and the sailing moon was white on them.

All at once the figure of the sheep-stealer emerged from the trees and turned back up the bank towards the tower; he had, apparently, either been headed off or had overshot the exact spot which offered him escape; in his haste he did not see what was plain to Finlayson from his point of vantage—namely, that he was running straight towards the third man, who, finding himself left so far behind, had sat down on a piece of protruding stone among the bushes, and now rose stealthily, waiting, ready to spring, behind a tree-trunk.

Nichol dodged, as though he had caught sight of his enemy, and would have turned; but, behind him, the two others were gaining hard. Finlayson threw out his arms, raving and crying to him to make for the open country, but his shouts were unheard by either hunters or hunted; and he could not see that Nichol, worn with prison fare, hardship, and hunger, was beginning to flag.

The sheep-stealer dashed a second time into the shadow of the trees, his face to the Esk. The men closed in behind him. Between wood and water the rock jutted out, a rugged white promontory, with, beyond and below it, the river swirling nearly a hundred feet down. The shepherd saw him clear the fringe of wood and run out upon the bald triangle that cut into the dark mystery of ravine. The pursuers were pressing close, almost upon him. As

they reached the edge, the nearer to him of the two flung out his hand and grasped Nichol.

For a moment the sheep-stealer was checked; then Finlayson saw him spring forward—outward—dragging his captor's weight with him.

The cry that came back along the night seemed to the watcher in the tower as though it had risen from his own lips.

"He saved himself from the rope, at any rate," said the young shepherd to himself, as he stood below and felt his foot touch the plaid that his friend had dropped.

When he laid himself again by the wall he could not sleep; the place echoed in his ears with that cry. He rose and went down the hill to the little fold, and stretched himself there, thankful for the company of the foolish, untroubled sheep.

THE FIGUREHEAD

The brig *William and Joann* of Montrose lay beside the quay at the Old Shore. She had come in very early from the Baltic and was to sail again at the beginning of November for Galatz, and her crew looked forward, each man according to his taste, to such distractions as the east-coast seaport could offer. From the bridge and along the Old Shore to Ferry Street there were fifty-seven public-houses, and the little steep wynds running down from the Sea-Gate to the water that lapped the quay-side were loud with the roaring company that frequented them. Swedes, Norwegians, Danes and Scots and the tow-headed, loud-voiced girls who shared their lighter moments, made the place ring from dusk onwards; and the sedate part of the townsfolk in the reputable streets, so near the thievish corners of the disreputable ones, would hurry along with their mouths drawn down as the gales of song and oaths and laughter assailed their ears.

It was a well-built, rather solemn-looking town which stood on a narrow stretch of land between the Basin of Montrose and the North Sea. Smoke and blue mist and cloud would brood over its long line of roofs, and, soaring through the vapours, rose the slim beauty of the high steeple that reared its grace of flying buttress and weather-vaned summit to be a mark to its homing sons as they rolled in from the Baltic. It was a place of wide thoroughfares, and in the days when the *William and Joann* came in and out over the bar at varying intervals there was a deal of trade and herring-fishing, and wind-jammers of every kind would ride in past the lighthouse to lie up in the harbour. A lovable town and one towards which a native might look with a warming of the heart, as he saw, from far out, the steeple come up over the horizon. At least, so thought Tom Falconer, mate of the *William and Joann*.

Falconer had been at sea since he was a lad of fifteen, and now, after more than a dozen years of it, he knew he had made the right choice. Not that he was aware of having any great passion for it, or of formulating such a sentiment in his mind; he was only sure that he was more contented in a ship than in any other place. He was a quiet fellow, unaggressive and rather gently-spoken for the traditional mate. Sometimes he was called ‘soft’ by men who had never sailed with him before, but that word would drop out of their talk, never to reappear, by the time they were a day or two out and the crew had had time to settle down together. He was an excellent seaman too, and the unassuming reserve, a puzzle to his shipmates, which was always a

bar between himself and them till they had learned to take it for granted, did not make him unpopular. Skippers thought well of him, though perhaps they understood him less well than did the crews. In port he was usually as quiet as at sea, but not always. Hard-working men do not analyse one another much; they either do or do not accept one another, and that is all. He had a serious, tanned face and seafaring eyes—eyes, that is, whose focus appears to be on an exact level with the horizon, neither above nor below it; and preserving that level through every movement and every conversation. His short hair turned up crisply under the dark cloth of his peaked cap; his hands were brown and sinewy. The signs of strength that he carried about him seemed to be dormant behind his personality, like sleeping dogs behind a kennel door.

Books said little to Falconer, and most of his leisure was spent in placid smoking. The men would wonder what their quiet-mannered mate thought about as he looked over into the water or out across the general vastness, alone with his pipe. Some people—and he was one of them—see their thoughts in very definite pictures, and the images he sometimes saw mentally were odd chunks of his childhood, of days at the little school in one of the wynds at the Old Shore, or strange people that he could recollect in the moving kaleidoscope of a seaport; things that had fascinated him. He remembered one, a gaudy fan of stiff, papery white feathers, speckled and painted in garish green and scarlet, that his father had brought from the China Seas. It had been a wonder to him, a kind of signpost pointing to those outlandish, desirable places that he got reflected glimpses of from foreign shells and from careful paintings of sailing vessels by heathen hands which he had admired in the houses of his father's friends. He loved his town in a steady, unemotional way and still had a home in it; for though both his parents were dead long since, an ancient bachelor uncle who lived on that side of Montrose farthest from the harbour, had an empty room in his cottage that Tom was free to go and come to as he liked.

He stepped ashore one October day, his bundle in his hand and a very small box on his shoulder; but he laid both of these down on the cobble-stones of the quay and stood staring at the bows of the *William and Joann*. Then he picked up his baggage and went off to the town between the piles of lumber lying about the wharf. As he reached the point where the streets began he turned to look back again at the brig. He could just distinguish the form of her figurehead sharp and clear against the wide background of shining water.

This figurehead was a thing that fascinated Falconer. It might be said that, while he was on board the *William and Joann*, he was never wholly unconscious of it. It had come to represent certain ideas in his mind. Often, lying in his bunk on a starlight night, he would fancy the white creature he could not see, her still face half turned up to the glittering, pathless spaces, her fixed eyes set on her course, her hands drawn up, folded together and pointing forward, as those of a swimmer, under her lifted chin. He could see nothing as he lay there but the small, swinging oil-lamp and the crowding sides of the cabin, but she, outside, in the forefront of their enterprise, her calm, sightless eyes gazing ahead, was pressing forward, self-contained and alone, into the night, with her ship's company behind her. To-night he would sleep on shore, and should he awake in the dark hours he would remember that she was not near him. He was thinking of that as he went up Baltic Street and along the familiar ways to his uncle, old Geordie Falconer's house.

The old man lived in a long, harled cottage, an old-fashioned place in an old-fashioned neighbourhood; here, off the smaller streets running down from the North Port to the links, there were many of these half-countrified cottages left with open ground around them. Triangular 'hakes' hung on the walls with drying haddocks, and hardy flowers stood in bushes below the window-sills; pink and white rocket—relic of the fag-end of summer—and the purple and pink asters of autumn. Clothes flew bravely in the wind on washing days; currant and gooseberry bushes, like chapels of ease accommodating superfluous congregations of garments; in many places, little home-made wooden whirligigs stood up on poles varied by odd figures of marionettes waving their arms. Old Falconer had a drying-green of his own, a stretch of coarse grass enclosed in a paling, with a fair-sized sycamore, now faintly tinged with brown. His female neighbours said it was a waste for a single man to have such a thing, but Falconer, who was the owner of this tiny property, took their remarks, as he took everything else of the sort, with that look, peculiar to himself, of knowing something ridiculous about the person who spoke.

Tom and his uncle got on excellently. The latter had been a ship's chandler in a small way upon the Old Shore, but he had done well enough with his business to retire from it before age set in and had bought his house and its drying-green with a view—so gossip said—of taking a wife. But the gossips were wrong, though he did not contradict them and though he was secretly inclined to encourage the idea for joy of the fraudulent pleasure he got from their mystification; the ministrations of the woman who came in daily to clean his house and wash for him were his nearest approach to the

advantages of domesticity. He was wonderfully adroit in looking after himself, and, till rheumatism compelled him to walk with a stout stick in either hand, he had done his own cooking and marketing, the latter with all the sagacity of one who had spent years behind a counter. When the mate came home with his sailor's handiness, the two were very comfortable together.

The old man was standing looking at a retreating fish-cadger's cart when Tom reached his door, and the derisive expression that his conversation with the cadger had left on his face remained there like the afterglow of a sunset. When he turned round and saw his nephew it intensified, as though he would include him in the gibe he had arrived too late to hear. The mate knew that there had been a gibe, because old Falconer always opened his mouth wide after such an event. It was his manner of laughing, and though he kept perfectly silent and did not so much as shake, his upraised eyebrows and penetrating stare into the countenance of his victim were as expressive and sensational as if he had thrown up his arms and crowed. No formal greeting passed between the two and they entered the cottage together.

It was a soft, fresh day as they came out again on the following morning. The figurehead had not obtruded herself on the mate, for he slept like a child in his stationary bed and there were no waking moments in which to think whether she were near or far. He had dressed himself with care, for, after clearing the board at which they breakfasted and putting aside the crockery for the woman to wash, he meant to look up some friends in the town. As he would have gone out, his uncle called to him to wait and they emerged together into the sunshine.

Though, to a stranger, the pair might have represented two generations of seafaring men, old Falconer was a landsman and perhaps had caught something of his air from his former customers, for the square white beard below his lean face and the cut of his clothes would make most people suppose that he had 'followed the sea.' He might be said to have followed it from a safe distance, not only because he had lived by making his bread from the requirements of its followers, but because, in the dark ages of his youth, he had been a ship's boy for a couple of years. He was a slow walker and Tom found plenty of time to look about him as he went. There was hardly a breeze. The sky out over the sea lay in long lines, pearly and soft. The morning shadows on the stonework of walls and chimneys was pearly too. As they entered the streets and passed along the pavements the young man looked down the closes at glimpses of green vegetables, scarlet runners growing a little dusty and weary, and the thick wreaths of the white

bindweed that Angus people love to train about their doors. He thought that strangers coming casually to Montrose might never see the real town. You had but to dive down one of these closes to come out into a different Montrose. Behind the frontage of the old-fashioned streets was a whole world of little dwellings, one and two-storied, sitting snug in their tiny gardens, some ordered and set neatly, like small residential squares, some in rows and double rows, some solitary. The stairheads of their outside stairs, vantage-grounds for conversations with neighbours, would have pot-plants hanging through the railings as though to join hands with the geraniums and bushes of 'apple-ringie' by the low green palings, no higher than a man's knee, which divided plot from plot. There were houses with spiky sea-shells sitting decorously on the window-sills; older houses with circular stone staircases inside rounded towers built against the wall; houses with doorsteps washed pale blue. Tom always liked to see these things; it was some time since he had been home, and he strolled down one or two of these closes to look in, old Falconer waiting patiently for him outside, tolerant of his whims; for he, as well as Tom's shipmates, felt the necessity of accepting them as part of the man. But at one close's mouth his patience gave way and he pursued his road. He was getting bored and he turned the first corner he came to with alacrity, glancing behind him like an old dog-fox and hoping that his nephew would pass it and continue his loitering alone.

The mate had forgotten his existence. He was standing in the shadow of the close's mouth gazing up at the stairhead of a house. It was one of the newer ones and the green door above the flight had a brass knocker. A young woman was leaning her elbows on the railing at the top, very still, her hands under her chin, her head, as he saw it from below, silhouetted against the sky. Her arms were bare, firm and symmetrical under her rolled-up sleeves. Perhaps she had been washing and had come out for a moment's rest into the fresh air. She was a pale girl with regular, rather thick features, but the outline of her head had some nobility and the outward curve of her throat was beautiful. Her abundant, heavy hair was gathered into a loose knot, which, from her attitude and the forward position of her arms, almost rested upon her back. He was not very near her, in fact there was another stairhead between them, but she may have felt, as people will, that there were eyes upon her, for she raised herself and stood up straight and then turned and looked him in the face. He grew rather red. A smile was on her mouth, as though she hesitated whether to say something to him. He drew back quickly and was gone. She stretched herself, laughing, and went through the door behind her.

He found that old Falconer had disappeared, and so continued his way cursing, for the old man knew all about every living creature in that quarter of the town and could have told him the name of the family in the brass-knockered house. He would not ask him anything about the girl. These questions he would lay by to discover the answers for himself. He did not know why her appearance had produced such an effect on him, but he was filled with an intense wish to see her again. He had seen hundreds of better-looking girls about the town than this lass with the rolled-up sleeves and dull, light hair. He might just as well have spoken to her, for she had looked as if she expected it. Something that was not shyness—for he was not shy—had prevented it; something of diffidence. He debated whether he should go back and just call out to her, as most men would have done. He returned and went softly up the close but the stairhead was empty. What a fool he had been! When he had arrived at being interested in a woman he had never dawdled over preliminaries. He would set to and discover all about her as soon as possible. All at once he knew that what had attracted and what had restrained him were one and the same thing. Perhaps it was her attitude and its stillness, perhaps her sharpness of outline, placed as she was, above him, perhaps a certain colourlessness—but she reminded him of the figurehead of the *William and Joann*.

After their midday meal the two Falconers strolled out into the drying-green and sat down, each with his pipe, on the rough seat which the mate had knocked together under the sycamore. The old man had not commented on his own disappearance; he was one who neither asked nor gave explanations. His part in life was that of a passively interested and faintly malicious spectator; he wished no one any real harm, but he preferred his entertainers to be foolish because he got better value out of their antics. He suffered fools not only gladly, but delightedly. It was characteristic of him that, though he had wondered what was keeping Tom so long, he had not gone to find out; but this was because he knew perfectly well that it would be revealed to him. Everything was revealed to old Falconer sooner or later.

“Wha bides in yon house wi’ the brass chapper awa’ doon Bailie Craig’s close?” asked Tom.

The other removed his pipe and opened his mouth wide. He said nothing, but his eyes lit up like those of a child who sees a desirable toy in a shop-window.

“Ye’ll ken the place, Uncle Geordie?”

Falconer's mouth closed a little, but what it lost in height it gained in width.

"Birse's lassie," said he.

His eyes pierced the mate's self-consciousness like gimlets.

"And wha's Birse?" inquired Tom, as casually as he could.

"He's deid."

Uncle Geordie shook with silent mirth, but whether at the thought of Birse's death or of his own entire comprehension of Tom's mind, it is impossible to say.

"She's a widdie," he added. "Yon hizzy's her eldest."

The mate had something of his uncle in him, so he knew that pretences were superfluous. Also he did not care. He had shown a little embarrassment, but that was because he was surprised, not because he minded. Uncle Geordie would be put off by no pretence that he had not seen Mrs. Birse's "eldest." He was not quite pleased with the word "hizzy," but he had sense to conceal that.

It did not take him long to make further discoveries, though not from his uncle. The old man vouchsafed no more, perhaps expecting to be questioned. But the mate, having found out the name he wanted, preferred to push his way into the girl's acquaintance without providing more amusement for him than he could help. He soon learned that the widowed Mrs. Birse made her living by taking in sewing and that she had two other children besides the eldest, Malvina, who worked daily as assistant to Miss Wiseman of the greengrocer's shop in the New Wynd.

Next day the shops closed early. Before ten struck from the steeple he was standing outside, gazing in cautiously between the early chrysanthemums, cabbages and spinach which formed the foreground of Miss Wiseman's window. Through these he could see Malvina Birse sitting in the corner behind the counter. It was too soon yet for much custom, he supposed; anyhow, the moment was fortunate. He opened the door boldly.

She recognised him immediately, but it took her a moment to decide whether she would receive him with smiles or with disdain. She was not astonished, for at the moment he appeared she was speculating about him. She decided for coldness.

"What can I do for you?" she inquired in her best genteel accent.

Her outward composure brought the figurehead to his mind again. Her clear, dead-white skin, her heavy hair and the pale pink of her full lips all looked paler against the background of greenstuff and ruddy fruit.

"What can I do for you?" she asked again.

"Maybe ye'd come out wi' me," he replied.

She eyed him curiously, adding him up, as it were. The situation was not new to her, though it had never presented itself quite in this way.

"I dinna ken yer name."

"Falconer."

"But I'm not acquaint wi' ye. Ye'll be a fisher-fella?" she added, tossing her head.

"Na, I'm no that. But I bide intill a ship. I'm frae the *William an' Joann*."

"Ye'll no be the captain, I'se warrant!"

"I'm the mate," said he.

She eyed him with more interest. She had not really supposed he was a "fisher-fella." A mate is somebody.

"I'll think o't," she said.

"Dinna think owre lang, then. I'll be at the heid o' the Kirk Walk three o'clock the day."

He looked at his watch. She did too, and saw it was a good one.

"Ye'll no suffer frae want o' impidence!" she exclaimed. But she giggled as she said it.

He left the shop, well pleased.

That afternoon he turned into the Kirk Walk from Baltic Street. The minute hand of the steeple clock neared the hour and he strolled up towards the Town Hall. He did not know from which direction she would come, and he had almost reached the top when round the corner came a knot of three girls, arm-in-arm, laughing shrilly and looking back over their shoulders. He knew that the benches on the Town Hall pavement were generally full of idlers, and he smiled at the well-known elements of the scene. One of the girls detached herself and came towards him. The others turned back, tittering.

Malvina Birse's eyes sparkled as they met. She carried herself well and the mate felt a pleased thrill as he looked at her. Certainly she was a fine-looking creature and the poise of her head was magnificent. There was no cinema to take a girl to in those days. Tea-shops were unknown; a walk was the only form of entertainment to be had. By tacit consent they turned towards the links and sauntered towards the sandhills covered with bent-grass that bordered the shore. There was not a sail on the sea but the brown patches of canvas of a few herring-smacks some way out. They roamed about for an hour or so and finally sat down on a hillock. They had not talked intimately enough to find out much about each other, but Malvina had taken in enough about the man beside her to find that he was unlike most of the men she knew. She had a hazy idea that he was creditable to her as a companion. He said things that she did not understand, but she was little impressed by that, though she realised a certain simplicity in him and disliked it. There were many things she wished to know about him, but it seemed that they were not those about which he was willing to tell. She was completely uninterested in the seafaring part of him, for, unlike most of her neighbours in the town, she had no connection with salt water. He had at his command none of the boisterous chaff to which she was accustomed in her admirers. He lay on the hillock looking up at her and thinking of the figurehead. So far, he had paid her no court.

"I was fair amazed when I saw ye come ben the shop the day," she began, hoping to get nearer to the personal note. "My! but ye hae a cheek! Was ye no feared I'd be affronted?"

He shook his head.

"I'se warrant ye it's no the first time ye've done that."

"Aweel," said he, "it is."

"Haud yer tongue!" exclaimed Malvina, giving him a smart tap on the arm.

"It's the truth."

"Maybe ye'll tell me ye're no carin' for the lassies?"

"I wadna tell ye that. I'd be leein'."

She did not know how to take this. There was no challenge in his words. She glanced down at the figure lying at her feet with the peculiar passivity of the seaman ashore. He was smoking and his teeth were closed upon his pipe. The tide was coming in; his crisp hair was just stirred by the breeze blowing faintly from the encroaching waves.

All at once she was exasperated. She snatched up his peaked cap that lay beside him and flung it out towards the water. He rose as easily and lightly as an animal and bounded down the sandhill after it. Malvina jumped up too and fled back over the bents. He came up with her, the cap on his head. His colour had risen. He threw his arm round her waist.

"Ye're due me ane for that," he said, and kissed her.

They went back to the town, a barrier broken down between them by the touch of his lips on hers, and he left her at the foot of Mrs. Birse's outside stair. In Bailie Craig's Close he had kissed her again and she had promised to meet him again on the morrow.

Their acquaintance ripened; it seemed that the figurehead faded from Tom Falconer's thoughts in proportion as his relations with Malvina grew more ordinary and familiar. He had admitted to himself that he was in love with her, though he had not admitted it to her; but he did not think of marriage as the consequence, and he was kept from thinking of anything less regular by the figurehead—or rather, by something which the figurehead had represented to his mind. Malvina had been sought out by him because of that likeness whose reality was growing fainter, though it thrust itself like a spectre between him and any deed of his that could detract from her.

The girl herself was falling in love too in her own fashion. He was still a puzzle to her with his lack of pretence, which she despised, his absolute self-possession, which she resentfully respected, and his personality, which continued to attract her. She felt a suspicion of her own inferiority, and this led her to assume a veneer of pert disdain to hide the ruffling of her vanity. But she was impressed, completely, and her mother was impressed too. She had brought him home to tea on the Sunday after their walk to the shore, and this visit had been the first of many, for a light had broken in on Mrs. Birse. To Malvina, he was the mate of the *William and Joann*, a young man difficult to understand but puzzlingly attractive; to her mother he was Geordie Falconer's nephew. She had almost embraced her daughter when she discovered whom she was entertaining unawares. As a Montrose woman she knew the old man by sight, for rumour had made him rich and settled that the person who was to profit by his good fortune and inherit the house with the drying-green was that vague shadow that haunts so many speculations about inheritances, 'a nephew.' And now the shadow had taken substance as Malvina's admirer. Malvina, looking through Mrs. Birse's eyes, began to see herself as mistress of a house larger than her mother's, with a husband who, though not a captain, was on his way to becoming one. A captain's lady! With her gaze on this vision, she must respect herself

accordingly. She was protected by her own ambition as well as by that influence unknown to her, the figurehead.

Inch by inch Tom was stepping into the net of domesticity spread in his sight. He would rather have enjoyed all of Malvina's company out-of-doors, but she would insist upon his coming to fetch her when her work was over, not to the shop, but to her home, and Mrs. Birse seldom let him go without an invitation to supper. Sometimes he would refuse, only to be persuaded by Malvina in the end. He did not care for the evenings spent under the patronage of the square, stout woman. Mrs. Birse showed her gums when she talked, and her bodice, tight across a solid bust, was stuck with pins, signs of her vocation.

The weather had broken; storms of rain and gales swept Montrose and retarded the 'tattie-lifting' which, though the Fast Day was some little time past, was still in full swing. Outside the town the roads were lively with wheels. Long brakes, carrying men and women whom the farmers had hired for the lifting, were going to and fro and families were abroad on the same errand; for the humbler townsfolk would buy a couple of drills as they stood in the field and would join with friends and neighbours in the business of getting the potatoes home. Sometimes they would band together and go out in small parties, and the girls of a family were expected by their parents to get a day's work out of their young men when the time came round.

Malvina had done her share. Tom had willingly promised to lend a hand, and besides this she had contrived to get the loan of Miss Wiseman's cart and driver as soon as her employer could spare it. Falconer looked forward to the expedition, for he was becoming tired of sitting in the house with Malvina, and when he could persuade her to come out between the onslaughts of the wet she was generally cross. They had gone near to several small quarrels. In the parlour there was little to say, and outside it her goal was always the shops and her talk of them and of the private affairs of the people who passed. He would not tell himself how the latter wearied him nor how much the former lightened his purse. The sea had not the remotest interest for her, and he, who would so joyfully have shared the pictures and scenes of his travels with the right woman, knew better than to make the attempt. Once there had been a wreck, and he had left her and gone down to where the lifeboat was being launched. She had been furious at this, and because he would not promise to take himself out of the way, should there be a call for extra hands. He had not gone near her for two days after this, yet he had come back on the third.

During all this time Geordie Falconer had kept his own counsel, and while he was perfectly aware of what was going on, both from his own observations and from those of other people, he had not said a word to the mate. No one knew what he thought about the matter. Mrs. Birse, for one, would have given a good deal to know and had made many attempts on his acquaintance; but though she had invited him over and over again to accompany Tom when he came to spend an evening, she had not yet succeeded in getting him to the house. It was all the more surprising that, when she suggested he should come to the supper by which she meant to celebrate their return from tattie-lifting, he accepted the invitation.

Tom had given it rather sheepishly as they sat together with their pipes one afternoon. Falconer was deep in a newspaper column on Arctic discovery, his face hidden by the printed sheet, and the mate brought out his words with a certain constraint.

"Aye, Tam. Ye can tell Mistress Birse I'd like it fine."

The young man looked with puzzled earnestness at the all-concealing expanse of *The People's Journal*, and while he was doing so it was suddenly dropped.

He was a little disconcerted.

"Oh, what a lives an' money's been wastit seekin' for they poles," observed Uncle Geordie, with fervent gravity, "an' likely though they were tae find them they wadna ken them when they saw them!"

The paper went up again immediately, leaving Tom's dignity intact; but this was because he could not see what was going on on the other side of it.

The party which set out next day to lift the potatoes were the three young Birses, their mother and Tom. They were to walk back in the evening, for the cart would be loaded and there would be no choice for them but their feet. It was a light, open, four-wheeled cart, only just heavy enough for their purpose; and while the little boy and the younger of his two sisters squeezed themselves together on the plank beside the driver, Tom and Malvina had to be contented to share with Mrs. Birse that part of it usually occupied by the vegetables in their transit to and from Miss Wiseman's shop. Straw had been laid in the bottom of it to make it more comfortable. Mrs. Birse's jokes about her own part as gooseberry had begun to pall upon the mate by the time they arrived at their destination, and he was glad when he found himself at work in the field side by side with Malvina, while the rest of her family were busy at the other drill.

They had piled a good heap of potatoes, Tom working with the fork and Malvina following with the basket, when the girl paused, pushing back the hair that had fallen over her hot face.

"I didna do sae badly, gettin' the loan o' yon machine frae the auld witch," she remarked, as her eyes roved to the cart standing at the head-rig of the field. "I'd a sair job, I can tell ye. She said she was need'n't to gang oot an' see her sister that's ill at Marykirk."

Tom paused too. "It was richt guid o' her," said he.

"Heuch! I just tellt her I'd a freend comin' tae help's that couldna come ony other time—that's you, ye ken. Yon auld fule believes onything!"

"Ye needna hae done that. A' days wad hae suited me."

"Fie! wha's carin' for the likes o' her?"

The mate was vexed. He bent down again to his work in silence. His shirt-sleeves were rolled above his elbows and the ship tattooed on his forearm showed blue against his skin. She came nearer to look at it. He worked on without heeding her.

"What ails ye?" she said sharply.

"Naething."

"That's a lee," said Malvina, gazing angrily at his averted head.

He raised himself and faced her. There was something in her that jarred, and a wave of rebellion against it surged up in him, drowning all else.

"It's no you that should speak o' lees," he said steadily.

Her eyes seemed to grow smaller and her lips were set in a thick, hard line.

"Maybe ye think a'body's sinners but yersel'!"

He had never seen her in a real rage before. She was shaking.

"Gowk that ye are!" she cried, as he made no reply.

Some women look well when they are angry, but she was not one of these; there was an underlying meanness in her face and it repelled him, though he scarcely knew what it was. All the same, he was sorry to have spoken so bluntly. He would have told her so had not a dumb misgiving dropped down and lain like a suffocating weight on him. She left him and went off to where the others were working. In a few minutes her sister came

over to him and, taking Malvina's place, began to shake the potatoes from the shaws as he forked them up. She chattered away and he answered absently now and again, sticking with dogged industry to his task. At midday they ate the food they had brought with them; Malvina sat near her mother, whilst her young brother, delighted by such an opportunity, devoted himself to the mate, whom he admired, but of whom he had seen little at home, being still young enough to go to bed early and to be hurried there even earlier than usual when there was company.

Malvina said nothing to her mother of what had passed, though Mrs. Birse was aware of something wrong. She was not a discreet woman, but she had learned from experience that it was impossible to coax her daughter to do anything that she did not want to do, so she asked no questions. The day wore on till dark set in and the loaded cart emerged upon the road and, followed by them, began its homeward way. All were physically weary, except Tom, and he was weary at heart. Malvina made no effort, as she would have done at another time, to separate herself and him from the others, and all trudged on in a group. The little boy, who was very tired, tried to hang on to her arm, but she shook him off, and Tom would have set him on his shoulder but that, by so doing, he would have lost any chance he had of being alone with her. He was blaming himself for his rough words.

It was a still evening and sound carried far. Stars were coming out and the long fields that border the Montrose road lay quiet and dim. A few peewits cried from beyond the stone dykes. About half-way to the town they heard a jingling coming up behind them and the slow trotting of hoofs mixed with noisy voices. Soon the brake with returning tattie-lifters went past them in the dusk, filled with shadowy figures, some with shawls on their heads, in two long rows behind the plodding horses. Men and women cried boisterous good nights and were swallowed in the gathering darkness ahead. Then the long-drawn notes of 'Annie Laurie' floated back to them as the tattie-lifters broke into singing. They were too far off for the words to be distinguishable, but the voices, strident, some of them, were mellowed by distance and came with an appealing cadence through the evening. As they died away, the mate thrust his arm through Malvina's and drew her back behind the others. She resisted for a moment, but finally give in and they followed their companions more slowly.

By the time the whole party reached home it was almost as if there had been no disturbance of their harmony. Though it had ended in reconciliation, the outing had not been much of a success from Tom's point of view, and that unformulated misgiving lurked in his heart yet. But Malvina, sitting

next him at the supper-table, her cheek flushed with the long day's exertion in the air and her eyes shining under her thick brows, seemed very alluring. She was a woman of fine gestures in spite of her hoydenishnesses, and she had changed the rough clothes she had worn all day and tied a blue snood round her heavy hair. She stood out in the crowded little room like a symbol of something freer and wider than the tame daily round suggested by its commonplace appurtenances. He thought again of the figurehead.

Uncle Geordie sat at the board steeped in his usual philosophic content. Mrs. Birse's assiduous hospitality was bringing to his face an expression which she interpreted in a very favourable manner; and certainly she was not wrong in thinking that he was enjoying himself. When the meal was over and her two younger children were sent into the scullery to wash up the tea-things, the mate and Malvina went out to the stairhead.

"We ha'na seen the new moon yet," Mrs. Birse remarked, by way of legalizing the retreat of the two.

"An' if she's no better nor the auld ane we needna mind though we never see her," replied Uncle Geordie.

"Draw in-by tae the fire, Mr. Falconer," said Mrs. Birse. "Guid folk's scarce, ye ken."

"They'll be scarcer sune. A doot it's near time a was awa."

His mouth widened. He was one of the many old men in Scotland who always allude to death as a joke.

"Think shame o' yersel', speakin' that way, Mr. Falconer!"

"O weel, ye see, we've got tae think o' thae things."

"Fie, there's time yet, wi' you."

"Mebbe, mebbe, but a'm no like them that leaves a'thing tae chance. A've been a business body a' ma life. Aye, ye'd wonder, Mistress Birse, tae see the money a've haun'lt i' ma time—aye, aye——"

He looked into the grate as though losing himself in a reverie of gold and merchandise. "Aye, times—times—" he said again.

Her eyes stared like glass marbles.

"I mind ye had a business doon aboot the Auld Shore," she began.

"Ye should hae seen the folk that cam in-by yonder," he continued, "a' sorts an' kinds—lads that couldna speak a word o' Christianity——"

“Aw, terrible swearers, nae doot!” she exclaimed, wagging her head.

“Na, na. Black craturs aff the Indian Ocean that when they saw the sun gang doon wad be oot-by turnin’ tapsalterie wi’ their heids amangst the stanes an’ their doups in folks’ faces; an’ lads frae the tea-clippers an’ Baltic men. They cam’ a’ ben tae me. Skippers an’ mates an’ powerfu’ traders. The shoppie lookit sma’ eneuch, but it wasna i’ the shoppie ye saw the things a dealt wi’—muckle profits, grand days——”

He broke off. She felt unable to speak. Few people were aware of the luxuriance of old Falconer’s imagination; it was a thing he kept so closely to himself.

“It’ll be a sad thocht to think o’ leavin’ it a’ to strangers,” she hazarded, at last, trembling to feel she was at the very heart of the great subject of his legacies.

“A’ve been guidit. Providence has lairned me that a can be awa’ contentit when the time comes, an’ ken a’s for the best. Ye see there’s Tam ——”

She was almost choking.

“Aye, Tam’s a guid lad. ‘Uncle Geordie,’ says he tae me when a spoke aboot ma hoose an’ a’ ma savin’s, ‘a ken what yer intentions is. Ye hae aye been a kind uncle tae me,’ says he, ‘but the sea’s a’ a care for. There’s mony,’ says he, ‘that has mair use for the money nor a chap like me. Let them hae it that needs it.’ ”

“There’s no sic a thing as gratitude i’ this warld!” almost shouted Mrs. Birse.

“Aye, but a respec’it the lad! Mistress Birse, a couldna but admir’t. ‘*Hae yer wull*,’ says I. And noo the hoose an’ the bittie green, an’ a’ that’s sittin’ i’ the bank’s tae gang tae Dorward’s Hoose o’ Refuge. A’s for the best, ye see.”

He smiled widely. To Mrs. Birse it was the smile of misplaced righteousness, the smile of a fool. She little knew that her own face was its sole cause.

The old man went home that night in high good humour. No notion of liberating Tom from the toils he was in had prompted his highly coloured disclosures; he had only acted as a small boy acts when he throws a stone into a pool to hear the splash and to see the widening circles in the water. If the mate wished to marry Malvina he did not desire to prevent him, for he

had no further animosity against her than was expressed in the word "hizzy" which he had used. No doubt she *was* a hizzy, but many women were that. It was Tom's affair.

October was three parts through and November would see Tom afloat again. He was moderately happy; that is, as happy as a man can be who does not quite know what he wants. He saw that he must either lose Malvina altogether or pledge himself to her for good. Often it had been on his lips to do this; on the night of the tattie-picking, his feelings stirred by their quarrel and reconciliation, he had all but spoken, and yet he had refrained. He would not allow himself to believe that he was gradually becoming disillusioned. The things that offended him were often trifles, but the worst of it was that there were so many of them. But he disliked Mrs. Birse and had drifted into putting down her daughter's every fault to her influence.

But the real victim of disillusion was Mrs. Birse; and in the first heat of her feelings she had forbidden Malvina to have anything more to do with the mate. There was an angry scene between the two women which made the girl more resolved than ever to see as much of him as she could. Though the vision of old Falconer's house and money was gone, Tom was still a man to be considered; the potential captain of a ship; and at least she meant to get all the advantages and the excitement of his attentions whether she threw him over or not. She was quite determined that he should propose to her before he went to sea again, and this made her strain every nerve to please him. Also, because with human beings the value of a thing goes up in proportion to what they have to pay for it, the fact that Malvina had a good deal to endure from her mother on the mate's account was making her fonder of him. It seemed to him, as the days went on, that she was growing softer, and that, after all, she really was the woman for him.

It was Sunday—two days before the *William and Joann* was to sail—and they were still unengaged. But his mind was made up and he would speak. He had no doubt about the answer he would get or that this would be his last voyage of freedom. She was good looking and he believed that she loved him, and he knew that he was looked upon by their acquaintances as an accepted lover. He might do worse. The evenings were drawing in now and the sun set at half-past four. To-morrow he would be busy the whole day, for they would go out early on Tuesday with the tide. In an expansive moment and with the prospect of the parting before her, Malvina had said that she would like to see the brig. He had proposed this many times, but she had always put him off on one pretext or another, and at last, rather chagrined, he had given up the idea. She would not be able to go over her now, he told her,

for the cargo was still coming on board. He wished that she had not developed her interest so late.

He was more silent than usual. He had chosen finally, but still he was oppressed; in that part of his mind into which he would not look he knew that on the first idle morning ashore his imagination had been set alight by something fantastic; he had seen with his bodily eyes what he had misread with the eyes of his soul. He did not put it in this way, but he knew the truth. If he married Malvina he would not even then have the possession he longed for, which was no physical one, but a thing imagined, a thing that did not exist. And yet, even now, the shadow of that likeness—or rather, the remembrance of its lure—clung round her. On this, their last day, she was in a quiet mood that he had only seen of late. Her laments over his departure had ceased and the shallow chatter of trivialities that had so often irked him; her face and speech were softer, and it touched him and made him ashamed of his hesitations. She looked on him as hers; that was evident and had been evident for some time, but long courtships were the usual thing, and from keeping company to being 'cried in the kirk' was a far step. He reflected that he would still have the same sea-life of his own, and that a man with a 'master's ticket' and fourteen years' experience need not be longer ashore than he liked. It was no vanity that assured him he would never be out of a job. He wondered if she would wait for him. He thought she would, but he could not be sure. . . . Here he left off thinking, because he could not tell whether, if she did not, he would be glad or sorry. . . . Anyhow, he would speak before he said good-bye.

There was a long stretch of pale, rainy yellow in the west, and sky and water were growing colder as they approached the quay and came in sight of the *William and Joann*. There was little doing on this Sunday afternoon, and with the threat of rain the Sunday idlers from the town were not many. A few figures were moving about the brig, and bales and sacking and sea-chests were strewn at her side. The sun had set, but the light was still good. Malvina stared at the ship with the absolute lack of interest of her strictly feminine point of view. It was the same to her as any other inanimate object that she could neither eat nor wear; as a thing that would take Tom away from her it was more disagreeable than most. Scores of Montrose girls would have looked at the *William and Joann* with comprehending eyes, but Malvina was a child not of the docks and the Old Shore, but of the High Street and the shop-windows. Had Tom been the captain of her dreams, it might have been a little different, but not very different. The mate, watching her, saw her listless eye and the petulance about her mouth. She moved away impatiently and walked on a few steps. Stopping level with the bows,

she looked up and noticed the figurehead. Something in the sightless yet rapt face must have struck her as an oddity, for she pointed at it with her forefinger and burst into a loud peal of boisterous laughter.

* * * * *

The *William and Joann* sailed with the tide on Tuesday morning; the sky was high and the horizon very clear. A fresh breeze was blowing, and outside the bar, where the waves were breaking into thin white caps, the bows of the brig were beginning to lift and sink. The mate was on deck. He had come on board with his traps on Sunday night after leaving Malvina at her mother's door, where he had seen her first. He had scarcely opened his lips on the way home.

He did not look back at the receding town. There was nobody waving to him from the quay, for old Falconer's rheumatism was bad and he did not come down to watch them go. But in front of him, where he could not see her, the still, white woman with her uplifted face rose and fell with the brig's motion, the little whips of spray striking her breast and her joined hands pointing out to the wideness of the sea.

EUPHEMIA

It was nearing evening. The corn was cut and stood in stooks on the fields. Overhead, the sky glowed with the faint primrose and saffron which is a foretaste of splendour to come, and in its midst, hanging above the west, a little thread of a new moon, almost transparent, was becoming visible in the delicateness of its pearly immaturity.

Where the road climbed a short hill stood a farmhouse whose walls made a bold angle upon the sky. Its gable-end showed a plain face of stone in which, high up, one small window was cut below the slope of the roof. A red-haired girl leaned from it, her arms on the sill, looking out into the light. At the wall's foot was a round, thick bush of white Stuart roses, and, at the bottom of the hill, a stream ran under a low bridge to wind away between the fields and to dribble through the marshes into the Basin of Montrose.

The stream was swollen, and where, by the bridge, it widened into the farm pond, the weeds at its edge were sodden and matted; only now the earth was drying itself after the steady downpour that had fallen on that rich crop, still ungarnered as far as eye could see. There was none of the fine, white crispness which is the last stage of a cut harvest; and the loads which had been brought into Braes of Aird stackyard wore the dark, suspicious gold of imperfectly dried stuff.

Anderson (or "Braes," as the farmer was generally called) had been leading[1] since noon and his gaunt face had an anxious look as he went into his house. He was weather-wise, as befitted a man of his calling, and it seemed to him that this clear spell might not last. Soon the grain would begin to sprout where it stood. He had met the minister a few hours since and had been emphatically told that it would be justifiable to load on the morrow, Sabbath day though it was, should the weather hold.

"D'ye think Noah waited till Monday to get into the ark when he felt the first spot of rain?" asked the minister, as Braes approached the subject with unnecessary caution.

He was a man of very practical opinions. And now, as the red-haired girl leaned from her window, she could hear one outcome of this interview which was taking place at the corner of the stackyard; Braes had offered his hands a double wage for the Sunday work and the young men of the farm were discussing the situation with their fellows. The voices came up to

Euphemia in varying notes of strength; she could not see the group, though occasionally the black head of Lachland Henderson would appear above the wall at the turn of the road. The predominant tones were those of the 'head horseman,' Patrick Duthie.

Euphemia's temper was stirred just now, for she was a woman of strong feelings and as practical minded as the minister. In Angus, women do much field-work, and she had been a well-known figure in the Braes of Aird fields for a couple of years or more. She had the high cheekbones and square jaws of her race, and her decided good looks were of that fundamental sort which outlasts youth. Hers was a face of possibilities. The fact that she had done well at school was either admired or cast in her teeth, according to the respective temperaments of her acquaintances.

She knew well what was going on up the road. Wherever Patrick Duthie was there would be strife of some kind, for the red-whiskered, spare young man was a stormy petrel indeed. Euphemia could hear the flow of his talk, though only a word, now and again, was distinguishable; but it needed nothing to tell her that, if Duthie could prevent his hearers from accepting the terms held out for the morrow, he would do so, not from the Sabbatarian point of view, but from the economic one. He was not satisfied with the offer—so he said; but had he been so, she knew that he would neither accept himself nor allow anyone else to do so, because he hated Braes. Euphemia, who did not like the head horseman, could never understand the influence he had in the bothy. It was a subject on which she and Lachland Henderson differed. Lachland was a silent youth and Duthie's flow of words seemed to hypnotise him. And he was easily led, too.

The girl's own opinion was decided, as most of her opinions were. She had no particular sympathy for Braes, but the sight of those stooks waiting to be saved from their fate was too much for her sane and thrifty soul. They were dry enough to load now, but, with another wet day their chances of salvation might be gone. There was a strong dash of public-spiritedness in Euphemia, which made the notion of their loss for want of a little goodwill hateful.

When fractions of the dispersing group began to dot the rickyard she left the window and went out through the patch of garden into the road. A long-legged, very dark-headed young man was coming to meet her. He made as though he would pass by, but she called to him derisively across the way.

"Well, have ye speired permission at Duthie? Is he to let ye gang?"

Lachland Henderson looked annoyed and a little foolish, but he stopped.

“Braes is gie’in’ us owre little,” said he sullenly.

“Duthie tellt ye that, did he? Well,” she went on, “if he’ll no let ye work, he’ll mebbe let ye gang to the kirk the morn’s morn; but ye’ll need to ask him canny, Lachland.”

“Tuts!” exclaimed Lachland, with as much scorn as he could muster. It was not a brilliant reply, but he did not know what else to say.

“It’ll be a grand thing to be a man,” observed Euphemia, “but ye’d hae done better to be a lassie, I’m thinkin’. Ye’d hae been fine and biddable. I wonder ye dinna think shame to see a’ yon guid stuff standin’ to be wastit, an’ you that feared o’ Duthie ye daurna put a hand to it.”

“Haud yer tongue, lassie,” growled Henderson. A few of the men were coming towards them and he was getting angry. He was a steady and rather obstinate young fellow and slow to take offence. But she was plying the goad well.

She tossed her head. Patrick Duthie was approaching with his hands deep in his trousers pockets.

A studied unconsciousness of his approach fell upon Euphemia, and Duthie, seeing it and knowing her attitude of mind by instinct, made the mistake of addressing her; for he was one of those who could never leave well alone. Though he had prevailed with his audience, the sight of this one rebel, a girl who had no voice in the question at issue, was too much for him.

“Lachland’ll no be to mind the likes o’ you. He’s got mair sense than fash himself for a haverin’ lassie,” he began, with that lack of dignity which will challenge unexpressed opposition.

She turned her back upon him and disappeared between the ricks.

She marched along towards the stone dwelling-house from whose windows Braes and his family could see across the fields to the other side of that sheet of tidal water, the Basin of Montrose. At low tide, the river which ran into its western end would lie like a silver snake upon the uncovered sands and the gulls scream on the salt marshes full of thrift and mauve sea-aster. Between the foot of the hill and the water the stooks were ranked like an army waiting for someone to lead the forlorn hope of the morrow.

Euphemia knocked boldly at the dwelling-house door, kicking her muddy boots against the step. The door was answered by a tidy maid, who

opened her mouth as she saw the visitor and then smiled broadly. The two were good friends.

"It's Braes a'm wanting," observed Euphemia shortly.

"Losh!" exclaimed the other.

"Away ye go," continued Euphemia, jerking her head sideways towards the closed door of the farmer's business room.

Before the maid could obey, it opened and Braes looked out.

"A'm seekin' a word wi' ye, Mr. Anderson," said Euphemia, advancing; and the astonished servant found herself alone in the little hall.

When Euphemia came out again she made for her own lodging. Five of the farm women were waiting for her in the garden by the rose-bush and she hastened to tell them the result of her mission; for it had been determined by them that, should the men refuse to work on the morrow, they would offer their own services and demand the rejected wage.

All were well accustomed to harvest work, and the six who had come forward to Braes's rescue professed themselves able and willing to keep two of the carts going all day. They consisted of Euphemia, the woman who looked after the men's bothy, three girls, and the young wife of a horseman who had, at the time, no domestic complication on hand to keep her from the fields. Euphemia, as the originator of the scheme, had been unanimously chosen to approach the farmer upon the matter.

Her colour was high and her eye gleamed as she sought her comrades. Braes had accepted their proposal, though he had been inclined to haggle over the sum he had offered, which, he said, he had intended as a man's wage; but in the end he had given in. Perhaps the sight, from his windows, of the acres of imperilled grain standing under the uncertain sky decided him; perhaps the finger of the fluctuating barometer; perhaps the not unwelcome thought of making his men look foolish. In any case, he agreed to the proposal and announced that he would be at the farm stables early in the morning to superintend the harnessing of the two carts. Not a word was to be said of the projected plan. The men would take their Sunday 'long lie' next day, and Euphemia and the women meant to get a load or two home before the bothy stirred. The horseman's wife determined to put her working-clothes in the scullery overnight that she might dress before sunrise without disturbing her man. The little company of petticoats dispersed to their respective homes in the dusk.

It was getting light next morning when Braes opened the stable door with his master key. The men were asleep in the bothy and the horseman's wife had left her husband sound in one of those cottages at the foot of the hill where the married workmen lived; the six women went down to the fields, six shadows in the dimness.

The clover had sprouted high among the sheaves. They had stood so long that there had been ample time for its greenness to swamp the stubble. The sun was heaving himself up from behind the steeple of Montrose, and Braes, as he followed his volunteers down the road, told himself that the price of this Sabbath day's work might be well-spent money.

Euphemia, bare-headed, walked beside the foremost cart, her pitchfork over her shoulder. She was a dexterous loader—as good as Lachland Henderson, allowing for their difference in strength. In her mind's eye she saw the stack, left half finished yesterday, ready for thatching by the time the kirk bell should ring. She had got a new hat which she had meant to wear to-day. She was smiling ironically at the thought of it lying on the rough deal chest of drawers in her little room under the roof.

By the time the beadle's hand sent the first clang of the bell ringing over the country, the girl was sitting in her empty cart looking at her handiwork before starting again down the hill. Yesterday's stack was finished and a new one begun. As she turned the horse's head towards the fields there passed her a handful of the farm men.

The black coat of maturer respectability and the grey suit by which the young farm labourer of Angus honoured the first day of the week made a combination that smote Euphemia for a moment with some inherited feeling of wrong-doing. But it was only for a moment. Had she not the minister's sanction at her back as she toiled to save the Lord's bounty to His creatures? She sent a look of defiance at the group which stood aside with jeers to let the springless farm cart rumble past. Patrick Duthie burst into a loud laugh; he had a pink geranium in his buttonhole that went ill with his ginger-coloured whiskers. She did not care for his laughter while the new stack was rising steadily in the yard.

Duthie had made himself more than usually smart; every touch of sanctification that he could apply to himself was especially appropriate to-day. Neither he nor his admirers had pretended to found their action on any Sabbatarian feeling, but they realised at the same time the extreme suitability of the strong muster they were making as churchgoers. They

stood, after the custom of their kind, loitering about the kirk door till the last of the congregation had entered.

The sun came slanting brightly through the windows as Lachland Henderson sat not far from the precentor. Most of the young men from Braes of Aird farm liked hearing their own voices, and the minister liked it too, for they made a considerable difference to the psalms and paraphrases. But, for once in his life, he would sooner have seen their places empty. He looked grimly down upon them to-day and upon Henderson's sleek head, as he laid his hand on the Bible and the usual rustle of opening books which heralded the giving-out of the text came up to the pulpit. There were several gaps in the assembly which pleased him better than the sight of those Sunday coats which had confronted Euphemia by the stackyard corner half an hour ago. The places where sat the men from Windy Edge and Mains of Balmanno were vacant. His feelings were as robust as his opinions; and, as he noticed Duthie's pink geranium and consciously church-going look, his frame of mind was, perhaps, not the ideal one for a man of his age and calling. And another thing which he noted as he looked down on the familiar up-turned faces, was the great advantage there may occasionally be in extempore preaching.

He had chosen his text from the nineteenth chapter of Matthew, intending to base his sermon upon its last verse. But, during the singing of the preceding psalm, his eye had fallen upon the chapter which followed. He adjusted his black gown on his shoulders, with a gesture which came to him sometimes, and cleared his throat; and as Patrick Duthie settled himself in a convenient attitude for surreptitious slumber, the words "*Why stand ye here idle?*" rolled out over his head.

News flew as fast in the parish of Aird as it does in most country places, and it was not only the minister who had heard of the action of the Braes of Aird men, though these had, for various reasons, kept their own counsel about the women. There were many who listened that day in the kirk and few who slept. The mistress of Windy Edge sat upright in her pew, her piercing eyes fixed on the young horsemen. The sole member of her own establishment present was the old hen-wife, who had passed her seventieth birthday; the place beside her was empty, and her thoughts went to her husband, toiling with every available hand on his sloping acres a couple of miles away. She sniffed complacently.

"*Why stand ye here idle?*" thundered the minister, finally, when he had applied the text in its wider meaning to human life and character. There was a pause in which the congregation almost expected him to address certain of

his hearers by name, and the back of Duthie's neck was seen by the occupants of the pews behind him to grow crimson as he fingered the metrical version of the Psalms lying on his knee.

"I have no message to the shirker," added the minister, "no word of encouragement for those who will stand by and see the Lord's good gifts perish when they might be saved; no feelings but those of contempt—I say *contempt* advisedly—for the man who will withhold his help when his fellow-creature is struggling in the stress of this adversity for what is his living and his daily bread. I miss many here to-day; but of those absent ones I can say that the vacant seats wherein I am wont to look for them do them as much honour as their presence in this church does in less anxious times, when we may meet together to praise the Lord of harvest with quiet minds. . . ."

Not a sound stirred in the kirk but the noise of fidgeting feet that came from a small child which sat by its mother and was conscious of nothing but its own desire for release.

The sermon went on and drew to its close; and, with the opening of the door, Lachland Henderson and his companions made their way out of the kirk. There was no loitering now. They sheered off together in a little knot, and when they had put a short distance between themselves and the building the wrath of Patrick Duthie was let loose; for this advocate of plain speaking was deaf to the suggestion that he should wait in the kirkyard and have his say out with the minister. The sharp voice of the mistress of Windy Edge could be heard as they went their way up the Manse hill. There was not much doubt about her opinions. Lachland Henderson walked a little apart. Certain misgivings that had come to him before the kirk went in knocked at his conscience more loudly. The others were too much occupied with their own comments to notice him as he slipped away from them and let them disappear down the road. He did not want to go back to Braes of Aird, for he had not quite enough courage to get home, to pull off his coat like a man, and to go into the fields.

He stood, half-hearted, at a turn of the way; had he met one living soul who would have given him a word of persuasion or sympathy, he might have repented yet, and gone, like the servants in the parable from which the accusing words had been taken, to work at the eleventh hour. But no one spoke to him; the world was hurrying back to its dinner; and he turned on his tracks and went off northwards. He decided to ask for a piece of bread-and-cheese at the house of a woman he knew and to keep out of the way till evening; for the present he was sick of Duthie and the rest of them, and he

promised himself fervently that, should there be leading on the morrow, he would work like ten men.

He hated Euphemia with a jealous hatred for what she was doing and he would have liked to drag her home from the work and to shut her up while he wrought in her stead. She was a reproach, a living, taunting, maddening reproach. He put his hand into his waistcoat pocket for his watch, and in his absence of mind and perturbation of spirit drew out a copper instead. Britannia holding the trident reminded him of Euphemia sitting in the farm cart and holding her pitchfork. She had barely looked at him in passing by.

The shadows were lying eastward of the trees when he turned, after some hours of purposeless loafing, and sauntered homewards. His pipe had been no solace to him, and, though he avoided the more frequented ways, he would have welcomed even the company of the cross farm dog which often followed him in his leisure moments. He was out of step with every man and every thing, including himself; most of all he was angry with Duthie, though his anger would have been more suitably turned upon his own weakness. Almost within sight of Braes of Aird, he was suddenly confronted with the beadle.

The beadle had a face like a full moon, but he had the eye that properly belongs to the more active part of mankind. Besides being a public functionary he was ‘the minister’s man,’ and, in opinion, he took his colour from his master; grave-digging had robbed him of none of his cheerfulness and he played the fiddle. He was the sharpest-tongued man in the parish, and the precentor, who was sensitive, hated him. He contemplated Lachland with the leisurely interest he might have given to some odd but harmless beast.

There was more humour in him than in the minister.

“He was a bittie sair on ye i’ the poupit,” he observed, as though continuing a conversation.

“He was that,” replied the young horseman, moved to the admission by his need of human intercourse.

“It’ll no hairm ye,” said the beadle. “A tellt him that when a ca’ed off his gown till him.”

“It’ll no hairm ye,” he resumed, as Lachland was silent, “but a’m thinkin’ it’ll na dae ony guid to Duthie (a tellt him that, forbye). Says I to the minister, ‘Them that’s fond o’ their ain blethers doesna like other folks’ blethers.’ (Dod, he wasna owre pleased at that, though he kent weel eneuch a liket fine tae hear him sort the lot o’ ye.) Man, ye need it.”

Lachland writhed.

“Duthie was fair rantin’,” continued the old man, smiling unregenerately, “what way did ye no gang hame wi’ him?”

“A couldna just say——” began Lachland.

“Weel, a’ll tell ye then,” interrupted the beadle, now absolutely in his element. “Ye was feared tae meet the lasses.”

Lachland swore heartily and with some originality.

“Whisht, whisht!” cried the other, drawing in his mouth with an effort that was a mere sop to convention, “lad, a’ll gang down the hill wi’ ye.”

He had been dying to get to the farm all day, but had not found a pretext. Lachland could have dispensed with his company, but there was no help for it.

They walked on together; and the young man, though he would not admit it to his companion, was much out of conceit with himself. He had done shabbily and he was sorry in his heart. The beadle’s caustic comments made his vanity smart, but what had gripped him and stung him all day was that sentence of the minister’s about withholding help from a hard-pressed fellow-creature; though, to men like the one he had listened to in his folly, employers were a breed apart. And Braes, though not specially free-handed, had offered a fair price.

The beadle’s talk ceased because they were nearing the farm and he was enjoying himself in anticipation. He was listening, with a hand over his ear, to unusual sounds that were coming up from the bottom of the hill, and, as the two got within sight of it, they saw a small mass of people contending in the road.

The beadle’s jaw dropped and he came to a standstill. Euphemia was struggling with a handful of men who seemed to be forcing her towards the bridge. Her hair had come loose and fell down her back in a long tail, and her field apron was hanging by one string. Duthie had hold of her wrists and was dragging her along, while a ploughman, whose arm was about her, was doing his best to lift her from her feet. One or two women who had apparently come to her rescue were being held off by the remaining men. Cries and loud laughter were mixed with the sound of trampling boots.

“Rin, Lachland, man!” cried the beadle.

Patrick Duthie had come back from the kirk in a frenzy of resentment. His tongue had never rested on the homeward road, but the minister had

now taken the place of Braes as a theme for his eloquence. No one could get in a word. As a rule he was quick to apply to his neighbours any home truths that came from the pulpit, but he liked to reserve the choice of culprits for himself. He did not notice the absence of Lachland from his audience.

The women were having their dinner in the fields when he had finished his own meal, and he went out with his comrades to spend the afternoon in hanging about under the great sycamore by the stable door. It was a convenient place from which to let them hear what he thought of them as they passed and repassed with their two carts, especially as Braes, who remained in the field, was out of earshot.

When evening came his state of mind was not improved by the complete lack of interest with which they heard him, and it was the culminating effect of the day's events that Henderson and the beadle were looking at now.

Lachland ran down the hill and came up with the strugglers as they reached the bridge. Braes had stopped work and gone home to his house, for the light was beginning to fail, and the clear western heavens and a keen bite in the air were giving promise of a fair morrow.

"Come awa', man! come awa'!" cried one of the ploughmen as the young man dashed in among them; "we're to gie her a drookin' that'll be fine for her aifter sic a day's work!"

"Gie's a hand, Lachland!" shouted another.

Some were laughing and some were merely urging their friends on, but the expression of Duthie's face as he haled Euphemia towards the water suggested more than horseplay. He had found a way of making an impression on these women at last.

Euphemia was a strong woman, but her strength was availing her little against the men, and the grasp on her wrists seemed to her to be breaking them. Someone had got hold of her long tail of hair too. Her breath came short and she was so much exhausted that she had ceased to fight when she turned her desperate eyes and saw Lachland Henderson strike Duthie full upon the cheekbone.

The head horseman staggered, but his hold on her kept him on his feet and he recovered his balance in a moment. Before the young man could attack him again he was overpowered by three of the others.

"Haud him ticht!" cried Euphemia's second assailant, loosing his grip upon her; "Man! we're no to hurt her! We're just to gie her a fleg! Losh, Patrick! but he's gar'd ye look bonnie!"

The blood was trickling down Duthie's face. He would have liked to turn on Henderson, but he had not done with Euphemia yet. They had come to the water's edge, and he suddenly let her wrists go, pushing her from him into the shallow pool. She sprang away, slipped on the muddy weeds and fell with one arm bent under her.

At the sound of the splash Lachland made a tremendous effort and wrenched himself free, hatless and with his coat torn half-way down his back. Euphemia's pale face and her hair dripping in the pool horrified him as he rushed in to her help. The stones were so slimy that he could hardly keep on his legs and his plungings in the shallow water raised a roar of laughter from the men at the brink; a clod of mud flew after him through the air and hit him on his white Sunday collar, then another and another. They came in such a storm that one of them missed Euphemia by an inch. She had raised herself painfully and stood beside him.

"Get ahint me, lassie," said Lachland, thrusting himself between her and the shower. "A'll no let them touch ye. Just you wait, Duthie," he shouted, "you and me's got to settle for this job——!"

He broke off as he felt a hand clutch at him and looked round. He was barely in time to catch Euphemia as she fell against him.

He stood in the middle of the pond with his arms round her. The sight of the fainting girl had somewhat subdued Duthie, and he turned away and began to push through the increasing number of men and women which had been attracted to the place by the noise. He looked up to see Braes and the beadle standing together on the bridge. The latter was proclaiming his opinion of everyone present with extraordinary freedom, but Braes was silent. Nevertheless, as Duthie met his eyes it was borne in upon him that he had better be looking for a new place.

The weather mended with the last week of September and the equinox came in with a dry wind. All over the country the leading went on undisturbed and the agricultural part of the world began to hold up its head and make concessions to Providence. It was admitted that things might be worse. Duthie, who had departed summarily, was busy preparing to sue James Anderson of Braes of Aird farm for wrongful dismissal. But, unluckily, when the case came before the Sheriff, he stated that the dismissal was due to his own feeling against Sunday work, while the farmer based his action on the circumstance that the head horseman had mishandled a woman in his employment and broken her arm. Euphemia appeared in court wearing a sling; the Sheriff dismissed the case, and the plaintiff paid the costs.

At last the fields sloping to the Basin of Montrose were bare and the stackyards dotted the landscape like so many tall yellow villages. The plough-horses had resumed their normal occupation, and, at Aird kirk, a Sunday came round on which the minister conceived it time to give thanks for what had, after all, proved to be a not indifferent harvest. Then, when the last words of the psalm which followed died away, he took up a little paper from between the leaves of his book and read:

"There is a purpose of marriage between Lachland Henderson, bachelor, and Euphemia Mary Maclaren, spinster, both of this parish."

And the beadle, looking across the pews, grinned, as he saw a black head whose owner seemed anxious that the earth should open and swallow him.

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[1] *Anglice*—carrying.

THE OVERTHROW OF ADAM PITCAITHLEY

People who have a taste for byways and are not too much overdriven by the clock to frequent them are free of certain byways of memory too; marginal sketches on the maps of their minds; unofficial scraps which give outside points of view. Unaccustomed crops of knowledge hang on brier and whin, ungarnered as the bramble fruit, pungent as the wild raspberry hiding in its green shelter in still hours, to stand forth, a coral spark, when the wind blows and turns up the white undersides of its leaves. It was in one of these byways that Jimmy's loon was revealed to me.

But first of Jimmy, the youthful flippancy of whose name belied him; for he could not have been less than seventy when I knew him nor have travelled the east coast of Scotland with his wife and his 'hurley' for anything short of forty years.

The smithy stood at the end of the loan haunted by him in his passings to and fro; and sitting one day, ben the house, with the blacksmith's wife, I saw a light-coloured streak of swiftness flash by the window.

"That'll be Jimmy's loon," said she, as our heads turned simultaneously.

I hurried away. My friend was, apparently, in his old quarters and I made haste to find him; as I came out upon the grass track I could see the ripple which was the trail of the vanishing "loon" running along the sea of green. He must be pretty small, I argued, if the broom could submerge him like that.

Jimmy was sitting on a log beside his very simple residence when I reached the accustomed spot; a large weather-stained piece of sacking was tied round the trimmed and inverted head of a fir which stood like an half-opened umbrella, resting its points on the ground. In the space within its area a fire burned and smoke rose straight into the air. The blaze was being fed with sticks by Jimmy's wife, whose figure I could see through the shortage of sacking that formed the doorway. It shone upon her wedding ring and on a few odds and ends of pots. I did not greet her, for I knew her of old for a woman of no hostilities, but few words. My acquaintance with the couple was of that restful kind in which all things are taken for granted. I sat down beside the old man; we had not met for two years and there were gaps of experience to be filled up.

"And what about *him*?" I inquired, as a small boy came round the apology for a tent and halted before us.

Jimmy took his pipe from his mouth in silence and paused, as he had a habit of doing, before making the most ordinary reply.

"Bell's lad," said he.

(Bell was his daughter, the wife of a prosperous tinker.)

"She's awa' north to Inverness," he explained.

It was not easy to tell how old the boy was, for his eyes and stature suggested different ages. His hair was like the roofing of a haystack. His bare feet were tan-coloured, as was every visible inch of his skin, and a pair of aggressively new red braces upheld tattered trousers which had certainly come to him from someone three times his size. The back buttons were on a level with his shoulder-blades. His features were angelic in type, his chin delicately pointed. But it was not of angels that I thought as I surveyed him.

"He's very small for tramping," I remarked.

"Aw, he does fine," replied Jimmy, "an' whiles, maybe, he gets a lift i' the hurley."

The boy did not give us much of his company; after a long look at me he probably put me down as insignificant, and departed, leaving me to finish my talk with his grandparent.

I went home, a little later, by way of Pitcaithley's farm which stood in the fields near where the loan debouched upon the cart-road. I waited a moment behind an alder which had sprung up unmolested in the path, for, with a tramping of hoofs, a pair of plough-horses were coming down to the pond hard by. The first was ridden by one of Pitcaithley's horsemen, and the second, an enormous bay with mealy coloured muzzle and belly, by the farmer's youngest boy, Adam, who, with a look of pride and some oaths unsuitable to his years, urged the horse forward with fists and heels. The gigantic creature took as much notice of him as if he were a splash of mud on its back.

"Ca' awa', man, ca' awa'; ye're dae'in brawly!"

The voice came from a broom-bush in which showed something red. Young Adam Pitcaithley stared round, and seeing nobody, rode solemnly on into the water. From the green growth Jimmy's loon emerged and stood, hands on hips and legs apart, watching the rider with an expression so

comprehensive that it staggered me. Admiration was in it and contempt; the first was for the oaths and the second for the person who emitted them.

"Come doon, till a' sort ye!" he cried, at last.

It was not a genial invitation; but it did not seem to move young Pitcaithley one way or another. He sat on the swilling carthorse, his body dragged forward by the pull on the rein and his smug nose and puffy cheeks in strong contrast with those of the little vagabond who eyed him. The latter changed his tune.

"What's yer name, man!" he inquired in a milder voice as he approached the pool.

"Awdam," replied the other, probably from habit.

"Come awa' doon, Awdam, an' a'll gie ye a ride i' the hurley."

"No me," replied the other.

The ploughman had left the water and was disappearing towards the farm with his horse as the boys gazed defiantly one upon the other.

"It's no for the likes o' me to play wi' the likes o' you," said Adam.

Jimmy's loon surveyed him sharply.

"*You're* no gentry," he observed.

"A'm fell near it," replied Adam portentously.

If Jimmy's loon were awed, he made no sign; and I knew enough about boys to see that the hostile attitude of these two was as conventional as the stiff walk with which one dog seeks to impress another at a first meeting. Soon they might be playing together among the bushes. All the same it struck me that Adam Pitcaithley was safer where he was.

"What like's yer hurley?" said he, after a silence.

"Braw."

"Will there be a shelt?"

"Gran'pa' hurls it himsel'."

A cold consideration entered into the rider's face; then hesitation, then interest. After all, a hand-cart has more original possibilities and can be treated more fancifully than the everyday vehicle drawn by a horse. Besides which, driving was no novelty to a farmer's son.

His haughtiness began to give way.

“Ye’ll gie me a hurl?” said he.

“Fegs will I.”

The immense beast under him had finished its drink and raised a dripping muzzle. Its ears were cocked and its clear eye focused on the spot where its yoke-fellow was growing smaller. With one of those thunderous sighs heaved by Clydesdales it turned from the pool. The movement decided Adam.

“S—ss—ss!” he cried; and, as the obedient leviathan stopped, he embedded his fingers in the mane and lowered himself to the ground. The act was not that of a really practised horseman, for half-way to earth a convulsiveness came into it which I thought was not lost on Jimmy’s loon.

The next moment the two boys had vanished in the direction of Jimmy’s tent, and I was left watching the horse pursuing its way home with human good sense. Before I followed its example I heard shouts and laughter in the loan, and I hoped that Jimmy’s hurley was pretty strong.

Next day was Sunday. The very skies seemed to look down with added benignity as I took my way to the kirk in the little company of the godly. In the distance a swarm of black figures was gathering round the door, and, in the church-going stream around me, my eye caught a familiar form. I recognised Mrs. Pitcaithley’s black beaded mantle and the splendour of her Sunday bonnet.

Beside her walked her son, Adam, the same as yesterday and yet how changed! He had not passed the age for frilled collars—at least his mother thought he had not—and the starched white stuff stood out below his conspicuous ears. A dark-blue velvet blouse with mother-of-pearl buttons and a pair of tight knickerbockers proclaimed the occasion. He carried a gilt-clasped Bible; and he appeared to be as proud of it and his clothes to-day as he had been of his oaths and his horsemanship yesterday. His scrubbed cheeks shone. Pride was evidently his besetting sin.

The clangour of the bell had not roused the congregation to a brisker pace when, over the roadside dyke, uprose a shock head with angelic features and eyes fixed—whether or no in admiration I could not tell—upon the glorious figure marching beside Mrs. Pitcaithley.

“Hey, Awdam!” cried the apparition.

A stir went through the church-going ranks and Adam stopped for one moment. Then he went forward, his mouth drawn down and his Bible clasped to him as though to ward off Satan.

“Man, Awdam!” shouted Jimmy’s loon, more loudly.

Mrs. Pitcaithley turned in outraged dignity and threw a glance of rebuke towards the dyke.

We tramped on in silence.

The footsteps in the field kept up with our advance.

“What ails ye?” cried Jimmy’s loon. “Man, ye warna sweer to speak i’ the hurley!”

Adam was deaf; he turned neither to right nor left.

“I’st yer ma ye’re feared at?” yelled the other; “maybe she’ll gie ye yer wheeps when the kirk’s skailed!”

Even this taunt was fruitless, and the situation grew plain to Jimmy’s loon, as well as the trend of public opinion. Pitcaithley himself approached the dyke shaking his stick. The enemy dodged behind some thorn bushes and was seen no more.

That evening I walked again to the loan’s end by the pond. That grassy bit by the alder was a favourite place of mine, and I sat where I had sat yesterday. My thoughts were far from Jimmy’s loon and his time-serving acquaintance as I heard the approach of horses and realised that these animals must be watered even on Sunday. It was the same pair and the same riders, but Adam, resplendent still in his Sunday clothes, was this time behind his companion. The latter had entered the water and left it before the young hero rode in, velvet blouse, knickerbockers, frilled collar and all. The only thing missing was the Bible.

Not a leaf stirred, not a sound; nothing but the gurgling draughts of the horse, when the bushes parted. Adam was facing the other way and the tail and quarters of the carthorse were presented full to the undergrowth from which crawled Jimmy’s loon. I saw the boy drop on his knee and draw his hand back to his ear. Something whizzed through the air. The horse flung up its head and plunged round, churning the pond into waves. There was a cry, a falling splash of dark blue, and in another moment Adam Pitcaithley, crowned with weeds and mire, stood up to his arm-pits in the deepest part of the pool.

There was wrath in Pitcaithley's farm the next morning. Adam, fearful of his mother's eye, had slunk home after dark, but when the truth was out a ploughman was sent down to the loan with a whip to search for Jimmy's loon.

But Jimmy, his wife, his hurley, and his loon had all disappeared.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Tales of my own Country* by Violet Jacob]