

THE STORY OF A STRUGGLE

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THE STORY

OF

A STRUGGLE

A ROMANCE OF THE GRAMPIANS

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DEDICATION

It was the late Dr. H. G. SUTTON, the well-known and much-loved physician of the London Hospital, who inspired the Writer of this book with the desire to compose a story which should have for its triple keynote, Freedom—Love—Trust. Month after month he watched the development of the different characters, and by his wonderful insight into the nature of humanity guided the Author to give expression to the sore need felt by numbers of men and women for encouragement to trust not only their Maker, but also themselves and their fellow-creatures.

Alas! he did not live to see the book published, but those who best knew the great teacher may be interested to learn that from beginning to end it met with his approval; and in loving gratitude "The Story of a Struggle" is dedicated to the memory of Dr. H. G. SUTTON.

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PART I

THE STORY OF A STRUGGLE

CHAPTER I

ONE fine autumn evening, many years ago, James and Jessie Stewart, two young Scottish Highlanders, might have been seen leisurely wending their way towards the small farmhouse of Belnaan, in Glen Feshie, each carrying two pails of water from the river. The setting sun shed a warm glow on the masses of heather bloom, whose rich purple colour was beginning to change into a beautiful reddish-brown, which was scarcely distinguishable from the stalks.

A forest of dark pine wood extended far up the mountain, and the eye of the onlookers rested with pleasure on the deep, glossy green of the foliage, relieved, as it was, by the light brown trunks of some very old trees. The slanting sunbeams were glinting on a luxurious growth of cranberry bushes,

golden brackens, and richly tinted mosses ; here and there, by the river-side, stood groups of graceful birches with silvery, glistening stems, whose fading yellow and brown leaves, shaken by the almost imperceptible breeze, shimmered in the sunlight for a moment, and then from time to time dropped on the ground.

It was an exquisitely lovely scene, in the midst of which we first meet James Stewart, a man whose mental and moral struggles are a type of what, in some measure, all who refuse to follow the leading of the natural in their lives have to go through.

The brother and sister, for that was the relation of these two to each other, lingered on the way chatting merrily. Neither of them had ever been farther from home than Grantown or Kingussie, for in these days Badenoch was a district unknown to the tourist, and its inhabitants were not enticed by "cheap trips" to leave their native place. The railway was not built, and coach travelling was too expensive, but, notwithstanding the absence of temptation to go South, there had arisen at times in their young minds a craving for a fuller life than could be found in their own beautiful glen, and James might well congratulate himself on the prospect before him of soon going to a University town.

Setting down their pails, the two stood still, and the girl, looking proudly at her brother, said :

" Only to think, Jamie, of your being a minister ! You'll maybe get a big church in Edinbro'."

" Yes, yes," was all the young man's reply ; and Jessie continued a little gravely :

" But I'm wondering what we'll be doing without you in the long winter nights. Aye, we'll miss you with your books ; the house will be real lonely. Father will be wearying for you as well as mother and me, I'm thinking."

" Oh, you'll all get on well enough," James replied, " it's me that will be worst off, for it will be terribly lonely in Aberdeen ; but," he added, in a more cheerful strain, " I'll be always looking forward to the vacations."

Jessie gazed at him affectionately, and James continued :

" Well, you see, Jess, I'm bent on being a good scholar, and getting on in the Church, so I have made up my mind to put every other thing out of my thoughts, for, oh, lass, I must get on whatever it cost me."

Jessie shook her head, but said nothing. Stooping to take up their burdens again, their attention was arrested by the appearance on the highway of a

handsome carriage and pair driving rapidly, but not so rapidly as to prevent them seeing its occupants, a well-dressed lady and gentleman, who were lolling back on the cushioned seats. After the equipage had disappeared, Jessie said, with a merry laugh, "You'll be like that some day, I well believe. It would be suiting you fine to be sitting beside yon grand lady; how proud mother will be if you come back with a bonny lady in a carriage!"

A satisfied smile passed over James's face, and he ejaculated:

"Well, who can say?" but immediately checking himself, he said seriously: "No, no, Jess, it will never do for me to be thinking of worldly vanities like these; I must remember that I am to be a minister of God, and I ought rather to look forward to the good I can do to other people."

With a sly look and a toss of her head, the girl answered:

"You need not be imagining that you are any better than other people, although you are going to be a minister; and you need not be so vain of yourself, Master Jamie."

With such talk and chaffing did the brother and sister beguile the way home, happy in the thought of James's prospects, and little dreaming of

the sad event near at hand which was to alter all their plans.

At this time, James Stewart, the youngest son of his father's large family, was about twenty years of age. He and his sister Jessie were the only children at home, all the others having been sent out early in life to make their own way in the world. James had been a studious boy, and his parents, well pleased, had determined to "make a minister of the lad," and they were now rejoicing in being able to send him to Aberdeen. By his talents, and through the influence of the heritors of the parish, James had received a bursary, which would enable him to pay for his college education, and also defray much of the expense of living during its eight years' course. If the holder of such a bursary passed his examinations successfully at the end of the eight years' study, he was licensed to preach, and after a year's work as a probationer might become a candidate for a parish charge, and this was James Stewart's ambition.

Everything was prepared for the student's departure on the morrow. The large trunk with its ample supply of home-spun clothes and knitted socks, along with the treasured store of books and sundry remembrances of home, was already corded. The crock of butter, the bags of meal and potatoes, the

large cheese, the basket of eggs, all stood in readiness for the carrier's cart next morning ; but during the night, the father, who had been ailing for some days, was stricken with paralysis, and his soul passed away just as the sun rose in magnificence and beauty. Of course, all thought of James's journey was for the time abandoned. His mother suffered so greatly from the shock that she was stunned, and her reason trembled in the balance ; but the necessity for action roused her, and before her husband's funeral day she had regained her wonted composure and determination of purpose.

James, realising how ill his mother really was, in spite of her present display of strength, began to fear that it might be wrong to leave her alone with Jessie, and he felt that perhaps he ought to give up going to Aberdeen, however unwilling he might be to do so. The afternoon of Alexander Stewart's funeral day had come, and the two chief mourners, James and his eldest brother, might be seen walking up the glen to the farmhouse where the mother and sister were expecting them.

There was a strange look of relief on the faces of the two women, easily to be accounted for by the superstition common at that time in Badenoch, which had led to the custom of "watching," a

custom which Mrs. Stewart had strictly followed. From the hour of death, the corpse had been assiduously watched day and night by female relatives or neighbours, who had sat by turns in the room, and never relaxed attention until the body was carried out of the house. It was considered a compliment to be asked to be a "watcher," and the invitation was always complied with. It was thought dishonouring to the dead if this watch were not kept, the idea being that the spirit having fled, the body could not protect itself from the Evil One, who was supposed to be on the look-out for an opportunity to snatch it away, which could only be balked by the presence of human beings, notably of the female sex. Everything was always done to keep these watchers awake, quantities of whisky, and also of tea, were consumed, and much conversation in hushed tones was carried on. From time to time, a chapter of the Bible, generally out of the Old Testament, was read ; and if any "godly person" was present, prayer was offered up for the protection of the living as well as the dead, for evil spirits were about, and if injury was done to the body, who could tell what might be the fate of the "watchers" ?

The body of Alexander Stewart, dressed in a

pure white starched shirt and necktie, the grey hair beautifully arranged on the pillow, and the limbs covered with a coarse but spotlessly clean sheet, had lain on the bed in the little room off the kitchen for three days, still and peaceful, so peaceful that it was difficult to imagine that human passion had ever stirred it. Now it was gone from the house, and the family could resume their every-day work.

The funeral was conducted with the greatest decorum, and with studied attention to all the customs of the country. A large concourse of people had assembled on the turf in front of the house in the forenoon, to show their respect for the deceased, who had been much loved, and to express sympathy for the family, especially for the widow and the two youngest who were living at home with her. The women of the house, and those who had taken part in the ceremony of "watching," occupied the "best room," where the minister, along with the schoolmaster and one or two others, talked and prayed with them. The bulk of the company waited outside in groups, while whisky and bread and cheese were handed to each, until the signal was given for the departure of the cortege. Then the men silently arranged themselves in fours,

so that there might be no unseemly hesitation or discussion about places, in changing the bearers who in rotation were to carry the body on their shoulders to the graveyard some miles off. This done, the nearest relatives lifted the plain black coffin, and started on the melancholy journey. A cart followed the long procession, with bread and cheese and whisky for refreshment on the way to the bearers, who had a heavy burden to carry, and a long way to walk ere they could lay it down.

At the present day (as it did then) the road winds through the glen by the side of the little river Feshie, which rushes along, tumbling noisily over the rocks in its bed, gaining strength and volume from many brawling mountain streams, till it becomes quite a fair-sized river at its junction with the Spey ; by-and-by the road turns off, and the river is lost sight of, the mansion of Invereshie is passed, Loch Insh comes in sight with the old church, perched on a little eminence upon its bank and surrounded by its graveyard. The church, a very old building of grey stone, roofed with dark blue slates, looks dismal even on the brightest day in summer ; the walls surrounding the enclosure are dilapidated, and in many places stones have been thrown down, and the gaps give easy entrance

to stray sheep, which often browse in the churchyard.

A few isolated pine-trees, whose scraggy boughs creak with the slightest breath of wind, add an element of weird picturesqueness to the scene. There has never been an "Old Mortality" to interest himself in the few monuments and inscriptions in Insh churchyard, and it is a desolate, forsaken-looking place. Here, then, they laid Alexander Stewart beside his forefathers, the old gravedigger filled up the grave, and the company separated for their respective homes.

Sandy, the eldest son, was the only member of the family who had found it possible to assist James at his father's funeral, and he and James walked home together. They were both very grave, solemnised by the sad day's work, and not a word passed between them for some time. At length Sandy, seeing James much depressed, determined to break the silence. He knew that bitter disappointment was mixed with grief in his young brother's mind, and thinking it would be kinder to begin at once on the subject that must be uppermost, he said :

"Well, James, our sad task is over, and we must now look things in the face, and consider

what is to be done for the best. I cannot stay over the night, so we had better make use of our time. I know father meant to give you provisions, and some money too, when you were going to Aberdeen; but I'm afraid the money will be all gone for the funeral expenses. What do you yourself think is to be done?"

"I don't know," replied James, looking very serious.

"Well," said Sandy, "who is to work the farm? What will mother do? And, how are you to be kept in Aberdeen?"

The two men stood still, the elder intently watching his brother, who said at last, bitterly:

"Oh, Sandy, can you that's so much older than me not find out some way for me to go to the college? Could you not come here yourself? I could manage to do without the money and most of the provisions, for I might get teaching to do when I had time. I cannot bear the thought of not being able to bring poor sinners to repentance. Remember how God called me to the work, and what father said about the dream I had."

James's parents had clearly seen in the dream to which he alluded a call to give up their boy to God.

The strong young man sobbed and shook with

keen emotion. Leaning on his staff, he continued in pleading tones : " Oh, Sandy, won't you help me ? Could you not come here instead of me ? "

" How can I do that, James ? " Sandy answered ; " I am only a servant, as you well know, a ground officer, far away from here, and I couldn't leave my place. Just think of my wife and bairns."

" True, true," said James, sadly ; " but oh, Sandy, it's hard to bear—to have to give up what has been my heart's desire is dreadful for me only to think of."

After a few moments' thought, he added earnestly, " Sandy, let us pray."

Then taking off their bonnets, these simple-minded men knelt down on the heathery knoll, and each by himself besought the Lord with earnest supplications to be the guide in this difficult case.

James wrestled hard for a while with his head bent on his hands, close to the ground, but presently he rose up calm and determined, though sorrowful, and said :

" It's the will of the Lord ; I can't help it, but it is hard. I will stay at home and do the farm-work. The Lord be praised. He has enabled me to overcome the Evil One, and I hesitate no more. Oh, Sandy, man, don't tell mother how

near I was to being an undutiful son. Satan tried to beat me, but he couldn't, and I have won."

Thus, with the decision and self-control which will be seen to mark his character throughout life, James Stewart took up his burden, and bore it manfully for years.

The small farmhouse of Belnaan, not much larger than a cottage, to which the brothers were now drawing near, was the same to which Alexander Stewart had brought his bride more than thirty years ago ; but the bareness which was then its characteristic had long since given place to the picturesqueness of age. It stood by itself on the moor of Feshie, no other dwelling in sight. Built of large rough stones, it was overlaid for the sake of warmth with sods of turf, some of which were quite green. The roof was of thatch, and the yellow crowfoot, white garlic, and reddish-brown mosses on the weather-stained straw, were enchantingly beautiful in the evening sunlight. There was an air of homeliness and a promise of comfort in the tidy doorway and brightly shining window panes, not belied by a look into the kitchen, the living room of the family, where the mistress of the house was busy preparing the porridge. Jessie, the family pet, was standing at the door in an atti-

tude of expectancy, one hand held up over her eyes to shade them from the dazzling rays of the sun, which otherwise would have prevented her being able to distinguish who was coming up the road towards the house, while with the other she caught up the corner of her apron to wipe away the tears which threatened to fall and dim her sight.

"Yes, mother," she called out presently, "they're coming. Oh yes, and there's only Sandy and Jamie."

In a few minutes the brothers entered the house : on one side of the passage was the "best room," already restored to its normal condition of slightly desolate propriety ; the women of the family prided themselves on the neatness and perfect cleanness of this room, which was only used on very special occasions, such as the reception of the minister and other important people. The kitchen on the opposite side was very different : there, a glowing fire of peats and wood with lovely crimson, yellow, and blue shades of flame prettily reflected in the bright tin covers hanging above the dresser, gave promise of comfort. The atmosphere of the room was not very clear, but there is nothing more soothing to the nerves of a Highlandman than the pungent aromatic smoke of a peat-fire, although

there is nothing more blinding to a Southerner, and the family at Belnaan was a truly Highland one.

The porridge in the pot hanging on the "swee" (a strong iron bar fastened in one side of the open chimney wall, and used as an arm for pot or kettle) bubbled and sputtered as if asking to be poured out, and the kettle on the hearthstone was singing and rattling its lid, quite ready to do its part in making the tea which Jessie had persuaded her mother to indulge in on this trying occasion.

Jessie and her brothers came in together, and, without saying a word, the men and their mother sat down at the uncovered but scrupulously clean deal table, on which were set a jug of warm milk, four plates, bowls and horn spoons. After Jessie had poured the porridge into the plates, Sandy stood up, he and James having first taken off their bonnets, and asked a long blessing, which was really an extempore prayer, in which thanks were given for the saint who had been laid to rest, and earnest petitions were offered up for direction as to the future. With sighs and deep groans from the widow, "Amen" was said, the men again covered their heads, and the meal was begun. There was but little conversation during its course, and when

it was ended James went out to look after the cows : then Sandy said : " Well, mother, I'm glad to tell you, that Jamie sees that he must give up going to Aberdeen."

" Oh," said Mrs. Stewart, in an aggrieved tone, " but, Sandy, I can't allow that ; Jessie and me can manage to get on by ourselves with the help of the neighbours at ploughing and harvest times. No, no, that must not be. James must go to Aberdeen."

" But, mother," Sandy replied, " the rule of the estate is, that no woman, however good a farmer she may be, can rent a place in her own name ; so that you would either have to leave this altogether—and none of us would like that—or James must be the nominal tenant in father's place."

Mrs. Stewart saw the difficulty, and with tears in her eyes she sat down by the fireside, silent and sad. Presently, James came in, and, aware of what Sandy had intended to tell her, thought, seeing her so still and weary-looking, that she doubted his capacity ; so he went up to her, and laying his hand affectionately on her shoulder said : " I'll do my very best, mother ; and though I can never expect to be so good a farmer as father, still I can learn, and maybe I'll not be so bad at it as you fear. God will help me."

The widow looked at her son simply, and said : " I know that, Jamie, your father was a man by ordinary ; I'm not thinking about the farm itself, but——" and she groaned heavily. " Oh sair's the day, I am terrible sorry. Ochone, ochone, what would your father be saying to your giving up the ministry ? Could we not manage some way to let you go ? "

He shook his head, and with a grave serious face answered : " No, mother ; Sandy and I have talked it all over, and there's no other way ; so don't say any more about it."

Mrs. Stewart made no reply, and James left the room immediately, feeling grateful to his mother for refraining from words of sympathy. The widow was well acquainted with her son's nature, and we may be sure that, silent though she was, she felt deeply for him, and he knew it.

If it had been possible for any one to have visited him in his little room under the roof that night, James would have been heard pouring out his soul to the Almighty, in heavy groans—groans too deep for utterance in words.

CHAPTER II

THE morning after his father's funeral, James Stewart rose betimes, fully prepared to resume the manual labour to which he now felt he must devote himself in earnest. Young and energetic, he soon made the farm pay better than his father had done, and ere long he accumulated a considerable sum of money towards future college expenses. The keen desire to be a minister was at first his guiding star, but as time went on he could not help noting the domestic happiness of those of his companions who married and settled in their own station, and occasionally he was led to question the advisability of prosecuting his own more ambitious project. He, however, sternly checked this idea by the self-satisfying thought that, unlike them, he had been "specially called" of God, and was therefore bound to persevere in the course he had adopted.

Soon after James entered into possession of the farm, one of his crofters died, and his place

was filled by John Macdonald, a man from Sutherlandshire, whose young daughter Elsie was destined to play an important part in James's life.

In the Highlands of Scotland at that time there were many marked, although minute distinctions of rank, as well as some customs which, although they are fast dying out with the advance of so-called civilisation, still continue greatly to influence the natives of Badenoch. Until quite recent times, the chief difference between a small farmer and a crofter was, that the farmer paid his rent direct to the Chief, while the crofter had only to do with the farmer to whom his hut or cottage belonged, and who allowed him a portion of land for his own use, in return for a fixed number of days' work without wages, leaving him at liberty to employ the rest of his time as he chose. The crofter had a right to money wages from the farmer for any other service, so that he was not the farmer's servant, although dependent on his goodwill for the dwelling-house he occupied. Such were the relative positions of the Stewarts and the Macdonalds their crofters, and it is perhaps not to be wondered at that Mrs. Stewart looked with disapproval (although it was unexpressed) upon the friendship which quickly

sprang up between her daughter Jessie and Elsie Macdonald. She could indeed find no fault with the girl who by her gentleness won all hearts, but she feared for her son, who she saw was attracted by Elsie's beauty. Mrs. Stewart was a proud woman, and very tenacious of the supposed dignity of her family. She had once been overheard saying to herself, "What an awful thing it would be if James was to fall in love with that lassie, Elsie! Him, that's going to be a minister; he must be kept from making such a mistake, for at all hazards his wife must be a lady born. John Macdonald, truly! he's not like me or mine; no, certainly! Him! he's but our crofter, and his bairns are not to be evened with mine."

Consequently, she always spoke disparagingly about the Macdonalds, and put all manner of difficulties in the way of the young people's meeting, although she lacked courage openly to prohibit the growing intimacy. Notwithstanding all Mrs. Stewart's efforts, James's love for Elsie grew apace, until it took entire possession of him; the girl returned his love, and at length he gained her promise to be his bride.

Elsie Macdonald was a young, beautiful girl, such as may occasionally still be seen among the

Celtic population of Scotland, though less frequently to-day than in past times. Tall and well made, she walked with innate grace and freedom of motion ; her refined features, soft dark hair, lovely deep blue, almost violet eyes, and small well-shaped hands and feet, were more what might be looked for in a descendant of generations of chieftains than in a humble crofter's daughter. Her gracious manners and winning smile were the outward indications of a nature born to love and to be loved ; and it was no wonder that the young farmer, with his quick eye for beauty and keen sense of the fitness of things, was fascinated by her, and drifted all unawares into "love's young dream." It was not her beauty alone that charmed him : much more, though unknown to himself, it was the inward grace and truth which shone in all that she did. Her disposition was amiable, gentle, docile, and affectionate, unsuspicious of evil, and ever ready to help the needy.

In the early days of their acquaintance, James discovered that Elsie was capable of a personal love deep and true, and that she could bring out the best part of his own nature, often inducing him to put forth an aiding hand, when otherwise he would have been but little inclined to do so.

James Stewart's intention to become a minister was well known to Elsie when she promised to marry him, but she could never enter into, nor even understand, his intense desire to go out into the world in search of God's service. She said to him one day, when he was throwing discredit on any other way of working for God than preaching to a large city congregation :

"Jamie, isn't God in the glen too? Has He not sheep here, as well as in the towns? And would they not listen to what you have to tell them, and you might maybe do without being a Reverend at all?"

"Oh, lassie," he answered quickly, "you don't know how the Spirit keeps aye calling me not to turn back; and my mother, who is a godly woman, quotes 'Quench not the Spirit,' so that I feel bound to go forward, and, when the time comes, try for as big a church as I can get. Do you not see that, Elsie?"

She shook her head unconvinced, though unequal to reasoning with him, and only said gently, "Weel, weel, laddie, you ken best; but mind and keep me by you wherever you are."

The young man's only reply was to draw her close to his breast and kiss her fondly, to which she

responded by resting a gaze on him full of confidence and love.

This happy state of matters went on for many months, and but few clouds darkened the lovers' horizon. Now, however, the day drew near to which James had been looking forward, and he knew that he would soon have to make up his mind decidedly about his future course.

He took counsel with no one, not daring, not even wishing, to talk with Elsie on the subject, a sure sign that the reiterated hints and insinuations of his mother against the girl were having some effect, although the prompter was ignorant of her success. Of late Elsie had not seen James very often, and she felt that when they did meet he was different to her; he seldom spoke now about becoming a minister, and she could not shut her eyes to the fact that he held aloof from her; but she endeavoured to console herself, thinking that he was probably unwilling to trouble her with his worries and cares. Never did a doubt of his fidelity enter her simple, trusting soul. Alas! alas! she was to find that her faith was grounded on a false foundation. James grew gradually more estranged, until the neighbours began to shake their heads, and say one to another that they feared there was something wrong between the lovers,

and hint that perhaps James would never come back to marry Elsie if he once went away. Meanwhile, the simple girl accepted in good faith her lover's excuses for seeing her so seldom, and she was comforted by his assurance that he felt the hardship too, and his expressed hope that by-and-by he would be able to return to the sweet old ways ; but James knew that he had allowed his love for Elsie to cool, and that he was ready to desert her if he could find an excuse for doing so. A fierce battle had been raging for some weeks in his breast between love of Elsie and love of himself ; in other words, between the good and the bad, between God and the devil. He was very miserable ; his mother had little notion of the havoc her bitter-winged words against Elsie were causing in her son's soul. He was being tossed about, for there still remained some of the old love, and he was racked and tortured by the conflict between it and his ambition. Now the struggle approached its climax ; the forces ranged on the side of God were thoughts of the sweet loving girl who trusted him so unreservedly, and whose life of faith and love he acknowledged to have brought the Almighty Father nearer to him ; he realised that Elsie was his good angel, and he knew that she would help him heavenward if she were his wife. On the

other side there was the devil, disguised no doubt as an angel of light, but a devil still, urging the "call of God," and the "duty" of making himself fit for the position of a leader in Christ's Church to which he aspired.

The last year of the lease of Belnaan was drawing to a close. There was enough money deposited in the bank to meet the student's expenses in Aberdeen. Jessie and her husband had offered a home to Mrs. Stewart, and apparently everything was favourable for the fulfilment of Mrs. Stewart's life-long desire. In spite, however, of the removal of all these obstacles, Mrs. Stewart saw with dismay that James was restless, uncertain, and uneasy. Elsie's gentle but oft-repeated words were disquieting him; he was pondering whether it would not be right for him to give up pursuit of the ministry for love of her who typified to him the love of his Maker, or whether it was really his duty to give her back her troth, and thereby serve God by sacrificing himself because of her fancied unfitness for the position he thought his wife should occupy. Arguing within himself in this fashion, it must not be supposed that he did not think he was honestly trying to find out what God would have him to do; he spent hours in prayer about it, but

all the while he was deceiving himself, for the pride of his heart had blinded him, and he had lost the power of discerning between the good and the evil.

Neither James nor his mother recognised, or at least they did not sufficiently recognise, that in Elsie's antecedents for generations there had been the natural training to make a lady; her ancestors had been members of a clan, and in every Highland clan in past days the Chief was a gentleman accessible to all his followers at any time. The Chief was, so to speak, the father of them all, and every member of the tribe was at liberty to speak to him familiarly, so that all were likely to become gentle at home, and all had native dignity and pride which made them willing to help and to be helped. Such was the custom in past days of all the tribes and clans in the Highlands of Scotland.

CHAPTER III

MRS. STEWART's health had failed much of late years, but no anxiety had been felt about her till the time came near for her removal to her son-in-law's house, when she suddenly lost the use of her bodily powers.

It was then plain to those around her that, in addition to physical failure, her mind had become fixed in the one idea of her son becoming a minister. She firmly believed that success in his calling would be impeded by his love for Elsie ; and accordingly she set about planning on her sick-bed how the engagement could be broken, encouraged by her son's evidently increasing apathy about the girl.

Mrs. Stewart talked much about James's future, but in the word-pictures which she delighted to draw of his church and manse, Elsie was never a feature, nor was her name ever mentioned in connection with the predicted successful career. James listened to all his mother had to say, his vanity was flattered,

and gradually the evil forces of pride and self-seeking gained the upper hand, so that before long he altogether lost sight of the true Almighty, on whose "special call" both he and his mother prided themselves.

Deliberately, James now decided to sacrifice his love for Elsie, and hers (in its expression) for him, on the altar of his own self-advancement, calling it self-sacrifice. He, however, deferred carrying out his determination for so long a time that his mother became unhappy about it, and she feared that unless Elsie could be persuaded to break the engagement on her side, it was by no means certain that her son would have fortitude for the task; so she determined, without letting James know of it, to see the girl herself, and talk with her about the duties and qualities required in a minister's wife, hoping to bring her to the point of relinquishing James of her own accord.

Mrs. Stewart was very ill indeed, but she was a woman capable of much concentration of mind, and she had great force of will. She prepared herself for the coming interview with Elsie by the self-satisfied assurance that she was an instrument in the Lord's hand, appointed by Him to break the fetters which bound her son. "James had made a Dagon of

Elsie," she said to herself, "and the idol must be thrown down at any cost."

Elsie had not been invited to the wedding of her companion, and had been made to feel in other ways that her visits were not agreeable to Mrs. Stewart and Jessie, and she was as much surprised as pleased to receive a message from the widow Stewart, asking her to go and see her.

Elsie was by herself in the cottage when the messenger arrived, and in a cheerful voice she told the boy that she would lose no time in obeying the summons. She had no self-consciousness nor any misgiving as to the interview; indeed, the happy thought crossed her mind that her long illness had perhaps made Mrs. Stewart no longer averse to her engagement with James, and she even ventured to hope that a blessing might be in store for them both.

Immediately she began to tidy up the kitchen, finishing her task by laying a heavy peat sod on the hearth to smoulder until the evening, when it would still be hot enough to kindle a fire for cooking purposes. Then she put on her Sunday frock, tied a blue ribbon in her hair, gave a look at herself in the little mirror on the wall, and after glancing round the room to see that she had forgotten nothing,

went out, locking the door behind her, and placed the key as usual in a hole under the thatch. Glee-fully she ran to the burnside, where her mother was washing, to tell her the good news.

Mrs. Macdonald was a devoted wife and mother, and many anxious thoughts were in her mind as she bent over the washing-tub. A few days before this she had overheard two neighbours talking about the changes going forward at Belnaan and the strange state of its mistress, and she had said to one of them :

“What’s wrong at Belnaan ? I’m thinking the old lady will not be very willing to move.”

“Oh, Mrs. Macdonald ! ” said the woman, “you never saw the like of her, she’s perfectly mad with pride ; but you must not mind her, for she is really not right in the mind.”

This remark had made Mrs. Macdonald rather uneasy, but she answered the speaker with an assumed air of confident unconcern :

“She may say what she likes. I hear very little about her ; but I’m sure that if there had been anything by ordinary Jamie would have told Elsie.”

She said this, and had tried to believe it ; but the disagreeable suspicion was left in her mind that

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the widow Stewart was bent on doing some mischief to her Elsie.

Mrs. Macdonald looked up when she heard Elsie calling to her, and was surprised to see her dressed in her best clothes. With some excitement the girl told her about the message from Mrs. Stewart, and how glad she was to go at once. Mrs. Macdonald stopped her washing to look at her eager, joyful daughter, then drying her hands she gave some finishing touches to her dress and said :

" Well, now, my dearie, you're just perfect ; your frock's real bonny ; aye, you look as nice as can be, and put these blue-bells in your waist-band, for they're the very thing to suit your blue eyes. Take care of yourself, my dear ;" and she added with emphasis, " Mind, now, and don't let Mrs. Stewart be taking advantage of you."

" Oh, mother," replied Elsie, in a shocked tone, " how can you ever think she would do that ? She is aye thought to be a godly woman, and she surely cannot be wanting to take advantage of the likes of me. Besides that, she knows that Jamie and me's trysted to one another. No, no, mother, there's no fear of me ! Good-bye !" And with a cheerful wave of the hand Elsie set out, skipping gleefully on her road to Belnaan.

The mother stood watching her pretty young daughter until she was out of sight, then with a deep sigh she turned again to her work ; but she had no more any spirit in it, her heart was so heavy about the child whom she felt helpless to save. She was well aware of Mrs. Stewart's disapproval of James's love for her Elsie, and she knew that she had a very cunning, vindictive woman to deal with, who would leave no stone unturned to attain her end ; but she hoped that James would stand firm, and even thought it possible that he might have induced his mother to hold out a welcoming hand to Elsie before leaving the place for good.

When Elsie came in sight of Belnaan, a strange, undefined dread began to take possession of her, which was not lessened by Jessie's reception on meeting her at the door, for there was no warmth nor kindness in either words or manner, and it was with great timidity that the girl entered Mrs. Stewart's room. Jessie placed a chair for the visitor beside her mother, and left the apartment. Looking very white and feeble, the invalid sat in an easy-chair unable to move. Her large black eyes, sharp and keen, had a new expression in them to-day that frightened Elsie ; but the hearty greeting reassured her, and her fear was lessened.

For a few minutes nothing was said by either of the women ; they were both very grave, for although Elsie, on entering the room, had been deceived by the warm welcome given to her, she soon perceived its falseness, and the cruel expression on the old woman's face made her intuitively divine that she would shrink from nothing that would help forward her aim, whatever it was.

Sitting in that dimly lighted room, poor Elsie felt herself growing strangely cold and timid, and she shrank more and more into herself. Becoming suddenly aware that her girlhood was past, she was frightened, and the stern uncompromising gaze fastened upon her added to her fear. The white-haired, dark-eyed invalid, calm and composed, sat looking at the girl earnestly, watching keenly every movement, and noting all the changes of expression and waves of feeling that were passing in quick succession over her face.

They each felt that this was a serious interview, and Elsie shuddered as she realised that at its close she would either be a very happy girl or a broken-hearted one. No middle course was possible. In character these two were very dissimilar ; Elsie's open, frank confidingness was quite incomprehensible to Mrs. Stewart, whose naturally

suspicious nature had been made more cunning by her disease—a development of the illness that had attacked her when her husband died. Silence was broken by Mrs. Stewart's saying :

“ Jamie does not know that I sent for you, Elsie, and perhaps he will be angry with me ; but it was borne in upon me by the Lord, that I should speak to you myself.”

“ Oh, Mrs. Stewart,” Elsie replied, “ I was real glad to get your message. I'm only sorry to see you so weak-like.”

“ Well, well,” said the other, “ if the Lord wills it, we poor human beings must submit ; and I have much to be thankful for.” Then she discoursed eloquently on her son's good qualities, his talents, his perseverance, his love for his mother, his devotion to duty ; to all of which Elsie gave a pleased nod of acquiescence. Burning words followed about his having quite made up his mind to be a minister before Elsie had come to the country, how his father's death had hindered him, because there was no way open then for defraying the expenses of his college life, and he felt that duty to his mother required him to stay at home. “ Nearly two years have passed,” the old woman said, “ since the difficulty about money was re-

moved, and the way made plain for his going ; but still he seems contented to stay here. A hindrance has come which is like Achan's accursed thing in the camp of Israel."

In loud, excited tones, Mrs. Stewart almost screamed out, as she shook her closed fist in the girl's face :

" Yes, God will withhold the blessing, if James does not put away the stumbling-block. True, he is going to Aberdeen, but his hands are not clean, his heart is not single."

Her black eyes glared, her face flushed, she moved her arms as if she were trying to push some one away with her hands, while Elsie sat, pale and fixed, unable to say a word in reply. After a few moments' respite, the wicked old woman went on to tell how her prayers had ascended day and night to Heaven for her son, that having put his hand to the plough, he might not be tempted to look back. She shuddered, and her face assumed a fierce expression, as she said with solemnity, turning up her eyes :

" The curse of me, his mother, and of his dead father will rest upon him, if he forsakes his calling, or goes half-heartedly to it."

After this outburst, she folded her hands together,

and sank back in her chair, exhausted. Poor Elsie listened to the tirade with terror and amazement ; she thought within herself, " What can she mean ? Does she think that I—Elsie—am the accursed thing ? " The idea seemed too absurd, and she repelled the insulting thought indignantly. " No, that is not true," she said to herself ; " but then, why does Mrs. Stewart speak to me about a hindrance as if I were to blame ? "

Sitting very quiet, very full of fear, she argued in her own mind that James had said that he told her everything, and he had never even hinted at the possibility of anything hindering him. Elsie never imagined that any one would consider the love between herself and James a possible hindrance to God's service, and she had told him that she would wait patiently until his education was finished. So, when Mrs. Stewart, exhausted, could say no more, the timid girl ventured very gently to remark :

" But, Mrs. Stewart, I don't think there's anything to hinder him now. I'm sure I'll never, never hinder him, but will try and help him all I can."

These words roused still more the burning fire in the old woman, and losing her self-control entirely, she shouted in passionate bitterness :

"You! how can you help him? It's you, with your pretty face and wheedling ways, that has come between James Stewart and his Maker. How could you help him in his calling? you that never even so much as sat down in a gentleman's parlour! If you really love James for himself, and want him to be a dutiful servant of the Lord, you might have seen for yourself that you could never be a right wife for him when he is a minister."

At these words, tears filled poor Elsie's eyes, and with the instinct of self-preservation, far removed from self-assertion, she answered in a timid voice :

"Mrs. Stewart, you are all wrong about Jamie and me. It was him that courted me, not me him, and he is for ever telling me how much he loves me."

The old woman actually hissed with rage when Elsie said this, so that the terrified girl, rising, ran as fast as she could out of the house, stunned and scarcely knowing what she did. The idea that sacrifice, in itself, is the most acceptable service to God, and that He values the thing sacrificed according to its costliness to the possessor, had so completely permeated Mrs. Stewart's thoughts about

higher things, that the mere sight of Elsie MacDonald in her fresh youthful loveliness, intensified her desire that James, her son, should show his devotion to God by sacrificing this beautiful sweetheart of his, and their mutual love, on the altar of his "duty" to God. Self-flatteringly, she thought within herself that thereby two young souls would be dedicated to God by her persuasion, and she would die the happier for it.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Elsie entered Mrs. Stewart's room, joy and hope were in her heart, health and energy in her body : when she left it, she was like a stricken deer, and there was no force left in her as she slowly turned her face homewards. The old woman's words were bearing fruit, and the poor simple girl was tossed hither and thither. Never before had the possibility of a separation from her lover suggested itself to her ; but now, she began to wonder if it would not be right for her to give up the engagement altogether.

A ray of hope came into her heart as she thought that James would perhaps put it all right ; but she checked herself at once, saying audibly :

" No, that must not be ; I see now that I am his stumbling-block, and he shall be free : " raising her voice, " yes, " she continued, " as free as they like. " And she quickened her pace, the decision giving her strength.

When about half-way home, she heard quick footsteps behind, which she recognised to be James's, and, sitting down to wait for him, she bowed her head upon her knees, praying for strength to do what was right. She had yet to learn how much more strength is needed to endure the wrong ; and it was well, for if she had perceived it, she might not have been able to concentrate her powers as she did. A great change had come over the girl ; her childhood and youth were gone, she was passing through deep waters, and for a little while she thought the billows must overwhelm her ; but they were beginning to recede, and she felt that she was not yet wholly wrecked. Her maidenly pride had been wounded, and her exceptionally strong sense of justice sorely hurt by Mrs. Stewart's words : her nature rebelled, and she was spurred on to ignore for the moment the existence of either her love for James, or his love for her. She was filled with indignation at the thought of the late interview, and when she remembered the insults that had been heaped upon her during the last year, in word and action, by both Jessie and her mother, the cause of which, mysterious at the time, was plain enough now, she stamped her foot and clenched her fist, so that, when James drew near,

he was indeed surprised at the change in his sweet, pliable Elsie, whose gentle face had never worn such a defiant air before. She saw that he was displeased, and her resolution was strengthened.

James had arrived at Belnaan very soon after Elsie left, and found his mother crying hysterically, in consequence, Jessie said, of the way Elsie Macdonald had behaved to her.

James asked no questions, but divining that some great injury or insult must have been inflicted on Elsie to make her do or say anything having even the appearance of being intended to hurt his mother, he had started at once in pursuit of her. His anger increased as he walked rapidly, so that before he reached Elsie he was in a rage against his mother and sister, and had forgotten all about the "duty" that he thought was laid upon him in regard to his sweetheart.

"Oh, my poor lassie," he said, sitting down beside her, "what did they say to you? You needn't take any heed of my mother's words, for since her illness she often doesn't mean what she says."

Elsie looked at him piteously, then a flood of tears relieved her, and James made a movement to

put his arm round her neck ; but she drew back, shaking her head. As soon as she was calm enough to speak, she summoned her pride to her aid, and said with great deliberation :

“ Jamie, we must part ; but I want to say something to you before I say farewell.”

“ What for must we part ? ” James said ; “ what has come over you ? ”

“ You needn’t ask that,” she replied ; and with faltering words she proceeded : “ I have seen your mother ; she was in a rage, and it’s like enough that she will not mind all she said to me. ’Deed, if she had been in her proper senses she would not have said all that she did say, but I’m glad of it, for she told me what I’m feared is true ; and oh, Jamie, what can I do ? ”

While she was speaking, James was reviewing the matter in his mind, and came to the conclusion that probably his mother had not said much to hurt Elsie, so he replied coldly :

“ Do, Elsie ? Why, make no more fuss about the whole affair, and be my own sweet lassie still.”

“ No, no, Jamie,” she answered, “ no such thing. I give you back your promise, and you and me are to be no more to each other than other folk after

this." Gathering courage, she continued after a pause: "Jamie, I must speak; your mother need not be the least feared that I will force myself either on her or you. Nay, nay, James, I'll be no hindrance, and you're to tell her that, and say that she may keep her mind easy on that score."

Rising from the bank where she had seated herself, she drew herself up to her full height, and stood for a few moments looking at the man beside her; then she said somewhat bitterly:

"I'm very young, Jamie, and it's cruel, cruel of the whole lot of you; but—ah well—good-bye." They both stood still for a minute, then, as if relenting, Elsie added, "God bless you, Jamie—good-bye." Shaking her head, she said, "Don't follow me on any account, I'm going home as fast as I can."

Without shaking hands, or again looking at him, she turned her back, and walked away with great dignity.

James, petrified, sat still, his mouth open, and his eyes staring at the departing Elsie till she was out of sight; then, with a deep groan, he ejaculated, "All's for the best, I believe—but, aye, she was a fine lassie."

No sooner had the gentle, suffering girl, strong in

her very gentleness, reached a part of the road where a jutting rock hid her from James, than her physical powers gave way, and, sinking on the heather, she leaned back against a large boulder, moaning piteously. Only for a few minutes, however, did she give way to this expression of wounded feeling; the remembrance of her mother's anxious looks and warning words stirred her up to resume her walk, though with trembling steps.

It would not have been easy for a passer-by to recognise in this wearied, hopeless figure, the happy, eager young girl who only a few hours before had turned round to wave her hand in glee, and nod her head as she passed out of her mother's view.

The pretty head was drooping now, the eyes were bent on the ground, the mouth quivered, and the whole face told a tale of sinking, sickening sorrow. The hands hung listlessly by her side, the feet were weighted as with lead, the very dress seemed to partake of her wretchedness, and the faded blue-bells added to the desolateness of the picture.

What had happened to the sweet girl who was naturally so agile, so graceful, so winning in her

ways? Never again would this moorland flower rejoice in herself among the beauties of her native hills. The spring of youth was gone, and gone for ever. She staggered as if under the burden of old age on that quiet afternoon, a complete wreck, due to a wretched old woman's pride.

The children coming from school ran after her, shouting and laughing, all eager to tell their stories to her; but they met with no response, and could not understand the reason why, until one of the elder boys reminded the others that Jamie Stewart was going away, and that maybe Elsie had been saying good-bye to him, and she would be sorry, for he was her sweetheart, and would be away for a long time.

Little did the child guess what that good-bye meant for his friend; but with innate delicacy he made the other children run on in front, so that Elsie might be left to walk home undisturbed, her little sister Annie, who would not go with the others, being too young to make her sister feel that she was noticed; catching hold of her skirt, the child prattled to herself, content to know that she was beside Elsie.

As they drew near home, the dog came bounding up, running and leaping to attract attention, but in

vain ; at length, seeming to discern that his mistress was in trouble, he ceased his gambols and walked soberly by her side, looking up in her face now and then, as if to assure her that he would not desert her.

Mrs. Macdonald, who had finished her washing, was busy preparing supper when Elsie came in, so that the girl could pass through the kitchen unobserved to her own little room. Entering it, she closed the door, and sternly schooling herself not to give way to her feelings, began to gather together the various gifts James had given her, and without a moment's hesitation locked them all in a small box. As soon as she heard her mother pause in her work, she took advantage of the interval, and beckoning her, gave her the box with the key, and said:

"Take good care of it, mother ; my precious things are all in it, but I do not want to see them again."

The mother understood. There was no need to tell her that sorrow had come to her child, and she refrained with difficulty from tears when Elsie said mournfully :

"You'll pity me, mother, won't you, and keep the rest of them from bothering me? I

could not bear them saying anything to me even now."

With true motherly instinct, and the tact which so peculiarly belongs to the Celt, Mrs. Macdonald made no reply in words, but, drawing the girl to her breast, she kissed her long and tenderly. Taking the box, she then left her to regain composure before joining the family party. When Elsie came in to supper, she made her sit with her back to the light, and then so completely engrossed the conversation, that Elsie's unwonted silence passed without remark.

Elsie was endowed with great gifts both of body and mind, gifts meant to be used in the daily work of the world. To enable her to fulfil her part in the universal working, she ought to have been taken and placed in a position that would have necessitated the exercise of her faculties for the general good ; it is the man's province so to place the woman. Elsie was going to realise that, with the desertion of her lover, the possibility of using her natural gifts to which she had unconsciously been looking forward, had ceased. She did not yet, however, know what was implied in the renunciation she had made.

According to the conventional or professional

view held by Mrs. Stewart and her son of the teaching of the Bible and the Shorter Catechism, the latter was bound to give up his love in order to "glorify God, and fulfil man's chief end." They considered that the sacrifice of Elsie was demanded by the Higher Power, as they put it; and Elsie, agreeing with them in theory, lent herself willingly to the delusion, so that at this point in her life she was a ready victim to the fetish of "duty;" for what was the so-called sacrifice of herself but a fetish in a Christian garb?

It must not be supposed that James realised the suffering that Elsie was subjected to, neither did his mother in its full significance, because at neither of the interviews described had the girl shown the intensity of her feeling, and it so happened that in the hurry of preparation for the change impending over the Belnaan household, every other thing was lost sight of, and Elsie's name was never so much as mentioned in the family.

The neighbours soon found out that there was something amiss between the young people, and they had much to say about the heartlessness of James and the maliciousness of his mother; but none of them had the temerity to speak about the matter to the parties most concerned, and it seemed

as if James would be allowed to begin his new life without rebuke or warning.

In the following chapter it will be shown that he had one true friend, who was only waiting for a favourable opportunity to speak to him about the great injury and injustice he was doing to Elsie.

CHAPTER V

DUNCAN MACNAIR, to whom we are now introduced, had loved James Stewart from boyhood, and had watched his career with admiring interest. From the first, he had sympathised heartily in the love between James and Elsie, and hoped great things from their union, for he well knew Elsie's loving nature and James's strong one, and thought they would be a well-matched couple.

Something must be told about Duncan before going on with this story. He was the Shepherd of the Glen, and his life had been mostly spent on the hills. When a younger man, he had often passed whole nights on the heather beside his flock, and during many years of service not a sheep had been hopelessly lost.

During his solitary hours on the hill-side, Duncan had learnt much of the Spirit of God in Nature, and having himself gained trust and confidence in the workings of the Almighty on the earth, it was his

constant desire to lead others to the same. In his communion with Nature, he had discovered that the God who had made all things beautiful in their own way, is the same God who allows men the liberty of going on, putting no obstacle in their path, no obstacle to their blindly following that self which ever leads temporarily to the destruction of the good. Outward things and their several developments for the world's needs were all tokens to him of the loving care of that one God, with whose animal and vegetable kingdoms he was well acquainted, and on the lonely hill-side he had learnt by experience the oneness of the whole creation with the Creator.

As may easily be imagined, such a manner of life as Duncan led was calculated to make him shy and reserved among his fellows, but his heart was too full of love ever to allow him to become misanthropic. We find accordingly that he was interested, though from a distance, in whatever concerned his neighbours, and that he had several lifelong friends in the Glen; but with the exception of his nearest neighbour, Mrs. Munro, he had but little intercourse with them. Duncan Macnair was a striking specimen of the Scotch Celt in past days; thoughtful and self-contained, his mind dwelt much on the force and

power in Nature as well as on her beauties, and he could express his thoughts in poetical language ; but timid and mystical, he was imbued with superstitious fears, and it was his love for humanity alone that prevented him being a slave to them. In his youth he had set his affections on a young woman who did not respond to his appeal for her love, and she passed out of his ken, emigrating soon afterwards to Canada, and he never loved any other woman in the same way.

Mrs. Munro, Duncan's neighbour, was a tall, good-looking woman of commanding aspect, and the name of Cæsar's wife, which had for some long-forgotten reason been given to her in her husband's lifetime, seemed so appropriate that the title still clung to her, although she had been a widow for many years.

Duncan was apt to pride himself on his masculine independence, and to boast of his power to do everything for himself ; but Mrs. Munro knew better, and she supplied him secretly with many comforts which, but for a woman's care, he would not have thought of, and on the whole he was grateful, although it must be confessed that he was at times a little snappish even to his benefactor.

Like Duncan, Mrs. Munro was in middle-life, but

strong and active. She was a broad-minded as well as a large-hearted woman, and had cultivated her natural gifts with so much shrewdness that she was far beyond the generality of her countrywomen in true views of life. Cæsar's wife was no great favourite in the neighbourhood, for, although very kind, she was apt to be impatient, and it was only in those who looked below the surface acerbity that she inspired confidence. Many were afraid of her sharp tongue, and some had even had the audacity to pity her husband on account of it ; but Sandy well knew his wife's genuineness ; he loved and trusted her with all his heart, and he had had his reward.

Mrs. Munro's daughter, who lived with her, was seldom at home during the day, and a crack with Duncan after finishing the " bits o' turns o' wark " for him was a great pleasure to both of them.

She dearly loved a bit of gossip, and took great pains to retail to her friend all she could pick up. She was extremely desirous that Duncan should marry, and took every opportunity of urging him to do so, telling him repeatedly that he " sorely needed a wife to make a man of him." Duncan did not enjoy her company when she talked in this strain, and he used often to rise and walk off, leaving her

very indignant ; but, nothing daunted, she would return to the subject the next time they met.

On one occasion, Duncan having listened quietly for longer than usual, so much longer indeed that she began to hope that his obstinacy was giving way, she bravely proposed one young woman after another to him for a wife, recapitulating their several good qualities ; but the effort was futile, Duncan proved invulnerable, and said crossly :

“ No, no, it’s useless talking to me. I’ll not be for having any idle hussy in this house ; she wouldn’t have any work to do, and would either be getting into mischief with the lads near by, or else she would be wearying herself to death when she was left by her lone, and I was on the hill. No, no,” shaking his head, “ never a young lass for me.”

“ Well,” Mrs. Munro answered, “ if you are so frightened for the young ones (though I’m not saying I believe it of you), there’s Lexy, who’s surely old enough not to be getting into mischief, and you must allow that she is a decent, comely woman.”

“ Lexy,” he said, with a contemptuous turn of the lip, “ ’deed, I would be far left to myself if ever I thought of taking her. No, no ; I will be biding as I am, but I thank you for your interest.” After a short silence he added : “ Did ever you hear tell

of the minister at Greenock, that went there from the Highlands, and what he said when somebody asked him what for he had not a wife ? " Mrs. Munro shook her head, and Duncan went on : " Well, I'll tell you. The worthy man said that if he ever married, he would need to get a prudent woman and a pretty object to look upon ; and I've heard tell that he never got the two things in one woman. Now, that's just my case ; and, what's more, I'm convinced that I'll never get it, for it's not to be had."

As soon as he had delivered himself of these sentiments Duncan took his plaid down from its peg, preparatory to going out, and as a hint to Mrs. Munro that he had had about enough of the subject. She, however, was not to be balked, and as a parting shot she said :

" Tuts, man, he must have been a conceited fool, that minister, and the women were well quit of him ; but I aye thought that you had more sense." Nodding her head and laughing to herself, she looked him straight in the face and said, " But I see I have made a mistake, and Duncan's not any wiser than the rest of his sex."

Then, as if a new idea had come to her mind, she added abruptly, " I forgot to tell you that your favourite, James Stewart, has surely done an ill

turn to Elsie Macdonald. They're saying that he has given her back her promise ; I met her yestreen, and never did I see such a changed lassie ; she was as pale as death. Believe me, Duncan, these Stewarts are a bad lot." Then throwing her shawl over her head she went away without another word. Duncan's grave face showed how much he was shocked and startled by the last remark of his friend, and that night he slept but little.

It was towards evening of the day after this conversation between Mrs. Munro and Duncan that James Stewart turned his steps to the Shepherd's cottage to bid him farewell.

The young man had put off his visit until he could do so no longer, fearing with some cause that Duncan would express disapproval of his conduct to Elsie, and he was depressed and unwilling to expose himself to the mentor's rebuke. At his own home everything was in readiness for the next morning's start, just as had been the case a few years before ; and James could not help comparing the present with the former circumstances, congratulating himself on his improved position. His heart was filled with self-satisfaction, and his whole face shone as he drew near the cottage, at whose door Duncan sat, basking in the

rays of the evening sun. Raising his bonnet, James addressed his friend with a pompous air :

"How is all with you the night ? It's a fine evening, Duncan."

"Ay," said Duncan absently, "it's grand ; just look at these clouds, and at the sun on that hill-side ; are they not all speaking to us ?"

"Yes, they are very beautiful," James replied ; "I'm thinking I'll often be wearying for a sight of these hills when I am in Aberdeen."

There was silence for a few moments, then Duncan, seeming suddenly to remember the presence of the young man, looked at him.

"They're telling me," he said inquiringly, "that ye're soon going away ?"

"Yes," answered James, "I'm going to-morrow, and I've come for a crack with you, for the sake of old times."

"Well, well, laddie," was Duncan's reply, "sit down here," pointing to a seat beside him, "and let me hear all about you ; but first tell me, Jamie, if it is true that you have given up Elsie, as they say."

"It was her that gave me up herself," replied James angrily ; "I had nothing to do with it, nor am I to blame."

"Surely it's not possible, poor bit lassie," said Duncan, in a reproachful tone; "I cannot believe it, for she was that fond of you."

"But it is true," interrupted James, while the elder man went on to himself, "And yet it *may* be true, for if she thought you wanted her to do it she would give herself up. Poor bit thing!"

James fixed his eyes on the ground, but his face grew very red.

"Duncan," he said, "it's been a hard fight to let her go, for I'm telling you the truth when I say that I love Elsie terrible much, and I think I'll never see her like again; but I must submit."

Duncan looked incredulous, and shaking his head ominously, said: "I cannot comprehend you, James; what is it that you mean? Elsie aye loved you well, and she is not one to change."

"Well," James replied, "I'll tell you all about it: when I saw that the way was getting clear for my becoming a divinity student, I spoke to Elsie about going away, and I told her that I would never be content with staying all my life in a country parish. She was kind o' vexed like, and tried to make me talk about other things, showing no interest whatever in my plans, so I began to think she was losing conceit of the whole concern,

and maybe wanted to be done with me altogether. After that I believe my mother got into a passion at her one day (whiles she does that nowadays), and she told Elsie that she was not fit to be a minister's wife because she had not been born a lady. Well, that very day I went after the lassie, for I knew that my mother's tongue was sharp, and she told me that we must part ; she would listen to none of my entreaties for her to be my sweetheart still. Since then I haven't gone near her, and I'm sure you yourself cannot deny now that *she* gave me up, not me *her*."

Duncan said nothing, but gazed wonderingly at James, who seemed startled by the expression on his face, and his pleased self-satisfaction changed into shame-facedness, which Duncan noticed, and consequently began to hope that the good was going to prevail ; but alas ! the time for that had not come. James stifled his conscience, and gave way to sullen obstinacy, which led him to say with anger in his tone :

"I did think, Duncan, that you, above everybody, would think me right in going forward to the ministry. You know quite well that the great desire of my life has always been to be a minister, and it seemed to my mother and me that the time

had come for taking the first step. Elsie evidently doesn't care about the life I wanted to lead, so it seemed to us that I must deny myself in the matter of marrying."

"Ay, ay," said Duncan sarcastically ; " and how did the Lord favour you, by letting you know that the time for this had come?"

" I don't know what business you have to be questioning me in this way," said James, rising and stamping his foot, " but I'll tell you, because you are such an old friend, and I respect you. In the first place, the lease of Belnaan is out, and you would scarcely advise me to bind myself for another nineteen years ; secondly, I have saved a good sum of money, which will enable me to meet my college expenses ; and thirdly, Jessie and her husband want mother to live in their house. Do you think there is any need for more reasons? The Lord is plainly pointing out that I should now go forward."

Duncan, fixing his eyes on the young man, whom he really loved, and whom it was his heart's desire to help, said gravely, after a pause : " Do you think in your innermost conscience, James, that your conduct to Elsie will meet with approval from the Lord ? No, no, my lad, no such thing. Depend

upon it, there will be but small blessing on your endeavours if you begin by jilting Elsie."

James, apparently shocked at Duncan's view of the matter, rose up as if offended, but recovering his self-possession, he said with some bitterness:

"Well, what was I to do? I cannot make Elsie keep her promise to me: and maybe it is better for both of us that we should separate; there's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"Oh, man Jamie, Duncan's maybe very ignorant, but for all that he whiles gets a sight of things that other folk don't see: and I'm not sure about you at all, at all."

"Do you not think," said James, "that the way was quite clear from what I've told you? And if Elsie chooses to think that she would not like the ministry, nor be fit to be a minister's wife, what can I do but take her at her word?"

"Oh, ay, I'm not misdoubting you about the ministry, but what about the lassie? James, you have no right to take her at her word, and you'll be punished yet for your cruel deed."

Duncan spoke with much solemnity, but his hearer was unimpressed, and said curtly:

"You're all wrong about Elsie, for she does not care a single groat; you should have seen

how ready she was to give me up ; I can tell you it is not her, but me, that's to be pitied."

"James, I will tell you something, and I trust you will take what I say to heart," Duncan replied ; "I learn a lot when I'm out in the early mornings, not only about the beasts, but about my fellow-men too, and I whiles hear things I'm not meant to hear. Well, the other day I was near John Macdonald's cottage, and my attention was called to a woman in great distress. She walked slowly to a knoll beside where I was resting, but did not see me, for she sat down with her side to me. My eyes are not so sharp as they once were, and at first I didn't recognise her, but Cooley knew, and off he ran wagging his tail, and then I saw who it was. It was Elsie, but oh ! what a changed lassie ; wae's me, poor lassie, poor bit thing ! She laid her head on Cooley's, and putting her arms round the dog's neck, sobbing sore, she said, 'Cooley, Cooley, I nearly wish I was a doggie, for it's awful hard to be a lassie : I daren't say what I feel, and I'm near dead, but nobody knows the reason.' She cried bitterly for a while, and at last, without ever seeing me, she rose and went away. Now, James, mind you that's quite true."

The young man looked very sullen, and muttered to himself, "It is perfect nonsense that. It is not possible after the way she spoke to me yon day, so cool as she was. I wouldn't believe it, Duncan, if I had not seen her."

Duncan took no notice, but went on to say: "I have not mentioned this to any other body, but I'm telling you, that you may not deceive yourself. Elsie was speaking the truth then."

Duncan ceased, and held out his hand to James, who said proudly:

"Thank you for your opinion. Now I'll be saying good-bye."

Duncan rose, and taking off his hat, said very gravely:

"Farewell, my boy, the Lord bless you, and give you a clear eye to see the right, and a strong will to do it."

James walked away, his heart filled with pride and self-satisfaction in spite of all that Duncan had said to him.

CHAPTER VI

SOME days passed before Mrs. Munro and Duncan again met, and when they did meet it was plain that they were not quite so unconstrained as usual. This was especially noticeable in the former, who, after cleaning up the house, sat down with her knitting in hand at the fireside, opposite Duncan. Every now and then she looked at her companion curiously, as if she had something particular to say, but lacked the courage to begin, and he evidently wished to appear absorbed in whittling a crook on his shepherd's staff. Whilst Mrs. Munro had been energetically sweeping and dusting until every part of the house was as clean as a new pin, her mind had been equally busy about its occupant's personal well-being, with the result that she determined to try and lead him to a freer, happier life, but she did not know how to begin her remonstrances. At length she summoned courage to say :

“Duncan, you and me is very old friends, and

I'm going to say something that will maybe make you angry ; but I must say it, and it is for your good. Now, will you be listening to me for the sake of past days ? ”

She laid down her knitting, and fixed her large grey eyes on her companion, who would not return her gaze ; so she gave a deep sigh, and Duncan was obliged to look up, saying with hesitation :

“ I have an idea, Jean, of what you're wanting to speak about. I'm perfectly sure you're going at me again about matrimony. But I tell you beforehand, woman, that it is no manner of use. I am like the nether millstone, and neither you nor anybody else can move me.”

Mrs. Munro laid her hand on his knee, and said coaxingly :

“ Now, you'll listen to me till I tell you something about him that's gone.”

Smiling to himself, the shepherd nodded his head and said : “ Well, well, Jean, you're a woman, and a wilful woman, too—one that's sure to get her own way with her tongue—so I may as well give in at once ; go on, but don't expect me to be agreeing with you.”

Acting on this half-hearted permission, Mrs. Munro began :

"My Sandy, or Cæsar, as they called him, was a good, hard-working creature as ever lived, and him and me lived many a happy day together ; but heh ! heh ! he wasn't always easy to put up with, and I had my fights to make him stand up for his own rights, and the childers' and mine."

At this point Duncan could not help looking askance at her, a humorous gleam in his eye, for he well remembered how his friend Sandy had had the credit of having lived in bondage to his strong-minded wife, often scarcely daring to express an independent opinion in her presence ; and he could not resist saying, in a sarcastic tone, "That's news, anyway ; I ever thought that he left the standing up for all rights to you, his own as well as yours."

Paying no heed to this remark, Mrs. Munro said in a low soliloquising voice : "Poor Sandy, I loved you well. You were often in sore trouble about nothing at all, and I was real cross when I first found out your ways, but it wasn't long till I made a different man of you. Ay, when Sandy felt that he had me to back him up, he did many a thing he couldn't have ventured on before I took him. Poor Sandy," she went on, "good Sandy ; it's long since I laid you to rest in the old kirkyard ; oh, a long time ; but you sleep quiet now, I reckon."

She groaned deeply, and threw her apron over her head. Silence reigned for a few minutes, then Duncan might be heard muttering to himself :

“ Rest, truly ; ay ! she said rest ; ay, she laid him to rest, and sorely he needed it.”

Without noticing the interpolation, Mrs. Munro, withdrawing the apron from her face, continued to speak : “ The paraphrase says :

*Few are thy days and full of woe,
O, man of woman born,
Thy doom is written ' Dust thou art,
And shalt to dust return.'*

Ay, and my Sandy has gotten his rest ; I laid him down after a long illness. Poor Sandy, you are resting now, I well believe, poor man that you was ! ”

Duncan became strangely restless while Mrs. Munro was talking. He looked as if either his chair was not standing firm, or he himself was not sitting steady on it. Certain it is that they moved about together in a queer way, and that every now and then he shook himself, as if his clothes were not comfortable to his skin, and he went on muttering at intervals, his eyes fastened on the floor : “ She laid him to rest ! murderous woman that she is.” He looked up furtively, and repeated, “ murderous

woman! laid him to rest, she said. Ay, what does she mean?" And he shuddered, scarcely daring to raise his eyes from the ground. "I do believe," he continued incoherently, "she thinks to lay me to rest next. She has got her eye on me even now."

Sure enough, Jean's large grey eyes were fixed full upon Duncan, and although he did not glance at her from fear, he felt the gaze all the same, and kept dodging as if in search of a way of escape; but there was no escape from Jean's eye, and he muttered again: "The murderous woman! she is a witch, ay, she knows that she is, and she's meaning to throw her spell over me the same as she did over Sandy."

Fain would the man have risen, but he lacked fortitude even to move, and could not speak aloud, his tongue seemed tied to the roof of his mouth; and he was motionless, fascinated by the idea lurking in his mind that Mrs. Munro was "not canny," and that she was doing her best to bewitch him.

At this moment, a black cat made a sudden bound from a dark corner of the room on to the dresser after a mouse, knocking down some crockery with a loud noise, and the animal, terrified by the

din, sprang to the top of the chair behind Mrs. Munro, and stood there, its back raised, tail erect, and eyes flaring. Puss hissed and spat, and Mrs. Munro shrieked out, "Duncan, Duncan, take care of yourself!"

Poor Duncan was trembling violently in every limb, and, hiding his face in his hands, he almost shouted out :

"Ay, ay—it's you that's the witch—that you are! Out of this and take your cat with you!—murderous woman! you've done for me at last!" Looking through his fingers, he whispered, fear depicted on every feature, "Am I going to be laid to my rest like Sandy? Oh, the wicked woman that you are! You have surely given yourself to the devil at last! ochone, ochone!"

His eyes glanced cunningly from the terrified cat to the woman, then back to the cat, and he repeated: "Yes, there is no doubt about it, she *is* a witch, and she is going to work her will on me."

He groaned and sank back nearly insensible. Duncan's imagination had fairly got the better of his reason, and a tremendous fear had taken away his senses for the time, but it was only for a few moments, as the whole scene was over in less time than it takes to read it. Mrs. Munro, roused by

Duncan's emotion, shook herself, flung a besom at the animal and stamped her foot, saying in a loud, commanding voice, "Get out o' that, ye evil beast ; go back to Satan your master."

Swiftly the cat disappeared, Mrs. Munro cast a look round the apartment, and then at Duncan, who was really a pitiable object ; the ludicrousness of the whole affair came before her, and she broke into a hearty fit of laughter. Beginning to clear away the broken dishes, she said in a cheerful voice, half to herself, half to Duncan, but not addressing him, "Well, that was a kick-up, did ever ye see the like ?" Turning quite round to look at Duncan, she was struck by the consternation on his face, and said rather tartly, "Man, what are you feared for ? There's nothing broke that's of any consequence, but no thanks to that confounded baudrons. Is't your cat ?"

Setting the kettle on the fire, she soon had tea ready for herself and Duncan, who, however, did not recover his spirits so fast as his friend expected ; and seeing this, she proposed adjourning to the cottage-door, when she resumed the interrupted conversation by saying, "Man, Duncan, are you shaking still ? Now, if you had a wife you would not be half so frightened," and she laughed to her-

self at the good chance she had for her argument. "Before we was married, Sandy has told me, how easy he was frightened, and I mind well on one day when I had to go to Inverness by myself ; well, when I came back that night, Sandy was like one demented. He said he had seen the devil—he had met a black witch—a hare had crossed his path, and I don't know what else. He was in an awful state : I made fun of him, and he got into such a rage that I really thought he would do himself some harm ; but in a while I gave him his supper, and lighted his pipe for him, and he cooled down, and after a wee sleep he was all right again ; but what would he have done if he had not had *me* then ? "

The fact was (and Duncan knew it) that Sandy had seen a very pretty young woman in his wife's absence who had captivated him, and on returning home he had felt distracted ; but Mrs. Cæsar was too self-complacent to see that Duncan looked at her now with a strange expression in his eye, as he said with deliberation :

"Jean, Sandy ever trusted you ; it was often a wonder to me to see his patience, and how he would aye bear with you ; for oh, Jean, whiles ye were very trying."

"Well," said Mrs. Munro, "we'll say nothing about that; he's away, and I'm not blaming him, but it wasn't only *his* patience that was tried."

She shrugged her shoulders and her brows became a little contracted, as she continued in a more subdued tone: "That's not what I'm wanting to speak about. I'll go on with what I was saying. Well, on his death-bed, Sandy tell't me that he had never known what it was to be easy in his mind about things, till he brought me home. Now, Duncan, last night when I was lying awake his words came back to me, and then *you* came on the scene; and do what I would, I could not get quit o' you—I was always seeing your sad face. I fell asleep, thinking of you, and in the morning ye were with me still; so I made up my mind there and then to give you the benefit of his last words."

Duncan's attention was by this time fairly rivetted; he had known Sandy quite as well as his wife, probably better, and was curious to hear what she had to say, so he gave an encouraging grunt, and she proceeded:

"The poor man had had a very restless night, but in the early morning he fell into a wee sleep, and I shut my eyes too, and leaned back in the

chair. It wasn't long till he called me to the bedside, and in a weak voice said, 'Wife, you and me has gone a long road together; you've been the good wife to me, and I don't think I could have found a better one. It's true we're both a bit quick in the temper, and we've often had to have a fight before we came to an agreement, but I'm sure that I couldn't have held on as I have done if it hadn't been for you. Now, Jean lass, we must part. I am loth to leave you, but it must be—you'll never forget me, Jean, will you? I'm sure I'll never forget you.' After saying this, he sank back on the pillow, and said not one word more." At this point, all at once Mrs. Munro's self-command gave way, and covering her face she wept copiously, while Duncan, much troubled, kept silence for a little, but at length he stammered out, patting her kindly on the shoulder :

"I know, old friend, that ye're meaning well by me, and I thank you for telling me about yourself and Sandy, but it's all of no use. I can *not* do it. The time has gone by, but it is a comfort to me to know that Sandy and you were so contented with one another. To tell you the truth, Jean—and I may do it now that he's gone—I used to wonder at his patience. Some people called it softness, but I

never said that." And he gave a sly look at his companion, who hastily overcame her emotion, for this was too much for her forbearance, and she blurted out :

" *His* patience, 'dced ! truly the patience of a man, whoever he may be, is soon worn out. If you were wondering at *my* patience now, you would have been nearer the mark." Rising abruptly, she walked backwards and forwards for a little, then stopping in front of Duncan, she raised her forefinger to emphasise her words, and said : " Ye'll mind that I'm not saying one word against him that's away, for if he hadn't patience, it was because it was never in him, and he wasn't to be blamed. Now, Duncan, I have told you what no other human being ever heard, and I'm hoping that ye'll consider on it."

She then drew her shawl over her shoulders and said good-bye to Duncan, who thought to himself, " You are a good woman, Jean, in spite of all your whims. May God bless you ! " And as he watched her disappearing figure he said aloud, " But you are a bit dangerous, too, and I would like fine to help you on the road the way I did your Sandy."

CHAPTER VII

ELSIE MACDONALD, a child of the mountains, was imbued with the same ideas of sacrificial service as Mrs. Stewart and James, and without much reflection she had been ready to accept the position they put her in, actually buoying herself up with the thought that she might consider herself specially favoured by the Most High, in having an opportunity to offer her love for James on the altar of God's service.

The gloomy mysticism of the religious views, held by many of those whom she had been accustomed to reverence in her childhood, had made it an easy task for Mrs. Stewart to impress her strongly and vividly with the idea that sacrifice of her own personality was imperatively demanded.

When she was still very young, Elsie had been fascinated by the weird tales and legends of her native glens and mountains ; more recently she had been much interested in reading about the human

sacrifices offered by the Druids ; and a long-forgotten story, with its tragic details, was forcibly recalled to her memory.

The incident shows the intense, innate religious feeling of the Celt, as well as the power possessed by the race of subordinating the strongest human affections to the religious instinct, which in old days was almost entirely directed to belief in a cruel God, a Spirit whose chief attribute was exacting justice, and who had to be in some way propitiated, and was the more likely to accept any sacrifice which was very costly to the giver ; it is easy to understand how belief in such a creed might lead to cruel proceedings.

Elsie was playing one day in a dark corner of the kitchen, when an old witch-like woman, well known for the terrible stories she told, came in, and sitting down by the fireside, began talking to Mrs. Macdonald. Presently, the child's attention was arrested by the gesticulations and hushed tones of the speaker, who was giving a vivid description of the "lapse of Halmdary." This is a thrilling incident referred to in the records of the presbytery of Tongue as "a melancholy scene," and it is seldom alluded to in the present day, but nevertheless it is a well-authenticated occurrence. Early in

the century, a lay preacher of great ability exercised a tremendous power over a large district in Sutherlandshire. By his eloquence and enthusiasm he attracted immense crowds of people, including at times even the ministers of neighbouring parishes, to hear his sermons. On the occasion alluded to, the place of meeting was a barn on the farm of Halmdary, every part of which was filled to overflowing with an eager congregation, listening intently to the preacher, whose sermon was upon God's wrath against sin, and he was still preaching when daylight began to wane. The people were unwilling to move, night came on, and with it darkness, which (scarcely relieved by the dim light of two candles on the minister's desk) concealed all distant objects in the building. Awe pervaded the assembly, enthusiasm was at its height, speaker and listeners were alike enthralled, when suddenly the preacher pointed with outstretched arm to a black bird perched on a cross-beam in the roof, and solemnly declared in thundering tones : " The devil is among us ! see him up there watching us ! he will not go away without a sacrifice being offered up and accepted by God."

The affrighted people looked up where the preacher pointed, and beheld a raven—bird of

evil omen—gazing down upon them. So fully were the whole congregation convinced that the devil was amongst them in the form of the bird, waiting to pounce upon them, soul and body, that they willingly followed the preacher in a fervent prayer, entreating God to accept a substitute for them, and so cheat the devil of his prey, and were quite ready to agree to his terrible suggestion that they should draw lots, and offer up the human being on whom the lot fell as a sacrifice, hoping thereby to propitiate the offended Deity. The congregation consenting, forthwith an altar was improvised, lots were drawn, and the lot fell on the minister's own infant son. The baby was laid on the altar, prayer was offered up, and the father stood, knife in hand, prepared to plunge it into his innocent child's breast ; when the nurse, awaking suddenly to a sense of what was being done, gave utterance to a piercing shriek, which broke the spell, and stopped the deed of horror, by dispelling the "delusion."

The congregation dispersed with fear and trembling, some with shame and self-abasement, others in dismay, tormented with the fearful thought that Satan's power had proved too much for them ; that their sin was still unpropitiated, and God's justice unsatisfied. The raven proved to be a black hen

which, unnoticed by the people, had taken her usual roosting-place when daylight began to fade.

Poor little Elsie was transfixed with horror as she listened to the terrible story, which was told with much dramatic force, and for a few minutes after the close of the narrative she could not move. The women did not know of the child's presence, but were startled by a fearful cry; and Elsie, terrified, rushed screaming to her mother's side, hid her face in her lap, and cried so excitedly that a fit seemed imminent. Mrs. Macdonald lifted the little one, pressed her to her breast, and crooned over her softly, so that she fell asleep. When the child woke up her mother took good care that the young mind was not encouraged to revert to the story, and it was never allowed to be mentioned in the family circle. It left an impress, however, on the child's imagination, and, strange to say, it comforted Elsie now to remember the regret of the old woman that the sacrifice had not been consummated, and to think that she was not thwarted in her own self-sacrifice, but had been able to relinquish all claim on James.

This was all very well for a short time, while she thought and felt herself to be a heroine; but by-and-by the reality came before her; and soon after

the shock of James's conduct, and his departure for Aberdeen, an occurrence took place which shed a light on the mischief he had cruelly wrought, and for which there was now no remedy.

Mrs. Macdonald knew that her daughter had been terribly wronged, and in outspoken words, as well as in her heart, she cursed Mrs. Stewart, for she was sure that it was she who had influenced her son to act as he had done. She felt, however, that it would not do to let her child sink without trying to help her ; and she felt assured that God, as He is to be found in Nature, could alone enable her to bear the mental suffering. Elsie loved Nature, and in former times was wont to tell her mother how she saw the Creator's loving hand in it all. The girl was quite unable to be of any use at home, in domestic work, and the daily family life had become very trying to her racked nerves, so that the mother often planned errands for her, sometimes with little Annie for a companion, but oftener by herself. One morning Mrs. Macdonald said :

"Elsie, d'ye think you would be able to walk up the Glen as far as the big house the day ? I've a message to deliver, and haven't time to go myself, but you'll do instead of me."

The girl answered languidly :

" Oh yes, I'm not minding what I do, but I can't walk fast. I'll take Coolie with me, and then you needn't be anxious if it's the forenigh't when we come back."

The mother prepared some oatcake and cheese, in spite of Elsie's assertion that she wouldn't eat it, saying :

" Oh, ay, take it, for you're never sure of getting anything at the house, and you should be hungry after your walk ; or if you are not wanting it yourself, Coolie will be glad of it."

When Elsie was ready her mother patted her on the back, as if to encourage her.

" Now, my dear," she said, " be sure you don't tire yourself too much ; take it canny, and sit down now and then."

She smiled pleasantly ; but Elsie had no smile to give in return, she only shook her head despondingly, and gave a deep sigh as she set out on her long walk.

The mother stood watching her as long as she was in sight, contrasting this wan, desolate-looking girl with the cheerful lively Elsie who had turned with such a bright face to wave her hand, as she started on the same road on that fatal morning

only a few weeks before. The outside world was all as beautiful now as then : the sky as blue, the birds twittered as merrily, the flowers perfumed the air as sweetly ; but with what different eyes both mother and daughter now surveyed the scene !

As Elsie walked away dejectedly in the bright sunlight, the very picture of a broken-hearted girl, out of keeping with her surroundings, her mother looked after her with pitying eyes, and her heart was filled with bitter grief, too deep for words, and she could only make an unspoken appeal to Heaven, with uplifted hands and eyes. She was rebelling with all the force of her nature against the untimely sacrifice of her sweet child, and the pity on her face shortly gave place to anger, so that she cried out passionately, unable longer to control her feelings.

Elsie was in a different frame of mind, and could not wholly understand her mother. Stupefied with the blow, she did not know what to think, but she did not blame its authors ; suffering acutely, she was crushed in spirit, but free from all temptation to be revengeful.

The mother felt her daughter's wrongs more than the daughter herself, and the love drawn out towards

the sufferer was far greater than she could ever have imagined herself capable of. It filled her whole being at this moment, rousing her anger towards somebody or something to a pitch hard to conceive. She threw her apron over her head, wringing her hands, and sobbed aloud as she sat down on the seat at the cottage-door.

It was a beautiful day in late autumn, and the atmosphere, indescribably crisp and clear, yet not too bright, gave an exquisite tone of colour to everything seen through it. Sad and dreary-minded as Elsie was, she could not help occasionally stopping to look with admiration and a kind of affection on Craig Mhigeachaidh, the mountain which encloses the Glen on one side. The lights and shades were very beautiful ; every passing cloud threw a grey shadow on its broad flank as it seemed to sweep over its surface, followed quickly by the glorious sunshine which lighted up the deep corries, and brought their lichened rocks and the exquisite shades of verdure into clearer view. No one with a true love of Nature who has once seen the Grampian mountains on a fine October or November day can ever forget the sight. There is no scenery, no air better fitted to soothe tired-out nerves, and to comfort and encourage hearts wearied with the sorrowing struggles common to

humanity, than that of the hills and moors of Badenoch.

Elsie had not gone far before she sat down to rest and eat her "piece," with Coolie at her side. The spot she chose was by the side of the stream in sight of the forest at the top of the Glen, and opposite the grand old mountain. The river Feshie ran along very softly in this part of its course, with none of the rushing noise that characterises it further down the valley, and its banks were of lovely velvety turf, edged at that season with ferns and mosses of all kinds. Here the pretty water-wagtail, balancing himself on a stone in the middle of the shallow river, looked round knowingly but trustfully at Elsie; the lithe brown lizard slid out noiselessly to bask in the sun; bees and wasps hummed and buzzed with monotonous sound; grasshoppers, too, chirped and hopped about; flies of many hues were a constant temptation to Coolie, who tried but unsuccessfully to catch them, a loud snap telling of his attempt, while the boom of a large beetle fell occasionally on the ear.

Little wonder that, when the poor stricken Elsie laid her head on a hillock, soothed by these lulling sounds, in addition to the soft murmur of the water and the sighing of the gentle wind among the pine-

tree tops, she was soon fast asleep, one hand resting on Coolie's back.

As she slept, she dreamed a dream, strangely vivid and distinct. She saw in the vision a great procession of men, women, and children coming through the wood towards her, accompanied by music, at first soft and low, then strong and loud. There walked at the head of this procession three tall, noble-looking men, whom she knew to be Druids, because they were dressed in pure white robes, richly decorated with gold, which flowed gracefully from head to foot ; their heads were crowned with wreaths of leaves, and their long white beards reached nearly to their waists. Their grave, pale faces wore a solemn expression, especially noticeable in the foremost, who, to Elsie's astonishment, bore a striking resemblance to James Stewart. He carried in his arms a very lovely little girl, naked, but adorned with spring flowers of every kind. The child was evidently happy, and danced in the priest's arms, keeping time with the music, but she never elicited a smile from her bearer, who looked grave beyond description ; and no wonder, for, as the dreaming girl discovered, the other two priests had faggots of wood, lighted torches, and large knives in their hands, signs of a Druidical sacrifice.

Presently, she saw the procession stop. A fire was lighted, the two priests raised their hands to heaven, sounds of monotonous music were in the air, the child was anointed with oil, and the principal priest was about to lay her on the fire. Elsie's wonder changed to horror, and she woke with a scream, which startled Coolie so much that he barked furiously, thereby bringing his terrified mistress back to earth, and the consciousness that it was all a dream. She sat up, soon all around became clear, and she remembered where she was. The vivid picture of the child she had seen prepared for the Druids' offering brought back to her memory the old Sutherlandshire woman's tale of "the lapse of Halmdary," which had been all these years unremembered, and gradually the girl's eyes were opened to the monstrosity of what she had suffered as a sacrifice to God.

From the day of her dream on Feshie-side, Elsie's physical powers failed more and more ; her strength was consumed, burnt up as surely as if she had indeed been a victim of the ancient Druids. But as the body slowly faded, Almighty Truth and Love became clearer and clearer to her, so that before her death, which took place in spring, she spoke words of peace and consolation to her parents, pleading

with them to forgive James. She told them how God had taught her that His ordering of the world is always good, and that the Oneness of His work is constantly marred by man's self-sufficiency and his self-abasement ; but they would not be comforted. Once again Elsie saw James, when he was sent for from Aberdeen at her request. The angels of life and death were then hovering over this simple, faithful, loving girl ; and she spoke words to him of deep spiritual import. Alas ! alas ! they fell on deaf ears, and not till long after she was gone did they bring forth fruit in his life.

The morning after Elsie's death, the poor bereft mother, distracted with her grief, refused to be comforted. She loved her child with a deep, comprehending love, and had recognised that she was fitted by nature to fill an important place, in which she might have done much for the world. Now, all her hopes were blighted, and who could wonder at any outburst of passion ? It may be well to follow Mrs. Macdonald in humility and sympathy to the bed where lay the body of her child. She looked with sad but dry eyes on the sweet face, lovely still, but the loveliness was no longer that of life ; it was the shadow of the life that had been, which was left on the mortal frame for a short

space after the soul had fled. The poor mother's heart was well-nigh broken as she gazed on the motionless body; then falling on her knees, she raised up her clenched hands and appealed to the Almighty, calling wildly for vengeance on those whom she rightly considered to be the cause of her bereavement. "Cursed hypocrites!" she cried; "Oh, God, punish them according to their deserts! Send fire on them! Oh, make them suffer for their doings!" She paused, as if searching for still stronger words, and beat her clenched fists together in her fury, when lo, she suddenly drooped. What can have changed the fierce woman in a moment into this supplicating, humble one? Let us see. While she was still breathing out revenge, and calling down vengeance from above, a gentle little arm had been passed round her neck, a sweet little face of wonder had held itself up to be kissed by "Mammie," and the question was whispered into her ear: "Do you not think, Mammie, that Elsie's like an angel? She must surely be seeing Jesus now, for she looks happier and bonnier than ever I saw her?"

It was Elsie's favourite little sister Annie, who had stolen into the room after her mother, curiously inquisitive about the great change there, and who,

having heard the distressed words and groans, had come forward to where Mrs. Macdonald was kneeling, and with intuitive tact was thus trying to comfort her. Mrs. Macdonald turned round, and touched to the heart by the little one's sympathy, burst into a flood of tears. Thus the tension was relieved, and, hugging Annie to her breast, she said softly :

"You're right, my dear ; there's no doubt about Elsie's being with Jesus, and happy there." Then she sobbed out, as racking thoughts came before her : "But, oh, she was happy here, and we were all happy ! Oh, why is she taken ?"

The child laid her own soft cheek on the face of her mother, who was now leaning over the bed, and pressing both their heads on the pillow beside Elsie's, as if she would show that Elsie was theirs still, she kissed and stroked the dead face for a few moments, without any sign of fear or shrinking. Then she took her mother's hand to lead her away, saying with a shudder :

"Come away now, mother ; it's cold here !"

And although the mother would fain have stayed longer, the look on Annie's face warned her that the child's feelings were becoming too much strained, and she rose from her knees. Taking up the child

in her arms, after one more look at the quiet figure on the bed, she went out and closed the door.

Nearly mad, thirsting for vengeance, because of the death of her daughter, Mrs. Macdonald had been planning how she could punish her persecutors, when the little child, with winning ways and coaxing words, had brought her back for the time. Even then, in the paroxysm of rage, she had begun to experience that God is the Almighty Love ; that Elsie was hers still, and that God had taken her to keep her safe ; for she saw clearly that there would have been dangers in her path from which she must herself have been powerless to save her. These thoughts softened and strengthened her, so that the mother's love for Elsie in heaven did much to increase that for her husband and the children left to her on earth. Oftentimes, however, she had a hard fight with her vehement nature before she could forgive James Stewart, and still more his mother.

The upward course of such a soul is a hard mountain climb. Many, many a time must those slip and stumble who are groping their way in dimness, searching for a hand to trust ; but they needs must ever advance onwards and upwards, in spite of falls often terrible and heart-breaking.

So it would be with this woman, who was full of ardent love, but pierced through with so bitter a sorrow that it had to find expression in violent words. The time would certainly come before her work on earth was over, when the divine power to forgive and bless would be hers, and she would be ready to embrace in her loving heart all who might come needing rest and consolation, and none would fear to confide in her ; but the time for that had not yet arrived.

As years went on, Mrs. Macdonald and her daughter Annie became more and more to each other, and in spite of their mutual relations of mother and child, they were made equals by the insight vouchsafed to both of them, as they stood and knelt beside Elsie's body. In her after-life Annie proved a real blessing to her mother, and the sweet trusting love between them made their hard daily toil less irksome, their daily troubles less difficult to bear.

CHAPTER VIII

DURING the sad, dreary months that followed Elsie's death, Mrs. Macdonald often longed to give expression to her feelings with regard to its cause, but consideration for her husband restrained her in her own home, and her grief was of a kind in which she could allow no stranger to intermeddle. There was one, however, with whom she knew she need have regularly converse, one who had loved her child and sincerely appreciated her.

This was Duncan Macnair, the shepherd of the Glen, he who had been James Stewart's monitor. Various circumstances had prevented the friends meeting for more than two years, but their relations with each other had always been pleasant, and it is easy to understand that, from Duncan's special love for Elsie, there was not likely to be any constraint between him and her mother, when they unexpectedly met one day on Feshie-side. After the ordinary salutation, Duncan said a little diffidently :

" I'm wondering, Mrs. Macdonald, if you will care to hear that James Stewart has come to visit his mother, and he came to see me yesterday ? "

" And what is that precious fine gentleman about now ? " was her answer.

" 'Deed," Duncan replied, " he's not like the same man that went from here. The Professors give him a high character they're telling me, for he's a capital scholar, and they say that he goes to a lot of their parties ; but oh, sair's the day, he looks an old man by what he should do."

" Ay," said Mrs. Macdonald, " what way is that ? How does that happen ? "

Duncan gave her a questioning look before he answered, as if not quite sure of his ground.

" I don't know for certain, but he's getting a lot of learning at Aberdeen, and I suppose that has something to do with it ; for they're telling me that he works at his books day and night."

" Ay, ay," Mrs. Macdonald remarked in a tone of mockery. " Oh, ay, he'll be a grand scholar, no doubt ; his head's very hard, and there's not much fear of his being beat, for he's terrible clever ; but, Duncan, he *cannot* get a blessing, for without love it's not possible to be a good minister : and all the love he ever had is laid in my Elsie's grave.

He'll find that out some day, although he may put a good face on it even now."

The shepherd shook his head sadly, and said :

" I well believe ye're right ; James did love Elsie, I'm certain sure of that, but the devil tempted him and whispered the lie in his ear, that he would never get a top place in the ministry if he hadn't a grand lady for his wife, and he thought that Elsie could never be a fine dame. There's not a truer saying than that Satan is a hard master, and he is terrible clever, that we know full well. He has heaps of ways for tempting men from God and light and love."

As Mrs. Macdonald listened to these words, anger took possession of her, and she said hastily :

" It's all very well to say it was the devil made James throw off my Elsie, but the devil's whiles not so black as he's painted, and you cannot deny yourself that your young man was ready to listen ; but he will *not* escape, and neither will that old witch his mother. I hope I will live to see them both well punished, for I'm sure they deserve it."

Duncan, taking her hand in his, pointed with kindly gesture to a heather knoll by the road-side, motioning her to sit down. Seating himself beside

her, he remained silent, his eyes shut, while the poor agitated woman continued, with increasing excitement: "Yes, all the learning in the world couldn't hinder James Stewart looking older than his years; there's nothing to keep him young; it's not book knowledge that will do that. Oh, James is cold, terrible cold; he will never turn out a real preacher of Christ, though no doubt by his cleverness he'll get a church, and I wouldn't wonder but he'll give them grand screeds of sermons. 'Deed, maybe he'll tell them about God's wrath against sin and warn them to repent, but he can never, never draw folk to Jesus by the cords of love, for he knows nothing about it himself; and how can he tell what he has not felt himself? A fine minister, truly! He must be a splendid hypocrite. God help the poor creatures that go to James Stewart for comfort and consolation! No doubt he'll pretend to give it, but it'll only be a bagful of wind that they will get, and they'll go away very discontented; he will give them plenty of words, if that will do. No, no, believe me, they made a great mistake, James and his mother, when they did not see that they should foster and care for my Elsie; for it's certain, though I'm her mother that says it, that she would have brought a blessing to

any man that married her, be he minister, or farmer, ay, or even laird. They'll have to pay some day for their hypocritical profession, but my bairn is in heaven in spite of them all, and all that they did to her here."

She paused, apparently for lack of words; her whole wild nature was stirred, and she found expression of the long-repressed feelings difficult. The wrong that had been done to her own sacred motherhood, as well as to the sweet maidenhood of her beautiful child, was forced upon her, and called for vengeance, but the very strength of her feeling prevented the easy flow of language.

Uncultured though she was, this woman knew that love only can bring the blessing, and that love recklessly thrown away, and murdered, must have its revenge in dreadful sorrow, and she was trying to show this truth to Duncan.

The intense emotion of Mrs. Macdonald startled Duncan, who had forgotten much of the fire of his youth. With eyes full of wondering sympathy, he looked at her inquiringly, puzzled to know how to deal with this acute feeling. For a little while he said nothing; then laying his hand heavily on hers he groaned out: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away. Don't grieve too much, my

woman, our bonnie Elsie is fär bonnier now than she ever was before."

The embittered mother here interrupted him, saying vehemently :

"Do you think that thought can ever comfort a mother whose child might have been living now if she had never seen these cursed Stewarts? My hope is that God will yet punish them that dealt so cruelly to my Elsie. She would have helped to make a fine stook at harvest if she had been left to grow. Away with the whole lot of them!"

Excess of emotion obliged her to stop, and she sat still, silent and worn out. Recovering composure shortly, she continued with trembling in her voice : "I can *not* tell you, Duncan, how terrible lonesome the house is to John and me, let alone the bits of bairns, who feel the loss as much as us. Do you not think that God will punish him and her for all they've done to me and mine? If He doesn't, then all I can say is that He is as bad as them."

She waited for an answer, but the listener said nothing, so she repeated the question in a different form, saying :

"Do you believe that God is omnipotent? If you do, will you tell me if He can possibly let these wicked, cursed persecutors escape?"

"I don't know, my woman," replied Duncan, very thoughtfully, "what God will do, but I'm certain sure that He will do what is right."

They were both silent for a little, and presently Duncan said :

"I think, Mrs. Macdonald, we may leave the punishment to come as God sees fit. You're a stranger in this country, and maybe you never heard the story about the laird of Invereshie, whose wife bewitched him, and he suffered for it as well as her."

Mrs. Macdonald did not know it, and Duncan, pointing to a broad rock covered with moss which juts out over one of the deepest pools in the river Feshie, said, "That is the spot where the dreadful deed was done," and proceeded to relate the story in his native Gaelic. Duncan liked to talk in English, but he had more fluency in his own tongue ; and although some of the original force is lost in the translation, we must be content with it.

"Long, long ago, there lived one John Macpherson, a laird of Invereshie, whose fate and that of the beautiful lady who bewitched him is the subject of the tradition which is still referred to with hushed tones in the district. It is said that this John Macpherson when on a visit at the house

of a neighbouring chief, met a lady from the South with whom he fell desperately in love.

“Macpherson was a tall, handsome Highlander, with all the virtues and many of the natural gifts of his family. The lady, who was extremely beautiful, was highly educated for that age, and had most attractive manners, besides being possessed of considerable wealth. Invereshie took every opportunity of becoming intimately acquainted with her, and it soon became evident to all that the admiration was mutual. In spite, however, of the fascination exercised over him by the lady, Macpherson was strangely unwilling to speak to her of his love, deterred by certain signs and occurrences which led him to question whether she was not possessed of the powers of witchcraft (for he was very much influenced by the superstition of the time and place), and he feared she might be using these powers on him. At length the following incident happened, which led to a sudden proposal of marriage and its acceptance.

“Macpherson was in the habit of spending a whole day from time to time at his own mansion, for the purpose of transacting the business of his estate, returning to his friend's house in the evening. On one of these occasions he was detained rather

longer than usual, and the moon had risen ere he was ready to set out. The road from his mansion led past the old graveyard of Insh, and he was riding quickly but carelessly, joyfully anticipating a meeting with the lady of his love, when his horse started violently, trembled, and refused to proceed. Its master dismounted, and thinking the animal's terror was due to the shadows of the trees cast on the glittering road, tried to lead it past them to a more open space ; but the horse snorted and could not be induced to move. Macpherson looked all round for the cause of the animal's behaviour, and his horror was unspeakable when he descried a ghost-like figure emerging in the moonlight from behind the graveyard wall.

"Clothed in a long white robe, the tall figure advanced slowly, and as it drew near he thought he recognised the features of his beloved. Dismayed, the chief lost his power of speech, and his terror was not lessened when he heard a voice saying softly, 'Invereshie, Invereshie'; and he stood transfixed for a few moments, trembling in every limb ; but all at once his fear was changed into delighted surprise, as he became assured that this was no ghost, but the lady on whom his thoughts had been fixed with anticipation of joy.

He clasped her in his arms, making a passionate declaration of his love, to which she eagerly responded, adding, however, in solemn tones, 'Invereshie, never forget this witching hour of night. Never forget our midnight meeting here.'

"Then she disappeared as mysteriously as she had appeared, and nowhere, either in the sacred precincts or on the road, was any sign of the ghostly visitant to be seen. So, remounting his horse, which was now quite quiet, the chief rode slowly along in deep amazement, haunted all the way by the words, 'the witching hour of night,' the meaning of which he could not solve, and which troubled him much. Arrived at his destination, Macpherson sought out his friend to tell him of his engagement to the lady, but he said nothing about the circumstances connected with it. The news gave his host great satisfaction, and in due course he announced it to his guests who were assembled in the drawing-room, among whom was the lady elect. Suddenly, while the master of the house was speaking, she groaned and became insensible, and to the dismay of her lover did not recover consciousness for some time, during which the poor man's anxiety may be imagined; then, all at once, as suddenly as she had lost her senses she regained them, and was

gayer and brighter than ever, the long insensibility leaving no bad effects. Such attacks occurred more than once during the next few weeks, but notwithstanding the undefined dread of witchcraft, which was the result in the chief's mind from these mysterious illnesses, and for which the other visitors thought there was abundant reason, the lady's fascination over him increased daily. He was completely enthralled by her, and hurried on the wedding, which took place very soon. Immediately after the ceremony was over, Macpherson took his bride home to the ancient mansion of his fathers.

"On the arrival of the newly wedded pair, they were met by an immense crowd of the Macpherson clan, who all, with the exception of one singular group, gave a true Highland welcome to their chief. The party alluded to consisted of two very old women, seated each in a pannier slung across the back of a donkey. They were Invereshie's nurse and her sister, and were both strikingly repulsive in personal appearance. Only their heads and shoulders were visible above the edge of the panniers, and they were so much alike that it was difficult even for their acquaintances to distinguish them. They wore large white mutes, with shawls of the Macpherson tartan thrown over their

heads, which, added to the sharp black eyes, wrinkled brown face, nutcracker nose and chin, and stray locks of grey hair blowing over the forehead, gave them a weird witch-like appearance, quite in harmony with the curses which they muttered as the bride passed by. The lady was terrified as she noted the looks cast on her by the two, but she did not understand their words, and clung trembling to her husband, who had not before observed the old hags. She implored him to send them away, but all he would do was to order the procession to move on more quickly, telling her that she must be mistaken, for it was perfectly impossible that his nurse should wish him and his wife any harm, much less curse them: she was apparently satisfied, and the untoward incident was forgotten.

“The beautiful but extravagant lady brought nothing but misery to Invereshie and his people; not only did she waste her own fortune in a very short time, but so rapidly was she spending her husband's, that black misfortune began to face him. Still, she insisted on keeping the house full of company, and when her husband remonstrated with her, she pleaded for permission to go on with her gaiety, coaxing him in every way she could think of, and

he weakly conceded to her request from time to time.

"He himself disliked the company so extremely, that he often absented himself for hours, spending the time in long walks or rides. One day he turned his steps towards the cottage of his old nurse, whom he had not seen since the day of his arrival with his bride at Invereshie. As he drew near the hut, he overheard the two old crones talking in distressed tones, lamenting over some great misfortune which was impending, but he had no idea that the subject of their lamentations was himself; so it was, however, and the one was saying to the other :

" 'Ochone, ochone! What's to come of Invereshie? That woman has bewitched him. Ay, ay, we always were afraid it would turn out so. Oh, that it was possible for us to do something to save our dear master! But no, we can't. He must break the spell himself, or he will be ruined body and soul. Ochone, ochone!'

"The sister echoed the words, and added: 'Oh, that our dear boy would but listen while there's time; he might be saved yet.'

"Evidently the words were from the hearts of the speakers, and there was no need for Macpherson to ask what they meant, for he knew full well, so

instead of going into the cottage he turned his steps homewards, sullenly meditating on what he had heard, and determined to put a stop to the extravagance of his wife. Once again he seemed to hear the words, 'the witching hour of night,' and began to associate them with the spell the old nurse spoke of. Arriving at his own house, he heard the usual sounds of music and revelry, and stayed outside until the company had retired to their rooms. Then he opened the hall-door, and going straight to his wife's bedroom, found her fast asleep. The pale moonbeams falling on the bed where she lay gave her the same ghost-like appearance as on the night when, emerging from behind the churchyard wall, she had alarmed and fascinated him into making the proposal of marriage, and his suspicion that she was possessed of some witching power was confirmed.

"Rousing her roughly, he ordered her to rise and go with him for a walk, which she did, wrapping herself in a rich blue velvet mantle, lined and trimmed with ermine fur.

"They took the road leading to the river, which gleamed like silver in the moonlight. Trembling, the lady took hold of her husband's arm, and to hide her terror she talked without ceasing ; but Macpherson,

giving no answer, strode along fiercely, dragging her with him.

"At length, as if impelled by a mischievous spirit, she said, looking up in his face with a coquettish smile :

" ' Invereshie, doesn't this remind you of the moonlight night at the churchyard ? Do you remember " the witching hour of night " ? ' "

" He stopped abruptly, shook her hand from his arm, and quivering with passion, madness in his eye, said in a voice of rage :

" ' Yes, truly. It is the witching hour, and you are the witch ; but I will bear your witchcraft no longer, your spell over me is broken. ' "

" Suddenly seizing her by the waist, he flung her violently from the rock into the rushing river. She gave a piercing scream, and catching hold of the branch of a tree called for mercy, but in vain ; her husband shouted out, ' No, your spell must be broken, and there's no way but this. ' Then drawing his dirk, he severed the branch to which she was clinging, and savagely thrust her over the edge ; three times she essayed to clutch the bushes on the bank, but with the fury of a demon he ever pushed her back. After the third attempt the lady sank, and uttering a terrific cry which was heard far up the

glen, Invereshie sprang in after her, and neither of them was ever seen again."

The story ended, Mrs. Macdonald, who had listened with keen interest, nodded her head very gravely, and said :

"Yes, yes, I take it, Duncan, I see it. Hech, sirs ! but beauty is a wonderful thing ! She must have been a grand sight when she was dressed in all her fine clothes. But, oh ! pity me, what an ending ; poor thing, poor creature !"

She flung up her arms as if in protestation, letting them fall again heavily, and continued in a scarcely audible voice :

"But then *he* was a chief, and his forbears had been chiefs too."

Rising from her seat, she stood silent, peering forwards into the darkness of the river, and with outstretched neck and arms, her whole attitude that of intense feeling, she cried out :

"Yes, Invereshie could do that. He was a chief ; ay, it needed a chief to do it. None but a chief *could* throw her in ; ay, verily."

Drawing herself up to her full height, with swelling bosom and arm raised above her head, she exclaimed bitterly :

"Ah, yes, it'll take the men a long time to

know how to trust women, ay, a long, long time."

With a suppressed cry as of feeling too deep for utterance, her whole frame sternly governed, she stood gazing up to heaven with eyes full of tears. Clenching her fists, she seemed to be appealing to the sweet blue sky, and with a deep groan she repeated in a hushed tone: "Ay, ay, a long time."

Dejected and despairing, she sank down on the roadside, her head drooped, the long hair which had come undone fell over her face, and with her head nearly touching the ground, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

Duncan looked on amazed. He had never seen the like before; his heart laboured, he breathed heavily, his legs trembled, and all he could say was: "Yes, yes! Ay, ay!"

The glorious mountain opposite which they sat was casting its protecting shadow over the glen, and soon this poor racked mother began to feel its soothing power. She got up slowly, pushed the hair back from her face, and folded it at the back of her head; then she said very humbly, but with firm gentleness:

"Ay, Duncan, the lady cried for mercy, for

a higher mind, for more insight from the chief; he didn't know how to give it to her, so he cut away the branch, and he had to follow her. Just you think of that! But, oh, what an ending to both of them!" After a pause, she continued: "Ay, Duncan, they're all deaf, they're all blind, they will not, cannot see; they will not, cannot listen; they're for ever misdoubting their own selves as well as others; poor creatures!"

Without another word on either side, these two human beings then separated, and went their own ways.

The sun was sinking in the west ere Mrs. Macdonald and Duncan parted; she turned her steps to her own home, while Duncan wended his way to the hill-side, longing to be at rest.

Mrs. Macdonald, like Duncan, had lived her life among the mountains and under their shadows, and in many times of trouble and sore struggle, both of soul and body, they had spoken to her in their own language, bringing peace to her from their Almighty Maker.

The strength of the Grampians, their beautiful colouring, their lovely, ever-changing shadows, their joyous dancing lights, all brought into view

by the animating life-giving sun, had taught her to trust the all-loving Giver.

To her there was a love dwelling on the broad bosom of her beloved Craig Mhigeachaidh; it seemed to be spreading out its ample wings, inviting her and every one in trouble to rest with it. It seemed to say to the poor mother's aching heart, "Suffering soul, come to your Father and mine; doubt Him no longer, trust and rest in His Almighty Power, as I do."

As she walked home that evening everything connected with the mountain pointed in her mind to perfect trust. Generation after generation, its stability had been unshaken; year after year, its beauty had been renewed; ever its summit had pointed to heaven; storm, rain, sunshine, were alike messengers to it from on high; century after century, it had done its work in trustful industry. Trust was the Almighty's impress upon it, and it seemed now to be saying, "Away with your hypocrisies, your lying professions, ye little, puny, self-satisfied men!"

Mrs. Macdonald and Duncan had both seen the meaning in the spirit of the hills, and uncultured as they were, these impulsive, loving, Highland natures had grasped a truth, hidden from many

a powerful intellect. They had learnt that it is useless to profess to know, to profess to be able to teach; they had perceived, but without the ability to put the thought into words, that profession is a curse. They had recognised that as everything good is the outcome of trust, and all is one great whole, so to deny the heavenly origin of man's earth-born nature is to deny that God's work in everything is good, and mistrust of human beings, alas ! must follow, whereby men do the devil's behest. Mrs. Macdonald knew well now that mistrust of the Father's beautifully tempered and arranged work in her Elsie had been the means of killing her, and that her death was the result of a false conception of the universal mind.

CHAPTER IX

THE day was fast declining as Duncan slowly wandered on, until there was only light enough left to see dimly. The leaves seemed huddled together, the vegetables were drooping, the flowers were drawing in their petals, even the stones on the road appeared more settled down in the earth ; the stones forming the wall seemed closer packed together ; everything in its own way expressed "we are retiring."

On the northern horizon there was a beautiful, soothing grey in the light that bade fair for the morrow. Stretching towards the west, and far away to the south, the sky was deepening blue ; but coming, coming, evermore coming was night's purple covering, shading over the trees, the wall, the road, the moor. The people whilst they walked were being covered, and looked as if they were striding along to be more and more covered by these ghostly foldings of night. Yet not one thing seemed to be

making any effort, they only retired into the night, they were bid to enter and they went ; all seemed satisfied to rest awhile. They drew close together, shrinking more and more ; even the house-tops looked more slanting, as if they, too, were trying to be more compact and supporting, as if they wanted to protect and embrace those who were sheltering under them. Soon that silvery hue of the northern sky passed away, and the purple robe of night stole silently over all things. Men's faces lost their colour, the trees lost their green, the red of the wall disappeared, the roofs of the houses borrowed night's robe, the grey hue of the chimneys was no longer pale, but purpled o'er with her dark robe. Night was stealing everything away ; it was "the witching hour of night." Deeper, deeper the darkness grew ; there seemed no limit to its depth.

"Get ye within," said night, "I will cover you all ; take your comfort, see not, know not, feel not." It was the unconscious reign when all seemed one—the one that knew how to give confidence, invited all to come and rest, to abide therein in sleep's cherishing endearments. The birds were winging their way to roost, the baby yawned and cried to be laid in its cot, and the elder children retired thank-

fully to sleep's sweet refreshment. All were passing restfully into sleep.

The night was falling fast ; the stars were struggling to appear. Duncan looked at the hills, and saw no form ; at the sky, the trees, and could see naught but shadows. It was a land of shadows, but shadows definite and distinctly marked by time. It is not so with the shadows on the spirit ; they are impalpable, and " take no note of time." We walk along, the shadows make us turn ; we look in this direction, we feel in that ; we are hunted about, driven about, led here and there—taught to be ready—and thus led to go on, ay, forced to go on by shadows of the spirit in "the witching hour of night."

Duncan was groping his way on the hill-side among the shadows of night. It was a long time since he had passed a night out of his house, but he felt that now he must get near the Almighty ; and he had experienced of old that, to do this, he must let himself be one with the earth, be alone in the night with his Maker and his Maker's universe, in order to regain the calm, sweet confidence in the Father's working which had been so rudely disturbed.

While he was gathering his sheep together, he muttered in Gaelic at intervals :

"Ay, Jamie, you thought you could see and know Elsie : oh, laddie, you should have let her shadow guide you to know yourself. Your book-learning, what is it all? Your mother and you thought you must get a lady for your wife, because you were to be a minister ; but you forgot that you must be a minister first, or how could you take to yourself a lady? She could never come down to you, and how could she help you to minister to us poor creatures that are snowed up in the winter, and blighted and pinched in the spring? We want to feel the love of our fellow-men with us in the long dark nights ; we want to know that our minister will surely give us a word of encouragement on the Sabbath, and that our minister's wife will give us a bit bonny smile, and maybe a shake of her hand."

He rambled on in this style for a little, and by-and-by lay down on the heather, wrapping his warm plaid about him, and, as he lay in the surrounding stillness, sleep with gentle force closed his eyes.

Elsie appeared to him in his sleep, coming in her old playful way, waving her hand as she used to do when she descried him in the distance. She was dressed from head to foot in rich purple heather, and held a large bunch of white heather in her hand. Duncan was looking admiringly on the lovely flower-

clad maiden, when lo ! the heather robe was changed into one of glossy, green foliage, interspersed with numberless ripe red cranberries, and dark-blue whortleberries, and the girl said joyously: " See, Duncan, I bring fruits of earth from heaven to you." And while he looked a change came over her face, and it was lighted up with a smile, the like of which did not pertain to earth. Then the dreamer beheld James Stewart, but only for a moment ; as he looked the vision vanished, and Duncan awoke. He rubbed his eyes, looked round with a dazed expression, but could see no Elsie. Ah ! it was but a dream, a spirit visit, and he sighed deeply, for he knew that James Stewart's presence could, as yet, give no pleasure to Elsie. The dream brought some comfort, however, to Duncan, who, as he lay thinking, became filled with hope that Elsie's spirit would, in the right time, bring the light of love to James's heart. He felt confident now that the fruits of her life would yet be gathered by those whom she had loved so well here, and he was gladdened by the hope that, through her shadow's leading him, James would come to know the greater life.

The dream itself, however, left an impression of supernatural awe on Duncan, for superstition darkened his Celtic mind, and he longed for the morning,

and was glad and thankful when the dark night began to fade away into the dim light of fast approaching dawn. Poor man ! his constant companion, the dog, came and licked his weather-beaten hand, rubbed against his knees, then barked furiously, wagged his tail, and jumped about as if to bid good-bye to the darkness. The sheep began to scatter, looking more and more for food as morning woke up ; the lark, spreading its wings, mounted up till lost to sight in the blue ether, and the lapwing curved her wings beating the air, so that she might be carried to where her food was to be found, and begin the work of the day.

After watching the gradual coming back of all things to their wonted forms and positions, Duncan said to himself, looking at the heather and flowers beneath him, and at the sheep grazing around him, and at the birds wheeling overhead :

" Oh, ay ! it's all very well now that the morning's come again ; ye're all very clever ; now ye've got the daylight, you, every one of you, take yourselves off, but you were glad enough to creep together in the night ; ye little twin lambs, thrusting out your noses, you get your forelegs well forward now, and whisk your tails, and even begin to take a bit run to yourselves ; ye're very particular

about what you'll eat, dainty enough, quick to see where your mothers are going; ye give a shy look at the old dog and poor Duncan, now that ye can see them all; I wonder, though, what ye would be without the night! I know that if there was no night you could never grow any more, and would soon not be worth the eating, for both you and the grass grow in the night."

His soliloquy ended, Duncan got up from the ground, and stretching himself took his staff in his hand, and walked away, renewed and refreshed by his solitary night on the moor.

The comforting, soothing solitariness of the moor and the mountain-side during the night is unspeakable, and happy are those who know its healing virtue. The human loneliness in midst of such varied company, the incomparable companionship of Nature, and the possibility of communion with the bountiful Maker of it all, are indescribably strengthening and solacing. Many a poor, wandering soul, searching like Duncan for light on some difficult problem, has found on the moor the great peace from the Almighty which will enable him to act at the right time, giving him rest meanwhile; and for the time, at least, the restless, dissatisfied yearning of spirit has been soothed. The

infinite, fathomless blue overhead, the wondrous beauty of the undefined heather and mosses, even the picturesque shapes of the grey boulders, help to the recognition of the blessed truth of the Oneness of the Almighty with all His creatures, and the human creature is allowed to experience that Nature is but the shadow of the Divine.

CHAPTER X

DWELLERS in country districts, especially the female portion of them, seldom go far from home, and, excepting on Sundays at church, have few opportunities of seeing their friends. It so happened that Mrs. Macdonald and Duncan Macnair belonged to different though neighbouring parishes, and nearly four years passed after their interview on Feshie bank before they met again ; but news of Duncan's illness was one day brought to Mrs. Macdonald, and she lost no time in going to see her old friend.

It was a fine frosty morning when Mrs. Macdonald started from home, the sun shone brilliantly, making every blade of grass iridescent by his rays ; the bare boughs of the trees were crusted as with silver, and the icicles were like opals in their changing hues, as she walked briskly up the glen. The clear crispness in the air made the exercise of walking a pleasure, and the crackling of the hoar-

frost under her feet sent a thrill of joy through the traveller. She had grown much in spirit since she had seen Duncan ; the hard bitterness in regard to Elsie had passed away, leaving in its stead chastened sorrow for the girl's untimely death, which, however, she herself acknowledged to be bearing spiritual fruit, terrible though the bereavement had been and still was. As she proceeded on her way, she mused on the past, the present, and the future, her thoughts dwelling much on her two remaining daughters, Mary who was about eighteen, and Annie who was six years younger. Mrs. Macdonald had a well-balanced mind, uncultured but very reasonable, and she had been brought to see the need for giving her own and other girls encouragement to do their duty to themselves, and let their heaven-bestowed natures have free play. Sore, hard experience had taught her that young human beings ought to be encouraged to lead their own lives according to the Divine guiding in each individually, rather than have obstacles placed in their way, and she had quite made up her mind that, so far as lay in her power, her daughters should be saved from their sister's fate.

Drawing near the shepherd's cottage, Mrs. Macdonald stood still in mute admiration of the scene

before her. The small house with the blue smoke curling from its chimney stood close to the glorious mountain, which in the clear, frosty atmosphere looked even grander than usual; and Mrs. Macdonald could not help thinking that it protected the little dwelling in a way that had never before struck her. The tiny garden was in its winter garb; the rose-bushes bare of foliage had their roots well covered, the gooseberry and currant-bushes were trimly pruned, and the faded leaves were all swept up; only a few kail stocks and cabbages, like grim guardians of the soil, were unprotected.

When she knocked at the door, a voice called out, "Come ben."

Lifting the latch, Mrs. Macdonald stepped into the cheerful kitchen where Duncan sat on the settle at the side of the fire. He stood up, and shook his visitor's hand heartily, saying in English, in which he liked to talk when not too much excited, "Welcome to you, Mistress; a sight of you is good for sore eyes; come in to the fire and tell us your news."

"Ay, ay, Duncan, we're pretty old friends now. I have been wanting to see you for long, but I never had time till to-day. How are you keeping this while back? Are you better?"

"Oh, ay, thank you, I am a heap better than I was," Duncan replied. "How's all with you at home?"

"We're all well, thank God," answered Mrs. Macdonald; "the two big lads are in good places, Mary is at home, and Annie is at school. John, too, is wonderful well this winter."

Taking off her shawl, she handed a basket to Duncan, containing some newly churned butter and a packet of tea, which he received graciously; she then sat down with a groan, for which she excused herself by saying:

"When a body's not much in the habit of walking, it is wonderful how soon you're worn out. I am sure that it's nearly five miles that I've walked."

After discussing the news of the district, the conversation took a serious turn, by Duncan's saying:

"I'll be often thinking about our Elsie when I'm left by myself like this. Oh, what a sweet lassie that was! I wish we were all like her! How are the two other girlyies growing up?"

"They're both fine lassies," the mother said; "but I'm wanting to tell you that I'm not bringing them up the same way that I brought up Elsie."

I don't mean them to die before their time if I can help it. No, truly."

Duncan glanced at her timidly, remembering the outburst of feeling on Feshie-side, and he said :

"Nobody ever dies before their time, and that is not in our hands."

"That's not true," Mrs. Macdonald said with earnest feeling ; "my Elsie did die before her time ; the good God never gave her yon beautiful nature to be snuffed out by any Stewart. Mind you, I'm not grumbling at my Maker, and I know that Elsie went to a better world than this, but she was cut off before she had done any work here ; and it'll not be my fault if Mary and Annie don't take better care of themselves than my poor Elsie."

Duncan shook his head, and said seriously :

"I just hope, then, that they'll be as good to everybody as their sister was, for she was an angel."

"Do you know, Duncan," Mrs. Macdonald said, "that's just what I'm meaning to prevent if I can. My lassies will be taught not to give up their own impulses for the sake of pleasing, or, as some people call it, serving others. God has given each of them a spirit and a body, and they are responsible for these to Him only. If you are well enough to

listen, I would like real well to tell you what has come to me since that day on Feshie-side that ye must mind on."

Duncan assured her that he was quite able, and even anxious, to hear all she might have to say, so Mrs. Macdonald continued :

"When Elsie died, you know that I was almost out of my mind. She had wound herself round my heart in a way that none of the others had done, much as I loved each one of them ; and yon day, when I saw you, and heard the story of Invereshie's lady, I wished that I had a chief to throw me into the water ; but long before I got home, I was ashamed of myself, and when the bits o' bairns came cuddling round me I was fair overcome, and couldn't help crying ; then Annie stroked my face, and said, ' Don't cry, Mammie, we'll be good bairns.' Her sweet young voice settled me, but a strange sort of shudder went through my heart when the child spoke about being good. Well, when John came in, I told him that I was fair done out, and needed a rest, so he made the tea, and when I had drank a cup of it he told me to go and lie down, and he would take care of everything. Oh, he's a kind man, my John ! so I went ben to the room, and I slept there that

night by myself, and nobody came near me. Ay, that was a grand time for me ; but I had a hard fight first. I thought over the past, and I raged in my heart against the Stewarts, but in a wee while I became calmer, and then a light seemed to come in the darkness, and I began to see how you and me, and everybody that had to do with Elsie, had gone wrong ; and I made up my mind there and then that none of the rest of my girls would die like her, poor lassie ! ”

She stopped for breath, and Duncan said :

“ I’m not wanting to contradict you, but, Mrs. Macdonald, is it not true that we never needed to cross Elsie, she was so good and obedient ? ”

“ Yes,” said the other, “ and that’s been the evil. She was a bonny, bonny flower, and from her earliest days she never gave her father or me the least trouble. But we went wrong in this way : instead of making her fight for herself and keep her own, we encouraged her always to give in to the others, until the dear lassie thought it was right to bow her head to the rest o’ the children. You see, it was easy for Mrs. Stewart and James, after that way of going on, to persuade her to give up her rights ; now that was all wrong. I ought to have helped her to get more hardness when she was

growing, and not have allowed her to stay away from the rough children at the school, or give up her own pleasures because the others wanted her to do so ; and what's more, I believe that if I had done that she would have been living the day. Oh, sairs ! what a heap of teaching we need to bring us humbly to the Lord and make us wise."

" But," Duncan answered, " are we not told by the ministers, who ought to know better than us, that we should think of others before ourselves ? Was Elsie not just obeying the Lord's command to love our neighbours as ourselves ? "

" The ministers, forsooth ! " Mrs. Macdonald answered, in a tone of contemptuous derision, which cannot be reproduced on paper. " The ministers ! Truly, they think they are alone the Lord's servants—the anointed of the Lord, they call themselves ; a bonny set of men to be the expounders of the Gospel of the blessed Saviour, the lowly Jesus. If you study the Gospels ye'll see that it was those that professed to be doing the best service that Christ condemned. Before my Elsie was taken from this world she had become not fit for its work ; but when she was born she was fit for it. When I looked back that night I saw a

wee girlie, full of health and glee, strong and sturdy on the legs, with bonny rosy cheeks, and a fat wee neck and arms ; and then I minded how I once saw her struggling with Johnnie for a kitten that belonged to her, and that he had in his arms ; and when I said they were hurting the beastie between them, she gave up the fight, and Johnnie kept the kitten. She was for ever doing things like that, and every child took advantage of her."

" Well," said Duncan, " I think she liked to give up to another ; and don't you think Christ would have liked her to do that ? "

" No, I do not," Mrs. Macdonald answered emphatically ; " it seems right at the first look of it, but search deeper, and I think ye'll agree with me that in this world we *must* fight for our rights."

" Well," said Duncan cautiously, " and what have you done about the other girls ? "

" I'll tell you," she replied ; " I have taken a different way with Mary. I scolded her when I saw her too ready to give in to the others, because it was easier than fighting, even although she knew she was wronging herself. I cautioned her not to be always looking into her heart for her motives, but to set herself, first of all, to love her Maker, and then to see that she did her duty to her own nature ; for I

told her that if everybody would do that, they would be doing true good to others as well as themselves. I knew that the girl was often foolish, and I pointed out her folly to her, but I never gave a command about these things, and I never saved her from the effects of her silly doings. And now Mary is strong and very useful, and there's not much fear of her sacrificing herself or anybody else. I have allowed her to be free with all the country-side, and there's not a lass in the Glen that's more thought of or better liked than my Mary. She'll make her own choice of a husband when the time comes, and I'm sure she'll not complain if he does come in sometimes with muddy shoes, and even sits down with dirty hands if he hasn't time to wash them. James Stewart would never do that ; he would rather take no meat at all than not sit down to it like a gentleman."

When Mrs. Macdonald ceased talking, she sat back on her chair, and Duncan said, with a sigh of relief :

" You've fair taken away my breath, but maybe you're right after all."

" I'm certain sure I'm right," she said ; " many's the time I've thought over it since that night. It was not right for you and me, Duncan, to encourage

that sweet lassie to increase her sweetness, for she had too much of it already. Her sister Annie is some like her, and I'm afraid it'll not be easy to keep her up to the mark of doing the best for herself ; but she has Mary's example, and you may be sure that I'll do all I can to make her follow in her footsteps."

Perfect silence reigned for a few minutes, then Duncan rose, and taking two cutty pipes from a little shelf in the chimney-corner, filled them with tobacco, and, handing one to Mrs. Macdonald, picked up a bit of burning peat in the tongs and set a light to them both. These two thoughtful but happy friends, smoking their pipes by the fireside, made a picture to delight the heart of an artist as much as a lover of mankind in its natural guise. Duncan sat with his back to the light, his brown hands resting on the arms of the wooden armchair ; he was dressed in warm, home-spun clothes of blue dye, a red comforter round his neck, and a Kilmar-nock bonnet on his head, without his shoes, but with thick stockings on his feet. His dark eyes were still bright, though their lids were somewhat bleared by the long winter evenings he had spent in an atmosphere of biting, aromatic peat smoke, but they were full of love, and occasionally a gleam

of fire came into them as his face glowed with interest in conversation with Mrs. Macdonald. The latter was a tall, upright woman of the dark Celtic type, an embodiment of feminine physical strength and mental force. It was beautiful to see how reverently she looked on Duncan, in whom she recognised the poet and the seer. Her snow-white cap, with its broad pleated border, formed a fitting frame for her comely face, with its beautiful blue eyes ; the dark, home-spun winsey dress, the thick, country-made shoes, and the comfortable tartan shawl which she wore, completed the picture.

Their smoke ended, Mrs. Macdonald rose, but Duncan asked her to sit down again, and when she did so, he said :

“ I’ve been thinking all this time about what you were saying, and I confess that I begin to see reason in it. I’m thinking, however, that I must be out on the hill before I can be quite sure. I know more about the sheep and wild things on the moor than young human beings, and you would be quite right if it was sheep you were speaking about. The beasts must fight, and a sheep that doesn’t look after its own rights on the field is not worth caring for, because the weakest go to the wall whatever you may do. That is the very principle —

hold, but these are brute
we are not like the beasts, and the Bible says
Mrs. Macdonald beasts that perish."

"It would interrupted him by saying :
beast, would be a sore pity if we were like the
beasts that have no future world ; but for all that,
the fact holds good, that if men or women cannot
fight, they must die or be crushed nearly to death.
What I want to do is to make Mary and Annie fit
to fight, and hold their own against everybody."

"Oh, I see, I see," said Duncan, a bright light
in his eye. "Yes, I see now what you're after.
Well, well ! you are a woman ! I will bet you
against any man, and I am real glad of it."

Then Mrs. Macdonald shook his hand and bade
farewell, but not without Duncan saying :

"Come back again as soon as you can, and we'll
have another crack."

After his friend's departure, Duncan put on his
shoes, and wrapping his warm plaid about him went
out, staff in hand, to look after the sheep which
were enclosed in a field belonging to a farmer in
the Glen. Duncan was not really an old man, but
he liked to speak as if he were an octogenarian, and
appearance lent itself to his fancy, for he was rheu-
matic, and leaned heavily on his staff, his shoulders
bent, and his face was weather-beaten ; but a

close observer might notice many signs contradictory of his assertion of old age, and, in fact, he was only about fifty.

That night the shepherd sat for nearly an hour in front of the fire, looking intently at the glowing peat, and his fancy was stirred by their deep caverns and lovely crimson and yellow shades of colour. His thoughts wandered to the past, and he drew pictures which, while they pleased, also saddened him. Then there came remembrance of the afternoon's conversation, and his shrewd common-sense made him acknowledge the importance of the views that Mrs. Macdonald had been explaining to him. From that the transition was easy to himself and his own loneliness, which was much in evidence to-night. In spite of the way in which, as we know, he liked to talk when any one urged him to marry, he acknowledged to himself that he would indeed be thankful to have a wife, if he could be sure of getting a "reasonable" woman like the one whom he had seen to-day. For many a day, however, his ideas bore no fruit, for he was timid, and led a very solitary life.

PART II

CHAPTER XI

MANY incidents occur, many interludes pass in the course of human lives, which fill in the span of each individual's life. Most interesting and instructive it would be if these could be discerned and recorded. Then should we see the steps by which the mountain has been climbed, then should we appreciate how gradual the progress is, what forbearance is called for, what patience both with others and ourselves, and how indispensable encouragement is ; then should we all say, as men who have toiled up the ascent, after slipping and slipping countless times, do say, " It is a blessing we do not see the future, for, if we did, we should never undertake the struggle."

Let us follow James Stewart, and observe some of the steps by which he was led to the knowledge and recognition of the All-powerful Will, the perception of which makes all life very beautiful, but for whose attainment so much discipline is needed,

that if the climber saw how he must suffer before reaching even the lowest peak of the mountain, he would be apt to give up the effort, and, we fear, he would often sink in the Slough of Despond.

In opening our eyes to see and follow the events that made up the sum of James Stewart's existence, it is necessary at the outset to perceive that men and women cannot be separated in their natures from the country to which they belong. They walk in it, breathe in it from morning to night, live in it, and die in it. They must share in all its prejudices, its dogmas, its superstitions and its sweet encouragements. A wonderful working of fear can be most instructively studied in the Highland character, and James Stewart was essentially a Highlander. Let no one underrate this nature. Superstition is death's follower; it is dark, fugitive, extremely versatile, and it enables the Highlander to carry stratagem to perfection. The working of this fear and dread may be seen by any close, intelligent observer, in almost everything these people do. It makes the Highland nature very valuable to those who know how to govern it, and extremely troublesome to those who think they can beat it. The race has had ages of experience in the art of evasion, and the time-worn policy of "taking what they

can, and keeping what they get," runs through all their dealings. A well-known chief of nearly a hundred years ago, indeed almost the last of his kind, frankly said to an Englishman, who was his friend: "You," naming him, "are a Saxon, I am a Celt; you will not believe me, I daresay, but nevertheless it is true, that the aim of the Celtic Highlander always is to get the better of the Saxon, and rob him of all he can." This holds true in essence even under the changed conditions of the present time, and it is useless for the Saxon to try to circumvent the Celt with his own weapons; if he does, he will certainly come worst off, for his opponent is a master in his art. It must not, however, be overlooked that these people are very much like children; they have mixed very little with the world, and are quickly fascinated with strange shows, ready at any moment to join in the building of an artificial world, nor will they desert these castles in the air until they are ruined, and compelled to do so, no escape being left for them. Caught by their fears, they have for ages worshipped the spirits of darkness, and James Stewart was a remarkable combination of superstition and profession; that is what has to be shown, while we must not overlook the fact that he was by birth a toiler,

a workman, an agriculturist. In the delineation of his character, we may see over again the working of Cain and Abel, which although repeated millions of times since the ancient story was written, may once more be instructively followed in the light of the nineteenth century.

James Stewart's college career was a successful one. His early life on the hills and moors of Badenoch had been a good preparation for the mental and physical strain which must be borne by all students, and which was peculiarly trying to one of his age and in his circumstances. He was indefatigable in his efforts to overcome the difficulties in his way, and he succeeded admirably in becoming not only a first-rate scholar, but also a favourite with the Professors, in whose families he was a welcome visitor. So intent was he from the first in the pursuit of his intellectual studies, and the improvement of his social position, that he really felt as much annoyance at the interruption made in the course of his life, as grief for its cause, when he was unexpectedly called to the death-bed of his former sweetheart. This event perhaps softened him for a while, but soon after his return to Aberdeen he became so completely engrossed in his occupations, that no lasting impression seemed

made upon him. He had yet to find out that the profession to which he had devoted himself was dearly bought by his desertion of Elsie, the free, the natural maid of the Grampians.

The long course of study over, James Stewart was licensed to preach the Gospel, and on the same afternoon a large party assembled in the Principal's drawing-room to do him honour. It was difficult to believe that he who was now the centre of attraction could be the shy man from the hills, who, only a few years before, had taken his place timidly among the other divinity students at King's College.

He was tall and strongly built; his hair, slightly streaked with grey, was pushed well back from his high forehead. The face was altogether a strong one, full of life and energy; the firm, severe mouth and almost square chin, indicated determined will and tenacity of purpose, but lack of sensitiveness; the pale blue eyes were keen and quick, but cold and without sympathy. There was also a touch of suspiciousness in the countenance which might well lead one to suspect the presence of a latent savageness, controlled doubtless by his strong principle. At present there was nothing to ruffle his temper, and his manners were most gracious as he received the congratulations of his numerous friends.

Suddenly there appeared what to him was a vision of delight ; his face became more animated, his whole being seemed to expand, and words fail to express the joy on his countenance, when a young girl dressed in pale blue and white muslin, and holding in her hand a bunch of beautiful roses, came gracefully towards him, and shaking his hand cordially, told him how glad she was to know of his success.

Her lovely face was bright with the hue of health, her brown eyes sparkled, and the smile on her lips was bewitching as she bent her prettily shaped head with the dark hair coiled on it towards him. She did not stay, but turned round quickly to speak to others with whom she was acquainted, and James's eye followed her admiringly wherever she went, and his heart beat faster as he watched her.

This was not the first time these two had met ; she had been for some weeks in Aberdeen visiting friends, and there had been many a meeting between her and the student, many more indeed than the young lady had wished. He had fallen desperately in love with her, but she did not reciprocate the feeling. No wonder that his heart was touched, for not only was she most attractive in appearance,

but her manner was so conciliatory and frank, and so utterly free from self-consciousness, that it inspired confidence, and encouraged the still bashful man to believe in himself. She behaved to him as a girl of eighteen might be expected to do to a man double her age. She had no love for him, and was inclined to make fun of his evident admiration. It seemed ridiculous that he should love her, and she was positively angry when her companions hinted that it was so ; but she was flattered by his attentions. He had not, however, yet spoken one word of love directly to her, and she still considered herself at liberty to treat him with offhand carelessness, joking about the "Hieland minister." She knew that he was very clever, but she told her friends that he was far too serious for her to think of marrying him, even if she had cared for him, which she did not ; but she played on the strings of his heart, making him often wince by a dashing or cruel word, which, however, she would hasten to soften with a fascinating smile or a sweet little speech. When Mary Scott entered the room James Stewart saw no one else, heard no voice but hers, and at length all general conversation on his part ceased.

This slight, fragile-looking fairy held complete,

if unconscious, sway over the strong learned man. He followed her with his eyes here, there, everywhere, often to her discomfiture, for she wanted to flirt and enjoy herself with the younger men of the company; and this was the one point in her conduct which did not please him. He was terribly jealous, as he saw that the same mysterious power which had bound him enthralled others as well. Little notion had James of the untold misery into which her witchery would lead him, and the ways innumerable in which she would try him. Those who knew her best could have warned him if he would have listened, that this girl, sweet and amiable as she seemed, was capable of leading a man whom she did not love, and who did not trust her entirely, into troublous waters where no skill nor energy would be equal to the task of catching her, "will-of-the-wisp" as she was, for she would ever elude the grasp that had not in it the touch of trusting love. At this time James's love was hot, so hot that he was blind to Mary's complete indifference to him, and even bore meekly her little jokes about his peculiar modes of expression and his Highland accent, glad apparently to think that he was noticed in any way.

James Stewart, having deliberately gone in for

profession, had left Elsie Macdonald, the natural, the loving maid of the Grampians, because he considered, and considered truly from his point of view, that she could not help him in his path towards success ; since then, until Mary Scott came in his way, the little god Cupid had sent no dart into his heart ; but now he was completely entangled. It will be well to learn a little of the previous history of this fairy, who will have much to do in making James see how little profession can do for human beings but destroy. The web of professional show that entrapped the Gaelic minister had to be torn in pieces before he would be able to do real work for the world, and Mary Scott, to whom he was now bending the knee, would reveal the truth to him ; but that revelation would have to be reached through much suffering on the part of both of them.

CHAPTER XII

MARY SCOTT was about eighteen years old when James Stewart became acquainted with her. Born in Bombay, she had been separated from her parents at an early age, and was brought up by Captain and Mrs. Gordon, the former of whom was an old friend of both her father and mother, along with their own family in Glasgow. On the arrival of the little Anglo-Indian girl in her new home, she was received by all the members of the Gordon household with true Scotch hospitality, and her timid bashfulness soon disappeared. Mrs. Gordon placed her under the special care of Maggie, her eldest daughter, and, in spite of a considerable difference in age, it was not long before there was perfect confidence between the two. Mrs. Gordon's great aim in the training of her own children was to make them truthful and obedient, and she was much shocked to find that Mary had no scruples about telling a lie to screen herself from punish-

ment, and had but little idea of doing what she was bid, besides having many deceitful ways, learned no doubt from the native servants. Ere long, however, there was such an improvement, that Mrs. Gordon began to hope that she might look forward to a time when she should be able to trust Mary as unquestioningly as her own children. Months and years passed rapidly away, during which Mary received an excellent education.

Mrs. Scott died shortly after the departure of her child to England, and Mr. Scott made up his mind to remain in India without taking any leave of absence until the time should come for his final retirement from the East India Company's service. He and his daughter were thus virtually strangers to each other, and Captain and Mrs. Gordon filled the place of father and mother to her.

It was therefore no wonder that when Captain Gordon died, Mary, who was about sixteen, suffered acutely. She loved him more dearly than any other person, and he had such a good influence over her that a fit of disobedience or obstinacy was often checked by her unwillingness to hurt him. Captain Gordon's death was Mary's first real grief, and for a long time the event cast a gloom over

her life ; but she was young, and her sorrow ultimately passed away.

Owing to the shock following her husband's death, Mrs. Gordon was unable for some time to overlook the young people's occupations as she had been wont, and when at length she so far recovered as to do so, her annoyance was very great to find that Mary had become intimate with Eliza Robertson, one of her school-fellows, and William her brother, young people who were, Mrs. Gordon feared, undesirable acquaintances, and whom she refused to invite to her house.

This prohibition was the beginning of trouble, as it did not hinder the young people meeting out of doors, and Mary, accompanied sometimes by Maggie, was in the habit of taking long walks with the brother and sister. Mary had become a remarkably beautiful girl ; tall and full of grace in every movement, she attracted attention wherever she went. The prettily shaped head with its glossy black hair was well set on her shoulders, the most striking features of the oval-shaped face were the large brown eyes with their ever-changing lights, long lashes, and well-marked eyebrows. The sensitive, though at times peevish, mouth, and high,

narrow forehead, gave the impression of a sweet, susceptible, but not very reliable or strong character. Mary was very lovable, made friends easily, and, being lively and animated in conversation, was a great favourite in society.

William Robertson, the young man to whose acquaintance Mrs. Gordon objected, was a handsome, dark-eyed youth, who had met Mary Scott for the first time about a year before this, and had fallen desperately in love with her. He was a student in Glasgow College, but only preparatory to beginning business in his father's office as soon as he should attain the age of twenty-one, a time that was drawing near, when the critical point came in Mary's life of her father's return from India.

The meeting-place of William and Mary was usually the "Three Trees," or "Pear-tree Well," on the bank of the river Kelvin, well known then as a trysting-place for lovers, and as such still held in loving remembrance by many who knew the Kelvin when it was a clear running stream.

It was a fine spring morning, dawn was breaking over the country, over the river, over the still silent city where ere long the sounds of toil would predominate over the stillness that now reigned.

Flashing points of colour on the eastern horizon

began to light up the red chimney-pots and blue slate roofs of the hundreds of houses. There was a pathetic interest in the whole scene, which Mary in some degree felt as she stood looking at it thoughtfully from her bedroom window before beginning to dress. She knew something of the efforts, too often vain and fruitless, that were being made there by earnest workers from day to day to gain a living ; something of the strivings after gold at the sacrifice of health and honour. Mary could picture to herself many human scenes under these roofs of tired haggard faces, old and young alike, whose spirits could not rejoice in the new day as she was doing, because of the anxiety that attended its advent, and whose bodies would be tired and nerveless when the watchman called them to begin their work anew. Mary soon turned away, for she saw people moving about, and she had to prepare for her morning walk. Starting unobserved, she left the streets behind, and coming to a country road sprang lightly over a low hedge into a field beyond, where short spikes of wheat pushed through the brown earth, and many a pretty red pimpernel and blue forget-me-not looked up at her and the sky ; and a lark, startled by her footstep, ascended up to heaven, fluttering its wings and trilling its

cheerful note. She stopped and watched the bird as up and up it rose until it was lost in the blue ether, and then, without waiting to follow its sudden fall back to earth, she proceeded rapidly on, until she came to a copse on the Kelvin's side. Here the glories of the sunrise fairly dazzled her, and she stood enraptured.

The pale yellow-green leaves of the lilacs, the grey buds of the ash, and the darker foliage of the sycamore were all becoming resplendent in the golden sunshine ; the cobwebs hanging between the branches of the low shrubs were like thinnest veils of silver, jewelled with opal dewdrops ; the awaking noisy life of birds, beasts, and insects told of their joyful recognition that the darkness was over, and that the glorious all-pervading light of the sun had come again to give them renewed life and action. Truly that spring morning was a setting fit in every way for a picture of the two human beings who, with every feeling intensified and every sense sharpened, witnessed its beauty. Mary's bright blue sash and William's red college gown were the strongest and most prominent bits of colour in the scene ; and as with the restlessness of youth they might be seen now on the mossy bank, now on the river's brink, at one moment quite hidden, at the

next suddenly emerging at some distance from among the trees, one felt how perfect, how complete to the outward eye, was the picture with its frame.

The lovers had of course much to converse about, and there were serious things to be discussed, for Mr. Scott had just arrived, and Mary's mind was filled with distracting thoughts. Her conscience was troubling her about the deception she and William had been practising all these months on Mrs. Gordon, and which she feared her lover would still wish to continue. She loved William very dearly, but her good sense prevented her being blind to the weakness of his character, and she knew how much her father disliked any inattention to duty, so she was afraid he would not look favourably on the youth; but she had firmly made up her mind to stand by her lover, whatever her father or Mrs. Gordon might say. This being the state of her feelings, it was easy for William to persuade her to accept a locket from him with his hair in it (there were no photographs in those days), and get her promise to say nothing about it. Mary was supremely happy, for William was just then the sun of her existence, and all about him was irradiated. She had made for herself an image of

fine gold to worship, ignoring the clay under the glittering surface, although she could not but have a dim consciousness of its presence. She dreaded her father's anger, but it was lost sight of in the excitement of the knowledge that William loved her, and she rested content.

The hour they had to spend together was all too short, and the time for parting drew near; the distant city clock struck a quarter to eight, and Mary gave her lover a slightly alarmed look as she said :

"Willie, should you not be at the college at eight o'clock?"

"Yes, yes," he replied; "but old Ramsay won't see me to-day, and I do not believe he will be astonished. What's more, he will not be sorry, for he told me yesterday that he was not going to trouble himself any more about me, and he said that I need not come again."

He laughed, but Mary shook her head, trying to look grave, although her smile nullified the implied rebuke, and William continued :

"I want to go home with you. Do you think old Mother Gordon will give me some breakfast as well as a scolding?"

His mocking tone puzzled poor simple Mary,

who gave no answer, but rising from the grass stood gazing into the river. In a moment he was at her side, had put his arm round her neck, and was kissing her passionately. But, listen—there are voices in the neighbourhood, and footsteps coming near ; the spell was broken, the glamour was past, and with grave faces these two on whom life was dawning with its joys and troubles, its mysteries and revelations, passed out of the calm sequestered Kelvin Grove into the interests and the hurries of the busy city.

During the first part of their walk home, neither of the lovers spoke. The very intensity of their joy solemnized the young souls ; a light from heaven had flashed upon them as they stood by the river-side, a bright gleam, a sunbeam which to each of them seemed to concentrate its glory on the other, and the individual self was lost sight of. It was their first full expression of love, and for a little while neither of them knew, or cared to know, anything further than that they loved each other, and they were half-way home before the silence was broken by William, who then began talking excitedly about their present bliss, and the happy days in store for them, when they should both be free to act independently. He expatiated on the delight

of this anticipated freedom, and speculated on what they would do when that time came, thinking of his own future only, not seemingly imagining that Mary might have views different from his. But Mary had thoughts of self as well as he, and she felt as he talked in this strain that a cloud was already coming over the brightness of her horizon, a jarring note in their mutual song, for with her quick woman's perception she saw that he took it for granted, that she would be absorbed in him and his interests. Her inner nature rebelled at this; she had not the full confidence in his love which would have made her trust him, so she kept silence, merely looking at her lover inquiringly. The expression on her face led him to change the subject to that of her beauty and personal appearance, a subject which was always pleasing to Mary.

Her good sense, however, awoke when he said :

" I wonder, Mary, what the other chaps will say when I tell them that I have won the girl they all say they're in love with. They will have to hide their diminished heads—for she's mine."

He flourished his stick, and almost danced with glee. Mary retorted impatiently :

" You needn't be so frisky ; I'm not yours yet, and perhaps I never will be, Master Willie."

He was at once sobered, and in a beseeching tone said :

"Oh, Mary, my own darling Mary, don't say that ; I can't do without you ; you're all the world to me ; heaven would be no heaven to me if you were not there. Oh, my dearest Mary," and he caught her hands and pressed them, vehemently protesting against the very idea of their separation.

Mary laughed, for she was not in earnest, and was gratified by his words, as he continued excitedly :

"Tell me, Mary, that you will never love anybody but me, or I will do something desperate."

Mary still gave no answer, but she was no longer inclined to laugh. The first doubt of William's sincerity had come into her mind ; she felt a want of the true honest ring in his words, and she shook her head doubtfully, as he went on :

"Mary, my own darling Mary, you have only to tell me what you want me to do, and I will do it. Tell me, oh, tell me that you will always love *me* and nobody else. Stand by me, won't you, Mary ? don't be cruel ; surely you do not know how you make me suffer when you hesitate."

He looked at her ardently, but she remained quite cool, and replied :

"I have told you already that I love you, but you need not think that I have no desires of my own. You speak as if I wished to be free from papa and dear Mrs. Gordon, whom I have loved all my life ; and I will not give them up, no, not even for you. You ask too much, Willie."

William protested that she had misunderstood him, and that he only meant that she was to give him the first place in her heart ; she was the queen of his soul, and he could brook no rival in hers. Then in humble words he begged her to forgive him for having expressed himself so thoughtlessly, and she was melted, and, taking his hand in hers, kissed it, in token of full forgiveness. So ended their first quarrel ; it had drawn them closer at the time, but in future, far-off days all its incidents would recur to Mary's memory, and she would remember them with bitterness. When they came within sight of Mary's home, she said :

"Are you coming in? Papa will be here soon."

"No, I think I had better not," was William's answer ; "we must be very cautious, my darling, and not let anybody know of our engagement yet. Be sure and keep the locket hidden."

Although Mary was quite willing to part from her lover when they reached the corner of the street where she lived, she stood watching him until he was out of sight, and then, clasping the locket tightly in her hand, went indoors.

She wanted solitude, and was glad to find that breakfast would not be on the table for a whole hour, an hour which she might spend in thinking of her lover and what he had said to her.

Mary's nature was not a deep one, nor were her principles firm, but the family atmosphere in which she lived was so thoroughly true and earnest that it had to some extent influenced her, and she now felt an inward conviction that neither her conduct nor William's would bear close investigation. She began also to have a misgiving as to the truthfulness of his words, and to fear that he was not to be relied on as her old friends the Gordons were.

As a matter of fact, William Robertson was a thoroughly undisciplined young man. His mother had died young, leaving a son and daughter, and his father, a man of the world, had never held up any high ideal of life to his children, who, after being spoilt in the nursery, were indulged by him in every youthful whim.

The youth was naturally good-natured, and would always rather do a kind than an unkind action if the two were equally easy, but he was ruled by the impulse of the moment.

His manners were good, and he had a fund of amusing conversation, which led to his being sought after in society, and it was no great wonder that Mary, gratified by his attentions, and attracted by his showy qualities, fancied that she loved him ; and probably she did love him to some extent. She recognised that he was vain, but she found plenty of excuses for him, and would not allow herself to blame him for holding the superficial views of life and its duties which he did.

The girl felt very happy this morning in her own little room, and she was standing at the window, her eyes fixed on the locket, when she was startled by a kiss on her cheek and a close embrace from behind. It was Maggie, who had come in softly to say good-morning to her pet, meaning to give her a pleasant surprise. The sudden disturbance of her sweet reverie had, however, a strange effect on Mary. Hiding the locket, she gave a dazed look at her companion, and then, flinging her arms round her neck, burst into a flood of tears, as she sobbed out :

"Oh, Maggie, what does it all mean? What am I to do? I'm very happy, but oh, so miserable too! I've been out walking with William Robertson, and he said such wonderful things to me that I don't feel like myself at all. Do you know, Maggie, that he loves me?"

She ceased abruptly, and hid her face, shuddering slightly.

Laying her hand on her shoulder kindly, Maggie said with amazement:

"Whatever is the matter, dearie? You once said that you would not keep anything secret from me. I thought you had kept your promise, but I fear you have forgotten about it. Tell me everything now, like a good child. Who gave you that pretty thing?" pointing to the trinket which had slipped out of her bosom.

"But," said Mary in a whisper, "I was not to tell anybody about it. I promised Willie not to say anything either about it or the walks we have had together. Oh! what will he say to me?"

Then, in a beseeching tone, scarcely audible for sobs and tears, she added:

"Maggie, darling—you are my dear Maggie, are you not? You will keep my secret, won't you?"

Maggie looked at her very gravely without answering, and Mary went on excitedly :

"Oh, I wonder if I might tell you the whole ? Do you think Willie will be very angry ? Surely he cannot be ; for when I let him understand that you already know something, he will see that it is better you should know all about what he said."

Maggie, who had had no idea that William Robertson cared for Mary, was taken aback, and did not at once reply. This added to Mary's excitement, and she fell on her knees, begging her to promise that she would not tell. Maggie raised the girl up, and regaining her own composure, said gently :

"Mary dear, be calm. I do not know what you are speaking about, and how can you expect me to promise in that sudden way ?"

Mary repeated with vehemence :

"Promise not to tell. Promise, Maggie, and then I will tell you."

Maggie again refused, adding :

"You frighten me, Mary ; what can you have been doing to make you excited like this ? You are far too young to know what you are speaking about. What has Willie been saying to you ?"

Mary gasped and seemed ready to faint ; apparently words would not come fast enough, but she sobbed hysterically, and ejaculated :

“ My dear, dear Willie ! No, I will never give you up.”

Maggie saw that the child was utterly worn out, and she left the room, returning in a few minutes with a cup of tea, which she made Mary drink before saying any more to her. Then she brushed her hair, an action that always soothed Mary, talking all the while, and managed to divert her thoughts completely by telling her of a treat that was in store for her and Katey with her father, who proposed taking both the girls for an excursion to the Highlands.

Except in personal appearance, Mary was still but a child, so that her mind was easily turned, and her whole attention was soon absorbed in preparation for the trip. As soon as breakfast was over, Maggie led Mary to her own room, and drawing her close to her breast, looked earnestly into her face, but Mary averted her eyes. Maggie was, however, determined to speak, so she said affectionately :

“ Mary dear, I have been thinking all the time of breakfast about you ; I do not want to hurt you,

nor make you angry ; but, dear, I must tell mamma about you and Willie."

Mary drew herself back from Maggie's embrace, but kept hold of her hand, as she said in tones of entreaty :

" Oh, please don't, Maggie ; my dear, dear Maggie, oh, do not."

But there was no sign of relenting, and she added angrily, turning away her head :

" You are cold and cruel, Maggie. If you were not, you would promise, and not bring me into disgrace."

Maggie remained firm, for she felt that a responsibility was thrown upon her by the knowledge she had had of the almost secret meetings with William. She shook her head decidedly, and Mary knew from Maggie's manner that she would not change her resolve, so she turned away, saying pettishly :

" Very well, do as you like ; but you are a mean thing. You cannot really love me, although you pretend to do so. If you did, you would not tell tales as you are going to do. And, there is one thing I can assure you of, and that is, that I will never give up Willie ; no, not for Mrs. Gordon, nor for you, nor for anybody else."

Rushing out of the room, she slammed the door, and ran downstairs to meet her father, whose footsteps she had heard in the hall. Mary was noted for quickly changing from grief to mirth, and Maggie was not surprised shortly to hear her singing and laughing, full of delight at the prospect of the trip with her father.

CHAPTER XIII

It was evening before Maggie found opportunity for an undisturbed talk with her mother, but at length they were both at leisure, and the former, seating herself on the hearthrug, rested her arms on her mother's knee, and looked up in her face.

Mrs. Gordon was an elderly lady, and no observer could miss seeing how true a mother she was in the widest sense. Her large blue eyes lighted up when her interest was excited, and although they had lost some of the sparkle that was one of the points of beauty in her youthful face, the love shining in them now was purer than in her earlier days ; her thick hair was streaked with grey, but a pretty cap covered most of it. Hers was a sweet, placid countenance with traces of hard struggle and suffering, but no hint of discontent. During the childhood and early youth of her children, Mrs. Gordon had been very strict, indeed severely so, but of late she had learned to look on

things from a higher point of view. This change was due to the occurrence of a serious accident in the previous winter, which had led to her being taken to a hospital, where she had lain for some time in great danger. For many days she had suffered intensely, but in all the physical agony she had never lost consciousness. The truth of the near abiding presence of the Almighty, and of His protecting care over all, was brought vividly home to her in that hospital ward, and filled her soul with unspeakable comfort. At the time, although she was unable to define the truth and light that filled her soul with such ineffable peace, she realized that all was well, and must of necessity end well, because every individual thing was but a part of the Universe of the Father of all, and that one object, tending to bring things right, was being carried forward in diverse ways. Day by day, she increasingly felt that the Almighty Will was guiding all events in the hospital ; that the patients, the nurses, the doctors, had all to do that Will, though not, in some cases, without much hard fighting against it. The stay in the hospital was a revelation to Mrs. Gordon ; she described it as a mysterious dream, a wide-awake dream, going on day after day in ever new forms, but it had required a

flash of light from a friend to enable her to formulate the thought and discern its lessons.

Mrs. Gordon was still something of an invalid, but her strength was gradually returning, and on that particular evening Maggie was struck by her improved appearance, and gladdened by the calm, peaceful expression on her face. The girl wanted both advice and comfort, and, sitting at her mother's feet, she meditated on what would be the best way of telling William and Mary's story without blaming either of them too much, especially the latter.

Seeing that her daughter was in trouble, Mrs. Gordon, with a true mother's feeling, kept silence for a few minutes, then, laying her hand gently on the girl's head, she said :

" Well, Maggie, what is troubling you ? I know there is something weighing on your mind."

Maggie gave a deep-drawn sigh, and seizing her mother's hand, kissed it impulsively, saying in a beseeching voice :

" Oh yes, mamma, I am in great trouble about Mary." And she proceeded to tell the story we already know.

Mrs. Gordon listened attentively, asking a few questions about dates and minor incidents, and

when Maggie had given her all the information in her power, the poor girl laid her head on her mother's lap and cried.

Mrs. Gordon caressed her, and said sweetly :

"Maggie, my dear, you have acted quite rightly, and I thank God for giving me a daughter with so much courage, and one who trusts me. We must not be too hard on Mary, nor think too seriously of her outburst ; she is still very young and inexperienced."

In spite, however, of her mother's encouraging words, Maggie continued to cry, and at last, looking steadily into her mother's eyes for a few moments, she said very earnestly :

"Then, mamma, you don't think it is *mean* of me to have told you ? I cannot bear the idea of doing anything mean, and Mary said that I was mean, so I began almost to fear that I was so ; and I could get no rest without letting you know."

Mrs. Gordon comforted her daughter, assuring her that she had done nobly, adding :

"Some day, Maggie, I hope Mary will gratefully acknowledge how much she owes to you for having been always quite open and upright with her, and she will then bless you for your courage."

Maggie stood up when her mother said this, and drying her eyes said cheerfully, as she imprinted a kiss on her forehead :

“ Thank you, dear, dear mamma ! I am happier now, for you have lifted off a heavy burden from my mind.”

She then ran off to meet her brother on his entrance.

One of the most valuable lessons that Mrs. Gordon had learnt in the hospital was to trust her young people ; and she would not have had a shadow of doubt or uneasiness about Mary if she had felt sure that Mr. Scott would place like confidence in his daughter. She knew that there might, and probably would, be rough places, pitfalls, deserts in the young soul's path, and stormy seas would have to be crossed ; but she was also convinced that the haven of rest would sooner or later be reached, and the eager nature would journey successfully to her life's accomplishment, if she were left free to do so. Mrs. Gordon had suffered much herself, and had gone through painful as well as pleasurable experiences before she learned how to treat young natures skilfully, and therefore less wastefully, than she would have ventured to do in her earlier days. She knew

that it was beyond her power to foresee what was best for Mary's success and real happiness ; but she would not allow distrust of her to arise in her own mind. She could afford to feel her way, and wait for time to show what had next to be done. Her mind was at ease as to the course and sequence of events, for she knew that the Almighty Father, who is One with His creatures, could and would make all things tend to develop the unity of all. The assurance of this truth is needed to make human beings willing to "let things be," and "wait patiently in hope."

When Mr. Scott and the two young girls returned from their excursion Mrs. Gordon was pleased to see how happy Mary looked, and how well her father and she seemed to understand one another.

There was in Mary a strange mixture of shallowness, and undercurrents both deep and strong of feeling and thought, unsuspected by those who had not studied her as Mrs. Gordon had done. By nature she was amiable, facile, and easily led hither and thither by those whose good opinion she sought, but she was deficient in stability. Hers was not a nature that could stand alone, but hitherto she had shown a decided preference for

guidance in the right, following good example and advice rather than bad.

Mrs. Gordon was much grieved when she found that, in spite of all her arguments and protestations, Mr. Scott was determined to put a summary stop to Mary's love affair by forbidding all meetings and correspondence between the two. Mary submitted to her father's command without much demur, and Mr. Scott was satisfied that he had taken the right course ; but Mrs. Gordon saw deeper. She knew that, in addition to the pliability which so much pleased her father, there was a great deal of obstinacy as well as cunning in Mary's disposition, and she feared for the possible consequences of Mr. Scott's arbitrary conduct.

Soon after this Mary went to Aberdeen to pay the visit during which she met James Stewart ; the complete change of scene, added to the gay life she led there among the students and her girl companions, occupied her so fully that she had no time for thinking about her Glasgow lover.

When the visit at Aberdeen came to a close Mary did not return to Glasgow, but joined her father at their new abode in Morayshire, near the place of Mr. Scott's birth.

Soon after Mr. Scott took up his residence in the

neighbourhood of Forres, in Morayshire, the Rev. James Stewart received a call from a Gaelic congregation a few miles off, which he accepted all the more readily because Miss Scott, who had so completely bewitched him in Aberdeen, was living near the scene of his future labours. Mr. Scott was in rather feeble health, and shrank from the society the place afforded, feeling its want of culture, so that the advent of the new minister, fresh from the inquiring life of the University, was a great boon to him. He was pleased to find that Mary was already acquainted with Mr. Stewart, for he could not hide from himself that the girl had lost much of her brightness since she had left Glasgow, and he hoped that she might be interested and amused by the new-comer.

It had not surprised Mr. Scott that, on first coming to Forres, his daughter should have missed her companions, but he had expected that she would soon find some one congenial in her new surroundings; this, however, had not proved the case, and Mary was often dull and depressed. Being left a great deal by herself, the girl's thoughts naturally dwelt much on her banished lover, and she used to gaze lovingly in secret on the locket he had given her, about which her father

knew nothing. William, however, made no effort to communicate with her after her father's prohibition, and his figure became dim in her imagination, so that her father seemed to have good reason for self-congratulation on the success of his prompt action with regard to William. Mr. Scott was a timid man, and he mistrusted Mary, and feared that even he himself might be beguiled into consent in opposition to his better judgment, and so he had thought it safer for his own peace and his daughter's well-being to act as he had done, and he was satisfied.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN the Rev. Mr. Stewart came to Forres, he did all in his power to bring variety into the life of Mr. Scott and Mary, and he was soon very intimate in the household, Mary not thinking at all of him as a lover, but simply as a friend of her father's. One day, however, all was changed by James appealing earnestly on bended knee that she would be his wife. Mary was taken aback by the unexpected proposal, and rushed out of the room in a flood of tears, leaving her lover surprised, grieved, disappointed. In the afternoon of the same day, Mr. Stewart saw Mr. Scott, who promised to use on his behalf whatever influence he possessed with Mary, but he made the reservation that on no pretext would he force her inclination, and warned him that there might be some difficulty, muttering something about "that scapegrace," an allusion which gave James a shock, as it confirmed the conclusion he had formed from Mary's outburst of tears that he was forestalled

in her affections, but he was so much afraid of having his fear confirmed that he refrained from even asking.

That evening Mr. Scott called Mary to him, and, taking her on his knee, he said kindly: "Mary, how old are you?"

"Eighteen, nearly nineteen," was Mary's quick reply. "Why do you ask me that?"

"Well, I will tell you," her father answered. "Mr. Stewart has been speaking about you to me; he wants my Mary to be his wife; he has got a call to a good parish in Badenoch, where you would have a beautiful home. Now, dear, what am I to say to him? Could you go?"

Silence reigned for a few minutes; Mary fixed her eyes on the carpet, seeming in no way inclined to speak, and her father continued:

"James Stewart will be very good and kind, I am sure, to whoever is his wife, and I think my lassie might be very happy with him."

Mr. Scott looked at the girl on his knee with sad eyes. He had only been at home for a year, and had come to love his daughter very dearly. He had allowed her, in spite of her frivolity, to guide him in intricate paths, and he trusted much to her in every-day matters; so he felt that if she married he

would be very lonely indeed ; but he also knew that, in the event of his death, she would have no relative to take care of her, and that he could not leave her wealthy, because his pension would die with him, and he had a very small fortune to bequeath. He likewise doubted her good sense in regard to her own future, and feared that she would do some foolish thing, possibly marry such a scapegrace as William Robertson, so he was really desirous to further the minister's suit.

At length, Mary looked up, and with a suppressed sob she said :

" Oh, papa, I don't know what to say ! I do not want to be married at all. I am very young yet, and you have only just come home. I don't want to leave you so soon. Besides, Mr. Stewart is far too old and far too wise for me. I assure you that I am a great deal too silly for a minister's wife, and" —she added with emphasis—" beyond all, I do not love him. Did he not see that I did not care for him when I ran away from him this morning ? "

Mr. Scott answered cautiously :

" Certainly, my dear, you are much younger than he is, but he has experience of the world, and will have wisdom enough for both of you ; and remember, Mary, he does love you deeply."

The girl was by this time crying ; her father caressed her, and said :

" I feel, my dear, that I should like to see you married to a decent man like Mr. Stewart, even though he is twice your age, for he will be all the better able to guide and take care of you. Mr. Stewart is an honest, good man, and a minister of the Gospel, so that his wife will have a good standing ; and although he is not rich, his stipend will be quite sufficient for your needs as well as his, and it is a certainty. It would be a satisfaction to me to know that you were likely to be comfortably settled." In graver tones, he added : " For I do not think I shall be a long liver, and I have not much money to leave you when I die."

" Oh ! papa," Mary sobbed out, clinging closer to him and hiding her head in his breast, " don't say that you are going to die. You must not die, you cannot be going to die ; I have nobody but you, and surely you are not going to leave me. Oh ! papa, papa."

Mr. Scott kissed her very tenderly, and said gravely :

" I do not think, Mary, that I am going to die immediately, but no one can tell what may happen ; my health is very uncertain, as you know, and I am anxious that you should not be left without a pro-

tector. Now, Mr. Stewart is very clever as well as good, and it would rejoice my heart to know that he would be your husband ; but, Mary, my darling, I will not urge you to do anything against your own will."

Mary ceased sobbing, but she was evidently meditating deeply as her father stroked her hair and patted her cheek.

" You know, dear," he said presently, " you have no mother, only me to take care of you, and I am trying to do the best for you. You are well aware of that, are you not ? " Mary assented by nodding her head, and her father continued : " Then do try and love James Stewart. Remember, dear, that love is not a common thing, and he loves you truly. It is not every day that you will have an offer like his, so think well, my child, before refusing it."

After a short silence, Mary kissed her father fondly, and, slipping off his knee, she said with a pleading look :

" I think, papa, I would like to go upstairs for a little while ; " and he let her go with the words :

" God bless you, my pet ; try and let yourself love Mr. Stewart, but you may rest assured that I will not press you to marry a man whom you really feel you cannot love."

Mary did not come downstairs again that evening. Fortunately for her, Kirsty, the elder of the two servants, was a very kind, motherly woman, full of sympathetic interest in her young mistress, whom she was always ready to advise and help. In very early days, Kirsty had suspected that the "Hielan' minister's" visits were due more to interest in Mary than in her father, and she watched the course of the courtship keenly. On the whole, she thought well of Mr. Stewart, and she determined that, if she had a chance, she would urge her mistress to look favourably on his suit.

That evening, Jeanie, the young servant, said in a slighting tone : " Mr. Stewart's in the dining-room ; he is real taken up with our lady for a certainty ; but I for one hope she will have nothing to do with him."

" What for would she have nothing to do with him ? " replied Kirsty quickly ; " he's a good-looking man, though he's not so young as he once was, and he's wonderful clever. Do you not think she might do worse—that is, supposing he asks her ? "

Jeanie shrugged her shoulders and said : " An old man like him can not be expected to understand a bonnie lass like our Miss Scott. Oh !

Kirsty, I do hope she'll not listen to him, for he would only make her miserable."

"Hold your clavering tongue," said Kirsty, "or speak about things you know something about. Miss Scott must marry somebody, and I think the master would like real well to have a minister for his goodson."

The servants knew that Mary had uncere- moniously left Mr. Stewart in the drawing-room, and that she had afterwards locked herself in her bedroom ; they also knew that Mr. Stewart had called to see Mr. Scott, and they drew their own conclusions : but Kirsty having, as she considered, the honour of the family at heart, wished to hinder Jeanie gossiping about her mistress, and she gave her no reply when, as supper-time drew near, the girl said :

"The master is all by himself now, and he told me he thought Miss Scott would like best to have her supper in her own room, so I'm to set a tray for her ; I do wonder what's up ! she was real quiet all dinner-time."

Jeanie set about her work rather sulkily, because she could not get any answer from the elder woman, who was bustling about with preparations for the young lady's meal. When she had buttered some

toast and scones and boiled an egg, she took up the tray herself, and said in answer to Jeanie's look of surprise :

" Ay, ay, I'll take it up myself, you can see to the master. Set out the spirits on the table and take in the hot water."

" Oh, ay," said Jeanie, tossing her head, " I reckon you're keen enough to serve Miss Scott even now when there's something up between her and the minister, and you think she'll tell you about it. 'Deed, if it wasn't for that, it's not you that would go one step up the stairs ; I well believe though that Miss Scott would rather see me, that's young like herself, much as she thinks of you."

Kirsty refrained from giving the rebuke these words deserved, and said : " Be quiet, Jeanie, mind your own business and I'll mind mine. Mr. Scott told me to look after the young lady myself."

Mary had been sitting at her bedroom window for more than an hour in the gloaming when Kirsty knocked at the door. It was a lovely night, and the scene the girl looked upon was very beautiful. The gradually waning daylight made all things seem on a level, and now she thought that the rising moon brought her a message. It cheered her to look up at the deep blue sky studded with

countless stars, their brightness somewhat overshadowed by the moon's light, except when she was obscured by a soft fleecy cloud veiling her face for a moment, and allowing other twinkling beams to be seen more clearly. From time to time shooting stars pierced the depth of the atmosphere, and the Aurora Borealis, flashing and pulsating, darted its coloured rays between the heavens above and the sea below. The sea was calm, and the rich yellow moon reflected on it made a path of golden undulating light in the dark blue-green solid mass of water, over which, while Mary gazed, a fleet of small fishing vessels passed on their perilous way to the German Ocean, and once a large schooner sailed right across the golden waves into port. Nearer home, the shifting Culbean sands in their dim colouring looked very still, and the river Findhorn like a silver ribbon flowed peacefully under the bridge to the all-embracing, all-absorbing sea. The town of Findhorn, uninteresting, even ugly in broad daylight, had a beauty and picturesqueness in this light, which were only the reflection of the splendour of the night.

Mary's outward eye took in all these distant objects, and she felt a relation towards them that was new; it was as if they were friends, and they

soothed her troubled spirit. She cast her glance on things near at hand, and here too she found much to interest her in the changed aspect of the garden, the hedge, the trees, the paths, even the tools lying on the lawn ; all were so ghost-like in the unusual light, and yet all so distinct. Never before had Mary had a similar experience. By-and-by, as she stood at the window, a shadow came on the lawn from under the shrubs, and advanced cautiously in the shade across the green sward. It was the shadow of a cat ; slowly it lifted its feet and set them down again one by one, as if afraid of being heard ; suspiciously it looked from side to side, guarding against the approach of foes ; abruptly it stopped, raised its head, and stiffened its tail ; crouching down, its whole attitude that of intense expectancy, the animal remained still as a statue for a few moments ; then with a sudden spring it pounced upon a poor little bird that had lost its way back to the parents' nest, and swiftly robbed it of its life. Mary was fascinated ; the whole proceeding on the part of the cat had been so delicate, so premeditated, and so cleverly executed, that in spite of her sympathy with the prey, she longed to hug pussy in her arms as she turned from the window with a gentle sigh.

CHAPTER XV

MARY had changed much since coming to Forres ; her young face was too often sad, and the want of variety and of the society she had been used to were telling upon her appearance. When she was in Aberdeen, she had a very light heart ; her love for William Robertson was at its height ; she felt sure of his love, and was confident with the confidence of youth that neither of them would ever change. Now she had begun to doubt his faithfulness, and to think that he had forgotten her, or perhaps that he had never really loved her. If he did care for her, why had he made no effort to communicate with her ? She stamped her little foot indignantly, and said aloud : " No, Master Willie, if *you* don't care, I will show you that I can do without you." A burst of tears followed, and she sat down with a heavy heart, but, unable to sit still for long, she rose and walked up and down, weighing her two lovers in the balance of her better

judgment, and finally she decided to accept James Stewart.

This was an impulsive girl with a great capacity for love, but she was proud as well as vain, and would not pine because her old lover seemed to have forsaken her. There had been other suitors for her hand, to none of whom had either her father or she been inclined to listen ; but the evident desire her father now showed that she should encourage the minister, made her turn favourably to the idea of marrying him. Mary had still some of the old free manner that fascinated by its naturalness, but she was more staid in her demeanour, and one felt that there was an undefinable change in her. Her surroundings were uncongenial, and some of the charming freshness she displayed in Aberdeen was gone. Grievously in want of a change from her monotonous life, she was in fact yearning for liberty, and for larger opportunity to express the love that was in her soul. She respected Mr. Stewart, and, believing that he loved her, she honestly hoped that she might come to love him in return. Such was Mary's present mood. Under her frivolous surface, she possessed a power to love which, if thwarted, would fret and gall, and the struggle against authority would then astonish those

who might have to do with her. Those around her did not perceive that if her inborn inclinations were forced, and her fiery impetuosity unnecessarily checked, her nature would be strained to such a degree that self-control would probably give way, and dangerous results would be certain to follow.

Mary was startled out of her reverie by Kirsty's entrance with the supper dishes, but she said nothing, although the rattling of the tray as it was set on the table made her look up, and Kirsty said :

" Well, well, Miss Scott, what's ado with you that you're up here in the dark all alone ? "

Kirsty struck a light, and after placing the food as temptingly as she could, went up close to her mistress, and said kindly :

" My dear, what's wrong with you ? Take your supper like a good girl."

" I don't want any supper," Mary said ; " and I like to be in the dark."

" But, my dearie," remonstrated Kirsty, " you must not take things so much to heart ; there's no hurry ; take your time to give the minister his answer. You see I know that he was here to-day asking you from the master."

Mary made a gesture of impatience, which led

Kirsty to lay her hand on her shoulder and look her straight in the face as she said :

"Once, Miss Scott, there was a bonnie man that wanted to marry me when I was young and thoughtless. I liked him real well, but I just thought I would keep him dangling for a while, and, like a cat with a mouse, I thought I might jink him now and then. But, oh, woe's me ! I did it once too often, and poor Sandy couldn't understand my ways. So one day he went to Nairn, and there he met another lass who wasn't so saucy as me. She wasn't near so pretty as I was, but when he spoke she aye listened to him, and when he asked her she made sure of him there and then, and they were married in a month. I have never seen another lad that I could look at since then. Now, my dear, I don't want you to be like me and lose the right man."

"But, Kirsty," Mary replied, "I have a sweetheart in Glasgow that gave me my locket, and we promised to be true to one another always, but papa doesn't like him."

Then she threw her arms round the elder woman's neck, and said with sobs :

"Oh, Kirsty, can you tell me why Willie does not write ? I do want a letter. Papa is angry at me,

but I can't help caring for Willie. I'm sure you think he loves me."

Sobs and tears choked her utterance, but in broken words she continued :

" He said he would always love me, and never any other girl. Papa says he would soon tire of me, but he does not know him Oh ! can he be right ? You are older than I am, and know far more than I do. Tell me what you think."

" Well, my dear," Kirsty replied cautiously, " I do not know, but be sure your father will have good reasons for not liking the young man, and maybe he sees farther than you can do."

" Well," said Mary, tossing her hair back from her ears, " if I thought it possible for papa to be right I would accept Mr. Stewart at once, for there are a great many nice things about him, and I would like well enough to be a minister's wife."

" Don't you make up your mind rashly," Kirsty said ; " take your time, and think no more about it just now. Take your supper when it's hot, and I'll come back in a wee while."

To Kirsty's satisfaction, she found on returning that Mary's healthy appetite had not been affected by the day's excitement, and she looked, as she felt, much pleased when the girl said :

"Kirsty, I think I will marry the minister."

"Well, my dear," was her answer, "I'm happy to hear it, but take care and put the other one out of your head altogether, or you'll be done for. You must never let yourself think about him, for it wouldn't be right, and Mr. Stewart will not stand a rival, I'm very sure of that ; 'deed, I'm thinking he is a bit suspicious already ; an oldish man like him is often that. He sees that ye're young and bonnie, and he'll be feared for you with the young lads, so you will have to be very careful."

"Yes, yes ; good-night," said Mary, a little impatiently, for she longed to be alone, and was truly thankful when Kirsty left the room. She went to bed, but not to sleep, and lay awake for hours. The girl's whole nature was stirred ; she wondered what she ought to do, for in spite of her decided words she was still uncertain. She pictured a life with Mr. Stewart to herself, in pleasant but sombre colouring, and it did not altogether take her fancy ; she thought he would be kind to her, give her plenty of books to read, take her with him to visit the country people, and do what he could for her pleasure ; but this did not satisfy her. She felt that he, who ought to be the central figure, was nothing but an accessory, only the

medium through whom she would get these good things, and she was quick to see the incongruity. Then again, she remembered Mr. Stewart's considerate ways, and his other good qualities, and as she pondered he became more acceptable, and her heart grew softer towards him. Suddenly, the other side loomed before her imagination, the countenance of her dear, dear Willie flashed upon her, and she flung her face upon the pillow, crying out :

“ Oh, Willie, come ! Willie, oh, why do you not write ? Oh, Willie, come and save me ! If you love me, come ! ”

Even in fancy no answer came, and her good sense told her that there was no reliance to be placed on Willie, for he would not do anything that would give himself much trouble. With a touch of bitterness she murmured to herself :

“ I won't demean myself to think any more about you, Master Willie ; you have shown yourself not worth my trouble.” With this thought in her mind Mary fell asleep.

In the morning, when she awoke, everything in the outside world was changed, and it was difficult to believe that the scene was the same as the one she had looked upon last evening. Drawing up

the window-blind, Mary was greeted by high wind and heavy rain. The trees were being roughly blown about, and thousands of leaves, even some whole boughs, were strewn on the lawn ; many of the hollyhocks and dahlias, which looked so beautiful yesterday, were lying on the ground ; the sky was leaden grey, the sea was raging, and huge foaming waves were dashing on Findhorn breakwater. Nothing was at rest ; the sea-birds, driven by the wind, were screaming as if in great distress, and the linnets and robins were flying from shrub to shrub in the garden, seeking for a sheltered nook. The young human soul, looking at the disturbed scene, felt that it was symbolical of the turmoil in her own spirit, and she turned from the window with a feeling of something like despair. The decision of last night was shaken ; she was doubting now whether it would be possible to live the quiet life she had conjured up ; she began almost to hate the mere idea of it, and was angry with Mr. Stewart for having asked her to marry him. When dressing, other thoughts came to her, and she smiled as she thought how she would be a free woman if she married, and be able to do whatever she liked, so that once more the ideas of last night gained the ascendancy ; and when

she went downstairs her mind was quite made up. Her father kissed her (not then an every-day occurrence in a Scotch family), and put his arm round her waist to draw her close to him. The girl looked up shily, and said, without waiting to be asked :

“ I suppose I'll take him, papa ? ”

Notwithstanding her words, tears filled her eyes, and she shook her head rather sadly. Her father took no notice of these signs, but said tenderly :

“ Thank you, my child.”

These words were the signal for Mary to break down completely. Tears rolled down her cheeks, her whole frame shook with emotion, and, hiding her face on her father's shoulder, she sobbed out :

“ It frightens me, papa, to think of being married ; why can I not stay here with you ? Oh, my dear, dear papa, do tell Mr. Stewart that at any rate he must wait ! I can't be bound to him yet ! ”

Mr. Scott, distressed at the sight of his daughter's emotion, and not knowing how to talk with her for the best, contented himself with caresses, which had the effect of making her cry still more, and in a few minutes, seeing that she would not cease

weeping, he began to make the coffee himself, an action which roused Mary to take her accustomed place at the breakfast-table ; and, gently pushing her father aside, she said, with a sickly smile that went to his heart :

“ No, no, papa, let me make your coffee as long as I am here to do it.”

Mary quickly recovered her spirits, and to the surprise of Mr. Scott, who did not understand his child, she was soon laughing and talking about trivial things, and all uneasiness about her passed out of his mind. Breakfast over, he said :

“ Now, Mary, come and have a talk with me.”

She drew a low seat near him, and leaned her head affectionately on his knee, while he repeated what he had said to her the previous evening.

“ Well, papa,” Mary said, “ indeed I will try and love him. Indeed I will, because you wish me to do so. It is true that I like him well enough already ; but that is not the right kind of love, is it ? ” Blushing very much, she continued :

“ Do you think it would be right for me to marry Mr. Stewart if I only liked him, and did not love him with my whole heart ? ”

She rose up suddenly, and much agitated began to walk rapidly to and fro ; after a few minutes, she

said hurriedly, as if she were afraid of losing courage by delay :

"I think I ought to tell you, papa, and I am sure that Mr. Stewart ought to know, that I love Willie Robertson far more than I can ever love anybody. He is dearer to me even than you."

Then, as if ashamed of what she had said, she sat down, and hid her face in her hands. Her father bent over to kiss her forehead, and with a smile he answered :

"Never mind about that silly boy. He is not worthy of my Mary. In any case, he could not marry you for many a year."

"Oh, but I could wait," Mary interrupted. "Tell me truly, if it is wrong—wicked of me to marry one man when I love another?"

"No, my dear," her father replied, "I would not ask you to do what is wicked; nevertheless, if you like, I will tell Mr. Stewart all about Willie and you, and leave him to withdraw his offer if he sees good."

Mary acquiesced, and so this most important matter was settled. Mr. Scott made light to Mr. Stewart of the youthful attachment, and the latter was content to rest in the expectation of at length winning Mary's heart himself.

The very foundations of Mary Scott's life were being shaken. The natural life in which she had been brought up in Mrs. Gordon's family had saved her from being spoilt by adulation, and had also made her quick to distinguish between mere admiration and true love. She was consequently easily impressed by the truth in her father's words about the value of Mr. Stewart's love, and therefore she had hesitated about refusing him.

James Stewart showed so much tact in not pressing his suit, that Mary soon felt at ease with him, and treated him more and more familiarly, much to his satisfaction. When the time came for his departure from Forres, she was ready to promise to be his wife, warning him, however, that although she had come to like and respect him, he was not yet the king of her heart, and she was marrying only to please her father. This was said in such a bantering lively tone that James, nothing daunted by it, replied :

"Kings, you know, are sometimes dethroned, revolutions come in kingdoms, and I expect there will be one in your mind, my Queen Mary."

She shook her head and said lightly :

"I cannot change myself, but I am going to

marry you, and I will try to do my duty, so I hope we may be happy together."

This little speech so charmed James, that, catching her in his arms, he pressed her to his breast and nearly smothered her with kisses. Mr. Scott seemed a new man after his daughter's engagement; he had never trusted his own nature and its impulses, and he had likewise mistrusted Mary's. He did not see the great lovingness that was in her, and the strong yearning for freedom; desirous to save her from fancied suffering, he had now put forth his hand rashly to help her into a position where he, with unpardonable shortsightedness, thought she would be free from harm and danger.

It was no doubt difficult for him to imagine that a marriage with James Stewart could be a mistaken one for his daughter. He was quite justified in thinking that her love for the "scapegrace," as he always called William Robertson, was on an uncertain foundation; but in his satisfaction that she had promised to try and love James, he lost sight of the possibility that the very fact of knowing that she ought to think no more of her old lover might make her value him more than ever.

In due time the wedding took place, and Mr. Scott had the pleasure of seeing his daughter in the position which he wished for her, but he did not live long enough to know how difficult it soon became for her to bear the burden of conventionalism and profession that necessarily surrounded the minister, and the minister's wife.

PART III

CHAPTER XVI

THE scene now changes from the town of Forres to the manse of Eathie, in the heart of the Grampians, to which, one fine autumn day, James Stewart brought his pretty young bride, and where much was to happen to mould the characters and alter the lives of both. James had accepted this small country charge when it was offered to him because he was anxious to have a home to which he might bring his wife, but he hoped it would prove only a stepping-stone to a more important charge, and that he would not be settled there permanently. Owing to the former minister's neglect, the manse was much dilapidated, and, in order to complete necessary repairs, the heritors gave Mr. Stewart permission to take a long holiday after his induction, before fairly entering his work, so that it was the month of September when he and his wife arrived at their home at Eathie.

The spot is lovely beyond expression in summer

and autumn, but it is terribly lonely in winter, in spite of all its beauty. Then, the surrounding snow-clad mountains stand out sharp and distinct against the deep blue sky, every crevice and each little precipice being clearly marked. The pink and roscinted rays of the morning sun on the broad, snowy surface of the hills make a winter sunrise on the Grampians equal at times to an Alpine one in beauty of colour. Towards evening, the glorious crimson and yellow glow, spread over earth and sky, may well fill the soul with admiration ; but the cold is intense, and the frost is often so keen that when the sun goes down every living thing must be in some way protected from the weather.

The parish of Eathie was large but thinly populated, and many of the congregation lived miles away from the church. The manse, a whitewashed square house, was built on the side of a little loch, whose dark, peaty water reflected every passing cloud. The loch itself was studded with innumerable white water-lilies, from under whose broad, flat leaves wild duck and teal ventured forth, in their season, to skim rapidly across the water. Beside the manse there stood the church, as plain and unattractive an edifice as the former, and neither of them detracted from the desolate aspect of the place in winter, or

in dull, misty weather at any season. There were a few thatched cottages on the opposite side of the loch, and the chimneys of a large house were visible among the trees, but all were at some distance from the manse. The few houses clustered round the pretty little inn, which was about a quarter of a mile distant, constituted the village of Eathie.

The delight of Mary Stewart, on that fine September day when her husband brought her to the manse, and she first caught sight of the wonderful view from the door-step of her new home, may be easily imagined. The Cairngorm range of mountains opposite, slightly tipped with fresh snow, seemed to pierce the sky, which was of an exquisite blue colour, flecked with soft grey clouds. The rich dark green of the pine forest on the side, and the warm purple of the heather at the base of the mountains, formed the background; nearer home, the broad, swift river, the yellowish-green meadows, in which pretty Highland cattle were browsing quietly, the graceful, drooping birches, the variegated sycamores, the red-berried rowan-trees, and, to crown all, the sweet, calm loch, made a picture which impressed the minister's young wife so strongly that she would never forget it. Little did she imagine how in after days, often sad and dreary, her spirit would be soothed

by the wondrous beauty ; nor how, in the extremity of her sorrow and suffering, the steadfastness of these hills, the effortless flow of that river, the joyous growth of those trees, would calm her troubled soul, and give her, at all events, hope of attaining the needed rest.

In spite, however, of all its beauty, it was a solitary place where our vivacious Mary would have to live, more particularly when the ground was covered with snow for weeks, and it was almost impossible for the pedestrian to make way.

The solitude and stillness in time became overwhelmingly oppressive to the bright, active young woman, and tried her nerves to such an extent that she was herself surprised to find how readily tears would flow at the slightest word of blame from her husband.

In the first year of their married life there came a week of furious weather, and Mr. Stewart one day having occasion to go to the parlour in search of a book, was for the first time struck by his wife's air of depression, and stood beside her for a little, looking into her face with loving interest, then, stroking her hair, he stooped over and kissed her affectionately. To his surprise and grief, her eyes filled with tears, and a remark he made about the

snow was sufficient to make them trickle down her cheeks ; so he said kindly :

“ My dear lassie, what is the matter ? Can I do anything for you ? Are you cold, or are you only wearying ? ”

She made no reply, but gave a piteous glance, and he added, in as cheerful a voice as he could command :

“ We must cheer up, dear. This weather cannot last for ever. I think I had better come and sit with you in the parlour here, instead of our each being in a separate room. Would you like that ? We might tell stories to one another, might we not ? ”

“ Oh, yes, do,” was Mary’s delighted reply, her face brightening at the idea. “ Do tell me about your youth and your life in the glen. Oh, you don’t know, James, how awfully lonely I feel it to be sitting all by myself here. Everything is so new to me that really I am sometimes quite afraid of what may be going to happen.”

“ But that is very foolish, my dear pet,” James replied ; “ you must not imagine or forestall evils.”

Mary shuddered, and said, “ I will try ; but do come and sit here ; do come to-day.”

James agreed to do so, and during the short

winter days he spent much time with her. That was a long, very severe winter, with a succession of snow-storms, and often during the dreary weeks James would sit for hours telling stories and legends, until Mary began to feel that she knew the glen and its inhabitants quite well, although she had never seen the place or the people. She was specially interested in any stories about Duncan Macnair, the shepherd of Glen Feshie, and Hamish, his foster-brother, a junior member of the chief's family whose wild expeditions were still the talk of the neighbourhood.

One day James came into the parlour with a sheet of paper in his hand, on which there was some writing, and, handing it to Mary, he said :

"These lines were written by Duncan Macnair ; can you read them ?"

Mary looked at the paper, but shook her head, and, smiling, said :

"It is hieroglyphic writing to me ; you must give me a clue."

"Well," James answered, sitting down beside her, "I will read the lines by-and-by, but will tell the story about them first. You must know that I was a very quiet boy, so fond of my book that I used often to take refuge in the shepherd's

cottage from the noise at home, for I could sit there undisturbed. One evening I was sitting on a little stool in the wide open chimney, close to a blazing fire, busy reading by the light of a torch of pine-wood. Roots of trees that have lain in the peat-moss, probably for ages, become saturated with resin, and give a beautiful blaze, and no other light was used in Glen Feshie at that time. Duncan and Hamish, both of whom had just returned from the hill, sat at the table, on which stood bread and cheese and a bottle of whisky, a long pipe, and a large glass before each of the men. As the evening advanced their talk and laughter waxed louder and louder, and every now and then I looked up from my book in amazement, mixed, I fear, with a share of contempt and annoyance, for they disturbed me. Having finished the bottle of whisky, Duncan rose to get another, and at the same time he brought out the bagpipes, which were instantly seized by Hamish, who began playing reels and strathspeys in fast and furious succession. Presently, Duncan got up to dance, and the other joined him, the two keeping time to the music, and dancing with such vigour that I, looking on wistfully, was lost in admiration, all contempt banished from my mind. The steps

were wonderful, the pipes were by-and-by laid aside, but still they danced on ; the partners bowed to each other, they cracked their fingers, they leaped, they crossed hands, they whirled each other round, they capered until, quite worn out, they sank down on their chairs. After only a few minutes' rest, Hamish asked Duncan for his new song, and he sang these lines that I hold in my hand to a beautiful soft air, which I wish I could sing to you. Oh, it was glorious ! I will give you a free translation from the original Gaelic :

*The sun has set, the day's grown old,
The light has met, 'tis September cold,
Old age has reached its Autumn end,
Our death must come for us to mend;
We drink to die, we fear to live
Unless we live our Master's life;
We fight in love, we gain to give
And so we try to end the strife.*

“Suddenly, at the close of the song, a martial air was struck up by Duncan, and in a moment the quondam chief, descrying me, whom he had not before noticed, pounced upon me with a loud whoop, and lifting me up in his arms as if I were a baby, raised me to the ceiling, and then set me down in the middle of the floor with a tremendous thud. As you may suppose, I was

nearly terrified out of my wits, and could not utter a syllable ; then this great and fearful giant, seeing my fear, opened his mouth wide and bellowed like a bull. I gave a loud scream, and with a desperate rush dashed out of the house, running like a hare, and I never turned round until I reached home."

Mary laughed excessively at the scene described, and James, glad to find that he could amuse her, continued :

"You may depend upon it, I never told them at home about the fright I had got, for I was sure that both of my parents would have been angry, and perhaps my mother would have forbidden me to go again to the shepherd's. Not until long after the occurrence did I speak even to Duncan about it, and then I found him very reserved on the subject, and I had difficulty in persuading him to let me copy these lines."

Tales such as this brightened the dull days to Mary, and the result was that her depression entirely disappeared, and her letters to Glasgow friends became so cheerful that Mrs. Gordon had no longer much doubt about the well-being of her former charge.

All this was very well while it lasted, but with the advance of spring Mary was again thrown on

her own resources, for her husband's leisure hours were occupied in attending to the glebe, and her depression returned. She was deeply disappointed with her work in the parish, which she had begun with energy and hope. She had acquired sufficient facility in Gaelic for ordinary conversation, an attention much appreciated by the older people, and "the sweet young lady," as she was justly called, was loved by old and young. In accordance with her husband's desire, she had tried to explain the Bible and pray with the sick, keeping strictly to what he told her she ought to do and say ; but she could not follow any defined rules, and after a few unsuccessful attempts had given up the effort altogether. Mr. Stewart did not know of this until one day, calling ministerially on a sick woman, he found his wife at her bedside with a child on her knee, the centre of an interested group, to whom she was singing with great feeling and spirit Burns' "Halloween," to the extreme delight of the invalid. On the way home James spoke very seriously about Mary's responsibility as his wife, and told her that she really ought to remember her superior position, and not condescend to amuse the people as she had been doing. Mary was much hurt by James's rebuke, and the conse-

quence of it was that she reluctantly gave up all efforts to help her poor neighbours. She did not find it any easier to please her husband in her intercourse with the wealthier members of his congregation ; in fact, the minister could not keep his wife within the bounds of his own rigid conventionalism, for she neither would nor could be the slave of profession, as he himself was, and he was dissatisfied. He could not, however, deny that her gentleness seemed to sway all classes, and she was certainly rewarded by the love of the whole congregation, although she was not herself aware of their feeling, and her timidity increased as time went on.

CHAPTER XVII

IN the following winter Mary's first child was born, and for a time the pride and joy of motherhood sufficed to fill her heart. James was pleased to see her happiness, and imagining that the depression from which she had suffered so greatly was not likely to return, gave up trying to find amusement for her as he had done the first year of their married life. In consequence of this, she suffered both in mind and body, and ere long black clouds began to gather on the domestic horizon. While the minister was in his study, thinking on subjects that interested him, the minister's wife sat alone, longing for sympathetic company, and in her heart finding fault with her husband for his neglect ; but she was too timidly reserved, perhaps too proud, to let him know her feeling, and so husband and wife drifted apart. Three or four monotonous years passed by, during which Mary sadly changed, and misery brooded over the manse. No more did sounds of joyous

laughter or bursts of lively song greet the ears of Mr. Stewart as he sat in his study ; but he was deaf to the change, and did not trouble himself about his wife's solitariness. Why was this ? Why had Mary so grievously altered ?

We have not far to seek for a solution of the problem. Mary had begun her life at Eathie by trying to do her duty as a minister's wife, looking to her husband for help in the work she attempted. He had given her none, but had grumbled incessantly at her repeated failures, and she knew that he was bitterly disappointed in her. Having unwittingly done his utmost to check her spontaneity, he had in a large measure succeeded ; and she, poor soul, thus driven back on herself, strove to repress her original nature. Her bodily health, too, was giving way from her confinement to the house, for she had given up driving with her husband as she used to do, and there was no great inducement to go out of doors. The life of daily repression was telling upon her ; freedom to act and speak without deliberation was denied to her, at the cost of the light in her eye, and the brightness of her whole being. The poor woman was fighting with giants, and she got no help in the combat from him who ought with his love and strength to have aided her,

and shielded her from the danger that threatened her. Mary's life was a burden to her ; she had lost all care even about her personal appearance, and frequently neglected her household duties. Instead of the children proving a bond of union between their parents, differences of opinion on matters connected with them often led to serious quarrels, and Mary resorted to subterfuge in order to get her own way. The misery in the manse was a common subject of talk among the villagers, whose opinion was divided as to where the fault lay, but there had not yet been any open discordance. Mr. Stewart had been fully occupied for at least two years with an important theological work, and nothing had been allowed to interfere with the course of his studies while it was in progress ; but when the book was published, and he had leisure to attend to matters near home, he made the painful discovery that his wife had slipped from his control. He determined not to submit to such a state of affairs, and made many efforts to bring back the old days, but all in vain. For too long a time had he neglected to please his wife, and done nothing for the comfort of any of his family. He had expected doubtless that, when he should choose to exert himself and his book was finished, he could

recover the place he thought he possessed in Mary's heart, but he was utterly mistaken, and he had to acknowledge to himself that his wife was completely estranged. There was no reciprocity between them, and day after day the tension increased until both parties felt that things could not go on much longer as they were. It was an actual relief, at any rate to Mary, when matters were brought to a climax one morning at breakfast, by James saying :

"It is a long time, Mary, since you had a drive with me. Will you come to-day? I am going to visit some of your old friends."

Mary's face told without words that she was not willing to go, so James was not much surprised at her saying :

"No, I had much rather not. I cannot leave baby, so you must go without me. Thank you, however, all the same for asking me, and give my kind remembrances to my old friends."

"Oh, that will not do," said James, looking up from his book, for he always read at breakfast; "you must come. You are losing your rosy cheeks and bright eyes, and the drive will do you good. Get on your bonnet and cloak quickly. It will soon be time for us to be off."

Mary sat quiet for a little, and then she said timidly :

"Don't ask me, James, I cannot bear to leave my darlings. Do go by yourself. I do not want to go."

"Don't be silly," replied James, in a hasty tone ;
"I cannot let you shut yourself up as you do. It is very bad for your health."

Mary glanced at her husband's face, and the obstinate determination on it impelled her to answer sharply :

"Pray, am I my own mistress with command of my actions, or am I not ? I assure you that I am quite able to judge for myself, and I know what is good for me. It isn't very likely that I will leave my children to go with you."

James did not show openly how angry he was, but said :

"It is no use your refusing to come, for come you must. We will take Johnnie with us, if you like, and then you will have one of your pets with you ;" adding peremptorily as she still sat on,
"come, go and get ready."

She, however, did not move, but said pettishly :

"Am I not at liberty to do as I choose ? Am I

your slave? Indeed, I should just think not;" and she threw back her head defiantly.

Looking at her with a hard smile, which provoked her as much as the harsh words, James said :

"You shall do as you choose so long as your actions are sensible, and are such as I approve of, but no longer. I do *not* approve of your staying at home to-day, so please go and get ready, for we must start soon."

James really thought the drive would be a pleasure as well as a benefit to Mary; and, startled by her refusal, he had hesitated for a moment what course to pursue. Eventually, as we see, he decided to adopt the stern tone of command, and crush any kind feeling he might have. This was Mary's first expressed defiance of his authority, her first assertion of herself, and James was both astonished and angry.

The effect of the incident on Mary was to kill whatever love might still have existed in her heart for her husband, and from this time she became more reckless. Similar scenes were of frequent occurrence, and Mary at last found it easy to ignore James, and concentrate her affections on her two little ones.

James was so much hurt by Mary's refusal to drive with him on this occasion, that he never again asked her to do so. One by one other bonds of mutual interest were snapped, and in the course of a short time each learned to live without the other.

Shortly after this, Mrs. Gordon invited Mary to pay her a visit in Glasgow. At one time, this invitation would have been eagerly accepted, but so listless and dispirited had she now become that it raised no enthusiasm in her, and she would have refused if James had not insisted on her accepting it.

He had become really anxious about her health, and was unable to account for the long-continued mental depression. Blinded by his self-love and self-conceit, he did not realise the danger of trying to control such a creature as his wife, to whom freedom was as necessary for spiritual and mental health as air and food for physical well-being. Mary had been cowed into concealing her real feelings, and he was deluded by her apparent submission to his will. Her whole being, however, rebelled at her husband's want of faith in her; she chafed at his continual imputation of wrong motives, and she was fast turning into a miserable, hard woman.

The journey from Badenoch to Glasgow in those days was very tedious, and the traveller was exceedingly tired and depressed at its close ; but a loving welcome awaited her, and by degrees she recovered some of her old light-heartedness. Excited with her return to the home which she had not visited since her marriage, she was as lively and happy-looking as ever for some little time after her arrival. She went a good deal into society, and found herself, as formerly, "the admired of all admirers." But when the excitement waned, Mrs. Gordon saw with concern that she was no longer the bright, impulsive girl, ready to love all, and be pleased with everything ; no longer the frank, confiding young woman of earlier days, and she feared that under the surface the cherished child of her adoption had become hard and unloving, and she was right in thinking as she did.

Mrs. Gordon was most desirous to learn something about the course of life at Eathie, but Mary positively refused to talk of it, asserting that there was nothing interesting to tell.

It was a real grief to Mrs. Gordon when she found that it was impossible for her to gain Mary's confidence, and she was made still more uneasy by observing how low-spirited she became on receipt

of the news of Mr. Stewart's early arrival to take her home, so that it was with a heavy heart that Mary's good friends in Glasgow bade her farewell. While she was in Glasgow, Mrs. Stewart had given much serious thought to the state of affairs at her home, and she had come to the conclusion—probably the wisest for her—that she would in future live for her children only, and not trouble herself about outside things, but she did not know how difficult it would be to carry out her purpose.

Her life was very lonely, and although James often urged her to sit beside him in the study, she would not do so, because he said the children disturbed him in his work, and she would not stay there without them. Gradually she sank into a dangerously depressed state of mind, but her husband was not aware of her serious condition until he found her one day crying bitterly over the infant on her knee. Troubled at the sight of her distress, James went up to her, and laying his hand in a fatherly way on her head, said :

“What is the matter, my dear ? Are you ill ? I am afraid you are staying too much indoors.”

“No, no,” she answered, tossing her head, “I am quite well. I cannot tell you what is the matter : you would never understand me. I am not ill in

body, but my heart is sore, and I am very weary of it all. I don't expect you to know what I mean, but you may rest assured that I am well enough, and I go out as much as is necessary."

She sobbed as if her heart would break, and James was alarmed to see her giving way as she did. All his efforts to quiet her were unavailing, and she absolutely refused to give him the slightest clue to the real cause of her emotion ; indeed, it is doubtful if she could have done so collectedly, and, by-and-by rising from her seat and hugging the child passionately to her breast, she cried out, with a wild look and hysterical sobs :

"Leave baby and me to ourselves, or I shall go mad. My life is nearly desperate as it is, and your presence makes me worse. I do not think I can stand it much longer, and I could not have borne it at all if it were not for my children. You have almost killed me with your stoniness, and your goodness, forsooth ! Oh ! go away."

"Calm yourself," said the minister quietly, "and tell me what it is that you want."

He looked at her very suspiciously, the idea occurring to him that she was perhaps going out of her mind ; and for a minute or two he felt frightened, confounded by this outburst of feeling. He had no

idea that under the meek, submissive demeanour which Mary had shown of late there burned such furious impetuosity.

Giving no heed to his words, she went on excitedly, her large eyes flashing fire, and her whole face working with fury :

“ Yes, truly,” she screamed, “ you shall hear : I hate you. Yes; it has come to that. Once I did try to love you, but it was more than I could do ; then I tried to do my duty to you, and I still try to do it, but it seems as if I should have to give up attempting even that. Did you not promise to be kind to me when my dear papa gave me into your charge ? What have you done for my good, let alone for my happiness ? You never do anything ; you do not tell the stories to me that you did the first winter we were married ; you never buy a book for me. Oh ! it is unbearable.”

She stopped as if she was exhausted, but when her husband seemed about to speak, she raised her hand to hinder him, and went on more excitedly than ever :

“ You treat me with suspicion, watching me in every way, so that I cannot even go out of the garden without your spying on me. You make me mad. The children are my only comfort.”

Then, hiding her face on the baby in her arms, she sobbed out hysterically, with alarm depicted on her countenance :

“ Oh, I see what you are meaning to do now ; oh, you cruel man ! ” The poor thing writhed in agony, as she gasped out : “ You want to separate them from me, but surely you cannot. I will kill them, as well as myself, before that happens. I warn you. I will do it. ” She positively hissed out the words, “ I hate you, you mean, cruel wretch ! ”

The poor mother trembled with rage and fear, for a terrible dread had taken hold of her, a not unreasonable dread, the cause of which must be explained. During the past year or two, whilst going through the struggle for freedom of thought and action, Mary had often felt obliged to resort to alcohol, sometimes even to opium, to soothe her weary brain and relieve her overstrung nerves. James becoming aware of this, had forbidden her to take any stimulant whatever, and had threatened in harsh words to take the children from under her care if she would not promise to obey in this matter. She made the promise, and had kept it until yesterday, when she had procured a bottle of brandy by stealth. Now she fancied that this unwonted visit to the nursery,

whose threshold her husband scarcely ever crossed, had been made with a view to the removal of the children. It was not so. James had no such intention, but only wished to frighten her by the threat, so he said soothingly :

“ Don’t be alarmed, I do not wish to separate you from the little ones so long as they are safe with you.”

“ Safe with me ! ” she cried out ; “ with whom could they be safe if not with their own mother ? I will always keep them, and if I die they shall die too. Leave me ! oh, leave me ! ” And she sobbed violently.

“ I assure you,” James replied softly, for he was much frightened, “ I am not going to come between you and the children, but I will not allow you to make yourself ill as you are doing.”

“ Much you would care,” she answered passionately, “ if I were to be ill, except for the doctor’s bill you would have to pay. I am quite well I tell you. Go away ! Baby and I can look after ourselves.”

She dried her eyes, looked defiantly at her husband, and rose to leave the room ; but James intercepted her, placing his back against the door so that she could not open it. She then turned to the window, casting on him such a reproachful gaze

that he almost relented. Recovering himself, however, he opened the door and walked away without saying another word. A few minutes later he might be seen hurrying out of the house and through the garden into the highway.

James Stewart had begun his ministerial life at Eathic with the honest desire to do his duty both to his family and his congregation ; but he gave no sign of love, and therefore he had done no really good work among them. The hard conditions of his people's life in the biting cold of the long dreary winter demanded warmth of feeling in their minister. They did not care about perfect moral conduct, and the majority would have been very lenient in their judgment if he had sinned ; but they imperatively required a loving heart, and were quick to feel Mr Stewart's deficiency. He preached carefully prepared sermons, but there was no soul in them. He held firmly to the ancient Calvinistic belief in God's being an avenging judge, as his mother had taught him, and he could neither write nor preach the free Gospel message, because of the chains which he loved to hug. He had never grasped the freeness of the truth, and the fog in which he now wandered was so dense that he never imagined he was on the wrong road. He had besides

become much estranged from his brethren in the Presbytery, who shunned his society, for he was moody and self-occupied.

When James Stewart left Forres he was vigorous and energetic, quite equal to taking a prominent place in his world of the Church, and although he had accepted a country charge, he had only done so in the hope of its proving a stepping-stone to something greater. He was well aware that by marrying the bright, cultured Mary Scott it would be easier to gain the position he coveted ; and besides, he had hoped that she would bring a joy into his life. He now recalled bitterly the many times she had told him that she did not love him ; but he checked his self-reproach by remembering how she had said she expected love to grow out of the esteem she had for him ; he had never doubted its doing so ; and if he had trusted her sweet nature he would probably have succeeded in gaining her love. He knew that when she came with him to this sequestered place, she had had every desire to do her duty in the parish ; but he felt that she had miserably failed. It was impossible for him to shut his eyes to the disapproving looks and remarks of some of the congregation who freely blamed them both. Proudly resenting their judgment, he

had by degrees retired from all unnecessary communication with them, and was now living a perfectly solitary life with his books. He walked alone, he drove alone, and he was always alone in his study. Mary was no companion to him in any of his pursuits, and one need not wonder at his wretched appearance as he quitted the manse after the scene described. Wending his way along the side of the loch after the interview with his wife, he looked quite an old man, with his shoulders bent, his head bowed on his chest, and his eyes fixed on the ground. His face was haggard and anxious, and the suspicious look in his light blue eyes had become so marked that every one noticed it; and no wonder, for his love was turned to hatred, and his whole nature was affected by the change. When out of sight of the manse he slackened his pace and straightened his back, as he muttered to himself :

“I wonder whatever tempted me to marry that woman? Surely, if ever man was bewitched I am that man; child of the devil that she is! I was mad; she fairly fascinated me. The very first time I set eyes on her, her witchery was at work. I remember how I could not get her face out of my mind. I tried to study, I tried to think, I tried to sleep; but for ever that pretty face with its bewitching

smile came to disturb me ; even now, those eyes of hers follow me." Then shaking his fist at an imaginary object, and gnashing his teeth, he cried out, no longer able to contain himself :

" Truly, it was an ill day for me when Mary Scott tripped so lightly before me in Aberdeen. She was the devil's lure, for nothing but the evil one could have given her the fascination that urged me on to my destruction. A spell was cast over me, and I rushed after her like a madman."

He clasped his hands together and flung them separate again as if fighting with an invisible adversary, then, groaning deeply and raising his eyes to heaven, he prayed aloud for deliverance from the power of the devil, promising increased service. The minister walked on as he prayed, swinging his hat to and fro in his hand. He kicked the stones violently out of his path, and crushed a beetle deliberately under his heel. Then he wrenched a branch off a tree, and struck it on the iron fence with such force that it snapped in two, and he gnashed his teeth in rage. His unbridled fury was like that of a wild beast, but its very fierceness wore out its strength. Presently, sitting down, he buried his face in his hands, rocked his body to and fro, and finally lay back utterly ex-

hausted. How long he sat there he did not know, for sleep overcame his wearied body, and when he awoke it was afternoon.

He woke in softer mood and inclined to be conciliatory to Mary, whom he sought out immediately on his return, and asked coaxingly to have tea with him in the study.

Mary, too, had gone through a terrible experience of her own, but it had not softened her. She acceded sulkily to her husband's request, but kept perfect silence during the meal. She was rebelling fiercely against him ; so much so, that the mere fact of his presence galled her and she longed for solitude.

For weeks, things went on in this way. James occupied himself with his studies and took no heed of his wife's trouble ; while she was searching for rest, yearning eagerly for the love of which she felt the need so bitterly. At length, she seemed to find a measure of comfort in her children, and in spite of the strained relations with her husband, she was honestly trying to do her duty. Dreary and desolate though she often was, no thought ever entered her mind of seeking consolation from any human being ; in fact, she had become utterly spiritless.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was at this critical period in the wedded life of James and Mary Stewart, that William Robertson, who had renewed his acquaintance with Mary when she was visiting Mrs. Gordon, came to the inn at Eathie for the purpose of fishing: the landlady, anxious to promote her lodger's comfort, took an early opportunity of introducing him to the minister, and Mr. Stewart invited the young man to the manse, not knowing that he was the veritable "scape-grace" whose power over Mary Scott he had once dreaded.

Mrs. Stewart was startled when she recognised in her husband's guest the lover of her youth, and she gave him anything but a cordial reception. As the evening advanced, however, her reserve gave way, and Mr. Stewart, to his extreme annoyance, found the conversation drifting into subjects that had no interest for him. His suspicion was aroused by the mention of incidents that had occurred in

Glasgow years ago, and he thus discovered the visitor's identity ; but in spite of this, with customary Highland politeness, he invited him again to the manse, and afterwards from time to time renewed the invitation.

Mary was very careful at first of her words and actions in William's presence, but circumstances threw the young people much together, and an intimacy sprang up between them which was most objectionable to Mr. Stewart, although he never openly opposed it. Mary's old witchery revived, and becoming possessed with the spirit of mischief, she tormented her husband by flirting with William, who was only too glad to respond. The strain of living under the shadow of the ministerial profession which her husband loved and worshipped, was proving too great for Mary's spirit, and it rebounded in the youthful society of their guest. Light and airy, she now rushed according to her nature into bursts of joy and enthusiasm, and was ready to join in any adventure, astonishing her husband by her light-heartedness ; and he gave no sign of disapproval, although inwardly much displeased.

Seeing that her husband lacked the courage to rebuke her, and well aware of his desire to do so, Mary became more and more reckless, until at length

she contemptuously ignored him when their guest was present.

After William Robertson's stay in the country came to an end, he kept up correspondence with both Mr. and Mrs. Stewart, and as soon as he could do so, he returned to the attractive little inn, and renewed his intercourse at the manse with fervour.

The young people were again much in one another's company, and but little prudence was exercised by either of them, so that the neighbours began to whisper evil words about them both. Mr. Stewart was for a long time ignorant of the village scandal, and it was only by overhearing his servants' remarks that he came to know what was said about his wife.

He had risen early one morning, and, on passing the byre-door, his attention was arrested by hearing Sandy, the plough-boy, say to Mysie, the maid-servant :

"Does the minister know, I wonder, that Robertson is in the country even now? Oh, Mysie, what will happen if he finds it out? You may depend on it, that Robertson's not here so soon again for any good."

"Hold your clavering tongue," Mysie answered,

and she flung the milk-cans rudely on the stones ; but Sandy persistently continued :

" Well, Mysie, you may say what you like, but I for one cannot think that the mistress should be doing what everybody says she does, and be meeting that idle fellow. Do you yourself think it is right ? "

" Who's the everybody ? " said Mysie, in a very angry tone ; " don't you be saying one word against my mistress, and don't be listening to evil tales about her. She has her faults, no doubt, but she's a heap better than the master ; anyway, she is not a hypocrite like him with his dour face, though maybe she does whiles take a wee drop more than is good for her. "

" I cannot deny, " said Sandy slowly, " that she is a fine lady ; she is awful kind to everybody, and has aye a pleasant word to give you, but it beats me to understand why she and the minister don't get on together. He cannot be a bad man, for isn't he for ever quoting the Scriptures ? "

" Oh, ay, I daresay, " she answered ; " that's an easy thing for the likes of him to do. I give him no thanks for doing what must come so easy to his tongue. "

Sandy scratched his head, and said thoughtfully :

"I think the master should be told what's going on. I would tell him myself if Robertson hadn't given me five shillings yesterday, and I could not tell on him after that."

"And do you really think," said Mysie, in a contemptuous tone, "the old fool does not know already? Full well he does that, but he is so frightened for what she'll say till him, that he daren't speak either to her or anybody else about it."

"They're telling me," said Sandy, "that the Presbytery will be down on him soon, and that they'll make him put her away. The most of the ministers have no liking for Mr. Stewart at any rate, and they will be very glad to give him such a humbling."

"Well, well," was Mysie's reply, "I'm sure I don't care if they do fault him, but I don't believe they can make him put her away. If that's true, he would have done it long ago, for oh, Sandy, he is cruel ; it's quite pitiful to see how he's broke her heart, and, just think, she is younger than me. These cold eyes of his are whiles dreadful, especially when they turn green." And she wiped her own eyes with the corner of her apron.

Mr. Stewart heard no more ; stunned and stupefied, he slipped away. He felt convinced now that popular

feeling would be likely soon to show itself against him, he dreaded its expression, and did not know how to meet it : it was therefore no wonder that he came in to breakfast in no softened mood. He sat down without taking any notice of his wife, and the meal was eaten in silence. Breakfast over, the Bibles and psalm-books were placed on the table ; Mysie and Sandy took their seats, and the minister read a chapter with great solemnity ; after which he prayed extempore in pointed language for transgressors that they might see the error of their ways, and meet with due punishment here, instead of hereafter.

Rising from their knees, the little household dispersed ; Mr. Stewart went to his study, and Mrs. Stewart, throwing a shawl over her head, slipped out of the house and turned her steps to the wood, where she knew William Robertson awaited her.

It is needful here to make it plain that, although Mary, by reckless flirtation and studied disregard of her husband's wishes, had frequently given occasion for animadversion, she was what is called a faithful wife, and the imputations cast on her chastity were groundless.

Her mind, never a very strong one, had lately become rather unsettled, owing no doubt to her

isolation and domestic unhappiness, but not until she was driven completely distracted, as was now the case, had she ever seriously thought of deserting her home ; for the first time she was now ready to listen to the oft-repeated voice of the tempter. When she rose in the morning, her intention had been to resist meeting William Robertson, as she had half promised to do ; but annoyance with her husband's conduct at breakfast made her change her mind, and determine to keep the tryst, not in the least realising what the action involved. Mary Stewart knew very little about the world, either by contact with it or from books, and it must be remembered that her thoughts had necessarily been confined to a very limited circle, and she had come to hate her husband intensely ; also that in William Robertson she thought she had found a counsellor, one who would think of her welfare. Her action this fatal morning was an impulsive one, for which she was scarcely responsible ; it was an effort for freedom, but in a wrong way, as she herself afterwards acknowledged.

It is scarcely possible to imagine a more lovely picture than Mary presented when William Robertson's eyes rested on her as she entered the wood

that wet morning. The quick walking had brought an unusually bright colour into her cheeks, her beautiful grey eyes sparkled with hope, and the expression on her face was one of pleased expectation ; the tartan shawl, which had been thrown loosely over her head, had fallen back in the excitement, and the dark hair pushed back from her white forehead was picturesquely blown over her neck and face. Mary came to meet William Robertson, forgetful of all she was leaving, in the fond belief that in him she would find her deliverer, and she was prepared to do whatever he wished ; but the fool's paradise was soon to be ruthlessly destroyed, and William disclose his true character. Mary shrank from his effusive salutation, feeling intuitively that it was insincere. With very little circumlocution, he told her in few words that he had asked her to meet him there for the purpose of saying farewell for a time. She did not take in his meaning at first, and he repeated his words, pleading with her to promise to follow him to the new country, whither he was bound, as soon as he had a home to offer her. He did not appear to know what his words must mean to her, and was surprised when she started back, and frightened when, with a scream, she sank insensible

at his feet. Much alarmed, William called Sandy, and looking at his watch, directed him to attend to his mistress, for he himself had not a moment to spare. Then, as soon as Mary showed signs of recovering, but before she had fully regained consciousness, he mounted his horse and rode off. The sound of the horse's feet roused the poor thing, and, sitting up, she gazed round with a dazed look, but saw only Sandy, who came forward, and, raising her gently, threw her shawl over her head. Without apparently recognising the boy, she drew the shawl tightly round her form, and, pushing him aside, rushed home.

Flinging open the bedroom window, she stretched out her head and arms as if to catch William, but her straining eyes could get no sight of the desired object. He was gone, gone for ever from her, for she felt sure she should never see him again ; and her forecast was to prove true.

The fact of William's desertion then burst on her in all its significance ; she knew that she was betrayed, her faith in him was destroyed ; but the way in which the world would judge her she did not yet perceive. Looking round the room in despair, she felt as if the ceiling were falling on her, and the walls gradually closing in, until unable

to repress her feelings longer, she fell heavily on the floor with a deep groan.

Mysie, at work in the kitchen below, was startled by the noise, and in less than a minute was upstairs. Pushing open the bedroom door, she saw her mistress lying on the floor, near the open window, in a fit of convulsive weeping ; her face distorted, her hair disordered, and her dress torn and soiled.

Mysie was an ignorant farm-servant, untutored in gentle ways, but of a kindly, sympathetic nature and a chivalrous spirit, which had often been stirred of late for her gentle mistress, whom she saw subjected to her husband's neglect and persecution. She generally spoke in a sullen tone to her master, but always addressed her mistress politely, even in his presence, so that no doubt could be left on Mr. Stewart's mind about her feeling towards him. She had received much kindness and human sympathy from Mrs. Stewart, in a time of great family trouble, and that seed was bearing fruit in the girl's conduct now.

Mysie was a tall, powerfully built young woman, but her face, which was weather-beaten and freckled, though intelligent, had no pretensions to beauty. Her large brown eyes were very kindly, and her

well-formed mouth indicated great determination of character ; her hair was red, the shade that Titian loved ; but red hair is not admired in Scotland, and she was almost ashamed of its luxuriance, and certainly of its colour. She was dressed in a short winsey skirt and a clean white short-gown or jacket, whose sleeves were turned back and pinned on the shoulders, showing the red brawny arms. A large apron, tied round the waist over the jacket, gave a tidy appearance to the well-formed figure ; and a thick white cap with muslin borders and long strings fastened behind so as not to interfere with the wearer's freedom of movement, completed the costume.

Mysie hated the minister, and it was with strangely mixed feelings of pity for the poor thing at her feet, and triumph over her master, that she called out from the top of the stairs :

“Mr. Stewart, ye'd better come up, and see what ye've done. The mistress is near dead, and it's all your fault. Come quick.”

The minister rose slowly from his desk, as if the summons was not altogether unexpected, and went upstairs. Mary was now quite insensible, and with a certain gentleness he lifted her off the floor and laid her on the bed. The movement roused

her, and she opened her eyes, but, shuddering, shut them again immediately, crying out in an unnatural voice :

“ Oh, go away ! The very sight of you maddens me. Go, go, I tell you ! ”

He obeyed, turning to the window, which he closed ; but after a few minutes he came back to the bedside with a stern, uncompromising look on his face, and said very quietly, evidently putting a restraint upon himself :

“ Mary, where have you been ? What have you been doing ? ”

She did not answer, but buried her face in the bedclothes. So he repeated in louder tones :

“ Answer me. Where have you been ? Do you hear me ? Your shoes are wet, and your gown is dirty ; tell me where you have been. What were you doing out in the rain ? ”

She remained speechless, and he shook her ; then in a voice terrific with passion, his eyes gleaming like a wild cat's, he shouted out :

“ The devil is in you, but, devil or no devil, you are mine—mine, and you shall be mine while you live. Tell me where you have been ? ”

The man was mad with anger and jealousy. Mary sat up in bed, and looking round her dis-

tractedly, raised her hands as if in entreaty. Then she pushed her husband away from her, and screamed out :

"Yes, it is true ; I am the devil's, but it was you that sent me to him. You *would* marry me, although you knew that I loved Willie Robertson. Then you brought me to this lonely place, where I had nobody to speak to ; you gave me no new books to read ; you grudged giving me money, even my own ; you shut up the very bread from me, in order, as you said, that I might not be tempted to waste the mercies. Yes, truly, it was *you* and *your goodness*, forsooth, that sent me to the devil."

Presently, seeing he did not reply, she gasped out :

"This morning I went to meet Willie, feeling that it would be better to go straight to the devil at once with him, than stay any longer in this hypocritical house with you."

Casting a searching, defiant look at her husband, she continued: " But you need not think I have done anything to make it possible for you to put me away, for I haven't : he has gone without me, and I have come back. Oh, poor me !"

Mr. Stewart stood aghast ; the servants' talk was fully explained ; and, clasping his hands on his head, he muttered :

"My God! Good God!"

Mary screamed out :

"Your God! Do you really think your God can be a good one? Do you deserve a good God? God! goodness, what a mockery!"

Giving a wild shriek, she sank back exhausted. Her deathly pallor made James fear that she would die, and he was thankful to see Mysie, who, coming up to the bedside, addressed her mistress, at the same time casting a spiteful look at her master.

"Here is a cup of tea, my dear lady. You would have had it sooner, but I had to send to the shop for it, and I paid for it myself. Everything here is kept locked up, and it was easier to buy some than to ask for the key."

She then faced Mr. Stewart, and said to him :

"You may go away now, sir; I'll look after her myself; but if you hear the child cry, will you take her up and walk about with her till I come down? I must stay here, for"—pointing to her mistress—"she is not fit to be left."

It will surprise no one that Mr. Stewart slipped away to his study instead of attending to the infant. Drawing down the blinds, he sat down at the table, his head clasped in his hands.

We must leave him there for the present, and return to the bedroom, where Mysie stood for some

minutes silent. She hesitated for a little how to act, for she was young and inexperienced, but presently summoning courage, she said in a tone of displeasure :

“ Mistress Stewart, whatever was you thinking about, to do as ye’ve done? Where have you been? Ye must have been out on the road or in the wood to wet your dress like that.”

Mary raised herself up in bed, stared wildly round the room, and, heedless of the cup which Mysie was holding out, clenched the girl’s arm so fiercely that the tea was upset over the bedclothes, and the cup rolled on the floor with a crash. Seeing what had happened, Mary burst into hysterical tears, shaking the bed, and almost pulling Mysie over with her vehement grasp. Mysie held the poor suffering creature close to herself, making her shoulder a pillow for her head, while she affectionately stroked the hair, which was all blown about and wet; but all her efforts to quiet the violent emotion were fruitless, and Mysie became really frightened.

“ Don’t cry that way,” she said, “ my dear lady; ye’re not that wicked. Oh, my dear, you’ll make yourself real unwell if you go on that way. Take the tea, my dear, it’ll help some to warm you, and if you’ll sit up a wee, I’ll beat your pillows.”

Putting her hand under the bedclothes, she felt her feet and said :

" Losh, these feet are as cold's death, no wonder that ye're like a corpse. I'll get a hot jar for ye this minute." She made a movement to leave, but Mary clutched her and would not let her go. She continued to cry bitterly for a long time, tossing her head restlessly on the pillow, but at length, seeming quite worn out, she lay perfectly quiet. Mysie took the opportunity to slip out of the room, returning in a very short time with a hot-water bottle for her feet. She was exceedingly quick, for although she knew that the tears must have relieved the oppressed brain, she had noticed an expression of despair on her mistress's face which made her think it would be unsafe to leave her alone until she slept.

The comforting warmth and the hot tea soothed the racked nerves, and at last Mary shut her eyes, appearing to be asleep. Mysie then got up, and closing the door gently, went to the kitchen. No sooner, however, did Mary hear the clamping of Mysie's shoes on the stone floor downstairs, than, slipping out of bed, she unlocked a drawer, took out a bottle of brandy, and pouring some into the cup, drank it off, lay down again, and was soon really fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIX

MEANWHILE, in the darkened study, James Stewart's thoughts reverted strangely to Elsie Macdonald. In bitter anguish, he recalled his conversation with Duncan Macnair the shepherd before his departure to Aberdeen, and he acknowledged with shame that Elsie had to be avenged. For a moment, he bowed his head in humility as he remembered his sin, but it was only for a moment. Anger against his wife had still full possession of him, his heart was filled with a passionate wish for revenge, and thoughts about the once loved Elsie seemed to harden rather than soften his heart.

If we could have seen him at this moment, we should have recognised by the tense, hard expression on his face that the fact, whatever it was, on which he was dwelling was a false guide. The idea that Mary was his property, his to command, his to protect from the world (for that was his view of the treatment he was giving her) now filled his mind to the exclusion of everything else.

Self in a peculiarly hateful form, shielded by religion and cloaked in the garb of so-called duty to God, to her, to his parishioners, was ruling supreme over the minister at this hour. He was a man of more than average intellectual ability, but his moral sense was defective, not perhaps in the actual perception of right and wrong, but in well-balanced judgment when what he called "duty" was in question.

The duty of providing for his mother and sister had been accepted by him and rigorously fulfilled; he had flattered himself that this was a noble deed, worthy of a follower of Christ, entirely ignoring the actual necessity that had existed for temporarily giving up the pursuit of the ministry. In course of time, with the aid of his mother, he had magnified the sacrifice which they both imagined he had made, until the true bearings of his life and its surroundings were lost.

When the struggle came that ended in the renunciation of Elsie, he had rejoiced in his power of fancied self-denial, little knowing the irretrievable injury he was thereby doing to his moral nature.

In after years, when his conscience pricked him for his conduct to the sweet confiding Highland lassie, he was easily soothed by recollections of his

mother's arguments, and Elsie's own apparently willing compliance with his unexpressed wish that she should give him back her troth, and the idea had never suggested itself to him that her death in some measure lay at his door.

Having accustomed himself to think of her as a saint who had been taken away in the ordinary course of nature, having died of consumption, he had lost sight of the fact that her suffering even to death was due to her action with regard to him. A glimpse of the truth began to dawn on him that dreary day. True, Elsie Macdonald had been sacrificed to the fetish of James Stewart's supposed duty to God ; but she had at least gone of her own will to the altar, not finding out her mistake until too late. Was Mary to be another victim, with the important difference that she was an unwilling sacrifice ? Undesired, this question would force itself on James, and he was haunted by the ghosts of former days. What would he do with the spectres which kept rising up before his mind's eye ? Would he give heed to them, or would he obstinately refuse to see ? There was much to be got rid of in order to clear the entrance to the haven of rest, which he must reach ere he could truly estimate Mary, and take her in the

right spirit. Would he have patience and love enough to discern the lesson of humility which, unconsciously to herself, she was teaching him? When James Stewart married Mary Scott, he had presumptuously ventured to take the guidance of her life into his hands, following out his own narrow views. He had looked on her only as his wife, and had thought simply of what would be becoming for her in that capacity. Mary had soon found this out, and although she had been silent for a while, she was at last driven to desperation by the trammels of profession, and he knew now that she had made an effort that morning to break her bonds. The effort had proved a failure, but he could not ignore the fact and its significance. He firmly believed in her being a guilty wife, in spite of her assertion to the contrary; and it is scarcely to be wondered at that he was very wroth, and these spectres from the past incensed him still more.

In the dreariness of his spirit, James saw apparitions to which he tried to shut his eyes with all his might, and shake off the tremor that was enfeebling his will, but in vain; they came and came again. He was once more, in imagination, the young man behind the plough, full of strength and vigour, realising the pleasure of mere existence as he

urged on the steady-going horses that were breaking up the hard brown earth ; flocks of lovely seagulls, uttering their peculiar cry, were flying before, after, and over the plough, pouncing down from time to time as the clods were turned to pick up food ; the fresh earthy smell seemed to linger in his nostrils still, the different colours of the soil were as present to his mental vision as when he was wont to spend his time in labour on the fields. On the particular evening which was now brought to his recollection so vividly, the sun was sinking below the horizon, a sign to both man and beast that the day's work was nearly over ; and when, at the end of the furrow, the patient animals had stopped, their restful attitude showed confidence in their master, who, unfastening them from the plough, had opened the gate of the field so that they might find their own way home.

He himself remained, for he had spied some one coming along the road, and could not doubt who it was. No girl in the neighbourhood but Elsie Macdonald had such a pretty figure and such graceful movements, and no other would ever dream of reading while she walked.

Yes, after the lapse of all these years, the minister saw her again, dressed as she used to

be, in a well-remembered frock, short enough to show the white feet and neat ankles ; for, according to the custom of the country, after leaving the village she had taken off her shoes and stockings, and was now carrying them and a basket in one hand, while in the other she held an open book. She looked up as she approached James, her whole face radiant with smiles and her eyes filled with loving trust ; for were they not plighted lovers, and had not each of them been looking forward all day to this meeting ? James took the basket, and putting his arm round her waist, they slowly bent their steps homewards. Their talk was sweet to themselves ; he told about the progress of his ploughing, how well the horses had worked, how even and straight the furrows were, how the white and grey birds had interested him, and how he had watched them enjoying the worms turned up by the plough ; but he had also grumbled a good deal at having had no time for study. She had looked up in his face smiling, to say that there was no hurry about his studies, and then had gone on to tell about her visit to the village : in such innocent converse the hour had come to a close.

Poor James ! As this sweet picture passed before him, he groaned deeply ; he longed for

oblivion, and would gladly have had all these scenes of his early life blotted from his memory for ever. But no! that could not be, and quickly another picture followed. It was now the old home, the farmhouse of Belnaan, that he saw, and the time was an evening in the last summer he spent there. Supper over, he had seated himself at the window, with his books on a table before him, but he could not settle his mind to study; he had tried one subject after another, but with no success; so, daylight waning, he had risen and gone to the door, where he had stood pondering over the momentous step of having given up the farm, preparatory to his departure. Presently Jessie had come round the corner from the byre, bright and happy, and told him with much delight that everything was settled between her and Donald, and they were to be married at Martinmas, adding that the wedding was to take place sooner to allow him to be present. Dreamily he had assented, and she had gone on inquiringly:

“What’s wrong with you the night, Jamie? Did you see Elsie in the forenoon, and what does she say?” “Yes,” he had answered curtly; and Jessie, paying no heed to his surly reply, had continued: “How does she like the idea of being a

minister's wife? I'm thinking she never really expected that!"

Ah! Well does James remember those words, and how they had sunk like lead on his heart, for the tone expressed his own doubt of Elsie's fitness for the position of the minister's wife; to-night they burned like fire within him.

This vision was harder to bear than the first, and he sobbed out: "Oh, Elsie, why did you ever let me leave you? Why did you not put your dear arms round my neck that day on the hill-side when you said good-bye? Oh, I did love you, and you only."

Yet another picture came before him, and now, trembling took hold of him as he saw vividly the little room in John Macdonald's cottage where the dying Elsie sat. He had then been in Aberdeen for a year, and ever since he had bidden her farewell, and with cold words and looks had taken back his troth, Elsie had been failing in health, but so gradually that the doctor had only been called in a fortnight ago, and alarmed her parents by telling them that nothing could, he feared, be done to save her life. They had then reluctantly allowed a message from Elsie to be sent to James, which he had answered by coming immediately. The glowing

peat-fire on the white hearthstone, the high mantel-piece with its quaint ornaments, the whitewashed walls, the thick rafters blackened with the smoke of years, the blue-striped curtains on the bed-press in the wall, the table with a mug of heather and ferns, the very seats (especially the old armchair at the fireside, where Elsie sat propped by pillows) were as plain to his mind's eye as they had been to his bodily sight on that painful day.

For years, these details had lain hidden in his memory, not destroyed, only obscured ; now the storm that raged in his heart was laying bare the wreckage of his life, and the rocks on which he had struck were becoming strangely clear. In his mind's eye, he saw Elsie stretching out her poor thin arms as she had welcomed him with a pathetic loving smile, for at first words had refused to come, and she could only sign to him to sit beside her. She was much altered, but he had thought her lovelier than ever ; the bright eyes and hectic colour had deceived him, and he did not realise how ill she was ; but he saw plainly that she was not the same Elsie whom he had known, and once had loved so well, and yet she was the same. Her sweet expressive face had more in it than when he had seen her last. It now told of communion

with heaven, and of a rest in spirit which had not been there in old days. Elsie had been taught by bitter experience that earthly love without the divine element in it, is and must be transitory ; and she had discovered that the divine was wanting in James's love for her. There had been so much of that divine element in her own heart, that for his sake she had been able to relieve him unreservedly of his plighted troth ; and later on, as she described it, the Spirit of God had brooded over her and given her the blessed knowledge that everything is of and from God. She had been made to feel tangibly that the Almighty, the loving Father of all, was near her, in her, and all around her, so that the painful things in her past life had become as naught, and the peace shining in her face was the result of that experience.

She had tried to tell James how she had attained this restful peace, and how it had cast a ray of light on her own life, and on much that had gone on around her. James now remembered the faltering in her voice when she had said to him :

“ Oh, Jamie ! I used to weary awfully for death, but since that night I have been content to wait, content even to get better if the Lord wills. Will

you mind when you are a minister to tell the people about the Almighty Father's Oneness with the whole world, and with us as part of it ? ”

James's understanding was darkened then, and these words were as idle tales, whose meaning he was only now beginning to discern.

He shuddered at the recollection of the violent fit of coughing that had interrupted the conversation, and recalled with a feeling of self-reproach how much relieved he had been by her mother telling him that he must not stay. Elsie had held out her hand, and, drawing down his head, given him a long kiss, and whispered in his ear, “ God bless my James, good-bye ; ” and he had never seen her again. That night Elsie's spirit took its flight, and James returned to Aberdeen to resume his studies. For a time he had been a sadder and a graver man, but, all too soon, the impression had died away.

As may be well believed, James's whole nature was deeply stirred by these spectres which flashed like lurid lightning through his soul, disclosing some of the lifeless rubbish, the nauseous decay, which had pervaded his life and made him a stumbling-block and a rock of offence. With a fearful effort he determined to shut out all these memories, and concentrate his thoughts on Mary. He felt

that she had seen through the sham, the crafty profession which was so much a part of himself, that it was like the cutting off of a limb for him even to acknowledge that she had done so, and he hated her for her discernment.

Rising, he went to the window, and, drawing up the blind, looked out. It was very dismal, there was nothing outside to cheer him ; so, disappointed with Nature, he turned away and sat down again in the dull room. Leaning his head on both hands, and his elbows on the table, James Stewart groaned deeply ; he could not get rid of his thoughts, and scenes of other days would force themselves on him.

He was now taken in imagination to Aberdeen, and saw himself walking briskly from the old town to the links. Clearly depicted in his mind's eye was the old bridge of Don, picturesquely beautiful with its fine single arch, grand in perfect simplicity ; the trees full of foliage, the green sloping bank, the houses and the windmill were before him as distinctly as on the day which was such a fateful one for him. The salmon nets spread out to dry, the deep translucent pools, the little boats moored further down the river, and the glittering sea in the distance, had seemed from his stand-point at the river-side a

sufficiently complete picture ; and James was gazing at it in admiration, when all at once the human element hitherto wanting had been introduced. He had spied something pretty falling from the bridge, and hearing girlish voices, had looked up, and seen two young ladies leaning over, one of whom proved to be the owner of the object—a hat which had been blown into the river by a gust of wind. He had saved the article, and running up the steep bank handed it to the girl, who, with sparkling eyes and bright smile, had thanked him frankly, bursting into a fit of laughter at the forlorn condition of her lately pretty hat. He vividly recalled how naturally that girl, who was now his wife, had come forward, and how his heart had leaped when she spoke to him on this their first meeting. Quickly his thoughts travelled from that chance encounter to the Professor's drawing-room, where he was afterwards wont on frequent occasions to meet this lovely bewitching will-o'-the-wisp, and he recollected how he would make all kinds of trivial excuses for calling when she was at the house, and how nervously he used to wait for the sound of her step.

He shuddered and would fain have ignored these ghosts, but they clung to him like a nightmare, and he felt himself fighting a losing battle.

When at last he raised his head, the haggard face told of the fierce struggle, and the anxious perturbed features showed that the strife was by no means over. Yes, James Stewart had as yet only skimmed the surface; he would have to go down into the depths before he would be able to conquer the evil spirit that was in him. Passionate anger took possession of him, the pale features became rigid, he clenched his teeth, his eyes shot flashes of rage, he struck his closed fist on the table as with a terrible oath he started up. Roughly opening the doors of his study and the bedroom, he stood at his sleeping wife's bedside, and, filled with brutal hatred, he bent over her. She was breathing quietly, dreaming of her school-days; her face was a picture of peace, and its very calmness exasperated the human fiend who stood over her. With a smothered imprecation, he clutched her slender neck in his powerful hands, squeezing it with evident intent to kill; but a gurgling sound in her throat, and a convulsive movement of her mouth, made him relax his hold.

The next moment, uttering a mad cry, he seized her, and shaking her furiously, flung her across the bed, and again grasped her throat. Mary, poor soul, thus rudely awakened, opened her eyes wide

and looked at the demon. Feeling herself powerless, she closed them again, and—submitted.

Suddenly a terrific awakening came to James. He stood aghast, and, horrified at the thought of what he had so nearly done, he loosened his hold. The violence of his passion was exhausted, he fell on his knees and called for mercy from God, if indeed there was a God. Ere long, rising from his knees, he left the room, staggering like a drunken man. Mary slept on, and never knew the danger she had been in. Returning to the study, James locked the door, and throwing himself on the sofa, gave way to an outburst of feeling.

The long suppressed jealousy of his wife, which had so terribly embittered him, had at length expressed itself in action, and he had allowed his savage nature to have full play. He was shocked, and trembled to think how near he had been to the commission of an awful crime. Then the truth gleamed on him that he had all along been acting a false part. Striving after the fulfilment of what he had thought to be his desire to do good, although it was always in his own way, he now knew that he had missed the path of life. His thoughts as he lay on the sofa were more than he could bear, and he started up hurriedly, and paced the room

to and fro like a madman. Ringing the bell, Mysie was told to bring his great-coat. Alarmed at her master's wild appearance, she cast a suspicious look at him, which led him to say with a sarcastic laugh :

“ You needn't be afraid ; I'll do you no harm. I am going for a walk.”

Straightway he went out, without saying another word.

CHAPTER XX

THE minister's mind was in a strange whirl when he quitted the manse, and leaving himself to be guided by the chapter of accidents, he turned his steps to a lonely glen where he thought he should meet no one. As he walked, a deep sense of his shortcomings oppressed him, for although he was tightly bound in his own conceits, it must be remembered that he was very conscientious, indeed morbidly so, and much had happened to disturb him. Keen disappointment at each fresh evidence of Mary's folly had been part of his almost daily experience lately, but he had been alive to her share of the blame only. Now the iron had entered his soul, and his mental distress was terrible to witness.

Superstition was rife in Badenoch for many a long year after it had been expelled or replaced by varying degrees of scepticism in other parts of Scotland. James Stewart had been brought up in

unswerving belief in witchcraft, second-sight, fairies, and other old-world notions ; but his college career and association with men of culture had shaken his credulity, and had even made him ashamed of ever having held such fancies. The fact remained, however, that James Stewart, having been born a Highlander, could not altogether cast off his childhood's dreads, and it was therefore not surprising that he should be ready at least to listen to words that had a tinge of the supernatural in them.

Wandering on aimlessly, perplexed by conflicting feelings about his wife, he was suddenly confronted by an old man whose wizened features and shrunk, almost deformed, body made the minister give a shrug of disgust which, however, he checked at once. This man, whose name was Donald Roy, was known to James. Donald was the sole survivor of a family who were popularly believed to possess the gift of second-sight, and his ancestors had been proud of the power which they had often exercised on those who offended them ; but times were changed, and such a possession was now looked upon with dislike, amounting to hatred, and poor Donald was often really persecuted.

Mr. Stewart had combated this superstitious dread from the pulpit, but a certain belief in his

supernatural knowledge still lurked even in his own mind. To-day, the minister felt afraid, and turned partly round, as if to retrace his steps when he recognised him; but to his dismay he could not move; spellbound, his feet refused to obey his will, and with terror depicted on every feature he watched the secret approach. Hearing himself called by name, he made a determined effort and drew towards the speaker, who with an imploring look stretched out his hands and said:

“What are you fearing, oh, man of God? It’s not Donald Roy that will ever hurt you, James Stewart.”

The minister was transfixed, and his whole frame shuddered as the old man came close up to him; but controlling himself as best he could, he looked at him, and then began to feel ashamed of giving way to his fears, for what could this weak old creature do to him? Still there remained in his mind a strange undefined dread which hindered him uttering a single word.

In solemn accents, Donald said:

“The hand of the Lord is upon me, and He has appointed me to enlighten you, James Stewart. Your wife is possessed of an evil spirit; I know she is that, but she is innocent of infidelity to you.”

Moving forward until he was close to James, and peering into his face, he added :

" Believe me, she has done you no wrong. Mary Stewart is like me, and the evil spirit that has got possession of her makes people think evil of her as they do of me. Go home to her, James Stewart, and save her from the evil spirit by loving her."

Casting up his eyes to heaven, he continued :

" Now, James Stewart, I have delivered my message. Go, and ask no more."

Without another word, he turned his back and went towards his hut.

Mr. Stewart bowed his head, astonished beyond measure, and he too went his way.

The idea of an evil spirit being in his wife, a spirit responsible for her actions, was so much in accordance with his own old belief, that he accepted it at the moment as a solution of her conduct, and he was somewhat comforted as he proceeded leisurely on his way. Remembering all at once, however, that he ought to attend a meeting of Synod in the afternoon, he turned and quickened his pace, thoughts of Donald Roy and his message seeming to have restored his sleeping energy, both mental and physical. On entering the manse he went straight upstairs, and for a moment listened

eagerly for sounds from the bedroom. Hearing none, he opened the door gently, and, going up to the bedside, stood gazing at his sleeping wife. Could it be that this haggard white-faced woman was the bright young girl whom he had made his wife only three short years ago? What had become of the vivacity, the happy unconcern, that had characterised her then? Was it possible that this poor miserable woman had once been the pretty Mary Scott? She was slumbering heavily now, proof sufficient that the sleep was not natural. James sighed deeply as he observed how much she had changed, how pale her face, how thin her hands; the wedding-ring had nearly slipped off her finger, and James replaced it gently. She moved uneasily and muttered as if in distress, moaning and shivering. At length she opened her eyes, but evidently she saw nothing, and closed them again. Heavy breathing came on once more, and James fell on his knees and prayed earnestly and humbly, for his heart was pierced through with sorrow and self-reproach.

He prayed that he might yet be permitted to do something for Mary; his better nature had prevailed, and the divine love which is in every human heart had come to the surface of his. He called

to mind her loving ways, her refusal of luxuries for herself in order to give them to the children, and on one occasion to James himself, and her devotion to all sick persons.

James had been taught much since the morning, and was beginning to feel certain that the Almighty Maker of all would take care of this suffering one, and bring her to His sheltering rest. The dying words of Elsie Macdonald were bearing fruit, and James was being enlightened.

Rising softly from his knees, he bent over Mary to give her a tender kiss: then, half closing the window shutters, he left the room. Returning to the study, Mr. Stewart wrote to Mrs. Gordon, telling of his anxiety about Mary, and asking her to come to the manse as soon as she could. Having done this, he rang the bell for Mysie, to let her know that he was about to start on a journey, and would be absent for some days, because of the distance he had to go for the meeting of Synod, which was to take place at Inverness. Unwilling as Mr. Stewart was to leave his wife at present, there was no valid reason for not fulfilling his official duties as Clerk of the Synod, and he felt obliged to go.

When Mysie came into the room, she gave her

master an angry, suspicious look, which was not lessened when he said :

" I am afraid, Mysie, your mistress is very ill, and I am sorry not to be able to stay with her ; but I must attend the Synod, and I know that I can trust Mrs. Stewart to your care in my absence. Will you see that she is not disturbed, and that she gets whatever she needs ? "

" Of course I will, sir," Mysie answered with some haughtiness ; " I've always been in the habit of taking care of my mistress. She will want for nothing that I can either do or get for her."

" Oh yes, Mysie," Mr. Stewart replied, " you have always been kind to her, and I thank you for all your goodness. She needs all your kindness now, and more than you can give her."

His eyes filled with tears, and his voice shook as he added :

" I mean, Mysie, to take more care of her myself in the future. I have neglected her in the past, but I will neglect her no more if God gives me grace. I am sorry that I cannot be home again for two or three days, but I trust her to you."

" Well, sir," she said, " I've always tried to serve both her and you faithfully, and her I have aye served with love, and I'm not likely to fail now."

Mr. Stewart turned away to hide his emotion, and he said presently :

"Try, Mysie, like the faithful servant you are, to keep the spirits from her."

The girl made no reply in words, but gave a nod of acquiescence, and a look which assured her master, if he needed such assurance, that he might trust her. Mysie was thunderstruck by this great change, and she burst into tears, ejaculating :

"Thank the Lord ! Thank Him." Looking up at her master, she said, "Oh, sir, God be thanked. He has brought you round to see that the mistress is a real jewel."

Shaking her head, she continued rather disconnectedly :

"Ay, ay, she is well worth looking after ; but, sir, you'll need a heap of patience. Poor creature, poor lamb ! There's no doubt but she is very ill the now, but I hope she will be better before you come back."

Mysie's heart warmed to her master, and she was ready to take his words without suspicion, in proof of which she said kindly :

"Now, sir, I'll make you a nice dinner before you go."

When she reached the kitchen, Mysie sat down,

threw her apron over her head, and gave way to her pent-up feelings, weeping, and thanking God for His mercy.

She had suffered with her young mistress, and had often blamed her master in no measured terms ; but she now began to think that the minister might not be altogether to blame, and she made up her mind, from this time forward, to help him with his wife, towards whom her love and pity were unchanged.

In the afternoon, Mr. Stewart set out on his journey with a heavy heart, full of anxious thoughts about the future. The love that had been revived was a real love, containing a divine element which produced thoughtful compassion, and also gave him strength to resist the despondency which was indeed natural, but whose indulgence would have been very prejudicial in his present circumstances.

Those who have followed James Stewart in his former life, and entered into his heart-searching struggles, will know that he was a much changed man when he left his home for the Synod meeting on this eventful day, and they will feel for him. The proud spirit which had heretofore prevented his being honest either to himself or to his wife, was broken. He had experienced that profession,

under whose shadow he had been living for so long, was gall and wormwood ; that having adopted false ideas of the course of life, and even of thought, demanded by his profession, he had become captive to it—tied down by his own preconceived notions of "duty," and that in so far as he had judged another he had been himself imprisoned. Many of the old-established doctrines in which he had been brought up were swept away in this overturn in his mind, and he saw things in a different light from past days. A new life was opening up before the minister, and he ventured to hope that love for his wife, that love which had been so truly renewed, would dispel the evil spirit, which he now firmly believed had possession of her, according to the seer's words, and James Stewart determined no longer to think any evil of the poor afflicted one.

CHAPTER XXI

MARY slept soundly for so many hours that the moon was shining when she woke up. At first she was dazed, and could not remember where she was, nor what had happened.

"Why am I in bed with my clothes on?" she said to herself; "why is there a teapot on the dressing-table? and why is the room in such disorder?"

Suddenly all the events of the morning flashed upon her, and she sat up, clasping her head in both hands, as if to make sure of her identity. Then she sprang out of bed, and taking a warm cloak from a nail on the wall, she wrapped it round her, threw the still damp shawl over her head, picked up her shoes, and carrying them in her hand for fear of making a noise, opened the bedroom door, where she stood for a few moments listening for sounds of movement. All was perfectly silent indoors; Mysie had gone to

the byre and was busy milking the cows, while Sandy was evidently preparing to lock up for the night. Mary knew that her husband must have gone ere now to the meeting of Synod, and she felt quite free from his supervision, which was certainly a great relief to her. She feared, however, that the servants might hinder her exit, and she moved about with great care. Stealthily she entered the nursery, and stood for a minute at the children's bedside ; they were both asleep, and she dared not kiss them for fear of waking them ; but she gazed at them with a sad, strange expression in her face, then she resolutely turned away, and rushing noiselessly downstairs, opened the front door and went out. Closing it softly, she sat down on the step, drew a long breath, and began to put on her shoes. While doing this, she felt a gentle pressure on her shoulder and the touch of a cold nose on her face. Bodach, the collie-dog, had found her out, and she was a little comforted by the dog's recognition. He sniffed all round her, wagged his tail, and made great demonstrations of delight. She patted him on the head, and made signs that he should make no noise ; signs which the animal seemed to understand, for he kept close by her, but made no sound even when she rose.

She opened the garden gate, gave a furtive glance back, and then started running rapidly. She fled, as if pursued by a demon, Bodach being sometimes in advance, sometimes at her side, but never behind.

It was a splendid night, the stillness being only broken by the sounds of Nature. The wind was rustling softly among the aspens and birches near the garden gate as Mary ran out into the road, and it was sighing monotonously in the tops of the pine-trees as she fled wildly along the path at the edge of the wood. The creaking of a branch, or the falling of a cone, made the fugitive start and look round with a white, terrified face ; but nothing stopped her even for a moment. On, on she went, rushing ever more and more wildly through the wood, until she reached the open moor, where nothing came between her and the deep, dark, blue sky. Then this poor driven human being sank down on the heather nearly fainting from sheer exhaustion. She closed her eyes with fatigue and excitement, and lay panting and breathless until Bodach gave a sharp bark, and she sat up.

The scene upon which Mary looked on opening her eyes, weird and ghost-like in the moonlight as it was, caused her a momentary shudder ; but its

beauty and quiet peacefulness soon brought the accustomed relief to her racked nerves. The rain and storm of the morning had passed away, and the wind was so light that it only gently swayed the trees. The Grampian mountains, with their peaks of Benmacdhui, Cairngorm, and Cairntoul, seemed to be telling of the peace that reigns above, and to be inviting all creation to join in recognition of Heaven's benediction. The broad river, bounded on one side by a low green embankment, and by a steep, well-wooded gravelly bank on the other, was flowing rapidly and smoothly. On the moor, above the river, a few sheep, made restless by the moonlight, were wandering up and down, while occasionally a wild bird, rising suddenly from its nest on the heather, startled the neighbourhood by its shrill cry, offering great temptation to Bodach, who, however, did not stir from his mistress's side, but only lifted his head for a moment, laying it down again on her dress, quite satisfied to get a caress from her hand. In front, a little way off, lay the dark loch, looking much larger in that light than it really was, its waves rippled in the bright moonlight, and each creek and indentation on its banks was clearly visible, while the little boat, fastened to the shore by a rope, moved softly up

and down on the water and gave a kind of human interest to the scene ; frogs croaked harshly, and from time to time a sudden movement, followed by gradually extending rings on the surface of the loch, showed that the clear light had tempted a fish to leap up after some insect ; the white lilies with their large glossy leaves were but very dimly visible, indeed they were merely points of white ; but Mary's vision was unnaturally quick, and she saw them all. The manse, on a slight rising ground at the foot of the hill, was a prominent object at all times, and to the lonely onlooker it was a point of absorbing interest. She raised herself on her elbow, trying to discover what was going on there. She saw Mysie going from room to room with a light ; another figure presently appeared at her side, which she knew must be Sandy ; she thought Mysie was crying, for she raised her apron to her face and was bending her head. The front door was opened, and a light set on the hall-table ; she watched anxiously for the closing of the door, but instead of being shut, it was thrown wide open, and something was fixed on the threshold to prevent its closing. Then Mary's eyes were opened to the meaning of Mysie's action and to her own position.

The poor thing stretched out her arms as if in

entreaty ; she threw herself on the ground in a paroxysm of grief and rage, and with her face hidden in the heather lay motionless for a long time, no one ever knew for how long. She cried out in anger against her fate, thinking in despair that all was lost, and she asked for death to relieve her.

In a moment a strange change came over her ; thoughts of her husband drove away the wish to die, and she thirsted for vengeance on him.

"No," she said to herself, "no ; I won't die if I can help it ; for that is what he would like. No, I will rather live to torment him."

A wild kind of joy filled Mary's heart as she realised that she had power to do him this harm. After the outburst she rose up and walked about, moaning terribly, tossing her arms, and crying fiercely for revenge, until at length she sank down quite worn out.

Presently, as she lay with her eyes shut, a heavenly angel seemed to touch her ; the long-forgotten face of Captain Gordon, the loved friend of her childhood, appeared before her, and she heard his gentle voice, and tried to seize his loving hand. The words he spoke on his death-bed sounded in her ears, and she repeated them aloud :

"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him;" and her anger was subdued. She called to mind his faith and trust in the midst of afflictions, which she had since learned were like to have overwhelmed him, and she felt rebuked. Her rage and hatred disappeared, and, humbled in spirit, she lay quietly submissive to the will of the Almighty.

Suddenly she started up; her face became whiter, her eyes stared fixedly, her mouth remained open as she beheld what seemed to be a graceful female figure draped in grey, rising slowly on the horizon behind the manse, to which it pointed as if inviting her to its shelter. In a short time it disappeared, but after a few minutes it came again, and Mary, fascinated, watched its second disappearance. Then with a frightful scream she jumped up, and fled with wild haste to her home, where the door stood open to receive her.

Mysie's dismay on discovering that her mistress's bedroom was empty may well be imagined. She ran downstairs calling out in terror:

"Mistress Stewart! where are you? Where have you gone? Oh! what can have come over you?"

She called on Sandy to help her in the search, and the two went over the whole house with a

lighted candle, hoping that in her stupor Mrs. Stewart might have wandered into one of the other rooms. But their search was futile, and Mysie was nearly disconsolate, when an idea occurred to her, and turning sharply to Sandy, she said :

“ I wonder where is Bodach ? ”

Sandy replied that he had not seen the animal since the afternoon, and as it was not forthcoming when whistled for, Mysie was easier in her mind, although she was still unhappy, and she groaned out painfully :

“ Oh ! my mistress, my dear mistress ! My poor misguided darling ! Oh, come back to us ! ”

Sandy was much troubled at Mysie's distress, and said kindly :

“ Don't you vex yourself, my woman, the mistress is sure to be all right ; there's not a single body in the country that would lay a finger on her, and you know fine that she likes to go away by herself these last days.”

“ Oh, ay, that's true,” said Mysie, “ and I wouldn't have been anxious if I had not seen her desperate face this morning, after she came in from meeting that wretch Robertson. She looked like a demented creature. Oh, Sandy, I'm terrible feared she'll do some harm to herself, the poor thing ! ”

Sandy put his arm round her waist, but she shook him off, saying angrily :

"It's not a time for such nonsense—let me alone. I can tell you this, that if I didn't know how fond she is of her bairns, I would be hopeless, for I am sure she is driven distracted ; but, mind you, I'm not blaming anybody, not even the minister."

Sandy, who was more troubled at Mysie's distress than at the absence of his mistress, said :

"I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go down the road if you like, and try if I can see anybody that might maybe have met her."

After a little deliberation, Mysie said :

"Well, you might do that, but you must be very canny with your tongue."

When the boy went out, Mysie trimmed the lamp in the hall, saying as she did so :

"I'll let the poor thing see that there's somebody here that's wanting her. She will know, too, that Mr. Stewart is not at home, for he wouldn't let the light be wasted nor the door left open, and so she needn't be feared to come back."

Then, as if to give herself more confidence, she said vehemently :

"It is just impossible for her not to come back to the children."

Mysie had gained an insight into Mary's character by her love, and she was sure that, if sober and sane, she would never desert her little ones ; but so much had happened to upset the girl's equilibrium, that she was beset with all kinds of fears and haunted by Mary's face of despair. It was therefore no slight relief to her to hear from Sandy on his return that a man crossing the moor had seen a woman sitting on the heather, and a dog beside her that was like Bodach. This news was so good, that Mysie at once set about finishing the work that had still to be done.

When all was finished, and the two servants met at supper, Sandy said :

"What do you think yourself, Mysie, about these goings-on in the parlour?"

"Oh, it will all come right yet, you'll see," answered Mysie.

The boy looked doubtful, and shrugging his shoulders, he said :

"It's my belief that they just hate one another."

"Well, Sandy, I would have said the same a wee while ago, but I've changed my mind, and I'll tell you why. When the minister rang the bell

for me before he went away, he was a different man altogether ; he wasn't like the same creature that spoke so wild in the morning."

"Ay, ay," replied Sandy contemptuously, "how did that come about do you think?"

"I can't say," she answered seriously; "but I'm thinking it could only be the Spirit of God that worked the change. He was a perfect lamb; he was actually crying about his wife, and that before me, too."

After thinking for a minute, Sandy said:

"You may be right; I don't want to contradict you; but I doubt myself if ever he'll forgive her, for you must allow that she was not a very good wife to him, although I'm not saying she wasn't kind to others."

After this remark Sandy yawned, stretched out his legs, and scratched his head, trying to find a plausible excuse for going to bed, and he was pleased when Mysie took pity on him and said:

"Go to your bed, Sandy, for ye'll maybe need to rise earlier than usual the morn. I'll wait up by myself, but I'm not the least afraid to be my lone."

With slow steps Sandy betook himself to the little room above the stable, where he slept.

Mysie then tidied up the kitchen, and put on a large fire of peats and sticks, so that her mistress might be greeted by a bright light when she returned. Her work being over, she drew a chair up to the hearth and sat down to think. Her usual occupations were not of the kind to develop her thinking powers, but this had been a day of such startling events, and she was so strongly impressed by all that had passed, that, as she afterwards said, "she *had* to stop and think, for her head was in a terrible buzz with what had happend." The result of her meditations was a deep-drawn sigh, and a remark muttered to herself: "Poor creatures ! poor things ! what an awful thing it would be to be tied to a man that ye once thought ye would be happy with, but found out after yc was married till him that ye could not bear him. Ah, well ! it'll be many a day before I put my head in such a noose."

The girl's face and attitude, after a very few minutes of these musings, showed that they had tried her more than a hard day's work, and shaking her head, as if convinced that she could not solve the problem about her master and mistress, she rose and went to the door to listen and watch. Rather more than two hours had passed since Mysie had

discovered Mrs. Stewart's flight, and it was no wonder that she was uneasy. She was standing at the door with her head bent in the direction of the river, when—hark ! her quick ears caught the echo of a dog's bark, and she heard footsteps coming rapidly towards her; almost before she had time to decide as to their direction, her mistress rushed panting in at the gate, and took refuge in the strong arms held out to save her from falling. Mysie helped her mistress into the kitchen, and induced her to take some much needed refreshment ; but she asked no questions, and Mary volunteered no information as to her movements ; and after finishing her supper and paying her usual visit to the nursery, she went to bed. Mysie was so much relieved by her mistress's return, that she troubled herself no more as to where she had been.

CHAPTER XXII

A DAY or two passed after the struggle described in the last chapter, during which Mary was dazed, and wandered about aimlessly, little able apparently to keep quiet, or take notice of persons or things ; indeed, it seemed from the look of her eye that her only desire was to escape, but she did not know, nor could any one discern, from what.

The servants watched her, trying not to betray their solicitude ; but one day towards evening, in spite of their care, she managed to divert their attention, and wandered off until she lost sight of them. The slanting rays of the setting sun brought out the exquisite beauty of the heather, of the moss, of the brackens, and there was a clearness in the atmosphere that made even distant objects quite visible ; the deep quiet flow of the river was interrupted here and there by strong currents, whirling round projecting rocks, and the sound of its rhythmic monotone was broken from time to time

by the cry of the oyster-catcher, as she flitted along in search of food, her wing-tips touching the surface of the water.

Pleased to find herself alone, Mary wandered on among the birch-trees, her eyes fixed on the ground, evidently not knowing what she did, nor where she was going, but seemingly impelled by an inner power, for she never turned, never hesitated, until she reached the foot-bridge, when she suddenly stopped. She could not remember having been here before, and seemed to question her knowledge of the locality. She gazed up at the sky, peered forwards among the brush-wood, glanced down at the gleaming river; all was strange to her, but she showed no sign of fear, she was merely surprised. All at once she made a start forward, and catching hold of the rail, stepped on to the wooden bridge. The sound of her feet on the planks pleased her, and she jumped up and down, listening like a child to the noise made by her shoes. She stood for a while, looking into the deep, clear river, and then she ran back, and picking up some pebbles from the bank, returned to her place on the bridge to throw them in, leaning over the rail to watch the gradual extension of the rings made by the stones on the surface of the water.

She soon got tired of this amusement, and began to dance, flinging up her arms, making gestures, and tossing her head, until, attracted by the poppies and cornflowers in a field, she shouted with glee, and ran eagerly across to where she saw them. Sitting down, she began to play with the flowers, speaking to them and handling them, sometimes roughly, sometimes gently. Presently she gathered a large bunch of the brightest and left the field, rambling on again over the heather, talking to herself and laughing all the time.

She soon found out that this was not the moor to which she was accustomed, but the thought seemed to cause her no uneasiness.

At length, wearied out, she sat down on the heather, and laying the flowers on her lap, looked at them fondly as she gabbled incoherently. Then she picked them to pieces, and, throwing them away, turned herself over and lay with her face close to the ground, humming a cradle-song. Tiring very soon of this also, she moved her hands restlessly, kicked pettishly, tapped her feet on the ground, and then, partly raising herself, rested her head on her hands, the elbows leaning on the ground, so as to look more comfortably all round.

Her attention was rivetted by the view. To

judge from her face, something was waking up the slumbering intellect, making her try to gather together the broken threads of recollection. The vacant, idiotic look was gone, and in its stead there was a bewildered but not frightened expression on the still beautiful face, changing shortly to one of infantile peace.

The sun was sinking below the western horizon, spreading a halo of glory over the hills, the sky was one expanse of rich colour; the masses of golden and crimson clouds were imperceptibly changing into lighter shades of pink and yellow, tinged with lilac and grey, on a lovely soft, pale-greenish background of cloud. Very gradually the glow passed away; very slowly, according to its wont in these northern regions, twilight advanced, and up above, in the deep blue vault of heaven, the evening star began to show her twinkling light. Although Mary must often have witnessed sunsets as beautiful as this one, she had not paid particular heed to their splendour until now, when, entranced, she lay motionless, her wandering, aimless thoughts soothed by its calm loveliness, and she gave a deep-drawn sigh of relief.

She had wandered from home without either shawl or hat, and her long dark hair had come

undone with the dancing on the bridge, so that it hung down her back nearly to her waist, and over her ears and the sides of her face. She was lying as described, gazing earnestly with dilated eyes upon the sunset sky, and lost in amazement at its beauty, when suddenly a large dog came bounding towards her and startled her, so that her head fell forward on the heather, and she screamed in terror, covering her face with her hands. Then she jumped up quickly, and with her hair flying in the wind, ran wildly to and fro, gesticulating with her hands. The dog, which was quite young, fancied she was playing, and ran with her, barking, leaping and bounding in exuberant delight ; but she cried out in fear, motioned him away, shook her fist, and even made faces at him, but all without effect. She stooped at last to pick up a stone to fling at him, when he bounded up, wagging his tail, and in his boisterousness knocked her over, and she lay trembling like an aspen-leaf. The dog meanwhile pawed and sniffed at the prostrate figure, and then finding that he could get no response, set up a doleful whine. Presently, Mary felt the touch of a hand, and, looking up, saw a woman bending over her, who said in Gaelic, and then in English :

" 'The dog will do you no harm, he's but young and silly."

Poor Mary stared without answering, but screamed loudly and shivered as if she were too much terrified to speak, covering her face at the same time.

Mrs. Macdonald, Elsie's mother, for it was she who had heard the piercing cry and seen the figure rushing about on the moor, laid her hand kindly on the sufferer's shoulder, saying :

" I'm thinking ye're a long way from home. Are you not the Reverend Mrs. Stewart ? "

Mary seemed not to hear the question, for she said nothing in reply, but went on muttering incoherently to herself. Mrs. Macdonald was frightened, but retaining her self-composure, she said calmly :

" I'm thinking ye're needing something to eat. Come with me, and I'll get you a cup of tea."

A little way off there stood a farmhouse, whose inmates Mrs. Macdonald knew very well, and thither she quickly decided to go. Arriving at the house, she opened the door and went straight into the kitchen, followed by the lady.

Mrs. Macpherson, the mistress of the house, was busy baking, and at the moment of the visitor's entrance was bending over the fire, turning the cakes on the girdle. She was startled, on raising

her head, to see Mrs. Macdonald, but the room was too dimly lighted for her to notice her companion until Mrs. Macdonald drew attention to her, and whispered hurriedly :

“ Whisht ! whisht ! ” raising her hand to warn her not to speak. In a low voice she then said, with many gesticulations : “ This is young Mrs. Stewart, I’m thinking ; I found her screaming with fright at the dog on the moor, and when I spoke to her she could not say one sensible word. ’Deed, I’m feared she’s gone out of her mind. Now, will you give us a cup of tea ? ”

Mrs. Macpherson nodded her head in acquiescence, and Mrs. Macdonald led Mary up to the fire and placed her on a chair ; then, laying her hand affectionately on her shoulder, she said :

“ This is Mrs. Macpherson, a friend of mine, who will give us some tea ; you’ll just warm your feet till it’s ready, and after that we’ll see to getting ye home.”

Mary looked in the speaker’s face questioningly, as if she did not understand what was said to her ; but she submitted willingly to the combing of her tangled hair, while she sat like a statue, keeping firm hold of Mrs. Macdonald’s gown, and effectually preventing any private conversation with their

hostess. Tea being ready, Mary loosened her grasp, and Mrs. Macdonald was then able to move quietly away without attracting her attention.

After a short conference it was decided to send Mrs. Stewart home in the cart, and very soon a bright, cheery girl came to say that all was ready, and that her father would drive the lady himself; then, looking bashfully at Mary and Mrs. Macdonald, she said :

“ If the lady would let me, I would like well to go too.”

“ That’s right, Kirsty,” said Mrs. Macdonald ; but Mary remained dazed and silent.

Mrs. Macdonald took Mary’s hand to help her to rise, but the lady sat still, and, shaking her head, she only gave an appealing look of weak incapacity. Without remark, but with the utmost kindness, the motherly woman then lifted her in her arms, and like a child Mary submitted fearlessly to be carried and placed in the cart, which was well provided with pillows and a warm plaid. Kirsty got in beside her, the back-board was fastened up, and the horse started.

At the first movement, however, Mary uttered a cry of despair, and, holding out her arms beseechingly, tried to stand up, but immediately fell back

on the floor of the cart. She sobbed piteously, but shed no tears, and Mrs. Macdonald, moved to intense pity, came near and allowed the poor thing to lean her head against her breast for a moment, caressing her fondly. She knew, however, that the parting must come, and thought that the kindest thing would be to shorten the pain, so, disengaging Mary's hands from her neck, she said :

"Now, my dear, you must let me go. My husband needs me, and I cannot go home with you; but Mr. Macpherson and Kirsty will take good care of you. God bless you, my dear. Good-bye."

Giving her another tender kiss, she went resolutely into the house, and Mary sank on the floor of the cart.

We have now witnessed the climax of Mary Stewart's suffering, culminating in the complete loss of control over herself, over others around ; in short, over everybody and everything; and she looked as if she knew nothing. She had not, however, reached the advanced point which many with higher minds might have attained, that of admitting to herself that she knew nothing. True, she must have been brought by her sufferings to the conviction that she was powerless, and, definite and bold as she had been in midst of her fears, she must

now have felt that she was mastered, although she was too inexperienced and had too little mental power to be able to express it.

Mrs. Macdonald had felt unaccountably drawn to Mary when she heard her cry of terror, listened to her incoherent words, and perceived her utter inability to answer even the simplest questions. The divine motherliness which is so large a part of every good woman's nature had been thereby brought into play, and she was filled with love and pity for the poor wandering human creature who had shown her appreciation by clinging to her and doing as she wished. After the meeting and parting with Mary Stewart, Mrs. Macdonald was a graver and a sadder woman. She began to feel her way into a further view of life, and could not but be grateful that an Almighty Hand had brought her in contact with Mary, blending her own feeling of suffering with the younger woman's, and had thus led her to perceive the extreme difficulty of working and living with so much profession as the minister's wife had to face. She herself had spent her days in laborious toil, working for daily bread in her cottage, in her garden, on the peat-moss, feeling the hardships of her lot day by day; but she had before this been brought by devious

paths to feel the loving Providence that was ever working in mother Earth. Now in the face of that experience she was confronted by profession.

She was a true Highland mother, keen as any of that wild, fierce race, and endowed by Nature with great natural beauty that glowed in humanness, if the expression may be allowed. She had also a mother's noble ambition to make the most of her children, for she saw that they were beautiful. Elsie had been to her a complete beauty, as beautiful in mind as body, and one that only needed the guiding hand of man to unfold to greater and greater usefulness. In familiar language, the neighbours were wont to say that Elsie was truly her mother's own daughter. It seems necessary to say this, in order to make plain how great had been the blow Mrs. Macdonald received at the time of her Elsie's death. It may appear to some that too much is made of this Highland mother, but it will not seem so to those who, having lived amongst the people, know their characteristics. Besides their truly human qualities, they are endowed with the fostering, loving powers of beautiful wild animals ; they will fight for their own even to the skin of their teeth, and if they lose the fight they will die loving still. Elsie, her mother's daughter, had died obediently rather

than let profession beat her. She was an illustration of the way in which the young motherly spirit is engendered in that country, and surely such mothers are calculated to give birth to a high-spirited race that only needs a master to lead them to conquer.

Short as Mrs. Macdonald's intercourse had been with Mary Stewart, she felt that it had been heaven-sent ; that Providence alone had led her that evening to the poor demented creature on the moor, not only to succour her, but also that she herself might be shown how impossible it would have been for her Elsie to have lived the life of James Stewart's wife, without suffering in a way that would probably soon have killed her, and have rent her mother's heart even more than the death she did die. The events of this afternoon brought her own past connection with James Stewart and her conception of his character vividly to her remembrance, and she began to feel a sort of awe of the man who, by his worship of profession in the guise of duty, and the desire, laudable in itself, to stand well with his fellow-men, had worked such dire havoc in the life of her Elsie, and in that of this sweet young wife of his. Feeling this deeply, she groaned and muttered :

"Well, well, and that's James Stewart's wife! that poor silly thing! Hech! hech! There's no doubt, however, about her being a lady born. She is that; but what a humbling it will be to James to get her home like what she is the night! Truly he is punished. Poor man! Well, he thought my Elsie wasn't good enough for him! How can I ever be thankful enough that a wiser One than me ordered all things as they've turned out? My Elsie would have died long ago if she had married him, and I would have been far worse off than I am now."

It was getting dark as Mrs. Macdonald set out on her way home. The events of the day had been very trying to her, and she pondered much as she walked along. The bitterness about James Stewart gradually melted away, and a restful calm began to pervade her whole being; thankfulness to the Almighty for the freedom He had given her and hers filled her soul, and she was glad to be alone. As she drew near home, she descried a stranger in the garden, and her first feeling was annoyance (for she was in no mood for gossip), but her face brightened when she recognised a well-known, half-witted man, for whom she had a great liking.

Eneas Maclean was the youngest son of a small

Highland proprietor, who had been himself the youngest son of a greater chief. In his youth he had led the idle life of a hanger-on in his father's house, after whose death he had continued in the same position with his brother until the marriage of the latter. Soon after that event, feeling himself an encumbrance in the family, he ran away and enlisted in a Highland regiment, which was soon ordered to India.

After many years' service abroad, in the course of which he saw numerous phases of life, he was badly wounded in the head, and discharged with a small pension. Then Eneas returned to his native country, but receiving no welcome from his own relatives, his feelings were hurt, and he determined never again to trouble any of them. He had no settled abode, but wandered about from place to place, staying for a few days at a time with such friends as he could trust, and who desired his company.

He was an elderly man with a pathetic face, bearing signs of privation and exposure to the weather, in addition to marks of battle wounds. Eneas was much attached to all the Macdonald family, and very grateful for the kindness which they so willingly bestowed on him. Mary, the eldest girl, was a special favourite of his ; they were both

fond of music ; besides his musical gift, which was considerable, Eneas was something of a poet, and Mary fully appreciated the songs which he composed, and they used to sing them together.

No sooner did Eneas see Mrs. Macdonald approaching than he ran forward to meet her, and taking the basket out of her hand, placed her arm on his, and gave her what help he could, saying to her :

“ Ay, mistress, but you are tired ! Where have you been all this long day ? Mary and I have been wearying for you.”

Mrs. Macdonald gave him no answer, but simply nodded her recognition of his attention, and quickly passed into the house.

Mary, thinking something extraordinary must have happened to cause her mother's silence, led her at once into the parlour, and seated her in an easy-chair before she allowed her to speak. A few words of explanation satisfied the girl that all her mother wanted was quiet, so she left her to rest, and returned to the kitchen where Eneas sat smoking. Moving about actively at her cooking, Mary sang softly in Gaelic :

*Mother tells me, rest to-night,
Rest to-night, rest to-night,*

*That the morrow may be bright,
May be bright, may be bright.
The stars are twinkling clear,
Life is ever near,
Love doth all things steer
Now and evermore.*

Eneas laid down his pipe to listen to the sweet voice, and presently he sang, in reply, his dark eyes shining with love :

*I know, Mary, that is true,
That is true, that is true :
But tell me now, what to do,
What to do, what to do.
I toil all day,
I hear them say
The work is done,
But nothing's won ;
My thoughts do stray,
But nothing's won.*

Eneas hummed over the tune, repeating the refrain, " nothing's won," with much feeling, and Mary brightly responded :

*Brother, listen, come with me,
Where my lover you shall see ;
But, hush, gently speak,
Be steady, and be meek.*

*His spirit's swift, and strikes with fear
The ruder, coarser that appear ;
He is the refiner's fire,
All take form and then expire.*

*Things move easy by his will
While beauty's ever on the way;
Come unto him, flow with the streams,
And dance for joy in the sweet sunbeams.*

Mrs. Macdonald, resting in the parlour, was soothed at first by the soft tune, but when her ear caught the words, she raised her arm, her whole face glowed with delight, and she whispered to herself in Gaelic :

"Oh, my Elsie, thou hast not lived in vain. Mary is thy sister, and she is gaining the rest that thou hadst to gain by suffering."

Then she burst into a flood of tears, tears not of sorrow, but of gratitude to the great Almighty.

"Joy, oh ! joy," she continued, "sweetest Universal Spirit of God, my children go to Thee. Take them, for Thou hast moulded them. Oh, ye dear hills, my children have grown by your sides ! Oh, ye graceful trees, ye bonnie heather, ye whirring grouse, let us all be at peace !"

Then, closing her eyes, this true Celtic woman, full of the poetry and the mysticism of her race, fell into a refreshing sleep, from which she awoke with renewed energy and hope.

In the course of the evening she related her afternoon's adventure to her family, including Eneas.

Deep sympathy was expressed by all for poor Mrs. Stewart, and, as might be expected, the minister's conduct was freely criticised until Mrs. Macdonald held up her hand and said :

“ Whisht, bairns, it's not for us to cast stones. The minister is a much afflicted man ; the Lord is dealing with him, and we must pray that he may be kept by his Maker, and made to see where he went wrong.”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE alarm of the servants at the manse may be more easily imagined than described at this second disappearance of their mistress. In the intervening time there had been much in Mrs. Stewart's behaviour to make them anxiously watch her comings and goings, so that they felt that it could only have been by what seemed to be extreme cunning on her part that she had got away unobserved by either of them. Her disappearance was not discovered until supper-time, when, to Mysie's dismay, Sandy told her that he had not seen the mistress all the afternoon. Darkness began to fall, still Mrs. Stewart did not return, and Mysie's anxiety became uncontrollable, for she feared the lady might do harm to herself. The girl could not settle, but went restlessly from the kitchen to the front door and back again, until at length she thought she heard the sound of wheels, and presently John Macpherson's cart, with the lady in it, drew up at the door.

Lifting out her poor mistress, Mysie carried her upstairs, and, undressing her, put her to bed as if she were a child. During this operation, Mary said nothing, and the listless expression on her face alarmed the servant so much that she decided not to leave the bedside all night. Not until the morning did Mary sleep, and when she awoke she knew no one, and was altogether so strange that Mysie did not hesitate to send for the old woman of the village who was the authority in illness. She declared Mrs. Stewart's case to be beyond her skill, and advised Mysie to call in the doctor without delay. Accordingly, Dr. Black was in the house when, on the following day, the minister returned from the Synod meeting, and the two men met in the lobby.

Dr. Black had known James Stewart all his life, and had been very proud of his successful college career ; for a long time he had refused to believe the current stories about the large share he had in causing the unhappiness in the manse, but by his own observation he had lately had his eyes opened to see that there were, to say the least, faults on both sides ; his chivalry was enlisted on that of the weaker, so that he was by no means inclined to be gentle or conciliatory towards Mr. Stewart. When

he met him now, he felt a sort of pleasure in telling him brusquely, almost cruelly, that Mary was dangerously ill, and that he feared she would die.

James was bewildered, and did not immediately grasp the doctor's meaning. He had learnt much since leaving home ; in the terrible fight with himself after the outburst against his wife, the better part of his nature, as we know, had gained the victory, and he was now a truly humbled man. His mind had been very busy all the way home from the meeting with plans for Mary's good, and he never dreamt of the calamity, news of which now burst upon him so suddenly, and he gasped out :

"What do you mean, doctor ? Is my wife ill ? I have been from home for several days, and of course I know nothing of what has been going on in my absence."

Seeing James really distressed, the doctor hesitated about telling him the true state of the case, but James said eagerly :

"Tell me all, please ; do not be afraid. I must know the whole truth about Mrs. Stewart."

The doctor then took him at his word, and gave an account of the illness and its immediate cause, as far as he knew it, concluding with a report of the patient's present state of unconsciousness.

Mr. Stewart, after thanking him for his candour, said :

“ Oh, doctor, do all you can for her ; I will grudge no expense if you will only save her. Do not spare anything. I have been living like a fool, blind to the truth of things ; but I see now how far wrong I have gone, and perhaps some day I will tell you all about my awakening. I will behave differently in future.”

“ Well, James, that is rightly said, and I am glad to hear it,” was the doctor’s answer ; “ and I do hope we’ll carry her through yet. She is but young, and I’ll do my best.”

Mounting his horse, he rode off with a cheerful wave of his hand, and James went upstairs to see his wife, who, alas ! did not know him.

An hour or two later, on the same day, Mr. Stewart was sitting in his study with a weary depressed look on his face, his shoulders drooping, his hands lying listlessly on a book opened over his knees. The morning was misty, with a dull grey outlook from the window ; the atmosphere was unusually heavy, everything seemed oppressed, the very leaves were flat and cheerless ; there were no sounds in the house, the children were hushed, all was still, when Mysie, opening the door, announced

Mr. Smith, who entered, smiling blandly. Mr. Stewart rose to receive him with much gravity, and, pointing to a chair, asked him to be seated.

Mr. Smith was the ruling elder in the church, and had exercised great power over the congregation before Mr. Stewart's appointment as minister. He was an elderly man without much education, and, excepting on his annual visits to the different cattle markets, he never left his native place, so that his knowledge of the world was limited. He knew his own business so well, however, that in twenty years he had risen from being merely a drover to the position of one of the richest farmers in the district. The former minister of the parish, who was very frail, had delegated most of his duties for some years to Mr. Smith, who delighted in preaching, and was very apt at quoting Scripture ; the people liked his discourses, and his greatest pleasure was to be the minister's substitute on a Sunday.

As may be supposed, Mr. Smith never cared for Mr. Stewart, and did all in his power to undermine his influence over the congregation. There had been no actual disagreement between them in public, but there was a tacit disapproval of each other well known to everybody.

Mr. Stewart was aware that his congregation was divided in opinion about him, and he quite expected them ere long to show their real feeling towards himself ; but he was not a man to submit to any self-constituted authority, as he perceived Mr. Smith expected him to do.

The elder seated himself, and taking a red pocket-handkerchief out of his hat, which he placed on the floor, he wiped his face with it, as if to gain time, meanwhile glancing uneasily at Mr. Stewart, who said nothing, but kept his eyes fixed on the visitor. Leaning forward, and placing his hands on his knees, the latter at length summoned courage to begin, and his face turned very red as he said :

"I doubt ye're in trouble, Mr. Stewart ; there's a heap of folk talking about you."

With great composure Mr. Stewart replied :

"When I tell you that Mrs. Stewart's life is in great danger, you will doubt no more about my being in trouble. But is that all you have come to say ?"

The minister's calm dignity seemed to embarrass the elder, who looked down, apparently to count the patterns on the carpet. He fidgeted on his chair, he coughed, he wiped his face again, all as if his

courage were not sufficient for the task before him; at last he gave a cunning sidelong look at Mr. Stewart, and said hesitatingly :

"Not exactly, Mr. Stewart; I am here as a deputation to ask what you are meaning to do?"

"Explain yourself," said Mr. Stewart, whose face became very stern as he looked at his questioner. But Mr. Smith kept silence, as if he either did not know what to say, or felt ashamed of the communication he had undertaken to make. So Mr. Stewart repeated: "Say on; explain yourself. What do you mean?"

Then, gathering together all his powers, the elder said :

"Well, Mr. Stewart, we had a meeting last night among ourselves, and we came to the conclusion that you should be spoken to about the goings-on in your house, and they made me their spokesman."

The speaker stopped, apparently waiting for a remark from his listener, but the other said nothing, and the oration was resumed with much warmth. Mr. Smith proceeded to explain that he and those for whom he spoke were much dissatisfied that their minister had done nothing to show disapproval of the conduct of one who belonged to him; indeed, one who

was a prominent member of his household. He told him that they thought he had forgotten that he was an ordained minister, and then he asked him how he could expect to approach the Lord, and receive a favourable answer for his people, when a stain rested on his own house which he did nothing to remove. Mr. Smith went on in this style, reiterating his assertions to the minister, who, however, to his great disappointment, answered never a word ; but when he had quite done, replied very quietly :

“ Mr. Smith, can you buy a cow ? Do you know the worth of a calf ? ”

Mr. Smith looked up suspiciously, beginning to wonder if the minister's trouble had sent him out of his mind. He gave no reply till Mr. Stewart repeated the question, when he answered gruffly :

“ It's not for me to be praising myself, but I believe the country-side say that there's not a better hand at a bargain than Donald Smith. Nobody knows more about cattle-beasts than myself. I'll beat the whole market at a bargain.”

“ Quite right, Mr. Smith,” was the reply ; “ I'll hold you up for knowing a good calf when you see one ; ” then, looking at the man very hard, he added

slowly, "and I advise you to stick to the things you do understand."

Rising from his seat, Mr. Stewart went to the window, and stood for a few minutes with his back to the light, his eyes cast down in thought, while Mr. Smith watched him wonderingly. Then looking him again straight in the face, Mr. Stewart continued :

"I have been a minister here for some years, Mr. Smith, and such a minister as I could see the congregation wished me to be ; but now let me tell you something. I have been put through much since I came among you ; I have learned something worth knowing, and—I say it with all deference—I have been brought to see what humility is, and I thank my wife for teaching me the lesson. Now, you will please tell those who sent you to me, that this is my answer to them, and say that I thank them for the interest they have shown in sending you here."

Mr. Smith made no reply, and Mr. Stewart, ringing the bell, told Mysie to bring in the whisky. Pouring out some into two glasses, he then handed one to Mr. Smith, and taking the other himself, drank to his good health. His visitor returned the compliment, adding his best wishes for the mistress's recovery.

Taking up his hat, he then bade the minister good-bye, and went his way. The elder's amazement was unbounded, and he left the manse unable to understand Mr. Stewart. No one ever heard a complete report of the interview, but the parishioners for whom he had been spokesman felt that their representative had been beaten, and the voice of discontent in the parish was thenceforth silenced.

Mrs. Stewart was so ill as to be unconscious for some time ; her husband and Mrs. Gordon nursed her tenderly, looking day after day for the improvement which the doctor had led them to expect, but which appeared so long in coming that James was fast losing all hope ; and he fell into the habit of wandering out, regardless of weather, not knowing what to do nor where to turn.

On one of these wanderings he was overtaken, some distance from home, by a fierce storm of wind and rain. Unwilling to submit to it, he struggled on for a while, but was at length forced to take shelter under a projecting rock by the roadside, where a sheep and her lamb were lying in safety. He listened to the roaring of the wind, and watched the dashing rain as it changed by degrees into snow, and it was with intense interest that he observed the havoc

made amongst the trees. At first, only the fading leaves were blown along and driven into every little nook and cranny ; then the boughs, shorn of their foliage, were swung backwards and forwards, keeping time with the howling blast. Some of them opposed the wind with what, to James, appeared human force, and, after a longer or shorter fight, these were invariably broken and made to yield.

Interested in the contest, he ventured to step out of his shelter in order to have a better view of it, but was unexpectedly thrown on the ground, where he lay breathless for a few moments. Struggling to his feet, he made another effort to breast the storm, but only to be dashed down again, so that he was glad to crawl back to the sheltering rock. Quite worn out, he now sat down, thankful to be at rest, and allowed his whole nature to be passive. It was not till then that his mind grasped the lesson of the storm, and recognised in the opposing branches which had been ruthlessly snapped, and in his own physical defeat by the wind, the futility of battling against the elements. He saw therein a picture of his soul's struggle, and he was brought to acknowledge that, strong as he thought himself, and wilful as he might be, he must act with, not against, all things that are working with

the great Almighty Power. Bitterly was he learning that it was vain to oppose that working, and, humbled, he bowed his head.

Presently he shut his eyes, and, no longer distracted by the howling wind, was lulled to rest and soothed, so that when the storm subsided, which it did shortly, he proceeded on his way home, a great peace filling his mind, which had been lately so much disturbed.

On his return, he found Mary more collected than she had been since the beginning of her illness. She had been longer left by herself that morning than usual, and her thoughts had been reverting to the past. For the first time, her eyes were opened to the precipice on whose brink she had stood with William Robertson, and she was appalled. She saw that the step she then meditated taking had been prompted by impatience with her lot, and not by any real love for the man, who more than once before had tried to tempt her from virtue. She was now humbled and ashamed, and gratefully acknowledged that it was the protecting hand of the Almighty that had put an insurmountable obstacle in her way. Her great ignorance and her many omissions of duty were brought home to her, and when her husband came in, her pillow was

drenched with her tears. She told him what was in her mind, and little by little the painful facts connected with her life as the minister's wife were disclosed to him.

Sitting by Mary's sick-bed, James learned much that he would never otherwise have known, and the husband and wife were drawn closer in spirit than either of them could once have imagined possible. Mary laid her head on James's breast, sobbing out her sore pain, and with loving tenderness he held her close to his heart.

During her illness, Mary had been very near the promised land of rest, and in the silence she had been taught that sin consists only in opposing the great Almighty working, which is always love. She had also learned that whatever is done in the real world is well done, for all is One. She and her husband were strengthened and comforted in their present trouble by the firm grasp they were each enabled to take of these two initial truths, and in their after-life they were guided by them in their dealings with the numerous men and women who came to them for help.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE tragic occurrences in the manse of Eathie were naturally a common topic of conversation in all the district of Badenoch, and we may be sure that the inhabitants of Glenfeshie watched the course of events with intense interest, but intercourse between the two places was small, owing to the distance. Duncan Macnair could not leave the flock of which he had charge even for a day, but in order to satisfy his desire for information, Mrs. Munro undertook to make a special journey to Eathie in his stead. On her return she gave a hopeful report about Mrs. Stewart, but she said she was afraid that the minister himself would break down, adding :

“ Oh, Duncan, but yon's the changed man. Would you believe it? He has become quite humble and meek! All the pride seems to have gone out of him, and he spoke to me like his father

used to do. I just wish you could have seen him yourself."

"Well, well," was Duncan's remark, "I aye thought there was much good in James Stewart, but I knew that he would have to be brought low before he could do much for poor suffering human beings. Little did I think, though, that he would get such a humbling as has be his lot."

"That's true," Mrs. Munro replied ; "the lady that he got for a wife has taken the pride out of him I well believe, and he may thank her for doing it."

Duncan and his friend were evidently settling themselves for a good long talk, when the former noticed two figures coming along the road towards the cottage, and he said rather crossly :

"See yonder ! Who can that be ? I trust it's nobody coming here."

Mrs. Munro's interest in strangers was always easily excited, and she replied :

"Ay, I have been trying to find out who they can be. I wonder if it's these going-about people that were here last harvest. The lassies were telling me that they saw them at Kingussie market on Tuesday. Do you mind on them ?"

Duncan's face brightened, and he answered promptly :

"Ay, fine do I mind on them, and I'm right sure that they'll be very welcome. Cheerie bodies they are! If it's them, they'll do us a lot of good. It's me that will be glad to see Thomas and Meg."

His satisfaction was not, however, shared by Mrs. Munro, who tossed her head and said :

"Well, I must say, Duncan, that you're not very particular to be taking up with tramps and gangrel bodies like them."

Astonished at her manner no less than her words, Duncan said :

"What's wrong with the poor bodies? They are decent people in their own rank so far as I have ever seen, and the wife is wonderful good company. I can assure you that I will give them a welcome."

"Not me, I am sure," was Mrs. Munro's haughty rejoinder ; "as for me, I like to choose my company. Hech, Duncan man! surely you'll not be demeaning yourself to take up with these going-about people? They may be well enough in their own place, but they're not fit for quiet-going folk like you and me."

"Humph! and that's your opinion, is it?" replied Duncan, very much amused; "but I have yet to learn what for I would not be neighbourly to everybody that comes the way, and certainly if that's Tom and Meg the tinkers there couldn't be many more welcome visitors."

"I suppose, then," was her sneering remark, "you'll be for asking them into the house. If I had foreseen this, it's not me that would have spent my strength in sweeping up your floor to be dirtied by a wheen tramps."

She was very angry, and Duncan, too, was nettled; but not wishing to quarrel, he said rather timidly:

"Now, tell me why I would not ask them into the house to take bite and sup with us? They will do neither you nor me any harm, and there is nothing for them to steal."

"Well," Mrs. Munro answered, "if ever I heard the like of that; upon my word, Duncan Macnair, I did not think you were such a fool; but if you are determined to entertain them, I must just stay for a wee while and look after you, or there's no saying what daft thing you'll maybe do."

Clapping her on the shoulder, Duncan said,

with a humorous twinkle in his eye, and laughing heartily :

"That's right ! Jean, Jean, you're aye the old sixpence. It's true that you were Cæsar's wife, and doubtless that was a grand position, and one that became you well ; but it could never harm Cæsar's widow to sit down to a meal of meat with poor creatures that often enough have precious little to eat at all."

Mrs. Munro smiled, but she said nothing, from which Duncan argued that she was becoming softened.

There was very soon no doubt about the identity of the travellers, and as they drew nearer it was evident that they were both tired and dusty. The man flung down his pack on the path before Duncan with a deep groan, and said jauntily, in spite of his fatigue :

"Here we are again, Shepherd ; how's all with you since we last met ? Meg and me has travelled many a mile since then, and we're quite worn-out the day. You'll give us a rest, will you not ?"

"Ay, ay," said Duncan warmly, "there's aye a seat for poor bodies at my fireside. Sit down both of you, and tell us how you've been getting on."

The woman looked at Duncan, and more espe-

cially at Mrs. Munro, half shyly, half impudently, but instead of answering her interlocutor, she turned round quickly to Thomas, and said to him :

"Oh, man, what a fuss you're making about nothing, groaning that way, as if it was you that had carried these bundles all the road."

Curtseying to Mrs. Munro, she added :

"Don't believe his groaning, mem, for it's me that has borne both the loads most of the way. Thomas is not very strong at the best of times, and"—glancing kindly at the man at her side—"he's gotten a bad cough even now."

"I well believe you," said Mrs. Munro, "the men are aye ready to lay the burdens on their womenkind. I'm often wondering what the poor things would do without us."

"You're about right there, mistress," said Thomas, with a slight approach to a leer ; "life wouldn't be worth the living without our lasses ; and, I can tell you, mine's better than all the world to me."

Meg looked up at these words with a bright smile, and, taking hold of Thomas's arm, she said :

"As for me, I'm the happy woman with my old man ; I wouldn't change him for a king."

Thereupon Thomas hugged Meg close to his

breast, and gave her a loud kiss and an affectionate smack on the back, while he said to her :

"Ay, that's your talk now, but you did not always think the same ; many's the teasing I had to give before you were content to take me altogether for your old man. Is that not true ? "

Mrs. Munro was beginning to feel somewhat out of her element, so she got up with intent to go, saying :

"Well, well, I'll be leaving you to your cracks. Meg can see to the supper, and you'll not be needing me more the night, so I'll be bidding you farewell, Duncan ;" and she drew herself up to her full height very proudly.

Duncan had been chuckling over the whole scene, no part of which had escaped his observation, and he fairly shook with laughter now at Mrs. Munro's pomposity. Her evident discomfort in the presence of the poor wayfarers, and their utter unconcern and happy nonchalance, tickled his fancy immensely, and his eyes twinkled as he replied in a dry, sarcastic tone :

"I suppose then, Mistress Cæsar, we must be letting ye go, but it's yoursel that will be the loser. These two have seen a heap more than

either you or me, and I'm sure they have a lot to tell."

"Ay, that," Thomas ejaculated, "but maybe the lady will come back after supper, and then she'll hear the news."

"You have a cheek," Meg interrupted; "we're to be on the road again after our supper; but, mem, your friend the shepherd will tell you all the news."

Mrs. Munro took her departure with simulated unconcern, but inwardly she was much annoyed at having shown her disapproval of the travellers so plainly to Duncan, and thereby shut herself out from their society.

Duncan and the tramps then repaired to the kitchen, where Meg was soon at work preparing the meal, a proceeding which the men silently watched with interest, until Thomas could be quiet no longer, and he burst forth:

"Well, Shepherd, we're much obliged to you for your hospitality. Me and my mistress are honest folk, it's our custom to take things as they come; and if they are too long of coming, why, you know, we are both Highland born, and so we go to look for them, and we aye try to make a good use of everything we can find—and lift without being seen."

Duncan said nothing in reply, but he gave a look of appreciative understanding, and Thomas continued :

"I'm thinking, Shepherd, you're not acquainted with many south-country folk, and you would scarcely believe what they say about us."

The speaker looked at his wife, who nodded knowingly, and thus encouraged he went on :

"The common vulgar Saxon says that the Highlander," and he drew himself up haughtily, "is given to steal ; that's the ugly name they give to our 'lifting.' But you know that it is not true ; we never steal, we only lift things that nobody is making any use of. That surely is not stealing : that is not breaking the eighth commandment, according to its real meaning."

Meg was stooping over the pot on the fire, but was all attention to the conversation, and now she muttered :

"Humph ! a set of Glasgow bodies, senseless things that they are, they cannot see the difference between us and their own thieves. Humph !"

Duncan smiled, but expressed neither approval nor disapproval ; he was intensely amused when Thomas added :

"Ay, Meg, weren't ye wild at them ?"

Again addressing Duncan, he said :

"I can tell you, Shepherd, that you have had a great misfortune. You have missed what I have gotten—an ever-ready, handy woman. My Meg is a woman of the world at large, both by her nature and her practice. She never asks any useless questions, and when she does anything for other people she always expects a return for it, and she gets it too." Then he added with emphasis : "Besides, she's so cheerie that a man need never be miserable when he has her at his side."

It took some time for the porridge to boil, and Thomas thought it a pity not to improve the occasion, as he considered it, so he said :

"Come, Meg, give us one of your songs. It will help to pass the time till the meat is ready, and it will cheer us up a wee. What do you say to that, Shepherd?"

Duncan nodded.

"You old haval," was Meg's reply to the remark, but presently she warbled forth :

*When I was young and light and gay,
The men came over the burn to me,
They listened to all I had to say,
And went away with a look i' their e
Hi ho diddle-di-dee, hi ho diddle-di-dee*

*The boys came over the burn to see,
I gave them a smile and for many a mile
They sang for joy in love with me.
Hi-ho-diddle di-dee,
Hi diddle didee, away in love with me.*

Duncan sat motionless while Meg was singing, wondering and intently observing her. A kind of sadness came over him, so that when Thomas said, "Now, man, is that not fine?" a deep sigh was his only answer, and Thomas continued: "Eh, man, but I am sorry for you! You have made a terrible mistake. My Meg is a woman of courage, and many's the day she has put spirit into me, but I don't say that you could get another like her. She is but little appreciated except by myself; folk like the grand lady that was here the now, little know what Meg the tinker is; she is a lady of the land, let me tell you; she walks over it from day to day, and she gets on well with our mother the earth, and her getting on so well with the earth in the daytime, makes me sleep well at night. Ay, ay, Meg's the woman for me; she takes full advantage of her opportunities, and I'm the richer for it. She is a woman of property too, but not like that grand lady that was here the now; she handles things, and handles them with such a nice handicraft, that we manage as we're going around to pick

up a little unseen." He gave a knowing wink, and added: "Eh, man, but I am sorry for you; why have you not gotten a wife? Come, you're not too old yet, you can rectify your mistake. A man is never the complete thing if he hasn't got back the rib that was taken out of Adam."

The three laughed heartily at this view of the subject, and Duncan said:

"I congratulate you both, but it is not everybody that is so contented with each other as you are. Many a one finds that marriage is a yoke hard to bear, and then it is a tie for life."

Thomas and Meg looked at one another when Duncan said this, and the former remarked:

"Well, you see, Shepherd, Meg and me understand one another, and we've settled between ourselves that our bargain is only to be lasting as long as we are both satisfied, and I for one think that we'll stay together all the days of our natural life. What do you say, Meg?"

Meg gave no verbal response, but her smile of loving content was sufficient. Duncan rose when the supper was over and said:

"Now, my friends, make yourselves comfortable and rest awhile, but I must go to the hill. It's time I was moving, so I'll be bidding you

good-bye. When you are ready for the road, you'll please lock the door, and put the key under the thatch where I'll find it when I come home." Shaking hands cordially with both of them, he added: "I'll be thinking long till I see you again, so don't be such strangers after this."

The two tinkers thanked their kind host, and it was not long before they set out anew on their wanderings with grateful hearts and much refreshed bodies.

CHAPTER XXV

MRS. STEWART'S illness proved a very tedious one with many ups and downs, and it may well be believed that her husband was much exhausted by the violent shocks, surprises, and wrenches that his mind and heart received. Day by day he felt that this exhaustion was increasing, and he became greatly depressed. It was a real trouble to him to find how apprehensive and full of fears he had become, and how, in spite of all his efforts, these baseless terrors often gained the mastery. Those about him were oppressed by his silence, and could not but be afraid that something must be going to happen to him. His parishioners' sympathy grew, for he made no complaint, and was evidently doing his best to bear his burden. They looked back over the years he had been their minister, and the more intelligent among them could not but admit that he had been exceedingly earnest, and had endeavoured to help them as much as he could.

He had often been mistaken, but his mistakes were such as are common to those of his profession. His people attached but little importance to much that he had professed : now they plainly manifested their respect for the man : and they questioned, if, with all his faults, they would ever find a better minister. Mr. Stewart himself was little conscious of the general impression he had made on the congregation ; it was enough for him to know that he had fought a hard fight, although he had been beaten.

Mrs. Gordon observed with anxiety how increasingly melancholy and desponding James was becoming, and one afternoon, when he seemed unusually low, she suggested that he should make a rather long excursion in the hope that the change and exercise would do him good. To this he agreed, and it was with great satisfaction that she watched his departure on horseback. He rode very quietly for some miles, then coming to a field he opened the gate, and turning the animal in to feed, shackled its feet according to the custom of the country, so that it could not wander, and left it there until he should return.

James Stewart was longing to get rid of himself, and the feeling that he would be quite alone,

and away from his fellow-men, was a blessed relief. It was a consolation to feel when wandering thus, that no more could be expected of him than was expected of all things around according to their kind.

He was seeking rest, and hoped to gain it as he went further among the mountains.

Turning a corner of the path, he was confronted by a singular figure, in whom he recognised an old woman, well known in the whole country-side.

She was very tall, and walked or rather strode firmly along with a staff in her hand. Dressed in a long dark tartan mantle, with a hood which shaded her face, she came forward with a majestic air that reminded James of an old picture he had once seen of the "Witch of Endor."

He knew her well, and, weakened by his long anxiety, terror overcame him as he watched her approach. He was more impressed this evening by her bold but womanly features than he had ever been before.

Her hood fell back, displaying her aged brown wrinkled face; wrinkles not only covered her forehead, but had burrowed their way down her lips and on her chin, and revealed how frightfully she

must have suffered from distress, compression, and intimidation.

She had once been a very beautiful woman, of more than average intelligence, and James knew her life's story. She had been a regular attendant at church, and had followed its teaching as well as she could ; but she was much afflicted, for she had three idiot children, and while the rest of her sons and daughters had made their way in the world, these three had grown up and stayed with her, and she had tended and cared for them year after year. She had never grumbled, but there they were with her daily.

She stood still as the minister drew near, and her dark eyes seemed to be searching his very soul. Looking at him fixedly, she said :

" Ah, Mr. Stewart, is that you ? I want to say something to you. Oh, but it's me that is sorry for you ; I'm after praying for you every day that the Almighty would be pleased to lighten your burden. But I want to tell you, Mr. Stewart, that often, often I used to wish you would leave unsaid much of what you did say to us in your sermons."

For a moment the minister was inclined to be offended, but he checked the impulse, remembering that like himself she had been through much suffer-

ing, and had been woefully disappointed. Therefore, instead of drawing back, as was his first intention, he shook her by the hand, and expressed his cordial thanks for her goodwill and her womanly sympathy.

"Yes, yes," she said; "my sympathy is true, but do not misunderstand me. Listen to what I have to say, for I will tell you my mind for once, and I will do it all the more frankly, because you know that I feel with and for you in my inmost heart."

James was half frightened by the keen earnestness of the old woman, and he gave her a questioning look, of which, however, she took no notice, but continued:

"Now, Mr. Stewart, why is it that you say so much to us about our sins, and the punishment of them? Does everybody not find out for themselves that they fail, fail, fail from morning to night? Are we not all disappointed at our want of success, at the little we do gain if we try ever so hard? Is there not everywhere around us the earth producing its fruit, and the heavens making it good? And yet do *we* succeed? Can we miss feeling that we are weak, helpless creatures, always sinning against our Maker? Ay, that is it—

against Him ; and I tell you again that it is against Him *only* that we can sin."

This was said most solemnly, and the listener could not help feeling as if the words were those of an oracle from above. It must be remembered that they were both Celtic Highlanders, and influenced for the time by the grandeur of their native mountains at the foot of which they were now standing.

"I am old," she continued, "and have known you, James Stewart, all your life, and I knew your father and mother before you ; and I must tell you again that it is only against our Maker that any of us can sin. You and such as you have no need to make us more frightened than we are. We fear every hour of the day."

The darkness was increasing, and James's attention was so fully concentrated on the speaker, that she soon became the only object visible to him, and he shrank timidly more and more into himself. After a short pause she began again :

"Oh yes, it is true, it is awfully true, that we all, and especially we poor women, are everywhere beset with fears, and do not need to be told about the doom that is to come, for it is here already. Lead us to life. Oh, Mr. Stewart, give us light that we may get life."

Looking very hard at him, she added slowly :

"You may be quite sure that we women will take you, and all that are like you, to death—death—to ever-ready death."

She ceased, and without saying another word walked away. As her dark figure receded, shrouded in the ever-deepening violet hues of night, the minister raised his hand to his head, feeling strangely giddy and confused. The words, "death, —death—ever-ready death," rang in his ears. It was as if they had been put into the mouth of a propheticess to hinder him from attaining the rest which had seemed nearly in his grasp, and he felt helpless. He moved away, but his limbs trembled, the trees became blurred and indistinct, the mountains were ghostlike, all the objects round seemed unreal. Dazed, and not knowing whither he was going, James wandered off the highway, stepping through the heather, and stumbling often as he went along until he reached the grass by the river-side.

Owing to the melting of the snow on the hills, the stream was very full and rapid, and the rush of the water as he looked at it increased his giddiness; so that he fell forward into a deep pool. The sudden shock and the coldness of the water

roused him to a sense of his danger, and, after much violent struggling, he managed to get into a shallower place, with just strength enough left to enable him to scramble out on the bank, where he fell down exhausted, and but half conscious of what was going on around.

As he lay in this dreamy condition, hidden by the undulating hillocks on the moor from passers-by, he fancied he saw his old love, Elsie Macdonald, driving home some cows. He hoped she would see him, but he was too much in dreamland to make any effort to attract her attention, and she and the cows passed quickly out of his sight; so near, however, did they come to him that he heard the girl sing :

*Beware the witching hour of night,
The witching hour of night beware.*

The old story of Invereshie and his lady who had been both carried away by the flood in the very river out of which he had just dragged himself, was brought back to his recollection by the words the girl chanted. Overmastering fear of the fast coming darkness made him tremble violently, and he became unconscious. It was daylight when he opened his eyes, and raised himself to a sitting posture. Feeling very cold and still full

of terror, which, though undefined, was none the less real, he shuddered, and claspings his head looked round for help. The same youthful figure he had seen with the cows the night before, appeared again on the horizon, and now it was really coming towards him with outstretched hand, and he made what he thought a superhuman effort to grasp it, but failed, and fell back on the turf insensible.

The girl who had come to the minister's rescue was the daughter of one of his own old friends. Running home quickly, she gave the alarm, and soon returned with her father and some of the neighbours. They found him still breathing, and carried him carefully to the manse: an attack of fever supervened, during which he was for some days quite delirious; after that sleep set in, and when he awoke he murmured feebly:

"Where am I? Elsie, give me your hand. Come, Elsie!"

The same cry was often repeated during the next few days, but in course of time the disease was overcome, and recovery was sure though slow.

Freed, as James Stewart now was, from professional conventionalism, by his terrible mental and physical sufferings as well as by pity for Mary, he

was brought in earnest to repent of his overbearing self-conceit. When he lay only semi-conscious on the river's bank, he discovered, as by a light from above, that woman with the true and healthy nature which is her Maker's endowment—such a nature as Elsie Macdonald had displayed in his early acquaintance with her, and which his wife was on the way to develop—can alone be man's earthly saviour in his deepest need. With humility he afterwards confessed to Mary herself that he had sinned greatly in this matter, and acknowledged how slow he had been to learn that woman must ever be treated with perfect trust, if the lovely divine nature given to her by the Almighty is to have fair-play. At length he recognised that his wife would be his true helper in whatever effort he might make for freedom of thought and action.

It is, perhaps, needless to add that the feelings of James and Mary were now in perfect unison with respect to their two children, who, instead of being a bone of contention, became the objects of their mutual love and care.

In bringing to a close this story of human struggle, it may be well to return to Duncan Macnair, the Glenfeshie shepherd, whose experience was altogether different from that of James and

Mary ; he had never wilfully opposed the guiding hand of the Almighty, and had had no hard mental battle to fight, but he had hitherto missed the restful domestic happiness that was his due.

For some days after the visit of the tinkers which has been recorded, Duncan was very thoughtful, so much so that Mrs. Munro was surprised ; and as he had given her some account of the conversation between himself and them, she drew her own conclusions from his absent-mindedness. It will easily be understood that her excitement was unbounded, although she was too shrewd to express it, when one Saturday afternoon she found Duncan busy brushing his Sunday coat with the evident intention of putting it on. On her entrance, he turned his back as if he did not wish her to see what he was doing, and the worthy woman smiled to herself. She looked round the apartment to see if there was any need for her housewifely attentions, but sedulously avoided the articles of dress in her survey ; and then she said in an unconcerned tone, as if she saw nothing noticeable in this new phase of Duncan's character—namely, attention to his outward appearance:

“ I see there's nothing wanted here the day, so I'll be making myself scarce ; but if you need

anything you can let me know. Good-day to you."

Duncan being a man of few words, simply thanked her, and she took her departure.

Not many days passed before Mrs. Munro was told by her old friend that he intended getting married very soon, and her inward delight was inexpressible, but with well-feigned astonishment she lifted up her hands and waited for further information. Duncan then confessed to her that his recent assertions against matrimony had been a blind, for all the time he had had his affections fixed upon a young sister of Mrs. Macdonald's, but he had never had the courage to ask her to be his wife until last night. To his great joy, his offer was accepted. Duncan's intended marriage was, of course, soon the subject of conversation over the whole country-side, and everybody wished him well. The Reverend Mr. Stewart promised to perform the ceremony, and it was with great pleasure that he and his wife set out for Belnaa on the wedding-day.

On that lovely afternoon the breeze was blowing freshly, and the branches of the graceful birches were bending harmoniously in obedience to its power ; overhead the clouds were sailing onwards,

underneath the soft mossy turf was taking the impress of the footsteps that were passing over it ; everything seemed to be whispering "It is done," and manifesting content. James Stewart and his wife felt the soothing influence of all around them as leaving their gig they walked leisurely over the moor and by the river's bank to Belnaan. There was not one jarring note ; not one hint of doubt in their minds of the great Father's goodness in all His works ; everything to them seemed emblematical of the peace they had themselves attained, though it had been at the cost of such infinite pain, and, in full sympathy with Nature, they too were content.

THE END.

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