The Village Tragedy.

CHAPTER I.

BLIGHTED HOPES.

After a heavy rain, at the equinoctial gales or the Lammas floods, the mountain streams of Craigiston, whose height heaves itself above our village, sweep down and swell the Lunarty into a river. It is then that the graphic description of Saunders Denovan's famous poem is borne home to us, and we see in very truth "The Lunarty in Spate." When these rivulets, rushing and tumbling, lash themselves into foam and pour their boiling froth into the burn, the Lunarty, dashing impetuously over its rocky bed, sweeps onward to the Forrie, where, breaking into twenty cascades, it plunges downwards with a roar and hiss to swell the greater waters of the sea. It is then, when the gray gloaming has fallen upon the village, and the angry voice of the Lunarty rises upon the still evening air, that mothers clasp their infants to their breasts and shudder at the thought of a long past tragedy. To the younger villagers the incident is as a story told, but to those whose memory can carry them back through five-and-forty years, the roar of the Lunarty has a strange and wierd significance. It keeps in vivid realism the awful solemnity that fell upon our vil-

lage, in the gray dawn of a September morning, when a rough sailor who had witnessed all manner of deaths, as he himself told, without ever shedding a tear, carried in his arms from Merleston the lifeless form of a little girl of ten summers, and wept as he laid her on her mother's knee. Yes, the tear that fell from Jack Robertson's eye on the white cheek of Mary Maxwell, and the woe-begone expression that was upon his face as he looked at the sorrow-stricken mother, endeared the rough salt to the most impassive of the villagers, and made the sailors a class of men for ever human in Kennethcrook.

There was much expression of sorrow at the time—three ministers preached three funeral sermons on the succeeding Sabbath, and many tears were shed for the bereaved parents. But time is the great healer of many wounds, and by-and-bye (when the novelty of the tragedy wore away) the bereaved household was left to mourn alone. Yes, and in its later sorrow, even the bereaved household forgot at times the little grave in the far corner of the kirkyaird. Those who saw Mrs Maxwell turning old too soon, marked her quickly silvering hair, and noted the lines of care that deepened on her face, felt pity for her, and spoke softly among themselves of the time when Mary was taken away. To them the hissing rush of heavy spate recalls the dark night when she was swept into the Lunarty from the mill-sluice, and the darker morning when her lifeless body was found at the foot of a crag at Merleston, whither it had been

driven by the angry stream. Yes, they spoke kindly of the mother, and fain would have sympathised with her. They kept silent, however, and it was well. Mrs Maxwell's sorrow was not one to be soothed by the momentary expressions of sympathy such as the villagers could have given.

"Ah!" she once said to me, and with a tear-stained face she spoke, "we have little, little to leeve for i' this world. Some o' the neeburs whiles tells me no to break down sae, an' they aye think that I'm mournin' for Mary. I dinna tell them onything different, for there's nae use o' makin' yer ain's fauts kent, but, I'd suner buried Davie too. It'll maybe seem harsh to speak o' yer ain flesh and bluid this way, but . . . but . . . a leevin' sorrow's waur than a deid yin."

When the tragedy awoke a sympathetic response from Kennethcrook, David Maxwell was a distinguished student at Glasgow University. It was just before his second session in the Divinity Hall that the sad calamity took place, and he was at home to comfort his mother in her trying grief.

"Mother," and it was a youth of nineteen, untried by the world, who spoke, "mother, dinna mourn sae, for it's no yer ain daein'. . . . Hard, nae deot, it is . . . but we see the Lord's will in it a'. . . . Mary's only gane whaur we'll a' need to gang. . . . At the langest the time'll be but short. . . . , Mother, the rest o' us'll dae oor best to make up for her loss."

But David Maxwell, M.A., looked cheerily at life then. He saw beyond the great sorrow that overwhelmed the family. He looked far into the future and saw much—much that was full of bright promise for himself. Nights of dissipation did not close the perspective of his vision, and there may have been a touch of unreality about his sympathy.

He rose from his mother's side, and looked for a short time at his sister's lifeless face. Bending down he kissed the pale lips, and his mother wept afresh. Who, among us, shall blame her? He passed his fingers through the curls that lay carelessly around his sister's head as in life. Little did he think he was filling his mind with pictures that time would deepen and memory intensify. As he passed from the bedside his eye fell on a morocco case which lay on the table, and he hesitated. It contained the medal he had won the previous session. He put out his hand, and, for the instant, saw no death-chamber, only the graduation ceremony. He would have lifted the medal, but his mother's hand arrested his arm.

"Time enough, Davie, when a's ower to look at your medal . . . but this is no a time for thinkin' on sic things."

She took the medal and put it up on the mantel-shelf, where eye might not see it, and David, feeling that his unconscious act had moved his mother to pain, went into the kitchen and left her alone with her dead.

Four years later the mother followed the daughter into the land of shadows. Within

that period there happened many things that it pains me to tell, but I feel that it is right to put David Maxwell straight with the villagers. Some there were who said unkind things of him at his mother's grave, and perhaps he deserved them. And some repeated those unkind things when we came to bury him ; but I, who saw eye to eye with them in all things they said at his mother's grave, had no heart to join in their later condemnation. It was given to me to witness the penitence of a soul : and the sorrow was such as I shall not wish to see again. I think now I have an idea of how it must feel before the suicidal hand takes the life it never gave. David Maxwell sinned and suffered.

Four years to a day after the tragedy on the Lunarty, Dr MacGregor passed up the Raw, and brought housewives to their doors. He was never a man of speech, but he spoke to no one as he made his way to the house of the Maxwell's. A month previously he had been called in, but no ray of hope had lit his face since the moment he had first seen his patient.

"I think there's a chance yet, George," was his reply when George Maxwell, after the doctor's first visit, walked with him to the door and asked him what he thought of Jeanie. Three weeks later, when these two met at the door, and George again asked the same question, this time with his eyes only, for he did not speak, Dr MacGregor looked into the face of George Maxwell, and said as kindly as he could—

"I knew it from the beginning . . . but it would have been ill dune to have told you. .

. . We must break these things gently."

George Maxwell went in from the door and did not say good-bye to the doctor. The burden was heavier than he could bear.

After that Dr MacGregor came more frequently to his patient, but, beyond looking at her, there was little he could do.

"It'll sune be over now, George, an' the suner the better. . . . That woman has no pleasure in life."

"Some'll hae a heep to answer for, for this wark. . . . He's no aff the face o' the earth yet," and all the vengeance that had been accumulating for three years against the distinguished student went into the bitterness of these words.

Dr MacGregor heard, but did not understand. The story that was to be told within the next three days had been kept a secret as best the dying woman could. She nursed it in her bosom, and would have carried it to the grave rather than let other mothers speak disrespectfully of her son. Yes, but the secret of a mother's heart is often the first word on a father's tongue.

"I'll come ower in the gloamin'," said the doctor, as he moved away, "for I doot the turn o' the nicht'll try her."

George Maxwell did not answer. He stood for a few moments and watched the doctor pass along the Raw. Then he went in and sat down in the chair which was nearest the door, so that the cool evening air might fan his fevered brow. He sat for a long time as though lost in thought,

and when he rose there was a look of calm determination on his face. He went over to the fireplace and looked above the mantel-shelf, where, in a little gilt frame that had been bought of a travelling gipsy, hung a portrait of the son, taken after his first session at college. He took it down, looked at it, and over it muttered something that my respect for the author of a short and wayward life will not permit me to repeat, and then placed it on the fire.

"Them that brings sic sorrow to my hoose deserve nae better than this."

It was a rash act, the work of a moment, and when the flames glowed round the glass he would fain have rescued the likeness. When he looked up the kitchen seemed dark. His eyes passed to the window, and a face disappeared. It was the face of the distinguished student. He went out to the door, saw nobody, and tried to think he was mistaken. Yes, he tried, but never convinced himself.

In the evening when the doctor called, Saunders Denovan's wife was with the patient, and after he looked at Mrs Maxwell and mixed up a draught for her, he passed into the kitchen to speak with the husband.

"Nae impruivment," said George, as he set a chair for the doctor.

The man of medicine only shook his head in answer. Dr MacGregor had been pondering the husband's words spoken at the door in the afternoon.

"What do you think, George, is the cause of this worry?" he said, after a pause.

George's eyes passed to the vacant space above the mantel, and then to the window. He rose, went to the door and looked out, then he moved gently to the sick-room and closed the door of it as softly as he could.

"Doctor," he said, "she's tried to hide this for three year an' mair, but they things'll no hide. She sometimes says that a leevin' sorrow's waur than a deid yin. Ay . . . an' a close sorrow's waur than an open yin. There's no mony in the toon kens muckle aboot it. . . . A mercifu' Providence has kept them frae spierin'. Some o' them thinks Davie's aye at the college yet. Doctor . . . Davie's an ootcast frae this hoose fer ever."

Once again George looked at the vacant space above the mantel.

"It's fower year the noo sin' Mary was drowned. . . . Ay . . . but we would hae gotten ower that. . . . The mother was aye takkin' on about Mary's death, but ae day, twa year syne, I cam' hame and got her sittin' greetin'. . . . She wasna mournin' aboot Mary that day. There was a letter lyin' on her lap. . . . She has the letter below her pillow i' the room. . . . It was frae Davie. . . . No . . . ye'll no ask me, doctor, to tell ye what was in't? But . . . it was to tell her that he had been forced to gie up his classes. Ay, ay, doctor, there's nae use o' gaun ahint the bush wi't. . . . It was drink that was at the bottom o't."

Dr MacGregor only looked into the fire the more steadily, the longer George Maxwell

spoke. He, in common with the other villagers, attributed the grief of his patient to the drowning of her child four years before, and had no idea that the sentence spoken by the husband at the door in the afternoon enshrined a tale so tragic and referred to a genius so mis-spent.

"Ay, doctor, an' it's preyed on her mind sae, that I sometimes thocht she would need to be ta'en awa'. . . . I felt it masel', and although naebody ever spoke to me aboot it, I had a thocht that a' body kent. I tried to cheer her, and keep her frae mournin', but it was nae use. Her heart was set on him, and she showed it even when he was man muckle. . . . An' mairsae than ever efter he preached at St Mary's. . . . 'Deed, doctor, we thocht we had gotten to the tap o' the tree . . . the grief o' Mary was beginnin' to deaden doun, for it was ten months efter the drownin' that he cam' an' preached for Maister MacThamas. . . . We was baith fell prood o' the laddie. . . . Ay, we was maybe ower prood. . . . He gaed back to the college, and aye wrote regular as he had been daein', an' we was coontin' on him bein' through within the next year."

A knock at the door interrupted the speech, and as George went to answer it, Dr MacGregor went back to the sick-room to see his patient. Mrs Denovan said she thought she was a little easier, and after an examination, the doctor came back to the kitchen.

"I think, George," he said, "that she's a little easier, an' if she passes the turn o' the

night, she may weather it for a day or twa."

George did not reply, and the men stood facing each other for a few seconds.

"Dae ye no think she would like to see him?" the doctor said after they had reseated themselves.

Unconsciously George's eyes travelled to the vacant space above the mantel, and then to the shuttered window.

"Na, na, doctor . . . there's nae mair meetin's i' this side o' the grave. . . . I wadna ask ye to mention onything o' the kind to her, for . . . mind ye . . . I couldna hear tell o't. . . . Them that treats their mithers as Davie's dune has nae claims for consideration, even at a death. It's little, little we've dune surely to deserve this," and George Maxwell wept, one of the few times he wept in his life.

"I'll look along in the mornin', George, and I hope she'll be some better," and Dr MacGregor rose to go.

"Ye'll no speak aboot what I've said to ye, doctor, until a's ower? . . . I could thole it . . . I think . . . if I kent she wadna hear it. . . . An' it'll gang like wildfire sune enough. . . . Davie looked in at that window the day."

The last sentence was somewhat unintelligible to the doctor, but he did not stay to make any enquiries. Strange thoughts were running through his mind as he passed along the Raw. He, too, had a son who was going to college.

CHAPTER II.

Forgiveness.

"I hope the Doctor 'll no mention what I said till him. She wad mourn hersel' to death if she thought onybody kent. No, but the doctor 'll no speak aboot it. He's owre guid for that." So soliloquised George, as he busied himself about the house after the doctor's departure. Ben in the sick room, Mrs Denovan was doing all that was required, and George's heart was somewhat lightened with the doctor's words that if the patient passed the turn of the night she might weather it for a little.

A few days later, after he had tidied up the house as best he could, George went into the room to sit beside his wife. He did not speak to her as many would have done, and she did not take his silence amiss. He was a man of few words, and Jeanie had learned this in the thirty years of married life they had had.

She was lying peacefully and calmly, there was scarcely strength enough left in her to move. Her arm, worn to a skeleton under the influence of the living death that had been upon her for these years, lay above the coverlet. He took the thin wasted hand between his, and in his mind's eye he saw his life again. Back, back

to his boyhood his memory carried him, and from that happy time forward, every scene realistic as life. He lived again the past, ay and more than the past. He dropped the hand with a shudder, for in thought he was living the future: he was standing at an open grave.

When he dropped the hand, Mrs Maxwell gave a feeble quiver and tried to rise. He lifted her up as gently as possible, put the softest pillow in at her back for her to lean against, and tried to look as though he anticipated no danger.

"Geordie," she said, and she never called him anything else than Geordie, "I canna be lang wi' ye noo. . . . I feel masel . . . getting weaker . . . and weaker . . . wi' every breath . . . that I draw. . . . Oh! I dinna like to leave ye . . . but what's God's will maun be dune."

These were sad moments for George. He heard the words, and knew the voice, but his sorrow did not permit him to look up. The tears of strong men take ten years from their days, but George's grief was too great to find relief even in tears. The world seemed to him an empty void. Everything was against him, unhappy fate had followed him for years, and now even God had gone against him, and was robbing him of the only treasure he held sacred. After a time he rose and looked out of the window, but I do not think his eyes saw anything. Then he came and sat down at the bedside again.

"Ye'll no be owre hard on Davie . . . if he turns up. . . . Ye'll forgie him . . . he is maybe sufferin' . . . for his fauts?"

"Dinna ask me to promise, Jeanie, for I wadna like to gie my word and gae back on't. . . . Davie has to answer to me for this wark before I forgie him. . . . I wadna care to hae the name o' bein' owre hard. . . . I aye did what I could to stand straucht wi' the neeburs. . . . An' to overlook a faut, gin they seemed to see that they were in the wrang . . . but this wark is no wark to be for-gotten in a day. . . . Davie 'll ne'er hae a warm corner i' my hert."

"I ken ye'll dae what's richt, Geordie. . . . I wadna ask ye to dae onything against your will. . . . But Davie was aye a guid bairn. . . . He's maybe no sae bad . . . as we're makin' him. . . . He'll maybe come a' richt yet. . . . I canna think that he's forgotten us athegither. . . . Only yestreen I saw him in my sleep. . . . He seemed to be the same laddie . . . as when Mary deid . . . an' he was aye guid then. . . . I waukened wi' a start, and thocht he was happin' me . . . as he used to dae . . . but there was naebody there . . . an' I juist grat masel to sleep again. . . . I saw him a second time, but I canna mind whaur it was. . . . When I waukened, I thocht I heard him greetin' to get hame."

It was the appeal of a dying woman to the honest convictions of her husband, and it seemed to move him not. He listened, or, at least seemed to listen, for he, too, was thinking of the wayward boy.

"What's dune canna be undune . . . an it's nae use mournin' for what micht hae been. . . . Geordie, ye'll maybe no be owre hard f"

It is an easy matter at times to humour the opinions and feelings of others when the humouring does not involve a sacrifice. Yes, but at times it is hard. To agree to the request of his dying wife seemed to George Maxwell nothing less than a sacrifice of the woman he loved to the selfish caprice of a son. Often, often, had that same voice pled at the bar of his soul and won its case, but in this instance the proof was greater, and the crime clearer, and the judge more resolute than on any former arraignment, and the voice, touched even by death, appealed in vain.

"I canna promise," and it was with difficulty that the father spoke. "I canna promise what I canna see my way to fulfil. . . . It's different wi' you, for ye was aye guid, an' I ken ye wad like to see us baith set richt. . . . I did my best by the laddie . . . and wad hae dune it to the end . . . only he didna dae his best . . . by you and me."

Exhausted by the speaking, Mrs Maxwell lay back upon the pillow, and for some time silence kept the field. Her hand was toying carelessly with something among the folds of the counterpane; it was the morocco case containing Davie's medal. She held by it to the last, and when all was over there was some little difficulty in releasing it from her grasp. She lay for a long time silent, and then, in a voice which indicated

that ere long she would enter into her eternal rest, she said—

"Geordie . . . ye'll read . . . to me?" "What wad ye like me to read, Jeanie?" and the tenderness of long ago was in his voice as he lifted a pocket Bible from the centre table.

"Oor auld favourite, Geordie. . . . Paraphrase forty."

Well Geordie knew what Paraphrase forty was, but he had not the heart to say no.

"Gently . . . noo Geordie . . . gently . . . for I canna hear . . . as I used to dae. . . . that's fine" . . . and she repeated every word after it was read.

"I'll go, and with a mourning voice,
Fall down before his face,"

"I see him . . . Geordie . . . I see him . . . he's comin' hame, and oh, but he's dune like . . . ay . . . read on."

"Father! I've sinned 'gainst heaven and thee,
Nor can deserve thy grace."

"Ay! . . . it's like Davie . . . he was aye guid . . . although maybe thochtless, read again, Geordie."

"He said, and hastened to his home,
To seek his father's love;
The father sees him from afar,
And all his bowels move."

Yes . . . that's oor Davie, an' you baith . . . he's comin' . . . he's comin'.

"He ran, and fell upon his neck,
Embraced and kissed his son."

"That's it noo . . . Geordie . . . we baith liked him. . . . Ye'll no be owre hard . . . ye'll let bygones . . . be bygones?"

And the touching pleading that had so often prevailed before, won the last case, for which it held the brief. George laid aside the Bible, and was standing at the bedside with her wan hand in his clasp, weeping as a child.

"There is aye an open door . . . an' sae lang's there's a bite, Davie 'll get it.

The dawn of the eternal morn was breaking. The thin hand shook, and a faint movement passed over the face to signify that all was well, and that she recognised that a reconciliation had been effected.

"I'll no be owre hard on Davie . . . for your sake," said George, but there was no one to hear. He was standing in the presence of death.

CHAPTER III.

The Village Sitting in Judgment.

Under certain circumstances, Kennethcrook is happy at a funeral. Not that she rejoices at the bereavements of her villagers, but there is a byword which has woven itself into her creed, and she rejoices or bewails according as the issue turns on the proverb. It is many years now since I heard it in the common parlance of Kennethcrook, and I believe it is fastly losing its potency. Forty years ago it was one of the principles of the moral philosophy of the village, and it ran as follows:—

"Blithe is the bride that the sun shines on,
And happy is the corpse that the rain rains on."

It was a very wet morning and the burn was high in spate when guidwives laid out their husbands' "blacks" to air upon the bed. The sky was dark, and it was like to be as wet a day as it had been a night. But that was of little moment: the village had to pay her respect to the dead. Over in the kirkyaird John MacDiarmid was busy at work. Clad in his rough, canvas dress, he was throwing the heavy earth above his head, every now and then coming to a halt and meditating on the latest gossip that the village had received.

"Ay na . . . imphim . . . That's what it's come to . . . imphim," such were the expressions that escaped from the grave-digger as he gradually found himself getting farther below the surface.

The story of the distinguished student's disgrace was public property. In Kennethcrook when a death occurred there was much conversation, and family failings and virtues were passed from neighbour to neighbour. It may have been offensive to rake up the ashes of dying feuds, as it may have been pleasant to speak well of the dead, but it was only the way of of the village. Kinship, too, was traced with unerring skill, and speculations made as to who would be at the burial, and who had right to be "chief mourners." It was in searching for the relatives of Mrs Maxwell that the villagers came upon the rich treasure of gossip which a mother's unfaltering love had shaded for three long years. David was being reckoned as "chief mourner" with his father, when the story of his mishap was made public, and upset the calculations of the villagers. One or two there were who said unkind things about the mother; about her having set her heart too much upon the boy, but the general expression was one of sympathy with her in her trial.

"Ay, nae doobt, nae doobt, it was a sair, sair trial, an' it's waesome to think it's ended this wey. Ay, ay, nae wonder she's awa. It would hae taen a hard-herted ane to hae studen't."

These were the words that were spoken to me

on the morning of the funeral, and they sum up the village talk for the three days following the death. After the tale was told the villagers manifested a doubly saddened interest in the burial. Yes, but they had their say.

Marget Steenson fanned the flame of village gossip. It was Marget's man who acted as watch and clockmaker to the village, and so she was in a way to hear any little tit-bit that was going. As the village folk said—"Marget was in a public wey."

"Dae ye hear that, Marget?" said San the morning after the death, as he laid down a watch he was examining and put his spectacles up on his brow.

Marget was ben in an instant.

"Geordie Maxwell's laddie, him 'at was at the college, has been gaun on maist terrible."

"Davie Maxwell?"

"Ay, he hasna been heard tell o' sin' the New Year twa year syne," said Robin Alison who had conveyed the news to San.

"It'll be the thocht o' that na that has brocht this tire on his mither? suggested Mrs Steenson as, with arms akimbo, she prepared to get the gossip that was going.

"There's nae doot but what that's the wey," said San, as he, too, settled down to discuss the family affairs of the Maxwells, "Jeanie Morrison wasna the lass to tak' a thing like that easy."

In Kennethcrook we seldom referred to a married woman as Mrs So-and-So. In this case it was not George and Mrs Maxwell; it was

Jeanie Morrison and Jeanie Morrison's man.

"It's maist pervokin'," said Marget. She meant to add something else, but did not. She, too, had had an interest in the Fortieth Paraphrase.

If there was any sympathy going it came from Robin Alison.

"Ay, ay, it's a sair blow this. To think they had fouchten sae weel to bring him oot, an' him noo to guide them this wey. Ay, something was bound to happen, the laddie was ower clever. I aye held by that opeenion," and Robin looked as though he had long ago foreseen the tragic event.

"Ye did that, Robin. 'Deed it's no that lang syne sin' a' heard ye say sae masel," said San, as he recollected a recent discussion at the kirkyaird.

"But a' didna think it was to turn oot this wey," added Robin still sympathetic in his speech.

"There's nae sayin' but what the laddie was byordnar clever," said Marget, "he was extraordnar clever an' rale obleegin', too, but folk shouldna think ower high o' siccan things. There's nae sayin' whaur they'll end."

Marget Steenson was giving point and speech to village thought and opinion.

"The laddie maun hae been misguided some wey," argued Robin, anxious to shelter the dead woman from the implication of Marget. "It maun be a gey job haudin' yer ain against the ill ye meet wi' in a big place like Edinburgh."

"I wonder what wey he never cam' hame?" said San.

"Ah, there was ower much o' the mither in him for that," replied Robin. "Them 'at kens Jeanie Morrison as I ken her 'll easy understand the laddie no comin' hame. She had aye a guid spirit."

"Weel, the craitur's at her rest noo, but she's had her ain to fend wi'. It seems juist the other day sin' Mary was brocht oot o' the water, and noo this has happened," and San Steenson joined Robin in his words of sympathy.

"I never liked to spier at her hoo she was keepin', for I aye thocht 'at it was the lassokie's death that she was mournin' about; I never had a thocht o' onything like this," said Robin, and there was a sorrowful look on his face that with a woman would have found expression in tears.

But if you wish to have family matters discussed do not set men to the work. In Kennethcrook that is the duty of women.

Half-an-hour after Robin Alison had conveyed the news to the village watchmaker, Marget Steenson stepped down the brae and into Luckie Jack's. Luckie had a small window in the partition which divided her shop from her house, and through it was wont to watch for customers. If Luckie had sold her gossip, Marget Steenson would have been a good customer, for it was a rare thing when Marget allowed a day to pass without calling for the postmistress. Through sheer force of habit Marget made her way through Luckie's shop and into her sitting-room without so much as waiting an invitation.

"Ye'll hae heard the news about Jeanie

Morrison's laddie, Kirsty?" said the village gossip as she seated herself.

The postmistress was always addressed by her maiden name, unless by bad boys, who favoured the opinion that she gave small weight. They referred to her (even in her hearing) as "Luckie."

"Ay, John MacDiarmid ca'd in yestreen and tell't me aboot it. It's an unco job, Marget; but we maun get something to mak' us humble."

"That's aye what I say, Kirsty," and two women of similar dispositions settled down to their work of social and domestic dissection.

"She wasna to haud nor bind for a wee while," said the postmistress with a heartless tone of voice.

"Ay, she got geyan prood," returned Marget.

"She used to come in here and ask for twa stamps at ainee, an' if there was onybody at the coonter they thocht, of course, that she did a geyan lot o' writin'."

"The like o' that!" chimed Marget.

"But I kent better, for I kent her hand-write, and she never posted mair than ae letter at a time."

"San was juist sayin' that he wondered what wey the laddie never cam' hame."

"I spiered at her mair nor twa 'eer syne what way Davie wasna comin' hame (for he aye came i' the summer time), but I canna mind what she said aboot him."

"Did he aye write hame?"

"Oh weel, woman, she hasna gotten a letter a'm sure for this eighteen month."

"Had she never naething to say aboot the letters stoppin'?"

"I said till her ae day that he wasna surely writin' sae muckle, and I am tryin' to mind what she said—I think she said he was travellin' up and doon the country."

"My word, but she kept it weel."

"There was aince I mind she sent a letter far awa'—I think farther than London—addressed to him, but it cam' back through the post—it hadna found him oot."

'An' what did she say?'

"She looked kind o' dull like, but didna say naething mair than that he wad hae gaen on till some ither place."

"I wonder hoo he'll tak this noo?'

"Oh, he'll no hae muckle chance o' kennin' onything aboot it."

"Wull they no hae written to him?"

"No, sae far as I could see. There's been a guid twa three letters, but there was nane backit to him."

And so the mystery of David Maxwell's existence was made the subject of village comment.

"I wadna say but what he'll turn up for the burial, Jeems," said the beadle to Jeems Jamieson the night before Mrs Maxwell was to be laid to rest.

"What wad Geordie mean by saying till the doctor that the laddie looked into the window i' the afternoon?" queried Jeems.

The beadle looked—eyes and mouth open with astonishment.

"He canna be in the toon, Jeems?"

"That was juist what I was thinkin'."

"Hoots no, he wad hae made himsel' kent, surely," said the beadle.

"Its hard to ken. He micht no be far awa i' the noo."

The morning of the funeral dawned, as I have already told you, with heavy rain and a dark grey sky that gave no indication of sunshine. The circumstances attending the death were such as to evoke general sympathy, and the attendance at the funeral was unusually large. When George Maxwell appeared, after the coffin had been laid in the hearse, and took up his place as chief mourner, heads were shaken in sympathy. As the hearse moved along Loom Lane one or two of the blinds were drawn aside and women wept. Funerals are not uncommon in our village, but we have seldom been called upon to witness tragedies. Jeanie Maxwell's death was one.

It was the custom in Kennethcrook when you went to a funeral and fell into your place behind the mourners, to enter into conversation with the person who chanced to be next you. I was walking alongside Saunders Denovan at Mrs Maxwell's funeral. The rain was falling heavily and I think the most superstitious and kindly disposed villager felt that the old-time freit of which I have spoken had everything in its favour.

Saunders and I fell to discussing the distinguished student on the way to the churchyard, and it was then that I was given to understand the true facts concerning David's college career.

It was his window I had seen lit night after night for some months after I came to the village. He was preparing for the university.

"The weys o' the Almichty is wonderful," Saunders said to me as the hearse turned round the corner of the wynd towards the churchyard, "but Jeanie Maxwell never did naething to deserve this."

Our service at the grave was eloquent in its simplicity, but John MacDiarmid made one little divergence from the common order of things. To some it might seem out of place, but the grave-digger was moved to the action by sympathy. He spread a sprinkling of grass upon the coffin-lid that the noise of the falling earth might be heard less audibly by the mourners. George and one or two of us stood till the last sod had been laid down. It rained incessantly during the funeral, and Jeems Jamieson ventured to remark, "Ye'll be wat thro'?"

"Ay, Jeems," answered George, "but it's the last weetin' we'll get for her."

In the loneliness of his dwelling that evening George Maxwell ratified the pledge of forgiveness that he had given to his wife on her death-bed. One or two of the folks called in to see him and spent some hours with him. But the time came when the last of them went home, and George was left to an empty house and his own reflections. His eyes passed to the vacant space above the mantel.

"I've been hard, O! God—but maybe ye'll forgie me . . as I forgie Davie. . . Lang

syne I learned it, an' I've ne'er forgotten it, 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.' I forgie Davie. . . O Lord forgie me."

It was the outpouring of a soul to its maker. Subsequent events showed that God heard the cry.

"Ay, Jeanie, lass," it's the first nicht ye've been oot. . . Ay, an' it's come ower sune. . . That's a cauld wind that's blawin', but ye're no feelin' it. . . Ay, I ken whaur you are, but I dinna ken whaur Davie is."

Again the eyes were raised upwards, and a voice exclaimed—"O God, watch ower Davie, an' bring 'im hame i' yer Ain guide time, for . . for Jesus' sake."

CHAPTER IV.

A Welcome Letter.

When the grave closes over those we love, public sympathy runs less freely, and gradually the outer world forgets that we ever invited it to a funeral. By the time the snows of winter had cleared away, and the birds were singing in the early spring, Jeanie Maxwell was forgotten in the village. To one alone was the hour of her death familiar, and he was surely following her to the grave. George Maxwell was bending beneath his burden. There was a "stoop" now when he walked, and his hat was fringed with silvering hairs. Those who knew him better than I did, said he never ceased to upbraid himself for his unforgiveness shown towards his son.

"O God," he was once heard to pray, "my sin has been great. . . I burned the picture. . . I thocht naebody saw me, an' I thocht I didna care for onybody . . . but Ye saw me . . . an' he saw me. . . O God, I think it's that that's keepin' him awa."

The vision of David at the window on that afternoon when impulse took the portrait of the student from its place above the mantel and placed it on the fire, haunted the father by night and day. He would fain have gone and wel-

comed the erring child, but the world was wide and he knew not whither to turn. Troubled by the fear that he had driven his son for ever from home, he could do nothing but wait—wait for a return that might never be.

"I was whiles dooncast and amaist thocht that the best was by . . . but I never lost hope a' thegither . . . O God, Thou hast been mair merciful than I deserved."

George Maxwell was sitting with a letter in his hand. It was three years and more since he had pledged himself to forgiveness, and now the time had almost come when he would be called upon to act in accordance with his pledge.

"I never lost hope athegither."

Let us intrude ourselves between the utterances and see the source from which they spring.

"Oh Lord, I thank Ye for this."

The letter over which George was praying was dated at Edinburgh, and was written in that neat hand which Luckie Jack used to recognise as the writing of David. But it was a long time since any letter of that writing had come, and beyond the remark that it was "frae Embro," Luckie said nothing as she handed it to George.

"Ay, laddie, an' ye didna ken your mither was deid?"

The letter was sympathetically written, and it began, as all his letters had ever began, "My dear father and mother."

"God knows I welcome ye the nicht wi' a' my heart. I wearied for ye sair."

That night George drew the table over to the fireside and set the lamp upon it and proceeded

to reply to David's letter. It was years since he had held a pen. In the old days he had sat beside Jeanie, and told her what to say when she was answering the letters which David used to send so regularly. He always told her what to say, but never seemed to think it was his own duty to write to his son.

"You were better schuled nor me," he used to say to Jeanie when she would tell him that it was his place to write, "an' ye dinna ken wha's hands it micht fa' into."

I tell you these things that you may not laugh at George's letter.

Taking David's welcome note as a model, he penned his reply.

"I wad need to mak it as kindly as I can, so as he canna mistak but what I wad like him hame."

Thus George soliloquised and then wrote three words.

"I wad need to say his mither's deid, for he'll wonder at the writin', an' it wad be a fell stun to him if I made ony excase an' him was to come expectin' to see her."

It took George a long time to write his letter, and many thoughts were given expression to during its composition. When he had finished and signed his name as best he could, he took the notepaper and held it to the fire that the ink might dry. The letter was a passport to David from the barren land of estrangement to the sunny confines of parental love. I shall tell you what was in it, but I would like you to promise

not to be too critical. If I could get you to see with my eyes, the letter might mirror the man.

"Wedensda nicht."

"Kennethcrook,

"My dear son,

"i got yer letter this efternune and i wis rale gled to see ye wis comin hame. i lost yer mither thre ear sin, but ill tell ye aboot that when i see ye, ill be lookin fur ye on Tusda, when the coach comes, an I houp yell come, am sendin ye suller, an if ye dinna need it ye can bring it back wi ye. no more at present, but ill be expectin ye on Tusda."

"Yer father,

"GEORGE MAXWELL."

After drying it at the fire, George folded the letter and put it in the envelope. The most trying work connected with all letter writing he had ever seen was the addressing of the envelope. To write a letter was something, to "back" it was something more.

"I'll dae my best. The Post Office folk 'll maybe let it past."

And so the letter was finished.

"I was wantin' to send some siller thro' the post, sir," said George to the Postal Clerk at Rockburgh later in the evening. He had gone these miles to that town that his son's home-coming might be kept a secret. He thought if he had posted the letter at Luckie Jack's the village would have had the news within an hour.

George had a light heart that night as he walked home from Rockburgh.

"He'll get it on Saturday and syne he'll only hae Sawbath an' Monday, an' he 'll be hame on Tuesday in the gloamin'."

Never once for three years had George retired to rest without committing his son to the keeping of the higher Power, but on that night his service was more elaborate than usual. Sitting in the silence of his chamber—his window shuttered that no face might witness—his eyes travelled to the space still vacant above the mantel. Then in memory he was carried back to the bedside of his wife. He saw a thin, wasted arm lying above the coverlet and the long, boney fingers closed over a small morocco case. He saw, too, a Testament lying open upon the bed, and noticed that the passage was the fifteenth chapter of Luke. Yes, and he heard a voice saying—"our auld favourite, Geordie, Paraphrase forty."

"There's nae use grettin' ower spilt milk, what is maun be, but I'll dae my best," and George opened the upper drawer and brought forth the morocco case.

"She aye thocht a heep o't, an' if she could speak she wad say it was richt I was daein'," and he hung the medal where the portrait had been before.

"If he spiers at me what cam ower the picture I'll tell how far I forgot masel and burned it.'

Then he took down the Bible which had been his wife's. He turned to the fifteenth of Luke's gospel, and as he was about to read, heard a voice saying, "oor auld favourite, Geordie, Paraphrase forty." Without reading in Luke he turned to the Paraphrases. As he looked, tears filled his eyes, for there, between the leaves, was something, the existence of which he had

forgotten. It was a lock of hair—white and gold. Long before David had gone to College his mother had taken a lock of his hair, and when he ceased to write, it found its way to paraphrase forty. A golden lock it was. After Mrs Maxwell's death George had gently taken a small lock from her hair and laid it beside the other. Somehow they had become intertwined. He bit his lip, and tried to keep back the tears, but his heart was full.

"Oh! to ha'e them baith the nicht, but . . but it canna be. Ay, but I ken whaur she is, an' Davie 'll be hame on Tuesday. . . She canna come to us, but we can go to her."

And yet a voice seemed to say, "oor auld favourite, Geordie, Paraphrase forty."

George read the Paraphrase with a new interest. Long ago, when the wind was whistling in the chimney, and the rain was lashing against the shutter, Jeanie used to take down the Book and read the opening verses of the Paraphrase and weep. George's heart was hard then, and the mother's tears were to him unwarrantable. But the vow taken at a deathbed and kept constantly before him by a vision of a dying woman—a vision that could only pass away when his eyelids closed for ever—had softened his heart.

"Jeanie used to read the son's pairt . . . what he wad dae to mak up for his misdaein's, I maun read the faither's pairt so as to be ready to tak him by the hand and bid him welcome."

And George read at the fifth verse—

"He ran and fell upon his neck,
Embraced and kissed his son."

"Ay, Davie, it 'll never be said that ye was na welcomed. I'll gang eot the road and meet ye, for it wad be ill dune to haud ye comin' an' speirin' if it was here that I bade."

"Bring forth the fairest robe for him
The joyful father said."

"To be sure he'll get everything that's gaun. If his mither had been here she wad hae dune her best for the laddie, and wi' God's will I keep my promise."

George read the Paraphrase over many times, till I think he could have repeated it. The next time the Book was opened at that place, one or two finger-marks were evident. Their imprint had been made with tears.

CHAPTER V.

Father and Son.

There was only one thing that kept the villagers and the farmers round about from church. When the snow could be measured by feet the worshippers could be counted with ease. Unless when fresh weather sets in immediately after a fall, snow lies long in the village. There is little traffic to melt it, and with the exception of the Main Street, where it is beaten black by the passing to and fro of the villagers, it lies white as when newly fallen. Now-a-days we have crossings cut in the snow, and sometimes the snow itself heaped together and carted away, but long ago such things were unknown. If the snow lay thick when Sabbath came, John MacDiarmid took the vestry shovel and made a narrow pathway from the session-house to the church.

"It's gettin' hard na', John," said Andra Duchart one Sabbath morning as the beadle applied the shovel vigorously to the snow.

"Ay, man, it's sweer'd to come," replied the beadle.

"Ye wadna hear onything aboot Maxwell's son?" queried Duchart, pursuing the conversation.

The beadle looked enquiringly.

"The guidwife was tellin's that she heard they had gotten word o' him, and that he was comin' hame."

"Gang doon to the Manse, John." It was the minister who spoke, and the conversation was brought abruptly to a close.

Even in a freezing cold our village critics retire to the kirkyard to discuss the sermon. The "Wull E'es" horse was pawing the ground restively, and the wife and children, notwithstanding the aprons and other wraps with which they were enveloped, were wearying to be within sight of the blazing fire at the farm, but Christie was unconscious of the cold, and was very busy arguing with Duchart as to the difference of opinion that existed between Mr MacThomas's latest sermon and that expressed on the same subject by the "Shorter Catechism."

"I'm tellin' ye what it is, Jeems," and Christie moved away towards his gig, "thae newfangled ideas aye come doun wi' a daud, and I'll stick to the Catechism."

When Christie turned to go, the school of criticism was broken up and the members went their several ways.

"Ye'll gie's a look in i' the darkenin', John?" queried George Maxwell.

"Ay, George, I'll be owre about sax," and the beadle turned down the Main Street, and George crossed over to Loom Lane.

It was seldom that George invited anyone to call for him on Sabbath evening, and the beadle was curious to know the reason which had produced this invitation. His guidwife, strange to

say, for she was always in the secrets of Luckie Jack and Marget Steenson, had heard nothing of the rumour which Andra Duchart had referred to in the morning. The beadle began to think that it might be to tell him of the son's home coming, for in the days that lay behind them they had been constant friends. George Maxwell's wife was a second cousin to the beadle's wife, and so there was even the bond of distant relationship to unite the men.

"I'll tak a stap ower and see George Maxwell," said the beadle to his wife as he took a muffler from the middle drawer.

"Ye're yer lane?" he queried as he opened George's door.

"Ay, c' wa in and steek the door, for it's an unco cauld wind that's blawin' I'm thinkin'."

"'Deed and yer richt. As Saunders says, 'they're best aff that has nae hame to gang to,'" and John lifted a chair from the front of the drawers and set it down before the fire.

"Juist mak' yersel at hame, John. We're auld friends, and ye're no needin' ony biddin'."

When two men of similar dispositions, such as these two to whom I have introduced you, meet, they have much to talk about. John and George conversed long and on many subjects, but I do not wish to tell you all they said. I believe much that they talked of was forgotten before the night had passed. After a while the conversation took a different turn.

"I had unco welcome news the ither nicht," said George, striking into the new subject.

"Ay, na," muttered the beadle.

"Ay, I got a letter (it's up on the brace there) frae Davie."

"Ay, na."

"Ay, an he's comin' hame."

"Dae ye say sae?"

"Ay, I wrote for him."

"That was guid o' ye."

"Weel, ye see his mither was aye a guid-hearted craitur and she asked me if ever I heard tell o' him to write and ask him to come back. Women bodies is aye mair kindly than men."

"An' when's he comin' na?"

"I expect he'll be on Tuesday."

"Imphm," said the beadle, and silence reigned for a few minutes. The dull tick, tick of the eight-day clock was the only sound.

"He'll hae been a gey while awa?" queried John after a space.

"Ay, close on fower 'eer," and again there was a pause.

"Did ye say whaur he had been?" asked the beadle.

"He doesna say naething about whaur he's been, but he's bidin' in Embro the noo."

"Imphm," and again the clock ticked loudly. George lifted up the "Scots Worthies" that lay at his side, read it a little, and laid it down again. He turned over a few pages of the Bible that lay on the table, and then shut the Book. He pushed the lamp a little further over, lifted his handkerchief from his elbow and set it down beside the Bible, and moved uneasily in his chair. He took down his pipe from the mantel, put a rosetty-end between the ribs of the fire and lit

it. He held it in his fingers till it burned away.

"John, I've been thinkin' aboot the laddie comin' hame."

"Ay, an' ye'll be gled nae doobt?"

"'Deed a'm that, but I wadna like it cast up to him aboot his bein' awa'."

"No, it wad be onkind to dae that."

"But ye'll no keep folk frae speaking aboot sic things."

"It's a' true, Geordie, but," and a thought seemed to strike the beadle, "we'll dae oor best, an' my name's no John MacDiarmid gin onybody ever casts a word at Davie Maxwell."

"I'll be obleeged to ye."

"Nae obleegement, Geordie, ye'll maybe be able to dae as muckle for me some day."

"I houp I'll never need."

"Naebody kens what's to happen."

"God forbid that onything like this should ever be needed wi' ony o' yours. Ye'll ca' ower on Tuesday after the coach comes?"

Snow fell steadily on the Monday, and the roads were heavy. On the morning of Tuesday it seemed as though it would draw to rain, but in the afternoon the air cleared and a keen frost set in. Heavy roads often meant a delay of the coach. Being behind for three or four hours was looked upon as of no consequence. When delays came to be counted by days it was time to record them in the oral history of the village.

"I wadna wonder but she'll be behind her time," soliloquized George as he looked out in the early afternoon. It was three hours yet

before the coach was due, but he was becoming impatient.

"They'll be heavy roads, but gin it gets far enough he'll maybe walk," and George closed the door and went in to wait. After he had sat a while he went ben the room.

The room window faced the south, and from it a full view of the carse of Forrie was obtained. For nearly a mile the road to Rangholm could be traced till it disappeared abruptly round the end of May Lowrie's hut. Further to the south, and a little to the west, the roofs of Rangholm could be seen—the spires of the churches rising above the town. The view to the east was obscured by the houses in the village and nothing was visible but roofs and gables.

"Tick-tick, tick-tick." George looked at the clock and then at his watch which lay on the mantel.

"Half-fower—half-five—half-six, she should be here in twa hoors if the roads doesna hinder her," and again he looked away to the south.

There was no road to be seen to-day. May Lowrie's hut appeared above the plain, but it was so far sunk in a drift as to be almost unnoticeable. The roofs of Rangholm were white as the ground, and the only distinguishing features of the town were the east sides of the Free Kirk and Parish Kirk spires, to which the snow had not drifted. The whole district for miles around was wrapt in the spotless robes of winter. The wooded height of Craigiston stood high above the village radiant as an iceberg, and supporting numberless trees with leaves of snowy fleece,

Not even the Lunarty held its own. It was not to be seen, for its waters, frozen by the ice king's breath, supported several inches of snow.

"Fower o'clock, five o'clock, six o'clock, she should be here in twa hours noo at ony rate, but I doobt the grund's ower white to mak muckle progress. It'll be teuch work for the puir beasts to haud their ain in sic a drift. Hardly even May Lowrie's hoose abune the snaw!"

Slowly behind the snowy heights of Craigiston the moon was wending its way. Bright almost to fulness, it shed a mellow light on the great stretch of snow. As it shone through the woods the fleecy leaves sparkled like myriad diamonds, and twinkled like miniature stars. But when the snow is on the ground, the moon hath ever a cold light, and seems only to shine in order to make the virgin robes of winter the fairer.

"It's a braw nicht an' a fine mune, but the drift maun be unco deep in some pairts. I wadna say but what she'll no get forrit."

It was nearing five o'clock. It was half-an-hour before the coach could be at the village even although there was not a flake of snow on the ground, but George was becoming more restless with every minute.

"I said I wad gang oot an' meet him, it wants a quarter o' five. I'll wait twa or three minutes. . . no, I'd better be gaun. The coach micht run up to time an' I wad like to bide by my promise."

He looked away to the south again. The moon was rising grandly, and the stars were gemming the sky.

"Lord preserve us! Tibbie, but there's Geordie Maxwell awa oot the Myreton. He'll be awa to meet Davie," and John MacDiarmid and his wife pressed their faces against the window to make sure. They turned from the window and there was a touch of sadness in Mrs MacDiarmid's voice as she remarked—"Ay, it's a cauld heart that doesna warm to its ain."

. . . . . .

Slowly the silver moon glided through the azure heavens. From the great curtain of night shone out many stars. Upward, ever upward, sped the chariot of light attended in its course by numberless worlds—beautiful and brilliant. By and by as it rose higher, it cast the shadow of St Mary's spire to the west. Within the shade, and amid the stillness stood two men—an old man and a young. The young man was the stranger, and kneeling down he read the words,

To the Memory of
my Wife,
JEANIE MORRISON.

He rose from his knees, and between the sobs of a man in agony, cried—"And my mother."

CHAPTER VI.

The End of the Tragedy.

It was one day in the beginning of the year that I first saw David Maxwell. I, in common with the other villagers, knew that the distinguished student had returned, but for the space of three weeks or more had never seen him. I was standing with the old Antiquary one forenoon in the Main Street when a man, apparently about forty years of age, passed down the street and nodded recognition to my friend. He was a stranger to me.

"Wull it keep up, think ye?" queried the Antiquary of him, and the watchmaker held up his hand as though to feel anticipated rain.

"It looks more settled like," the stranger answered, and then passed on.

He was a man about middle height. He was not a handsome-looking man, but his face was very pleasant. It was what the villagers called an honest face. I did not know him, but something struck me that he was David Maxwell.

"I've gotten something here that I wad like to let ye see," said the Antiquary, and he beckoned me to enter the shop.

"Div ye ken 'im?" San said to me, with a nod in the direction of the stranger, as soon as we had entered.

In answer I merely shook my head.

"I thocht as muckle," said the watchmaker; "that's Geordie Maxwell's laddie, him 'at was at the college."

"I thought that, as he was speaking to you," I replied; "but of course I wasn't sure."

"Ay, that's him. It's a pity to see a chield like that gaun sae sair aside."

"What will his prospects be?" I queried.

"Prospects!" exclaimed the watchmaker, "Davie Maxwell's prospects is gey dark. I'll be sair cheated if the puir fellow ever does a day's guid."

"Nonsense," I replied, "he's a young man yet."

"Ay, he's a young man yet. He looks forty an' he's no thirty. But he's gey dune. He has a hoast (cough) that racks his whole body. Ay, Davie Maxwell was ower lang awa. He maun hae been gey careless o' himsel', for he was a weel-faured laddie when he first gaed up to the college. I doot the best o' his days is past."

I did not venture any opinion while the Antiquary was speaking, for of course I knew nothing of the young man, and had never seen him until he passed down the Main Street a few minutes before.

"There's twa times i' the year," continued San, "that try silly (weakly) bodies. Marget an' me aye notices that. The bud o' the buss and the fa' o' the leaf. Thae's the twa tryin' times

an' it'll cheat me sair if Davie Maxwell gets ower the bud o' the buss."

Alas for the truth of the watchmaker's prophecy!

About a week after this conversation with the Antiquary, I made the acquaintance of David Maxwell. He was of a pleasant disposition, cheerful to speak to, and we often found ourselves in each other's company during the few weeks that he was out of doors. He called for me occasionally, and once or twice ventured to tell me something of his college days and after. He drew aside the veil, and revealed the panorama of four short years. His story was interesting to an extreme, but I cannot retell it here. Respect for a dead friend and the honour of a promise forbid that I should do so. But some there were that were not pledged to silence. Each had his little say, and many stories, doubtless coloured in their travels, hang like a curtain of romance over the memory of the student. One thing only I will tell you, and I do not think I forswear my vow to silence by doing so. David told me this, but he told it to others also, and it is public property to-day.

We were sitting one night—it was the last night he called for me—and he was telling me a little of his life in Edinburgh.

"Things might not have gone so far as they did if I had had anybody to help me."

"When you thought of help, did you never think of home, and what your mother might do?" I enquired.

He leaned his head upon his hand, and said, wearily, "Yes. I never ceased to think of home. I once set out from Edinburgh, but I used to think afterwards that it would have been better if I had never done so."

The story as I have told it was in great part unknown to me at this time. It was not until the grave had closed over the last of the Maxwells that Dr MacGregor told me the story of the face which George had seen at the window.

"Did you never reach Kennethcrook?" I asked.

"Yes, but I left it quickly."

I did not say anything, but waited for him to speak further in explanation.

"I didn't like to come back, as you may imagine, but something was driving me to the village. I dreamt one night that I saw my mother on a death-bed. She was crying bitterly, and I somehow fancied it was for me. I heard her speak to my father, and she seemed to be waiting my coming. I went over to the bedside to speak to her, and then I wakened. In the morning I set out for home, and reached the village early in the afternoon of the day after."

"Then you were *really* in the village?" I asked.

He nodded his head in answer.

"I went along the Lane without looking at anybody. I did not want anybody to see me. I saw Dr MacGregor come out of the house, and I fancied something was wrong. I slipped up and looked in at the window, and then I realised

all. Father was sitting downcast-like, and after a while he went over and took down a portrait of me of which my mother was always proud. Then the dream of two nights before, and the vision of a death-bed came back to me, and I went away vowing never to show face."

"And they never knew you were in the village?" I queried.

"Father has never said he saw me, but I think somehow that he must."

And so there was truth in the story of the face at the window.

Although David Maxwell had long before his return given up the idea of entering the ministry, he had not come to consider his life one without purpose. Strange as it may seem, he had clung to his books through the varied scenes of his wayward life, and they came back with him to Kennethcrook. He worked hard at them for some weeks, for it was his hope that he might find a place as a schoolmaster. But the prophecy of the Antiquary was approaching fulfilment.

"Ye maunna bother yersel sae muckle wi' thae books, Davie," his father used to say to him; "ye'll tak' ill wi't for a wee while, but ye maun juist tak' things easy, for, mind ye, supposin' there was twenty schules waitin' for a maister, ye'll no gang ae fit oot o' this hoose till ye're stronger."

But David toiled on. He had been too long in idleness; he must now be up and doing. All through life he had been inclined to look at the bright side of things, and now that he was

home, and the past forgiven, he determined to work for a better future.

"That's a bad hoast ye hiv i' the nicht-time, Davie," his father said to him one morning. "I think I'll tell the Doctor as I'm gaun past to ca' in i' the bygaun and see ye."

David would not listen.

"No, no, father, only a slight cough that'll soon go away."

The first sense of fear that the student had was one afternoon when he was seized by a cough, and blood came. The tinge on his handkerchief brought home the nature of his complaint. He looked into the glass, and wept when he saw himself. His eyes were sunken, and dark lines were underneath. The veins of his forehead stood out—blue marks on a marble brow. All were too truly presentiments of approaching danger. He went down on his knees, and, with the little Greek Testament which he had been studying in his hand, cried—

"O God! have mercy for my father's sake."

One sometimes hears it said that the true Christian can imagine death without fear. I have no sympathy with such thought. Death is always repulsive, and to a sensitive soul even terrible. David Maxwell was a sensitive creature, and I believe he experienced the fear of dying in no small degree.

That same night on which he had noticed the blood, his father said to him when he was seized with the cough,

"I doot, laddie, that hoast's no liftin', an' I think ye'll be the better to see the doctor."

With the exertion of the cough David was unable to answer, and he only held out his handkerchief in reply. One look was sufficient to let the father see what the marks meant, and his heart failed him. Then as suddenly he recognised his duty. Hitherto he had made the illness as great as could be, now he must make it as light as possible.

"Hoots, man, that's naething to be feared at. That's only the hoast at its warst. Wait till the warmer days comes and ye'll be a' richt again."

But David only shook his wearied head in reply.

"Ye'll gang awa' to your bed, an' gin the hoast's no easier in the morning we'll send for Doctor MacGregor. He's aye been rael guid an' he'll cheat me if he doesna gie ye something to lift it."

David passed a restless night, and in the morning it was considered advisable to send for the doctor.

When Dr MacGregor called in the afternoon David was sitting cosily wrapped up and before a cheery fire, with Genesis in Hebrew in front of him. The doctor sat with him for a long time and talked over various subjects. This was the usual practice of our doctor with his patients—he learned the symptoms from observation rather than by question.

"Your cough seems to stress you," he said, as he rose to go, "but I'll soon make that all right. I'll send along a bottle in the evening."

"What is the part affected, Doctor?" David asked with downcast eyes lest he should seem too eager to know.

"Oh, only the chest, nothing very serious. You'll take this mixture, and I'll come back in a day or two and see you."

When the doctor called again David was in bed. Exhausted by an attack of the cough, he was lying thin and wan, and it was then that the doctor realised the gravity of the illness. George was preparing a draught for him, and when the doctor saw him he said gently—

"We'll no give him that just yet."

After he had fallen into a sleep Dr MacGregor moved to go. When George went to get his hat and umbrella the doctor looked at his patient. He shook his head sorrowfully and said faintly, "three weeks."

"Guid nicht, George, I'll look in in the morning an' see how he's keepin'."

He held out his hand and George took it and clasped it firmly.

"Doctor," he said, "what is't? . . . the warst. Tell me your thochts. . . . I'm his faither. . . . I hae a richt to ken."

It is a doctor's duty to speak of illness in the lightest possible way. If the disease is a dangerous one he may indicate to the relatives that there is just the merest room for fear. He keeps back the evil day so far as is within his power.

Dr MacGregor recognised this as his duty, and oftentimes had veiled an illness he was afterwards forced to admit as serious and even fatal.

Never in all his practice had he made a full admission when first questioned, but, to-day, with these honest eyes upon him, and his hand in that firm grasp, he hesitated as to whether he should smoothe the matter.

"Nae beatin' aboot the bush, Doctor, whaur is't to end?"

George's last sentence supplied the doctor with a means of speech.

"George," but it was with great difficulty he spoke, "that's mair than man can tell. The ways o' Providence are past finding oot. It mayna be sae bad's we think."

"Ye think it ill?" George queried searchingly, and again the doctor was silent.

"I'll see how he is in the morning."

True to his promise and attentive to his duties, Dr MacGregor called to see his patient.

"He's sleepin' an' peacefu' the noo, Doctor, but he's had a sair nicht.'

The doctor sat down at the bedside. The room—the ben-end as George called it—which served the purpose alike of parlour and bedroom, presented all the features of a sick ward. A little, round table displayed a number of bottles and boxes, the contents of which had been prescribed by the doctor and sundry sympathising callers. A white counterpane—which, somehow or other, is always associated with illness—gave the place all the appearance of a sick chamber.

"Ay, doctor, that hoast's mair than mortal can stand. When it tak's him its sair to see his distress, and it leaves him fair dune."

The doctor did not say much, and for a time there was no sound but the murmur of a restless sleeper.

During his wife's illness, George had acted as nurse with the kindly help of Mrs Denovan. For the few days that David had been confined to bed he had done the same, and was prepared to do so to the end.

Leaving David sleeping and apparently more restful, the doctor and he passed into the kitchen.

"What think ye o' him the day, doctor?" George queried as soon as he had shut the door.

"Weel, George, he doesna seem ony better, but I don't think he's ony waur."

"Ay, doctor, he's a heep waur. He put in owre sair a nicht no to be waur. He never closed an e'e or gied owre hoastin' till weel on for six o'clock this mornin'."

"Ay, the illness maun come to a heid."

For a space there was a painful silence which neither man cared to break.

"Doctor, whaur's that heid to be?"

"George, I dinna consider it's my duty to tell ye, I dinna think ye have a richt to ken, but Davie's been owre lang awa'. If he had cam' hame suner there micht have been a chance."

The tears gathered in the honest eyes of the father, he bit his lip to stop them, but they came in spite of him.

"A chance! Is it owre late noo for a chance?"

The doctor forgot his position as medical adviser, he was sympathising with his friend and from his lips escaped the words uttered in terrible anguish, "owre late."

David slowly sank under the terrible disease that was upon him. After a week he was not so much as able to leave his bed. During the day-time the father snatched what sleep he could while Mrs Denovan was about the house, and at the gloaming took up his post at the bedside, to keep vigil through the silent watches of the night.

"Ye maun be sair sittin'," Saunders Denovan said to him one morning when he looked in to see how David was keeping.

"For sax weeks thae claes was never aff when his mother was ill, and mony a sair body I had. But I didna think on that; I only wanted her better; and I'll dae a' that's in my power for Davie."

Dr MacGregor was regular in his visits. He called daily, and, when the patient was able, sat for a time and tried to cheer him.

"I doubt, Doctor, I'm no getting ony stronger," David said, and the Doctor was called upon to give answer.

"Oh, ay," he said, "ye're no near sae dune noo as when ye lay doon, an' gin ye were able to go aboot a bit, ye'd be a' richt and in your ordnar in twa days."

But David only smiled faintly, and shook his head as though he was in doubt as to the Doctor's sincerity.

"Dae ye think there's to be nae chance for the laddie, Doctor?" George enquired as the Doctor was going away. "Dinna say there's hope if ye dinna think it, but tell me honest what your opinion is."

Dr MacGregor leaned his hand upon the dresser, and for a space did not speak. He did not look at the father, but he felt that George's eyes were on him. At length he made an effort.

"It's hard to tell ye, ay, as hard for me to tell ye as for you to bear it; but, Geordie, the best's by wi' the laddie."

"Wull naething be of ony guid?"

The Doctor shook his head.

"Onything, onything that I hae ye're welcome tae't—but save him. It was but the ither day that I found him, and I canna pairt wi' him yet."

"Geordie, I've telled ye the warst. Dinna lippen owre much to the chances o' Dr Macgregor's first disappointment, for I was never cheated before. Sae far as man can see, it's death. The rest lies wi' God, an' if it's the Lord's will, I'll be weel pleased to be cheated. He micht leeve an' see us a' awa, there's nae sayin' but . . . I'll gie him ten days."

There was a sincerity in the Doctor's voice that could not be mistaken, and when he had finished, the light of George's life went out for ever. That night, as he sat by the bedside of his son, he prayed earnestly that the cup might pass from him. He was as pure a soul as ever I have known, but he did not pray "not my will, but Thine be done." I will not blame him.

Tenderly he nursed his son, ever hoping against hope. But as the son sank the father aged.

"Ye're no lookin' sae weel as ye were, Geordie," Mrs Denovan said to him. "I m dooting the sittin' up sae muckle's no' 'greein' wi' ye."

George's voice grew husky, and his eyes filled with tears as he answered—"It'll a' sune be owre."

"Ye maunna tak' on that wey. A body never kens whaur thae things is to end," Mrs Denovan said kindly.

For answer, George said nothing.

When Dr MacGregor gave the extent of the patient's life as ten days, George thought that even although David was not to get better it was surely impossible that all should be over within so short a time. But, notwithstanding this thought, George pondered the doctor's words, and, every morning as he looked upon his son, made a mental calculation that another milestone in life's journey was passed. As day followed day the apprehension of death seemed to grow on David.

"I doubt, father, that there'll be no more schools for me," he said as George sat by his bedside the evening before the last.

"Ye maunna think that, lad; oor days is a' in the hand o' the Lord, and no' even the strongest o' us is sure o' the morn."

"I would like to live for a while yet, if only to make up for the past."

"We a' like to live, Davie, as lang's we can, but when oor time comes we've just to gang. Your mither had to gang and leave us, and Mary was taen before she kenned right that she was born. An' ye ken that there's to be the grand meetin' at the last."

"Yes, but I wadna like to leave you noo when you're gettin' dune."

"Ay, Davie, but we maun submit to a' that, the works o' Providence canna be owerruled."

They were engaged in conversation for a long time, and spoke on many subjects—noble aspirations, broken promises, and blighted hopes. George broke the news as gently as he could to David, and gave him to understand that his days were numbered. In the stillness of the night two voices—one faint and weary, the other husky and mournful—sang for the last time the song they had in happier days so often sung. Melody there may have been none, but before God the sincerity of the heart is the sweetest music, and I believe their song was a graceful offering at the altar of the Almighty. Nor in the singing of it did they need their books, it was the outpouring of their hearts—

Through each perplexing path of life
Our wandering footsteps guide;
Give us each day our daily bread,
And raiment fit provide.
O spread thy covering wings around,
Till all our wanderings cease,
And at our Father's loved abode
Our souls arrive in peace.

When they had finished their song George went down on his knees. The one clasped the

ether's hand, and David prayed with many pauses, for the wheel at life's cistern was slowly ceasing to move :—"All gracious Father, . . . into Thy keeping we commend our spirits. . . . Pardon our sins and teach us to serve Thee more faithfully. . . . We pray for life, . . . nevertheless . . . not our will, but Thine be done, . . . for Jesus' sake." And then in a heart of anguish, and as if in continuation of the prayer, the father cried —"Lord, if it is Thy will to tak' ane o' us, tak' us baith."

When morning came David was peaceful, but much weaker, and when Mrs Denovan asked George to go and take his accustomed rest, he shook his head sadly—

"There's a change cam' owre his face this morning; there's nae sleep for me the day, but we'll a' sleep soond enough the nicht for Davie."

Those of us who called occasionally to ask after David saw signs of a breakdown in the father more than in the son.

"I houp he'll get better," Andra Duchart said to me a day or two before the last, "for if onything happens him, Geordie 'll gang too."

As the forenoon advanced David gradually sank. I was heartily sorry for the father when in the early afternoon I called for him. His face was that of a man in despair, and he never lifted his eyes from off his son. A faint shake or nod of the head was the only answer to questions, and sometimes his hand was raised at the faintest whisper in order that there might be peace.

Mrs Denovan moved about as gently as she could, now bringing a cloth for the patient's brow, and again a feather and wine with which to moisten his lips. But the tragedy was nearing its close.

About four in the afternoon George started, and then with a look beckoned Mrs Denovan. The faithful nurses bent over their charge and listened. George looked at Mrs Denovan and she at him, and their heads were shaken sadly. They heard in David's throat that terrible omen of death which was dreaded by so many, and which was known in the village by the somewhat harsh name of the "death-rattle." The last hope sinks when this omen is heard.

"It's a sair trial, Geordie, but ye maun try an' thole it," and Mrs Denovan sat down to comfort him. For answer he wept.

"It's hard that a young life should be taen, an' mony a yin that could gang left to battle in their auld age; but, Geordie, the Lord's weys is past findin' oot."

"Sae lang as he was awa, I had something to leeve for, for I aye had the hope that he wad turn up; but surely God's forgotten me a'thegither when He's takin' him noo," and George wept afresh.

"I've naething to leeve for, an' I only wish that the Lord wad tak' us baith."

"Ye maunna say that, Geordie, it's only wushing yer days awa; an' God's purpose for this'll be made clear some day."

As they spoke David neared the end of his journey. There was no one present but George

and Mrs Denovan, and it was a peaceful death, as Mrs Denovan afterwards told.

"He never gied a quiver. He juist slippit awa as calmly as an innocent bairn."

That night after all was over, and the last duties to the dead had been performed, Mrs Denovan sat a while with George to console him, and to make what preparations were necessary.

"Ye dinna seem strong, Geordie, an' its gey cauld weather this. I think if ye're no nae better she shouldna venture to walk ahint the hearse. Ye'd be better to get a coach."

He shook his head.

"I little thocht I was to bury him, my laddie, my laddie!"

Before Mrs Denovan left for the night, she went over with George to look at the dead. When the father saw the silent countenance he gave way, and buried his face in the bed-clothes.

His grief was more than Mrs Denovan could bear. She touched him gently and said—"Guid nicht. I'll come owre an' see you i' the mornin'."

True to her word, she went over in the morning. The door was not locked. She did not wonder at that, but she started when she saw George sitting where she had left him, and all silent as the grave.

He reached the churchyard on the day of David's funeral, but he did not walk.

THE END.