

MARY MALCOLMSON'S WEE MAGGIE.



MARY MALCOLMSON'S COURTSHIP.

POOR Mary Malcolmson! her time of wedded bliss was not long; and the price she paid for it was to the hapless lassie a great price. Of course, it was a love match; and Mary's choice was not to be regarded as an unworthy one, taken simply as the choice of a true-hearted, confiding girl, prepared to join her fate, for better or worse, with that of one of the opposite sex, who could appreciate her true-heartedness, and who would reward her confidence by a yet stronger affection, and be prepared to cherish her with entire self-devotion. But in this artificial life of ours the conventionalities are to be found permeating, more or less, literally all the strata of society. And thus it was that when Mary Malcolmson, the only daughter of Saunders Malcolmson of Skellach Brae, and Margaret Malcolmson, his wife, chose to own her love for Willie Fraser, the fact of Willie being in the position of a mere farm servant, while Saunders was the actual tenant of the small farm we have named, was sufficient to rouse to a very high pitch the indignation alike of Mary's father and mother. Saunders Malcolmson himself had been born in the very same rank of life, and his elevation to the position he now occupied was due solely to the possession of qualities not dissimilar from those manifested by his daughter's lover, if Saunders had allowed himself time

to reflect upon it. But in the case of the man who has risen, in all grades of society, it happens oftener than otherwise, perhaps, that if there be not positive jealousy of youngsters following in the self-same path, there is at least the absence of that sympathy which leads to appreciation, and incites to deeds of active encouragement. And so it was here too. It was not that the lad was Mary's inferior either in point of mental cultivation or moral character. Thus far they stood on a footing of sufficiently near equality. Even Saunders Malcolmson had been wont to describe Willie Fraser as a "weel-faurt young chiel; an' a chap wi' some smeddum tee." Though the son of a mere cottar, he had both natural ability and acquired intelligence in more than average measure as compared with his fellows. But on none of these things could the mind of Saunders Malcolmson now rest. And Margaret his wife was simply carried along with him for the time.

Ah! but what demon of stupidity possessed thee, Saunders, that thou shouldst not merely "fee" a man of the stamp we have described to be thy servant, but also renew his engagement and keep him on upon terms of such intimacy as betokened the fullest confidence in the lad, until poor Mary's affections were hopelessly entangled? It boots not to ask, only one thing is certain, that when the state of matters was discovered, the first term was promptly fixed as "flittin'" time for Mary's sweetheart.

But it was too late. Weeks and months of entreaty and upbraiding, and not more the former than the latter, could not alter Mary's resolution. I do not think the poor lassie was obstinate or callous, and least of all where the feelings of her parents were concerned. That slight figure, that soft, rounded, and withal pleasant face, with its blue eyes and pale complexion, spoke rather of one whose natural disposition would have been to yield readily, unless there was some very strong reason to the contrary. And there was. Mary had

given her heart away wholly and loyally, and neither her father's hot and stern anger, nor her mother's more incisive vehemence, served to make plain to her how it ought to be or could be taken back again.

In parting with Willie Fraser, Saunders Malcolmson had spoken sharp and bitter words. It was the term-day at Martinmas, and Willie had just come home from "the yoke" at near to mid-day. He had put Saunders Malcolmson's two horses into the stable for the last time, removed the harness, carefully rubbed them down, and as carefully put food into the mangers before them. As he turned him to leave the animals he had tended so long and well, Saunders stood in the stable door. He held half-open in his hand the leathern pocket-book from which he had just extracted a small bundle of one-pound notes.

"I'll gie ye your siller," said Saunders, in a hard and surly tone. "Is't a' there?" and, as he spoke, he handed the bundle of notes to Willie Fraser.

"It's a' there," replied Willie, when he had made believe to count the seven or eight pounds handed to him; and his effort to conceal a certain degree of emotion was not quite successful.

Saunders Malcolmson put up his pocket-book, and as he did so, he said—

"There's nae forder eese for ye here; an' the seener ye gae, the better."

"Ou, dinna be fear't, maister; I ken my place owre weel to lie aboot here i' yer road."

"Ken yer place! I howp ye'll ken't as weel aifter this as never to lat me see your face near this toon again."

"That'll be seen," said Willie Fraser, in a tone of slightly increased firmness.

"Blackgaird! D'ye mean to tell me to my face that ye'll come back here an' brak the peace o' my faimily?"

"I never said that," answered Willie.

"I order ye fae my toon, sir!" exclaimed the irate

Saunders, "an' never to luik the gate o' my dother, or I'll get ye pitten faur ye'll get time to dunt yer heels at leasure."

"I'll gie Mary up, fan Mary, o' her ain free will, gies me up. Till than—never!" said Willie Fraser, with an emphasis which there was no mistaking.

And thus they parted.

Saunders Malcolmson had two sons, mere boys, the elder being only sixteen, and a slimly built lad of his years; but such a heart—"scaad" had Saunders got with what had just been discovered concerning Mary, that in the fierceness of his anger he had fully determined that no adult stranger of the male sex should again be permitted to occupy the position of an extraneous even in his household. That Saunders's feelings were strong, and his convictions sincere in the matter, there was the amplest proof. For his was not one of those resolutions, that may be adopted at the dictation of caprice or prejudice, and capable of being carried out at no personal sacrifice or inconvenience to him who adopts it. Saunders was made of sterner stuff than that implied, and, his resolution once taken, he had dourness enough in his composition to make him stick to it, even at the cost of consequences that might be personally the reverse of agreeable. Clearly then, Saunders Malcolmson's elder son, Donald, had not physical strength for the heavier everyday duties of the farm, and Saunders sought not to impose them upon the lad. Although it was many a year since he had given up such heavy and continuous tasks, he now grimly, yet uncomplainingly, returned to the personal performance, with his own hand, of the major operations in the stable; day by day he grasped the stilts of the plough, finding only a temporary relief when in some bit of loose stubble land the "loons" might be trusted to gore away as they listed without fear of damage; if corn had to go to mill or market, he would painfully carry out every several "lade," on his own

wearied back, till the cart-loads were completed, and when the journey was accomplished, perform the like process in reverse order in unloading at the purchaser's granary.

Saunders Malcolmson, as we have said, did all this ungrudgingly ; and, according to his own notion, he did it for Mary's sake. That his love for his child was of the tenderest or most discriminating sort, one might scarcely be prepared to say ; but that it was not love, and love with a somewhat vigorous strength in it, I certainly would not take upon me to assert. Of one thing I feel very sure—namely, that the fact of Saunders Malcolmson voluntarily "slavin'" himself as he was doing, was not a matter of indifference to his daughter Mary. On the contrary, Mary felt it keenly, and that keenness was intensified tenfold by her perfect knowledge that she was the cause of it all. Although her father had as yet spoken no word to indicate as much, Mary's true and loving instinct had told her the whole more vividly than words could have done, in the painful thrill that went to her heart the first time she saw her father put the horses "a-yoke" after her sweetheart had left. And Margaret Malcolmson fully reckoned on all this when, addressing her daughter about this time, she said—

"Ay, Mary, 'oman, it's geyan hard to see yer peer fader, 't's toil't sair for 's a', fan he was abler nor he is this day, forc't to tak' up the wark-leems again to keep oot the frem't, although he be weel-able an' wud be weel-wull't to pay for fat he maun jist pit 's nain han' till. Mony a sair hert does fowk get."

Poor Mary Malcolmson ! let us say again. It wrung her to the heart to think of it all ; that it should alter her affection, or that the contumelious terms in which the elder of her two brothers, in particular, under maternal schooling, had for the time learnt to speak of Willie Fraser in her hearing, should shake her confidence in her lover, was what in the nature of things could not well occur. For had not the passion that

throbbled within her breast possession of her whole being? And was not the object of it near to her, with a nearness that left no possible room for another to step between and cast a darkened shadow on what she knew and felt him to be?

Of course Saunders Malcolmson's resolve to eschew every "frem't" person in masculine shape could not last. It looked but a hasty "tig" at best. To enable him to keep the work of the farm going efficiently, Saunders, ere "Can'lesmas" had passed, was provided with a ploughman old enough and ugly enough to hold Cupid at bay.

But Saunders was ill satisfied about Mary's love affair still. It was not that Mary had given cause of offence by any overt act, nor even that she had declared the intention of braving her father's threat that she would be "bainish't fae the toon" if she did not give up "that scoon'rel"; but simply that when Saunders and Margaret Malcolmson pressed their point harshly, Mary would look the very picture of frail, helpless misery, and if the thing were persisted in, burst into tears, piteous to behold. And then would Saunders stride about the place almost wishing, strange as it may seem to say it, that Willie Fraser, whom he had so emphatically forbidden ever to appear there again, would present his face and figure before him that his pent-up feelings might have vent.

But no such event happened; and during the next twelve months Saunders Malcolmson utterly failed in finding tangible proof that his command had not thus far been literally carried out. How Mary's courtship was continued and matured, strictly guarded as she was, must be left in the same category with those hard things that puzzled Agur, the son of Jakeh. But so it was, that in due course Saunders Malcolmson had to step sulkily aside and permit the marriage to take place, to which he had stubbornly refused to give his consent. What he could do in one way he did, inas-

much as Saunders Malcolmson, comfortable farmer as he was, saw his daughter depart from Skellach Brae without a penny of "tocher," and with barely a decent outfit to carry her to her new home. And even his own wife—who, keen as her anger had been, felt a certain compunction here—dared not put in a word of appeal or remonstrance. She dared not even to give over to her daughter's hand certain small articles of female adornment in the nature of family heirlooms, which on high occasions had been worn by Mary as suitable to her years, and so had come to be tacitly recognised as her property.

To Mary the marriage-day was a day inwardly of wildly conflicting emotions, and outwardly of much bitter weeping; and when she entered for the first time the humble abode which she was now to call her home, without the personal countenance of father or mother, though she clung as fondly and devotedly as ever to the husband of her choice, and never felt him more worthy of her love, a saddening sense of something like the realisation of that banishment, for the time being, which had been threatened, would ever and anon rise up and overpower all other feelings within her.

CHAPTER II.

MARY MALCOLMSON'S FIRST EXPERIENCES OF MARRIED LIFE.

IN the experience of all but absurdly soft-headed people, the first six months of wedded bliss will presumably be recognised as more or less an abnormal phase of human existence! The relationship is totally new, and however well the couple who are thenceforth destined to draw under one and the same yoke may imagine that they had known mutual feelings, tastes, and sympathies, it can be no disparagement to either side, looking at matters in the practical aspect, to say that, before they have got fairly and evenly stretched to the "draught," the action of the traces will be felt to some extent in unanticipated tightenings and slackenings. Of course, a little experience brings all this to an end; and thenceforth the pull is steady and simultaneous. "A bullock unaccustomed to the yoke" is the figure that occurs to us, albeit, it may not be a very felicitous one. How often have we seen the willing creature, even after he had learnt to draw his single harrow quietly and demurely by himself, awkwardly taken aback, perhaps irritated to the point of positive rebellion, when put in to pull alongside another, by whose pace he must now strictly regulate his own, if he would get along comfortably or to good purpose!

I daresay that, under externally happier circumstances than her's were, Mary Malcolmson would have realised somewhat of this feeling—the feeling that well as she knew Willie Fraser before, it had now become inevitable that, in the most real sense, she had no

choice but, through experience, to learn to know and understand him better. And situated as she was in relation to her alienated parents, it is hardly to be wondered at if deep and somewhat saddened thoughts should spring up while she pondered on all that her husband must be and become to her, as she to him, in order to a completely united life, and the filling up of that great void in her heart's affections which her father's churlish treatment, and her mother's vehement anger, had chosen for their part to create, and on poor Mary's part had done nothing to close or sear over.

It would be altogether untrue to say that Willie Fraser did not, in every possible way, strive to be to his wife all that, as her husband, he ought to be. In view of winning and retaining Mary's affections, his thoughts had been not those of a mere love-sick ninny, whose empty pate was filled with the one idea of complete happiness to be achieved by the single act of uniting himself for life with the woman of his choice, but rather the thoughts of a man prepared to undertake a great and precious charge, and setting his face stedfastly toward mastering the circumstances that should make him worthy of his new position. And in this relation the bitter and unfriendly words of Saunders Malcolmson, although very keenly felt, had but deepened his sense of responsibility in deliberately standing to his claim as Mary's plighted lover, and clinched his determination to show, even in the eyes of Saunders Malcolmson himself, that Mary's guileless instincts had enabled her to judge him more truly as a man, than Saunders's strong head and hard worldly experiences had allowed him to do. He had been careful all through to save as much off his wages as he could, and he had resolved to qualify himself for the best situation open to him in his own line of work. When he married, therefore, and took Mary away to live in a small half floor in a two-storey house in Love Lane, in

the burgh of Innerebrie, it was quite understood that that would be their home for only a very few months. At the coming Whitsunday term, Willie had the absolute promise of a situation through an old master of his own; as, in point of fact, he was soon engaged, as grieve on one of his farms, to Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esquire of Seggieden, a well-known advanced agriculturist and large dealer in prime cross cattle and black-faced sheep.

Willie Fraser and his wife had once and again discussed their projects and prospects in life; and as they sat quietly together at the close of a week's labour, the subject of their approaching removal came up once more.

"An' syne ye'll win oot amo' a' that steer o' unco wives an' ill-tonguet, ill-tricket littleanes, tum'lin' about an' rappin' at the door, an' blaudin' a'thing that will blaud, or fechtin' wi' ither i' the gutters, an' greetin'," said Willie, in view of the coming change.

"It's nae the fowk's blame, I'm sure," answered Mary. "They're aye richt willin' to be neighbourly wi' me. Only there's nae convainience to lat bairns play themsells, or muckle fowk keep things snod."

"It's you that I've been vex't about aye, fan I minet upon 't, Mary," continued Willie Fraser, reflectively.

"Hoot," answered Mary, "I'm only nae acquaint wi' their wye yet. But I can mak' oot richt weel, though it's maybe nae vera hame-like—'cep' fan ye're here."

Mary crept closer to her husband's side, and looked up in his face with a confiding smile, while she hurriedly added the last clause of the sentence, as if to correct herself in the use of the expression that had immediately preceded it.

"Peer lassie!" The words were uttered with a touch of gravity about them, inasmuch as in Mary's smile, even, Willie fancied he could perceive the slightest appearance of sadness. "Peer lassie!"

"But I'm your happy wife;" and Mary cast herself on the bosom to which she was forthwith fondly pressed.

Just then the outside door opened noisily, and a tremendously heavy and irregular footstep was heard on the stair, accompanied by a babblement of confused words.

"Fat's that?" exclaimed Willie Fraser, surprised and indignant at the uncouth and intrusive noise.

"Oh, never min'," answered Mary, "it's only the fowk but-an'-ben wi's. The man's files some the waur o' drink fan he comes hame."

"I canna stan' that, though; he'll brak' a' the doors i' the hoose."

"Jist hae patience a minute; fan ance he's in till's ain en', the noise winna be freely so ill;" and Mary laid her hand on her husband's arm, to prevent him carrying out his intention of opening the door, and accosting the originator of the uproar.

The truth was that the "fowk but-an'-ben" with Mary and her husband were persons whose habits did not, on the whole, betoken much of light and sweetness; and in particular toward the close of the week, when the head of the house, who worked as a sawyer, had got possession of his wages, he came home invariably, on one night at least, in a more or less advanced stage of drunkenness—the facts that his home had been where it presently was for only a short time, and that he could be there only at irregular intervals, accounted for Willie Fraser not being fully aware of all this. And it was contingent on a variety of circumstances how the man would behave himself at these times. Being what might be termed a cosmopolitan drinker, it was pretty much a matter of indifference to him whether he swilled ale or porter by the pint, or imbibed raw whisky by the glass and gill. These three liquors represented the range of his drinks; and it depended entirely upon the "company" for the

time being, and other incidental circumstances, such as the state of his finances, to which of them he would, on any given occasion, addict himself. There was a brewer handy, a great boon in itself, and especially if one happened to be on intimate terms with Tam Kettle, the working brewer, who at set times would allow his special cronies to sit on the deal "forms" in the "boxed-in" corner of the brewery floor, and drink at wholesale rates from a tin-pail full of reaming liquor. Then the small "Public," where "harder stuff" could be got, was quite accessible, and, as indicated, received its share of patronage with the utmost impartiality.

Now it turned out that just according to the course followed by the sawyer in getting drunk, was his behaviour when the process had been completed. If his drinking had been mainly at the brewery, he came home muddled, very greatly muddled, in the head, and altogether unsteady on the legs; otherwise his tendency was to a comatose state. And if got up the stair and to bed wholly or partially undressed, there was no further trouble with him—he slept heavily, if not soundly and sweetly, and awoke next morning in the enjoyment of sensations best known to himself. If, on the other hand, the sawyer had achieved inebriation through the medium of the gill-stoup exclusively, the crude adulterated whisky brought forth results that entirely corresponded with its own villainously fiery character. He came home with less unsteady gait it might be, but with such brain as he had in an actively volcanic state. The stage of vociferous hilarity came first, and next the stage of vociferous quarrelsomeness and determination to the utterance of abusive and blasphemous language, directed against all and sundry from whom he conceived his dignity to be in danger of receiving insult, including those most nearly related to him; which latter stage was usually prolonged far into the night, to the edification, not alone of his own wife and children, who

had first and chiefly to bear the brunt of his drunken explosions ; for each and all of three other families who dwelt in the house could hear every outrageous word he uttered ; indeed, unless they were remarkably sound sleepers, were compelled to hear it.

On the night of which indication has been given, the sawyer had taken refreshment at the Public ; and he acted, as was his wont, in the circumstances. As being his first experience of the sawyer in this phase of him, a perfect tumult of feelings was naturally enough aroused in Willie Fraser's breast ; nor was it allayed when he found the uproar going on with little or no abatement for hours after the sawyer had entered his own domicile. In his indignation at periodically recurring yells of a very intolerable loudness, he had oftener than once started to his feet, determined to go and either quell, or take summary vengeance on the obstreperous savage ; but was firmly, if gently, restrained by his young wife.

" Dinna meddle wi' 'm ; ye 'll only mak' ill-will ; an' we 'll seen be awa' oot o' this, ye ken."

" But the scoon'rel's misca'in' an' ill-guidin' 's vera ain wife. Divnin ye hear 'er greetin' ?" asked Willie.

" Ay ; but for a' that *she* maybe wudna like to be pairt-ta'en by naebody against her ain man—mair nor *he* wud like it."

" Hoot Mary ! nonsense !"

" Ay, but hoot ! tee. Fa wud like onything o' the kin' noo ?" asked Mary, slyly.

" Weel, weel, your wye be't, lassie. I suppose we maun jist thole the din o' 'im till he's tir't 'imself."

" Ye wud only mak' mair mischief gin ye interfer't wi' them," said Mary, " an' dee nae gweed."

Mary's conclusion was sound, without doubt ; and she had been helped in reaching it by observing with what particular care the sawyer's wife had been wont, after previous ebullitions of the same sort, to explain that her husband, poor man, had been suffering from

indisposition of a recurrent character, to which he was unhappily subject. And then, on general grounds, was not the house of the sawyer *his* castle also? and if other people's castles happened to be in such juxtaposition thereto as rendered his private doings uncomfortably audible to them, was that to be made a pretext for trenching on the inviolability of the sawyer's stronghold?

The safer way clearly was to let him alone; as we are satisfied every reader who has had practical experience of neighbours like the sawyer will admit; and he who has not had such experience, has yet something to learn of the domiciliary conditions under which many an honest man and woman must not unfrequently live. Willie Fraser and Mary did so, bearing with what patience they could the ruffianly din of the sawyer, which was continued over midnight of Saturday and a good couple of hours into Sunday morning, and comforting themselves with the thought that when they had got "flitted" away to the out-farm of Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esquire, at Seggieden, they would have their house by themselves, and be free of all such annoyances.

CHAPTER III.

SAUNDERS MALCOLMSON AT HOME.

THAT Saunders Malcolmson was a man of upright principle, and correct habits of life, was a thing that nobody who knew him would for a moment have called in question. Indeed, but for his own decided refusal, he might have occupied the position of an elder of the kirk; and had he chosen to accept that sacred function not a single parishioner would have dared to gainsay his fitness for it. As it was, although Saunders declined ecclesiastical office, the public verdict was altogether in his favour. True, the standard of judgment was not vitally affected by questions of ecclesiastical standing, or of religious principle. It was a very practical standard; and the estimate of a rational human life therein implied was of a very tangible and comprehensible sort:

Saunders Malcolmson had sat for the greater part of a "nineteen" in the "possession" of Skellach Brae. By his own industry and thrift he had carved out his position; for he too, as has been said, had occupied the place of a farm labourer, and in that capacity had amassed the means that enabled him to climb to the rank above. He was an industrious, skilful, and successful farmer; whereas his predecessor in the "haudin" he occupied had fallen somewhat short in the latter particular, at least. But that was not exactly the way in which Saunders's neighbours put it. What they said was in this wise—

"Weel, man, I ees't to think Skellach Brae a weird-

less scaup. Geordie Paip, they say, never did nae gweed upon 't."

"Haud yer tongue! Forbyse to dee gweed, he cudna deen muckle waur."

"Nae, man; he tyeuk-na naebody in, did he?"

"Na, na. Geordie was only owre honest for 'imself, peer stock; but though he tyeuve and wrocht hard, late an' ear', he was nae han' at bargain-makin' an' that."

"An' that wye he made-na naething o' 't?"

"Naething. Aw doot he lost the muckle feck o' fat he hed."

"Yea, man; but aw b'lieve Skellie's deen' weel—makin' siller like sclate steens!"

"He's deen' byous weel, min. Though he's hed a faimily to fesh up and skweel—an' the like o' that canna be deen upo' naething—aw'm maist seer he's layin' by a puckle notes ilka year. Deen' weel! ay is 'e."

"Loshtie, man, he'll be worth a hantle o' dry siller, forbyse's cover, afore the tackie be oot."

"An ondeemas thing o' 't. Wi' the onwal man, fan a body gets a beginnin', it seen comes up."

"Weel, he begood bare aneuch."

"Bare aneuch. He hed naething but fat he made wi' 's twa han's. But he's deen' oon-com-mon weel. Fat wud ye wauer but he's layin' by half a rent, aff an' on?"

"Man, gin some o' 's cud win within sicht o' that, we wud think we wus a' richt."

They discussed a man's well or ill doing, you perceive, strictly in the light of his success in a pecuniary point of view. And in this they were by no means singular. The same rule, less plainly expressed it may be, obtains somewhat extensively in different sections of society; and it was a rule by which Saunders Malcolmson would, I verily believe, have been gratified to be judged, even as he himself would have judged others by it.

A notable thing in the matter was this:—Twenty-

five years previously, when Saunders Malcolmson was a young man of twenty to twenty-five, because he was not vicious—a spendthrift of his wages and the father of one or two bastards, but prudent in his conduct and saving in his habits—they said he was “a weel-deein” lad. His character had not then taken fixed shape, but was in process of getting fixed. Now that it was fully consolidated, the qualification “weel deein,” which in a way certified good moral character, had absolutely given place to “deein weel,” which spoke purely of prosperity in secular things. It would have been deemed both superfluous and absurd to speak of Saunders Malcolmson as a “weel-deein” man now; yet might Saunders, like others, have fallen something short of “weel deein,” in a moral point of view, and still have enjoyed to the full the credit of “deein weel.”

Nevertheless, the rule of judgment referred to is not an altogether adequate or perfect one; and walking by it, and minding too exclusively “the same things,” ultimately tended to embitter and sadden the life of Saunders Malcolmson far more than the events that happened to him rendered inevitable or necessary in themselves. As a “weel deein” youth, he had been able both to conduct himself properly in a social and moral point of view, and to acquire the means of elevating his position. As a man who was “deein weel,” he had allowed his thoughts to be concentrated on the sordid process of steadily adding to his means on the line of the vantage ground already gained. And it was undoubtedly the lack of harmony between the set of his daughter’s affections and the pecuniary prospects thereby opened up to her, as it seemed, and his own special operations in constructing his “pile,” which gave the rude shock to his feelings and hazily defined hopes that had led him to behave with such unnatural harshness as he had done toward Mary and her chosen husband. When he was amassing money so satisfactorily for a man in his position, it seemed to him a

thing outrageously hard that his only daughter, to whom, in due season, her portion of those means would fall, should show no better appreciation of the value of his hoard than to throw herself away on a comparatively penniless youth, when she might have held herself in the market against offers of at least equal pecuniary value.

As regarded the outside public, Saunders was absolutely and rigidly silent on the subject. In the bosom of his family, in so far as he adverted to it in articulate fashion, he rather endeavoured to hold himself up as a very ill-used and somewhat heart-broken man. And in this way his indirect references to Mary's unfilial conduct were not infrequent.

"Ou weel, man, aw'm seer ye've naething to reproach yoursel' wi'," Margaret Malcolmson would say in reply. "Gin them that's nearest till's will rin their ain road we canna help it. They'll jist hae to try an' winnow o' their ain cannas, an' they'll hae the mair credit themsel's gin they win to the gate o' their nain skeel come time."

"Ah-wa', 'oman, aw won'er to hear ye speak; fat eese hed the like o' her mairryin' already; an' mairryin' a wuddiefu, wi' nedder hame nor haul' o' 's nain."

"Deed, it's tryin' aneuch; but fowk maun learn to pit up wi' a hantle."

"Aw wuss to Gweed this toon hed never kent the face o' 'im."

"Weel, I'm seer I'm nae pairt-takin' them, man; but ye ken he mith'a been an ill deer; ye sud min' that."

"A bonny reward for ony ane to mak', aifter bein' ees't as he was; he cudna expeckit better guidship though he hed been ane o' oor nain faimily."

"Naething mair lickly nor that; but he was a gweed servan', ye ken, an' carefu' o' the beasts; an' naebody cud 'a been mair agreeable wi' the laddies."

"He was weel paid for's wark; an' I howp the

loons 'll keep clear o' the like o' 'im aifter this, unless *they* wunt to gae the black gate neist."

Saunders Malcolmson uttered these last words in a tone that induced his wife to drop the subject for that time, and which indeed checked the utterance of what might have drifted her further on in a certain direction than even she had any strict intention of going. As the perspicacious reader will have observed, Margaret Malcolmson's feelings, from the extreme of anger, had now got into at least a wavering state. It so happened that, despite their father's stern denunciations, and her own previous monitions on that subject, her two sons had continued to entertain a certain liking for their hated brother-in-law, as well as a keenly revived love for their only sister; and though open correspondence with Willie Fraser was strictly forbidden, the lads, as their mother very well knew, contrived somehow to keep themselves informed in a general way of his and their sister's ongoings. They had thus been able to tell their mother that Willie had got a situation as a grieve to Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq.—a circumstance which Margaret Malcolmson, moved by a sort of not unpleasing impulse within her, had got to the very eve of placing before her husband with a kind of hopeful glow around it, as almost more than confirmatory of her previous remark concerning the possibility of the young people "winnin to the road," more or less, in course of time. Saunders's tone effectually checked the impulse, and the fact remained untold for the time.

When Margaret Malcolmson did inform Saunders of what seemed the improved prospect of their son-in-law, Saunders received the announcement with a sort of hard, unsympathetic grunt. He exhibited no desire whatever to be made further acquainted with the details of the matter; and a still more distinct proof, perhaps, of his obstinate alienation was found in the circumstance that though his wife tried once and again

to pave the way to it, he did not thereafter revert to the subject. In the character of Saunders Malcolmson, that element which has been described as the "stalk o' carl hemp," had not been wanting at any time; but the "dour" obstinacy, now exhibited by him, took even his own wife aback, and made her doubt whether she had so fully understood the man as she had heretofore imagined. And, meanwhile, the more she mused on it, the more did she feel compelled to keep the subject of her musings to herself.

And thus the term of Whitsunday drew on; and Mary Malcolmson's immediate prospect was that of removing farther from her native place than she had ever yet been. It was but a matter of twenty-five miles, but the means of communication were far from direct or certain, and to go where her new home was to be, seemed like severing herself utterly and conclusively from the home of her childhood and youth. To Mary it would have been a source of inexpressible comfort simply to know that she had the full forgiveness of her father and mother; how much more to see their faces in peace, and depart with their parental benediction. But this was not to be. Her mother had now come, in part at least, to feel what this alienation from a confiding, affectionate daughter signified to her own heart; and there was but a short step to be taken when she would gladly have clasped Mary to her bosom again. But there *was* an obstacle in the way; and such an obstacle as she had not yet seen the possibility of overcoming.

On the night previous to Willie Fraser and Mary leaving the region of Love Lane, the two youthful Malcolmsons, Mary's brothers, unexpectedly ascended the stair of their dwelling. They did not say they were come to bid them good-bye. On the contrary, they were at some pains to explain that it was their mother who had sent them to the brewery for a couple of pecks of "maut," and with a particular injunction "nae to

set aff owre lang by the road," which instruction they were heedful to fulfil. Still the main theme of their discourse had relation to the approaching departure of their sister and their brother-in-law.

"But we're maybe comin' to see you sometime," said the younger of the two lads, when they had discussed the subject so far. "Fader's aye so ill-natur't about things, but m' mither winna hin'er's, I think."

"Weel, be sure an' nae forget to come, fan they can spare ye at hame," replied Mary, with lively emotion.

"It's a middlin' lang road," remarked Willie Fraser, "but ye wud manag't brawly o' yer fit i' the simmer day."

"Ou, nae fears o' the road, gin that be a'," quoth the other and elder Malcolmson. Then he added abruptly—"This is a little bun'lie 't m' mither bad's gie ye; there's holie-pie thingies in't 't ye made yersel', but they're siccar row't up, and ye needna apen't oot eenoo an' you flittin'. She bad ye tak' gweed care o't."

As the lad spoke, he had, with some effort, pulled from his pocket a brown paper parcel, carefully wrapped about with stout worsted threads, which he handed to his sister. Mary Malcolmson, with pale face and trembling fingers, received the packet, which seemed to her saddened heart simply a tangible remembrance of happy days past, and of a relationship severed for ever in its true intents. Thereafter, the two brothers quickly left for their home.

CHAPTER IV.

SEGGIEDEN.

PATRICK ELLISON SCURR, Esq., was, as has been said, an advanced as well as an extensive farmer; indeed a model agriculturist on a somewhat magnificent scale. On each of his farms—for he had three or four—he had got erected, at large expense, an improved “steading,” embracing the newest appliances for the accommodation of his valuable herds of cattle. Unluckily P. E. Scurr, Esq., had not manifested quite the same care in providing for the proper housing of the human beings whose office it was to conduct the active every-day operations on his various farms. And thus it was that, when Willie Fraser and Mary Malcolmson had reached their new location, they found the house destined for their habitation to be a structure something short of elegant in aspect, and that did not seem to promise the maximum of comfort or convenience to those who were to live in it. In constructing the farm of which it formed an adjunct, it was clearly evident that two or three small farms had been absorbed in the like number of spacious fields; and the “grieve’s house,” which stood in the far corner of one of those fields was simply a rickety remnant of an extinct “steading” of limited dimensions. The low clay-built walls were old, the straw-thatched roof was old, and the other parts corresponded. Standing where it did there was no visible approach to it, except a foot-path by the dykeside. The old cart track that had led up to the place had been ploughed over to increase the cultivated area;

and for the like reason, the garden allotment had been minimised to a patch at one end of the house capable of rearing about a score of "kail" plants.

But Willie Fraser was now a grieve; and he and his gentle little wife set about applying themselves to a right fulfilment of the duties of their new position with what heart they might. On the whole, the aspect of things did not strike them as being essentially different from what was to be expected in their circumstances; and with diligence in labour, and an earnest desire to please, their thoughts were made to rest more on their master's work than on their own immediate personal surroundings.

And so the summer passed on. Mary felt a little lonely at times; a stranger in a strange place, as she was, far removed from any neighbourhood, and her husband much absent—for his office being that of the useful functionary known as a "working grieve," his "hours" were longer than those of any other male servant upon the farm; if, indeed, it could properly be said that he had any recognised hours at all. If the other servants of Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., were bound to start promptly afield at six, *ante meridian*, they took care to close their working day as promptly at six *post meridian*; but while it was the grieve's business to be on the ground sufficiently early to see that they were timeously "a-yoke" in the morning, his charge was by no means over when they had "lows't" at night. If cattle on the pastures had to be seen to, if some extra hands had to be spoken for at the nearest village, or if, in short, any incidental requirement emerged in connection with the ongoings of the farm, then the grieve was expected to give immediate attention thereto; and, as oftenest happened, this had to be done when, to others, the day's work had been completed.

Still the grieve and his wife were happy in each other, and quite disposed to look at the hopeful side of things. Mary had bestowed infinite pains in the shape

of sand-scrubbing of sooty woodwork, whitewash, and a little amateur upholstering, to make their home look its best; and with fresh air, bright sunshine, green leaves, and gay flowers abundantly furnished by kind Nature, in the way of surroundings, one was almost tempted to say, "Well, after all, a somewhat dilapidated house is no great evil." But summer ended; and with a succession of wet and stormy days in the "go-harvest" it was seen that the roof leaked here and there above; while, through lack of drainage of any sort, there appeared a worse evil in the shape of an inflow of "un'er water" below. This was annoying, no doubt, but it must just be put up with, as others had put up with the like before; and perhaps the evil was only too lightly thought of, even by those most vitally concerned.

And then the promised visit from Mary's brothers—what of it? For weeks and months that visit had been matter of pleasant anticipation; but alas! the season was now closing in with the visit still unrealised, and the prospect of its realisation even less likely than before; for in the last brief note from the elder of the two lads, he had not so much as mentioned the proposal. Upon Mary the effect of this was depressing in a degree known to no heart but her own. It was clear to her now that her father and mother were as far as ever from entertaining thoughts of reconciliation with their daughter, whose affectionate heart so yearned for their sympathy. That then must be the bitter sorrow of her life; but why complain to her husband? Did it not seem like ingratitude to him, whose life was entirely devoted to her? And Mary strove to bear her burden in secret and alone.

Such were the circumstances when, on a certain "blae" autumn gloamin, Willie Fraser, on returning to his home, found that his wife had made him a father. The kindly female practitioner from the village, who was in attendance; who had, in fact, constituted herself

mistress of the situation ; a woman of ready resources, with copious showers of tears at command when her emotions stirred within her ; and who had clothed the latch of the door in flannel to muffle the noise of opening it, and taken all other needful precautions, assured him that Mary was "as weel's cud be expeckit;" and then, in a whisper, the worthy dame continued, "an' it's a lassikie ; freely sober, peer thingie, but a richt brow, wisse-like creaturie's ever was seen. Sit ye doon there ; an' aw'll fesh't ben jist eenoo and lat ye see't. Mithna ye tak' aff yer tacketie beets at ance, an' stap yer feet in'o some bits o' aul' skushles, or gyang o' yer hose, for fear o' disturbin' 'er."

And after this fashion was the advent of Mary Malcolmson's first-born. Mary's recovery was neither very rapid nor very perfect ; yet when the baby was a month old she had resumed all her household duties, and it was reckoned full time to have it christened. The excellent and kind-hearted old parson willingly made the journey to the grieve's cottage for that purpose. He christened the babe in the presence of three or four of those whom Willie Fraser and his wife had come to regard most in the light of friends and neighbours, assembled for the occasion. The judicious official already mentioned acted as a sort of mistress of the ceremonies throughout. Then, as was his wont when the christening was over, the old minister put a half-crown into the baby's breast for "hansel"; and then he sat for a little space, courteously partook of the dram offered, and spoke some "couthie" words, addressed chiefly to the baby's mother :—

"Margaret ; that's a pretty name. And who, may I ask, is the child named after?"

"My mither, sir."

"Ah! very good, very good ; she'll be glad to hear about her little grand-daughter, I'll warrant. Your mother lives some distance away ; has she any more grand-children?"

"No, sir."

"None!"

"No, sir."

"Wee Maggie will be her favourite, then," said the worthy old parson, pleasantly. "You must take care she does not spoil her."

"Yes, sir," answered poor Mary, hardly knowing what she ought to say.

"Ah, well," continued the minister, "children are God's heritage. Who knows what a blessing that poor, helpless, innocent babe may be to some, after the heads of even the youngest as well as the oldest of us are covered by the dust of the graveyard! Consider it a high privilege, my friends, as well as a solemn responsibility, to have such a charge as that of this young and undisclosed life entrusted to you."

And then, after other suitable and friendly discourse, his reverence bade them all a kindly good night. The women folks, as they sipped their tea, failed not to comment on the "byous" nature of the minister's remarks. As a parson, he must naturally speak with some degree of unction at such a time, but it was generally admitted that, well as he usually did, he had on the present occasion fairly outdone himself.

When the christening party had gone, and her husband had left for the time to look after some odd jobs on the farm, Mary's thoughts reverted with great intensity to her parents and her parent's home. What would they think, and what would they say, when they knew both that this feeble wee bit specimen of humanity lived and breathed on its own account on this earth, and that its name was Maggie? Mary bent earnestly and affectionately over the poor little morsel now lying asleep in its cradle; and then she proceeded to ransack her humble chest of drawers for the purpose of carrying out some bit of work which her new circumstances as a mother had suggested as needful to be done. In so doing, she stumbled upon the parcel given

her by her brother last time she had seen him, and which the lad had described as containing some "holie-pie" work of her own. From a feeling that the opening of the parcel must be equivalent to stirring recollections of happy days unhappily lost, it had to that hour remained unopened—had in a manner been shrunk from, in fact. Moved by a more practical reason now, Mary untied the threads to get at the pieces of sewed muslin-work within. And as she unrolled those pieces down toward the centre, her feelings got keenly excited, as first one and then another well remembered little thing that she had handled or worn long ago, came unexpectedly to sight. At last there tumbled out a small tortoise-shell box, loosely wrapped in tissue paper. At sight of the little box Mary started, and her heart beat rapidly as she lifted it, and, divesting it of its covering, eagerly looked inside. Yes! There, amid its nest of soft cotton wool, was that old stoned ring which she had gazed on so often with childish veneration as something precious in itself, but doubly precious, because, as she had learnt from her mother, it had belonged to a grandmother whose days on earth were ended before hers had begun.

That unspeakably cherished ring in her unconscious possession all this time, and clearly by the will and act of her own mother, and none else! Well might the words of her brother, "She had ye tak' care o' t," recur to Mary, and with a very different significance to that which they had seemed to carry with them when uttered. It was not merely that she, in her girlish vanity and ambition, had coveted the ring dearly; she knew that her mother, whose sole specimen of jewellery, with the exception of her own marriage ring, it formed, set an almost priceless value on the stoned ring, and only on very rare occasions would consent to its being taken from its place of safety in her own "drawers" for the purpose of being exhibited, or, as a special indulgence, worn by her for a brief and well-

defined space of time. What room now to doubt of her mother's strong affection for her, with that mother's most cherished treasure of a material kind thus silently conveyed to her so long ago? No wonder if the conflict of feeling in Mary's breast was strong, and no wonder that, after gazing earnestly on the ring, as bewildering thoughts of the past in rapid succession rushed through her mind, and pressing the little box to her lips, she should burst into a passionate flood of tears.

CHAPTER V.

A FAMILY SCENE.

THE home of Saunders Malcolmson at Skellach Brae had become the reverse of a cheerful home. For the first few months after his daughter's marriage, Saunders's spirit had sustained him wonderfully under the feeling of an ill-used man righteously angry. But now that Mary was fairly away, and beyond easy reach, there by-and-by came home to Saunders, unbidden, a certain painful sense of loss. The thought would once and again flash into his inmost heart that, after all, his daughter was more vitally a part of himself than to be severed at the dictation of mere impulse, however strong, without leaving a grievous rankling void behind, which even growing prosperity in his worldly calling, could never altogether fill or soothe. Yes; the gentle, placid girl, that in all her life had never returned him an un-dutiful word, and to his angriest reproaches had replied only by heartbreaking sobs, had filled a larger, nearer place than Saunders, in the blindness of his passion, had realised.

Through the summer, Saunders Malcolmson had been moody in the extreme. His old form of indirect complaint had altogether ceased, and he seemed carefully to avoid the least reference to Mary and her husband. And his continued reserve on this point served to put a sort of embarrassing restraint upon the other members of his family, when otherwise their conversation would naturally have gone in that direction. In this state of matters, his sons had practically given up their pro-

posed visit to Seggieden, as finding no opportunity to broach the subject. Then there came by direct message, indirectly sent from Willie Fraser, the announcement that Mary had got a little daughter; and by-and-by, from Mary herself, a letter to her elder brother, bearing on the same subject.

It so happened that Margaret Malcolmson was temporarily absent from home, and the two boys stood by the window conning and commenting on the newly arrived letter, while their father sat on the "deece" reading the "News," all oblivious, as they imagined, of their ongoings.

"Eh, it's gyaun to be ca'd Marget—Maggie"—exclaimed Donald, as he read.

"It'll be aifter m' mither aw'll wauger," replied the other.

"Ay is't, for Mary says 't'ersel'; heely till aw read it oot. 'She is named Marget, after dear mother, and I think is like her'"—

"Pheuch! fat wye cud she ken that, an' it but a little wee creatur', hardly muckler nor a kittlin, aw reckon."

"I wud like richt to see't ony wye," answered Donald.

"Sae wud I."

"Aw won'er gin't 'll hae black hair or fite."

"Hoot, min, ye never saw a littleane wi' a black heid."

"Nae freely black, maybe; but Mary's heid's black, ye ken," answered Donald.

"Weel," said Francie, "ye'll need 'o read that to m' mither ony wye, as seen's she comes hame."

The two lads had carried on their conversation in a kind of half under-tone, fully reckoning on their father's indifference to the subject, and engrossment at the moment in another. They were, consequently, rather taken aback when the words fell on their ears—

"Lat me see that letter?"

The letter was handed over as desired, and the two boys looked on with a curious sort of interest, mingled with an air of incredulity, as they saw their father lay the newspaper down on his knee and set on to an intent perusal of it. Nor when he had finished did Saunders seem in any hurry to give the letter up again. What the precise nature of the predominant feelings stirring within him may have been, it would not be easy to say. Saunders Malcolmson was not the man to give way to anything in the nature of sentimental weakness; yet it was evident that his mood of mind had at least undergone somewhat of a change from the time when the mere mention of Mary's name served to rouse his anger. Perhaps the new relationship in which he found himself—a grandfather, the head of a third generation—was awakening certain new thoughts, just as it opened up yet another aspect of human life. At any rate, Saunders Malcolmson's two sons found their puzzled cogitations cut short for the time in a very practical fashion.

“Gae 'wa noo an' maet oot yer beasts; an' see 't the feeders get plenty o' beddin',” quoth Saunders, bluntly addressing the lads, as he turned to the “News,” while still retaining the letter in his possession.

The order was obeyed, and the two youths had gone but a few minutes when their mother returned home.

“Here's a letter fae Mary, 'oman,” said Saunders, exhibiting the letter as he spoke, soon after his wife had entered.

“Ou, yea! Fan got ye 't?” exclaimed Margaret Malcolmson, with some surprise.

“It cam' to Donal', aw b'leive, i' the foraneen.”

“An' are they brawly; or hae ye read it yet?”

“H—m, weel aw tyeuk a glimsh o' 't,” said Saunders, with half-averted look.

“Ye mith read it oot, man, at ance, an' lat 's hear about the creaturs.”

Margaret Malcolmson spoke with earnestness, not to

say anxiety, in her tone ; and Saunders felt that her request could not well be denied, inasmuch as, although his wife was very far from an ignorant woman, she was, as she herself would have phrased it, "nae scholar," and thus unequal to the task of deciphering Mary's letter. Still it was with something of an effort that Saunders could compel his organs of speech to obey his wavering will, as he read :—

DEAR BROTHER,

I write these few lines to tell you about our little baby which you know we have gotten. It has grown a good bit already, and will soon be noticing everything. It was christened last Saturday, and is named Marget—after dear mother, and I think is like her. The minister is a very kind man, and gave her half-a-crown. He said my mother would call her Wee Maggie. I hope she will see her some time.

I would like very much to see you, but winter is beginning now. We like this place very well, but it is some langsome, and nobody near us ; it will be worst when the frost and snow comes. We are quite well, except myself not very strong, but some better. If you like, would you tell mother what I have said ? and tell her I took good care of what you mind you gave me, and with kind love to all at home.

I am, your affectionate sister,

MARY.

P.S.—Please write soon, and bid Francie write, too. This letter is for you both ; and please tell me how mother and all at home are.

Saunders Malcolmson did not perhaps read every word set down here, brief as Mary's letter was ; yet he could not avoid reading in its main drift the simple epistle of his daughter. And the exercise seemed a sufficiently embarrassing one for him. His wife, as he stumbled on, listened with undisguised emotion, and when Saunders had made a final pause, she said—

"Lat me see 't in'o my nain han'."

Saunders Malcolmson handed over the letter as desired, and again professed to fix his thoughts on the columns of the newspaper. Perhaps his feeling was

that he had gone just a little too far in the direction of mawkish sensibility, and so must pull up. After a couple of minutes' pause, he threw down the newspaper, which lay still on his knee, seized his head gear, and rose to leave the house for his ordinary out-door avocations.

"It's jist her vreet, peer thing," said Margaret Malcolmson, in a sort of half-soliloquy, as she gazed at the letter a second time; "an' some or ither o' ye'll need 'o vreet till *her* vera seen. Aw howp she'll be stronger again ere lang, for she winna be wuntin' 'er chairge noo; an' nae ane 't's drap's bleed to them within reach fan onything gaes vrang."

Saunders Malcolmson spoke not good or bad. The time was not long gone past when, in all likelihood, he would have uttered words of angriest import if his wife had ventured to say what she had just then said in his hearing. But in so far as unquiescent feelings existed within him now, I rather think they took the form mainly of dissatisfaction with himself; not by any means the most hopeless frame of mind into which it is possible for a human being to get, little conducive as it may be to that latent assurance of well-desert which comes of the self-conscious feeling that we are doing our orthodox part in the discharge of all those duties that imply no sacrifice of comfort or inclination, and no thwarting of our will. But then Saunders Malcolmson had his own full share of dogged northern reserve; and, if nothing special intervened, it would certainly take some time yet before his mind would work round to the point of giving perfectly free expression to the thoughts that had begun to force their way upward upon him.

CHAPTER VI.

A JOURNEY TO SEGGIEDEN.

“WEEL, Mary ’ersel wasna vèra stoot fan we heard a fyounks syne; an’ we’re jist some anxious to get anither letter.”

These words were uttered by Margaret Malcolmson in reply to the friendly query of a neighbour woman, wife of the farmer of Sprotston; and Margaret Malcolmson added—

“Ye see she’s far awa, an’ oot amo’ kent fowk; an’ we’ve baith been thinkin’ a gweed hantle about ’er livin’ sae muckle by ’ersel’ throu’ the deid o’ the winter.”

“It’s a caul up-throu place aw b’leive; an’ Mary was never jist fat ye wud ca’ unco hardy,” was the reply. “Aw dinna won’er nor ye sud be gey concern’t about ’er. She’s a’ the lassie’t ye hae, ’oman; an’ a richt naitral-hertet creatur was a’ ’er days.”

When the next letter came the winter had just begun to give place to spring. It was not from Mary, but from her husband. It, too, was written to one of Saunders Malcolmson’s sons, and not to Saunders himself or his wife, although its contents were pretty evidently meant quite as much for the heads of the house as for the sons. Things being as they had up to that date been, it was not to be expected that Willie Fraser could write with other than a feeling of restraint to any member of the Skellach Brae household; yet he indicated with sufficient distinctness that Mary was not improving in strength, as could be wished, and, indeed,

was now in a state which made it a tax on her energies to attend to her small household duties, and bestow due care on her infant child.

“Weel, man, gin ye war throu wi’ the hurry o’ the ait-seed, ye man jist tak’ twa days’ leasure, an’ lat me win to see them ; for I can-not hae patience langer.”

Saunders Malcolmson did not indicate any disposition to resist this proposal ; but it was now only a week or so past the end of February ; the “ait-seed” was not even begun, and almost six weeks would in all probability elapse before it could be carried into execution. And a less space of time than six weeks may bring about events that affect us in a momentous fashion. So it was in this case. March had run its course, April was just begun, and Saunders Malcolmson in the very “heid-hurry” of oat-sowing, when a stranger was one day seen approaching Skellach Brae—a man of Highland aspect, roughly clad, with a faded shepherd-tartan plaid about his shoulders, and riding a shaggy pony of rather diminutive bulk. It was not yet nine o’clock by a full half-hour, for Saunders Malcolmson had but finished his breakfast, and was about to return a-field where he had been busy sowing. The dew of a quiet and sunny April morning still lay on the grass, and the laverock poured its strains of rich melody overhead.

Certainly the “unco” man on the hairy “shaltie” was coming there. There could be no doubt of the fact ; for he had turned up the rough cart-track that led by the park “yett,” and the pattering footfalls of his pony became quickly the most audible sounds in that quiet and beautiful scene where nature was presenting herself to man in her most hope-inspiring phase. The man pulled up his shaltie at the front of Saunders Malcolmson’s dwelling, and there was a formal pause of nearly a minute’s duration. The stranger asked if this was Skellach Brae, and being answered in the affirmative by Saunders Malcolmson himself, he said—

“An’ ye ’re Saun’ers Malcolmson ?”

"It's a 't's for me."

"Eh, man, aw 've ill news to tell ye!"

"Is—is she waur?"

"It's nae her ava, man."

"My dother—Gweed be thankit! Fat's happen't?"

"Yer gweed-sin's fell't!"

"Gweed forgi'e ye man!" exclaimed Margaret Malcolmson, bursting from the door, inside which she had caught the drift of the conversation, as she went to and fro at her work. "Faur come *ye* fae? Did ye see Mary? Oh! tell's, tell's, man, fat's happen't?"

The stranger, who bore himself with a very serious and really sympathising air, although his manner of introducing the melancholy tidings he professed to carry might have seemed to savour of unfeeling bluntness, proceeded to narrate how on the previous day a couple of spirited young horses, belonging to Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., at Seggieden, had got restive in the hands of the man who was driving them; and under his harsh mode of treatment had gone over the traces, and were plunging wildly about, with every appearance of forthwith trampling down or otherwise mastering, and at least seriously injuring, if not imperilling the life of the man, when Willie Fraser rushed to his aid; and going incautiously near, one of the horses struck out its iron-shod foot, hitting him on the chest, and knocking him down mortally injured. The blow, it was believed, had been the result more of terror through the ill-usage the animal had previously received at the hands of its driver than native viciousness of temper; and hence the unfortunate grieve had been less guarded in approaching it than he might otherwise have been. At any rate, the terrible result had come all the same. And when further help arrived, and Willie Fraser had been carried to the soft bank at the side of the field, and there laid down, while they doubted if he were alive or dead, he could only utter in broken whispers, "Mary! Oh, Mary! my ain! God bless you. Tell them to be

kin' till 'er." And Willie Fraser neither spoke nor breathed again.

"Licht ye doon man, an' come in. Oh, sirs!" exclaimed Margaret Malcolmson, "it's nae eese to speer for her; peer thing, it'll kill 'er!"

The stranger threw his long leg high over the little shaltie's ears, as it eased its neck in the slackened bridle-rein, and stood on his own feet on *terra firma*. He followed Margaret Malcolmson inside the house, and the shaltie, well content to have release from its burden, and the hope of something to fill its hungry stomach, willingly followed the guidance of Donald to the spare sta' in Saunders Malcolmson's stable. An order which speedily followed, and which Donald had forthwith to carry out, was to go to the field, where sowing had been going on, and tell the servant-man to "lowse" and send home the grey gelding immediately; the other might be used to cart back the unsown "lades" to the barn; for with only a single harrow at work, there was space enough seeded for some days to come; and meanwhile the grey gelding was required on more urgent business.

Two hours later, and Saunders and Margaret Malcolmson had started on a melancholy journey. There they were; Saunders driving the stout grey gelding, and Margaret Malcolmson in her darkest Sunday dress, seated amongst the straw in the cart, surrounded by the needful supplies of food for the gelding, and by a wonderful quantity of all those forms of linen and woollen manufacture which female instinct had selected as right and suitable in the circumstances, but which uninstructed male reason need not attempt to describe. Wonderfully little had been said; even as to the details of needful preparation, Saunders Malcolmson and his wife seemed to have simultaneously acted on the injunction—"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." And they were now on their way to far-off Seggieden; a place that neither the one nor

the other had ever seen. The stranger had staid to rest him a little : more to rest and fully refresh his shaltie. But he would speedily overtake them, he said ; at anyrate he would "be up wi' them" long before they had passed kent bounds, and begun to doubt of the proper route to follow ; and he duly fulfilled his promise, for the shaltie was a nimble trotter when it chose.

And then the stranger of Highland aspect once more performed the easy operation of dismounting from his saddle ; for he would walk a bit to stretch his own legs, and give the shaltie corresponding relief from its burden. As for the faded tartan plaid, it could easily be, and it was, cast into the cart beside Margaret Malcolmson, and what else was there contained.

They journeyed on hour by hour. Sometimes the two men walked ; sometimes the stranger re-mounted his shaltie, and Saunders Malcolmson took his place on the "forebreist" of the cart ; sometimes, too, the stranger, as a second alternative, took a turn in the cart as well. They did not talk much ; quite the reverse. With Saunders Malcolmson and his wife, of course, the predominating thoughts went deep enough to restrain free utterance on any subject. The stranger, as has been said, seemed to be a sympathising person. He had delivered his sad tidings with all gravity, and by snatches re-delivered the chief points oftener than once ; but he had not acquired the faculty of laying down general principles, or moralising at length for the benefit of those whose deepest emotions must needs be reading them a far more solemn lesson than his words could do. The native *gentlemanliness* of the man taught him the unfitness of all that. He felt it incongruous, moreover, in his simple way, to introduce extraneous subjects, even in such forms as those of objects of interest passed on the way, except it were in terms of the utmost brevity, and almost dryness of tone. Of course, as he knew more or less of various of these,

while his companions knew nothing, a few words might be allowed, but only a few, in the way of stating the bare facts. Then, as neither the weather nor the state of the crops could fitly be discussed in a formal way, again silence would ensue. Happily not all along however. For why—was there not the shaltie which, by the wonderful journey of twenty-five miles on that late night and early morning, a journey now in process of being doubled step by step by the shaltie on those small hairy legs of its own, with but a very partial rest between, had, so to speak, brought itself fully *en rapport* with the circle involved in this mournful tragedy? Margaret Malcolmson was not sparing in words of pitying kindness toward the shaltie; and its master, once started on that key, bore unstinted testimony to its remarkable qualities, which, along with high endurance and wonderful sagacity, included a determined proclivity toward an astonishing series of half-pawky and wholly mischievous tricks. It was both a “wily” and a “wicket little won’er,” as its personal qualities and social habits fully testified. In short, the description of the shaltie’s qualities culminated in the phrase, “It’s a terrible ted,” oft repeated by its master, the man of Highland aspect, as they moved on. He had evidently attached to his four-footed companion a very definite individuality. And no doubt the shaltie’s character found its most pronounced illustration for the time when they had “lowsed” the cart behind a range of stately pines to feed and rest. During that process, the shaltie not merely bearded the grey gelding, by deliberately stealing the best tufts of fresh clovery hay from under his very nose, but, when the huge cart horse put back his ears, and, extending his big head, snapped his front teeth in scowling threat at the impudence of his diminutive companion, deftly evaded him, and quickly lifting its fore hoof, with an angry little scream, actually made the frightened gelding start backward from his feed.

“Noo, didna I tell ye ; saw ye ever the like o’ that, the ted ?” quoth the admiring owner of the shaltie. “Back roun’ there, noo, ye little smatchet ;” and the shaltie suffered reproof by being pushed round from its acquired vantage ground accordingly.

Then they re-yoked the cart and journeyed on for three hours more. And it was sundown of that long April day when Margaret Malcolmson and her husband reached the out-farm of Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., at Seggieden.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GRIEVE'S HOME.

WHAT is it, Oh Saunders Malcolmson, that makes thee approach that humble straw-thatched cot, with its quiet surroundings and solitary aspect, so uncertainly? It is to that spot, without doubt, thy long journey hath tended; thither that thine own wife, Margaret Malcolmson, but a short time ago, hurried away with anxious step while thou wert busy housing the grey gelding for the night, under direction of the homely man who owns the shaltie, and who has been at pains to point out to thee where to go and what to do thus far. It is there that thine own child Mary waits, with heart so broken, bereaved, and desolate, that all human sympathy were but a drop to fill the void.

And yet Saunders Malcolmson felt that his step had more of the laggard and faltering in it than he could have desired, had it been possible for him as things stood to shape his thoughts into active form. The descending shades of night, that were beginning to envelope the grieve's cottage at Seggieden as he drew near to it, were not ungrateful to the mood of his spirit, albeit he instinctively groped after the dawning of some inner light of which he had yet seen no glimpse. He was now at the little rude gateway that admitted the visitor within the cottage enclosure; and now at the door of the cottage itself. Absolute silence reigned within and all around, except what noise his own footfalls made. And no human presence stirred to bid him welcome there. It was with a certain feel-

ing of hesitancy, and even of "eeriness," that Saunders Malcolmson slowly lifted the latch, pushed back the door, and stooped under the low lintel to enter the cottage, in whose dimly defined interior one might not clearly discern what or who were present. To Saunders Malcolmson it gave a feeling of partial relief, as he paused in shutting the door, to hear at last, in a low whisper, from the lips of his own wife, the words, "Come awa', man ;" and he groped his way inward to the place where she seemed to be.

In the cottage, when Saunders Malcolmson entered it, the only living occupants were Mary, her mother, and her child. The neighbourly women who had come to Mary's aid during the day had left for their own homes, and she sat with her head laid on her mother's bosom, perfectly silent, but for her quick and heavy breathing. When Saunders Malcolmson had reached the centre of the floor by the aid of the dim gloamin' light, Mary rose and flung herself on his arm, uttering only the one word, "Fader !"

Even by one word the stern goodman of Skellach Brae failed to respond ; he merely put his other hand over his daughter's neck, and stood stock still, contriving to make his own strongly-embarrassed feeling palpable, dark as it was.

"Mithna we licht the lamp noo?" asked Margaret Malcolmson, after a pause, and desirous of bringing the trying scene to an end.

The lamp was lighted accordingly, and Saunders Malcolmson sat in the chair in the corner beyond it, taking in at first glance the chief contents of the whole little place. But—what! Could that stooping figure, with wasted cheek and languid step, that now met his view, be his own daughter? Mary was calm, with a painful and unnatural calmness, and her eyes, which seemed to shine more brightly than they had ever done before, were perfectly tearless ; but now that she made haste as she could to prepare tea for her parents, the

earnest attention of both was fixed upon her feeble movements, and sadly-changed appearance. And then the eyes of Saunders and Margaret Malcolmson met with a glance that spoke more significantly than words could. Mary was indeed a mournful sight to see—a mere ghost of her former self physically; evidently far gone in pulmonary disease, and with a terrible shadow darkening her crushed spirit.

And what of her child? The poor thing by and by gave audible tokens of its presence, and wish for temporary removal from the cradle. A puny, sickly-looking creature; and how could it be other? Unconscious of much about it nearly affecting its own little history, did not that strangely premature look of care on the wee wan face affect thee, Saunders? And was it not even more touching to see it, after a time of earnest gazing at the strangers, exchanged for a sort of grave passing smile, as Wee Maggie, moved by some incipient idea of her own, turned to bury her face in her poor mother's bosom?

"Weel-a-wins, my peer innocent," exclaimed Margaret Malcolmson with intense earnestness as she bent over and patted the child.

Saunders merely gazed on the infant with a fixed and troubled look.

The burial of Mary Malcolmson's husband was arranged to take place on the next day but one. The homely man who rode the little rough shaltie had looked in once and again, saying little, but with an evident disposition to make himself useful; and when the day of burial had been fixed, he had offered the remark to Saunders, "Never ye min' man, I'll tak about the graif, an' that."

The corpse was laid out in the "but" end of the house, and there the "kistin'" took place. They said it was "a bonnie corp," and that he was "richt like himsel'," as to each successive comer the face cloth was lifted for a last look of the dead. I do not know all

what Saunders Malcolmson felt at this time. When Mary first led him "but," and in her terribly calm tone asked, "Wudnin ye like to see Willie noo, fader?" Saunders had absolutely started, though his answer meant more that he would, than that he would not. And Saunders looked steadily and long on the now rigid features of the man whom he had two years before spurned from him in such hot anger. As he stood and looked at the inanimate clay, he felt that the essential part that inhabited the familiar form had gone beyond his reach for ever for good or evil, and the thought, silently developed as he gazed, seemed to engross his whole consciousness for the time.

It was not once, nor even twice, that Saunders Malcolmson stood by the corpse and intently gazed on the still face; and when the coffin lid was to be screwed down he was there to look a final look, and anxious to see that everything was done decently and in order.

The funeral procession was humble enough, and yet in its sober and decent ordering there was nothing that seemed needful lacking. The worthy old minister who had christened Wee Maggie conducted the simple religious ceremony; the parish mortcloth, black by original intent, but brown and threadbare by age, had been brought there by the care of the wright, authorised and instructed, as he had said, by the bellman. It was carefully spread over the coffin, which was placed upon two wooden "spokes" and carried to the churchyard, a mile and a-half distant, the bearers, members of the funeral company, relieving each other by the way.

As they passed on, the dog-cart of Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., came along the road, and the occupant of the dog-cart descending therefrom, accompanied the burial procession to the kirkyard, which by that time they were nearing. It was regarded as rather an event that he should do so by those who knew Mr. Scurr's habits and general procedure in such matters.

At the grave, the great agriculturist, having ascer-

tained Saunders Malcolmson's identity and relationship to the deceased, approached him with what he no doubt regarded as appropriate speech:—

"It's a sair bizness this man—I'm vera sorry for 't I can tell ye."

"Ay, it's a sair bizness," said Saunders.

"I wud 'a raither onything nor it hed happen't; an' the sizzon jist comin' on tee."

As a man who could appreciate the disadvantage of interruptions to work in the busy season, Saunders could not fail to understand the position; but somehow the words that fell on his ear seemed less in place than he could well realize, as he answered in a mechanical way, that he "cud weel b'lieve 't."

"It's a great disappointment to me I can tell ye," continued Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., dwelling on the theme. "Ay is 't. He was a vera carefu', cawpable man, an' they're nae aye easy gotten."

To this Saunders Malcolmson made what answer he could, but Mr. Scurr was not exacting in the matter of reply in such cases, and he went on—

"He was ane that wud 'a risen, man; ay wud he. He kent wark fan he got it, an' he was a judge o' beasts tee." Then he wound up as before—"It's a great disappointment to me, I can tell ye." And then, without further remark of any sort, he turned away to meet his conveyance, now approaching the kirkyard gate, leaving Saunders Malcolmson to digest these his utterances at leisure.

They had filled up the grave and replaced the green sod, and the company had begun to drop away before it occurred to Saunders Malcolmson that his friend, the owner of the shaltie, had been acting the chief part in the interment. He now stood with his shovel in his hand and the folded mortcloth under his arm. The old minister, who had walked alongside Saunders directly behind the coffin, with a few words of grave discourse, now shook hands and kindly bade him good-

day ; and then Saunders and his friend were left alone by the kirk gable. Just wait a minute, the man said, till he would put past his things and lock the kirk door ; and Saunders waited. Then the bellman, for in truth he was so, invited the stranger into his dwelling. Then he paid the small dues of the bellman as gravedigger, and then the bellman and his wife pressed him to rest "'imself," as the manner is, and have some refreshment. "Na," said Saunders, "Nae the day ; aw'll awa' owre the gate again."

"Heely'll I fling on my coat than, an' I'll convoy ye doon the road," answered the bellman, who, in his own way, felt for the lonely stranger burying his dead.

The bellman meant his "ilka-day's" coat ; for in truth he had, out of respect for the departed, arrayed himself in his "Sunday claes," although compelled by the requirements of the case, and the general discomfort inflicted as he went about the work of filling the grave, to lay down his long hat and coat by the dykeside. So he now "flung on" his grey coat and his bonnet, and that done, leisurely "convoyed" Saunders three-fourths of the way back to the grieve's cottage.

CHAPTER VIII.

P. E. SCURR, ESQ., AT HOME.

THE funeral over, it remained with Saunders Malcolmsen to think of what had next to be done. His interview with Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., abrupt in its commencement, and equally abrupt in its termination, had afforded him no opportunity of arranging the matters needful to close the connection between that celebrated agriculturist and his deceased son-in-law. Next day, therefore, Saunders Malcolmsen had no help for it but seek out Mr. Scurr, at the Mains farm, two miles distant, where his residence was. And a handsome residence Saunders found it to be. In Saunders's immediate locality there were no such farm houses; it wore the air rather of a mansion-house, indeed, standing, as it did, on a knoll, at two hundred yards distance from the spacious farm stead, amid shrubbery surroundings, and with a pleasant lawn and flower garden in front.

Saunders Malcolmsen had been accustomed to "traffike" with some sort of recognised standing among farmer "bodies" of his own class. He was in his way a successful man; and that very idea of success which had lodged itself in his mind is apt, in the absence of some proper moral counteractive, to lead a man, consciously or unconsciously, to centre his feelings of consideration and respect upon those who have gained a yet higher measure of success than his own. He knows his position among those who are merely his fellows, and easily assumes it. To conciliate the good opinion

and regard of the men he recognises as superiors is alike grateful and satisfactory. That Saunders Malcolmson, with all his sturdiness of character, had not quite escaped this tendency was, I fear, true. Yet, as he now approached the Mains farm, his feeling of personal insignificance was only equalled by his sense of shrinking from the presence of a notably successful man. His impressions were not radically changed by the scene in which he was just about to act his part.

The house at the Mains farm had two doors, like any other modern residence, one for the kitchen in the rear, the other the front or "entry" door. After debate within himself as to which door he should call at, Saunders Malcolmson bent his steps toward the latter, where he made his desire to see the master of the place known to the florid servant maid who answered his modest "chap," and who unceremoniously left him where he stood, whilst she went in person, or by deputy, to seek for Mr. Scurr, an operation which occupied some ten minutes, that gentleman having gone a short distance a-field. In the meanwhile, several well-grown young ladies came round from the west end of the house, where they had been occupied in gardening, and pursued their operations in the flower plots near by where Saunders Malcolmson stood, but without interrupting their conversation, or taking the slightest notice of his presence, beyond a casual stare. By and by Mr. Scurr had been discovered, and came stumping round, a sandy-haired man of middle age, dressed in a grey tweed suit, with an immense white hat of the soft felt type, and leather leggings. As soon as he approached, one of the young ladies burst forth in a voluble address to "Papa," concerning sundry things interesting to herself personally, and on which she proceeded to "instruct" papa fully before opportunity was given to poor Saunders Malcolmson of uttering a single word. Saunders had no choice but wait his time.

“A fine day, man,” said Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., as soon as he was granted release, and not perfectly certain apparently who the man might be whom he was addressing. Saunders Malcolmson replied that it was “a *fine* day,” and then he paused.

“Ou ay—ye’re Fraser’s gweed-fader. I’m vera sorry for ye, man; vera sorry. It was a great disappointment to me, ye ken.”

Saunders Malcolmson did not doubt it; it would have been unreasonable if he had, after the assurances given; and he ventured to express his belief that there were also others who would feel the loss.

“Ye’ll be come to get fat was yauchtin ’im, are ye?”

“Weel, an’ it be a’ the same to you, Maister Scurr,” said Saunders, “we mith mak’ a sattlement; it’s a lang road atween this an’ oor pairt.”

“Come ye awa’ in than, man.”

Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., strode toward the front door and ascended the three steps that led to it; and then a thought struck him:—

“Of coorse I’ll lippen to you clearin’ onything that’s due at this time, ye ken—the doctor an’ that?”

“Ou I’ll see a’body paid afore I gae awa’.”

“Aw dinna doot it, man, aw dinna doot it; but the law’s strick, ye ken, an’ ony o’ them mith reest the siller in my han’—I’ve nae doot o’ t—gin they war timorous: or aiven gi’e tribble aboot it aifterhin—My wife. This is some o’ that peer unfortunate lad Fraser’s freens, ’oman.”

Mrs. Scurr, a buxom matron, as she pointed Saunders Malcolmson to a seat in the large and comfortably-furnished parlour, launched out rather copiously into a series of comments on the unhappy circumstances attending the death of the late grieve at Seggieden; the general imbroglio and risk to animal life and valuable property occurring through the incapability or culpable recklessness of a single man, besides the actual death of a human being that had resulted; and she consider-

ately added that, but for the knowledge that it was too late to prevent or remedy this last, and her general sensitive shrinking from "deith," she would have personally visited the grieve's desolate abode, for, by her husband's testimony, he was a man who had merited even that—had no reasons to the contrary existed.

"Ay, he's a rash chap the secon't horseman owre by; but fowk maun jist tak' their risk wi' the like o' 'im, an' it's nae little. That's a pair o' beasts cudna be pitten yon'er for eighty poun', man. Fraser kent 't the man hed to be cheeng't; an' we'll need to get anither in's place at the term ony wye. Foo muckle was ye makin' 't oot to be, man?"

Mr. Scurr, as he spoke thus, had risen from his chair and gone to his desk; and Saunders understood rightly that the question was how much he expected to receive as Willie Fraser's remaining wages.

"Weel, Maister Scurr, ye ken that better nor me," answered Saunders.

"Twal poun' for the half-year, ye ken; the same waage simmer and winter; an' the hoose an' the yard, wi's bow an' sap money."

"An' Awpril was hardly an ouk run," interposed Mrs. Scurr.

"Ou weel, 'oman, we winna coont hard upo' that; he was a gweed servan' to me, peer man. We'll mak it the four month an' a half; nine notes for the fee an' the lave confeerin'. That coonts aff only sax ouks, an' ye ken it's a gweed seyven ouks yet to the term."

And on this liberal scale Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., adjusted the payment, which he forthwith made to Saunders Malcolmson as representing the deceased Willie Fraser and his.

"The hoose?" added Mr. Scurr, in reply to a further suggestion of his wife. "Weel, I'm sure I'll mak yer dother rael welcome, man, to bide in 't till the term, an' she likes. It's be in nae ane's poo'er to disturb her till than. No; it's be in nae ane's poo'er to disturb 'er."

Saunders Malcomson expressed all needful gratitude for this fresh proof of the philanthropic disposition of Mr. Scurr; and that gentleman, holding the business part of the interview to be ended, laconically added, glancing towards his wife—

“Dram, an’ a bite o’ a piece, ’oman.”

Mrs. Scurr, whose manner was more diffuse, and likewise more modern, so to say, than that of her husband, wished to know if Saunders would drink port or sherry, or—

“’T a gless o’ fusky, ’oman, to the piece o’ ’s, an’ a bit breid an cheese.”

And this half-impatient utterance of Mr. Scurr, saved Saunders from a real dilemma. He was not accustomed to a choice of wines, and would have felt the good lady’s complete list embarrassing.

When they had “wuss’t” each other health, Mr. Scurr, who now naturally turned to social topics of a personal kind, enquired—

“Hae ye a bit placie o’ yer nain, man?”

“Ay; a little placie.”

“A twa-horse wark, maybe? or dee ye make it oot wi’ ae beast an’ an owse?”

“It’s owre fifty awcre—we need twa horse beasts.”

“That’s a gey bit tackie, man; ye’ll need a chap fit to haud the pleuch, forbye yersel’?”

“Ay; we need aye some ane.”

“I’m seer ye will; ye’ll keep twenty heid o’ nowte beasts aff an’ on.”

Again Saunders answered in the affirmative, and the next question was as to the precise location of his farm. That stated, Mr. Scurr was in a position to diagnose the whole matter. He knew the estate of which Skellach Brae formed a part, and he knew the owner of it; he knew the quality of the soil and the style of farming in the locality; and he knew even more than that.

“Man, I’ve seen your face i’ the markets at Inner-

ebrie ; I'm seer o' 't," said Mr. Scurr, turning full upon Saunders to look at him.

Saunders conceived it possible. Of course he had often seen the face of Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., in the markets named ; for where was he not known ; but that was a very different thing from Mr. Scurr having seen his face and attached a separate individuality to its owner. However that might be, the field now opened up might have been cultivated to any extent in the way of discussing lan', and beasts, and rent, had it so suited the great man. But Mr. Scurr's time was valuable ; and, accordingly, when he had finished his dram, he again turned abruptly to his wife, and proceeded to direct her about giving instructions to have his conveyance brought to the door in half-an-hour from that time. That done, he went on at once to discourse to Mrs. Scurr in detail about various personal transactions with people of whom Saunders Malcolmson had never in his life heard. Saunders, after some minutes had passed in this way, not unnaturally felt that his presence might be dispensed with ; and he accordingly rose to leave.

"It's been a great disappointment to me, I can tell ye. Ye're gweed-sin wud 'a been a vaeluable man, gin he hed been sparet, man. But tell ye the widow that she's welcome to keep the hoose till Whitsunday ; there sall nae ane tribble 'er till the term-day."

With these words Mr. Scurr dismissed his visitor ; and Saunders Malcolmson went on his way, pondering dimly and with a certain shade of perplexity in his thoughts on the absolute greatness of such a man as Patrick Ellison Scurr, Esq., and the comparative, as well as absolute, insignificance of persons who had merely attained to such social standing as one could lay claim to who was master of a "placie" like Skellach Brae.

CHAPTER IX.

SAUNDERS MALCOLMSON GOES HOME ALONE.

SAUNDERS MALCOLMSON had been four whole days absent from Skellach Brae ; the fifth day was running, and he was naturally anxious to be home ; for during all those long years that Skellach Brae had known him as its master, he had never been away from it two days on end before. But what of Mary and her child ? It had been Saunders's intention, promptly determined in his own mind, to get the modest furnishings in the griever's house forthwith put in charge of some trustworthy person to be disposed of, and then carry Mary and Wee Maggie home along with himself and his wife. Two difficulties, unanticipated by him, came in the way. In the first place, now that the funeral was over, the state of extreme and unnatural tension in which Mary had been held, both physically and mentally, was succeeded by reaction equally extreme. She was completely prostrated, and totally unable to attend to her own wailing infant, through sheer weakness. And when the doctor was consulted on the point, he at once declared that it would be perfect madness to attempt to remove her. By any conveyance that Saunders could command she could not be taken half the distance from Seggieden to Skellach Brae in her present low and fevered state. Thus far of Mary's present physical condition.

Saunders Malcolmson, it was evident, must content himself meanwhile with the prospect of fetching Mary home some time after. And he tried to make up his

mind to that. He had arranged matters with his wife, who was to remain as her daughter's nurse, and he came to the bedside to say good-bye to Mary before setting out to return to Skellach Brae alone, when he found that yet another obstacle stood in the way.

"Weel, I'll be back again gin an aucht days, maybe, for ye baith," said Saunders with what hopefulness of tone he could command.

"For mither an' Maggie, fader?" said Mary, looking up with a troubled and feverish look.

"Oh God help me na, Mary!—for them an' *you*," exclaimed Saunders Malcolmson in a tone of earnestness that made even his own wife start slightly.

"Na, fader, nae me."

"Hoot, Mary, dinna speak that wye," persisted Saunders, coming nearer the bedside as he spoke.

"*He* wudna leeft me though a' the wardle hed been against me," continued Mary, whose eyes were again half closed.

"We winna vex'er eenoo, man; her an' me'll speak about that aifterhin fan we're a bittie better, may be. An' we'll lat ye ken fan to come back for's," said Margaret Malcolmson.

"But for a' that I canna leave him; I canna leave him noo; an' he was aye sae kin' to me an' Maggie, an' wuntin' to dee richt to a' body."

The words, in the latter part of the sentence especially, were uttered in a tone of what seemed half soliloquy. As Mary ceased speaking, Margaret Malcolmson motioned her husband to leave; and after again bidding his daughter farewell with far more outward evidence of strong emotion on his part than he had up to that point exhibited, Saunders Malcolmson reluctantly left her bedside; and, after a brief and earnest conference with his wife outside the cottage, was soon thereafter on his homeward journey to Skellach Brae, where he arrived in due time.

Now, as Saunders Malcolmson pondered these imme-

diately bye-gone things in his heart, his reflections did not become more comfortable, but rather the reverse. It was not that Saunders retained the slightest shade of the old hard bitter thoughts that had moved him to do and say as he did, when Willie Fraser and Mary had so outraged what he imagined to be his heart's deepest feelings. Concerning Mary there could be no doubt his feeling—and he had unmistakably shown it—was that of strong anxiety rooting in true, even if it might be rugged and repressed, paternal affection. But as Saunders thought and thought again of him in whom Mary's life had been so closely bound up, he had much more than begun to doubt how far his own sentiments and conduct had, from the very outset, been right or justifiable. His familiar friend, Sprottie, had called after his return, to learn the facts and offer what sympathy seemed allowable in the circumstances. Sprottie, erstwhile, a man after Saunders's own heart in matters ethical and economical, had cautiously groped his way to the subject of his visit by referring to the death of Saunders's son-in-law, as "an ill accident," and then adding, with some suddenness—"Ye hinna fesh'n the goodwife wi' ye?"

"Ah, Sprottie," exclaimed Saunders, "it's a terrible bizness this? Fa cud 'a expeckit it. Nae aiven them 't wus nearest till 'im able to win till 's side fan he was deid an' gane!"

"Eh, man!" exclaimed Sprottie.

"There's nae wardle's gear, man, that I wudna gi'en to see 'im alist again, fan aw luikit on 's stark an' seelent face yon'er. An' weel nicht aw; for I didna dee richt to him an' her, man."

"Hoot, Skellie," exclaimed Sprottie, fairly surprised and even startled at his neighbour's passionate tone; "hoot Skellie, ye mauna speak that gate; the like o' that comes o' Providence, ye ken. Fowk maun bide a hantle in this wardle."

"Bide a hantle! Ay; but fan yer nain conscience

tells ye straucht out 't ye 've been deein the deevle's wark oonbidden, an' wi' nae thanks nor paymen', it 's a terrible thing, man."

"Noo, Saun'ers, ye maun *not* speak that gate, ye 've nae occasion," protested Sprottie.

Saunders Malcolmson did not debate the point with him. Sprottie, on the other hand, needed no one to tell him that his friend was troubled after a fashion that his skill was little adequate to deal with; and having said his brief and somewhat blunt say of sympathy, he was fain to turn the conversation in the way that seemed to him most natural. Sprottie tried to strike a workable key-note about the weather an' the "girse" an' the young beasts; but he failed in drawing out any responsive chord. Even when he talked gravely of the valuable stirk that had taken the quarter ill, whose life he had saved by a prompt and vigorous use of the "fleems," and advised Saunders to follow his example by letting blood freely of his "year aul's" as a precautionary measure, Saunders, to his great surprise, seemed like a man absent in mind on such topics, and who could at best give but a dull Ay or No, being weighted in spirit by some yet graver matter. And Sprottie being in his measure uncomfortable at this aspect of things, did not much prolong his visit.

Saunders Malcolmson was troubled about Mary's extreme weakness; and he was troubled more than he could well say about the way in which she seemed to cling to, and have her heart filled with thoughts of him who was dead and gone. But he could only bear his burden in silence as he moved out and in. He could not communicate much of what he thought to his boys; they were, Saunders felt, too young and too inexperienced in relation to life's sadder side. Yet, self-contained man as he was, Saunders felt sorely the need of something like wise companionship and true sympathy, even if accompanied by words of honest rebuke. A week had passed since he returned

to Skellach Brae, and he had begun, for more reasons than one, to long much for a reply to the letter he had made his son Donald write, giving intimation of his safe arrival home, and asking very specially to be informed, at as early a date as conveniently might be, how Mary was, and when it was likely she could bear, and would consent, to be removed to Skellach Brae.

Alas, for thee, Saunders Malcolmson ! Return of strength when the light of life is flickering to its last with all the force of the heaviest wrack the spirit can suffer bearing on it !

A letter at last came, but its contents were neither full nor satisfactory. It had been written by some one at Margaret Malcolmson's request ; it could hardly be her dictation even ; and the few bald, uncouth, and unexpressive sentences of which it consisted, while they gave the minimum of information, conveyed a sufficiently unsatisfactory, and even alarming impression. Its effect on Saunders was only to add to his sense of trouble and anxiety.

Mary Malcolmson, in truth, was now wholly confined to bed, occasionally delirious, and, for the time at least, past all power of taking sustenance to support her strength, or remedies to check the disease that held her in its deadly grasp. Her mother was a woman of too much good sense, either to shut her own eyes to the real circumstances of the case, or to desire to keep others concerned in ignorance of them. But perhaps, even to her watchful eyes, the rapid progress of the fatal disease was not apparent in its full extent.

CHAPTER X.

A LIFE JOURNEY ENDED.

A FORTNIGHT had now passed since Saunders Malcolmson had returned home, and the time that had elapsed had, as already stated, witnessed a material reduction in Mary's little remaining strength. Margaret Malcolmson, who now but seldom left her daughter's bedside by night or by day, had laid "moyen" and got the services of a rather stupid old crone as nurse to Wee Maggie. The "speanin" of the poor infant was, of course, a matter of sheer necessity; and despite the utmost vigilance that Margaret Malcolmson could use in the circumstances, the process went on at times in a less skilful and tender fashion that was desirable—a fact made all the more touching by reason of the poor young mother's keen distress at the feeble wailings of the infant her weakened arms could now no longer shield or fondle.

At the stage of time already indicated, Mary had had an unusually troubled night, and while the early part of the day had passed with more quietness, it had hardly brought more rest. Toward mid-afternoon, when the descending sun began to shine through the small four-paned window in the western gable of the cottage, and to light up the interior with a more cheerful light, Mary desired to be half raised in bed. She endeavoured to sit thus, with pillows at her back to support her; and then she wished Wee Maggie to be set by her side, the old woman being at the time absent on some errand. When matters had been so adjusted,

the poor wan bairnie, that now looked even more shrivelled and unthriving than before, responded to its mother's feeble effort to stroke its cheek by a tiny "scaigh" of satisfaction, and an attempt to scramble yet nearer her bosom; an attempt to which Mary could respond only by a fixed look of intense and yearning love.

"Mither," said Mary, breaking a short season of what appeared to be meditative silence on her part—"Mither, ye've been kin', kin', to me."

"Hoot na, Mary; fa wud be kin' to ye gin it warn a yer ain mither?"

"An' it hedna been you I wud 'a been sweir to leave Maggie noo. But ye've been kin'er to me nor onyhody kens; an' ye'll be kin' to her tee—winna ye mither?"

"Peer innocent, fa wudna be kin' till 'er?"

"Mither, continued Mary after another pause, during which the oppressiveness of breathing stopped her utterance—"Isna Maggie richt like *him*?"

"Eh, her blue eenies 's as like yer ain as they can be, Mary!"

"But the brooie, mither—an' jist notice fan she luiks up to ye."

"Ou ay, peer thingie; awat she's rael like 'im," said Margaret Malcolmson. Perhaps she was convinced of what Mary so clearly saw; perhaps her words merely indicated that she considerately recognised the expediency of at least humouring the fancy of the poor mother.

"An' she'll be a' 't 'll keep onyhody in min' o' 'im ere lang. Wasna Marget grannie's name tee?"

"Ay; but she was awa' mony a year ere ye was born, Mary?"

"But the ring was her's?"

"Was't the little stone't ringie?"

"Ay," answered Mary, apparently surprised that any doubt could exist on the subject; "the ring 't ye sent to me."

"It was yer grannie's; an' she ga'e 't to me oot amo' a' the lave for a keepsake, 'cause I was youngest."

“ Oh, mither, it was—sae kin’ o’ you to sen’ t—to lat me ken that your love wasna less aifter a’. Oh, gin it hedna been that, my hert wud ’a maist broken, mither,—to be sae lang bainish’t fae ye a’. Wud ye —lat me gi’e t to Maggie—the ring mither ?”

“ Surely, Mary ; but ye ’re speakin’ owre muckle, *my lassie*. Lat me tak Maggie awa’ noo.”

“ Nae yet, mither. I wunt—it deen—it maun be deen noo. Wud ye open my breist ?”

“ Faur is the ring, than, my dear ?”

“ Here, mither, faur it’s been—nicht an’ day—sin’ Maggie’s kirsenin.”

Margaret Malcolmson, as directed, opened the breast of her daughter’s bed-gown, and there, over her heart, on a narrow ribbon passing round her neck, she found the precious stoned ring, of which the reader has previously heard. She shortened the ribbon, and passed it over Wee Maggie’s neck, carefully placing the ring in the bosom of her little dress. Mary, who was lapsing into a state of extreme exhaustion, now looked up with a satisfied smile, and said in a faint whisper—

“ Mither !—lat me kiss Maggie !”

When she had gratified this last request, Margaret Malcolmson took the child gently away to put it into its cradle. She smoothed Wee Maggie’s couch, laid her carefully down, and for a couple of minutes sung a quiet lullaby to the infant as she stooped over it. She then returned to the bedside. Mary seemed to be dropping quietly off to sleep ; she sought to make some slight adjustment of the bed-clothes for her comfort, and as she did so her hand was arrested in the act. A change in the patient’s countenance struck her, and as she watched it for a moment, two or three heavy acts of breathing followed. Nothing more ! Then all was silent, and Margaret Malcolmson, with an awe-struck heart, gazing fixedly on Mary’s sunken face and still form, knew that her daughter was no longer an inhabitant of this earth.

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER CALL OF THE BELLMAN.

THE man with the Highland shaltie made another journey to Skellach Brae. And this time when Saunders Malcolmson saw him approach, he was in no doubt either as to who he was or what was his errand.

“An’ my lassie’s awa’ neist,” was his exclamation when the bellman drew near.

“Your lassie’s awa’ to them that’s gane afore.”

“God’s will be deen,” said Saunders; and I think he spoke with a goodly measure of sincerity when he said it. Saunders Malcolmson’s nature was stern and rugged, but it had at last been touched in some of its deeper springs. The man with the shaltie did not say Amen literally to the utterance of Saunders, but he meant as much probably when he exclaimed—

“Ay, an’ it’s fat will be deen for evermair, man.”

The man with the shaltie, as has been already said, was the bellman of the parish. A truly proper and respectable church officer and sexton he; in the outward aspect and bearing of him homely even to roughness, yet was there nothing about him suggestive of the ghoul with a bias toward interment of all and sundry as a piece of professional work, sorrowful, it might be, but at least necessary, and that served to put money in his pocket. On the contrary, the bellman was one of the most supremely contented, certainly one of the most obliging men in the parish to which he belonged. For why—had he not his croft, his doddie cow, his wonderful shaltie; were not his family trials over long,

long ago ; and could not he, by jogging along in his own easy, unfettered way, do more than meet the very moderate wants of himself and "the aul' oman," his wife ? To what better use might he turn his time and efforts, as it concerned the souls and bodies of the community, than a due and faithful discharge of the duties of that office, which in its season meets the need of all ? Not the mere perfunctory burial of the dead, leaving the rank grass and uncouth weeds to grow at will over the entire space, where at each footstep there lies the silent testimony of generations to the great mystery of life and death—the nearest testimony we shall get till we have ourselves passed over to the majority. Not thus did the bellman perform his function ; but with that kind of diligent painstaking, and regard to order, which seemed to recognise the right of every inhabitant of God's acre, how humble soever, to be remembered and cared for by some one.

No, Saunders Malcolmson ; it was very natural, and a thing creditable to thee no doubt, when thine own Mary had been laid by the side of her husband in that quiet, half-highland kirkyard, and seeing all the kindly trouble the bellman had first and last taken, to pull out thy pocket-book and offer him a "paper note" in reward of his services, over and above the modest dues. It was equally natural in the bellman to decline the gift as he did.

"Hoot, fat hae I adee wi' yer siller," said the bellman decisively, and almost sharply.

"Ou man, it's nae within my poo'er to mak' ye up nae ither gate for fat ye've deen."

"Ah ! bless ye, goodman, siller winna buy back the breath that's awa'—weel ken I that ; nedder will 't gi'e a quaet conscience to them that hisna 't. An' fat hae I deen that siller would pay me for ? I'm nae needin' ocht that it cud buy ; na, na, Gweed be thankit. I've hed o' my nain, man, ta'en hame to the faul', an' I've neen wi' me noo but her that's been my marrow for

foorty year; we can nedder o's need lang fat we can gedder here, an' feint a plack o't can we cairry farrer wi's. An' fat happier wud I be though ye sud mak' me maister o' the best mailin i' the pairis'."

"Weel, weel, ye've deen a hantle for me 't siller cud never pay."

"The best paymen's to ken 't ye can be lippen't till b' them t' needs a freen's turn. Tell me gin there be ocht else, be 't muckle or little, 't I can dee."

"I've pitten ye to fash that belangs to neen but mysel', but it wud save me mair nor a weary travel gin ye war to see him 't was their maister aboot han'in' owre the hoose fan we gyang awa'."

"It'll be sma' fash that; to turn the key i' the door as ye lea'e 't, an' han't owre to wyte till anither comes to apen an' gae in."

"Oh, man, I'll never forget yer kin'ness to me an' to—them that's awa'," exclaimed Saunders, grasping the bellman's hand with some fervour. "Gweed nicht; an' it's a gryte comfort to me an' mine, at sic a time, till'a hed the like o' you takin' aboot things."

"Gweed nicht; gin ye be satisfet, I'm mair nor pay't," replied the bellman.

And so they parted once more—the bellman and Saunders Malcolmson.

CHAPTER XII.

AT SKELLACH BRAE AGAIN.

WITH the last chapter this homely sketch should probably have taken end. In the way of characters I have little left but a stubborn old carle, of whom the reader may be supposed to have now seen the best side as well as the worst; and a puny infant of a few months, whose life or death, to all outward seeming, were as little likely to affect the history and ongoings of the world as almost anything that could happen within the range of rational observation or human experience. Nevertheless, in the possibilities of every human life, young or old, not absolutely in the power of that gross overmastering vice which almost to human sight seems to burn out the potentialities of the immortal soul, there are, to be found, with little seeking, elements of perennial interest, be the station ever so lowly, and the sphere of action ever so uneventful.

Yes; one owes this much to Saunders Malcolmson even. There are afflictions that not only take away the light of our life, never to be relit here, but which limit our prospect to a single measured step between us and the great hereafter. And yet where the affliction has served its end in some good measure, we shall, if we see in the least clearly, find the power of the awful and silent I AM, soon wonderfully mellowed by the sunlight beneficence—manifested in one form or other—of the pure and great-hearted FATHER, whom the later and better revelation has taught us to believe in as the Ruler of all events. “I will not leave you com-

fortless." The words, while uttered with a special reference, yet express a principle of wide application in the divine government; and they have by-and-by been found true in the experience of many a one who had been verily persuaded that comfort for him on this earth there was none.

Not that Saunders Malcolmson thought or reasoned precisely thus. Saunders for a while, and a long while, was simply out of tune with himself; terribly out of tune; bereaved in feeling, but, let us not omit to say it, somewhat penitent. What we wish to do before closing is to get a glimpse or two of the progress of matters with him under this state of mind, and they can only be quite cursory glimpses, and to learn somewhat of the future of his grand-daughter, the feeble and fragile Wee Maggie.

Mid-afternoon of the day after Mary's funeral saw Saunders Malcolmson far on his homeward journey to Skellach Brae. The cart was in its former rig substantially. Saunders, of his own proper motive, had arranged that, along with Mary's chest of drawers and body clothing, Willie Fraser's "kist" and its contents should be removed home; but, meanwhile, these articles were left behind, and only such things as served the purpose of the journey taken. Beside him, among the clean straw, sat his wife, Margaret Malcolmson, and in her arms, underneath a multitude of wraps, the orphaned Wee Maggie. It had been wonderfully quiet, the poor wee fragment of humanity. For though it was a rough blustering day in early May, the watchful care of that grannie, who was now her tenderest guardian, served effectually to prevent the winds visiting her tiny face too roughly, and Wee Maggie was in a quiet way delighted with the inspiriting feeling created by the free air and light of heaven. And otherwise, poor thing, she had no great surplus of physical energy at command to produce anything in the nature of an uproar.

“ Sit roun’ a bittie, ’oman, an’ lat ’er see the horsie noo, to be some divert till ’er,” said Saunders Malcolmson, when they had jogged on for several hours, after sundry attempts of his own to attract the child’s attention, and, as he believed, amuse it.

“ Peer wifie ; it’s growin’ unco tireteese. But it’s a richt gweed wifockie ; an’ never greets neen ;” and Margaret Malcolmson fondled the infant afresh.

“ Weel, ’oman, it’s something byous wi’ quaetness ; or it wud ’a been oot o’ teen a’thegither ere noo ;” said Saunders. “ It’ll be a perfeck ferly gin it dinna leern to girn some mair nor it does.”

“ The peer infant’s fenless, an’ tir’t oot as weel, eenoo, man,” said Margaret Malcolmson.

“ Ay, nae doot, nae doot ; but it chates me gin it binna quaet o’ naitur,” continued Saunders gazing earnestly and thoughtfully at Wee Maggie, who was directing her demure and steady look at nothing in particular.

In this instance, perhaps, Saunders’s instinct did not mislead him. At any-rate, when Skellach Brae had been safely reached, and matters had again subsided into something like their ordinary course, the domestic procedure adopted and enforced by him left no room to doubt that, in the person of Wee Maggie, a somewhat important addition had been made to the household. Maggie, moreover, had early attained a certain character with others besides her grandfather.

“ Weel, ’oman, o’ a’ the creaturs that ever wus seen in oor pairt, that bairnie at Skellie’s is the mervel to me.”

“ Eh, but the peer thing ’ll be clean connach’t.”

“ An’, wud ye b’lieve ’t ? it’s the aul’ man ’imself, Saun’ers yon’er, ’t’s maistly to blame.”

“ But dinna ye raelly think ’t Saun’ers’s jist been some weyk kin’ aye sin Mary’s deith, no ?”

“ An’ ye’ve jist said it noo. I never mintit at sic a

thing to nae livin', and wudna, on nae account; but that time 't Sprottie 'imsel' gaed doon i' the spring to speer for them fan *she* was awa' wi' Mary, Saun'ers spak till 'im mair like a fey bodie nor the cowshus man 't he ees't to be. Awat Sprottie tyeuk byous ill wi' 't fae ane that we've kent sae lang for a neebour. Only we thocht he hed jist been dumpitch about things 't hed happen't at the time. But the wye that he's been idoleesin' the creatur o' an infant wud raelly gar a bodie think that 's jeedgment 's nae fat it ees't to be."

"Hoot, 'oman; gin ye hed seen 'im as I did, i' the vera heid o' hairst, gyaun stoitin' about amo' the stooks at 's leasure, wi' the littleanie in 's oxter, fan oor fowk, aul' an' young, wus a' at the flaucht to get in a puckle for fear o' the brucklie weather—aw cud hardly believe my nain een."

"Aw dinna won'er at it; for fa ees't to be first o' the feedles gin screik o' day fan there was the chance o' an enterin mornin', an' hin'most o' drawin' hamewith as lang's the meen glentit owre the tap o' the hill fan gloamin hed set upo' the shearers, but Skellie."

"He 's feerious fon't o' the bairnie, an' a bodie wudna won'er at it; but there 's a midse i' the sea, ye ken, an' it is *not* wisse-like to gae sic len'ths. Forbye gettin' a lassie to nurse 't, he can hardly lippen't oot o' 's nain sicht."

"Weel, peer man, it 's an unco veesion o' a creatur; aw doot sair it winna store the kin lang, dee wi' 't fat he likes."

"Eh, it winna live; it 's owre douce an' aul'-farran like, an' fan it lauchs or sielike it has nae kin' o' craw about it ava. An' ye wudna aiven hear 't gi'e a cheep o' a greet in a month's time."

The interlocutors in this dialogue were Sprottie's wife and her neighbour woman, and their discussion of Saunders Malcolmson and his personal affairs might be regarded as a not inaccurate reflex of the opinion of the neighbourhood six months after the advent of Wee Maggie at Skellach Brae.

As time went on, matters did not change much in the quiet life of Saunders Malcolmson's establishment. At Maggie's first coming, Saunders's two sons, now tolerably well grown lads, who felt themselves rather beyond bairnly ways, had fought somewhat shy of the fragile-looking little stranger, for which they were immediately visited with Saunders's emphatic censure. Maggie soon gained on them too, however, till by-and-by Saunders deemed it incumbent upon him to warn them against the risk they incurred of "spoilin'" the bairn. In Saunders's idea of the thing, he, solely and alone, could hit the just medium between over-strictness and over-indulgence in the management of the child. No matter if other people continued to think, or say, that Saunders in his own case furnished the most glaring illustration of foolish fondness for his little orphan grand-daughter. Saunders was not only totally unconscious of anything of the sort, but he held to it more firmly than he held to any other article of his creed, that he could not be in any mistake about Wee Maggie. Spoil the bairn by over-indulgence! Preposterous notion! Where in the wide universe was there aught that could mar or obscure his perfect comprehension of Maggie's just wants and feelings, or dim Maggie's simple yet unqualified and growing faith in him?

As pure matter of fact, the terms of intimate communion of spirit and feeling on which Saunders Malcolmson and Wee Maggie lived were remarkable to behold. When he took his place by the hearth, the puny "lassockie" would creep over even from her grannie's knee into his rough arms, and pull his whiskers, or quietly pick at the brass buttons on his grey waistcoat, with supreme satisfaction, while Saunders watched her movements with an expression which there was no possibility of mistaking. It was not that he said much, still less that he indulged in any kind of ecstatic puerility with a view to accommodate himself to Maggie's infantile intellect. Yet that Maggie knew

all about him somehow, and had unspeakable confidence in the old man, was a point not open to doubt. And Saunders's love for her, on which the whole relationship rested, was, I think, chastened as well as strong.

When Wee Maggie had "wun to the fit," she would toddle away as she could after Saunders Malcolmson at his outside labours for hours at a time, when the weather suited, without manifesting the slightest desire for other companionship. Her pedestrian powers were rather slight, for Maggie, despite the care bestowed on her, was still but a feeble, wan-coloured bairnie; but when she got tired of walking, she would sit contentedly down, and seek amusement in her own quaintly-demure fashion, by plucking such modest wild flowers and showy grasses as happened to be within reach, finding her reward in Saunders's expressed admiration of her incipient nosegays, which he would condescend to smell and praise loudly when held up to him for inspection.

If Wee Maggie was feeble as a walker, she acquired very early, and very perfectly, the gift of speech. To Saunders Malcolmson this of itself would have been a source of unqualified satisfaction, simply as another proof of Maggie's super-eminent merits. To the sage women in the neighbourhood it was the last and crowning proof that poor Wee Maggie was destined to fill a very early grave. As invariably happens in the case of such vaticinations, these predictions had become perfectly well known to those who were most likely to be keenly touched by their sombre shading. Margaret Malcolmson knew all about them: they had indeed been confidentially communicated to her by their authors under the guise of fulfilling a stern duty, in the most friendly way, of course, on their part, and Margaret had not been altogether unimpressed thereby. Every faint suggestion of the sort had, however, been met by an indignant and even angry protest from Saunders Malcolmson himself:—

“Aw won’er to hear ye, ’oman ; fat gars ye gi’e heed to sic aul’ wives’ stoit. Tell *me* that Maggie’s owre wise for ’er time ! It’s seerly aneuch that oor gran’-mithers believ’t i’ the can o’ the fairies. The littleane’s life ’ll be ta’en care o’ b’ a wiser Han’ nor oors.”

It was Saunders Malcolmson’s wont to “stick to his ain text,” and in this case he was every way disposed to do so. Nevertheless, as he looked upon the undoubtedly weakly physique of the placid and affectionate little woman who had come to be so much to him, it might be that Saunders at times felt a certain measure of disquiet, bred of such thoughts as have been indicated. And, as time went on, Maggie failed to improve in point of robustness ; or to acquire that love of physical movement and noise that distinguishes your healthy bairn in its normal and thriving condition.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE OMENS THICKEN.

ON a certain Sunday in early summer, when Saunders Malcolmson had chosen to stay at home from church and "keep the toon," with Maggie as his companion, the two went a-field together for a short distance. Saunders, who had done his shaving on the previous evening, had assumed a sort of easy *dishabille*, with the collar of his clean striped shirt loose, his red Kilmarnock night-cap on his head, and his stocking legs doubling downward over his unlaced shoes. Maggie had been duly set out in her best check pinafore, and such other small changes of attire as betokened the Sunday outfit. They had daundered together for a little space, when Saunders sat down on the sunny side of a piece of mixed plantation that encircled the grass field, in which they were, on its eastern side. Maggie, whose years now numbered two and a half, and who maintained the better part of the confidential conversation that was going on, had taken to gathering gowans, and sprigs of wild heart's-ease, when suddenly her quiet prattle ceased. Just then, a "cushat" in the plantation, which they had faintly heard before, had renewed his plaintive *coo-coo-coo*, with what seemed redoubled earnestness. Perhaps the cushat, in his shady tree, was unconscious of the comparative nearness of human creatures, otherwise his timid instincts would have led to the cessation of his monotonous, yet, pensively pleasing, solo. In place of that, a yet closer approach to his retreat, and the stillness of everything around, made his half-pathetic notes fall with increased emphasis on the ear. On looking

round after a little time, Saunders Malcolmson found Maggie motionless, and listening to the cushat's song in rapt attention. She listened for several minutes, and when the cushat had, for the second or third time, made a partial break only to begin again, she rose from her temporary resting-place amongst the grass, dropped her flowers, and toddling up to Saunders, gazed into his face with the utmost seriousness, as she said,

"Daddy-da ; that doo's greetin' 'cause his wife bids him sing !"

Saunders made no reply, except to stroke Maggie's head, and smile at what seemed to him a quaint conceit, to which only such a supremely gifted spirit as Wee Maggie's could have given birth. Then she listened with renewed earnestness as the cushat went on with his croon ; crept a little closer to Saunders's breast, glanced up once or twice in his face, and then, with a half-frightened look, said—

"Bid him stop, daddy-da !"

"Hoot, Maggie," exclaimed Saunders, "the cushie-doo winna touch ye."

Maggie strove to be composed as Saunders fondly clasped her in his arms ; but it was no use. She only clung to him more closely as she listened again, and then, with trembling lip and appealing look, she said—

"Oh, my peer, peer mammy ! she's deid an' awa', an' its needin' me noo, daddy-da ;" and poor Maggie, as she buried her face in her grandfather's bosom, burst into a wilder fit of weeping than Saunders had ever heard her do.

"Oh, great God, spare me my lassie ! Tak' aught, or a'thing else, but—my lassie !" exclaimed Saunders Malcolmson, half mentally, half articulately, and almost or altogether involuntarily, as he clasped the sobbing Wee Maggie yet more closely to his breast.

Was the superstitious notion operating on Saunders Malcolmson even ? Or *was* it superstition ? Who shall say ?

CHAPTER XIV.

WEE MAGGIE DEVELOPING.

To speak out to thee now frankly, and at once, good reader, is something very like making a virtue of necessity. It was not the fate of Mary Malcolmson's Wee Maggie to fulfil the destiny shaped for her by the female augurs. In place of dying off in early bairnhood, Maggie continued to live and grow, all in her own quiet and sober fashion. It might be that she was pretty much the reverse of robust, and that in her whole bearing there was a kind of premature sedateness that formed a contrast to what is usual in everyday childhood, brimming over with animal spirits; and delighting, above all things, in mere physical activity. And it might be that though Maggie seldom if ever complained of actual illness (it was not her habit to complain much of anything), there was enough peculiarity in her childhood, physically as well as mentally, to make those most nearly interested in her not unfrequently feel—

Yet there is something that doth force my fear.

Under this ever-recurring thought, a thought which he breathed not to any human being, Saunders Malcolmson indeed lived for years. It had at last got a lodgment in his mind, and there it would stay, or come and go as it chose, and not according to his will or desire.

But why, oh, Saunders, should it thus be? Was not the whole life and being of thy little grand-daughter a perfectly harmonious outcome of the later history of

thy own Mary, her mother, whose last legacy to thee and thine the child was? I have no intention of attempting to discuss psychological questions in their hereditary relations or otherwise; but it seems to me that, under all the circumstances surrounding her birth, there would, to say the very least of it, have been less of congruity in finding Maggie a creature full of rude health and boisterous vivacity, than in finding her to be what she really was; and Maggie, let it be said, is no mere fancy picture. In relation to Saunders Malcolmson personally, I am firmly persuaded it was better ordered the one way than the other; inasmuch as the feeling of solicitude was kept sufficiently in exercise—not once, or for a brief space, but often, and over a series of years—to constitute a discipline fitted to deepen his sympathies, and tone down the native hardness of his nature, which a previous habit of mind had done much to intensify. And so it was that men of the stamp of his old neighbour Sprottie found evidence to satisfy them that Saunders Malcolmson had “never cour’t” the death of his daughter; that the sad events of that time had really made him a little weak, poor man.

In the childhood and girlhood of Wee Maggie, one feature of character was to be specially noted, and Saunders Malcolmson did not fail to note it.

“Ye winna believe me ’oman, but oor naim Maggie hisna ’er marrow i’ the pairis’ for a biddable, aiven-temper’t lassie, lat aleen ither things.”

In uttering these words, Saunders, of course, addressed his wife.

“Ou, it’s nae ill to get creaturs to rin the road that they want to gyang; it’s easy ca’in the dyeucks to the mill-dam, ye ken!” said Margaret Malcolmson, in a jocular tone.

“Hoot, ’oman, ye ken the lassie as weel’s I dee; an’ ye ken that I’m speakin’ the trowth.”

“Deed, man, I think she’s gotten the gate o’ you

unco weel," said Margaret Malcolmson, still speaking half jocularly.

"The gate o' me! an' fat syne?"

"Ou, ye ees't to be gey gweed at garrin' the ba' row's yer nain fit ca'd it; but heely till we see ye conter Maggie!"

"Ay, but ye ken perfectly weel noo that Maggie never refees't to dee a single thing that she was bidden, edder to you or me."

"Aweel, that's true aneuch, peer thing," said Margaret Malcolmson.

"An' she's nae like some creaturs that'll dee fat they're taul', and sulk aboot it a' the time syne. Maggie never luiks as gin there cud be twa wyes i' the maitter."

"Ou na," again retorted Margaret Malcolmson, "an' it's a' the easier to dee fan Maggie's wye's aye the richt ane!"

Saunders accepted this equivocal reply in the sense that translated it into a confirmation of his own view.

It was even very much as the worthy couple had put it from their respective points of view. I shall seem, perhaps, to make a very incredible statement, yet it is a statement literally true, to say that when Wee Maggie had reached the discreet and responsible age of fifteen, she had never once received direct punishment or even serious reproof for disobedience, or, indeed, for any other fault. That she was a greatly "indulged" bairn in one sense there could be no manner of doubt, for it was not known that her grandfather or even her grandmother had ever denied her anything she desired to have. And as for the two young men, to whom Maggie, from being an attractive plaything, had gradually and insensibly grown into the rank of a companion, in no way distinguishable from a younger sister, had it not been an ever-recurring "burden" with Saunders Malcolmson to warn the lads against "spoilin'" Maggie? But Wee Maggie's was one of those exceptional natures that literally won't spoil.

Not that the lassie was a perfectly faultless being ; and, still less that she was one of the class of juvenile prudes whose abnormally developed sense of propriety enables them to discourse in the conventionalisms of mature life with a precocity that is absolutely bewildering. Maggie was simply a placid little maiden whose uniform sedateness struck even the casual observer irresistibly. Better known, Maggie had a definite mind of her own ; could perhaps be even a little wilful at a time ; but was found withal, to be distinguished by a prevailing tone of cheerfulness : quite subdued cheerfulness, as a rule, but which now and then broke out in very hearty, though not very boisterous mirth. And over and above all, Maggie's nature was strongly affectionate. It was this that enabled her, with an instinctive tact and discrimination that never failed, to fit herself into the nature and needs of every separate member of the Skellach Brae household, giving her an unconscious power and influence with each, which it would have been difficult fully to estimate, because it was never strained to its limit.

Saunders Malcolmson was getting an old man ; a hale man for his years, but his years were now nearly seventy ; and while he did not contemplate laying him down to die quite yet, his thoughts were more toward the winding up of such of his worldly affairs as could be put in any completed shape. He had a long while ago made his will, wherein his goods, gear, and effects were equitably apportioned amongst his two sons and Wee Maggie, reserving the rights in ample measure of his wife should she survive him. And in these later years of his history, sundry other matters occupied a share of his attention, which in the years gone past would have been regarded with indifference, impatiently turned aside from at once, or met with a burst of unmistakeable anger. His behaviour in this respect rather tended with some to keep up the impression

of his weakened judgment, but of this Saunders made no account, if, indeed, the thought ever crossed his mind.

Now it so happened that Saunders Malcolmson had been exercised in mind about two things. The first was the possibility, probability, or propriety of his elder son, Donald, who was to be farmer of Skellach Brae, getting married, and what it lay to him to do in that case. It was in the natural order of things that the young man's desires and intentions should be that way. And, Saunders, heedful of bitter experience in the past, had reached the conclusion that it was a parental duty to know all that betimes, and knowing it, to adopt the course, at any sacrifice to himself, that should avert the risk of such disaster as might thereafter be rued. But how to attain his end? The question was not one to be successfully handled by himself unaided; and Saunders naturally thought of his wife. He was not, however, greatly advanced in the business by his application in that quarter—

“Hoot, man, fat need ye fash yersel' about that. I'se warran' Donal' 'll tell's in gweed time. Foo wud ye a' ta'en wi' 't gin ony bodie hed speer't that at you fan ye was like 'im?”

Saunders failed to see it as his wife did, but evidently little more could be made of Margaret Malcolmson directly, and when he still pressed the question, she said:—

“Weel, weel, man, gin ye will be at the boddom o' 't ye 'll jist need-a gae to Maggie; she 'll shortly manage to pit Donal' an' you tee throu yer facin's, nae doot.”

“I 'll speer at 'er ony wye,” said Saunders.

He “speer't” accordingly; and Maggie laughed pawkily in old Saunders's face, but said nothing.

“But aw wunt ye to tell me,” Maggie.”

“I maybe cudna.”

“Fa ither cud dee 't than?”

“Donal' 'imsel', gin he like't.”

“Weel, I’m seer he’ll tell *you* seener nor onybody.”

“But aw dinna think that Donal’ has—a lass,” said Maggie hesitatingly; “an’ he wudna be seekin’ to mairry, ye ken.”

But Saunders insisted on reaching certainty; and Maggie, with little more ado, undertook the duty of asking Donald all about it. This duty the sly little damsel had perhaps the less delicacy in undertaking from the fact that “Uncle Donal’” had up to that stage, as she very well knew, rather prided himself on stiffly maintaining the attitude of a non-marrying man. Maggie’s unceremonious way of getting at her object was to ask him straight out, with an air of assumed gravity—

“Fan are ye gyaun to be marriet, uncle?”

“Eh! ye little monkey,” said Donald, catching Maggie by the ear, “fat gars ye bather fowk? I’ll get you marriet to some crusty aul’ Turkis, wi’ a face like a grey cuddy, that’ll keep ye in order the richt gate.—Ye’ve a lad yersel’, eh?” Truth to tell, Maggie blushed at this interrogatory somewhat more decidedly perhaps than her interrogator had expected; and the good-natured Donald, with a firm asseveration that *he* knew quite well who her sweetheart was, ceased his banter forthwith.

Maggie on her part was able to report in good faith to Saunders that, so far from any definite intention of getting married, his son Donald really could not, so far as she knew, boast of owning a sweetheart. Such was the opinion of her uncle Francie, as well as her own. Maggie presumably did not regard her “remit” on the subject as including the affairs of uncle Francie himself, concerning whom there was ground to believe she could have revealed a different state of matters. But if uncle Francie—who had years ago left the paternal roof at Skellach Brae to learn the useful craft of a blacksmith, and was now a “tradesman” on his own account—had made Maggie his confidant, it would have been out of the question to divulge his secret.

The other subject which had revolved itself in Saunders Malcolmson's mind now and again, for several years, was of a totally different kind. Long ago, Saunders had thought of a "head stone" to mark the far-off grave of his deceased daughter and her husband. In course of time the stone had been actually got, and he took counsel with the dominie concerning the inscription. The dominie gave it to be understood that he could on fit occasion furnish a very elegant and suitable epitaph in Latin. He repeated several examples with a paraphractical translation for Saunders's enlightenment; and even hinted that the classic tongue named was the fittest vehicle of any for the expression of pious grief and loving remembrances. Saunders failing in due appreciation of this harmless display of learning—(for his friend had no serious intention of proposing for his approval what he could not read)—bluntly declared he could have nothing to do with the dominie's "Laitin"; and he referred him to the Bible as the proper place from whence to select a fitting sentiment; when, having the names and dates, he could "pit it thegither" correctly, as desired. Of course, the dominie at once fixed on the beautiful lines in King David's elegy on the death of Saul and Jonathan—"They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided." Rather to the dominie's disgust, as well as his surprise, Saunders, after due consideration, rejected even this as failing in appropriateness, and he gave up the task with a slightly crusty remark concerning Saunders's obstinacy.

"I may be obstinate, man, but it gaes nearer the quick wi' me nor ye wud think. It's fae nae disrespect to you," said Saunders, in a tone of much earnestness, "but *I* daurna pit that"; and the mollified dominie handed him a new draft in outline, adding,

"Weel, that's the settin' o' 't, ye 'll jist need to choose a text yersel', an' copy in'o the blank."

At this stage the dominie's elder son, then a high-

school student, and a not infrequent visitor at Skellach Brae, came in to lend his assistance, freely offering such hints and suggestions as occurred to him, in accordance with what he saw to be the mood of Saunders Malcolmson's mind.

And in this wise, and after much pondering on Saunders Malcolmson's part, the headstone had ultimately been finished, sent to its destination in charge of his two sons, and duly set up under supervision of the old bellman, the erstwhile owner of the small hairy shaltie.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CONCLUSION OF THE WHOLE MATTER.

Seventeen long years had passed since the death of Willie Fraser and Mary Malcolmsen, when Saunders Malcolmsen, this time as one of a family group, again stood by their grave. At Saunders's request, Donald had yoked the cart and driven him, his wife, and Wee Maggie thither, over all that long road from Skellach Brae. There they stood; Donald in the full strength of early manhood, with Maggie, a comely girl of eighteen, but whose staid and thoughtful look, when at rest, might have well enabled her to pass for twenty; and, close by her, Margaret and Saunders Malcolmsen, now both considerably "failed," through the course of years. By Maggie's side, too, was our old student friend, whose hand had some years ago been employed on the epitaph. He was presently the substitute schoolmaster of a neighbouring parish, having hitherto acquired no recognised position of his own; and by some mysterious means, which it did not occur to Saunders to inquire into, had become aware of the visit about to be made, and employed part of a school holiday to travel a half-dozen miles to meet his old friends. And near them stood a yet older man, bending over his stick—the bellman, now a lonely widower. They stood and read thus—

Sacred to the Memory

OF

WILLIAM FRASER,

ACCIDENTALLY KILLED, APRIL 8, 1853,

AGED 29.

AND HIS WIFE,

MARY MALCOLMSON,

WHO DIED, APRIL 27TH, 1853,

AGED 23.

*And behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they
had no comforter.*

*Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead, more than the
living which are yet alive.—Ecl. chap. iv.*

"An' this is their lassockie, man!" said the bellman after a pause; "a grown 'oman."

"Ay, she's comin' up; an' we've baith come to be little bu'kit sin' we last met here," said Saunders Malcolmson.

"Gweed safe ye, my lassie; ye get nae dower o' shame fae them that wus yer pawrents," continued the bent old bellman looking kindly at Maggie. "It wus little I ken't o' them, an' less I ken o' ony o' you; but simple, honest, hamel fowk, wi' little o' this wardle's gear to ca' their ain, an' maybe a fell share o' fat we come a' throu', mair or less, o' the shady side o' the wa'—they're nae ill to win alike wi'. To them the wardle wears nae fause face; an' they canna mint to gae here or there afore ithers in playactors' claise. We see them ance, an' we've seen them aye, or the faut 'll maist lickly be oor nain. 'Deed ay; ye winna tak it ill fae an aul' man, but the tae half o' the tribbles an' disagreements that mak oor life snell and bitter faur it mith be sweet an' pleasant, comes fae oor ain laithful conceit o' oorsel's, an' it may be oor hard an' hasty joodgments upon ithers—better nor oorsel's, it weel may be. An' is this anither oye o' yours?" continued the bellman, whose eye next rested on Maggie's immediate companion.

"Ou na, man," replied Saunders; "he's nae freen'; a neebour lad 't we've kent sin' he was a bairn, an' weel respeckit him an' his. It's vera kin' o' 'im to min' on 's aul' acquaintance, but he's nae freen', man."

"Weel, weel," quoth the bellman, "they're sometimes fitter freens 't's nae drap's bleed nor them 't's sibbest till 's. Seil upo' them," he added, as the young people, for reasons known to them, turned away to look at the quaint and rustic memorials of the departed that were placed all about them; Donald had gone to find his horse for the return journey. "Seil upo' them, they're a winsome pair. Aboot fat they may hae, or houp to hae, o' this wardle's gear I ken naething; an'

as little wud I care to ken. But, oh, man, it's a muckle maitter to be leal an' true, first an' foremost, an' for aye, to fat's set deepest i' the single ae-faul' hert by Him that made it."

Saunders Malcolmson looked first at his wife, and then he gazed after the two young people in a half-bewildered kind of way. "It may be; it may be, man. An' nae fitter place for me to mak' amen's to them for my oppression i' the time byegane;" and Saunders, who spoke slowly and abstractedly, paused.

"But ye mauna heed me," continued the old bellman, resuming, "ye mauna heed me, sirs. I'm but a stranger in a menner to you an' yours. I'll awa' an' tak a stap doon the loan; an' fan yer throu' jist tak' ye tee the yettie ahin ye. We dinna like orra stragglers, wi' four feet or twa, comin' aboot 's oonkent an' uncarin'. Good-day, good-day!"

The old bellman went his way as he had said. And those whom he addressed, in due season, went theirs; not, however, till Saunders Malcolmson had made it perfectly plain to all concerned that, greatly as his affections were bound up in Maggie, there was a yet tenderer tie which Maggie might rightly form, and with the formation of which no sordid thought must interfere, under pain of a vastly greater crime than sacrilege. It is a safe enough conclusion to say that his words were accepted by Maggie and her immediate companion, at any rate, as the words of ripened wisdom.