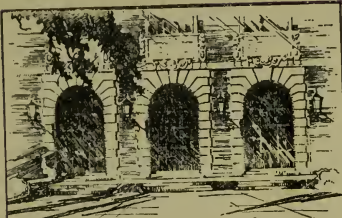


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THE MINISTER'S WIFE.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF

'CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,'

'SALEM CHAPEL,'

ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE MINISTER'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE death of Margaret Diarmid had been, as people say, sudden at the last. Whether the agitation of that visit had been too much for her, or if Nature at the end, having lingered so long, had succumbed in a moment to some unseen touch, it was impossible to tell. She was dead—that was all that could be said. Things had gone on as usual all the evening through in the dim parlour, where Jean came in from time to time to see that all was safe, and Isabel moved softly about at the appointed hours with her cordials and her medicines. Margaret had been lying, as her stepmother had left her, with her large, humid, wistful eyes fixed, taking less notice of everything around than usual, looking out, as it were, into an unseen world of her own. An intense quietness had fallen upon the house. The children had been sent early to bed; and Jenny Spence, who had volunteered to assist

in the watch, was comfortably installed in the big elbow-chair by the fire in the kitchen. 'We're better without her,' Jean had whispered to Isabel; 'but it's a real pleasure to her, and she's a connexion; and she'll no disturb Margaret.' Jean herself had taken up her position, wrapt in her cloak, just within the parlour door. It was usual for them, at an earlier hour than this, to remove their patient to bed. But Margaret had been so still that they had hesitated to disturb her. 'By-and-bye,' she had said to them softly, as she lay there with her white face upturned, and her open eyes. She was not asleep; but so quiet, so smiling, breathing so calmly. Could it be that she had taken 'a good turn?' Isabel, seated at the foot of the sofa, her duties over for the moment, kept her watch, praying mechanically, dozing by moments, stupified by grief and weariness. Jean behind backs saw nothing of what was passing. But after a time the stillness became intolerable, and weighed upon her. Her first impulse was to steal out to the kitchen and rouse Jenny Spence, and console herself with a melancholy talk over the fire; and then she bethought herself that it would be cruel to leave Isabel in this atmosphere, which somehow seemed all at once so strangely chilled and silent. Listening intently, it seemed to her that she heard no breathing but her own. Margaret's hardest

paroxysms would have sounded natural and consoling in place of that awful stillness. Jean's heart began to throb in her ears, and her eyes to dazzle. It was some time before she could move. When she at last summoned her powers and roused herself, it was all clear to her in a moment. The strange silence, the sudden chill, had been death; but thus the long illness, which all the parish expected was to have a triumphant and victorious conclusion, ended softly in the silence, without sound of trumpet or demonstration of exceeding joy.

It would be impossible to say that this was not a great disappointment to Loch Diarmid. Those who had been Margaret's most warm adherents, against the others who condemned her for want of faith, felt themselves deceived in their most just expectations. Even Jean consented with a pang that it was really so, and that there were to be no last deathbed pæans, and cries of victory, and visions of angels, to vindicate Margaret's sanctity. 'Slipped out o' life at last like a knotless thread; no glorifying her Maker, as was to be looked for,' the crowd said, not disguising their disappointment. They would not believe that God had given her her release sleeping, as He does to His beloved.

As for Isabel there was an interval, unfortunately for her a very short interval, in which

she was conscious of nothing. Not that the simple, healthful girl, trained in stern Scotch self-restraint, found refuge in any swoon or fit of bodily unconsciousness. But fatigue had so worn and bewildered her, and benumbed all her faculties, that she was incapable of any fresh sensation. The kind women took her to her bed, and the young creature, all broken and worn, slept the heavy sleep of sorrow, that profound, joyless slumber which pain and suffering bring to young eyes. When she woke, it was not with any fresh pang: she had carried the sense of 'what had happened' with her throughout her sleep—but with still the same heavy, listless, benumbed sensations. Sometimes, when she started involuntarily at the thought that it was time for Margaret's wine, or her soup, or her medicine, her heart thus sharply pricked would rouse up, and her eyes gain relief in the measureless tears of youth. But she did not come to herself for days, scarcely until the time of darkness was over, and the procession had gone out from the cottage doors, and her sister was carried away from her, while she herself remained behind. Then her life sprang again out of excess of pain.

I cannot give an idea of her feelings at this terrible moment without conveying to the reader, I fear, an unworthy impression of poor Isabel. It was not grief only, but life that sprang up

thus wildly in her heart. Had she followed her impulses, she would have rushed out, rushed into any distraction she could find, done something, anything, it did not matter what, to relieve the terrible unrest, the feverish sense of energy that was within her. Grief, unable any longer to blunt, sharpened all her faculties. And yet she had to stay still in the darkened room, to read her Bible, as was thought proper at the moment, with her heart so plucking at her and rending her, that the mere effort to be still was agony. Jean, weeping in the kitchen, with the great family Bible opened out on the table, and with all that strange consciousness of the proprieties of bereavement which belong to her class, was comforted by the solemn quiet; but Isabel was incapable of such conventional restraint. She walked about her room, falling on her knees, sometimes breaking forth into sobs that shook her frame, glad to feel exhausted by her weeping, eager to do anything that would keep her calamity at a little distance from her. The enforced idleness of the moment, which to Jean was the solace of grief, was madness to Isabel. How was she to bear it? Henceforward alone in the world, having herself, and nothing better to think of; no one to consider, to be bound by, to invoke on all occasions. And at the same time life springing up

already in her, all strong, and full, and fervid, after this temporary interruption. Her veins seemed to swell; her pulses and her heart were ever throbbing, throbbing, till the sound of them filled the silent house as with a buzz of life.

It has been often said, that the many plans into which the survivors plunge after a death show human nature's callousness to the deepest impressions; but in reality there may be a very different meaning in it. Sometimes it becomes one of the most pathetic forms of suffering. 'Let us do something—anything to make this void and ache endurable,' cries the soul that loathes itself for living, and feeling still capable of life. It is like the restless tossings of fever, the writhings of a wounded creature on the awful sword that pierces it. So Isabel writhed and tossed, stretching out her hands wildly in her abandonment. Out of that horror and suspense of her existence it had sprung up more powerful, more alive than ever. All her old thoughts came pouring back upon her, her half-developed hopes, the desires of her heart. Such a fulness and abundance of life possessed her, that the very air seemed to pulse and beat around. And this on Margaret's funeral day, when she should have been lying down prostrate, or seated somewhere, silent and motionless with her Bible, in the shadow of the darkened windows! The sense of this tumult

within her, so unsuitable to all the requirements of her position, shocked and horrified the poor girl. It seemed to her, as it does to the superficial spectator, to be heartlessness and insensibility. She was not wise enough nor experienced enough to feel that it was but a symptom of the awful convulsion that had rent her nature. Could she have turned her face to the wall and been still, and spent the silent hours in tranquil weeping, Isabel would have felt consoled by the consciousness that thus Margaret should be mourned. But there was in her heart nothing of that incapacity of all exertion, that prostration, and weakness, and need of repose, which are supposed to be the characteristics of grief. Hurry, and tumult, and labour, would have been more congenial to her than rest and quiet. The room seemed to stifle her, the silence to drive her wild. Her grief was no sentiment but a passion, boiling through all her veins. She felt like a hypocrite when she heard Jean describe her, in the terrible days which followed, as 'no just able to see you yet.' When the fact was she could have seen anybody, and done anything, and welcomed any exertion, in the keenness of her misery; but grief, like all other things, owes a certain respect and homage to the world.

It was about a week after the funeral when Jean came in, solemnly tapping at the parlour-

door, where Isabel sat alone. She was arrayed in her new black gown, and with her freshest cap, and had a certain air of gravity and importance about her. She came in softly and stood by Isabel, half behind her as she sat at the table. 'Isabel, my bonnie woman,' she said, tuning her homely voice to its softest cadence, 'it's time we were having a talk, you and me, about what we're to do.'

'What should we do?' said Isabel; 'but sit down and tell me what it is: it's weary, weary to sit alone.'

'My lamb!' said Jean, furtively smoothing the girl's soft hair. It was seldom she ventured on such a proof of sympathy, for Isabel was proud. But she did not sit down; she stood with some agitation, twisting the table-cover from the table, shifting from one foot to another. At last her burden came forth with a burst. 'It's best I should ken; it's a' yours now, Isabel; and you were never that fond of me and the poor bairns. I'm your father's wife, and I'm no a lady born like you; but I'm one that would never thole to be where she wasna wanted. Whisht! whisht! I'm no misdoubting your kindness; for her sake I ken you would aye be kind; but if there was to be a change I would like best it should be now.'

'Why should there be a change?' said Isabel, weeping. 'Oh, is there not change enough to

please you? Would you like me to stay my lane in this still, still house and die? But I could not die—I would go wild; and, maybe, you would not care.'

'As if I didna care for everything belonging to ye!' cried Jean, once more timidly caressing her stepdaughter's bent head. 'If it was only *that*, I would be content to be your servant—as near your servant as would be becoming to the Captain's widow,' she added, after a momentary pause. 'But your heart's touched and tender the noo; and if, after, you should reflect on me for taking advantage of you, or anybody else should reflect——'

'Who is there that has any right?' cried hasty Isabel, drying her tears with a hot and trembling hand. 'There's but me now in all the world, and no one that can bid me go or come, or do this or that. Ah, me!'

'My bonnie woman,' said Jean, 'there's mony in the world would be real proud to think a' was their ain to do what they pleased with, and to be able to say as much.'

Isabel answered only by a despairing gesture, and resumed tremulously the work upon which she had been labouring to employ herself. She would have buried herself in books could she have obtained them; but books were but few on Loch

Diarmid, and she had been trained to think 'idleness' a sin, and decorum stood out against her seeing any one, or even going out, except for the most melancholy exercise. So she had mechanically taken to her sewing, the only work she could lay her hands on, the worst work she could have had at the moment. Her brain had been growing dizzy over it when Jean entered, by multiplicity of thought.

'It's a grand thing to be free,' said Jean, her voice faltering a little; 'free o' them you're bound to by any bonds but what God has made. When it's nature it's different—or when it's your free choice it's different; but you and me, Isabel, are free to meet and free to part. I'm no saying but what it would be a sore heartbreak; but if ever there was to come a time when you would reflect ——'

'Oh, dinna speak,' said Isabel; 'if it's your will to leave me, go, and let me take my chance. If I was to go out of my senses or die on the hill-side, what is that to other folk? There is none to care if I was mad or dead to-morrow. If you speak because you're wearied of me and my silly ways ——'

'Oh, Isabel, my lamb!' cried Jean, with tears, 'I'm saying I would be your servant if that was a'. But you maun tell me your will plain if we're to go or stay. A's yours. If we live here, the

bairns and me, it's upon you; and that I canna do unless you say plain out—Bide; and let things be as they have aye been.'

'Is there anything else I could say?' cried Isabel; 'maybe you've forgotten already what was said to you and me—yon night? But I will never forget. Nothing is changed but one thing. Oh, no, I am saying wrong—the heavens and the earth are changed and all's different—all's different!—but not between you and me. And I'll mind about Jamie,' she added, once more hotly and tremulously, drying her eyes. 'He's to be brought up for a minister, if he has a desire to it. We'll speak to Mr. Lothian, or Mr. Galbraith, and I'll not forget.'

Jean shook her head softly behind her step-daughter's back.

'I'm no speaking of Jamie now,' she said; 'afore he's old enough you'll have a man, Isabel, that may have other meanings. But I'm aye thankful to you for the thought. And a young lass is real solitary by herself. I'll bide since you say sae, and weel content; but when the time comes that you're married, my woman, we'll speak of that no more.'

'The time will never come,' said Isabel, hastily. 'I have had my share of life. I am not like a young lass now.'

‘My bonnie lamb!’ said Jean, with a tender smile, letting her hand rest on the downcast head. It was that last touch of self-pity which broke down Isabel’s reserve. At her age the sufferer is so tender, so pitiful of herself! She turned suddenly round, and throwing her arms round her stepmother wept and sobbed on her homely bosom. She had been trying to live to herself, but could not succeed; and of all living creatures this woman, against whom her pride had so often revolted, was nearest to her now. She clung to her as to her last support, and Jean received her in her motherly arms. Her heart had warmed to the wayward Isabel, all through her faulty youth with a love less reverent, but more familiar than that she had given to Margaret. And now a common grief united them as they had never been united before. She held the girl close, repeating over and over those soft names of homely kindness.

‘My lamb!’ she said, ‘my bonnie Bell! my bonnie woman!’ and bent down her head over her, not with the lavish caresses of a lighter nature, but with a strong sustaining pressure. Jean could no more have dropped a flood of kisses on the weeping creature supported on her bosom than she would have thrown her off and abandoned her in her grief. But she held her fast against her honest breast, standing by her in the natural paroxysm.

When the sobs grew fainter, and exhaustion mercifully dulled the pain, it was she who smoothed her hair, and dried her wet cheeks, and gave her such comfort as she could bear.

‘Come ben beside the bairns,’ Jean said, drying the tears from her own eyes, ‘and leave this room that is so full of a’ that’s passed. There’s a cheery fire, and the wee things’ faces are aye a comfort. That was *her* thought: and I’ll make you your cup of tea, and we’ll do our best to bear the burden for her sake.’

There was a cheery fire, as Jean had said, and Isabel was cold with that chill of grief which penetrates into the very heart. The blaze and the warmth gave her a little forlorn consolation; and so after awhile did the sound of voices other than her own, and the care and service that surrounded her. Little Mary came and leaned against her, standing silent by her side with a child’s speechless sympathy. And Jean talked to her, asking no answer. It was the first break to the stillness of death which had gathered round the lonely girl. The sound of the waves on the beach, or the rustle of the trees, would have been almost as coherent and significant. Jean talked by instinct, for the sake of the sound, knowing that was all of which her charge was capable. The hum of external life thus once more returned to keep

from her ears that awful constant buzz of her own confused being. It was the beginning of her new existence; the life that seemed so awful and cold and solitary when she looked at it in her little parlour alone.

Jean attended her to her room when it was time for rest, as she would have done had Isabel been her own child, and gave her one of those rare shy kisses, of which the homely Scotch matron was half ashamed in her intense reticence and self-control. 'Try and sleep, my lamb,' she said, 'I'll come back and put out the candle.' And then she returned to her kitchen, to shut her shutters, and put the 'gathering coal' upon the fire, and make all snug for the night. When she had ended her silent labours, Jean took her moment of indulgence also, sitting down to think in the elbow-chair, by the side of the dark heaped-up smouldering fire.

'Na, na,' she said to herself, 'I maunna trust to that. If Margaret had set it apart out of her share—but I'm no reflecting upon Margaret. It was a' the first wife's siller, and it's Isabel's by right; and I dinna doubt her bit warm hasty heart. But if she were to marry that English lad, me and mine would be little to her after; and if she was to marry anybody else—even the min-

ister—he would be for thinking of his ain first, and maybe a family coming. It would be real natural. Na, na! I maunna trust to Isabel; and, maybe, after a' it's best for the laddie,' she said to herself, with a sigh. 'If the root o' the matter's in him, he'll fight his way to it; and if it's no, he'll never try; and when a' 's said and done, maybe that's the best.'

But it was with a sigh she rose from that moment of reflection and stole back to remove the candle, and saw with affectionate pleasure that Isabel, worn out, had already dropped to sleep. 'The poor bairn!' Jean said, in her tenderness, and clambered up to the attic beside her children, with that sense of being the protector and sole guardian of so much helplessness, which fills the heart of a solitary woman with such softness and such strength. She was but a homely soul, with little refinement about her. In all the world there was scarcely one observer who, Isabel being by, in the interest of her youth, would have wasted one thought on her peasant step-mother; and yet Jean mounting the narrow stair leaving all in order below, spreading her motherly wings over the child who was not her own, as well as over the children of her heart—making up her mind without bitterness to the inevitable

misfortunes of the future, was something nobler than pretty Isabel.

‘I can aye work and keep them in bread,’ she said to herself, as she looked at her boy and her girl in their sleep.

CHAPTER II.

THE next step in Isabel's solitary new life was the visit of Miss Catherine, whose entrance Jean permitted a few days earlier than decorum properly allowed.

'After a', she's a connexion, and the poor bairn's best support,' she said, as she went, wiping her hands on her apron, to open the door to the visitor. 'Oh, ay, Miss Catherine! come your ways ben; she'll be glad of a kind word. She's no suffered that much in her health—God be thankit! But whiles my heart breaks to see her in that weary parlour her lane, and nothing to wile her from her ain thoughts.'

'I had not the courage to come sooner,' said Miss Catherine. 'But, Jean, we must not leave her to her own thoughts.'

'Whiles I wish she was but a common lass,' said Jean, 'that had to work, sair heart or glad. Work's aye a comfort—but sitting pingling wi' a seam! The minister sent some nonsense books; but I hadna the heart to take them to her. A

chapter now and then, or maybe a page o' a good book—that's a' a feeling person can be expected to be fit for. I wonder at the minister. Was I to take in fuil stories and novells and siclike to my poor lamb?'

'They might have wiled her from her thoughts, as you say,' said Miss Catherine. 'And now I'll go in. Wae's me! I've looked on two Margaret Diarmids dead in this house, and me older than the eldest of them, and living to this day.'

'It's for the comfort of the poor folk,' said Jean, putting her apron to her eyes. And then she opened the parlour-door. 'Isabel, my bonnie woman, here's Miss Catherine come to see you,' said she, with a watery smile.

There could be but one way of meeting for the two. Isabel stood up for an instant with a nervous attempt at composure, and then dropped weeping into her old friend's extended arms: and there was first the inevitable attempt at consolation, tender words and encouragements. 'It's well with her—it's better for her. We must not mourn, for her sake.'

'And now tell me, my dear,' said Miss Catherine, when poor Isabel had wept herself into quietness, 'how you've settled with Jean? You are young, and it will be a strange life for you here by yourself. Is it settled that everything is to go on as it has been?'

‘Why should there be any change?’ said Isabel. ‘It is her house as long as it is mine. Is she not the nearest I have left?—and, oh, she’s kind! though I have never been good to her all my life.’

‘She is not a drop’s blood to you,’ said Miss Catherine, with some warmth. ‘Isabel, I’m not one to bid you run away from grief; it’s a vain thing to do; but you’re young, and you have a sufficiency, and why should you be burdened with the second family? I had nothing to say against it in the past. Jean was aye kind, poor woman. But I cannot bear to think of you staying here in this room after all that’s come and gone.’

Miss Catherine cast her eyes round the little sombre parlour. The sun was in the west, behind the house, so that no brightness came in to enliven it. Even the glimpse out upon the wistful pale stillness of the Loch, was saddening rather than gladsome, and she shivered a little as she laid her hand on the arm of the sofa on which Margaret had died.

‘I like it the better,’ cried Isabel, quickly. ‘Where should I stay but here? where she can aye come back in her mind, and think upon me, even sitting up yonder among them all! If I were to go to a strange place she might not know——’

‘Oh, Isabel, you were always fanciful. A

blessed spirit, if it's permitted, can go anywhere, you may be sure, and know the place wherever you are,' cried Miss Catherine, scarce less fanciful in the sobriety of her thoughts.

'Ah! but it would not be like home,' cried the girl. 'She has but to think and she'll see me—even when she has her gold harp in her hand and singing yonder. Just a thought and she'll know the very room I am sitting in, the light in the window, the bonnie Loch she was aye so fond of. She could not come to me so quick if I was in another place.'

'My dear, we must not make idols of those that are gone,' said Miss Catherine with tears in her eyes, 'or like the Papists, worshipping their saints. We must mind there is but One that hears when we cry, and He can never fail.'

Isabel made no answer. She took up her work with trembling fingers, and made an effort to go on with it, while the visitor, for her part, had enough to do to master the sob in her voice.

'You are so young,' she said; 'you cannot know what you want, or what is best for you. I know a poor gentlewoman in Edinburgh, Isabel, that would be very kind to you. A change would be good, though you cannot think it now. Making and mending is grand work for the mother of a family, but for a young creature alone, it is not to

be thought of as an occupation. And there are things you might learn that would fit you for your life to come. How can you tell what your life will be? Your blood, my dear, is as good by the mother's side as mine; and if you saw a little of the world—You're a proud thing, Isabel, you'll not allow you want anything; but the change would do you good, and the novelty would divert your mind——'

'As if I was asking to be diverted!' said Isabel. 'Oh! Miss Catherine, if it's like that you think of me! I am seeking no change. My life, the best of it, is past. What have I to think about but how to be quiet and do my duty, and consider my latter end?'

'Oh, bairn! that you should be such a bairn!' said Miss Catherine; 'if it were not for what you've gone through, I could find it in my heart to be angry. Twenty years after this you'll not be so sure that your life is past, nor think so much about your latter end. What is likely is that you have a long life before you; and by-and-bye you'll marry, as most women do. I don't say now—you're thinking of nothing of the kind now; but when due time has past, and you have shown the respect you ought.—You may think me heartless to speak so, but I'm not heartless, Isabel.'

'I cannot understand what you are saying,'

said Isabel. 'Oh, let me be! I am at home, and among my ain folk. I neither want change nor diversion—nor to be married—nor a new life! If there is one thing I would like, it would be to work late and early and take care of the house. But I am too old to learn lessons now, and I am not old enough to be aways thinking about myself.'

Miss Catherine gave a sigh of vexation. She had made up a little pet scheme of her own, and could now but reproach herself for having broached it too soon. She had decided within herself that Isabel must go to Edinburgh to be polished and trained, and that thereafter being well born by the mother's side, and a Captain's daughter,—('There would be no need to enter into particulars—Duncan being dead, thanks be to Providence,' she had added to herself)—and pretty and young, she might yet make a good marriage; and emerge altogether from the lowly sphere in which her mother's foolish choice had cast her lot. Perhaps Miss Catherine had partially reckoned upon Isabel's high spirit being subdued by grief; that she would be ready to obey any suggestion, to take refuge in obedience, to be led whithersoever it was thought best to lead her, was what her adviser expected. But sorrow had not taken this form in the impetuous spirit of the girl. She resumed her work with a little air of nervous determination. She had

obeyed her sister all her life, but no one else; and in this mingled excitement of passionate grief and newborn independence was little disposed to take upon her any new yoke.

‘Perhaps it’s best for the present,’ said Miss Catherine, finally giving in, ‘though I always think when there are changes to be made it is well to make them at once. You think you can go on for ever like this, and you’ll find you are far wrong; but, for the present, my dear, let us talk of other things. Jean will be good to you, I don’t doubt. If I were not concerned for your mother’s daughter, Isabel, and anxious to see you free from all those common folk, I would not speak——’

‘She is very kind to me, and she’s the nearest friend I have now,’ said Isabel; ‘and if she was good enough for my father to marry——’

Miss Catherine shook her head.

‘You are aye your old self,’ she said, ‘trying to provoke me for all the sorrow in your heart. But we’ll say no more on that subject. I would tell you the news of the countryside, if I thought you would care; but if you would not care——’

‘Oh, I do!’ cried Isabel, with a violent, sudden blush. She was ashamed of herself for caring, and angry to think that the country-side should be anything to her in her desolation. ‘I

was meaning,' she continued, timidly, 'if there's any news about friends.'

'John of Ardnamore has gone mad, I think,' said Miss Catherine. 'My dear, don't cry—but I'm grieved and sorry for that man. They tell me he's to marry Ailie, and that they are going away, two fools, on their grand mission. Isabel, is it for him you are shedding such tears?'

'He was here, the last day,' sobbed Isabel, choking with her recollections. 'He fell down there on his knees. Oh, my Margaret! and she put her bonnie hand on his head. I thought nobody would ever be so cruel as to name his name.'

'My darling, I did not know,' said Miss Catherine, tenderly. 'If I had known this I would not have named him; I thought *that* was all over and past, years ago; and I did not think you would remember—you were so young.'

'I will aye remember what happened that day,' said Isabel, through her tears, 'and married, did you say? Oh, Miss Catherine, are men like that? Not a fortnight since he was there, crouched down on the very floor!'

'There are plenty of men like that,' said Miss Catherine; 'but in poor John, it's despair that is driving him. I see all now. He lost heart and hope when he took farewell of her; and he's

mad with his prophesying and his mission. He is my cousin, nearer than you, Isabel. I knew him when he was but that height, such a bonnie boy. I cannot but be sorry for the man.'

'And Ailie!' said Isabel, under her breath. Her first impulse was one of indignant passion; and then there came over her mind a thought snatched from her own youthful experience, such as it was. To marry a man and find after that he loved some one else, even were she dead and gone! 'Poor Ailie!' she said under her breath, after a pause. The indignation was on account of her sister; the pity was her own.

'Ay, poor Ailie!' said Miss Catharine. 'It's a great rise to her in life if it ever comes to pass; but, she will have to part with all her friends, and I doubt much what she'll get in return. Mr. Lothian has been ill, Isabel; that is why he has not been here.'

'Has he not been here—I did not know,' said Isabel, with profound and calm indifference. Miss Catherine gazed at her for a whole minute, without moving, her eyes fixed with a wonder beyond words on the inexperienced creature who could thus balk the most artful attempts to draw her into any path she did not choose herself.

'My dear,' she said, rising, 'you do not know all the love that good man wastes on you. Would

you have been as careless as that if I had spoken of the lad under his roof? As if the minister was not worth twenty of him! and you not to see it, you foolish, foolish Isabel!’

‘Miss Catherine,’ said Isabel, rising too, with fine youthful gravity and superiority, ‘is it right to speak like that to me, at such a time?’

These last words took away Miss Catherine’s breath. She was lost in amaze at the curious innocent dignity and cunning and utter unconsciousness of Isabel’s self-dependence. She felt herself rebuked by the girl who stood so pale before her, who was so resolute and superior and certain of what she said. Had the circumstances been different, she would have laughed at the native skill with which her attempts were baffled. But it was not a moment to laugh, as Isabel had said.

‘Well, well; you will not hear anything I have to say,’ she said, ‘but there may come a time when you will be glad of my counsel. And when that time comes it shall not be denied you. Come to the House and see me when you’re able, Isabel, for the sake of the past. You need not be afraid. I’ll keep silent and give you no advice.’

‘I will always be thankful for your advice,’ cried the unconscious girl, ‘more thankful than I can tell—for who have I to look to now? I would

thank you, on my knees, if ye would always tell me what I ought to do.'

Miss Catherine could not restrain a smile; but Isabel's earnestness and good faith shone out of her serious eyes.

'If you bid me counsel you in the general, and then turn away from every single thing I say, how can I help you,' she said? 'But, my dear, I'll not stay now—go out and take some exercise, and do not sit brooding here. Jean will take care of you, and the fresh air will do you good.'

'I was thinking to take a turn—on the braes—where it's quiet,' faltered Isabel. Perhaps she was afraid to meet Miss Catherine's eye; she swerved aside a little so as not to face her, and paused, and then sought refuge in tears, she could not have told why.

'Eh, but these bairns are strange creatures,' Miss Catherine said to herself as she left the cottage. 'Me to think she would be too broken with her grief to mind what she did. But no! for all so young as she is, as fixed in her ways as if she knew the world from beginning to end like an A B C; going her own gait and thinking her own thoughts, and how to have her own way. And not a fortnight yet since my poor Margaret was laid beneath the sod. These creatures now-a-days never know what sorrow means. They think

of themselves when *we* would have broken our hearts. And me that was always so fond of that wilful Bell!

Thus the old lady mused as she went down the hill from the Glebe, notwithstanding all her experience, with not much more understanding of the young creature she left behind her than had she been twenty like Isabel. The girl wept bitterly by herself when her friend had gone. It was her first contact with the outside world, and she felt that all the strings of her nature had been pulled awry, and that she had given nothing but contradiction where she owed only respect and tenderness. Tears of mortification and shame came to her eyes, and every fresh touch opened the sluices of her natural grief. And she had betrayed to Miss Catherine the guilty, vagrant thought which as yet she had hidden even from herself. Why had she said she was thinking to go out upon the braes? In reality she had not thought of it. And what could Miss Catherine believe but that she was always thinking of her lover, yearning after those meetings, which at all times Isabel had been half ashamed of, as too like the rustic wooings of a 'common lass?' Shame bowed her down to the ground; she had been wrong in every way, full of nothing but herself.

'Oh, my Margaret!' she said, with the bitterest

sense she had yet felt of her loss. Margaret had stood between her and the outer world; she had been her conscience, guiding her with an infallible tender guidance, of which she had never herself been aware. When Margaret was pleased what had Isabel cared who should blame? And Margaret had been so easy to please! It was different, very different, explaining her wayward ways to that soft judge, with now a tear and now a smile—and thus standing up to defend her independence and assert her own judgment against the world.

Isabel had but scarce dried her tears, and composed herself as best she could to her solitary labour once more, when Jean stole in with anxious looks.

‘My lamb,’ she said, ‘there’s the minister’s coming up the hill. He’s been ill, poor man—and white and wan he looks as I never saw him look before. Will I let him in? It’s better now if you can bear to see him; and, Isabel, if you’re feared for his speaking, I will cry upon the bairns and get out the Book, and he’ll give us a word o’ prayer. I dinna ken what he may think, for he’s newfangled in his ways. But that was aye the practice on such an occasion, as long as I mind. Will I let him in?’

Isabel turned away with a hasty gesture of pain; but she was humbled and penitent, and the

solitary parlour looked more solitary, more dreadful than ever to her broken and suffering mind.

‘I do not care who comes,’ she said, with petulance. ‘Let them all come. When they have once been here, and spied upon us how we bear it, maybe they will let us be, and come no more.’

‘Oh, Isabel!’ said Jean, ‘it’s no with that thought the minister comes. You know well what’s in his heart, though he might be your father—and a’ the parish kens.’

For the first time this suggestion was a kind of comfort to the poor girl. She had been feeling so ashamed, so wicked, that there was some balm to her in the thought that all the parish was aware with what feelings she was regarded by the first man in it, and the esteemed of all.

‘Let him come,’ she said, sitting down by the window, where she would have the Loch at least to turn to, away from the reproachful affection in Mr. Lothian’s eyes. ‘If they would but let me alone!’ she said to herself; but in her heart, —the impatient, petulant, struggling heart, desired anything rather than to be left alone. She sat and waited for him with a curious thrill running through her. He was nothing to Isabel—all the love she had to give was given to another; but there came into her mind a sense of wonder whether now she stood alone the minister would care for

her at all? Had it not been the shadow of Margaret he had loved in her? Could it be that her simple self,—her silly, childish, variable self, doing the things she would not, and leaving those undone she would, could be still dear to the man who stood on so strangely different a level? It was a curious experiment she was about to make, and her whole mind was moved by curiosity to know how it would be.

If any one imagines that all this busy crowd of thoughts, all the ceaseless throng of speculations and reflections that crossed her mind, were inconsistent with the great strain of grief which ran through all, it will be because the critic is happily ignorant of that strange self-consciousness in which sorrow lives and has its being, and which calls up a thousand lurking fancies from all the dark corners of the feverish mind—as let ‘*In Memoriam*’ answer, better than any weaker voice.

Mr. Lothian came in, looking, as Jean had said, white and wan, yet full of a hushed fever of agitation, with flushes of colour crossing his cheek, as he came up to her, and took into his her half-reluctant hands. Then Nature suddenly, as with a stroke, quenched out all the curiosity that had been in Isabel’s heart. The sight of him woke again the tears in their fountains. She could say nothing to him, but only weep helplessly with her head bowed

down, almost choked by the convulsive sob which climbed into her throat. His heart was so melted with love and pity that he laid his hand on her head with half-paternal tenderness.

‘Poor child! poor child!’ he said, bending over her, holding the soft small hand which she no longer thought of withdrawing from him. The sight of her tears was almost more than he could bear.

He was still standing by her when she came to herself, and the first thing that roused Isabel was the instinctive homely politeness which her humble breeding had taught her. As soon as her eyes were so clear of tears that she could see, she would have risen to find a seat for him.

‘Sit still, Isabel,’ he said, ‘I have not come to weary you to-day; I shall not stay. Only one moment, my dear, to tell you—but what can I tell you? you know everything I would say.’

Isabel could make no reply; but somehow on the very borders of that outbreak of her sorrow there came to her the sense that her curiosity was satisfied. The man’s voice, though he was so old, like her father, was eloquent and musical with love.

‘I could not come to you sooner,’ he said, ‘and I have not come now to trouble you with words. It is not the time to speak of what one

might wish, or what one might dream. But, my dear, I want you not to forget that there is one heart not far off full of love for you. Not a word—not a word. Isabel, I am asking nothing, my dear. I am going away this minute, as soon as I've said what I have to say. Kindness you'll have in plenty—but love is rare. I thought I would just come and tell you of mine.'

'Oh, Mr. Lothian, I do not deserve it!' sobbed poor Isabel.

'And that there is not a trouble you have, nor a tear you shed, but I would fain bear it for you,' said the minister; 'and my thoughts never leave you in your sorrow night or day; that is all. My dear, when you think, you'll understand. It is not to bribe you to give me anything back—it is but to be a comfort to you.'

'I do not deserve it,' Isabel repeated, not knowing what she said.

And then the good man sighed, and laid his hand once more tenderly, reverently, upon her drooping head.

'I might be your father,' he said; 'but I love you. And farewell for this time, my dear. That was all I had to say.'

The next moment it was as a dream to Isabel that he had been there. She cast a timid look round her, and he was gone, and the very sound

of his footsteps had already died away from the flags at the door. Jean came in amazed, with the great Bible in her arms and met her stepdaughter's eyes. 'Ye'll no tell me he's gone!' said Jean; 'and made his first visit to a bereaved family without a word of prayer? What did he say? What could he be thinking of? Lord preserve us! was it but some appearance, and no the minister himself?'

'He had no time to stay,' said Isabel, faltering; 'he but came to say a word. That he minded upon—us; and was sorry——He had no time to stay!'

Jean, with her big Bible in her arms, and her countenance full of consternation and disappointment, stood thunderstruck in the middle of the room.

'Minded upon us!' she said. 'How was it like he could forget? Folk well kent and thought of in the parish before ever he was heard of. Weel, weel! there's no a day passes in this world but folk may learn something; but I never yet heard of any minister that would gang to see a bereaved family, and leave without a word of prayer!'

It was the subject of her eloquence all the evening after. She had 'cried upon' the bairns, and she had brought the book from the drawer in her own room, in which, being too precious for

daily use, she treasured it. And then had found the minister gone! The good woman could scarcely have been more shocked had he committed some offence against morality.

‘I wouldna have believed it was possible if all the parish had threeped it in my face,’ she said to Jenny Spence. ‘A bereaved house, and no a common bereavement. You would have said he would have made use o’ the occasion to gie us a’ an exhortation; and him to go without even a shake of my hand, or a word of prayer!’

‘And yet he’s a real kind man,’ said Jenny; ‘though folk say he’s an Erastian in his heart.’

CHAPTER III.

It was some days after this before Isabel actually ventured out upon the braes. She had strayed about the garden, looking wistfully along the road, not without a thought that the circumstances were such as to justify Staplyton in coming to her, even within the shadow of her own house. He had asked for her, she knew, at the door, as had everybody in the parish; and it seemed natural to Isabel that her lover should know by instinct the moment when she first looked into the open air, where all their meetings had been. But either he was not aware, no inward monitor having warned him, or else his reverence for her grief was too great to permit of his approach at such a moment. Isabel in her own heart wondered wistfully at his delay. 'If it had been me, I would have aye been upon the watch, to comfort him,' she said to herself; 'but men are different.' And then she thought of Mr. Lothian and the half-dozen words he had said to her. Ah, but he was an old man; he had not

the occupations, the distractions of youth; and he was all but hopeless, eager to seize every opportunity of thrusting his attachment before her. Whereas Horace knew *she* knew; and knew also that she loved him as well—or might it be better than he loved her? It would be hard to tell how the poor girl longed for him in her solitary sorrow. Only to have him stand by her, say her name, would have been consolation beyond all that the most eloquent voice on earth could give. She thought of clasping her hands on his arm, and bending down her head, and crying her heart out there, as a child thinks of rushing to its mother's arms. Isabel had no mother, no friend now that Margaret was gone, so dear as to take that place; and, accordingly, yearned with a sick heart for the young man whom she had made a god of, and who had about as much real sympathy for her grief as his dog had. She was even aware—so humble is love—that he could not enter into it, as many less dear to her could; and for that very reason longed for him all the more, to move him by her grief, to win him over to fellow-feeling by the mere sight of her tears. This longing, however, did not seem to call forth any response from Stapylton's heart. Her thoughts played about him continually without moving him. None of that curious, subtle communication between mind

and mind, which makes one aware instinctively of the needs of another, influenced Isabel's lover. She stood in her garden in the autumn twilight, gazing out upon the pale loch and the shadowy ways. But he never came, never even appeared at a distance to look at the place which contained her, as the poor girl thought he must have done. Could he be gone? This thought racked her mind, gradually distracting it from the immediate empire of her grief. It would have been right for her to appear at church on the Sunday following the funeral, and both Jean Campbell and Miss Catherine were deeply scandalized by Isabel's refusal to go. But she took one or two solemn walks in the afternoon, leaning on Jean's arm, as her stepmother thought proper, though Isabel felt herself possessed of energy enough to climb mountains or walk leagues. And still the one figure she looked for everywhere, eagerly, furtively, from behind her crape veil, was not to be seen.

One afternoon, standing in the garden, seeing nobody near, a forlorn impulse seized her to visit the birch-tree on the braes, which had been so often their trysting-place. Looking up and looking down, the white roads seem to her to extend for miles on every side, without a single passenger upon them. Nobody, then, could criticise or blame her for that sick movement of her heart. Isabel

went in softly, feeling her circumstances now too solemn to permit her to run out with a shawl round her as she had once done—and put on her bonnet. And then, with a thrill of excitement, took her way up the hill. Either its steepness or some strange expectation took away her breath. The braes were changed from what they had so lately been. The ferns were crumpled up by the first touch of frost, and tinged with yellow. The heather bells were all dry and dead, with the colour and life gone out of them, like so many *immortelles*. The long tresses of the birch had grown brown; the wind blew chill across the heathery slopes, and there were some specks of snow among the hollows of the hills; under the sunshine the scene was still wildly sweet, but the sun had gone down behind the hills on the other side of Loch Goil, and the grey tones of the evening stole over the faded heather, and sobered down the range of mountains behind out of all their dramatic variableness. And the turf was wet under Isabel's feet. The great heather bushes caught her dress, and sprinkled her with showers of rain-drops. She was cold, and her heart sunk within her. Was it maidenly to come and look for him here when he did not seek her? Was it becoming her bereavement to be able now to think of him, to remember anything about the birch, and all the foolish words

that had been said under it? She put her arm softly, almost with a sense of guilt, round its silvery stem. There were only young trees on the braes, and this little lady of the woods with its long locks waving, and its graceful, slender stem, was like Isabel. He had said so, moved by the sentiment which sometimes makes the dullest mind poetic. She thought of that as she put her arm round it, and leaned her cheek against the silvery bark. Moved by her touch, the branches dropped a little shower of rain over her. Were they tears? She wept, too, leaning upon her woodland likeness.

‘It is liker me now—far liker me now—for I’m alone! alone!’ said Isabel; and with a pang of exquisite anguish could not tell which she was mourning for—her dead Margaret or her lost love.

But tears will not flow continually, however full the heart may be. They had all dried out of her eyes after a few minutes, and she stood still leaning against the tree, gazing out once more upon that familiar landscape, and wondering if she was to see nothing for ever and ever but the still loch and the roads that stretched away so long and wistful up to the sky on one side, and away to the Clyde on the other, without a living creature upon them to break the stillness—when she heard behind her a rustle as of some one coming. She dared not turn her head to see whom it was, but the sound

made her heart thrill and beat with a wild excitement she could not control.

Then, suddenly, an arm was put round her, and a voice sounded in her ear. She had known it must be so. A flood of satisfaction came into her heart. 'I thought I was never to see him more!' she said to herself without turning her face to him. But he had come at last, and her mind for the moment required no more.

'It was a long time before I could make sure that this black figure in a bonnet was you,' he said, as if they had parted an hour before; 'I have been gazing and wondering for five minutes who it could be. I ought to have thought of the change of dress.'

Was this all he had to say to her after 'what had happened?' Isabel's heart shrank, with a sense of sudden chill, within her breast. Those secret tears which she had thought she could shed leaning on him, to relieve her heavy heart and hot eyes, dried up in their fountains. But she reconciled herself to it with the anxious humility of love. No doubt he had other things on his mind, business of his own, something that had kept him from her. How could she acknowledge to herself that he was less than perfect when she needed him so much?

'I came out because my heart was sore,' she

faltered. 'I cannot tell why; I thought I would like to see it again.'

'Not to see me?' said Stapylton, coming round where he could see her face.

'If you had cared for that you might have come before,' said Isabel, with a little movement of displeasure. How different it was from the conversation she had dreamed of!—the soft words, the tender pity, the assurances of his love.

'Yes, among all those women that are constantly about you,' he said, 'your stepmother, and that old witch Miss Catherine—to see you coddled and kissed and mumbled over! No, Isabel; if I could have had you all to myself, as I have now—'

'And you never thought. Maybe she wants me sitting there her lane? Oh, Horace! I would not have studied my own pleasure if you had been in trouble.'

'Well, never mind,' he said. 'Of course I am not so good as you are; if I were to show myself so gentle, and patient, and unselfish, it would be taking your *rôle*. But we must not quarrel now we have met. You are pale, my darling, They have been shutting you up indoors and preaching you to death.'

'Do you think there is nothing else to make me pale?' said Isabel, moved once more by a pang of disappointment.

'Don't let us speak of that. Why should we

‘dwell on such gloomy subjects?’ said Stapylton. ‘Change of thought is as necessary as change of scene; and, besides, I have other things to tell you of. It is weeks now since I have been able to get near you. Don’t let us be unkind and miserable now that we have met at last.’

Isabel had no answer to make. She was stupified by his tone; and yet how could she, loving him as she did, tell herself that he was heartless? Her startled soul paused and stood still for a moment, and then she said to herself that this must be the way folk thought in England, the custom of the bigger, greater world. No doubt it was only in an out-of-the-way corner like Loch Diarmid that there was time to dwell upon personal grief. She dried her eyes hastily with a furtive hand, and half upbraided herself with self-indulgence. But she could not reply.

‘I am not very cheerful, either,’ he said. ‘I want you to comfort me, Isabel. I have heard from home since I saw you last, and I have no further excuse to make. I fear I shall have to go away.’

‘To go away!’ cried Isabel, feeling as if the sky had suddenly darkened, and all comfort had gone out of the earth.

‘It is very hard upon me,’ he said, ‘just when I might have had you a little more to myself. But

I am not my own master, and the folks at home must be obeyed.'

What could she answer? So much in need of pity, and comfort, and soothing, as she was, so unprepared to encounter any new blow! She gave a little gasp as for breath, leaning again upon the birch-tree. And once more the chill tears from its long drooping branches came down upon them like a shower. Stapylton sprung aside with a little impatience.

'Hullo!' he said; 'mind what you're about!' And then, after a pause, 'Well, it appears you have nothing to say!'

'What can I say?' said poor Isabel, shivering with agitation and pain. 'If you must go, Mr. Stapylton, it cannot matter what I think or what I say.'

'I knew it would be like that,' he cried; 'I knew you would take it as an offence. But, Isabel, look here; I have been dangling after you for more than a year. You are quite willing I should hang about and wait for you here; and perhaps you would let me come down to the cottage and see you, for anything I can tell, now. But as that is all the satisfaction I have ever got, or am likely to get ——'

'What satisfaction would you have?' said Isabel, under her breath.

‘What satisfaction would I have? that is a charming question to put to me after all that has passed between us. Just look here, Isabel; if it had not been for your ridiculous scruples, think what a different position I should have been in. I’d have written home a penitent letter, saying I was very sorry, and all that, and that I was married, and all about it. There would have been a flare-up, of course; but what could they have done? Whereas now, what can a fellow say? I cannot moon on here for another six months, or another year, or perhaps more than that. Neither my people, nor anybody’s people, would listen to it for a moment. When I speak plainly you are affected; and yet it is all your own fault.’

Isabel stood leaning upon the birch, with her eyes cast down, and the chill evening closing over the scene, and listened with a desolation in her heart which no words could have described. What she had expected was so different: that her grief should be the first thing to be considered; that she should feel his arm supporting her, his help strengthening her, the burden taken half off her shrinking shoulders. She shrank back into herself, as she stood and listened, with that humiliating sense of too highly raised expectations and of looking for something more than she deserved, which is so bitter to the heart. She shrank, and a languor as

of death came over her. She could not raise her head against those unmerited reproaches. There is nothing that so undermines one's self-confidence as to find out suddenly that what one took for the highest approbation and appreciation was in reality criticism and disapproval. 'If I look like that to *him*, what must I look to other folk?' Isabel said to herself. Her pride was not roused, but broken down. She leant her throbbing head against the cold support of the tree, but softly, not to move the branches, and rouse his impatience again; and traced unconscious devices with her foot upon the damp, mossy turf. Even the thought of answering him was absent from her mind. She had to receive the expression of his will; but what could she reply to it? She had nothing to say.

'So,' he continued, after a pause, 'I am to be left to make the best of it, I suppose. You have no answer to give me even now.'

'You have asked me no question, Mr. Stapylton,' said Isabel, faintly. 'You have but found fault with me. It was never my meaning to keep you hanging on, as you say. What you asked me was impossible—then; and if I am aye to be reproached and blamed for what happens, maybe it is best that it should always be impossible. I would not be the one to keep you back—from your own folk—or waste your time—or ——'

‘What more?’ said her lover, irritated. ‘Say something more! say you’ve been making game of me all the time. I can believe it. Perhaps that canting hypocrite at Ardnamore would please you better. I hear he was in the cottage not long ago; or the minister——’

Isabel’s heart swelled as if it would burst. She raised her drooping head with what remnants of pride she had left in the utter overthrow of all her strength.

‘I cannot tell,’ she said, with a gasp, ‘what right any man has to say such things to me.’ And she disengaged herself from the birch-tree which had been her prop and support—but softly still, poor child, not to throw upon him the rain with which it was laden—and made a step or two away. Then she paused, finding it hard work to stand alone, and harder work still to restrain the convulsive sobbing which struggled in her breast. ‘If we are to part,’ she said, softly, taking breath between the words, ‘you know best—I am not saying a word; but if we are to part, may not we part friends at least?’

And with a woeful smile she put out her hand to him. She was too weak for pride; she seemed to herself to be dying, too, like Margaret, and dying folk should be kind, she said in her heart. He was but a man, and perhaps knew no better;

and she was too much crushed and wounded to be angry. The only anxious desire she had was to be done with this, and to get home to the fire, to feel some sensation of warmth in her once more; and then die.

‘I think you want to drive me mad,’ he said; and then he seized the proffered hand with sudden haste, and drew her almost roughly to him. ‘This is a woman’s way of doing things, I suppose,’ he said, ‘but not mine—crying; you seem to me to do nothing but cry. Look here, once for all, Isabel, you had a reason before, but you have none now. Will you come with me now?’

‘Where?’ she said, in a whisper, not having breath enough or heart enough either for resistance or utterance.

‘Where? what does it matter where? It might be here for anything I care; but all this ridiculous set would object, and there would be time lost, and the news would be sent home. Come with me now—come to-morrow. What does it matter? You have no invalid to keep you back. What! offended again? How is a plain man to understand all your fancies? If you like to be gloomy and cry I can’t help it, Isabel; but what is the good of dwelling on the past? You did all you could be expected to do, and more. Surely you may think of yourself now.’

‘It is you that does not understand,’ said Isabel, with a sudden movement of indignation, withdrawing from him. ‘What can I say that will make you understand?’

‘I don’t want to understand!’ he cried. ‘Come, Isabel, don’t keep me in pain. If you’ll meet me here to-morrow I’ll arrange everything to-night. We’ll go to Kilcranion and get the steamer there, and reach either Glasgow or Edinburgh in the evening. Isabel! no, you shan’t go away! You can leave a note for your stepmother. Surely, I am more to you than she is. You will make me happy, and make everything possible. It is best to write and tell them after it is done. We’ll go and see everything together; and you never were out of your parish before. Isabel, it will bring back the roses to your cheeks again.’

He held her hand, though she struggled away from him, and bent forward gazing into her face. Isabel’s pale cheeks grew crimson with a violent blush; all at once life and force and strength seemed to pour back into her heart with this wild temptation which shook her to the very depths of her being. The stream had sunk so low that this sudden tide swelled all her veins to bursting, and brought noises to her ears, the sound of awakening, confused hum and buzz of every pulse, of her breathing and her heart. Escape out of this grey

atmosphere into the ideal light—out of this chill into the warmth of love—out of this stillness into movement and music and sunshine, and all the stir of common life. In sudden contrast with the monotony of grief, everything quickened and flushed and blazed before her eyes; the temptation was doubled and redoubled by all the aching solitude and restlessness of sorrow. She shook, as she stood alone, from head to foot. She tried to pluck her hand out of her lover's—then she staggered and held by him, almost swept away by the force of the rising life within her. But again with equal suddenness a sense of the chill, the grey landscape, the falling night, the heavy evening dew came back to her, quenching out the light and stilling the sounds. She uttered a heavy sigh, she clasped her hands together as if relinquishing all outside aid. 'And Margaret not three weeks in her grave?' That was all she could find to say.

'What has that to do with it?' said Stapylton, 'you sacrificed yourself to her when she was living—and are you to make no use of your freedom now she is dead? *She* can't feel it *now*: what will it matter to her whether you are here or with me? You are free now; go where you like, it can't affect her any more.'

He had taken her hand again, but she wrung it out of his almost with violence; a dull flush

came over her of nervous passion. 'You neither understand her nor me,' she said, with a pang in her heart. 'Oh, how dare you speak—how dare you speak?' and in her anger she stamped her foot upon the yielding turf.

'Now I'll tell you what, Isabel,' he said, 'I am not to be trifled with any more. It must be made an end of one way or another. The steamer leaves Kilcranion at three——'

'It shall be made an end of,' cried Isabel, 'when you can speak to me like that in my trouble—when you can speak of *her* like that—oh, say no more! It shows me you do not know what love means—not what it means. I bade you farewell, and you would not take it—but now I say, Go, Mr. Stapylton, go! You have said enough,—oh, too much, too much! I cannot bear it. Free! and nothing to her! O man, man, have ye a heart within ye? and can you think I would be glad of that?'

'I can't speak your cant,' cried Stapylton. 'Isabel! this is the last attempt I will ever make——'

He followed her as he spoke, for she had turned from him, making her way towards the highroad. For a few minutes he went on with her, keeping close by her side, speaking rapidly.

‘This is the last time I will speak. The steamer leaves Kilcranion at three; I will be here waiting for you at two o’clock. I will take every precaution, and make every arrangement. Think it over, Isabel, you never made such an important decision. If you do not come to me at two to-morrow we may never meet more in our lives.’

She stopped and stood gazing at him as he came to this conclusion. For his part he had grown pale and breathless with excitement. He looked at her menacingly from beneath his lowering brows. ‘Never in our lives if not to-morrow!’ he repeated, looking intently in her eyes as if to look her down.

But Isabel was roused, too; she met his eyes without flinching, though every particle of colour had left her face.

‘You threaten me!’ she said, with unconscious scorn. ‘If it was me, I would go to the end of the earth for one I loved—not frown at her, and break her heart to do a thing that’s impossible. Oh, how could you ask me to do it? It will have to be never—never! if that is your last word——’

And even then poor Isabel’s maidenly soul was so faithful, so incapable of believing he could mean the cruel things he said, that her eyes grew

wistful and woeful looking at him, for one final moment appealing still.

‘I will wait for you all the same,’ he said, with a half laugh. ‘When you think it all over, you’ll change your mind. At two o’clock I will be here.’

For yet one more moment they stood confronting each other; he with a smile of affected calmness; she with a gaze that gradually clouded into despair. Then she turned with a little wave of her hand, and left him. He did not attempt to follow. He stood on the same spot watching her as she wound her way through the heather. Once or twice he moved a step in the same direction, as if to go after her, but immediately stopped himself.

‘If I give in now all’s lost,’ he said to himself, trying to force his lips into a cheerless whistle; but the calmness was a fiction. A shade of doubt began to creep over his face, as he watched her figure disappearing across the moor. ‘She’ll have thought better of it before to-morrow,’ he said unconsciously aloud. But Isabel was out of sight before he left the little birch-tree; then he went away slowly in the opposite direction with moody looks and an uncertain step. It had not ended as he supposed. He had taken it for granted that he must be successful. What had she to retain her now? After all, a sister is

only a sister, a sort of secondary relationship in life. What girl (he thought) would lose a husband for the sake of a dead woman who could interfere with her comfort no more? 'She'll think better of it,' he repeated to himself in his heart.

CHAPTER IV.

ISABEL went softly down the hill in a concentrated calm, such as only excitement knows. All the emotions in the world seemed to have swept over her head since she ascended the perilous path. To have seen her mournful figure, nobody on the Loch would have passed by without some voluntary or involuntary expression of sympathy. She looked as if she had come from weeping over the newly-made grave, rather than from the tumult of a lovers' meeting. Her head ached, her heart throbbed, pulses of pain beat in her temples. Perhaps she was going to be ill, which would have been a kind of comfort; but yet there was little akin to illness in the vehement gathering of all her forces to meet this extraordinary crisis of nature. She did not even know what the nature of her feelings was, what she was thinking, what she was to do, as she made her way home. There was a vague, indescribable force in her; a flush of hysterical strength, an exaltation of feeling and bearing and step. Jamie

had been sent out by his mother to look for her, and met her some hundred yards from the cottage, stopped short, amazed by her looks, 'Oh! Isabel, what is it?' he cried; but Isabel swept past him unaware of his presence. She went in through the parlour to the innermost retirement of her own room, and there sat down to think; but she was not capable of thought. Whether it was her mind all confused and stirred, or her body wrought to a pitch of feverish excitement, or her heart stung with fear, and fluttering with suspense, she could not tell; all together made such a sound in her ears, such a swelling in her veins, that the calm of thought was beyond her reach. She sat down with her bonnet and shawl still on by the side of the bed on which her sister had lain in the last silence of death, and leaned her head against the chill pillow to still and calm herself. It was the room which they had shared before Margaret's illness came to the worst. It was the room in which she had watched, half awake, half asleep, starting at her sister's lightest movement, during those last melancholy weeks. Now it was still enough, cold, nothing but white coverlets, snowy linen; a veil of muslin like a shroud over the little mirror, which had been placed there according to Scotch usage when Margaret lay dead. It was still Margaret's room. The touch of the white, spotless pillow on which

Isabel laid her aching head struck a chill to her heart. It was the very touch of death to the living, suffering creature. Was this all she had to look for now? Was Margaret indifferent now, as *he* had said, to what she did or where she went? could it make no difference to her? And Isabel had not sufficient command of herself to recollect what her sister had said to her, or to strengthen herself in her own visionary belief of the privileges of 'those that are gone,' as she stood between the warm, eager, impious touch of passion, and this still immovable snowy coldness of death.

It was thus that Jean found her half-an-hour later, when, having heard Jamie's report of Isabel's return, she went to seek her wayward charge. Jean's first glance informed her that the crape on her step-daughter's dress was limp, and spoiled with the damp, and that her feet were wet.

'Oh! Isabel, my bonnie woman, it's no good for you. You've been in the kirkyard again,' cried Jean putting her apron to her eyes. She could make nothing of the cry, 'Oh! no, no, not there,' that came from Isabel's white lips. Where could she have been but at the grave? It was perhaps a little hard that she should deny it, as if Jean could not enter into her feelings; but no doubt it was natural. Jean took the forlorn creature into her motherly arms.

‘Come ben to the fire, my lamb,’ she said, ‘your crape’s damp and a’ ruined, and your feet are as wet as the moss itself. I canna have ye ill to break my heart. My darlin’, put off your bonnet and come ben to the fire. I’ll change your feet and make ye a cup of tea. Oh, Isabel! it’s an awfu’ loss and an awfu’ trial—but ye maun mind, it’s God’s will and canna be wrong.’

Isabel turned away from her with a cry of despair, which Jean misunderstanding set down but to the renewed vehemence of grief rekindled to its fullest by the melancholy visit which she supposed her step-daughter to have just paid. She was half frightened by Isabel’s paleness and by the sudden flushes of colour that came over her face. When she got her at last into her own elbow-chair by the kitchen fire, and knelt before her chafing the girl’s little white feet in her rough but kindly hands, ‘Isabel, my bonnie woman, you must promise me no to go again,’ she said, surrounding her with kindly ministrations. But Jean felt with an ache in her heart, that Isabel’s averted face and unresponsive look meant a falling back into the partial antagonism with which except since Margaret’s death she had always regarded her step-mother. She made no reply to all Jean’s sympathetic words. She turned her face from her inspection, shutting herself up as she best could in

silence and self-communion. But it was not till her thankless charge had been cared for in every possible way that Jean withdrew with a sigh to her own concerns. 'I'll leave ye quiet,' she said, 'since that's a' ye seem to desire—and light the fire in the parlour: but it would ease your ain heart, Isabel, if ye would be mair open with me.'

'Oh, let me be!' sobbed Isabel, 'let me be;' and sighing, Jean left her in her own especial sanctuary, by the warm light of the kitchen fire. Poor Isabel was still very young and inexperienced in suffering. The weight of such a crowd of emotions was too much for her—and after the chill and the damp, and all the depressing influences of the evening outside, and the cold death-chamber in which she had first taken refuge within, the kindly warmth of the fire, the soft silence of the house, the soothing effect of Jean's presence and touch, arrested in her at once the passion and the force. Nature stood still a moment and sought rest from its unwonted excitement. Unawares her eyes closed, her hands which had been strained together with a painful pressure unclasped, her head fell softly back upon the blue and white covering of the high-backed chair. Jean was so moved by the sight when she returned into the kitchen, coming and going at her work, that she turned even little Mary, just coming home from school, out of the

darkling place. 'Can ye no see that Isabel's sleeping?' she said sharply to her own flesh and blood.

'But, oh, what makes her sleep in the day?' said Mary, following into the parlour with a frightened face, 'Is she to die too like Margaret?' and big tears sprang to the child's eyes.

'The Lord forbid!' said Jean, 'but, whisht now, and be as quiet as a mouse — she's worn, and wearied, and grieved at her heart. When ane's in sair trouble sleep is sweet.'

'I wonder if she aye dreams of Margaret like me,' said little Mary. 'Eh, mother, Margaret comes and stands by my bed every night!'

'Oh, bairn, whisht, and no break my heart!' cried Jean, uneasily. 'Ye were aye the one for dreams.'

'But I'm no feared,' said little Mary, 'whiles she speaks, but I never can mind what she says. It's just the same to me as if she was living. Then I used to see her a'day, and now I see her a'night — and she has aye light round like an angel out of heaven.'

'Oh, whisht, with your dreams!' cried the mother with a tone of anger, which belied the sudden tremor in her heart. 'Have ye nae lessons to learn like Jamie? He's away on the braes, the poor callant! with his book.'

'He's making a whistle out of a rowan-tree branch,' said Mary; 'I cried upon him as I passed,

but he wouldna come in, and he'll cut his fingers, for it's getting dark.'

'Eh me, he's an awfu' laddie!' said poor Jean, rushing to the door. What with her precocious daughter, and her backward son, and Isabel whose heart it was so hard to keep, she had, as she herself expressed it, 'a bonnie handful.' But fortunately the one anxiety kept the other in check, and uneasiness about the cutting of Jamie's fingers dulled in her mind the painful impression of Mary's dreams; and then night fell, and the children came in, and Isabel awoke to a sense of warmth and comfort. She did not even propose to retire into her dignity in the parlour, but stayed in the elbow-chair, and even smiled as she had scarcely done before. She was glad to take refuge among them—glad to avoid the inevitable encounter with her own thoughts; and indeed her mind had taken refuge in a kind of insensibility. She had felt so much that for the moment she could feel no more.

Thus it was that Isabel did not return to the events of the afternoon during the whole course of the night. The emotions that had been so strong in her seemed to have been somehow lulled to sleep. She made an ineffectual attempt to recall them when she went to her own room, but fatigue and sleep got the better of her. A curious sense of escape came over her. She had expected to be rent

asunder with indignation, and that madness which devours the mind when we are wroth with those we love. A hundred terrible questions had seemed on the eve of sweeping down upon her like so many birds of prey to be resolved and settled in a moment. And yet nothing of the kind had happened: instead, a soft insensibility had crept over her mind. She was too weary for anything; and slept, like a tired child, quieted and composed and wrapped in physical warmth and consolation.

These were her feelings when she fell asleep. But Isabel awoke, in the middle of the night, as she thought, in the deep darkness and stillness, broad awake in a second, without any twilight interval between the deep blank of repose and the tremendous struggle of existence. She woke up all at once and was sensible of the darkness lying heavy on her eyelids, and the ticking of the clock through the house and eerie rustling of the night; and of the conflict which had been waiting for her, lingering till all her faculties were refreshed and her mind capable of the effort. Her thoughts rushed at once into the heat of the battle; it seemed to her as if somebody unseen had awakened her and called her suddenly to it—to consider the question which invisible hands seemed to thrust under her eyes. Whether she should believe in the love of the man whom she loved, and for his sake insult her sister's

memory and turn her back upon all the affections and prejudices of her life—whether she could forget that he had insulted her sister's memory, and treated her own grief with indifference, and made light of the solemn moment through which she had passed: whether she could bear all this and forget it all for his love; or reject his love and leave him for ever; that was the question. Had it been put to Isabel, six months before, as a hypothetical case, she would not have hesitated for a single instant—she would have denounced the unworthy love with all the eloquence of which youth is capable; but things were changed. She loved this man past her own power of alteration; she had schooled herself with the subtilty of affection to account for many a thing which was below her ideal or different from it. No later than yesterday she had made up her mind even, that his want of sympathy for herself might be no fault on his part, but only a too eager craving on hers. Her heart was wounded by him, sore from the blows he had given to her love and her pride and her more delicate nature. But somehow it seemed natural she should bear all that—for he loved her. She had winced at the strokes as they came, but yet adapted herself to them. He was English, and perhaps in England that was how people felt. He was a man, and men could not be expected to be high fantastical, like women.

All these excuses she made to herself unconsciously, holding by him, covering with her love the multitude of his sins. And all that life could give was with him—the fresher air—the fuller sky—the movement and action for which almost with a sense of guilt her young blood throbbed. Here, nothing but stillness, monotony, solitude; there, companionship, action, a whole world to know and discover. In the profound darkness which it hurt her eyes to gaze into, in the intense chill of the early morning before dawn, she lay open-eyed in the stillness, and saw panoramas of her future life extended before her. On one side was the Loch, all quiet in the light of common day, with drizzling rain and cloudy skies and the grey atmosphere of winter, not a distinct feature it but the little mound and white headstone which marked Margaret's grave. And on the other, a beautiful new universe, altogether unknown, and all the more beautiful for that, an ever-widening scene. Edinburgh, England, the world—and Horace—not in stolen interviews and snatches, half of love, half of conflict—but with her always, learning to know her as she wished to be known, coming to understand all the discords and harmonies in her heart, her life-long companion, her warmest friend. It was not, she said to herself, as if she had a choice to

make between him and any one she loved. It was between him and Margaret's grave.

No one saw the struggle, no one ever heard of it, save the unseen. It cost her many a tear and many a trembling, wandering, incoherent prayer. To make a choice on which the happiness of her whole existence might lie would have been a hard thing to do under any circumstances. But now it was more than hard. How could she give him up? how could she retain him? The one and the other seemed both impossible. Sometimes she would feel herself swept by the force of the temptation to cast a furtive glance, as it were, at the half-unfolded picture on the other side—the vision of two going out upon the world together into the sunshine arm in arm. But as Isabel gazed it would seem to her that the face of the bride was always pale, always averted,—that remembrance was always tugging at her heart, and that in the midst of all her happiness she was sighing mournfully—Oh, to be back to that deserted grave! The nearer prospect was still more appalling; the parish would rise up as one man asking, Was it Margaret's sister that had done this thing? her name would be blotted out from among the names that were sweet to the general ear. And Margaret's white headstone would glimmer through the mists before her eyes like a reproachful

ghost. And if she rejected that alternative altogether, the panorama of existence which rose before her was dim and still as any life could be. Herself in her black gown always there in the one unchanging room; Miss Catherine and the minister gliding across the scene; but nothing more. And *he* gone out of all knowledge, lost in the distant mists, gone—never to return. She turned from side to side in her weary bed, sometimes hoping that out of the gloom there might reveal itself a sudden figure, all blazing with awful brightness, to show her what was needful to be done—counting the steadfast, unbroken, terrible tickings of the clock, feeling the darkness affect her, a thing which weighed down her eyes and oppressed her soul. When the first shade of grey trembled into the dusk, it was to Isabel as a messenger from heaven. Her heart bounded up with a sense of relief; and as the dawn grew; revealing in a mist the whitening hill-side, and the reflexions in the loch, she found it possible to sleep again and forget her troubles. The struggle had exhausted her like a day's labour. She fell into a heavy slumber, which still lasted when Jean came softly into the room to rouse her.

‘I dinna like thae long sleeps,’ Jean said to herself, with a sudden pang: ‘Eh, if she should gang too, like Margret!’ and stood by the bedside

reluctant to awake her, gazing at the sleeper's pale face, at the unconscious knitting of her brows, and tremulous movements of her hand. She grew more and more anxious as the morning advanced, and Isabel, trained in the habit of early rising, never woke. The good woman stole repeatedly to her stepdaughter's bedside, laying her hand softly on Isabel's forehead, and touching the white arm which lay on the coverlet to discover whether she was feverish. When she opened her eyes at last, Jean was gazing at her with an anxiety which she did her best to dissimulate as soon as she perceived that Isabel was awake.

'I thought you were never to wake mair,' she said, with attempted playfulness. 'Lazy thing! It's ten o'clock in the day, and half the work of the house done. But, now you're so late, bide a wee longer, and I'll bring you your tea.'

'But I am quite well,' said Isabel, raising herself with a little start.

'I canna think it, or you wouldna sleep like that,' said Jean. 'You, that were never lazy in the morning. You've gotten cauld on the braes.'

Jean did not know what meaning there could be in her words which brought that cloud on her stepdaughter's face. She looked at her very anxiously, but could make nothing of it.

'I shouldna have said a word of where ye

were,' she exclaimed, with sudden compunction. 'It's me that's a thoughtless body, never minding. But we must submit to God's will, my bonnie woman; and I'll go, and bring ye your tea.'

'This will never do,' Jean said to herself, as she left the room. 'It will never do. She must have some change. I'll go and speak to Miss Catherine about it this very day.' And when she went back, with the tea on a little tray, the suggestion framed itself into speech. 'What would ye say to going to Edinburgh, and seeing a' the sights? But—eh! bless me, is the lassie daft?' cried Jean, thunderstruck by the effect of her words.

'I will not listen to you,' said Isabel, with sudden passion. 'Never! Go to Edinburgh! How dare ye put such things in my head? Go away, and play myself, and be happy,—and my Margaret not three weeks in her grave!'

'My bonnie lamb!' said Jean, with streaming eyes. 'To see you happy—or if no happy, a wee cheerful—taking some good of your life—Margret would have given half hers. Do you think she's mair selfish, mair hard, no so thoughtful now?'

Isabel could but gasp at her with startled, wondering eyes? Was Jean, too, pleading for him? Was she taking his part consciously or unconsciously? She put away the food her stepmother had brought her, with nervous, trembling hands.

‘I cannot lie here,’ she said. ‘I am quite well. Let me get up, and then I will know what to do.’

‘Lie still, my dear,’ said Jean, anxiously. ‘You’ve been waking through the night, and greetin’ sore; and you’ve got cauld on the wet grass. Lie still this day, and rest.’

‘But I cannot rest,’ said Isabel. ‘I cannot breathe. My heart is like as if it were bound with an iron band. I want to rise, and to get the air.’

‘Nae air the day except the air from the window,’ said Jean. ‘I can be positive, too. Na, na; I have the charge of you, and decline’s in the family. You shanna cross the door this day.’

Isabel fell back on her pillow with the strangest sense of relief. She, who had never yielded to her stepmother in her life, felt a certain consolation in this exercise of authority.

‘It is not as if it was my own doing,’ she thought in herself, and kept still, satisfied for the moment with her relief from all responsibility. The manner in which she subsided into sudden listlessness and quiet frightened Jean still more. Had it been any one else, she might have accepted it as the result of natural weakness or weariness, but nothing of the kind had ever been seen before in wilful Isabel. Nor did it last long. When Jean returned, an hour later, her charge was again struggling with excitement.

‘I am going to get up,’ she said, with two brilliant spots of colour on her cheeks. ‘I feel as if I were in my grave here. I must get out to the fresh air!’

Jean’s answer was to draw away the curtain from the window. Then Isabel saw, looking out on the hillside, the falling of the noiseless rain. It was no white violent blast with actual colour and solidity, but the fine impalpable dropping which penetrates through every covering, and which the experienced West Highlander looks at with hopeless eyes. ‘To gang out into that wet would be as much as your life is worth,’ said Jean, solemnly. ‘The braes are nae better than a shaking moss, and the roads are running like burns. It’s an awfu’ saft day. Ye may get up and sit by the fire, but across the door ye’ll no go, or else you’ll quarrel with me.’

This time it was with a kind of despair that Isabel listened. To be about to make a decision which should influence her whole life—and to be stopped by the rain! Even in her excited condition a sense of the strange incongruity struck her. It was almost as if a suicide had been stopped from ending his life by reflecting on the bitterness of the poison which was to do it. And yet, in her present state of feeling, the objection seemed a valid one. Could it be possible that he would go to the tryst-

ing-place with any expectation of meeting her there on such a day? She was stricken in body as well as in mind, though she was not conscious of it; and the sense of chill and wet,—the heavy uphill way, the sodden turf, the rain-swept steamboat, all the miseries of a journey under such circumstances, suddenly passed through her imagination. He would never think of it—he could not expect her, nor would he go himself on such a day. His departure would be put off, and with it the crisis, and time would be left to think. A little time to think, even an hour more she felt would be something gained. She had another moment of tranquillity, gazing out from where she lay through the low window, upon the melancholy braes. Her room was on the ground-floor; indeed, there was but one room in the second story, which, with a corner partitioned off into a closet for the boy, was Jean's property. Isabel's lattice was not much above the level of that soaked and treacherous turf. She could see across half way to the Manse, and there was no one visible on the dismal slope. No, no! it was impossible! He would never look for her—never think of going himself on such a miserable day.

After a temporary lull, however, her fever returned. This time she rose and dressed herself hastily, putting on, in a half-dream, not her new

'mourning,' with the crape on it, but a thick winter dress, black enough to indicate any depths of sorrow. She did it, and felt she did it, in a dream, exercising broken gleams of reason on secondary matters while still her mind was totally uninfluenced by any reasonable purpose. She put on her black merino gown, which would be more suitable for the journey than the crape, and yet she had no more made up her mind to the journey than she had to take away her own life. And the one did not feel more unlikely than the other. When she had dressed herself with nervous haste, she went into Margaret's room, where she was in the habit of saying her prayers. But her prayers were so hasty, and incoherent, and wandering, that they did not calm her as might have been supposed. When she rose from her knees, her eye was caught by the large, old-fashioned watch placed on a little stand, which was now hers, as it had once been called Margaret's. It had been her mother's watch, a cumbrous, steady-going machine, with plain large cases of purple, almost copper-coloured gold. Margaret had been its nominal possessor by right of her half-hour's seniority, but had never worn it. And now it was Isabel's alone, no one else having any right to share with her the homely heirloom. She took it up with a hasty hand and put it into her breast, then paused trembling with

a sense of guilt. It seemed to her as though she were robbing her dead sister,—robbing the unconscious, unfearing house. She took it out again stealthily and looked at the hour, for it was one of Jean's cherished duties to wind up and keep in order the 'gold watch,' pride of the house, which kept time like any chronometer. It was just noon. With a shudder Isabel put it back within her dress. This time she had forgotten all about the watch, and recollected only that in two hours,—two short hours, her life must be won or lost.

Always like a walker in a dream—that was the only explanation she could have given of her own feelings. Clothed for her journey, yet without any intention of taking the journey, she wandered drearily about her sister's room. Except, however, the associations of the room itself, there were few relics about it to move her. Everything that belonged to or recalled Margaret had been removed at once by that officious care which occupies itself in sweeping away every trace of death out of a house. Isabel roamed about the room in her dream, wondering, was there nothing left to tell that Margaret had ever been upon the earth; it felt damp and cold, and was arranged with a cruel perfection of order—all white, shrouded, lifeless, and chill, the chamber of the dead, not of one who had

once lived. The sensitive creature shivered with its icy loneliness. Then she went into the parlour, the room where Margaret had died. Though it was so cold it was still only October, and 'a fire in the parlour' was a luxury which, except under very special circumstances, was not to be had so early in the year.—The girl in her solitude felt such a longing upon her for warmth and the sound of life, that, after a few minutes, she abandoned her own dreary portion of the house, and sought the kitchen where her step-mother was. The chill and the silence which should have been favourable to thinking made her incapable of thought. Perhaps she said to herself under cover of Jean's chatter, and the voices of the children, should they be in the house, she could seclude herself to better purpose and make up her mind. She sat down once more musing and bewildered in the high-backed elbow-chair. One o'clock, struck by the solemn eight-day clock, which gave a kind of mechanical soul to the house, knelled upon Isabel's ear, as she held her white trembling hands over the fire. It shook her like a convulsion of nature. But one hour more—and all to be decided in that hour—and her mind no nearer the solution, scarcely so near as last night.

'You're looking real weakly, my dear,' said Jean; 'shaking like a leaf. I'm no sure you

should have risen out of your bed. Take this shawl round you, and I'll give you a few broth to warm you. You've eaten nothing the whole day.'

'I could not eat!' said Isabel, wrapping round her with a shiver the soft warm shawl. Tick, tick, tick! Would nothing arrest these inexorable moments? As they went on her thoughts seemed to rise round her like a whirlwind sweeping about and about her bewildered soul; every beat brought nearer to her the last moment when her fate should still be in her own power. And yet she was like one paralyzed, and could not move. The minutes pressed and trod upon each other's heels, and yet were so slow in their confused procession, that it might have been an age instead of an hour. At last, while Isabel sat striving to break the spell which bound her, the door flew open and then closed violently after Jamie rushing in wet and muddy from school.

'It's no raining now!' cried the boy as he dashed forward to the side of the fire. Isabel started as if a shot had struck her. Just then the clock gave its little whirr of warning that it was about to strike the hour. She sprang up to her feet with a sudden cry;—then sank down again—her pale head falling back against the chair, her hands falling listless on its arms. Jean, rushing to her, believed for the

first moment that Isabel was dead. She was as one dead, her eyes half closed and ghastly; her colour completely gone; her very lips deserted of all colour. The struggle had been too much for her. She lay insensible in a dead faint before her step-mother's affrighted eyes.

Faints are rare upon Loch Diarmid, and Jean Campbell was alone and entirely unprepared to deal with any such phenomenon. She screamed to Jamie to run for the doctor, which, indeed, was a thing easy enough to do—but where to find a country practitioner at two o'clock on a wet day, when he might be at the other end of the parish, was, as Jean well knew, quite another matter. It was while she laboured with pain and terror to lift the inanimate figure which seemed to be twice Isabel's natural weight that she noticed her stepdaughter's change of dress, and after a while perceived round her neck the well-known ribbon which hung to the 'gold watch.' A curious sense of something suspicious and unexplained aroused Jean's mind, but she had no time to consider the question. Jamie had gone for the doctor. Mary had not returned from the little school, more genteel than the parish school and not so far off, which she attended; and there was no neighbour near to be called to the rescue. Jamie was at the door coming back again after a run of two miles to the doctor's house, ere the patient began

to show any symptoms of recovery. And he brought with him Mr. Lothian, whom he had encountered on the way, and who now entered breathless and pale with anxiety to hear what this new trouble was.

CHAPTER V.

STAPYLTON sought the trysting-place on the hill on the decisive day with all the excitement natural to the crisis, but with little fear of the result. He had taken none of the precautions of which he had spoken to Isabel. What need was there of precautions? she would wear a veil of course, and a cloak. The road to Kilcranion was little frequented, especially on such a day; and by the time Kilcranion was reached, they would be, to some extent, among strangers, not liable to recognition at every step as here. He made up for himself a small bag of necessaries, put the money he had just received to carry him home in his pocket, buttoned his great-coat, and took his way through the drizzling rain to the hill-side. He said to himself, that up to this moment he had been mistaken in his mode of dealing with Isabel. He had given in to her too much, showing no authority nor intention to be master. But now things were different. He was

determined to show her that it was she, and not he, who ought to yield; and with that object in view he had regulated his conduct on the day before. Perhaps, had he been acting solely from the impulse of the moment, he might have shown her more sympathy, treated her less harshly at their first meeting after her grief; but he was acting on theory as well as inclination, and consequently was pitiless. She must know without delay, he thought, that it was a question between him and her own fancies, and that if she would secure the inestimable advantage of his companionship and protection, her own way must be given up. It must be given up; there was no middle way. She must consent to tear herself up from her family root. She must, by degrees, be reconciled to the sale of the cottage and the transference of everything belonging to her; or rather, when he had her in his own hands, there would be no further difficulties about that. And he was, so far as he was aware, quite honest in his intentions respecting Isabel. He meant nothing but to marry her—somehow—as soon as he had got her away from Loch Diarmid. His views were not very clear about the how and when. But what did that matter? In Scotland a man had but to say he was married and he was married. Nothing else was necessary. Isabel had never dreamed of being married in church or with any of the

solemnities an English girl would have thought necessary; and a blacksmith or a Scotch minister, what did it matter? he said to himself with characteristic contempt. Thus he made his way to the hill, looking out for her with interest and expectation, but scarcely with anything which could be called anxiety. He loved her as well as it was in him to love; and yet it did not concern him that Isabel must mount the hilly road, which ran, as Jean Campbell said, like a burn, with the fast falling rain—or that she should have before her that miserable walk across the hill, and all the dreary, chilly journey, on such a day. He should have to put up with all these inconveniences himself, and why not she too? or rather when she was with him, could she so much as think of any lesser particulars? His vanity said no. He kept on the watch to see her coming and save her the task of wading through the wet heather to the trysting-place; but that was all the exertion it occurred to him to make by way of saving trouble or fatigue to Isabel.

Then he placed himself under the little birch-tree; it was a conspicuous spot on such a day; but no one was near to remark him. Of all the days in the year this was the best for such an evasion,—not a soul was to be seen about from one end of the parish to the other; the mournful land-

scape was all shut in with mists—the mountains were invisible—the loch, like a dull mirror, gave forth but a gloomy reflexion of the clouds. The moor looked treacherously green; the heather saluted every breath of air on the hill or chance movement of his own restless foot by showers of raindrops; great, heavy drops, like tears, accompanied by brown withered leaflets, fell from the birch-boughs. ‘Thank heaven! this is my last of Scotland!’ Stapyhton said to himself, looking round with a shiver. The next time he was to look at this same scene, how different, how strange, it would seem to him; but at that moment he was firmly resolved that he would never see it more.

He had loitered there for about half-an-hour watching for traces of Isabel’s approach, and gradually beginning to be angry, when the rain suddenly stopped, and the sky cleared ever so little. That was so far good. He put down his bag, and lighted a cigar to comfort himself as he waited. Below where he stood, just within sight, the thatched roof of the Glebe Cottage rose like some natural growth out of the heather. No doubt she must have waited for this moment; though why she should have waited, keeping him in the rain, he could not imagine.

However it was a pardonable sin if she came now. This thought went through his mind just at the moment when Isabel, rising to go to him, fell back and fainted in her chair. He paced up and down the wet turf, and smoked his cigar, and looked for her, calculating in his own mind how long the weather would 'keep up,' and whether there might be time to reach Kileranion before it came on to rain again. Another half-hour, it might be, was spent in these speculations; and then he took out his watch suddenly, and woke to the consciousness that he had been waiting for an hour on the moor, that the steamer must be gone from Kileranion, and that the way of escape unobserved was closed to them for that night.

It would be difficult to describe the rage which rose in a moment in his mind. She, whom he thought so entirely subject to him, whom he had felt to be delivered over to him bound hand and foot when she was deprived of her sister,—had Isabel rebelled against his influence? Had she cast him off? It did not seem possible. A momentary thought of going off at once, never appearing again on Loch Diarmid, punishing her by utter and total separation from himself, was his first thought. But even had there been inducement enough to do this, the steamer was gone, and that way out of the difficulty was lost at least. No,

he would leave the spot to which no doubt she would yet come with her explanations and apologies; he would go away and prepare for his legitimate departure home and never seek nor see her more. He would——but was that Isabel? It seemed to him he could hear sounds from the cottage; the noise of doors opening and shutting—a babble of tongues. Could they be detaining her by force? But then no one in the world had any right to detain her—she was absolutely free. Still there was some agitation about the Glebe. He snatched up his bag, not without a private imprecation upon Isabel for making him thus ridiculous, that he should have to drag it about from one place to another; and then he turned rapidly down the hill. Some one came out of the cottage as he got full in sight of it,—some one whom he easily divined to be Mr. Lothian. ‘Confound him!’ said the young fellow; what was he doing there just at the moment when Stapylton’s fate was being decided? Could she have consulted him? Was it through the minister’s plotting that his purpose had thus been brought to nothing? The young man hurried down, carrying in his hand, and cursing the troublesome bag, which but for her——it was a small matter, but it exasperated him more than a greater. He had half a mind to fling it at the cottage door, and

order Jamie to carry it for him for sixpence, by way of driving the step-mother out of her senses. But surely there was something strange going on at the Glebe. Jenny Spence had just come out with another woman, and stood in audible colloquy with her at the door. 'You'll tell the doctor she's come to hersel,' said Jenny. 'It lasted an hour, Jean thinks. But time looks awfu' long when folk are feared, and maybe it wasna an hour. She's come to hersel, and very quiet, and there's nae such haste as we thought. But for a' that, tell him he's to come on here as soon as he can.'

'And will I say what was the cause?' said the messenger, while Stapylton listened eagerly.

'He's ma' likely to tell us,' said the other; 'the first thing she asked was, What o'clock was it? And when she heard gave an awfu' sigh, and syne lay as quiet as a wean—though what the clock had to do with it gude kens. I hope it's no her head; that would be worse of a'.'

'But she's aye been real healthy and strong. A body in trouble may faint, and yet no be that ill after a'.'

'But ye see decline's in the family,' said Jenny Spence, and then they parted, the one returning to the house, the other speeding on her mission. The

bag grew less oppressive in Stapylton's hands. His clouded brow cleared a little. After all, she had not meant to leave him in the lurch. If she was ill that was a different matter. After a pause he went and knocked at the door, and asked how Miss Diarmid was?

'If you 're meaning Isabel, she's no that weel,' said Jenny Spence; 'she was out yesterday in the damp, and she's gotten a cauld.' This was all the information she would condescend upon to a stranger and a 'young lad.'

'But what did I hear you say about a faint?' said Stapylton eagerly.

'Lord!' said Jenny, who, like most of the villagers, disliked the Englishman, 'how can I tell what ye might hear me say? I say plenty whiles that I canna mind myself; but Isabel's gotten the cauld. It's natural at this time of the year.'

'Cold? and nothing more?' asked the young man.

'Ane can never tell—it might turn into an influenza,' said Jenny; 'but that's a' the noo, for a' that I can see.'

And then she closed the door upon him, with a certain malicious satisfaction. Stapylton was no favourite in the parish; perhaps because of a sneer which was always lurking behind the few

civilities which he had ever been known to offer. Jenny had no confidence either in his friendship or his love.

‘Yon’s the lad that would beguile a young lass, but be dour as iron and steel to his wife as soon as she had married him. I hope there’s naething amiss between him and Isabel,’ she said to Jean, when she described this visit; and Jean felt a little thrill go through her, as if this new event threw light on something, though she could scarcely tell what.

‘Do you think our Isabel would be thinking of any such nonsense at such a time!’ she said, indignantly. But still a sensation as of some discovery darted through her own heart.

Stapylton however, shut out as he thus was from all approach to Isabel, was not to be so easily put off. He hastened down the road at his quickest pace, determined to find out, at least, from the minister what had happened. Mr. Lothian was standing at the door of the doctor’s house when the young man made up to him. And there, too, the messenger, whom he had seen to leave the Glebe, and whom he passed on the road, was directing her steps. The minister was in his fiftieth year; but he was one of those fresh-coloured, rural men, who carry with them to the end of

life the candid brow and bright eyes of youth. At this moment there was however a certain heaviness about him, which somehow Stapylton, unsympathetic as he was, for once divined and understood. He himself was excited, full of curiosity, and even interest,—yet satisfied to know that it was illness, and not disdain of him, that had prevented Isabel keeping her tryst. It was not entirely heartlessness either which made him so apparently indifferent about her health, but only that rash youthfulness and utter inexperience which so often look like hardness. She might be ill, no doubt; but of course she would get better, and all would be well again. But Mr. Lothian's looks were heavy with care; and the young man divined as clearly that he was weighed down by anxiety, and that for every minute's suffering undergone by Isabel Mr. Lothian had an hour's, as if it had been written in the minister's face. He was conscious of a little wonder, almost of a softening of pity, towards his rival. The sense that she was more to the other than to him went through the young man's mind. But then it was natural it should be so: to himself—well, yes, she was at the present moment the first of women; but he did not pretend to believe that she was the only woman in the world.

And though she was a thing upon which he had very much set his heart, still there were other things also upon which his heart was set. Whereas to the minister she was everything,—the last hope and the greatest. For one moment an impulse came over the young man—a generous impulse, not of his own originating—something whispered in his ear by some good angel: to go away, and clear the path, and leave to the good man the one prize he asked from Heaven. About the space of half-a-second this idea fluttered through Stapylton's mind, and then was rejected with the disdain it deserved. A little laugh of vanity came from his lips unawares. 'Much Isabel would thank me!' he said to himself. He could laugh, though she was ill—perhaps in danger. But Mr. Lothian turned round at the sound, as if even the laughter of another was an offence to him at such a moment as this.

'Is it you, Stapylton?' he said, with an evident struggle to be friendly. 'You are merry, which is more than I am. It has been a dreadful day.'

'Not cheerful,' said the young man; 'but only, after all, "a wee saft," as you say in these parts. You have not been consulting the doctor, I hope, for yourself?'

'No,' said Mr. Lothian, fixing his eyes upon his interrogator, and adding nothing to the syllable.

Stapylton's spirit of natural rivalry woke up at once.

'I saw a messenger for the doctor coming from the Glebe,' he said. 'I hope I might be mistaken—or if there is any one ill there, that it is only one of the children. Children are always ill.'

'It is not one of the children,' said Mr. Lothian. 'It is—Isabel.' He uttered the name with a sigh. He was so anxious, that he was glad to speak, even to Stapylton, of the subject that lay nearest his heart.

'What is the matter?' said the young man, himself feeling somewhat breathless.

'She fainted to-day,' said the minister, 'without any reason, so far as we know. She had been out yesterday, at her sister's grave, and I fear she caught cold; but a fainting fit shows a state of weakness which—I cannot but be alarmed at it,' he added, hurriedly, with a faltering voice.

'So she said she had been at her sister's grave!'—Stapylton thought within himself. 'Clever of Isabel!' 'I thought women were always fainting,' he said, aloud. 'I never knew it was a bad sign.'

'I suppose you don't know very much about it,' said Mr. Lothian, with unusual vehemence; and then he checked himself. 'Heaven knows it ill becomes me to be so impatient,' he said. 'You see,

it depends so much upon the kind of women a man has known. Her mother died young, and then Margaret; they are a delicate family.'

He could not say any more. Something seemed to rise in the good man's throat, and choked him. And even Stapylton was struck and startled.

'But, good heavens! she always looked like—the rest of us. I have never seen her look ill,' cried Stapylton.

And then he paused, and cast his eyes back upon the time he had passed on Loch Diarmid. Certainly, she was pale in comparison with the blooming, laughing, joyous creature, like an apple-blossom, who had charmed him when he saw her first. No doubt, she was pale. But that was very comprehensible, considering her sister's long illness and recent death, and that detestable mourning, which made everybody look like a ghost.

'It can't be anything,' he said. 'I saw her yesterday, and she was quite well.'

'*You* saw her yesterday,' said the minister, with a pang of jealousy. 'Where?'

'Oh!—I suppose, on her way to—her sister's grave,' said Stapylton, scarcely able to conceal the smile that curled the corners of his mouth. If she had been so completely in possession of her wits as to be able to give such an explanation of her

ramble on the braes, he could not feel that her illness was a very serious matter, after all.

‘I have seen her but once in her own house,’ said Mr. Lothian with a sigh: ‘but here is the doctor at last, and I must send him to the Glebe instantly. There are some letters laying for you at the Manse,’ he added, as he turned away. Stapylton, for his part, did not feel now so anxious about the doctor. He smiled to himself as he went on. It was clever of Isabel to give so ready a reason for her absence. Her sister’s grave! He laughed softly to himself, with a full sense of the cleverness of the imposition and total insensibility to anything unlovely or derogatory to Isabel’s perfection in it. She had got her feet wet and caught cold, and made all this pother. But, of course, she would be all right again to-morrow, and then——.

Yes, it must be. He liked her all the better for having lied to keep their meeting secret. He had not thought she had so much spirit. And after all it would have been a wretched day for a journey. To-morrow would still leave time enough. He must send her a note somehow, to say so; and, well or ill, she must pluck up her forces and do it at last. Thus Stapylton’s anger evaporated into fondness, and his disappointment brightened into

expectation. To-morrow! it was but one day more; and what, if instead of the pleasure of a pretty, charming companion, she had fallen ill on his hands on the very journey? Thus he gradually reconciled himself to all that had happened, his *amour propre* being consoled, and even elevated by the sense of his rival's melancholy and complete misunderstanding of the whole business.

‘I could have relieved his mind,’ Staphylton said to himself with silent laughter, and was not sorry, for his own part, things having ended thus, to hurry to his room and put himself into dry clothes. Had he carried out his journey as he intended in these soaking garments, probably he should have been ill too. It amused him to think what might have been the consequence if Isabel and himself had both caught colds, and been reduced to gruel and hot water on the very outset of their elopement. But to-morrow—to-morrow, no doubt the sun would shine, and all would be well. He looked at the glass as he went to his room, and found that it was rising; and already it had ceased to rain. Dry clothes and a fine day would make all the difference. And Isabel, who could no longer assume any superiority over him—who had been as sly about it as any ordinary girl—would have given herself to him by that time, and be altogether in his power. The young man whistled

in sheer lightheartedness as he changed his dress. After this she could never mount her high horse, and show her superior sentiments, as of yore. The first thing he did when his toilette was accomplished was to write her a note. It was the first communication of the kind which had ever passed between them, but the fact did not excite him as it does most young lovers. Poor Mr. Lothian, on the eminence of his fifty years, would have written to Isabel with very different feelings; but Stapyhton took it calmly, not being of an imaginative turn. His letter was as follows:—

‘Dearest Isabel,—I was in an awful state of mind when I found you did not turn up to-day at the usual spot. I felt furious I can assure you, and called you a jilt and a dozen other names. But I hear you ’ve been ill, and I forgive you, my darling. Of course it never would have answered to set out in the rain on such a frightful day if you were ill. I got soaked to the skin waiting for you, which I hope you will be sorry to hear. But, Isabel, remember to-morrow is the last day. Go I must to-morrow. If you can’t pick yourself up and get well, and join me at the same place and the same hour, I shall go mad, I think, for I must go. My people are writing letters upon letters. There’s one waiting for me now, but I have not opened it, for they’re

all pretty much the same thing over again. They've written to Mr. Lothian, and to Smeaton at the farm, for information as to what detains me; and I must not risk it any longer. But of course, when you know it's so necessary, I can trust to your spirit to get well, and join me as I arranged. We'll have a run into Edinburgh and do the business, and then I can write home. I don't care much about seeing sights myself, but it will all be new to you, and you'll enjoy it. So get well, my pet, as fast as ever you can, and remember to-morrow at the old place at two o'clock. I'll have a trap waiting on the hill: but for heaven's sake don't be late.

'You may think me joking, but I never was more serious in my life. That is my way, as you know. I can't look solemn and use big words like you Scotch. But I mean it all the same. If you don't love me enough to come to me to-morrow, I'll take it for granted you don't love me at all. I will go right away by myself, and I can't hold out any hope to you that I will ever come back. Now don't mistake me, or think I am threatening you. I have waited long enough, and you must not make a fool of me any longer. If I am once driven away, the chances are I can never return to Loch Diarmid—or to you. Come then now. It is our only chance. I will wait for you to-morrow as I did to-day. I shall be there at half-past one,

and I shall wait till a quarter after two. No longer. You must be punctual. It's for you to decide if we are to be together for ever, or separated for ever. I can do no more. To-morrow at the old place, or most likely never in this world.

‘Come, Isabel, my darling, come! Don't fail me. If you do, I will never see you more.

‘Yours, if you will have me,

‘H. S.’

When he had finished this epistle he read it over with a little complacency. If anything would do it, surely this would do it; though, indeed, there was no reason to believe that Isabel required any special entreaty. As he thought it over, it occurred to him that probably she had fainted out of sheer aggravation and passion when she found she could not go to him; and that was easily comprehensible. When he had folded his note, and got up to find some wax to seal it (for envelopes were not common articles in those days), he found the letters Mr. Lothian had told him of on the table, and tore the first that came uppermost open, suddenly, holding still his love-letter in his hand. His face grew heavy as he read, and pale. He went back to his chair and hurried through it, and the other which accompanied it. They were written on the same day, and to the same purpose. His father was ill.

One of the letters was from his sister, the other from the doctor.

‘Come for mamma’s sake,’ wrote the first. ‘Papa is fearfully angry, and threatens to change his will. For your own sake don’t waste a moment.’

‘Your father is dying,’ said the doctor. ‘There is not a moment to lose. He is clamouring for a lawyer. Everything that I can do to postpone this you may be sure I will. But come! you may yet be in time.’

Young Stapylton wiped the heavy moisture from his forehead and stared into the air as if he had been staring at himself. ‘Clamouring for a lawyer!’—‘threatening to change his will!’ Horace was not a devoted son, but such words as these penetrate the most callous heart. After the first shock he set himself to consider with a promptitude that did him credit. There was not a moment to lose. After all, it was just as well he had packed his bag. He would borrow the miller’s horse and the minister’s old gig, and there was still time perhaps to get to Glasgow before the English mail should be gone. But there was not a moment to lose. It was only when he sprang up to prepare for immediate departure that he found the note to Isabel crushed in his hand, and bethought himself of her. He sat down again hastily and added a few words

to it: and he was in the act of sealing it at Mr. Lothian's writing-table when the minister came in. Even then a spark of malice crossed his mind. Here was the best messenger he could find to carry his love-letter—and it would be a Parthian arrow, a farewell blow at his adversary.

‘My father is ill,’ he said; ‘I must go instantly. There is just time to catch the coach for Glasgow if Andrew White will lend me his mare. I am going to ask him now.’

‘Going—instantly?’ said the minister, stupified, looking at the two letters on the table. Stapylton gathered them carefully up and nodded in reply.

‘I shall see you again,’ he said. ‘I must rush up now to the mill. I may have the gig, I suppose? But look here,’ he continued, coming back from the door. ‘There’s one good turn you can do me, if you will. If not I’ll send it by some one else; will you take this note for me to the Glebe when you go?’

The minister started slightly and coloured high, but he made a little ceremonious bow at the same time and held out his hand. ‘I will take it,’ he said gravely; and then, perhaps out of the softening of his heart towards the young fellow, who was thus torn away at such a moment, leaving him master of the field—for to be left master of the field is very softening and consolatory to the

soul—he laid his hand upon Stapylton's arm. 'The doctor says it is but grief and agitation—you'll be glad to hear it,' he said.

'Yes, yes,' cried Stapylton, scarcely taking in the words; 'and I may have the gig? There is not a moment to lose.'

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Staphylton was gone Mr. Lothian looked round him with a certain stupefaction, not able to comprehend the sudden relief and freedom. Could it be possible, that the companion to whom he had been so long tied was gone; that all the alarming possibilities of his presence were over; that Isabel was free from him; that everything was safe? Perhaps for the first moment a thrill of personal hope that the field was clear for himself was in the good man's mind; but that, to do him justice, was not all. Some other suitor younger and more like her than himself might still come in to woo Isabel and win her. But there was, at least, the hope that this problematical lover would be more like her, more capable of appreciating her, than to the minister's eyes Staphylton had ever been. No doubt he was prejudiced in his judgment. When one man imposes himself on another for months, *bon gré mal gré*, more than an ordinary amount of virtue is necessary not to impute every crime on

earth to the undesirable companion; and Mr. Lothian's virtue had not been equal to the trial. Though Stapylton had not injured him in any conspicuous way, though he had never positively lied to him, done him no absolute harm in anybody's opinion, the minister set him down with unconscious ferocity as capable of anything. Had he heard suddenly next day that his former guest had forged or robbed or perjured himself, that he had betrayed trust and outraged weakness, that he had half-a-dozen wives living, or that he had murdered five of them, Mr. Lothian, albeit so good and indulgent in his ordinary disposition, would have believed every word. 'I always knew it;' he would have said, 'I never trusted him;' which indeed was hard upon the young man, who, except that he loved himself above all created things, had as yet done nothing particularly wrong. And the relief of his departure was beyond expression. Mr. Lothian put the note which he had undertaken to carry on the mantel-piece of his study, and walked all over the house with a candle, only half aware what he was doing, to make sure that his troublesome inmate was gone. Then he sent over for the Dominie, and ordered up those 'materials' which are euphemistically entitled 'the hot water' in respectable Scotch houses. He felt disposed to make a night of it in a modest, sober,

clerical way. Isabel was better and Stapylton was gone. The two things together raised his satisfaction almost beyond the narrow limits of content.

‘Yes, he’s gone!’ he said, when the Dominie entered, ‘thank heaven!—I am not an impatient man—’

‘As long as things go your own way.’

‘And longer, ye sneering body,’ said the minister, ‘my own way!—much of that I have had in this world. But never mind. He was a thorn in my flesh, and a merciful Providence has removed him. If there ever was an occasion of rejoicing, it’s now.’

‘Well, well,’ said the Dominie, ‘I have no objections to rejoice. He was a lad without regard for his seniors, which is unlovely in youth. And ye were cooped up in one house with him, besides other drawbacks that we need not discuss. And so there’s been mair sickness at the Glebe? It is an unlucky house!’

‘Is it damp, do ye think?’ asked the minister, with instant alarm.

‘If ye’ll tell me a corner of the parish that’s not damp!’ said the Dominie; ‘but I meant nothing. What I would have said was that it had no *luck* if ye do not object to the word. First the poor mother—and then Margaret.’

‘But with twenty years between,’ said the minister, quickly.

‘ Ay, that ’s true, man ! ’ cried the Dominie ; ‘ a man gets little better than a vegetable living on in such a place as this. I would have said it was scarce twenty months. The loch ’s always the same ye see, and the hills—and seedtime, and harvest, and all the rest. A man gets as senseless as an auld tree. I ’ve been five-and-twenty years here.’

‘ Ten years longer than me,’ said the minister, with defective grammar.

‘ Ten years is a nothing, a moment, the twinkling of an eye. I set little store by your ten years. But there are some things that change for all that. No the bairns to speak of, for they are about the same standard, and awfu’ like each other from generation to generation. On the whole, I think there ’s nothing changes but a man himself,’ said the Dominie, musing. He had made his toddy, and was stirring it thoughtfully with the spoon. Then, suddenly, all at once, he raised his bright old eyes to his friend’s face, and smiled according to his wont.

‘ You are thinking what a spectacle I was for a young man,’ he said, ‘ and that ’s just what I was thinking myself. I am greatly of opinion that there are some men that never pass twenty ; and some that are born a hundred. I ’m one of the last. I never had an hour’s comfort, so far as I can mind, till I was an old dotard, as ye see me.

Here 's your health, Lothian, and wishing ye joy. You 're about twenty yourself.'

'Alas!' said the minister, but not without a gleam of pleasure, 'fifty well chappit, as they say; but it is not a matter of years—altogether,' he added, with a sigh.

'Altogether?—ye mean not a bit!' said the Dominie. 'Come, my lad, let us make up our minds for that, to-night, at least. Ye have shaken this young fellow off your shoulders, and it's a poor heart that never rejoices. That's good whisky. Ye'll get it at Auckinglass?—'

'It's pure Glenlivat,' said the minister; 'I had it sent me ten years ago; though that is but a moment, as you say it ripens the juice of the barley, as well as the juice of the grape.'

'Dinna be too Scriptural, my friend,' said Mr. Galbraith; 'in the lightness of your heart ye may play pliskies with the word. And so he's gone; you're quite sure he's gone? No likely to come in as we are speaking, and up to this table with a insolent colour in his cheeks, and youth in his eyes, and order in another glass as if he were master and more? If I were you I would never have lost sight of him till he was in the coach.'

'And lost my quiet evening?' said the minister. 'No, no; he is safe enough. And, besides, there was never any love lost between us. He would

have been amazed had I offered—and I should have made sure he saw through me all the time.'

'So the thought occurred to you,' said the Dominie, shaking his head over his toddy, with an amused smile.

'I confess it did—not for my own sake, Galbraith; but I would not have had him try to get an interview with—that poor child at the Glebe.'

'I thought that was where we were coming,' said the Dominie, under his breath.

'Where else could we be coming? There was no other personal question between Stapylton and me.'

The Dominie played a march on the table with his finger. 'It's very good whisky,' he said; 'but I like the kettle by the fire for my part. That bit brass thing on the table is like a fine lady. Give me the sony, black kettle that sits and sings and pleases all the senses by the fireside.'

'If your tumbler's done,' said the minister, 'we'll have it in; 'it is not every night we celebrate the feast of liberation.'

'My tumbler's no done, and has no such intention,' said the Dominie. 'No, no—let us give no hold to the adversary; but if the water was boiling I would not object to an eke. If we went the length of two tumblers in the present state of the

parish, who can say the Manse would not tumble in on our heads? But the very prophets themselves could see no harm in an eke.'

'It's more insidious,' said the minister, as he rang the bell; but gravity returned to his face before the kettle had been brought 'ben' from the kitchen, black and polished and steaming, and placed on the hob as on a not unaccustomed place. 'To return to our subject—'

'I'm in no mood to return to any subject,' said the Dominie, 'except the whisky. I know nothing finer than the fumes of a fresh tumbler, or rather, an eke—the spirit of the spirit breathing away in an ethereal vapour just as the rest of it rises in a man's brain. I could understand some bit creature of the atmosphere getting aërially fou, before we gross animals have had our first sip. Yes, I see what you're thinking—he is fou himself the hawering body; nothing of the kind, I am as sober as a judge—and no intoxicated with other fumes like you.'

'It's but a poor kind of intoxication,' said the minister, shaking his head, 'and little chance of satisfaction coming with it. There's a letter there I promised him to deliver—'

'I would rather put it in the fire,' said the Dominie, 'and tell the lassie she's well rid of him. What think ye of this new move? It will be a

good riddance for the parish ; but I am sorry for poor Ailie—she 's but an innocent thing when all 's said ; and as for Black John, if he 's no crackit, he 's worse.'

'He was mad, or something near it,' said Mr. Lothian. 'I am not without sympathy for the man. The death of Margaret Diarmid drove him mad. I don't think you ever did him justice—her death drove him out of all bounds.'

'To marry one woman off-hand is a queer way of showing your grief for another,' said the Dominie. 'I have not examined the phenomena of love-making myself with sufficient care to know ; but it is not a form of grieving common to see, and it 's no great compliment to the living woman whatever it may be to the dead.'

'Poor Ailie!' the minister said. 'What will happen to so sensitive a creature when she puts her inspiration to the test among strangers, with John Diarmid by her side?'

'She 'll not live,' said the Dominie, 'that is the best solution of all these knotty questions. There will be first a shock of surprise to find that she does not carry everything before her as she expected : and then a struggle between hope and disappointment, and then a sick heart, and then—some fine day she 'll catch cold, or get a fever, and she 'll die—and there will be an end of a creature

with no harm in her, only uplifted by—what is it?—can you tell?’

The minister shook his head—‘Temperament,’ he said.

‘Vanity?’ said the Dominie.

‘Neither the one nor the other, but something of both, and something more—stop: you’re an old Moderate, Galbraith. You believe in nothing that’s beyond flesh and blood. Yes, something more. I cannot tell you what it is—if it’s from heaven above or earth beneath—if it’s some influence of spirits we have no cognizance of. But there is something more than excitement, or temperament, or vanity. I don’t call it prophecy, as they do; but it is the same thing that fell on the multitude when Peter preached. Mind, I give it no importance, but it is the same thing.’

Mr. Lothian spoke with a little excitement, and perhaps it was the first time he had suffered himself to go so far. As for the Dominie, he puffed clouds of smoke from his protruded underlip with a certain cynical protestation against the other’s enthusiasm.

‘I think I may venture on another brew,’ he said, ‘if you’re getting to that exaltation. I was not aware that ye admitted all their claims in that enthusiastic way. If it’s the Primitive Church

come back, that is all they ever asserted, as you well know.'

'They asserted a great deal more,' said the minister, with excitement — 'that the Primitive Church was perfect and to be our model in everything — which is not my opinion, nor was it Paul's. If you mark the little store he sets by tongues and prophesying —'

'I am thankful to think it is none of my business,' said Mr. Galbraith. 'Paul and I have little to do with each other in a professional point of view. I cannot think he was the man to stand interference one way or another. But we may as well make use of the kettle while it's boiling. There is still some corn out on the high ground, and I hear it's spoiling with all this rain.'

'It's the plague of the west country,' said Mr. Lothian; 'we have our compensations, but it's hard upon the farmers all the same. My own opinion has always been that they should pay more attention to the beasts and let the corn alone.'

'But you want great farms for that, and capital,' said the Dominie. 'In all professions it would be a grand thing to have a race of bachelors once in a century or so, that would give their mind and their money to the land, for instance, instead of wasting it in the bringing up of bairns.'

Land is aye thankful and gives a return; whereas lads—or lasses either for that matter——’

‘Ye old cynical bachelor body!’ said the minister; ‘would ye have everybody a dry stick like yourself?’

‘Maybe no, where the uxorial and parental qualities are developed as they are in you. Besides, unless you were to amass a fortune out of your stipend and endow a bursary, I cannot see what good a minister can do,—in that kind, be it understood. But it’s time to break up our sederunt,’ said the Dominie, finishing his last ‘eke,’ ‘or the elders and the wives would all be scandalized. You’re such an impressionable youth that the parish is of opinion you’re no just safe in the company of an auld Moderate, as ye call me.’

‘It’s as much as I can do to hold my own,’ said Mr. Lothian with a smile, and the two old friends went together through the silent house to the door. It was not late, but the servants were in bed and everything shut up. The minister accompanied his guest to the gate. It was very dark, black as night only is in the country, and up or down as far as could be seen, there was no light visible, except a certain glimmering paleness where the loch lay, and the candle set in the Dominie’s window to guide him home through the gloom. The air was damp and chill with the recent rain,

the burn trickling unseen through the night, all the mystery of darkness enclosing the two solitary figures at the gate. When they parted life was still on Loch Diarmid, and nothing but the two faint twinkles of light from the minister's study and the Dominie's bedroom, where the latter betook himself without delay to sleep, broke the intense blackness in which all that homely existence and so many passions and agitations were hid.

Mr. Lothian returned to his room and opened the window softly with a certain reverence for the solemnity of the night. The great rose-bush, as usual, dewed him all over with rain from its branches, and thrust its sharp-pointed leaves into his face as he looked out. It was to clear the air of the smoke that he did it, but yet it was impossible to resist the fascination of the impenetrable darkness which tempted him to gaze, as everything unfathomable always does. Then he returned to the fireside and looked for the hundredth time at the letter on the mantelpiece. It had no address, Stapylton in his haste having forgotten that necessary detail. Would it be a sin to drop the nameless thing into the fire which burned so temptingly underneath? A sin against whom?—against the stranger to whom he owed

nothing, whom he had been much kinder to than he deserved, who had no claim in any way upon his aid—or against Isabel, whose life he felt would be delivered from its greatest danger were Stapylton once and definitively banished away from her thoughts? Alas! that was not the question. He could not take refuge in any pretext of good to come. It would be a sin against honour. He was bound to carry the thing, whatsoever poison might lurk inside. Though it might agitate, or even destroy the life that was so dear to him; though it might plant new thorns in her innocent way and perplex her overburdened heart; and though he himself would willingly have been cut in little pieces to keep that heart in peace—yet he must do it: there was no possible question on the point. He put it into his pocket out of sight and out of danger, with a sigh.

Next morning Mr. Lothian went to the Glebe as early as he could permit himself to go, though his heart had been on the way for hours before he permitted his reluctant footsteps to follow. He found Isabel lying on the sofa in the parlour, in the very spot where Margaret had died, and naturally the association of ideas struck him profoundly. ‘Why have you laid her there?’ he said to Jean, turning back from the door.

There went a chill to his heart as if he had seen the tragedy all acted over again, and heard that the end was already approaching.

Jean Campbell stared at him, only partially comprehending what he could mean. 'Where else could I put her,' she said, 'unless it was ben in the kitchen with me? and the doctor says she's to be kept quiet. And it's mair cheerful there than in a bedroom, where she could see nobody.'

'Cheerful!' echoed the minister.

'Eh ay real cheerful,' said Jean, in whose mind perpetual use and wont had subdued the force of melancholy associations. 'When I've put the sofa she can see the road, and the loch, and the steamboat, which is real diverting—and I'm aye coming and going to keep her cheery myself. She's no to call ill. It's but the sorrow and the weakness and a' her trouble. We've no need to be alarmed about her health, he says.'

Mr. Lothian, silenced by this matter of fact treatment of the subject, went into the parlour, feeling even his own apprehensions a little calmed down. To fly from the habitual house because of anything that had happened in it—to abandon the simple sitting-room of the family, because death had come in by its door, was indeed an impossibility—and even Isabel did not seem to be conscious of the awe and thrill of something like fear with which

her visitor perceived her surroundings. She was very pale, but quiet, in that languor, half of suffering, half of recovery, which makes a slight illness a relief at once to body and mind. She had been ill enough to be sharply recalled out of all dreaming to a consciousness of herself, and the existence which still remained to her. She had learned once more to realize the sensation of bodily comfort, and the consolation of being watched and waited upon and tended. And another great event in her life, a thing unknown except to herself, but all the more powerful on that account in its influence, had come between her and the freshness of her grief. Therefore Isabel was a new creature. She was reclining on Margaret's sofa, which had never been for an hour out of her sight since Margaret's death upon it, and, without any terror of the associations surrounding her, was gradually awakening in all her youthful being. Her mind had recovered its tone. She had been alone with no companion but the fire for the greater part of the day, from the moment when Jean's heart was set at rest by the doctor's visit, and had been thinking about many things. She could not understand now the state of excitement into which she had been thrown by Stapylton's proposal. Her heart was hot with anger at him, and almost disgust with herself. And yet her heart clung to

him still. But in that little interval she seemed to herself to have grown ever so much older and wiser. She would send for him, she thought, openly in the eye of day. She would say to him that if he came back and sought her at a fit time, she would wait for him, and give him all her thoughts; but if not——She had framed in her own mind over and over the words she would say to him: a gentle reproach for the unworthy thought that she should care so little for Margaret's memory, a soft remonstrance against his haste and wilfulness. 'It is as easy to come back as it is to go away,' Isabel had made up her mind to say. 'It is not as if it were over the seas; and I'm not so poor nor of such common folk that you should think shame to speak of me.' She thought with foolish youthful hope that such words would overcome all his selfish resolution, that he would overwhelm her with prayers for pardon, and dear protestations of all she was to him. Such protestations were, to tell the truth, very little in Stapylton's way; but yet she was able to invent and believe in them, with all the obstinate idealism of her age and character. She was deep in such thoughts when the minister came in casting a shadow as of another life upon her. One moment she had been glowing with tender indignation asking Horace in her heart, how he could,—oh, how he could make so cruel a proposal to

her? and then rising into simple pride, was she such a one as he would be ashamed to name to his mother? and then, softening ineffably over him, that she would wait and write, and count the long days till he came back. The glow of those reflections had not faded from her cheek when Mr. Lothian's shadow fell over her. It chilled her just a little. She knew too well what were his feelings towards herself to be quite at ease with him. He had been as delicate of her feelings as the other had been inconsiderate; but the very contrast in his favour gave her a certain touch of resentment towards himself. And neither were without embarrassment when he thus came and sat down by her side.

‘I am very glad to hear you are better?’ he said.

‘Oh, yes. I never was ill to speak of. I know I never was ill,’ said Isabel, turning away her head.

‘Then perhaps the rest and quiet is all you want?’ said the minister, not knowing in his agitation what to say. And then there was a pause. There were a hundred things which he had longed to say to her, but could not when the moment thus came. He felt as if some cruel necessity was upon him to think of Margaret—to remind her that Margaret had died just where she

was lying—to beg her to change her attitude, and look, which made his heart sick with terror. He had to restrain himself with an effort from suggesting to her this strange topic. And perhaps the other things he was tempted to say would have been less palatable still. At last, after a perplexed and painful pause, he brought out of his pocket the letter of which he was the unwilling bearer.

‘I have a letter for you,’ he said, ‘it was left with me last night.’

‘A letter!’ said Isabel, growing pale, and then she turned it about in her hands, and looked at it. ‘It has no address.’

‘It was put up in such haste,’ said Mr. Lothian. ‘Isabel, will you read it now, in case I can give you any explanation?—or shall I go away?’

‘It is from ——’

‘Horace Stapylton. I gave my promise I would bring it—though against my will.’

Isabel gazed at him, for a moment growing pale. She held the letter helplessly in her hand. What could he mean? It had been *left* with him last night. He could perhaps give some explanation? What could he mean? Her pulse began to beat again as it had not done since her faint. She made Mr. Lothian a little sign with her hand to stay, for he had risen and stood quite

apart from her in the centre of the room. Then with a hasty hand she tore open the letter. When the minister gave a stolen glance at her, he could see that her cheeks were growing more and more flushed and feverish. The colour on them was no passing glow of delight and modesty, but the burning red of excitement and sudden passion. She went over it all rapidly, and then she uttered a low cry. Mr. Lothian glanced at her, but, seeing that the cry was unconscious, betook himself again to the window with what calmness was possible. Isabel had come to the postscript. He did not look round again for what seemed to him an age. He stood with such feelings as may be imagined, gazing blankly out on the familiar scene before him—knowing that her whole mind was occupied with his rival's farewell—knowing what was worse, or, at least believing, that his rival was unworthy of her. Mr. Lothian represented to himself that it was this that was the sting. She was utterly absorbed, forgetting everything in Stapylton's letter, and he was not worthy to unloose the latchet of her shoe. But whether this sympathetic feeling or simple rivalry was the more prominent emotion in his mind, it is certain that the pain was so great that it bewildered and benumbed him. He stood not knowing how time went, feeling that it might be a month or a century, wondering if life after all

were not the saddest of mistakes, and envying poor Margaret, blessed Margaret, in her early grave. What roused him at last was the rustle of the paper falling to the ground, and turning round hastily, he found Isabel with her face buried in her hands in a passion of tears. This was hard to bear. He went back to his seat beside the sofa, and picking up the letter laid it gently on her lap; and then he touched her shoulder softly with a fatherly, caressing hand, and said, 'My poor child! my poor child!' in a voice that came out of the very depths of his heart.

Then Isabel uncovered hastily her passionate, tear-stained face.

'It is not that!' she cried—'it is not that! Oh, I think shame! Am I one to be spoken to so?—is it my doing? I think my heart will break! Take it and read it, and tell me if it is my doing, before I die of shame.'

He could only gaze at her, wondering if her mind were unhinged; but hasty Isabel, all ablaze with passion and misery, could not stop to think. She took up the letter,—her lover's letter, and thrust it into his rival's hand.

'If it is my doing,—oh, never speak to me again!' she cried. Shame and anger, and disappointment and anguish, were all tearing her asunder. And she had no Margaret to go to, to

relieve her. Some one must give her that support and solace which her heart demanded, or she felt she must die. She hung upon his looks as he read it, reading his expression.

‘Could it be my fault?’ she cried. ‘Oh, Mr. Lothian, was I such a light lass? Was it anything I did that made him write like that to me?’

‘No, Isabel,’ he said, with a blaze of rage in his eyes, taking her feverish hand. ‘No, Isabel. My dear, think no more of it. It is that he understands neither yours nor you.’

And then instinctively, in an instant, hasty Isabel felt the mistake she had made, and felt that she could not bear any criticisms upon her lover even now. She took back her letter as suddenly as she had given it, and folded it up with trembling hands.

‘He does not understand,’ said Mr. Lothian, altogether unconscious of this rapid revolution. ‘You speak a language he cannot comprehend. The women he knows are a different species. Isabel, I have never said a word against him—’

‘No,’ she cried, hurriedly. ‘No; I am always a fool, and never know what I am doing. No. Dinna say a word now.’

Then he stopped suddenly, the very words arrested on his lips, and gazed at her wondering, not knowing what she could mean.

‘You don’t understand me either,’ cried Isabel. ‘Oh, not a word—not a word! You cannot judge him right; you never saw him like me. He was bewildered with the news; he never meant that.’

‘If I were to say the like, would you ever forgive me?’ said the minister, shaking his head. She answered only by weeping, a mode of reply which took all power of remonstrance or protestation away from the spectator. A hundred contradictory emotions were in Isabel’s tears. Shame and pain over the letter; shame still sharper, if not so deep, that she had offered it to the criticism of another; wrath against Stapylton; rage at herself; and a certain bitterness against her companion for not taking her lover’s part to her, for not contradicting her, and pleading his rival’s cause. She could not have spoken all this wild jumble of pain and passion; but she poured it all forth in tears.

It was the postscript which had specially excited her, and which ran as follows:—

‘I have just heard that my father is ill, and I must go. I would have waited till to-morrow even now, but I hear he might alter his will, which would never do. It is all your own fault. I was ready, waiting for you—as you know. What could a man do more? If you will come, and meet me somewhere on the Border, as soon as this business

is settled, you will find me as ready then as I was to-day. No time to say a word more.'

Mr. Lothian once more left her side, and went back to the window in his perplexity.

'I should not disturb you,' he said, with his back to her. 'I should go away. But it is grievous to me to see your tears. I would give my very blood to save one tear falling from your eyes. And he would wring tears of blood out of your heart; and yet he is chosen, and I am rejected. What more can I have to say?'

'Nothing! oh, nothing!' cried Isabel. 'Oh, will you not understand? I would like to hide myself in the depths of the earth. I was going to him yesterday, when I fainted. I have kept it a secret, and it was like a lie burning in my heart. Now I have told you; I would have gone with him if I had kept in life. What better am I than him? He is free to speak, for he sees I am no better. It is my fault, and not his. And now you know,' cried the girl, clasping her passionate hands together, 'and you may despise me! I let him tempt me; I could not bear the awfu' quiet. I'll cure you at least, if I shame myself. It was me that was to blame.'

'But I am not cured. I'll never be cured, my dear, my dear!' cried the grey-haired man, coming back to her, with tears in his eyes, and taking her

hands into his own. 'It was your innocence, and your grief. Do you think I do not know of the struggle that was at your heart?'

She left her hands indifferently in his, not seeming to care for, nor scarcely to perceive, his emotion. She fixed her eyes vacantly upon the air, with great tears rising in them.

'And Margaret knows it all,' she said; two piteous tears, the very essence of her pain, dilated her eyes into two great globes, but did not fall. Self-abasement could go no further. Margaret, in heaven, would not despise her sister. But what could she think of the variable, miserable creature who, fresh from her own death-bed, could be tempted by such a poor temptation, and think such thoughts as these?

CHAPTER VII.

WHILE all this had been going on at the Glebe, a drama of a different kind was evolving itself among scenes of strange devotion, and plans as wild as enthusiast ever formed, at the other corner of the Loch. Mr. John's madness had come to a height on the night of Margaret's death. The sudden announcement of that event falling on him at a moment when he had already worked himself into a kind of frenzy, had brought to a climax this supreme crisis of his being. He went away from Ailie's cottage, vaguely wandering across the gloomy moor to the Glebe, and throwing himself down there on the wet heather, watched through the starless, solitary night within sight of the melancholy house which held his dead love. It was such a night's watching as sometimes changes the entire tenor of a life. Fables of hair growing grey, or faces taking the print of years in a single night, do but express the merest outside semblance of the effect which such a measureless cycle of time—or

rather of something which was not time, which was long and ruthless as ages, yet brief as the twinkling of an eye—can make upon a man's being. With a body exhausted by watching, with a mind kept preternaturally awake by the highest strain of passion—grief, remorse, self-condemnation, personal misery, the man watched through all the awful hours of darkness; not a tear relieved his burning eyes, nor did the eyelids ever close upon them or modify even for a moment his passionate fixed gaze through the blackness of the night upon the unseen house. He could no more see the house than he could see his love, the only love of his heart, lying white and shrouded within it, but everything was present to him in vivid imagination; his own soiled and feverish life, the first impression she had made upon him, the habitual evil thought with which before her pure influence had time to work, he had regarded even Margaret. And then his loss of her, the revulsion of his frantic soul, the descent into hell, the wild flight out of it, the sudden contact with inspiration and light from heaven, and the passion of religion which seemed at first as if it must make him amends for all the other lost and evil passions of his life. And now what was this termination of all? The end of hope for heaven and earth? or else God's awful way of trying in the furnace and

proving by fire, the servant who was yet to do, for Him, something above any recorded mission of prophet or of saint?

Strange thrills ran over the impassioned watcher as he sat on the desolate braes, with his eyes gazing into that painful gloom; voices awoke in his heart with which his will had nothing to do—indeed, had he not thrown away his own will, cast himself with open ears and anguished soul at God's feet, to hear whatever should be said to him, to suffer whatsoever might be inflicted, to be moved by angel or spirit or aught that moved in the silent night, in which he alone moved and breathed, the one sentient being capable of influence from above or from beneath? What had his will or his thoughts to do with it? Out of the awful silence, out of his own heart, out of the air and the very soil, voices seemed to wake and whisper. 'Companion of devils, false love, murderer, Cain!' one seemed to shout at him; another caught and rent him, like the spirits in the Gospel, with unearthly, inarticulate cries; another seemed to mock and tempt him, flashing before his eyes wild pictures of the past, reminding him of those excitements of vice in which a tortured spirit may sometimes forget itself; and then the infernal chorus would be silent, and another band not less wild would take up the strain, bidding him to go

forth and teach the nations, to heal and bless, to curse and denounce, to proclaim judgment and salvation.

Who could so well fulfil that mission as a man delivered out of hell and the grave? They bade him go and proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!' 'Son of man, behold I take from thee the desire of thine eyes at a stroke; but thou shalt not weep nor mourn.' This mystic voice of anguish echoing over the buried ages seemed to ring out loudly once more over the midnight wild in John Diarmid's ear. Was he not as Ezekiel in the greatness of his woe? Had not God set him as a sign before this people, before his generation, and the world? Then the wild force of that which he and all around him supposed to be inspiration came upon the solitary man. Through the silence he spoke in his strange ecstasy pouring forth those sounds which were unintelligible to himself as well as to others. But there are moments at which all passion becomes unspeakable, and in which inarticulate utterance, in music, in sighing, in groans, and outcries,—anything that will utter the meaning of a heart without words, is a certain relief. The utterance rent him asunder, but left him with a sense of languor and exhaustion in which was the first touch of consolation he had yet felt. And

then did he dream, or did the angels come and soothe him, with dizzy gleams of light about them, and soft airs of Paradise from their wings fanning his feverish forehead? It was they that revealed to him the mission he was to accomplish, he and the prophetess whom he was to take to him—not clearly with any geographical or economical detail, but vaguely as angelic indications are. In a distant island among the seas they were to find the expectant people who should understand the tongues they spoke and receive the message they had to deliver. They were to go forth and seek this refuge, preaching as they went, like the Apostles, taking no thought what they should say, uttering such words and such languages as the Lord might give them. A vision of listening throngs along all the dusty paths; of ‘the Spirit’ falling here on one and there on the other, of strangers standing up as they did in Jerusalem, and blessing God for the new revelation; of devils and diseases flying before them, and a millennium only waiting for the accomplished work, rolled out before him in the exaltation of his weariness and despair. When the morning suddenly woke and looked him in the face, the man woke shivering too, and confronted it, not knowing where he was. And then another wave of great anguish rolled over him, and he crept to the pale house which grew faintly dis-

tinguishable in the dawning, and made his way round and round it, groping by the wall, blinded not by tears, but by some mist of misery that came before his eyes. And then by-and-bye found himself at home, not knowing how he had got there, nor when.

The result of this terrible watch was an illness against which he fought with feverish passion, never resting nor stopping one of his ordinary occupations. He was in the churchyard on the day of Margaret's funeral, shivering and burning, and scarcely able to sustain himself, but keeping up by force of will, grasping at the cold tombstones, stopping the melancholy train, as it dispersed, to hear 'the word of the Lord.'

'You have closed her up in her grave,' he cried, his voice hoarse with sickness and passion; 'but when He comes, think you, your green turf and your cold stones will hide His saint from giving Him a welcome.'

'Come home! come home!' said the minister, approaching the haggard prophet, with a compassion, in which there was some touch of fellow feeling, 'you are too ill to be out of your bed, much less here.'

'By God's grace I will never yield to what you call illness,' said Mr. John; 'is it for me to rest and let them leave the place where they have laid

her, with hearts like stones in their bosoms. Is she to have lived,—and is she to die, in vain?’

‘Mr. John, this is worse than folly,’ said Mr. Lothian; ‘no one here will let Margaret’s dear name be made an occasion of strife. For her sake, go home and take thought, and rest.’

‘For her sake, I will rest no more till He comes, or till I die,’ cried the inspired madman: ‘but I shall not die, I will live and declare the works of the Lord.’

There were many of the wondering party thus accosted who believed that Mr. John had been betrayed by his grief into a new vice, the most common failing of the country-side. ‘He’s been drinking,’ they said among themselves: ‘puir fellow!—to make him forget.’ ‘Na, na, it’s no drink, it’s grief,’ said others. ‘And wha are ye that speak like them in Jerusalem,’ cried a third party, ‘“they’re drunk with new wine,” when it was the Spirit of the Lord?’

And then, a few days later, it became known in the parish that he had bidden Ailie Macfarlane in the name of God to become his wife, and excitement rose very high on Loch Diarmid. Something in the passionate, haggard face, which looked like that of a man on the point of death, and yet was to be seen more than ever at kirk and market, awed the common mind and threw a certain light

of reality upon those desperate and tragic motives which had led him to such a proposal.

‘He’s lost Margret for this world; and now he thinks to force the Lord to come afore His ain time and get her back,’ said Jenny Spence.

‘And Ailie—poor thing!—is to be his tool that he’ll work with. I see his meaning—a’ his meaning, as clear as daylight. He’s out o’ his wits about Margret Diarmid; and he’s ta’en to the drink for consolation,’ said another gossip, ‘and he hasna strength to stand it. It’ll be his death, and that you’ll see.’

But it was not his death; on the contrary, he related publicly in his meetings how he had fought with his illness and overcome it, thus strengthening the evidence that sickness and suffering were from Satan, and could be overcome by faith. Thanks to his constitution, or to the sustaining force of excitement, he shook off the fever which was on him, and came to himself, and every day had further revelations, and spoke more fully of the mission with which he had been charged to the world.

Poor Ailie, however, on her side, was of a very different mind. When ‘the word of the Lord’ had burst upon her on that night of Margaret’s death, her very heart had failed in dismay and consternation. She had implicitly believed all that had been revealed to herself of her own mission,

and was ready to set out at any moment without staff or scrip, with all the simplicity of a child. But her faith failed her when Mr. John's strange proposal fell on her ear. 'Is this a time for marrying or giving in marriage?' she asked, with something like indignation, when, with infinitely greater vehemence, he renewed his commands to her as the handmaid of the Lord. 'Is not the time of His appearing near? and are we to be burdened with earthly ties and earthly troubles when the Lord comes to His ain work? Oh, man! I'm no made to be ony man's helpmeet. There are plenty round you that are better for that; it's my meat and my drink to serve God. I couldna think of the flesh to please my husband, but of the Spirit to please the Lord.'

'And yet you contradict His Spirit and refuse His message,' said Mr. John, 'which I brought to you out of the darkness of the night,—out of a mind rent and torn with pain, not lightly, or with common thoughts, but from His presence. Will you please Him by rejecting His word?'

'But it might be a lying spirit,' said Ailie. 'It might be to tempt us,—as if you and me had need of alliance in the flesh.'

'We have need of alliance for the work,' he said, with his great, heavy, passionate eyes fixed upon her. 'Men have gone before, but never man

and woman. The Lord has said to me, Go in to the prophetess. Fear not to take unto thee thy wife. If you disobey, the sin be upon your head.'

'But it has never been revealed to me,' cried Ailie, her cheeks crimsoning with shame, and whitening with terror. 'When there have been messages concerning this life, they have been revealed to them that were to profit, and no to another. And in the mouth of two or three is every testimony to be established. If the word comes to me I'll no resist the Lord.'

'The head of the woman is her husband,' said Mr. John, loftily, 'it is the sign of God's will towards you. If you are to be given to me, your instructions, your directions, must come through my hands. It is to me it is revealed, for I am the head. Listen to the Lord's voice. Want of faith has laid one head low that should have shone above us all. Will you let it overcome you now that have triumphed in your time? Ailie, beware! The blasphemy that cannot be pardoned, and the sin that may not be forgiven, is the sin against the Holy Ghost.'

'But I canna see it! I canna see it!' cried poor Ailie, bursting into tears. Her dignity seemed to have deserted her, and all her spiritual gifts. She kept in-doors, shut up in her room, spending her

time in feverish prayers and divinations from the the Bible. 'I will do what the Lord wills,' she said to herself and others twenty times in a day; but when any text which seemed to favour Mr. John's cause caught her eye on opening 'the Book,' she would shut it again hastily, and try again, without any acknowledgment. All her partizans, and indeed the entire parish, took an interest in the question which no previous features in the movement had elicited to such an extent. The matter was discussed everywhere, involving as it did the interest of a personal romance along with the intense charm of the religious excitement, and calling forth a hundred different opinions. There were some who thought that Ailie—'set her up!'—had won what she aimed at in making herself so conspicuous, and that her reluctance was pretence. And there were some who, without going so far, still felt that the promotion of a gentleman's hand thus offered to her, was enough to make the prophetess forget her calling. Miss Catherine, who was of a sceptical mind, and had never given in to Ailie's pretensions, was so much moved by her kinsman's madness, that it almost broke down the barrier which had divided them since the time when Mr. John's evil ways had finally closed her doors against him. She even hesitated at the church-door whether she would not pause and

accost him, and see what reason could do to turn him from his fatal intention; but was deterred by the haggard look, the watery bloodshot eyes, the parched and feverish lips, which struck her like a revelation. 'I understand it all now,' she said, so much agitated by the supposed discovery, that she went in tremulous to the Manse, to recover herself. 'It is not a common failing among us Diarmids of the old stock—but that accounts for everything. And as for arguing with a man in that state—'

'You mistake,' said the minister; 'indeed you mistake.'

Miss Catherine shook her head, 'Well I know the signs of it,' she said; 'it is not a failing of the race, but when it comes it is all the worse for that. The unhappy lad! One would think that the words of Scripture came true, and that such a man was delivered over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.'

'He has been wrong, no doubt; but not in that way,' said Mr. Lothian. 'It is grief—despair if you like; and all this excitement, and agitation, and sickness, which he will not give in to—but not what you suppose.'

Once more Miss Catherine shook her head. 'He is but a distant cousin, thank God,' she said to herself. But yet he was related nearly enough

to throw upon the house of Lochhead a certain share of the responsibility. 'I am glad his poor mother is safe in her grave,' she added; 'ye preach, and ye preach, you ministers, but ye never will persuade the young what a weary wilderness this world is, nor the old that there's anything but tribulation and sorrow in it. Will ye marry them when all is done and said?'

This question was asked so abruptly, that Mr. Lothian was startled. 'Marry whom?' he asked.

'Those I am speaking of: John Diarmid and that lass. Is it a thing you can bless, you that are an honest man, and know your duty, and have some experience in this world?'

'My dear Miss Catherine,' said the minister, 'you have too much experience yourself not to know that if they've made up their minds it will make little difference what I do or what I think. I have no right to say they are not to marry if they please.'

'No; I wish you had,' said Miss Catherine, rising: 'and I wish there was some kind of a real government, or some control, that men should not be left to make fools of themselves and put shame upon an old name whenever they please.'

'She is not his equal,' said Mr. Lothian, 'but there is no shame.'

Miss Catherine marched out of the Manse gates

strenuously shaking her head. 'A lass that has preached and prayed and ranted in a public place!' she said, with a mixture of lofty indignation and contempt, shaking out her great shawl and rustling her silk gown, so that the minister felt himself buried and lost in their shadow. And she continued to shake her head as she went majestically alone down the slope and took her way home through the village. Isabel was still only recovering from her little illness, and had not as yet ventured to church. And her patroness missed the pretty, graceful creature, with all her hasty impulses, and shy pride, and impatient temper. 'And *she'll* marry that English vagabond!' the feminine Squire of Loch Diarmid said to herself, with such a sigh as might, had she been near enough, have crisped the waters of the Sabbath-keeping loch. If she could but have taken the affairs of her kindred into her hands and married them her own way, what an improvement it would have been! Miss Catherine had a due respect for Providence—but still she could not but feel that in some respects she could have improved on 'its' proceedings, especially in respect to marriages—which are things which Providence is sadly apt to mismanage, as all the world knows.

When the minister was left by himself at his own gate a sudden impulse seized him to interfere

in this delicate matter; or perhaps not to interfere—but at least to exercise that privilege of curiosity or interest which a clergyman, like a woman, is permitted to feel. He went up the brae towards the little line of cottages where Ailie lived, with kindness in his heart to the visionary girl, notwithstanding all her recent denunciations of his lukewarmness and interference with his business. Half way up, he met Mr. John coming down in his rapid, excited, breathless way. The two men paused and came to a stop opposite to each other, without for the first moment any attempt to speak. Mr. Lothian was half alarmed when he saw the ravages which so short a time had wrought on the enthusiast's face. He himself looked young and ruddy beside John Diarmid, who must have been at least a dozen years his junior. There were deep lines under his eyes and about his haggard mouth; his cheeks were hollow, his eyes seemed increased in size as well as in fire; and a beard, a wonder in those days, the only symptom by which he had betrayed the languor of the fever which had been consuming him, covered the lower part of his face. This beard had been visible at church that morning for the first time to the general public, and the parish had involuntarily looked with distrust upon its prophet when they saw that symptom of eccentricity on his chin. But Mr. Lothian was not so

easily shocked. Nevertheless, it was Mr. John who was the first to speak.

‘You will soon be free of us,’ he said, in his deep voice; ‘the time of the visitation of Loch Diarmid is nearly at an end. Him that is unworthy let him be unworthy still. We’ll hand them back to you and your sermons. A greater work is opening before us now.’

‘If you will tell me what it is, I will be glad,’ said Mr. Lothian. ‘I have heard, but vaguely. Where are you going? and with whom? and to whom? You are not a villager, like the rest, Mr. John, but know the world.’

‘I have bought my knowledge dear,’ he said; ‘but I’ve offered it all up on the altar with the rest. I make no stand on my knowledge of the world. Henceforward we know no man after the flesh. I answer you, we are going to the world; the Lord will direct us where.’

‘But will you start,’ cried the minister, ‘and with a young woman unused to such fatigue on no better indication than that?’

‘The same indication that Israel had,—the pillar of cloud by day and the banner of light by night. But I cannot discuss it with a carnal mind. The Lord will direct where we are to go.’

‘And that is all?’

‘That is all; if you had fathomed heaven and

earth, could you know more than that, or have a guidance more sure?’

‘Mr. John,’ said Mr. Lothian, with a certain impatience; ‘you know so much better than the rest. Whatever they take into their heads they will believe in: but you, who are a man of the world——’

Mr. John gave a sweep of his hand as if it were to say, ‘Get thee behind me, Satan,’ and passed his questioner. ‘I am the servant of the Lord,’ he said. There was in the man’s look, in his nervous movements, in the extraordinary absorbed expression of his face, such a sense of the reality of his extraordinary purpose that the minister found not another word to say. He paused and looked after the wayfarer making his way, absorbed and intent upon his own thoughts, down the hill. It was no vulgar enthusiasm at which a man of higher training might smile. By whatsoever process Mr. John had arrived at it—whether it was all honest throughout, or if there had been any deception to begin with, it was sufficiently true now. He at least believed in his own mission. Mr. Lothian turned and continued his way with a sigh. There is something in such fervour of conviction which moves the mature, experienced man of thought to a certain envy. No inducement in the world could have moved the minister to such straightforward, down-

right belief in any mission of reformation. 'Therefore, I will never move a multitude,' he said to himself, 'and who knows——'

Who knows? I am a fool for Christ's sake, said Paul who was no fool. Was not there something divine in the conviction, even if that were all?

When the minister reached the cottages on the brae, the first thing that caught his eye was Ailie standing at the open door, her face contracted as if with pain, and her hands clasped fast in each other with a certain beseeching gesture like a silent prayer. There was no conviction in Ailie's face. In the Sabbath quiet, when all the world had retired into their houses, the prophetess stood—'as if it was an every-day,' her mother said, who felt the dereliction keenly—at the open door. The girl's face was full of doubt and trouble and nervous disquietude. The man who claimed to share her fate had just left her. He had been fulminating into her ear once more 'the message of the Lord.' He had upbraided her for her doubt, her love which was failing from the love of espousals, her strength which was growing weary in the way. That lack of faith with which she had reproached Margaret Diarmid was now imputed to herself. And Mr. John had left the prophetess who was to him 'the sister, the wife,' of apostolic precedent, quivering all over with wounded pride and feeling. Poor Ailie did

not know it was pride. She believed it was the tenderness of conscience, the tenderness of heart, which could not bear to feel itself guilty of the ingratitude imputed to her. But she was sore and wounded, not knowing how to bear it, fighting blindly against what it was more and more evident must be the will of God and her fate.

‘Ailie!’ said Mr. Lothian, looking at her with kind, fatherly eyes. It was true he was Isabel’s lover, strange even to himself as such a position was; but in presence of every other woman in the world, he was a man growing old, a man calm and sobered, fully sensible of his age. ‘Ailie, I have come to ask for you, though it is long since I have seen you of your own will. You have higher pretensions now-a-days; but still you are one of my flock——’

Ailie lifted upon him her lucid, visionary eyes which were full of a certain despair. ‘Oh, ay, oh, ay!’ she said; ‘I’m but one of the flock. I thought I had the Spirit of the Lord. But the oracle’s dumb and the books are closed. Oh, minister, you’re no a man of light, but I think in your heart you’re a man of God. If you were required to walk in a new path, and had nae instruction given to your ain soul, what would ye do,—what would ye do?’

Mr. Lothian was brought to a stand-still by the eagerness in her eyes, and the pathos in her voice.

He was in earnest, it is true, in wishing her well, and yet in pursuing his own religious way. But he was not in such deadly earnest as this. It was not a matter of life and death to him to come to a certain conclusion on any one point that remained to be considered in life. And in the calm of his age he could scarcely understand the young creature's passionate eagerness. He faltered a little in his answer. 'Ailie,' he said, as any other man of his years would have done, 'I would consider which was best.'

Ailie, who had been gazing wistfully at him, as if with some new hope, turned away her head suddenly, throwing up her hands with an expression of despair. 'The best!' she cried; 'God's way is aefold, and no many. His will is one, and has to be done. Oh, ye that think ye can shift and dally to please Him this way or that way. Am I asking which is best? Can ye no wake out of your sloth and open the eyes of your spirit and tell me what's the will of God?'

She had expected no answer, and indeed turned from him leaning her head against the portal of the humble door. But the minister felt himself called upon to speak.

'Nature is God's servant as well as you and me,' he said, 'and Nature is speaking against this, Ailie,—speaking loud. Whatsoever leads ye from

your natural duties and affection, you may be sure is not the will of God.'

Ailie raised her head and looked at him, wondering beyond expression to find herself so admonished. 'I've nae duties but to follow God's will,' she said; 'to follow Him to the end of the earth. Oh, if I could but open the way of the Lord to you and the like of you. Nature's but a poor handmaid of His grace, no a mistress nor a guide. Oh, man, with your grey head, that should ken what God's service is, how can you speak of nature to me?'

'And what if it were that you wanted to consider above all else?' said the minister, laying his kind hand on her shoulder. Ailie put him aside without a word. A little shudder seemed to run through her at his touch. If it was her ecstasy that was coming upon her, or if it was merely a movement of the nature which she defied, Mr. Lothian could not tell; but she passed him thus, taking no further notice, and glided across the road like a ghost to the heathery braes which stretched away into the distance.

'As if it were but an every-day,' said her mother, who appeared in the passage behind, ready to pour out a flood of troubles into the minister's ear. The Sabbath-day was a more rigorous institution in Scotland then than now,

and the inhabitants of the surrounding cottages, most of whom would have considered a Sunday walk, which was not a work of necessity, to be something like a crime, looked on perturbed, and not knowing what to make of it, when Ailie, thus driven by the intensity of her feelings, sought solitude and counsel on the hill.

‘There’s Ailie away across the braes,’ cried a weary young prisoner in one of the neighbours’ houses. ‘It canna be a sin. Oh, let me go too!’

‘Are ye a prophet of the Lord like Ailie?’ said the mother with fierce contempt. The Holy Maid was above those laws which weighed so rigorously upon ‘common folk.’

CHAPTER VIII.

AILIE went forth, not to seek counsel of flesh and blood, but to lay, as she would have said, her 'burden before the Lord.' Her eyes were bent upon the ground, for her heart was heavy; her mind was full of a wandering chaos of thoughts, through which she sought in vain for anything which she could take as an indication of the will of God. It was thus she expressed it, and thus she meant in all honesty. Ailie was subject, like all enthusiasts, to take the suggestions of her own heart, veiled by a natural unconscious subtlety of expression, for the revelation of Heaven; but she was ignorant of that wonderful process which goes on in every self-absorbed and self-studying intelligence. Her own being was not to her a complicated piece of intellectual machinery set in motion by every passing touch or breath, but a hallowed, silent, receptive place, where God's voice was heard, where whispers came from above, and by turns in anguish from

beneath, which echoed to celestial tones, and was conscious of every passing spiritual influence. 'O Lord, I'm emptied of myself. O dear Lord, my chambers are swept and garnished that Thou mightest come in and dwell. Is it my will I want or my way? I am dumb; I wish not; I speak not. Speak Thou, for Thy servant heareth.' These were the words that fell from her lips as she strayed among the rustling, faded heather which the wind had dried and crisped. With a faith unfeigned she believed what she said. Her heart had risen up against Mr. John's first intimation of what was to be, with a wild tumult of resistance. But now she had succeeded in calming herself. The storm had gone down, but trouble, and doubt, and disquietude, had taken its place. Ailie was a Puritan born, and knew nothing of Rome and her ways but as the Scarlet Woman or the Man of Sin. But Nature, which is ever stronger than creed or doctrine, had impressed on the mind of the Scotch country girl the sentiments proper to a Pucelle of the olden faith. She believed in herself, a simple maid, burdened and honoured with God's message to the world. She believed in her power to traverse that unknown world from end to end, guarded by her purity and His holy angels. Fear was no more in her mind than in that of Jeanne of Arc. Her mission was even higher. She had to restore not

a king, but the defaced image of God in the hearts of men—to call back not her people to national existence, but humankind to the recollection of the Saviour. She did not even ask herself why to her, a simple girl, such a mission should have been confided. She accepted it with the Pucelle's unhesitating, simple faith, with the Pucelle's dauntless, visionary valour. Her utter weakness, ignorance, unsuitability for such an enterprise, were to Ailie as, no doubt they were to Jeanne, the very reasons,—God's reasons, ineffably above all the ideas of man—why she should take it up. A creature specially dedicated to Him, belonging to Him, one of those who walk in white with the Lamb, the natural flower and blossom of humankind; such Ailie felt herself to be without either vanity or doubt. Vanity had nothing to do with such a solemn question. To consider the simple beauty which belonged to her state and age as any subject of self-satisfaction would have been but the victim's pleasure in the garland that wreathed its doomed neck. Ailie had no leisure for such a thought—but her maidenhood was her white garment of ministration, her natural qualification for her work.

When her ear had first been struck by Mr. John's extraordinary proposal, her entire soul and nature rose up in revolt. As a wife it seemed to Ailie that she would have no mission, that she

would no longer be God's directly appointed servant, that she would care no longer where she went or what became of her. All the dreams which she believed to be prophetic visions failed from her mind. She no longer saw the visionary multitudes receiving her message, nor herself in a mysterious elation discoursing to them, in words which she could not understand, but which they did, the wonderful works of God. Her future became a blank before her, her inspiration vanished. For more than a fortnight no tongue had come from Ailie's lips. She was humiliated, disappointed, cast down. The crown was taken from her head. A man's wife! No theory of any kind respecting wives or maidens had ever crossed her mind, but yet she felt instinctively that her work would be changed, that her dreams would be over. If God wanted such a sacrifice she was ready to give herself up like Isaac to be bound for the immolation; but was it a lying spirit to which her own gave no response, a temptation sent to try her; or was it the will of God?

The braes lay lonely under the faint occasional glimpses of a watery sun. It was Sabbath all over the silent country; something exceptionally still marked the exceptional day. The little steamer that fumed and fretted up the Loch every afternoon about this hour was of course invisible,

and so were the boats which for use or pleasure dotted the water on week-days, and added one characteristic sound to the usual noises. The people going home from church had all disappeared. Nothing moved except the blue smoke from the cottage-roofs, and sometimes a shy rabbit or invisible wild creature among the high heather. And yet by-and-bye even Ailie, absorbed as she was, became aware that she was not the only wanderer on the hill-side. Under the birch-tree, some one sat crouched together, whose heart was full, like her own, of many thoughts. There was but one creature on the Loch who was likely to seek such a hermitage. Perhaps had Ailie's thoughts been at their usual strain she would never have remarked her companion; but earthly things had come in to confuse the current of her imagination; and a certain sense of companionship, and even of possible help, came to her. 'She's but a simple thing,' was her first idea, and then, 'She's Margret's sister,' the young enthusiast added to herself. Ah, blessed Margaret! maiden Margaret! whom Ailie had striven to keep out of that quiet, sheltering grave and to deliver to all those cares of life which for the first time had now come upon herself. She drew close to Margaret's sister with a faint throb of expectation. 'Am I to judge whence the word may come?' she

said to herself. 'Is it not out of the mouths of babes and sucklings that He perfects praise?'

Isabel had not yet made her appearance at church to her stepmother's infinite distress, though it was one of the unalterable etiquettes of rural life 'after a death.' The wilful girl had declared with tears that she could not bear it. 'With everybody looking, and looking, and all the folk going past, that used to stop and say, How is she? It would break my heart,' said Isabel. And she had stolen out to the braes when Jean and the children returned from church, feeling the silence a consolation to her. Now that *he* was gone the braes were changed, the romance had gone from them—the quivering of possibility, that sense that he might come at any moment which had made this stretch of heather enchanted ground to Isabel. Now he was gone. And not he, but his very image, was gone from the place of which he had been the charm. Poor Isabel's heart was very sore; he had wounded her in a way which perhaps she might have forgiven had he been here, but which she could not forgive while the arrow of his supposed contempt and disrespect quivered in her flesh. 'He might have left me with some comfort,' she thought. 'I would have parted with him and never said a word. I would have waited twenty years. He should have had my heart and

my thoughts. But all he had was a light word for me.' This had subdued her beyond all her other griefs. That subtle sting of disrespect, of light estimation, and half-contempt, had gone through all the defences Isabel could protect herself with. Had he ceased loving her, perhaps even that might have been endured; but to love and to hold her so light—It was this that went to her heart.

At that moment she was more absorbed in her thoughts than Ailie, being hopeless and expecting no consolation or deliverance; and when the rustle of the heather caught her ear, and looking up she saw Ailie's slender figure standing over her, a movement of impatience woke in Isabel's mind. Nobody could give her any comfort, could they not then leave her alone? It was all she asked. To be left to brood over the ending of her early, lonely life and all her dreams. This was all that now remained to her. To others, life renewed itself, changed its fashions, put forth new blossoms, extended, full of light and hope, into the future; but hers was over. Could they not have the charity to leave her at least alone?

'Is it you, Isabel?' said Ailie, coming to her side.

'Ay, it's me. I thought I was sure to be alone here. Do you take your walks all the same on the Sabbath-day?'

‘To me a’ days are the same,’ said Ailie. ‘If I ken mysel I have nae desire but to be aye doing my Master’s business. Sabbath or every day, I make no difference. And the silence is fine, and the air sweet to-day, like every day.’

‘It is not silence now,’ said Isabel; with the fitful, hasty temper for which, as soon as the words were said, she was sorry and penitent.

‘No,’ said Ailie, from whom the great perplexity she was in had taken much of her solemn aspect. ‘It’s no silence now, and whiles there are better things than silence. Isabel, when I saw ye among the heather, I felt that the Lord sent ye to give me an answer in my trouble. It’s like drawing the lot; and I’ve done that o’er and o’er by myself, and I canna see it. But you, you’re innocent, and ken nothing about him or me. I’ll draw the lot at you, Isabel. I’m no saying it to make you vain. It’s because you’re young, and soft, and no learned in the ways of this world, but like a little bairn. Isabel,’ said the young prophetess, kneeling down suddenly at her side, and gazing into her face with those visionary eyes which were wild in their pathos, ‘am I to do what he bids, or no?’

The question raised Isabel out of her personal brooding. She was startled—almost frightened by the vehemence of the appeal. ‘Oh! how can I tell

you, or what do you want me to say?' she said, clasping her hands; and then she remembered what she had heard about Ailie and Mr. John, and shrank at the thought of the responsibility thus placed in her hands.

'Tell me ay or no,' said Ailie, gazing so into her face, into her eyes, that Isabel's very soul was moved. She bore the look as long as she could, and then she covered her face with her hands.

'Your eyes go through and through me,' she said, 'and I cannot judge for you. I am not like her that is gone. I am but Isabel. I cannot guide myself. And you that have more light than all the rest—how should I help you?'

'I am giving no reasons,' said Ailie, 'it's no a time for reasons. It's out of the mouth of babes and sucklings—Isabel, say ay or no?'

'Then I'll say ay,' said Isabel, suddenly lifting her head with a gleam of her old impatience. It was far from being spoken like an oracle of God. It was uttered hastily, with a certain nervous distaste to being thus questioned. But when she saw the effect her words produced, her heart failed her. Ailie sank down helplessly on the road. She did not faint, as Isabel, being somewhat pre-occupied by her own first experience of bodily weakness, thought. She sank down in a heap without making an effort or a struggle.

Every tint of colour fled from her face. Her eyes, which alone seemed to have any life left in them, were raised with a look of such reproach as made her hasty adviser tremble. But Ailie did not say a word. She lay with the air of one stunned and helpless among the heather. Then after the first minute a sob came from her lips. Isabel was overcome by her own fears.

‘Oh, Ailie!’ she cried, ‘I meant nothing. Why should you put such weight on what I say? I was impatient, and I said the first word that came to me. I did not mean it. I meant No instead. Oh, Ailie, will you listen now to what I say?’

‘When I’m come to myself,’ said Ailie, waving her hand. Her voice was so low as scarcely to be audible. Then her pale lips moved, though no sound came from them at first; and her eyes turned upward with such an expression of submission and pain, as Isabel had never seen. ‘No my will,’ Ailie murmured, with her hands holding her breast, ‘no my will, but Thine.’ It was a voice as of despair, when a little thrill of renewed vigour made it audible. Awe stole over her companion, whose careless words had done it. Isabel, in her self-reproach, rose up from her seat in haste. She took off the shawl in which she was wrapped, and kneeling down beside Ailie endeavoured to place it under her. She put her arms round

her with a remorse that made an end of pride. 'Oh, Ailie, I meant nothing! It was my hasty way,' she cried, bending over her, kissing her even in her eagerness. Ailie did not resist the soft caress. She laid her head down upon Isabel's shoulder, and closed her eyes, which were strained and painful with so much emotion. 'My soul is poured out as water—my strength hath He weakened in the way,' she said, leaning back with closed eyes. The struggle was over. She had resisted long; but in this fantastic way at last she had satisfied herself, and would struggle no more.

And thus the soft air breathed on them, and the still moments passed over those two young creatures, clinging to each other among the silence of the hills, with the sorest ache in their hearts which each had ever known. Isabel in her fright had almost forgotten hers. She sat embracing Ailie who leant upon her, and wondering what it was which had moved the girl so strangely to the exclusion of her own thoughts, which had been bitter enough. Once before Isabel had spoken in her haste, and her voice had been taken for an oracle of God. She had never forgotten the awful sense that, had she but held out and struggled against utterance, Margaret's life might have been spared; she had given way to her feelings then and again now; and what was it that she had done this time?

—something which she had never anticipated and did not yet understand. In her trouble she spoke, with a voice that trembled, closely in her companion's ear.

‘O Ailie, you are not to mind! I was not thinking what you meant or what it was. I said the first thing that came into my head, as I am always doing. Ailie, tell me what it is and then we'll think—we'll try and see what is best.’

‘No,’ said Ailie, faintly, ‘it wasna that I wanted. I wanted but one word, the first that came into your head. It was drawing the lot. If you had kent what I meant it would have been different. No, it's a' past. I've struggled and fought in my mind like a profane person. It has aye been the same in the Book itself; whiles one word, whiles another; but aye saying, “Yes, yes” —aye about the bridegroom and the bride. But I said to myself, the next time it will be different. And now there's you. I thought She'll say No, the innocent thing. She'll divine by my eyes that my heart's broken. And you didna look at me, Isabel, to let yourself be turned away, but said what was put into your mind.’

‘Is it about you and Mr. John?’ said Isabel, bending down to her ear.

A shudder ran through Ailie's frame. ‘Ay,’ she said, with a long sobbing sigh. ‘But if it's

the Lord's will, nae man shall hear me say a word more. And, Isabel, if it come to pass, and ye see him and me together as we'll have to be, you'll not take any notice; what I must do I will do to the full, and no in part.'

'But, O Ailie! you'll never do it; you must not do it,—if you don't love him!' said Isabel.

She shrank and hesitated to say the word. It seemed to her a kind of blasphemy.

'Could I have said it to Margaret?' she asked herself. And was not Ailie, too, like Margaret, a dedicated virgin, above such suggestions of this common earth?

'Oh, whisht!' said Ailie, with a wild, sudden flush of colour flaming over her face. 'Whatever the Lord's will may be, I am His handmaid to do it. But, eh! how I'm punished now! I wouldna let your Margaret be. I would bid her back to earth when she was at heaven's door—no thinking what was waiting for myself. Though I'm no murmuring against the Lord.'

And then there was a moment of silence, on the one side full of eager revolt and determination to oppose; on the other of that stunned submission which comes after a great blow.

'Oh, no—no! it cannot be,' cried Isabel, clasping in her arms the girl for whom, up to this moment, she had felt so little sympathy. 'I will

never believe it is God's meaning. If you did not love him you would hate him. How could you help it? It cannot be—it must not be!

‘Whisht—whisht!’ said Ailie, with a faint momentary smile, ‘you’re aye so earnest. Oh, if ye would come with us, Isabel, for *her* sake, and put yourself on the Lord’s side. Whisht!—What’s God’s doing can never harm His servants. I’m no rebelling now, that’s a’ past. The worst is I canna see my work, nor what remains for me in this world,’ she added, with a piteous gentleness, ‘for the spirit of prophecy is ta’en from me as would be fit, when I’m under another, and no free in my ain power. Or, maybe, it’s my een that are blinded,’ she said, putting her hand up to them with a close pressure, as if they ached. But it was not because they ached. It was because they were full to overflowing with a stinging salt moisture. She would not yield to that common mode of relief. ‘Why should I greet when the Lord’s will is manifest?’ she said, all at once. ‘It would more suit me to greet if I knew not what that was.’

‘But it cannot be God’s will, and you so sore, —sore against it,’ cried eager Isabel, ‘in your heart.’

‘I’m no such a rebel,’ cried Ailie, with a start. ‘Oh, I’m no so ill as you think—me that am set

to be a sign to His people. Now it's all past,' she added, raising herself up. 'And, Isabel, though you dinna understand, you've been real good to me, and I'll never forget it. Oh, will ye no come and open your heart now to the Lord, as long as the day of visitation lasts? I canna bide to think that Margret's sister should be on the world's side, and no on the Lord's.'

'I never was on the world's side,' said Isabel, with something of her natural impatience, rising, as Ailie did so, to her feet.

'He that is not with us is against us,' said the young prophetess. 'O Isabel! Dinna trust in the good that's just nature. The day is near past—the night is at hand. And you thinking of love, and pleasure, and the delights of this life, and no of that awfu' day.'

'Delights!' said Isabel, holding up the heavy crape on her dress to the intent eye which remarked no such homely particulars; and then she turned hastily and went away—partly irritated, partly weary. She had forgotten her own burden to minister to the other. And she had need of consolation and encouragement herself, not of weariness and excitement. She turned, as was her hasty way, and left the visionary creature standing behind her on the hill. Ailie stood and gazed after the rapid, retreating figure, not offended as in a different region

of society she might have been. This parting *sans façon* was not extraordinary among the homely country folk. She stood and looked after her with a wistful interest, stronger than any human sentiment which perhaps had ever before crossed her mind. A girl free to live her natural life, free to make her natural choice, bound by no mysterious rules, prepared to no awful office as God's ambassador to man—

Her appearance filled Ailie with a certain softened envy, a wondering desire to penetrate the future, a sense of contrast which weighed her down. A vision passed before her eyes, of Isabel's lot and her own. The one, smiling, simple, full of love and light, among her own people; the other, overcast with clouds, on another path through the unknown. A throb of pain went through her heart. Ailie had never dreamed, as girls dream, of what might be waiting her in the future. Romance with her had been religious vision and ecstasy. No fairy prince had ever moved her fancy. She was of the nature of those predestined mystics upon whom earthly love has no power. But now a sudden change had come across her destiny. A man had stepped into it, in a pale horror, blanching the very sense of life out of her heart. Marriage was to come to her, not as by nature ordained, but arbitrarily, her own will

having no share in it. And, for the first time, a wistful envy of Isabel, and of the natural lot, came over her mind. She, too, was to bow her neck to that same yoke, but not with sweet reluctance, with tender consent, like Isabel—only in a passion of submission and painful acquiescence in the will of God. And as the contrast struck her, the peaceful path which lay before Isabel shone sweet before those visionary eyes.

‘Aye peace, aye love, aye consolation; kind faces to smile on her, bairns to hang by her. And me——!’ cried Ailie, with one last sob of self-pity. Then she, too, turned, and left the birch-tree among the heather, the scene of so many dreams.

There was a meeting the same night. Ailie shut herself up for all the afternoon of this memorable day. She went into the little room, at the window of which, in the middle of the night, Mr. John’s extraordinary proposal had been first made to her, and placed her open Bible on her bed, and knelt down before it. There she remained, fasting, in one long trance of prayer and reverie, while the short autumn day came to an end, and the twilight closed round her. Had her fate been to go to the stake on the morrow, her preparation for it would have been triumphant in comparison. But the stake could not have been a more supreme proof of her devotion to the ser-

vice of God than was this act of submission to what she believed His will. Martyrdom would have been a glorious sacrifice worthy of all her powers; while this was miserable, humiliating, a shock to her whole nature,—a clog, as she thought, upon her work,—a moral annihilation. Poor Ailie bowed her head upon her Bible, that even herself might not see the tears that came in a flood to her still girlish eyes. She had received as a brother prophet the man whom she was now about to accept as the companion of her life—who was she that she should refuse whom the Lord had called?—but a certain horror of him, of any approach to him, even of the voice of his prophesying too close in her ear, had been the prevailing sensation in Ailie's mind in respect to Mr. John. Was it a 'judgment' on her for her want of charity? Had God noted, as He was said to note, the point at which she was most susceptible, and struck her with His awful arrow in that spot? These, and a hundred other thoughts, passed through Ailie's mind, while she lay, as it were, crushed and bleeding, at the footstool of her Master, who had wounded her. But there was no longer a thought of resistance in her mind. The future was very dark before her, and life, under so changed a form, a mystery which she could not comprehend. But yet it must come, however awful the anticipation.

She accepted the bitter cup from God's hand, and made no further struggle against her fate.

When the hour for the meeting came, Ailie wrapped herself in her plaid and went out alone down the dark road. Her mother was in weak health, and, with that strange diversity which is so often met with in life, was a homely, sober woman, who thought there were 'far ower mony meetings,' and was more scandalized than flattered by the prominent position taken by her daughter in them. There was a little controversy between them before Ailie went out, over a cup of tea, which the anxious mother importuned her child to take. 'O Ailie! do you mean to break my heart and murder yourself?' she said. 'Neither bit nor sup has crossed your lips since morning. You've been ower nigh death to be that careless of your health—if it were but for your puir auld faither's sake, that canna bear ye out of his sight.'

'I couldna swallow it,' said Ailie; 'and he'll have to bear the want of me. I must forsake father and mother for the work of the Lord.'

'Oh, lassie, ye make my heart sick,' said the mother: 'as if the Lord couldna do His ain work without the help of a bit lass like you.'

But Janet's mind did not dwell on the words. Such words were usual enough in the highflown, religious phraseology of the moment, and the

‘work of the Lord’ might mean no more than a series of meetings, or retirements to her room for prayer. Neither was the mother alarmed by Mr. John’s proposal. It was ‘an awfu’ compliment;’ but in her heart she felt that even a special revelation could not make such a *mésalliance* possible; and that rather than suffer such an extraordinary downfall, the aristocracy of the clan Diarmid would procure some powerful remonstrance with Heaven itself against such a removal of all natural boundaries. ‘Na, na, Miss Catherine will never allow it,’ she had said when she heard; though a thrill of natural pride went through her. ‘If she would take a little pains with herself, and put up her hair like the rest, our Ailie is a bonnie lass,’ the mother had added to herself, not without complacency, ‘But, na, na, it couldna be.’

And Ailie made no intimation of what she was about to do. She had not taken counsel with flesh and blood. It was not a matter with which father or mother could interfere. God had spoken, and must be obeyed. She went down alone wrapped in her plaid—wrapped in an abstraction that kept the other passengers on the way at a distance. At all times it was her habit to go and come alone; but on this particular night some shade of special self-absorption was noted by the quick eyes of the rowd. ‘Is it *that* she’s thinking of?’ said one, fall-

ing back behind the shrouded, slender figure, which passed among them like a ghost. 'Poor thing! her heart gangs another gait, or I'm sair mista'en.' 'Set her up!' cried a second, with indignation, 'auld John Macfarlane's daughter. I would like to ken what she would have.' 'Eh! I wouldna take that awfu' man for all the world,' said a younger critic; while another added with authority, 'Ye'll see it'll all be settled to-night.'

Such were the comments with which the people of Loch Diarmid went to their prayer-meeting. Religious excitement had risen to the highest pitch among them. It had produced many actual and tangible results, changes of feeling and conduct and life. To many it had been the very turning-point of existence. But yet they were not able to dismiss from their minds that interest in human affairs which holds its place through all higher excitements. They were on their way to the little assembly in which many of them expected to hear what they considered direct revelations from Heaven;—but yet they paused by instinct to scrutinize the heroine of this little drama—the story, so different from other stories, which was being played out, as on a stage, before their eyes.

The meeting was to be held that night on the south side of the Loch, in a barn reluctantly granted by Mr. Smeaton for the accommodation of

the prophets. Before entering it, Ailie went into the cottage of the shepherd who lived close at hand. There she found Mr. John seated by the fire, along with several leaders of the movement. There was no other light in the room, and he sat with his dark head, relieved against the blaze, leaning on his hands. The others were talking around him, arranging their little services, exchanging experiences; but Mr. John sat silent and took no part among them. Ailie went up to him, penetrating through the group. She held out her hand to him, standing before the fire.

‘It shall be as you say,’ she said with a voice which almost failed her at the last.

Mr. John turned round and gazed up at her for a moment, the ruddy light shining in his face, as it did in hers. He was dark and haggard in that illumination, she very pale, and with a look of exhaustion on her face. He took her hand and held it for a moment, and then he let it drop out of his.

‘You acknowledge the word of the Lord, at last?’ he said, almost with severity. And then he sprang up and interposed in the order that was being arranged for the services, with a nervous hurriedness which struck her strangely. She had thought that, perhaps, he at least would be glad. But he was not glad. He rushed into the discus-

sion which he had retired from with an unwonted eagerness. Thus Fate had caught them both in her net. And though Mr. John had set his heart on this thing, it filled him with such an acute pang now he had gained it, that only instant movement and occupation prevented him from betraying himself. But the meeting of that night was such an 'outpouring' as few people present had ever known before. A feverish earnestness filled them, born of the very excess of pain.

'Eh, but Ailie was awfu' grand to-night,' the people said. 'Eh, if you had but heard Mr. John!' They were both in a half-craze of misery, speaking like people in a dream. And thus, as the assembly foresaw, everything was settled that night.

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER this there was a certain lull in the course of life, as happens so often after a crisis full of events. Ailie went home alone, as ever, to her father's cottage, consoling herself as best she could, rather trying to forget herself in the flood and hurry of spiritual excitement. She had spoken much and long, with such fervour that all who heard her were moved by it, of the Second Coming and all its wonderful results. Was it not the moment when all that was wrong would be set right, and all the misery and confusion of this world turned once more into harmony? With that discord in her own heart which closed her ears even to Heaven's music, Ailie's mind betook itself piteously to the great deliverance which seemed approaching so near. He was coming again,—He whose advent had been the beginning of all mercy and kindness and tender consolation to the hapless race of man; He the first who had ever taught that mercy and meekness, not splendour or wisdom or pride, were the highest things on earth;—He whose ear was never shut to

any petitioner. With her own heart beating and yearning she had set this picture before the eyes that followed every glance of her inspired eyes, every movement of her eloquent lips, — ‘Oh, friends! your hearts may be sore, your lives a’ out of tune, but He is coming that will set it all right,’ she had cried, with moanings of those unknown voices, the cries that were unspeakable, mingled with her intelligible speech. On that night she had regained the power which personal uncertainty had taken from her; the mist rolled off from the future and she saw clear. ‘I see Him coming; and a’ the kingdoms of this world crumbling and falling!’ she cried: ‘I see the great and the wicked that have oppressed His folk, crying to the hills to fall on them and the rocks to cover them. And I see you!’ she had gone on, stretching out her slender hands, gazing with great lambent, visionary eyes into the hearts of her hearers. ‘Oh, come to His feet with me! Say, Lord, all’s well, all’s well, now Thou art here! What is trouble, or sorrow, or the outcries of the miserable, or the writhings of the wounded in heart, when He has come to heal all? Come, oh, come quickly! What is it but for this that all creation groans and travails? Let Him but come and all will be well.’

Her heart was still beating and her frame thrilling with the excitement of her own words, when

all was silent again, and she was wending her way, once more in a dream, up the dark road, clothed with darkling groups of whispering figures, to her home. Ailie's heart quivered and palpitated, and yet there was in it a dead calm as of death. Her personal feelings had got the better of her devotion, and under shadow of the darkness which seemed to wrap her round and cover her, Ailie began once more to question the future;—deliverance from every trouble, —harmony to every discord. Ah, yes! But would there be any consolation for *her* even in such a joy of the whole earth? She reflected in her own heart that Mr. John was a servant of the Lord; that it was God's will she should give herself to him; that they would be made one, though she shuddered at the thought. What comfort, then, could even His appearance bring to *her*? What could she possibly hope for? He would not dissolve the bond which He had made —He would not put them asunder, having put them together. For all other troubles there might be help and relief from every misery. But John Diarmid's wife, who could deliver? Not even God. God would respect His own law, let heaven and earth pass away. He could free from sickness; but now Ailie would have received back her sickness, that was killing her, with eager arms. He could open the prison gates, he could make the tongues of the dumb to sing; but, oh! would

He, could He, send help to a man's wife? Never, so long as the heavens and the earth should stand fast. How could she so much as tell God?—how could she lay open her heart and show Him the pangs of resistance that were in it? Even in heaven that awful bond which made one human creature the possession of another would hold fast. There would be no escape in death; none in the better world.

Not the extremest Catholic would have held more extreme views on this subject than did the Scotch country girl, nourished in the belief that marriage was the one unalterable, eternal union. She had given her word and was as if she were already his wife; and it was for ever and ever. What could even the coming of the Lord do for her? With these sombre thoughts she contended as she threaded the darkling groups home alone, and went in the midst of the crowd. Her eyes were caught, as she passed the churchyard, somehow,—she could not tell how,—by the gleaming of one white stone—the stone, she felt instinctively, on Margaret Diarmid's grave. If the angels could mock, it might be some white vision tantalising her, bidding her mark the peaceful rest of that sister in Christ whom she had done her best to detain. But it could not be an angel that mocked her in her woe. Oh, could she but lift the stony cover, and draw aside the soft, chill

sod, and creep in by Margaret's side!—Could not God carry on His own work without the help of a simple lass? She hurried on, feeling as if the ceaseless round of this long argument with herself, in which one thought kept surging up above another, would make her mad. Had she not put force upon herself, her feet would have carried her to Margaret's grave. It was better to take refuge in her own room instead, with her face hidden in her Bible, and her praises turned into such prayers as were possible. And thus eventually she fell asleep on her knees, and was found by the anxious, homely mother, who took her in her arms and placed her in bed as if she been a child again. Such was the end of the struggle for Ailie; next morning she was composed and steadfast to carry out her sacrifice.

It was an event of which the country-side remained incredulous, until the very last moment. The strange pair were 'cried' in church, both being present when the banns were proclaimed, in defiance of all superstition; but still no one believed it could be. Ailie sat passive in her seat while her name was read out, not a passing flicker of colour, not an indication of embarrassment being visible about her. She was very pale, and had been so, as all the world remarked, for some time before; and this public announcement of what was about

to happen produced no visible effect upon her. Neither did Mr. John visit her as a lover should. Sometimes they would be seen absorbed in conversation, both pale, holding apart from each other. On the evening of the day on which the banns were proclaimed, there was another meeting; and both bride and bridegroom announced 'in power' that the day of visitation was almost over, and that before another week had past, they should have gone forth to carry the word to the Gentiles. 'We go, not knowing whither we go,' Ailie had cried; 'and ye for whom we have laboured, will ye bide for ever in the gall of iniquity? Oh, give us your souls to be the first-fruits of our mission. Give us joy in this awful moment. When we leave our ain land and our father's house, let the light go with us of your salvation.' Those who saw her that night never forgot her. She was half divine with inspiration and despair. Over her face, which was no longer pale, but marble white, there trembled a chill reflection, as of some intense, colourless, devouring flame. Her dress was black, 'an awsome dress for a bride,' as the women said with a shudder. And as she lifted her arms and stood leaning over them, like an angel of doom, her soft, musical voice raised to its highest pitch, her visionary eyes gazing into the air as if they saw something unseen to the common crowd, a thrill of excitement ran through the

assembly. It was the look of a martyr approaching the moment of sacrifice—except indeed that a martyr would have been triumphant, flushed with celestial joy and elevation, not devoured with that pale despair and shame.

And to the amazement of the parish, no attempt at interference was made. Miss Catherine sat still within her ancestral palace, the homely mansion-house of Lochhead, like an offended queen. She absented herself from church on the Sunday of the banns, and was not seen of human eye until all was completed; but she made no attempt to interfere. Neither did Mr. Diarmid of Clynder on the other side of the hills, Mr. John's uncle. The opposition which everybody had expected never made itself visible. It is true that Mrs. Blythwood and Miss Isabella Diarmid, two of the bridegroom's aunts, paid him a sudden and brief visit at Ardnamore without any warning given of their intention to the household. But the parish, though all its ears and eyes were intent to glean what information was possible, could make nothing of this event. 'Ae thing is certain,' said Jenny Spence at the head of a female parliament on the subject, 'that Miss Bell and Mrs. Blythwood never gaed near Ailie—though a's settled so far as I can hear, and she's to be married the morn.'

'Na, that would be too much,' said another

gossip. 'The like of Miss Bell visiting at John Macfarlane's house!' 'Ye gang far and far enough in thae Radical times, but no just so far as that.'

'I canna see why if she's to be Mrs. John the morn——'

'And Leddy of Ardnamore—set her up! Eh, didna I aye tell ye, all thae prayings and preachings would come to nae good end?'

'It depends on what ye ca' a good end,' said Mary White from the mill: 'would it be better if John Diarmid was roamin' wild about the country, and no a lass nor a house safe from his evil thoughts? If your hearts werena hard as the nether mill-stone, ye would thank God for His wonderful grace. Here's a man that was a public scandal in the parish, drinking and feasting and chambering and wantoning. And now he's clothed, and in his right mind, as great a saint as he was ance a sinner. And instead of marrying a wife to please himself, isna it the Lord's voice they're baith following that bids them wed and go forth for the salvation of the world? Oh, ye're aye ready, aye ready to find fault! But when there's a grand exhibition o' grace like this, no a word o' praise to God will ye find in any person's mouth.'

'Eh, I wouldna like if my man had asked me for any reason büt to please himself,' cried a young wife. 'I would rather jump into the

Loch if I was Ailie. That's what makes her look so pale.'

'Whisht, ye silly thing! are you to be examples, your man and you, that are little better than twa bairns?'

'But she's no that far wrang,' said Jenny Spence. 'Our John and me have been married this twenty year, and nae doubt he thought I would make him a good wife; but he wasna the fool to say it was that when he came courting. "I love you!—I love you!" was a' his sang. And so it's natural it should be.'

'Among carnal folk,' said Mary, standing her ground. 'But is this a time to waste in courting and vanity when the Lord's at the door? You and your love and your nonsense, filling young folk's heads with folly! But when He comes with His saints, will the lad think of his lass, or the wife of her man? It will be Ailie's joy to think she's done the will o' the Lord in that day.'

These words silenced a little the group of women who had almost all been 'impressed,' as it was common to say, and gone to the meetings—and given at least a certain portion of their belief to the prophets and their work.

'I canna allow, a' the same, but what there should be something mair than that between married folk;' said Jenny Spence, whose superior con-

nexions made her bold. 'If a lass canna like a man, how is she to thole him by her side for ever and ever? Losh, I'm no an ill wife mysel,—but a man about your hands early and late—aye there, if ye're ill or well—that ye canna send ben the house out of your gait — that'll no let ye be— If you havena a feeling for him by the ordinary, how are ye ever to put up with him? That's what I aye say.'

'Eh, woman, mony a time it takes an awfu' strong feeling!' exclaimed a bystander, with a little grimace; but the village parliament took the utterance *cum grano*, knowing there were difficulties in her house.

'You shouldna talk like that with young lasses about,' said Jean Campbell, who had lately joined the group. 'I've come up the road with our Isabel. I canna tell what she has to do with it. But she's gane to see Ailie, aye saying, "She maunna do it!—she maunna do it!" Our Isabel is no a lass that likes to make or meddle—but when she puts to her hand ——'

'I never saw a woman so infatuated as you about thae two,' said Mary. 'They're no princesses after a', but only Duncan Diarmid's bairns.'

'The Captain's daughters were baith ladies born,' said their stepmother, proudly, 'as a' the

Loch kens; and if I'm infatuate, as ye say, wha should ken them as weel? But I wasna speaking to Mary White, that thinks it her duty to put a' the world out of conceit with each other. If our Isabel doesna change Ailie's mind naebody will.'

'It's too late now,' said Jenny Spence; 'they're to be married the morn.'

'And auld Janet Macfarlane's no the woman to let such a grand match go by,' said one. 'And maybe Ailie's no so simple as folk think,' added another. 'There never was such a thing kent on the Loch as that a simple lass out of a cothouse should be Leddy of Ardnamore.'

At the smithy the same exciting subject was discussed in a different tone. It was equally amazing to John Macwhirter and his gossips. But naturally they considered it from a different point of view. Perhaps it was less easy for the men to conceive of any real change of character in a man who had, for evil and for good, made so much commotion in the parish; and the matter was simple enough from their point of view. Ailie was 'a bonnie lass,' and she was above temptation—unattainable except in one way; and Mr. John, driven wild by one excitement on the top of another, moved by the horror of Margaret's death, and perhaps alarmed for his own

salvation if he continued in his evil ways, had been led to bid the highest price for a new gratification. This was the easy decision to which the worthies of the smithy felt themselves drawn.

‘And Janet Macfarlane’s awfu’ long-headed,’ said the smith himself. ‘We’re auld neighbours, and I ken her ways. Put a grand chance like that in her way and she’s no the woman to give it the go-bye. I wouldna give much for Ailie herself in the way of worldly wisdom. But she’s a good lass, and wouldna be led astray for a’ the lairds in the Highlands; and whiles that answers just as well.’

‘I wonder how long they’ll bide away,’ said Peter Chalmers, the general merchant. ‘You’ll see it’ll turn out a wedding-jaunt this grand journey; they’ll gang to France, or Eetaly, or some of thae places. But they’ll find the tongues no generally applicable; and they’ll mind that Ardnamore’s a pleasant dwelling, and they’ll be hame again before the swallows. Ye’ll see if I’m right or no when the time comes.’

‘I’ll no say if you’re right or wrang, but you’re a nasty body,’ said old Sandy Diarmid, who as usual was waiting for his cart to be mended, ‘and believe in naething nor naebody. I’m no that fond o’ John Diarmid, but he’s in earnest *now*. For the woman I canna say—a man’s aye at a loss to ken.’

‘He’s never at nae loss,’ said John Macwhirter. ‘Set them down offhand wi’ an ill motive, and ye’re aye right, according to Peter. He’s nae judge o’ human nature. Bad’s the best, if you’ll trust him; he canna see the distinction atween ill and waur; there’s nae real philosophy in him. And he’s a nasty body, as you say.’

‘I ken human nature ower weel, ye mean,’ said Peter, unabashed; ‘and if ye were to look at it across a counter, or through my books frae year’s end to year’s end, ye would maybe change your mind. I’m saying no harm of Black John; he’ll pay any price for a thing he’s set his heart on, sooner than want it; and a bonnie missionary he’ll mak’. I wish ye a’ joy of him. With the like of him for preachers, ye’ll soon see a converted world.’

‘I see nae reason against it,’ said Sandy, holding out his shrivelled old hands, as was his wont, towards the fire. ‘He’s in awfu’ earnest, as any fool could see; and why he mightna be a changed character, as well as Paul or suchlike, I canna tell.’

‘Nane of the friends will interfere,’ said the smith. ‘I wouldna say but they might think it was the best ehance for him—now the Captain’s Margret is dead and gone—if he were married and satisfied, and a bonnie lass like Ailie to keep him

right. And I'm partly of Peter's opinion, they'll no bide long away. She'll like to have the full price she sells herself for. She'll gie him little rest till he's back, and herself kent in a' the country-side as Mrs. Diarmid and the Lady of Ardnamore. I canna blame her. If I were to sell myself in that way—though I would like to ken wha would buy me!—I'd be keen to have my price, and get a' I bargained for. Poor Ailie! it's but a bitter bargain, as ye may see in her face.'

'John Macwhirter,' said the miller, who had just entered, 'I'll have ye up before the kirk-session for ill-speaking. Is that a way to talk of two persons chosen of the Lord? You should a' think shame—and you, Sandy, an auld man—of putting in your word where ye canna understand. There was never seen so blessed a pair in a' the west country as thae two. They're chosen vessels, chosen for the Lord's service. You're never joining in against Mr. John, Peter Chalmers. You that have good occasion to be grateful to the house o' Ardnamore.'

'Me?' said Peter; 'am I one to make or meddle? Na, na; let them gang their ain gait, and please themselves. I might say it wasna a suitable match for one of the Ardnamore family—but more than that I never interfere.'

'And that's too much,' said Andrew. 'You're

like a when wives about the doors — leaving your wark and abusing your friends. It's no flesh and blood that's the bond between these twa, but God's will and God's revelation; nor is it Ailie's view of what her work was to be. But the Lord will never put up with opinionated folk. What we like the least is what we've aye to do.'

'I dinna haud with one of your views,' said the undaunted smith, 'and I'll argue ye out afore ony judges in the parish. Talk of a when wives about the doors! They're neither so narrow-minded nor so spiteful as Him ye call the Lord. Has He naething ado but watch the like of you, and see what you like and what you dinna like? I'll never believe that, if I were to live a hundred years.'

'John Macwhirter,' said the elder, sternly, 'dinna blaspheme!'

'Blaspheme!' cried John. 'Tak' tent to that yoursel. I'm saying I wouldna think as ill o' God as you do, no for half the world He's made. I'm no a ruling elder, nor a prophet, nor naething remarkable; but I have a respect for my Maker, if that's a'; and it's mair than you have. Na, na, Andrew: I'm no a man to be feared for the kirk-session. Speak you o' this marriage, if ye like, and gie us your views, like a' the rest of the

world; but ye needna try to frighten me, for I'm no the kind of man.'

'Which just shows the misery of a lukewarm minister,' cried Andrew. 'If he was as earnest as he should be, and withheld ordinances as he ought when there was need for it, ye wadna answer me back so free, and you a wean to christen! What should I say about the marriage? It's ane of the marriages made in heaven.'

'Weel, I aye said he was in earnest now,' said old Sandy, subdued by the man of authority, who stood by his side.

'O, ay, he's in earnest,' said the smith. 'Ailie's a bonnie lass!'

'Ailie's the handmaid o' the Lord,' said Andrew. 'I canna shut your smiddy, John Macwhirter; but it shall be well known in the parish—as well known as I can make it—what you've said about these two this day; and it will do you little good.'

'*That* for your ill or your good!' said Macwhirter, snapping his fingers; 'I'm no depending on you, Lord be praised! And,' he added, loudly striking a resounding blow on his anvil, 'Ailie's a bonnie lass—I say 't again; and Mr. John, he's a fool, and will have his ain way. But what kind of content or happiness is to come of such a wedding is mair than I can tell.'

‘You’re no the judge,’ said Andrew, drawing away towards the door.

‘Nor you neither—a’ the better for the lass,’ said John, exasperated; and then he showered such blows upon the red-hot iron that the sparks filled the smithy, and the conference ended if not in smoke, yet with a ruddy glare and illumination—fire without and anger within.

Meanwhile Isabel, profoundly moved by her interview with Ailie, and by all that had since occurred, had made up her mind to one final remonstrance ere the sacrifice should be accomplished. When she had said to Jean, ‘I am going to see Ailie,’ the good woman’s consternation had known no bounds. Not only was the condescension unparalleled, but it was not to be expected that Isabel, as a lady born, and entitled to the possession of feelings more delicate than those of ‘common folk,’ should yet be able to pay any visits even among her equals. ‘Ailie!’ she remonstrated energetically; ‘and wha’s Ailie, that you should gang to see her at such a time? She’s no John Diarmid’s wife yet; and if she was——’

‘That is why I must see her,’ said Isabel. ‘She must never marry that man!’

Upon which Jean uttered the usual comment half in scorn and half in indignation. ‘Set

her up! I would like to ken what right she has to ony such man.'

'She does not want him,' said Isabel. 'She'll go and marry him and break her heart. Oh, I must go! If they were cried yesterday there is no time to lose.'

'They're to be married the morn,' said Jean. 'And if that is what you have set your heart on, wait till I've gotten on my Sunday bonnet. I'll gang with ye myself.'

'It is not necessary,' said Isabel.

'Bell, my bonnie woman,' said her stepmother, 'I ken better what is needful than you do. It's no a moment to have you wandering on the road your lane.'

And thus it was that Jean found herself in the midst of the village group, while Isabel penetrated into Ailie's cottage. The young prophetess was seated, silent, with a sombre fire in her eye, dejected yet excited, when Isabel was ushered in by her anxious mother. Janet had begun to take alarm about her daughter's aspect; but such an honour as the visit of the Captain's Isabel, no doubt paid to the prospective Mrs. Diarmid of Ardnamore, was a foreshadowing of greatness to come which went to her heart.

'Ailie, my woman!' she said. 'Here's Isabel from the Glebe. It's most kind of her to come and

see you, and I hope you'll let her see you think it kind.'

'Isabel!' said Ailie, dreamily; she was sitting on the side of her bed, pondering over her little Bible. 'Oh, ay, mother, I'm glad to see her; if she'll come ben.'

'Let me speak to her alone,' Isabel had begged at the door; and the mother, half pleased yet half doubtful, withdrew with wistful looks. If perhaps the mission of the mourner might be to reconcile Ailie with the wonderful match she was making; and yet, again, a fanciful young girl might do her harm.

'I've come to speak to you before it is all over,' said Isabel. 'O, Ailie, you mind what you said to me? You are not happy. You are not looking happy; and yet they say you're to be married——'

'The morn,' said Ailie, mechanically.

'To-morrow!' repeated Isabel, carefully choosing her words, to be more impressive; 'and yet you are not happy. Ailie, Ailie, it must not be!'

'What's God's will must be,' she said; 'happy is neither here nor there;' and began again to turn over the leaves of the small Bible she held in her hands.

'He is going to take you away,' said Isabel,

‘where none of your friends perhaps will ever see you more; where you will be all alone with none but him, and no love for him in your heart. Oh, Ailie, listen! you will hate him if ye cannot love him. I could not rest; I’ve been in no strange house till now *since*—but I could not rest. Oh, Ailie, God would not have you to be miserable; that can never be His will. You are wiser than me, but you have aye been thinking of other folk, and not of what was in your own heart.’

‘Little but deceitfulness and wickedness,’ said Ailie, musing, ‘well I know; and a root of bitterness in the best. But, Isabel, there’s no a word to say. It’s no in my own hands. It was settled and ordained before you or me were born.’

‘And nothing will make you change your mind?’

‘It’s no my mind I’m speaking of,’ she said, with a half-despairing smile; ‘if it was me to decide! But whisht! whisht! and say no more; my mother is coming. I’ve had ill thoughts and thankless thoughts, and you’ve seen them, Isabel; but I’m the handmaid o’ the Lord, and it’s no to His glory to betray my weakness—no even to my mother.’

‘I’ll not betray you,’ cried Isabel, with a little natural heat. Ailie turned wearily away, with a sigh of languor and heaviness; and just then her

mother came bustling in, carrying a white muslin dress on her extended arms.

‘It’s no to call grand,’ said Janet, ‘but I thought you would like to see it. As for Ailie, she takes nae mair notice than if a wedding was a thing that happened every day.’

‘She’s so full of her own thoughts,’ said Isabel, instinctively attempting an excuse.

‘Thoughts are grand things,’ said Mrs. Macfarlane, ‘and our Ailie, as is weel kent, is a lass far out of the ordinar.’ But her wedding gown! A woman made out of stone would take an interest in that! I would be real thankful if you would put some real feeling in her mind.’

‘She has done her best,’ said Ailie, still bending absorbed over her book; ‘but I’m thinking of the Lord’s will, and no of men’s pleasure. My black gown that I wear every day is good enough for me.’

‘Hear to her!’ said the mother; ‘but eh, Isabel, you that’s young yoursel, ye might tell her this earth is nearer than heaven, and that we maun take some thought for the things of the flesh.’

Ailie turned her head away. She turned her back upon them and resumed her reading, murmuring broken words to herself half aloud. The others stood gazing at her as she sat, her drooping

figure relieved against the pale light from the window, wrapt in that feverish absorption. 'If He'll but stretch forth His arm and save,' murmured Ailie; 'if He'll but come quickly;—provided it's no a' in vain.' Isabel's quick youthful ear alone caught those faltering words. To the mother, who was accustomed to her habits, they were but 'Ailie's way.' Janet shook her head and wrung her hands as she looked at the condition of her child, and then she turned with natural relief to the wedding dress which she had spread out on two chairs. She beckoned Isabel to come and examine it, pinching and drawing out tenderly as she exhibited them the snowy folds. 'It's awfu' plain and simple,' she said, with natural pride, in a half whisper, 'but we're poor folk. If she had been to marry a neebor lad I would have got her a useful spotted muslin 'or a good print. But Mr. John, you see, he's a gentleman, and she'll be lady of Ardnamore. And it's white for a bride when she can afford it. If it hadna been the word of the Lord, as she says, I canna think it would ever have been. And it's an awfu' heartbreak to see her take nae notice, no even of her wedding gown.'

'Do you think she's happy?' said Isabel, wistfully, feeling the full misery of this indifference, and yet bound by honour not to reveal what she knew of Ailie's mind.

‘Happy!’ echoed Janet, ‘with Ardnamore waiting to make a lady of her? What would she get better in this world? And I hope you’ll no put nonsense in her head. It would just break my heart.’

‘I’ll put no nonsense in her head,’ said Isabel. And then, surmounting her irritation, she added, ‘But oh, think if she were to be unhappy, and away in the world with nobody to comfort her.’

The mother turned away with a little laugh. ‘Simple thing!’ she said, under her breath, ‘you’re like hersel; ye take it a’ for gospel, every word they say.’

‘Are they not going away?’ asked Isabel in amaze.

‘Oh, ay, they’re going away; but think ye the world’s like Loch Diarmid, Isabel? They’ll soon tire o’ their preaching and their wandering among fremd folk. She’s a’ spirit and little flesh, my poor lamb. And her heart will fail her, and he’ll be sick o’t a’, and syne they’ll come cannily hame. And I’ll see my bairn at kirk and market, with her bairns about her—no a common body like me,’ said Janet, wiping her eyes with her apron, ‘but leddy of Ardnamore.’

‘But she’ll break her heart,’ said Isabel.

‘I’m no feared for her heart,’ said the motner. ‘She’s a loving thing, though you wouldna think

it. Her heart will turn to her husband when she has nane but him.'

This was Janet's programme of the strange romance. Isabel, though she was not used to contrasts of this description, went down the hill in a maze of reflections, wondering over the difference. Ailie's tragic purpose of going forth into the world to save it, her first step being upon her own heart, and all its maiden hopes; and her mother's frightful, sceptical, middle-aged prescience of the effects of weariness and failure—the inevitable disappointment, the sickening of heart, the giving up of hope, the despairing flight homeward to seek peace at least and quietness—stood before her side by side like two pictures. Would the two enthusiasts content themselves with common life and comfort after their high dreams, or was there after all, nothing in the dreams for which Ailie was making so awful a sacrifice? Isabel was too inexperienced to come to light on the subject; but Janet Macfarlane's cheerful unbelief struck her with mingled horror and pain. She did not ask herself whether all that was beautiful and wonderful in the hopes and beliefs of beginning life was thus looked upon by the calm eyes of the elders as so much delusion to be dispersed by the winds and storms. But that suggestion of insecurity, unreality—and of the better-informed

spectator, who realised and knew the downfall that was coming—appalled and terrified her. The sight of Mr. Lothian, who came out from the Manse-gate as she passed, was, perhaps for the first time, a relief to Isabel. She was glad to have him come to her, to hear his sympathetic voice, to feel that there were people in the world who were not sceptical. 'I have been seeing Ailie,' she said, accounting half-apologetically for the little shiver of nervous excitement which she could not restrain.

'And now you'll come and see Miss Catherine,' said Mr. Lothian. 'You cannot help the one, but you can help the other, Isabel.'

'Me help Miss Catherine? No, Mr. Lothian,' said Isabel, with a little air of dignity. 'She is never pleased, whatever I do. She would like me to pretend to be somebody else, and not myself.'

'And I am so foolish,' said the minister, with a smile, 'as to like yourself best of all; and so does she, Isabel, if you saw her heart. You'll come and see her with me.'

'To please you,' said the girl, not meaning any coquetry, nor thinking of the tenderness with which words so unusually soft moved this man, who might have been her father. Even as she spoke her eye caught some passing figure in the distance, which was like that of the lover whom she fancied she had abjured; and her heart sprang

up and began to beat furiously against her breast. She knew very well it was not Stapylton—but the merest vision that reminded her of him, how different was the feeling it awakened within her! She walked on leisurely by Mr. Lothian's side, making him soft answers, which, in spite of all his better knowledge, filled him with a sweet intoxication. And all the time her object was to lead him artfully with all the youthful skill of which she was mistress to some allusion to her lover. 'Are you glad to be alone?' she said at last, stooping, as she did so, to pluck off a thorny branch which had caught her dress. And he did not even perceive what that leading question meant, so wrapt was he in the delusion which—half-intentionally in her unconscious selfishness for her own purposes—she had been weaving round him.

'I would not be glad to be alone if I could have the company I like best,' said the deluded man; and so, deceiver and deceived, they went along the quiet rural way.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN Isabel found herself once more in the drawing-room at Lochhead, it wrought the most curious change upon her. For weeks past she had been living with her stepmother alone, hearing nothing of more interest than Jean's gossip, falling unconsciously into the habits of the humbler life. Her mind was so softened by her grief that she had fallen back with a satisfaction she had never before been sensible of, upon the humble love which surrounded her. And in that sense of final ending and conclusion which calamity brings to the young, she had made up her mind that Jean and the children were henceforward to be her sole interests. She herself was dead with her twin-sister. Existence was but a grey and patient round of routine and duty. Her heart was so hushed and languid with the shadow of her first great sorrow, that it had not rebelled against this decision, nor had she felt, as she would otherwise have done, the depar-

ture of her lover, after the first fever of excitement into which he had thrown her, and the illness consequent upon it. It had seemed the natural fulfilment of all her previsions. He was gone—everything was gone, except the quiet, and Jean's homely consolations, and the care of 'the bairns.'

But the Lochhead drawing-room awoke in a moment a crowd of other thoughts. The other side of life rose up upon her as by a sudden transformation. She who had been learning to content herself in the blue-and-white elbow-chair by the kitchen fire, felt a sudden thrill run over her when she was placed by Miss Catherine, close to herself, upon the velvet sofa, with her feet on the Turkey carpet, with the portrait over her head of a stately lady in powder and ruffles, who was her ancestress as well as Miss Catherine's, and with all the countless details of an ancient 'gentle' house visible on every side. Lochhead was old-fashioned and very far from fine. But yet Buckingham Palace could scarcely have been more distinct from the kitchen at the Glebe, or even from the little parlour, which, now Margaret had gone out of it, was destitute of all grace to compensate for its grey, pictureless walls and unlovely furniture. Isabel felt herself 'a lady born,' as she took the place of honour by Miss Catherine's side. Her heart woke up in her breast. After all, this was her natural sphere—this, and

not the homely, low-roofed room, with its two latticed windows and whitewashed walls—and the children coming in from school. The impression of the still life round her was stronger than that of anything which was said. She sat almost silent, while Miss Catherine and the minister talked, but with a mind awaking to all the influences about her—the grace, the superior softness, the refinement of the place. Life here must, it seemed to Isabel, be a different thing from the life she had always known. There were books of all kinds about, and her appetite for books was great, though as yet it had been but scantily supplied. The ample window gave an amount of atmosphere and breadth to the room, which Isabel perceived by instinct, without knowing how it was. It was very nearly the same view as that from the parlour window at the Glebe, and she could not tell what made the difference; unless indeed it was the superior grandeur, splendour, amplitude of the life. There were a hundred resources within, which were impossible at her lower level of existence, and a much widened perception of the world without. She had no notion that it was the old furniture and the great windows which impressed this so strangely upon her. It was something in the atmosphere, the expanded breathing, and hearing, and seeing of a larger life.

And as the minister accompanied her home,

Isabel, unawares, fell into a little self-revelation. 'You can see the same view out of the village windows,' she said, 'and from the Glebe; but the Loch is grander and the braes are higher, and away down to Clyde is like a picture—I don't know how it is.'

'You like it better than the Glebe?'

'I cannot tell,' said Isabel; 'it is so different; and so many things to fill your life. I think I would never tire reading; but then I know my books off by heart, and reading them is little good. And there's always a seam. I know a seam is *right*,' said Isabel, with decision; 'I did not mean that.'

'But sometimes you would like something else,' he said, growing foolish as he looked at her; and finding something half divine in her girlish simplicity.

'I don't know,' she said; 'I have made up my mind to be content. But still one has eyes, and one can see it is different. I never thought—of such things—before.' And a rush of tears came to her pensive eyes.

Mr. Lothian left her finally at the door of the Glebe, and found himself in such a state of *attentissement* that he rushed in once more upon Miss Catherine as he passed the house. 'Life is beginning to stir within her,' he said with excitement; 'she is feeling that all is not over and past. The sight of you has done her good.'

‘The sight of me is not difficult to be had,’ said Miss Catherine, ‘though it’s early yet, after a death, to get good from the like of that.’

‘She is so young,’ said the minister, ‘her mind goes quicker than yours and mine. Not that she grieves less; but everything goes quicker—the days, and the events, and the beats of the heart.’

‘I doubt if you would take as much trouble to understand the beats of my heart,’ said Miss Catherine. ‘Minister, you’re a sensible man in other things——’

Mr. Lothian retreated from her look, and turned to the window. In comparison with himself, Miss Catherine was an old woman; but still, when he was brought to task for it, he had nothing to advance in defence of his love.

‘You need not turn away your face,’ she said, with a smile, ‘as if I had not seen it grow red and grow pale many a time at the lassie’s glance. And she’s but a bairn when all is said. It’s a mystery to me. A woman of your age would think as little of a lad of hers, as of an infant. And yet you, an honest man, that might be her father, let such a lassie fill up your very heart. No! you are a man and I am a woman; you might explain till ye were tired, and I would never understand. A man is a queer being, and, so far as I can see, we must take him as he is till his Maker mends

him. And about Isabel, if that lad does not come back——'

'Whether he comes back or not,' said Mr. Lothian, hotly; 'he has disgusted her so much that she will never think of him again.'

Miss Catherine shook her head. 'Make what progress you can while he's away,' she said. 'Keep him away if you can; but don't you trust to her disgust. He is her first love?'

'I suppose so,' said the minister, with a very rueful face.

'Then she'll forgive him all,' said Miss Catherine, with perhaps a thrill of painful knowledge in her voice; there was a vibration in it which made her companion glance round at her with keen momentary curiosity. But her face betrayed no story. 'She'll forgive him all,' she repeated; 'and to undeceive her would take a long time. Perhaps it's only by dint of marrying him that a woman finds out what's wanting in her first love. And you would not like her to go through that process. But if he keep away——'

Mr. Lothian's face had gone through as many alternations of hope and fear as though he had been on trial for his life. 'He loves her,' he said under his breath, 'as well as he knows how.'

'But he loves himself better,' said Miss Catherine; 'and if he has to hang about at home for fear

of being disinherited he'll save you some trouble here. And there is no other man about the parish to come in your way——'

'Her thoughts are differently employed,' he said, with a little annoyance. 'What does she know of the men in the parish—or care——'

'That's very true, no doubt,' said Miss Catherine, gravely. 'There was never one like her on the Loch, nor a lad worthy of her, since Wallace Wight. But yet Isabel has eyes like her neighbours. And there is nobody in your way. My word! if I were a comely man like you, little the worse for your years, and not another suitor in the field, she should be Isabel Lothian before the year was out!'

Mr. Lothian coloured like a girl with excitement and gratification. Scarcely on Isabel's own cheeks could there have risen a purer red and white. He was, as Miss Catherine said, 'little the worse for his years.' He was as erect and elastic in his step as if he had been five-and-twenty—his colour as fresh, and his eyes as bright. To be sure his hair was getting white; but that, like powder, had an embellishing effect. And though the minister has appeared in these pages under an invariably serious aspect through the shadow thrown by Margaret Diarmid's death-bed, yet there was nothing gloomy in his character.

On the contrary, he was capable of almost boyish exuberance when unwonted holiday or delight came in his way. He flushed with pleasure as Miss Catherine spoke—

‘If it depends on me’—he said, with a sparkle in his eye.

‘And who else should it depend on?’ said Miss Catherine. ‘Take your courage by both hands, and, take my word, you’ll not fail.’

Thus the house of Lochhead rained influence on this eventful day. Isabel went home with a vague longing in her mind for wider air and a fuller life. But when the minister had left the door, going back with his mind full of tenderness, and just touched by hope, she sat down by the parlour window, and took out Stapylton’s letter, and began to read herself into satisfaction with it. The careless words which had struck her like stings at the first reading, she set herself to smooth and soften. ‘He meant them to cheer me,’ she said to herself; ‘to be cheery himself and to cheer me;’ and then she would make an effort and swallow the sentences to which no such explanation could be applied. ‘It was all his love,’ she said again. Words change their character when thus studied. Out of what seemed almost an insult this tender casuistry brought but another proof of the confidence and certainty of love. ‘He did not choose his words,’

Isabel said at length, with a certain indignation against herself; 'he felt I would understand—how should I miss understanding when I knew his heart?' And then there were other apologetic murmurings, less assured, but not less anxious. 'After all he is but a man—he does not think like the like of us;' and—'That will be the English way; he always said it was different.' Thus the fanciful girl went on with her letter, until at length she kissed and put it away among her treasures, all anger having gone out of her heart. When she had accomplished this, Isabel could scarcely deny to herself that the shadow of grief and pain had grown lighter. It was not that she forgot her sister. With an unconscious heresy, which every theologian in the parish would have condemned as idolatry, she referred her thoughts to Margaret still, with a soft fervent earnestness, an inward breathing very like a prayer. '*She* could tell me—oh, my Maggie, if you would but tell me!' she murmured in her heart. But still her heart was lighter. The sun was shining again, skiffs were darting across the loch, one last gleam of brightness before the winter came on the woods and hills. And Isabel could not but open timidly like a daisy in the grass, to the sun. When she kissed Stapylton's letter, a vision rose before her of their next meeting. He would come back. What he said about a meeting on the Border was

but a jest, as she ought to have known. He would come back. He would woo her as a lady should be wooed; and some kind angel—why not Margaret?—would softly sweep out of the minister's mind any thought that he had ever loved poor Isabel. She assured herself that he could not love her much—that it must be a fatherly affection, very different from the love of a lover—and that when the moment had come, and the bridegroom stood beside her, ready to carry her away from Loch Diarmid, into the great vague, shining world—Mr. Lothian would bless the young pair, and send them consoled out of the last possibility of pain. She settled it all in every detail while she sat looking from the parlour window. Through all the interview between Miss Catherine and the minister, in which so very different an aspect of her affairs was discussed, Isabel sat gazing on the loch as it faded to evening, with a vague smile about her mouth, and liquid soft eyes, and dreamed. She saw how it would all happen as well as she saw the boat on the Loch making its way from Ardnamore. Perhaps he might not come for three or even six months. His friends would tell him what time must pass before Margaret's sister could consent. His mother would tell him, for surely even in England mothers could not be so far different. And he would come asking pardon with his lips, claim-

ing more than forgiveness. And Margaret would bless her sister—would plead *up yonder* for a blessing. And the two would stand side by side on the spot where Margaret had died, and plight their troth as it were to her, in her very presence, to love each other for ever and ever. She sat and dreamed while the minister, with unusual light in his eyes, went home to dream on his side of how different an ending. And neither the one nor the other saw aught but boundless happiness, the very climax of life and love, and perfection of human existence in the visionary future that lay beyond.

And then a great quietness came over the Loch. The marriage of Mr. John and Ailie Macfarlane was a nine days' wonder, but that died out by degrees; and even among his relatives or hers, little, after a while, was said of the pair. They had gone out 'into the world,' like Adam and Eve, seeking the unknown region in which their Tongue would be intelligible, and themselves received as the bringers in of a new dispensation. But in the meantime they disappeared from Loch Diarmid, and the lesser prophets they had left behind soon failed to interest the crowd which was used to excitement. Things fell into their former quietness; worldly amusements began again to be heard of. Mr. William at Wallacebrae, though an elder, had a 'kirn' in his barn, in cele-

bration of the reaping, in November, of the last high-lying patch of corn; and though Andrew, at the mill, had threatened to bring it before the kirk-session, that body had so quieted down, and was so thankful for a little repose, that nothing was done. Quietness fell on the Loch; the winter passed, with sweeping storms of rain and brilliant gleams of sunshine, and all that languor of imprisoned life which falls on a rural parish in the dead season. The talk of the women at the cottagedoors dwindled till it reached the low level of half-a-dozen sharp words ringing from one side of the street to the other, when the air was clear with frost.

‘Jenny Spence, our Robert’s just come in, and he says your man has gane into Maryburgh with a load of peat to the factor.’

‘Eh me, I’m no fond o’ Maryburgh. It’s an awfu’ place for keeping the men late—and him with the minister’s turnips on his mind!’

‘It’s time enough for the turnips the morn, and it’s a fine night.’

‘O, ay, a fine night, but real sharp. I maun shut the door, for the bairns have a’ coughs.’

To this scanty, necessary kind of communication was the parish conversazione reduced. The men bore up better in the smithy, in the red glow of the fire; they gathered in the ruddy corner within sight of the blaze, and continued their usual tattle about

current events with scarcely diminished vigour; and throughout the parish there were a few tea-drinkings, and neighbours would tap at the friendly doors or open the trustful latch with a 'How's a' wi' ye?' to make up for the fewer meetings out of doors. Winter was never very hard at Loch Diarmid. The sea air, which breathed its subtle influence like the tide through all the crevices of the hills, kept away all keen frosts and bitter chills of snow. The hills now and then put on their glistening garments, and shone like so many white-robed prophets in the sun; but the braes kept green, or, rather, kept their natural mixture of colour—the red-brown of the ploughed land, the grey rustling brown of the leafless trees, the rusty stretch of faded heath, the spots of humid, verdant turf. It was a wonder and marvel told for years when there happened to be a great fall of snow; and in this year there was none, except on the hills. But the Loch would toss itself into wrath now and then, and the way to the outside world would be partially barred. Thus imprisonment outside moved the parish to a little quickening of intercourse within. The people in the white villas down the Loch had mostly retired to spent the winter in some less complete retirement, but such of them as were left would ask Mr. Lothian to dinner, keeping his steady mare fully employed.

‘ He’ll break his neck some night over those dark braes,’ said Christie Steel, his housekeeper, ‘ aye riding, like a young man. Why canna he get a sober gig, wi’ lamps to it, like his father before him?’

But the minister himself had no fear of any such consequences. It was said on the Loch that he got more like a young man every day.

‘ He’s younger-looking now than when he came to the parish fifteen years ago,’ people said. ‘ It’s exercise and being out in all weathers that does it.’ ‘ Nae, it’s ease of mind now thae prophesyings are over.’ ‘ It’s neither the one nor the other, but a bonnie lass——’

After this fashion the minister and his ways were discussed in the parish. Mr. Galbraith smiled and looked — not even wisdom itself restraining him—like one who knew all about it. Mr. Lothian alone knew nothing about it; his courage and heart had come to him afresh. He had hopes that seemed to brighten every day; his worn life seemed about to blossom out into a new spring. It was even much to him that the religious excitement in the parish had almost ceased, and that things were returning to their usual course. He had quietness without, and he had such expectations to brighten him within as he had never before ventured to entertain. It was like

a spring and no winter in the records of his life.

And all was very quiet at the Glebe. Day after day, week after week—nay month after month, Isabel had sat silent, expecting, looking for the letter which never came, for the familiar step and voice which she had made so sure would come back to her. And neither letter nor visitor had come to break the wistful silence; no one knew the longing looks she cast from her window, as the winter twilight darkened night by night, over the gleaming surface of the loch. She felt sure he must write, until the time was past for writing; and then a strange confidence that he would come seized upon her. And she had no one to whom she could say a word of her expectations, to whom she could even whisper his name. If Jean perceived her eager watch for the postman, her shivering start and thrill when any footstep was audible by night, or knock came to the door, she mentioned it to no one. Three months and not a word,—then six months, the year turning again unawares, the snow melting from the hills, the snowdrops beginning to peep above the surface of the soil—

It became the one absorbing thought of Isabel's life. She thought she had betrayed herself a hundred times a day. But the fact was that nobody thought of her secret. She was passive

and subdued, it is true; but no doubt that was the shadow of death in which she had been so recently enveloped. The minds of her friends had taken a sudden leap away from that disagreeable subject. They agreed to forget the very existence of Stapylton. He was gone, and had left no trace of him in the district—why should there be any trace of so unworthy an intruder in any heart? They had made up their minds that Isabel had forgotten him, and went calmly on their way pleased with that conclusion. It was strange that they should have found it possible thus to delude themselves—but such things occur every day; what they wished they believed, taking their desires for granted. And Isabel, whom they all considered themselves so tender and indulgent to, feeling that in one point there was no pity, nor sympathy for her, shut up her thoughts in her own breast. They were sad enough thoughts sometimes. Now and then it was impossible for her to escape from the conviction that her lover had forgotten her. She would steal out and sit under the little birch-tree on the hill-side, with her work in her lap, but doing nothing, gazing eagerly along the winding road, wondering at the blank of distance, out of which no one came. Sometimes the figure of a tourist would move her to a gleam of hope. But still he never appeared. There were various explanations given of her favourite

post under the birch in the parish, and why she went there. Could it be, like Margaret, to pray? Could it be to escape from the constant companionship of Jean Campbell? Could it be, as her stepmother thought, that these visits to the hill were but assumed to cover a continual visit to the churchyard and Margaret's grave? But no one thought of Stapylton, or of the unexpressed longing that moved Isabel. Oh, if he would but come! She began at length to feel almost indifferent as to how he came. If it were but to say farewell for ever, to tell her he would never more come back to her, Isabel felt as if she would have been satisfied; but to keep her thus in uncertainty, in this long suspense between hope and fear—that, indeed, was almost more than she could bear.

And it would be impossible to describe all the alternations between fear and hope which moved her as the months went on. Spring came, stretching day by day, more green, more warm, more cheery and sunny on the hills. The poor girl, in her loneliness, sat watching, holding on, as it were, to the darker season which melted away under her grasp, taking comfort in every gloomy day, saying to herself, 'It is winter still!' The birds warbling in all the trees about was a trouble to her. No; not spring again—not so far on as everybody thought: only a little lightening of the

cold, or gleam of exceptional weather. She kept this thought steadily before her mind, through March and April, refusing to understand what months they were. But in May she could no longer refuse to perceive. The trees had shaken out all their new leaves from the folds. The hill-side was sweet with wild flowers, the primroses were over. 'Everything is so early this year,' Isabel said to herself with a sick heart.

'No so early either,' said Jean, with profound unconsciousness of her step-daughter's sentiments; 'no that early. I've seen the lilac-tree in flower a fortnight sooner than now.'

And then the girl could no longer shut her eyes. Winter was over; the charm of early summer was in the air; everything had come again—the lambs, the birds, the flowers, the sunshine, the fresh thrill of life and brightness—everything except Margaret, who was dead; and Stapylton, who was lost; and these two were all in all to Isabel.

Her friends perceived that she was going through some crisis, but it did not occur to them to think what it was. When she was questioned, she would weep, and remind them of her sister, who alone did not come back with the flowers she loved, and all accepted it as a sufficient apology for her redoubled melancholy. And the plea was not a false one; more and more every day she missed

her sister, her authority and her sympathy. But it was so far false that another name was conjoined to that of Margaret. Of him she said nothing. Her heart going back upon itself, decided with inexpressible silent pangs, that now he would not come—and yet each morning she looked for him again with fresh hope. And no one knew of it. Her struggle was absolutely her own. She preserved it jealously, never mentioning his name, or referring to him, either to Miss Catherine or the minister: not even to Jean had her mind been opened. She sat under her birch-tree, waiting with a silent anguish that grew ever greater and greater, waiting for him, beginning to realise, with more or less distinctness, that her hope was in vain.

CHAPTER XI.

THIS state of things could not go on for ever. Miss Catherine, who had made a hundred vain exertions to draw her young kinswoman to her house, and out of all the melancholy associations of her own, at last became seriously alarmed about Isabel. And the minister, who all the winter through had been indulging himself in such hopes, slowly woke to a perception of the absorbed looks, the languor, the wandering of her eye, and the paleness of her cheeks. She was very soft to him and gentle, accepting his kindness as she had never done before, looking up to him in a way which filled him with a thousand fond dreams. She had done this with unconscious selfishness, because she wanted the support of affection and kindness, not with any thought of him. She was struggling along her solitary way with so much expenditure of strength and life that it would have seemed hard to Isabel to deny herself that comfort on the road, the anxious de-

votion that surrounded her like a soft atmosphere. And yet she did not mean to be selfish; but by-and-bye they all found out that her strength and heart were failing her. 'I canna tell what it is,' Jean said, with her apron to her eyes; 'she'll sit for hours on the hill, and syne she'll come home that worn, she hasna a word for one of us; and her eyes aye wandering miles away, as if she were looking for somebody. I canna tell what it is.'

'It cannot be any of their wild notions,' said Miss Catherine, anxiously, 'of Margaret coming back from the grave.'

'Na, na, she has a' her senses,' said Jean; 'she'll look as pleased now and then when she sees the minister coming up the brae.'

Mr. Lothian's cheek flushed, but he shook his head. 'Alas! it is not for me,' he said; and yet a little secret hope that perhaps it pleased her to watch his approach crept into his heart.

'It cannot be that English lad she's thinking of,' said Miss Catherine; and Mr. Lothian, struck as with a sudden chill, raised his head and fixed his eyes anxiously on Jean's face.

'She never mentions his name,' said Jean. 'I've reason to think she was awfu' angry at him. The time she fainted she let fall words in her sleep—Na, it canna be that.'

'Provided it is not her health,' said Miss

Catherine; and Jean again raised her apron to her eyes.

‘I darena say it even to mysel,’ she cried. ‘I will not say it; but, O Miss Catherine, that’s my dread night and day. I try to shut my eyes, but I canna forget that our Margaret was much the same. You ken weel she was a perfect saint, and it was prayer and the Book that filled her mind. But at first, when her illness was coming on, she would sit like that,—and look and look! It makes me that sick when I think o’t, that I canna sit and look at the other one going the same gait. I canna do it. I think it will break my heart.’

‘The same gait!’ said the minister, raising a blanched face of woe, ‘the same road as—Margaret? No, no—don’t say so. It cannot be!’

But both the women shook their heads.

‘I canna be mistaken, that hae watched them baith,’ said Jean, with her apron to her eyes.

‘And we all know it’s in the family,’ said Miss Catherine, sinking her voice to solemnity.

There came a sudden groan out of the minister’s breast. He turned away from them to the other end of the room, with a pang to which he could give no expression. No, no—God could not do it: it was impossible. Margaret—yes—whose visionary soul was fixed on heaven from her cradle; but Isabel, impetuous, faulty, sweet

human creature, whose presence made the whole world bright. No, no;—after all, God had some regard for the hopes and wishes of His creatures: He would not thwart and trample upon their hearts like this.

‘It’s in the family,’ repeated Miss Catherine. ‘Her mother, my kinswoman, Margaret Diarmid, was not five-and-twenty—and her sister younger still; and that branch of the family is extinct, you may say, barring Isabel. But so far as flesh and blood can strive, I’ll fight for the lassie’s life.’

Mr. Lothian had no power of speech left; but he came to her and took her hands in his, and pressed them with a look of gratitude such as no words could express.

‘She shall not be lost if I can help it,’ repeated Miss Catherine. ‘It may be a kind of brag to say, but there are many things that can be done when you take it in time. Leave her to me, Mr. Lothian, and do not break your heart.’

This conversation took place while Isabel was absent on one of her usual visits to the hill. When the minister had left them, Miss Catherine turned to Jean and began to inquire into the girl’s symptoms.

‘She has no cough,’ she said; ‘I have noticed that. But now that man is gone, tell me, Jean

Campbell, are ye sure it's not a pining for yon English lad?'

'I canna tell,' said Jean doubtfully, shaking her head. 'Whiles I hae my doubts. She had aye a craving about the post at first. That's past. But if she hears a footstep sudden in the road, or maybe a neighbour, coming in for a crack, lifting the latch at the outer door, she gives a start that drives me wild; but she never names him. And there were some words she let drop——'

'Don't tell me of words,' said Miss Catherine. 'It was her first love, and there's nothing in this world she'll not forgive him. That's it. And now I see what I must do.'

But nothing was done that day, nor for several weeks after. It was, as so often happens, the very crisis of Isabel's affairs on which they first discussed the question. When she came home that evening she was ill. The spring winds were cold, and she had taken a chill on the wet braes; and for some weeks every symptom which could most afflict her friends made its appearance. It was whispered in the Loch, with much shaking of heads, that the Captain's Isabel was soon to follow her sister: that she had fallen into 'a decline;' that she had never recovered Margaret's death; and even that the twin sisters had but one life between them according to the common super-

stition, and that the one could not long outlive the other. These prognostications reached the minister's ears, moving him to a misery of which the people who caused it had not the remotest conception. On the whole the parish, though deeply grieved, enjoyed talking this matter over; and even Jean Campbell, though her heart, as she said, was breaking, had long consultations with Miss Catherine, and with Jenny Spence, and many other anxious visitors, touching the resemblance between Isabel's illness and the beginning of Margaret's. She was rather bent, indeed, on making this out to be the case, although her tears flowed at every suggestion of danger to her remaining charge.

'Her cough has taken no hold of her; she'll shake it off,' said Miss Catherine.

'I mind when Margaret's was no more than that,' Jean would answer, shaking her head. And notwithstanding the profound pain which the thought of any approaching misfortune to Isabel gave them, there was almost a degree of mournful enjoyment in the comparing of notes and exchanges of confidences which took place among the nurses. But the effect was very different upon the minister. The mere thought of danger to her acted upon him like a temptation to blasphemy. In such a case what would remain to

him but to curse God and die? He could not acquiesce even in God's will, if it took from him the one love of his life; he went about his work like a man distracted, with feverish cheek and troubled eye, doubting everything, feeling no foundation of truth or comfort on which he could rest. All the devotion of which he was capable was a faint cry of 'Isabel, Isabel!' half supplication, half remonstrance with the cruel heavens. Without her what would the world be to him, or anything it contained? He was almost crazed by the dread which spread a curtain over earth and heaven, and darkened the whole universe. It seemed to him that her sweet life, if once assailed, might come to an end any moment; and he could not rest, but kept waking in the middle of the night, wandering to the door at every hour of the day to see if, perhaps, some messenger had come for him from the Glebe; but yet, wherever he went, people met him with questions. 'Have you heard how the Captain's Isabel is the day?' 'Eh, I thought she would gang like her sister.' 'Ye see twins, ye never can separate them in life or death.' Such were the comments he was in the daily habit of hearing; and they stung him so that every day was full of torture—pain which, after the bright dreams he had been indulging in, was doubly hard to bear.

But as it turned out the pain was unnecessary. Isabel had caught cold, her body being susceptible at all points, and her mind unhinged—just such a cold as might, had her constitution been weaker, have ended as Margaret's had done. Jean was right in her diagnosis—just as Isabel's illness began Margaret's had begun; there had been, even to some extent, the same cause. The shock which Mr. John's love, and the painful interruption of it had given her, had unstrung Margaret's strength just as Stapylton's absence had done her sister. But there the resemblance stopped. The elder sister's constitution was feeble and Isabel's was strong, and other influences besides that of disappointed love had come in, in Margaret's case. The shock had struck at all the delicacies of her nature, and made her sick of the life in which such thoughts could be. And her contemplative nature, her visionary heart had taken refuge in heaven. Isabel's trial and her struggle were less—the circumstances were different. Instead of the Captain to vociferate against her suitor and reproach her if she looked sad, she had soft, compassionate silence all around her, everybody sympathising with her, no one asking what her sorrow was. Margaret had been surrounded by a closer domestic group; first, the Captain, loud and rough and peremptory, inca-

pable of comprehending any scruple of her delicate mind; then Jean, not yet sufficiently melted by love to understand the visionary girl; and Isabel was still too young, too foolish and heedless to have one sigh of the breaking heart breathed into her bosom. But so far as Isabel was now concerned, all this was changed. Jean had been trained by long watching of them, and by love which had grown in the interval into an instinctive apprehension of her stepdaughter's moods; and there was Miss Catherine, with all her faculties quickened by the loss of Margaret; and Mr. Lothian, whose power of observation was increased tenfold by his love. They asked her no questions, they made no comments, but they surrounded and wrapt her about in an atmosphere of tenderness and observance. Her looks were studied, her wishes anticipated, her very thoughts divined. Sometimes even under such circumstances the life must end, the weary soul go forth from earth before it is satisfied; but with Isabel it was not so. Her illness, though it lasted only for a few weeks, looked like a interval of months or years. It put Stapylton at a distance from her. So long as she had lain in her sick room, all expectation of his coming or longing for it had gone out of her heart; and as she recovered the thought came back but dimly to

her. She had not forgotten him, but time had gone faster than its wont, and he was further off than she could have supposed,—drifted away.

Then Miss Catherine, moved by the urgency of the case as she had scarcely ever before been moved, announced her intention of taking Isabel away for change. As soon as she was able to move, they went to one of the watering-places in which Scotland believes—the Bridge of Allan, and then to Edinburgh. It was not a very long journey, but everything was new to Isabel. It roused her in spite of herself. Youth gained the ascendancy over all the facts which had lessened its brightness. So many new things to see, the bright summer weather, the change and movement,—the sight of crowds and novelties, drove things more urgent out of her mind. And then she was Miss Catherine's close companion, accompanying her everywhere—sharing all her thoughts. Miss Catherine, though she had lived chiefly on Loch Diarmid, had been sufficiently in the world to be aware of much which had never dawned upon Isabel. She knew everybody they met as they drove or walked about the streets,—that is, everybody who was, as she herself said, 'worth knowing.' And she knew not only the people, but their histories, the tragical incidents which are hidden in so many family records; the

loves and feuds, the misfortunes which make the smoothest life a mystery. She told Isabel endless stories, not visions of romance, but the sadder, more awful stories which we are not permitted to use in fiction, authenticated by real details of place and date, and recollections of 'When I saw them last,' such as gave them an intensity of interest beyond the reach of invention. 'There was a very strange story about these two,' she would say, when they had passed some placid couple. 'I remember it as if it were yesterday, when I was a girl in Edinburgh, attending classes. Remind me to tell you when we get home.' Thus wisdom would flow from her lips, not the abstract results of a life's experience, but those individual instances which are more effectual than philosophy. The 'Arabian Nights' were scarcely more varied, more endless, flowing on from father to son—from grandmother to grand-daughter—revelations of all the profounder deeps of life. Isabel listened with intent eyes and lips apart, recognising the difference between the world outside and the world within with such a pang of surprise and thrill of interest as are natural to the young. Was it the cheerful pair whom she met driving, or riding, or walking about the daylight world, morning after morning, to whom that convulsion had happened? Was it the peaceful, mild old man, who took off

his hat to her as he passed, who had that tragedy in his life? Was it true that scarcely one of all those smiling people round were without some mark which had been a wound, some break in their existence where life and death—or shame and honour—or love and hate, had struggled for the mastery? Her own thoughts stood still to contemplate the changed world round her, secretly questioning its meaning. Oh! what curt suggestions of anguish, what heart-breakings conveyed in few words, were in Miss Catherine's talk. It filled Isabel, in the softness of her youth, with a wondering reverence and pity—compassion unspeakable and awe for the silent, smiling earth, which bore so much and made no complaint. And slowly her own little story—a story scarce begun, not yet tinged with the deeper shades of human mystery, rose up like a curtain rolling itself together before it vanished altogether like a mist upon the freshening wind.

And then Mr. Lothian came and paid them frequent visits; so frequent that the parish was moved to its depths, and grumbled at his repeated absence. 'We might a' dee for what he cares,' said the women at the village-doors; and even John Macwhirter, though unused to interfere, gave forth his opinion on the subject: 'I'm no a man to insist on a call from the minister every other

day,' he said. 'He's enough ado with his sermons, if he gives his mind to them as he ought; but he's an aulder man than me that have half-a-dozen weans to think of; and a bonnie example that is to his flock, trailing over half the country after a young lass. Lord, if I was like him I would bide. Ye wouldna see me bring wife and bairns on my head at his time of life; and a young wife's a bonnie handful for an auld man. Ye may gloom, Mr. Galbraith, but you're no far from the same way of thinking yoursel.'

'I'm thinking there's many young lasses in Edinburgh and many things of more importance,' said the Dominie. 'Mr. Lothian, hasna left the parish for years. And his sermons are running dry, if you'll take my opinion. No doubt the world's a wicked place, but it does the best of men good to see it now and again. I wouldna say, John Macwhirter, but even you yourself might take a hint from smiths of more advanced views. And as for a divine ——'

'You're grand at your jokes,' said the half-offended blacksmith; 'but if I were to take hints, as ye call it, in the same kind of style as the minister, I would like to ken what my Margaret would say? She would be neither to haud nor to mind.'

'Now, I was saying,' continued the Dominie,

‘a divine has most need of all. He hears what folk are thinking, and a’ the new wiles o’ the Evil One to fortify your spirits against them. Maybe you think the Auld Enemy is always the same?—which shows how much you know about it. No, no, John. Keep you to your anvil and your iron, and let the minister alone.’

‘Na, if it’s the deevil he’s studying I’ve no a word to say,’ said John; ‘a’ the world kens there’s nae teacher for that like a woman;’ and having thus secured the last word and the victory, as far as the applauding laughter of his audience was concerned, John proceeded to constitute himself the champion of the minister when the Dominie withdrew from the field. ‘After a’ thae prophets and trash, I’m no surprised he should take the play, but he’ll be cleverer than I take him for if he gets bonnie Isabel.’

‘It would be the best thing she could do, a lass with no friends,’ said one of the bystanders.

‘But she’ll not do it,’ said the blacksmith, confidently, wrapping himself all at once in a flaming mist of sparks. Such was the general opinion of the Loch. ‘I canna believe she’ll have the sense,’ Jean Campbell said, to whom it was most important; and after a while the parish almost forgave the minister for his neglect of them in consideration of the interest with which they regarded his suit.

Everybody, except Isabel herself, was aware of the conspiracy against her. To herself it appeared strange that Miss Catherine, out of love for her, should leave the Loch and her own home so long, and waste the early summer, which was her favourite season, in the dusty, windy Edinburgh streets. Isabel accepted the sacrifice with the faith of her age in personal attachment, and said to herself that she could never be grateful enough to her old friend. She could not but acknowledge to herself that the change had made of her a new creature. She looked, and thought, and spoke, and felt herself so to do with a touch of soft surprise—like one of the young ladies whom she had sometimes seen at Lochhead. She, too, was a lady born—yet with envy and wonder she had looked at the strangers, whose look and air were so different from her own. They were not different now. Insensibly to herself Isabel had acquired another tone and air. Her soft Scottish speech was still as Scotch as ever, but it was changed. She felt herself to move in a different way, all her sensations were different. Sometimes she thought of the Glebe with a thrill of strange alarm. To go back to Jean and her children, and the solitude without books, without variety—could she do it? Or if that was all in store for her, was it not cruel to have brought her to this different life?

‘Now bring me some of your friends from the College, and let her hear you talk,’ said Miss Catherine, in furtherance of her deep design. The minister, whom she addressed, only shook his head with a doubtful smile.

‘What will she care for our talk?’ he said. ‘The nonsense of a ball-room would please her better. She would take my friends for a parcel of old fogies; and so indeed we are.’

‘And ready to go to the stake for your own notions all the same,’ said Miss Catherine, with much scorn. ‘Are you, or am I, the best judge of what she’ll think? As for ball-rooms, heaven be praised, in her mourning that’s out of the question; and if she set her eyes upon a man under forty, except in the street, it may be your fault, but it shall not be mine.’

‘Will that serve me, I wonder? or is it fair to her?’ said the scrupulous minister.

‘The more I see of men, the more I feel what fools they all are,’ said Miss Catherine; ‘go and do what I tell you, minister, and leave the rest to me.’

And accordingly Miss Catherine Diarmid’s lodging became the scene of a few gatherings, which to a girl more experienced in society than Isabel would have looked sufficiently appalling. But Isabel, with her mind and intelligence just

awakened, and with that fresh sense of ignorance which made her intelligence doubly attractive, regarded them as banquets of the gods. Mr. Lothian's friends were unquestionably old fogies; they had their ancient jests among themselves, at which they laughed tumultuously, and the outer world stared; and they had endless reminiscences, also among themselves, which were far from amusing to the uninitiated. But then by times they would talk as people talked in the old days when conversation was one of the fine arts. And Isabel opened her great brown eyes, and her red lips fell a little apart, like the rose-mouth of a child. She listened with an interest and admiration, and shy longing to take part, and shy drawing back which made it impossible, which altogether rapt her quite out of herself. And her eyes turned with a certain pride to the minister, who would take his full share, and was not afraid to lift his lance against any professor of them all. Isabel raised her pretty head when he spoke, and followed his words with quiet understanding glances, with rapid comprehension of what he meant, with the ever ready applause of her bright eyes. He could hold his own among them all; he was not afraid to enter into any argument. He contributed his full share to all that was going on; and Isabel looking at him grew proud of him—with the par-

tizanship of his parishioner, and friend, and—favourite. Yes, she knew it but too well. This man, whom everybody respected, who was so clever, and popular, and wise, was her own slave if she pleased to exercise her sovereignty. One glance, one movement of her finger, would have brought him to her side out of the society of the most learned professor under heaven. For her he would have thrown them all over, and come joyful to her, content to read a novel to her, or a poem (which to Isabel in her ignorance was, like a novel, the most frivolous of productions, notwithstanding that they went so to her heart), or even to hold her wool while she wound it, or occupy himself in any other foolish way she might require. This she knew, and it gave her a strange sense of pleasure. Stapylton's love had been a different thing altogether, demanding everything, giving nothing. And, besides, had not Stapylton vanished from her life like a tale that was told? She could not but feel a gratification in the certainty that a man like Mr. Lothian was thus devoted to her service—to her, who was so ignorant, not yet nearly up to the level of the other young ladies, though she flattered herself approaching that lofty standard day by day.

And all this time Miss Catherine sat, like a benevolent crafty spider at the opening of her net. Nobody divined the deep intention in her choice of

her visitors. Not a man under forty, as she had betrayed to Mr. Lothian, ever penetrated within her doors. If the question had been suggested to Isabel, no doubt she would have recognised it as unusual that gentlemen in Edinburgh should be all approaching half a century. But it did not occur to Isabel. She was awed and filled with admiration of the men she saw. It did not come into her heart to ask where were the young men who would have better matched herself and the other girls whose society Miss Catherine cultivated for her sake. Even the chatter of these girls did not enlighten her. They talked of pleasures of which she knew nothing—dancing all night, for instance—but how could it ever be possible for Isabel to dance all night? No, was not this better, loftier, a kind of amusement not inconsistent with all those solemnities of life into which she had had premature admission? Therefore the absence of the youth did not strike her. Miss Catherine was old, and it was natural she should choose her friends to please herself.

CHAPTER XII.

‘Now,’ said Miss Catherine, when it approached the end of June, and Edinburgh, like other towns, began to empty itself of its prisoners. ‘Now, minister, you may go your ways, and settle down in your parish. I am going to take her home.’

‘Home!’ said Mr. Lothian; ‘to the Glebe?’ and his countenance fell. For, to come and go a dozen times a day to Miss Catherine’s lodgings, and to see her young companion constantly under the shelter of her presence, without awaking Isabel’s susceptibilities or seeming to seek her, was very different from going to visit her in her own cottage, putting her on her guard by the very act.

‘Yes, to the Glebe!’ said Miss Catherine. ‘Don’t look at me as if you thought me an old witch. Maybe I am an old witch. No, she is not coming to my house. I mean to plunge her back into her own—to Jean Campbell and the bairns;

and then if you cannot make something of the situation, it will be your fault and not mine.'

Mr. Lothian paused, and mused over this last wile. He smiled a little, and then he shook his head. 'It might be good for me,' he said; 'but it would be cruel to her.'

'Go away with your nonsense!' said Miss Catherine; 'I hope I know the world and what I'm speaking of; but men are fools. I have given her all the change that was good for her here, and she has had just a taste of what life is, a flavour to linger in her thoughts. And now she shall know the cold plunge of the home-coming. Do you think I don't know it will give her pain? But how can I help that? It will show her what she wants, and where she is to get it; and if she does not make up her mind that it is to be found in the Manse parlour, I tell you again it will be your fault and not mine.'

'My bonnie young darling!' said the minister, moved to unusual tenderness; 'but I feel as if we were cheating her, conspiring and taking advantage of her innocence. If it could be done at less cost——'

'Go away and mind your own affairs,' said Miss Catherine, 'leave Isabel to me. Am not I seeking her good? and must I hesitate because my physic has an ill taste? Not I. Go home with your scruples and see what you'll make of it. And

you need not take advantage of my work if you have any objections. It's in your own hand.'

Upon which the minister went away, shaking his head more and more. 'You know my scruples will yield but too soon if Isabel is the price held out before me,' he said. And he obeyed his general and went away; but foolishly freighted himself in the very teeth of Miss Catherine's plans, with everything he could think of to lessen the dreariness and change the aspect of the Glebe Cottage. He sent a great box before him when he arrived at Loch Diarmid, which was on Saturday; and on the Monday he hastened up to the cottage, and unpacked the case with his own hands, and took from it pictures and bookshelves, and books to fill them, 'a whole plenishing,' as it appeared to Jean. 'What is this all for?' she said, looking at the arrivals with a sceptical eye.

'It is that Isabel may not think too much of the past when she comes back — that there may be something new to cheer her,' said the minister, somewhat struck by a sudden consciousness that his motives were not much more noble or innocent than those of his ally and fellow-conspirator. Jean stood and looked on while he hung the pictures and put up the shelves, very critically, and with her own thoughts.

'Then Isabel is coming back,' she said, 'and

I'm glad of it; among all your grandeur she was like to forget her home. And by all I can see you mean her to stay, or you would not spend good siller and time fitting up all this nonsense to please her e'e.'

'It is to comfort her heart, if that may be,' said the minister; 'that coming back may not be more than she can bear.'

Jean was offended, and tossed her head with an impatience she did not attempt to conceal. 'I'm no one for forgetting them that's dead and gone,' she said, 'nor changing the place they've been in. For my part I would keep a' thing the same. It's like running away from God's hand, to run away from the thought of a bereavement. And I would rather mind upon our Margaret than look at a' your bonnie pictures; and so, if she's no spoilt, would Isabel.'

But Mr. Lothian persevered with his work all the same. The Isabel who had left the Glebe two months before, and the Isabel who was coming back, were different creatures. His heart ached for the effect this 'cold plunge' would have upon his love. That it might make the Manse parlour bright to her, was an effect within the bounds of possibility, and one which would (almost) justify any means of operation; but yet he trembled with a sensitiveness stronger than any feeling he had ever

entertained for himself, stronger than her feeling for herself to think the chill which would fall upon the girl when, out of all the variety and brightness which had surrounded her, she went home to that utter silence—to the home where Margaret's death and vacant place were the chief associations. Some vague general reproach as to the callousness of women breathed through his mind just as his anxiety for Isabel had brought Miss Catherine to the sentiment that men were fools. Miss Catherine herself was utterly indifferent, or seemed so, to the trial to which she was about to subject her young companion—she had planned it indeed with cruel art. Mr. Lothian had not the self-denial to refrain from taking advantage of it. But yet he denounced the cruelty of the woman who thus planned Isabel's eventual happiness at the cost of so much suffering to begin with. 'My bonnie darling!' he said to himself as he went down the brae; and felt, not without a thrill of self-satisfaction, that he had done what he could to neutralize Miss Catherine's unkindness, while at the same moment he put in a little plea for himself.

On the Saturday of Mr. Lothian's return to Loch Diarmid, Miss Catherine intimated her intention to Isabel. 'My dear,' she said, 'the summer is wearing on. I would not say a word about it if I did not see how much better you are. But I

think, now that you are able to bear it, we should be thinking of home.'

And in a moment the chill which the minister had foreseen fell upon Isabel. It came upon her like a sudden frost, suddenly quenching the light out of her eyes. She said 'Yes?' not so much in acquiescence as with a sudden wistful question as to when and how this change was to come.

'I was thinking of the end of the week,' said Miss Catherine steadily, 'if that would be agreeable to you.'

'Anything would be agreeable to me,' said Isabel, with a little rush of tears to her eyes—'whatever pleases you. It has been so kind, oh! so kind of you——'

'You are not to speak to me of kindness,' said the old lady. 'It was a pleasure to myself. But now, God be thanked! you're well and strong; and bonnie Loch Diarmid will be in all its beauty. Are you not wearying to get home?'

'Oh, yes. I shall be glad——' faltered Isabel. But it took the colour from her cheek, and silenced all the little cheerful strain of talk which by degrees had developed in her. 'You have stayed away all this time for me,' she said, feeling this a subject on which she could more easily enlarge.

'Yes,' said Miss Catherine, without hesitation; 'I don't pretend to deny it, my dear. It has been

for you. And I am very glad I came. You are a different creature. But all the same it will be a great pleasure to get home.'

Isabel said nothing more. Oh, why was not the minister there to take her part? He would have read the sudden dullness in her eye, the change upon her voice. Then a hundred different thoughts flashed across her mind. Foremost of all, was a sudden vivid perception of the grey little parlour where Margaret had died, of the lonely life she should live in it, of the old dreary thoughts that would come back, of the old state of mind, the sick longing for change, the yearning towards the unknown. And now, even the charm of custom, which had trained her into the persuasion that such a life was the only practicable existence for her, had been broken. She knew there were other possibilities, another kind of routine. And so soon as she had made the discovery, it was her fate to go home. Home to Jean Campbell! Jean had been very kind to her, and Isabel was not ungrateful; but to have her stepmother for her sole companion, and a listless ramble over the braes for her sole recreation, and Mary's frocks to make for all her work—the prospect quenched out all her newly-acquired cheerfulness and strength. And then came the thought how wrong was all this; how unkind to her friends; what a miserable evi-

dence of her own slight and thankless nature. She tried to reason with herself on the subject, but in vain. So she sat for the rest of the day quenched out, making attempts to speak now and then, but failing utterly; trying to smile and to talk as Miss Catherine did about the proposed return. Oh! how the girl envied Miss Catherine! The old woman was as lonely as the young one. She had her duties, it was true; but no one to make Loch Diarmid pleasant to her. And yet how pleased she was to go back to all the tedium! Was it only because she was old and Isabel young?

‘You’ll feel the change, my dear,’ said Miss Catherine the day after, as they sat together alone. ‘It will be a trial to you going home.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Isabel, eagerly; and then she made an effort and said, very low, ‘It will bring everything to my mind—but, then, it was never out my of mind; it will be as if it had all happened over again ——’

‘It would have been the same sooner or later,’ said Miss Catherine. ‘It has to be got over. And now, I hope, you are able to bear it. And when you weary, my dear, you can come to me. I will always be glad to see you—when I have the time.’

‘Thank you,’ said Isabel, feeling her heart sink in her breast. Glad to see her—when she had time! After having been a mother to her, and

her companion for so long, opening up all her various stores of experience and knowledge on Isabel's behalf, feeding her with legend and tale. And now that was over, too—and Jean Campbell and Jean Campbell's bairns were all the companions she should have in the dim future. Oh, for Margaret! Oh, for the love that was gone! Oh, for — Isabel knew not what she would have said. Anything that would have warded off from her the blank that was about to come.

'It will not be cheerful for you, Isabel,' said Miss Catherine; 'but you have a stout heart, and you must not forget it is your duty. This has been very pleasant for the time. It is cheery to see new people and new places. But home is aye home.'

'Yes,' assented Isabel, feeling in her heart that she was the most abandoned of sinners not to be able to feel any rapture at the thought.

'And there is no saying when we may have another such holiday,' said Miss Catherine, cheerfully. Isabel could make no reply. The full force of the change rushed upon her. The sounds in the street seemed to grow melodious as she thought how short a time she would have it in her power to listen to them. And it seemed to her that her friend was quite unaware of the tumult which this intimation had raised in her breast. Had Isabel known how cunningly Miss Catherine

had contrived it, how she had been working up to this climax, and kept the 'cold plunge' as her most effectual weapon, the girl's mind would have risen up in arms against such cruelty. Miss Catherine left her seated, melancholy, over some work, with every line in her face turned downwards, and the new life gone out of her, and retired to her own room that she might be able to chuckle unrestrained over her success. 'She 'll marry him, if he ask her, in six weeks,' Miss Catherine said to herself. And then she gave a brief, half-amused, half-contemptuous thought to the folly of the man who was wasting his whole heart upon such a child,—'At his time of life!' She was contemptuous of his extraordinary fancy, but yet she worked for him with all her craft and all her heart. And then, though it might be foolish in Mr. Lothian, it was the best thing possible for her young kinswoman. There was not a young man in the district who would have been a suitable match for the Captain's Isabel. The young lairds would have thought twice before mingling their undiluted gentility with the alloy of Duncan's daughter. And the young farmers were not good enough for Miss Catherine's relation. And the sons of the Glasgow bodies in the pretty villas on the Loch, had a keen eye to money; and rich as they were, were not rich enough to marry for no other

portion than the few drops of good blood which Isabel possessed. But a minister was a gentleman by right of his cloth. Nobody in Scotland could object to such a connexion; and this special minister was well connected in his own person, and well off, and a well-looking man for his years. In short, those years were the only thing against him. Twenty years earlier he might have pretended to a much better match. And it was apparent that Isabel could not do better should she search the country through. Therefore the thing for every Diarmid to do was to promote the marriage to the extent of their united powers.

Left to herself, Isabel cried—not altogether because she was going home—because she was so wicked as not to be glad at going home—because her badness of heart was such that she regretted her holiday life with all its indulgences. When she returned to the Glebe, should she be able, she asked herself, to resist the movements of her own feelings, to think as little of Stapylton as he did of her, to keep from longing and looking and listening till the suspense brought on another fever? What should she do to occupy herself? to keep off such a humbling absorption in one thought? There was but one bright spot in all the monotonous landscape: the minister would stand by her, whatever happened to her. Night or day she could trust to

his sympathy. He would come to her when she called him, stand by her, be her support, her counsellor, her guide. She thought not of him, but of herself, with youth's spontaneous, unintentional selfishness. It did not occur to her to think of him. But so far already Miss Catherine's spells had wrought.

They arrived at Loch Diarmid at the end of the ensuing week ; and were met, not only by Mr. Lothian and by the carriage and servants from Lochhead, but also by Jean Campbell, eager to see her charge, and rapturous over the change in her appearance. From the moment in which they left the steamer, Miss Catherine began to carry out her remorseless policy. She kissed Isabel as soon as she had stepped ashore, and took leave of her.

'You'll come and see me, my dear, whenever you have time,' she said ; 'but you've a good long walk to the Glebe, and I will not hinder you now.' And Isabel, standing still by her stepmother's side, waiting till Jean had arranged to have some one sent after them with the boxes, watched her friend drive away with an undescrivable sinking at her heart. Miss Catherine compelled the minister to enter the carriage with her. She pulled him by the sleeve, and whispered in his ear, and resorted to violent measures to bring him, as she

called it, to himself. 'Go with her now, and you show her her own power, and you'll spoil all,' she said; and the bewildered man yielded. The carriage flashed away, while Isabel stood, not able to believe her eyes, on the little pier. The summer evening light was sweet upon the Loch, glancing down aslant on the braes, which were golden with the setting sun; and the labourers were going home, and all the soft sounds of repose and domestic reunion were in the air. Jean was busy with the man on the pier about the luggage. Since Isabel had left that same spot nearly three months before, nobody of Jean's appearance or manners had come near her, except as an attendant; and it would be difficult to explain the sudden sense of desertion, the cruel solitude, and mortification and falling back upon herself, with which the girl looked after her friend.

Her friend! Had it been love for her at all which had moved Miss Catherine, or only pity, and a disagreeable duty, from which she was glad to be relieved. Was there any one in the world who cared for Isabel—for herself? They had been sorry when she was ill; they had pitied her. Even the minister—he was gone too, with Miss Catherine, leaving her in the first moment of her return all by herself. Tears flooded to Isabel's eyes, and these were driven back by pride, and

rushed to her heart again, filling it with a silent bitterness beyond all expression. It was a kind of public affront to her, leaving her there on the pier to make her way home as she could. Even Jean opened her eyes when she returned to the spot where her stepdaughter stood forlorn.

‘They might have taken you with them as far as Lochhead,’ said Jean. ‘Is that the way your grand friends part with you? And the minister, too! I canna understand it. They might have taken you with them as far as Lochhead.’

‘I would rather walk,’ said Isabel, though she had a struggle to enunciate the words; and then the two took the familiar road and went on together, as if it were all a dream. If this was how it was to be, then it had been a bitter dream, fretting the girl with a glimpse of a different existence, to which it was clear she had no pretensions. She could not listen to Jean’s homely talk, for thinking of what must be going on between the others. She was not jealous—but yet how strange it was! She knew exactly how they would be talking; of the journey; of what had happened at Loch Diarmid, since the minister returned; of their recent visitors in Edinburgh. And all this would go on the same as if Isabel had been there, while she trudged along the dusty way, thrown back upon Jean. Mr. Lothian would have been more and more of

opinion that women are cruel if he had seen the sudden pallor, the inward-looking eyes, the quiver of suppressed pain about poor Isabel's face. 'Go away with your nonsense!' Miss Catherine was saying to him at that very moment. 'She must feel the want of you, and feel the difference, or she'll never know her own heart.' And though the process was cruel, perhaps Miss Catherine was right.

There was a little consolation in the changed aspect of the little parlour, the engravings on the walls, the little bookshelves, the volumes the minister had chosen. It would not be *his* fault that he had so left her. And for the first time a sense of pleasure and pride in the watchful, anxious tenderness of her elderly lover, came into Isabel's mind. At that particular moment, she was so forlorn that these marks of his thought for her came sweet to her heart. It could not be his fault. As soon as she had taken off her bonnet, she who had come up the road with such languor, feeling a weariness altogether out of proportion with the fatigue she had undergone, came eager to look at her new treasures. He had consulted her about them all, though she had not known why. She it was who had unwittingly chosen the half-dozen prints which so changed the aspect of the gray walls. He had remembered exactly what she

liked, what she had said, shy as her opinions on such subjects always were. Her countenance smoothed out under this influence. Jean, who had been rather contemptuous of the 'nonsense,' followed her about while she examined everything with anxious eyes. 'She's real weel in her health; but oh, I'm feared she's changed,' had been Jean's first thought as Isabel's abstracted looks and indifferent answers to all her news chilled her warm delight in her stepdaughter's return. 'After a' your grandeur, you'll no think much of your ain little house,' she had even said, with a perceptible taunt as they entered it. And Isabel's first step, which had been to sit down on Margaret's sofa, and cry her heart out, had, natural as it was, been a blow to Jean. She had herself become callous to the associations of the place; and she had taken so much trouble to set out the tea there, and brighten it for the home-coming. But when Isabel perceived the change about her, and began to brighten, Jean brightened too.

'Eh! if I had but thought you would have cared,' she said. 'There's the history o' the Prodigal up in the garret, a' painted and grand, no like thae black and white things. But I never thought ye would care. Oh, ay, it was just the minister! and a foolish thing it was for a man of his years, climbing up on chairs and hammering

away like a working man. But so long as you're pleased——'

'Did he do everything himself?' said Isabel.

'Oh, 'deed did he,—everything; and would have jumpit into the loch at the end, if that would have pleased ye. The man's just infatuate. I think shame to see it—at his time of life.'

'He is not so old,' said Isabel.

'Ye've gotten to your English the time you've been away,' said Jean; 'and nae doubt it's as it should be, for you that's a lady born—but it doesna sound so kindly as the auld way. And you're bonnier than ever;' she added, walking round her stepdaughter with admiring eyes; 'and it's a pleasure to see a gown that fits like that; and you've gotten a new way of doing your hair; you're like some of the Miss Campbells that visit at Lochhead, or that English young lady that was living down the Loch. But eh, my bonnie woman, ye're no like the Captain's Isabel.'

'I don't know that there is any difference,' said Isabel, touched in spite of herself by the tears that rose in her stepmother's eyes.

'Nor me,' said Jean, putting up her apron. 'I canna tell what it is, but I see it. Eh, Isabel, I'm an auld fool. I've been thinking we might be real happy, now you kent me better. But I see

the Glebe's nae place for you now. You'll no bide long here.'

'Where should I go to?' said Isabel, with a little bitterness; 'no, you need not be afraid. I am wanted nowhere, but in my own house.'

'You couldna be any place where you would be mair thought of,' said Jean wistfully, 'but you're no to be angry at Miss Catherine either. It was want of thought, maybe, or that she took it into her head that you and me—after being so long parted—would like best to be alone.'

'Angry! why should I be angry?' said Isabel. 'It is not that. I did not think of Miss Catherine. She has been very kind, and I hope I am grateful——'

'You're her ain kith and kin. I dinna see the call for gratitude,' said Jean, with a little heat. 'And she might have brought ye hame in the carriage, and nae harm done. I never understand your fine folk. But sit down, my lamb, and I'll pour you out your tea, and ye maun try to mind we would a' lay down our lives for you, and that you're in your ain house, and can do as you please.'

Perhaps there was a forlorn satisfaction in that, after all. But when Isabel crept to bed, a few hours later, without any visit from the minister, without any communication from Lochhead, her

heart was far from light. She wept in the dark when she laid herself down in her own little bed. It had been a dream, that was all; and now she had come back, and was no longer of consequence to any one—a Miss Diarmid, companion of Miss Catherine, and favourite of society no longer; but only the Captain's Isabel, too lowly for the lairds, too high for the peasants. Visions came across her mind of the scenes she had lately taken a part in, of the smiles that had been bestowed upon her, of the interest with which her simple words had been listened to; and now no smiles, no flattering tribute of admiring looks, were to be hers. Miss Catherine had put her back decisively into her own place; and the minister—even the minister! Yes, he was very good to her; he had given her books and pictures to amuse her, as if she had been a solitary child. It was the last little mark, no doubt, of the interest in her which she had attributed to another feeling. But why should Mr. Lothian care for her? Why should Miss Catherine care for her? They had been very kind to her, which is quite a different matter. They had cured her of her illness, and done a great deal to improve her; and now they had put her back softly, but firmly, at once into her own place. No doubt it was best, Isabel thought, turning her face to the wall, that she should know at once how it was to

be; but yet it was a strange downfall—and very hard to bear.

She did not go to church on the following Sunday, pleading her fatigue; and with an unexpressed hope that Miss Catherine would have sent to take her along with herself; but Miss Catherine took no notice. She made the proper inquiries of Jean, and was sorry to hear Isabel was tired; but that was all. Mortification, anger, and disappointed affection, surged up altogether in poor Isabel's mind. The idea occurred to her to go away suddenly and secretly, without telling any one, as it has done to so many wounded youthful hearts, not to make any claim upon the regard which was so slow to come, but to disappear without a word, leaving them to remember—perhaps, when it was too late—And this dreadful state of things lasted—she never could tell how long. Day after day passed and nobody came. And as the darkness fell on every evening, Isabel renewed her sick dream of disappearing altogether. What! no one? not even the minister! not a soul that cared if she lived or died? In such a state of the heart and mind, a grief to fall back upon is the next best thing to a friend. Isabel's sorrow had been sinking into the soft and tender melancholy—pathetic but not tragic sense of loss—in which Margaret's memory was to be enshrined as long as those who loved her lived;

but now, in the destitution of all other food for her heart, she fell back upon this with passionate reopening of the half-healed wound. Margaret had been all her own, had never neglected her, never forgotten her, never thought but of her. One of those forlorn days, with her veil over her face, she made her way, by the most unfrequented paths she could think of, to her sister's grave. It was in a corner of the churchyard, out of the way of passers-by; and Isabel threw herself down by it and clasped her arms round the white stone in all the abandonment of her immediate pain, though that pain was not primarily called forth by the loss of Margaret. After she had wept out all her tears, she still retained her position, her soft arms wound about the stone, clinging to it as she might have clung to her sister, her head leaning against it, her dilated, tear-worn eyes gazing sadly into the air at their full strain, though she saw nothing. Isabella, embracing her pot of basil with that ineffable softness of exhausted passion out of which Holman Hunt has made a second poem—was not more touching than this gentler creature, distraught, she too, with her loneliness, with the great want in her young heart, with the fancied neglect of all she had ever cared for. Not another tear would come—she had spent them all. She clasped Margaret's gravestone in her arms, and laid her cheek upon it, awed yet

comforted by the chill of it, by something which she could touch and feel, though it was only unresponsive stone.

She was watched, though she did not know that any one was near. Mr. Lothian had yielded against his will to Miss Catherine's peremptory counsels, but he had kept upon the watch wherever Isabel went, finding out her movements by that strange mesmerism of sympathy which conveys our secrets through the air. He had seen her to the grave, though she had not seen him. And when her tears were over, and she sank down into this melancholy embrace of all that was left to her, the man's heart could bear it no longer. She whom he could scarcely refrain from taking to his protecting arms when she felt but little need of him, how could he stand by and see her clinging to the cold gravestone as to her only refuge? Isabel was too much absorbed, too hopeless of any external consolation, to hear the rustle through the grass as he came to her. He had fallen upon his knees by her side before she roused herself to turn those wistful, strained eyes to him. And then all considerations of what he might or might not do, had been driven out of his mind. He put his arms tenderly round her, not even thinking of love, thinking of nothing but her need. 'My bonnie darling!' he said with

a sob, 'my precious Isabel! It's the living you must come to, and not the dead, my dear! my dear!'

'I have nothing but Margaret in the world,' said the girl, with sudden, sharp anguish, the fountain of her tears once more opened by this unexpected tenderness. She thought as little of love or love-making as he did in the sudden flooding of his heart. Nor was Isabel conscious how he drew her away from the chill stone to his own breast, and held her, letting fall actual tears over her as he had not done twice in his life before.

'No, no; not there!' he said, unconscious of his own words, holding her close to him; clasping her fast, and thinking, as men so seldom think, not of himself, but of her. It did not even occur to him how sweet it was to appropriate her thus to himself. It was her want, her absolute need of him, her self-abandonment which he could not bear. 'Here, my darling,' the man murmured, with a pathetic abnegation of his own feelings, 'lean here;' and so held her upon his bosom, schooling himself to be—if need were—her father instead of her lover—anything to comfort her in the moment of her weakness. When Isabel came to herself, he was gazing upon her, as she leant on his shoulder, as if from an unapproachable distance. She was in his arms, and yet his eyes rested on her with

wistful reverence, as though she had been miles away.

‘I did not mean to be so weak and so foolish,’ she said, gathering herself away from him with a vivid blush. ‘I thought I was—alone—I thought——’

‘You thought you had nothing in the world but her that is gone,’ said the minister, ‘Isabel! and yet you know who is the light of my eyes, and the desire of my heart?’

She leant her hand again upon the stone, her tears dried, her heart beating, and visibly a crisis before her, which must affect her whole life.

‘I am old enough to be your father,’ he said, with his voice trembling. ‘I never forget that. I’ve seen you grow up bonnie and bright, and loved you more year after year. And now I feel as if I were taking an advantage of my bonnie darling. Isabel, if your life were bright and full of love it would be different. But you are alone. And never man on earth could love you dearer than I do. Will you let me take care of you, my darling?’ he cried, and took her hands and gazed into her face. ‘Will you come to my house and make it glad? I’ll be young for my Isabel!’ said the minister, with tears in his eyes. And the virgin heart within him came to his face and chased away the years as if

by magic. He was kneeling, though he was not aware of it; and his eyes and every line in his countenance were pleading more eloquently than words. But Isabel, in whose heart two rival forces were struggling, was too much agitated and blinded by her own feelings to see.

‘Oh, Mr. Lothian, let me go home!’ she cried, stumbling to her feet. ‘How can I think of this—How can I answer you here?’

‘You shall answer me where you please,’ he cried, rising with her, and supporting her with his arms. ‘When you please and where you please, my darling! But it is here of all places, that I want you to know—Isabel, you *know*?—that there is one that loves you above life, above happiness—more than words can say.’

She turned to him for one moment, and gave a sudden, tearful look at his agitated face. ‘I know, I know!’ she cried. ‘Oh, let me go home, now!’

And he drew her hand within his arm, and took her home, saying not another word. All was said that could be said. It was for her to decide now.

CHAPTER XIII.

YET the minister said one more word as he left his love at her own door. He had been debating the question with himself as they crossed the braes, whether he should leave it to her to answer him when she pleased and where she pleased, as he at first said. That was the more generous, the more chivalric way; but Miss Catherine's instructions had not fallen on him in vain. If he left the matter thus, might it not fall again into a vague and general matter as it had done before? Isabel had known of his love years ago, and the consciousness of it had floated about her, sometimes tempting her to be petulant, sometimes to be trustful, but never facing her as a thing which required decision — which had to be renounced or accepted. And the same thing might happen again if he left it in the same way. He took her to her own door without a word more upon this subject of which his heart was full; but ere he left her, he paused a moment, holding her hand in his,—‘Isabel,’ he said, but

without looking at her, 'if I come to-morrow will you give me my answer?'

Isabel made no reply. She gave him an anxious, timid look, and withdrew her hand, yet lingered upon the threshold as if there still might be something to say.

'I will come to-morrow for my answer,' he repeated in a more decided tone. And then the cottage-door closed on her, and he went away.

'Eh, is the minister no coming in?' said Jean Campbell. 'Pity me, Isabel, what have ye done to him—him that was for ever in this house, and now he never enters the door?'

'I have done nothing to him,' said Isabel. 'What should I do to him? I have nothing in my power.'

'Oh, lassie, speak the truth!' said Jean. 'You ken weel, and a' the Loch kens, that you have mair power over him than kith or kin—ay, or the very Presbytery itself. But you're that perverse, ye'll listen to nobody; and I doubt but ye've been unkind to him, or giped at him, puir man! and he has nae fault that I ken of but his years.'

'I don't think he is very old,' said Isabel, half under her breath; and she went away into the little parlour which he had decorated for her, and sat down by the window, all alone, without even taking off her bonnet. Never before in her life

had she been conscious of having anything so important to think about. Thinking had nothing to do with the matter when Stapylton was concerned. It was nothing but a struggle then between her love and grief—between the lover's eager wishes on one hand, and all the tender decorums of life, all the claims of the past, on the other. She had struggled, but she had not required to think. But now there had come such an occasion for thought as she had never before known. The question was not one of inclination or any such urgent motive for or against as should have settled it for her, without loss of time; on the contrary, it was of the very nature of those questions which demand the clearest thought. Love, as she had apprehended it once, had floated altogether away, she told herself, out of her life. Of that there was to be no more question, either then or for ever; but yet life would not end because it had been thus divested of its highest beauty. And Isabel knew she was young, and felt that she had a long existence before her. Was she to do nothing for the comfort of that existence—nothing to win it out of the mists and dreams? She sat down breathless, her heart heaving with the agitation through which she had lately passed, her nature all astir and moved by a hundred questionings. She did not love Mr. Lothian. Love was over for her

—gone out of her life like a tale that is told; but life had to continue all the same: and what kind of life? At the Glebe, with Jean Campbell and the bairns, the only use of her in the world being to make frocks for little Mary, to maintain the family, to keep Jamie at school? And, on the other hand, there was the companionship of a man who loved her—a companionship which was the highest type she knew of, of that highest fellowship which to the simple mind seems always to exist somewhere, could it but be got at. The Manse was the centre of all that stirred in the mind or thoughts of Loch Diarmid. The visitors who came to that lonely solitude found Mr. Lothian out by instinct. He was known over all the country round as ‘maybe something of an Erastian, but a real clever man.’ Since the prophets had flitted forth like wandering spirits to the world, he had taken his position again as the leader and head of the parish; and he loved Isabel. She knew how he would surround her with tenderness and care, that the winds of heaven should not breathe roughly on her, that he would set her up high above all cares and troubles, that she would have everything with him that heart could desire—except love. No, she did not love him—never could, never would. For had not she loved already—the one only time of which, in her inno-

cence, she thought herself capable? and was not that over for ever? Mr. Lothian loved her, though she did not love him. To have her by him ministering to him, accepting his love and his smile, would make him happy; and it would not make her unhappy that she knew of. It would be a better world and a better life. The time of holiday, which was just over, the months she had spent in Edinburgh, with the minister always at hand and Miss Catherine for her close companion, had been a kind of heaven to Isabel—a sober, quiet, neutral coloured heaven—but yet Paradise itself compared with the grey, solitary parlour in the Glebe and Jean Campbell's society. And now she had to choose between the two. Her head swam when there occurred to her the recollection of another choice which she might once have made; but pride and pain alike concurred to drive that out of her consideration. How could she think of what might have been? was not it over for ever and ever?

Then she did what, in the circumstances, was a strange thing to do. She went to her room, and took out of the locked drawer, the only one she possessed, Stapylton's letter, which had lain there for months. This letter had experienced a curious fate. Her first movement on reading it had been pain and indignation beyond the power

of words to express. She had said to herself that it was an insult, and that the man who could write so to any woman was worthy of no woman's love. But after a while, moved by the hunger in her heart, Isabel had read it over, again and yet again, and had set all her faculties to work, finding meanings for it, and smoothing down the roughnesses, until the letter had changed its aspect. And then had come her illness; and the sense of neglect which stung her to the heart, and the careless arms which he seemed to be holding out to her, to come to him if she liked, struck her with all that revulsion of feeling common to the imaginative. It had been put away, and there it had lain like the buried body of her old life, awaiting the moment when for resurrection or final burial she should take it forth. It was with a certain sense of solemnity that Isabel approached it now. Her mind was strengthened and refreshed by her absence, her improved health, and the mist which first languor and suffering and then restoration, had thrown over the still recent past. She felt herself able to judge of it freshly as if at first hand, almost impartially; so much had the course of events changed her. And yet the mere effort of taking it out from among the rest of her treasures affected Isabel as she had thought nothing could affect her. She tried to reassure herself,

saying that her object was only to read the letter once more, but in her heart felt that she was reopening the entire question, that Stapylton was being put upon his last trial, and that between him and his rival the great final question had been raised at last.

But she could not read it there, nor even in the parlour where there were so many signs of the one love and none of the other. She went out, for she was still in her walking dress, carrying the letter in her hand. No, she could not seat herself under the birch-tree on the hill and read it there—the spell of its associations would have *been too* strong; the very air, the bees among the heather, the rustling of the branches, would have spoken to her of him who had met her so often on that spot. Isabel hesitated for a moment in doubt, and then she crossed the road and ascended the hill opposite the cottage. The place she sought had already grown to be a sacred spot to all the country-side. The burn still ran trickling by, though the sweet thoughts that once accompanied it were still; the rowan hung out its odorous blossoms over the grassy seat. It was Margaret's little oratory to which her sister went to think over her fate.

And there she read Stapylton's letter over again. Her own mind had advanced, her manners had changed since she read it last. She had grown

used to the delicate, ever thoughtful tenderness of a man who not only loved her, but was full of old-world, chivalrous respect for her womanhood and her youth. Her eyes flashed, her whole heart revolted now, as she read this letter. When she had come to the end she cast it from her like a reptile, and clasped her hands over her face with a sudden thrill of shame that blazed over her like fire. She was ashamed of having inspired, of having received, of having ever reconciled herself to such an address. What could he have thought of her to write to her so?—how could he have dared? Isabel did not know how much her own estimation of herself, and the world, had changed since she read it first. It wrung from her a moaning cry of injury and self-disgust. To think that she should have borne it—that she should have spent her tenderest thoughts on a man who was so confident of his power over her, so insulting in his security! The letter lay white on the grass, and the breeze caught it, turned it contemptuously over, and tossed it to the edge of the burn, where it lay dabbling in the soft little current. It was the first thing that caught Isabel's eye as she uncovered her face. No, she could not let it float away on the burn to tell the passers-by how little respect her first love had felt for her. She caught it up fiercely and thrust it back into the envelope, as if the paper itself had harmed her.

Her wound was so sharp that the very touch of it seemed to sting her anew. And yet she did not destroy the cruel thing. Her heart ached as if it had been crushed in some one's hand, and two bitter tears welled up into her eyes. But it was his writing, it had come from him,—the last communication between them; though she hated it, and hated him, she could not destroy it. No, no, she said to herself, moaning in her heart, let it remain to humble her if ever again she should be proud, to show what she had been thought capable of. The bitterness of wounded delicacy, mortified pride, and something still more poignant, filled her whole being. She had been loved perhaps, but loved scornfully, loved slightly. She, who almost up to this moment had been giving unawares, hiding it even from herself, a visionary adoration to the shade of him whom she had concealed in her heart.

And on the other side how different it was! What tender regard, what reverence, she had met with there! Not a lad of her own standing, her equal, upon whom she had all the claim that young love can have; but a man whom, with her own eyes, she had seen taking a place of honour among his fellows. Yet he was ready to be her attendant wherever she went, to make her his companion in everything, consulting her, deferring to her; taking

her likings, her tastes, every indication of her timid will, for something sacred. Once more Isabel's heart expanded, her lips quivered, a gleam, half of pleasure, half of scorn, flickered over her face. If she could but have shown *him*—him who had ventured to invite her to meet him, to make her own way to his careless arms—that a better man than himself waited her pleasure, watched to see her will in her eyes, served her as a pilgrim does his saint! It did not strike Isabel that this was but a poor motive for accepting Mr. Lothian's love. It was the natural suggestion of her own young heart intolerant of slight or pain. Oh, what a difference there was! To be addressed in those light words, to be required to make the sacrifice of everything sacred in her life, of all her associations, everything personal to herself; and for what? An insulting fondness when she was with him, and such indifference when she was absent that he would leave her to pine for months without a word; to lose her courage and heart, and almost her wits, sitting lonely waiting for him in her solitude and sorrow under the trysting-tree. And the other, who had never forsaken her, who had thought not of himself, but of her—who was offering her all the results of his life, his tender heart to shield her, his wisdom to guide her, the honour and high regard he had won for himself, to be ornaments to

her—the prospect of all this ought to have lit up Isabel's face and made her proud. But instead it only bent her head into her covering hands once more and called forth a silent flood of tears. 'Oh, Horace, Horace!' she murmured; oh, if it had but been he and not the other! And yet she hated him, and would have thrust him from her had he appeared at that moment; and held that other as high above him as heaven is over the earth.

After this conflict she went silently home, holding Stapylton's letter in her hand. She did not put it even in her pocket as a thing belonging to her; but held it, wetted by the burn, listlessly in her hand. Yet she put it back once more into the locked drawer. It was one of her possessions still, no more to be parted with than any other legacy of her past life. It was still afternoon, and the broad bright summer sunshine lay over the Loch. Isabel sat down at her parlour window, listless and alone. She was tired with her walk, and had 'no object,' as her stepmother said, in going out again. She could not now wander about the braes as she had once done. There was a heap of work lying on the table, domestic mending and making, chiefly for herself; but she could not sit down to that silent occupation at a moment when all the wheels of life were standing still, with an expectant jar and thrill, to await the least movement of her finger.

She took a book at first; but her own thoughts and her own situation were more interesting than any book. Then she gazed out, without well knowing what she saw—but by degrees, her perceptions quickening, became aware that Miss Catherine's boat, with its bright cushions, was gliding out from the beach opposite Lochhead. It was a boat which could be identified at once from all the coarser forms on the Loch. There were ladies in it,—young ladies, as Isabel felt. The boat stood out shining on the silvery sunshiny water, with its shadow as vivid below as was the substance above. That was how life went for the others—a life within Isabel's reach, so near that she could touch it with her finger. It seemed to her that she could hear their voices and laughter while she sat alone. They were going up Tam-na-hara, the highest hill on Loch Diarmid, to judge by the direction they were taking—a merry party, with the sunshine flooding all round them and their joyful way. And Isabel had not even been told, knew nothing about it; she who would have been one of the first to be consulted had her home been at the Manse instead of at the Glebe. Miss Catherine had been very good to her in Edinburgh, and made an equal of her. But here, what was she?—the Captain's Isabel—half peasant, half gentlewoman—Jean Campbell's step-daughter and companion; not high enough for the

ladies and gentlemen, too high to be content with 'common folk.'

When the boat disappeared out of sight, Isabel took up some of the work that lay on her table. Had it even been work for the children there might have been some sort of consolation in it; but it was for herself. She seemed to be shut up in a little round all circling in herself—the grey walls her only surroundings—this homely household her only sphere. At six Jean came to the door and called her to tea. The children were seated at their porridge, Margaret's chair had been carefully put out of the way, and Isabel sat down on her stepmother's other side, to the curious composite meal. She was not disposed to listen, but Jean was as little disposed to be silent.

'Mary's been complaining of her head,' she said; 'I think I'll no send her to the school the morn; maybe you would give her a bit lesson, Isabel, out of one of your books, as you used to do. There's measles about the Loch. I dinna like to expose her at the school.'

'Very well—if she likes,' said Isabel.

'Na, we'll no ask her what *she* likes. Jamie's been keepit in again the day. If I was Mr. Galbraith, I'd find some means of making a callant work better than aye keeping him in. Losh, I would think shame to be mastered by a wean!

And you, ye muckle haverel, why should I be at a' the trouble, and Isabel at a' the expense, keeping ye at the school when ye learn nothing? Laddie, ye've nae ambition. If Mary had been the lad and you the lass——'

'I wouldna be a lassie to be the Queen,' said Jamie in indignation.

'I can do a' his lessons better than he can,' cried little Mary; 'I never was keepit in in my life. I'm aye dux, and he's booby—!'

'Whisht! whisht! and no quarrel,' said Jean. 'There's company at Lochhead, Isabel. Nae doubt that's the reason Miss Catherine has never been here. But she might have sent for ye when there were young folk about. I'm no meaning a word against you, my bonnie woman; but you were aye a hasty bit thing, and strangers dinna ken the warm heart that's wi' it. It's vexed me, the minister no coming in. You've been taking affronts, Isabel, at them; or some of your pridefu' ways; they were a' a great deal mair here in the auld time——'

'It was for another, and not for me,' said Isabel, with sudden humiliation.

'I'm no saying that,' said Jean; 'but ony way there's a change. I have my ain pride, though I'm but a cotter's daughter myself. And you've mair right to it, that are a lady born. But if you'll no take it amiss, Isabel, a young lass like you

shouldna show it to the like of them. They're no used to it. And though you've good blood in your veins, you're no just the same as Miss Catherine; and it canna be a small thing that's turned the minister that he wouldna come in.'

'There might be other reasons for that,' said Isabel under her breath.

'What are ye saying? The man has worshipped the very ground ye trod on since you were little older than Mary,' said Jean seriously; 'I'm no saying I understand it for my part. He's aulder than me—and figure me fashing my head about a young lad! But if he wearies at the last it can only have been your blame.'

'I think it would be best not to speak of such things,' said Isabel, with some heat, 'before the bairns.'

'Maybe you're right there,' Jean muttered, after a moment's pause. And then she resumed, 'Mary, you'll get your seam if there's nae lessons to be learned to-night,—unless Isabel gives you some of her poetry—and, Jamie, get you your books. If you're diligent, maybe Isabel will gie ye a hand. Poor thing!' she said to herself, as she turned away to put her room in order after the meal, 'it's the best thing I can do for her—better than sitting hand idle and no a creature to speak to her. If she were a lass that could go to service, or even that

could stir about the house. But her that was never brought up to do anything, and a lady born !'

And thus Isabel sat while the long evening lingered, prolonging the day to an extent of which only a northern day is capable. The light stole out of the skies with a dying fall like a strain of music. Once or twice she rose and went to the open door, and gazed out wistful upon the silvery evening tones, the soft shadows and softer lights. A night in June, not such a glowing June as even that of England, no parched nor sultry heat in the earth, but all coolness, softness, fragrance, light on the horizon, light on the loch, lingering and wooing all the hollows among the hills ; it was such a bridal of the earth and sky as morning could scarce equal—a bridal and a parting at once, sweet sorrow full of returns and lingerings, and a hundred last words. At such a moment it is doubly hard to be alone. Isabel went to the door, and stood there with all the perfume of the night breathing about her ; fragrance from the firs, from the young birches, from the honeyed whins all aglow upon the hill, from the bog-myrtle that filled every corner ; and sighed—what could she do but sigh ? And then went in to sit again with the children, and hear the murmur of their lesson-learning. The monotonous sound drove her to her

parlour to take refuge there. She sat at the window and watched the lingering of the last lights upon the Loch, and saw the boat come home with the Tam-na-hara party, and heard some of them singing in the stillness, and the dip of the oars in the silvery water. The water still shone, retaining the last reflexion of the day; but within the little grey parlour all was dark. A hysterical gasp came into Isabel's throat as she sat and thought of all the brightness life had for these others, and its tedium for herself. How could she go on living with this routine and no other to occupy existence? What was life worth under such circumstances? It was cruel of Miss Catherine, after all she had done for her, to cut her off now so completely from all share in what was going on. But that was not the immediate question. Nobody on Loch Diarmid could ignore her, nobody could forget her existence, if she were Mr. Lothian's wife; and he loved her—and it would be a different world to Isabel when it was at the Manse windows she watched the falling evening. Had she seen the minister at that moment mounting the brae, Isabel said to herself she would have hailed him as a messenger of light. He would have come in and dispelled the monotony with his talk of everything that was going on outside, with all the many ways he had, as she had discovered,

of interesting and lighting up the world to her. He knew so much more, and had seen so much more, than she had. And if she would thus welcome him as a chance visitor, would not the greeting be happier still if she were his wife watching for his coming home? A little nervous shudder crept over her as she sat in the dark looking out upon the pale glimmer of the Loch, and upon the sky where the dying light seemed to tremble in the mystic northern twilight, as if gathering its strength to burst forth again from the shadow of the momentary night. And then once more she hid her face in her hands and murmured in her heart a name which was not Mr. Lothian's name. Oh, no! no! she did not love that other! he who had loved her so lightly, left her so cruelly, written to her so slightly! But oh, why was it not he who was so good, who was so tender and true, who was waiting for her answer? That was the question she was asking herself vainly, and to which no kindly spirit could give any reply.

The next morning, when Isabel was putting her books in order, and wiping the dust from the shelves he had put up for her, and pleading his cause to herself, Miss Catherine suddenly appeared at the Glebe. A more unexpected visitor could scarcely have been, and for the moment Isabel was disposed to be stately and affronted. Miss Cathe-

rine paused, almost before she spoke, to look round and observe the change in the room. She shook her head as she kissed Isabel. 'Poor man!' she said; 'poor man! that's what his wisdom suggested to him. To make your own house pleasant and cheery when he should have thought of nothing but tempting you to his.' This was a sufficient indication of her mission. She sat down steadily with the air of establishing herself for serious work, and pointed Isabel to a seat near her. 'My dear, sit down; I have a great deal to say to you,' she said; and the girl's impatient temper fired at once.

'Whatever you have to say, Miss Catherine, it can surely be said while I am doing my work,' she said, turning to her books. But she was held by the glittering eye which her old friend, half contemptuous of her petulance, fixed upon her, and after a vain attempt to continue her occupation, turned round and dropped into the indicated place. 'You have not said anything yet,' said Isabel, but with a feeling that already she was having the worst.

'I might speak to my housemaid while she was dusting,' said Miss Catherine, 'but not to you, Isabel Diarmid. I have come to ask you but one question, my dear. Are you going to be a reasonable creature, and make yourself and an honest man happy? or do you mean to deliver yourself over to weariness and this do-nothing life?'

‘ I have plenty to do,’ said Isabel, startled, but without sufficient presence of mind to answer anything but the first natural scrap of self-defence on which she could lay her hand.

‘ It is not true, Isabel ; you have nothing to do worthy a young woman of good connexions by the mother’s side, as you are. And when you have better in your power, and a life that is worth your while, and a man that is fond of you, do you mean to tell me you will throw them all away ?’

‘ Miss Catherine,’ said Isabel, almost crying, ‘ you have been very kind ; but I don’t know why you should question me like this. At home I am not so good as you ; you don’t care to come to see me or take notice of me. Why should you take any interest in me now ?’

‘ Well, you may say it is him I take an interest in,’ said Miss Catherine, dryly. ‘ If you are affronted, Isabel, as you appear to be, I am come to tell you what will happen if you send him away again as you did before, and take no courage to look into your own heart. Are you happy without him ? If it comes to be that he will never pass this road again, never enter this room, nor take more interest in you, will that be a pleasant ending in your eyes ?’

Isabel made no answer ; she only turned her head away, with flushed cheeks and averted looks.

‘For, don’t deceive yourself,’ said Miss Catherine, ‘that would be the result. He may have been weak, but he has always been able to hope; but if you say “No” now, there will be no middle course for him. If he puts himself in your way again, I, for one, will wash my hands of him; and I will never do anything to throw him in your way. Do you understand what I mean?’

‘Yes, I understand,’ cried the girl; ‘but if you think—if you think—I am to be threatened——! Miss Catherine, you have been very kind; but you are not my mother, or my near friend, to meddle with me now.’

‘But I *will* meddle,’ said Miss Catherine, ‘and for your good. Will you part with him and me, and all that is best near you, for a dream—a delusion—a fancy of your bit foolish heart? Or will you accept a happy life and a good man, and all that heart can desire, when Providence offers them to you, Isabel?—that is what I have come to ask. And I’ll not go till I get my answer. I was fond of your mother, and fond of Margaret, and I am fond of you,’ said the old lady, with softening eyes. ‘My dear, I would give a good year of my life to see you so safe landed. They are gone that would have advised you better than me. But I cannot stand by and let you throw your life away. It would be a happy, good life. You would be like the apple of

his eye. He loves you like the men in books—like the men in your poetry you're so fond of, him and you. If I were as young as you, and my life in my own hands again! — But when I was your age I was a fool; — will you be like all the rest of us, and choose your own dream, and let your life go by?'

'Were the rest like that?' said Isabel, suddenly rousing up, with white lips and troubled eyes, to gaze at her monitor, who had thus changed her tone all at once.

'I could tell you stories of that,' said Miss Catherine, suddenly taking the girl's hand into her own, 'and some day I may. But there is no time for that now. Isabel, will you think well, and ponder what I say?'

'I am dizzy with thinking,' said Isabel, putting her hand to her head, with a certain despair.

'Then think no more,' said Miss Catherine, 'but take what God sends you. He must not find me here; he would never forgive me. Isabel, me, that was your mother's friend, I bid you make that man happy, and not sin against your own life. He'll come before I can get away. God bless you, bairn,' said Miss Catherine, hurriedly kissing her, 'and don't forget what I say.'

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS CATHERINE'S words had scarcely died out of Isabel's ear when the minister himself stood at the door.

She was standing where her kinswoman had left her—standing in front of the window, where the light fell full upon her face and figure, her hands held softly together, her eyes full of uncertainty and anxious thought. When Mr. Lothian came in, she raised them to him with a dumb entreaty, which went to his heart. He had come to have an answer to his love-suit; and she who had to decide it stood gazing at him, praying him meekly to tell her what to do and what to say!

He came forward at that appeal, and took her hands into his.

‘Isabel,’ he said, with a voice full of emotion, ‘must I leave it over till another time, and come back when you have made up your mind? My

darling, you are not to make yourself unhappy for me.'

'Oh, no, no,' she said, half sobbing; 'I cannot tell what to do. Tell me what to do. It is you that know best.'

And once more she raised her eyes to her lover—humble, beseeching, asking his counsel. Surely never man was in so strange a dilemma before. He made a little pause to master himself; he made an effort to throw off from him his natural interest in his own suit. He looked at her, into her beseeching eyes, to see her heart through them, if that might be. His voice sunk to the lowest passionate tones.

'Isabel,' he said, clasping her hand so closely that he hurt her, 'do you love *him* still?'

Then there came a cry as of a dumb creature, and big tears rolled up into her eyes.

'No!' she said, gazing at him with those two liquid globes—dark, unfathomable seas, in which all his skill and wisdom failed. It seemed to him as if she had, by some craft of nature, veiled the eyes which he might have divined, with the unshed tears which he could not divine.

'You only can tell,' he cried, losing such semblance as he had of calm—'you only can tell! Isabel, do you love him still?'

'No!' she repeated, with more energy; 'no,

Oh, no—never again!’ and let the tears drop, and looked at him softly, with her eyes unclouded.

‘Then come to me!’ he said, almost with violence, letting her hands fall and holding out his arms to her.

She paused; a flood of colour rushed over her face, that had been so pale. Her eyes fell before his. She held out to him the two hands he had loosed his hold of, and put them into his. It was not such love as he had dreamed. His heart, that was so young and full of fire, ached with the pang of the almost disappointment, though it was better to him than any other satisfaction. She gave herself to him sweetly, gently, with a soft, virginal calm.

‘Yes,’ she said under her breath, ‘if you will take me—this way—if you are content——’

‘My dear, my dear, more than content!’ he cried, his heart beating with love and joy, and disappointment, and mortification, and happiness. She was so gently acquiescent, so calm, so—resigned—yes, that was the word; while he was full of all a young man’s fervour and passion. And yet, at last, she was his, and it was sweet. When he left her he did his best to school himself in the tumult of his emotions. Was it not always so? Could one mortal creature ever fully satisfy another at that supreme moment and junction of

two lives? Was there not ever too little or too much—a failure from the perfect dream, the unspeakable union? But she was his all the same—to be cherished, cared for, made happy—she who was so unfriended. About that side of the matter there would be no doubt; and she would consent to his happiness, acquiesce in it, smile with soft wonder at his passion. Well, after all, was not that a woman's natural part? Was not that half-insensibility, that acceptance, more passive than active—one of the most delicate of her charms? By the time he had reached the Manse the minister had satisfied himself that no man had more full occasion for happiness than he; and he roamed through his house, visiting all the rooms, planning what he could do to make them more worthy their future mistress. He was not a poor man, and the thought made him glad. He could make her home as beautiful for her as the place and his condition and her tastes admitted. He would surround her with everything that could brighten the serene and lovely days that were coming. And as he mused his heart ran over with the sense of completeness so long wanting to his life; he had attained the happiness he had dreamed of, tried for, yet scarcely hoped ever to win. He might have twenty years yet before him, he calculated, in the

sweet delirium of the moment; he was but fifty, fresh and healthful and unbroken, with sound good blood in his veins, and happiness before him, and every inducement that man could have to hold fast by his life. A vision floated before him of various patriarchs of his race who had lived far beyond the three-score and ten. But, accepting that limit, there were twenty years—twenty years of happiness and peace: was not that well worthy half a century of preface? And by that time she would be a mature, experienced woman, able to stand when his sheltering arm was withdrawn from her. Thus he dreamt like a boy in the intoxication of his happiness, seeing that visionary life stretch out before him more real than the Loch and the hills upon which he gazed, not knowing what he saw.

Isabel, for her part, was very giddy when it was all over, and felt like a creature in a dream. When she stood up the light seemed to swim away from her eyes, and a blackness came over the world. Something sang and buzzed in her ears; strange colours seemed to creep over the Loch and prismatic reflexions. But yet amid all the bewilderment and confusion was a sense of comfort that it was settled at last. She had no more need to question with herself,—no effort to make after a decision; a sense of quiet stole into her soul, the storm was over, and she had reached the haven.

Whatever the future might be, at least its foundation was laid, its keynote struck. When she came to herself a little, though she asked no such questions of it as her lover did, that future seemed to stretch out long and calm before her, with no agitations in it. Her thoughts, as she looked to it, were very subdued; not rapturous, like his. It was a new world to her, but yet a grey world, level, and even, and calm, and smooth, with none of the flushings of youthful delight about its quiet horizon. And somewhere, hidden out of the way, she was just aware of a little secret ache in her heart. But, still it was all settled, that was the great matter; and he was so good, and tender, and true. And it would be a life among her equals, among her fellows; not a helpless drifting ashore, as was her fate now. The worst was that it looked so long—so long: an infinite of existence without any visible end. She did not think of the twenty years which the minister might still have before him; though even twenty years to Isabel looked more like an eternity than a measured bit of time—but of indefinite duration, long beyond the reach of thought; so long, so serene, so subdued in tone, that the stretch of grey distance made her sigh. And yet it was a right thing she had done. She was glad that it was over; and felt herself grow dizzy

when she rose up; and had something singing in her ears; and sighed; and yet was content.

That was an exciting day at the Glebe. Miss Catherine returned in the afternoon in the carriage, which was a rare grandeur, and kissed Isabel, and blessed her. She had gained her purpose, and it was no longer needful to shut the girl out from her house and her life. As the first symptom of the great change over, she carried Isabel off in the carriage to join the visitors at Lochhead; and it was Miss Catherine, who intimated the great news to Jean, who had been much startled and mystified by the commotion in the house, though without any very clear idea what it meant. It was an intimation, not without its importance to Jean, and took away her breath; but she received it with a stoical concealment of her own individual feelings, with a few tears, and a shower of good wishes. 'And me that was finding fault with Isabel because the minister wouldna come in!' she said, with an unsteady laugh. Jenny Spence arrived on a visit to the kitchen just as the carriage drove off, and she, too, as was natural, came in for her share of the tidings. They were the first in the parish who knew of it, and that in itself was no small distinction. But the news itself was too exciting to require any enhancement of circumstance. The two

friends drew their chairs to the kitchen-fire as soon as the carriage was out of sight. They had watched it to the turn of the road, dazzled by the splendour. The children were out, and all was still in the house except the ticking of the clock, the inevitable household heart. And in the languor of the long sunny afternoon, they drew near, with true peasant indifference to the changes of the season, to the clean and cheerful hearth. The fire scorched them, but they gave no heed to that, any more than they gave heed when the cold wind swept through them as they stood at their doors. Such vicissitudes of cold and heat were accidents to be submitted to, not things which made any difference to the indispensable routine of life.

‘If Margaret had foreseen it she would have made some kind of a will,’ said Jean, confidentially, over the fire. ‘Mr. Lothian, he’s real weel off, and they wouldna miss it. But ye can ne’er tell what a man may do; they like to have a’ in their ain hands. And then he may tak’ his ain notions about Jamie; they’re so awfu’ full o’ their opinions and their ain way. It’s no for myself, for I’ve aye had it before my e’en that, sooner or later, I would have to work for my bread,’ said Jean, lightly raising a corner of her apron to her eyes; ‘but I had aye set my heart on breeding up Jamie —— and him the Captain’s son.’

‘It’s an awfu’ pity,’ said her sympathetic friend, ‘that it didna happen in Margaret’s time.’

‘I might have kent it would happen,’ said Jean; ‘but I was aye feared for that English lad, and weel I kent he would have nae consideration; but Mr. Lothian was another thing. Eh! to think of a man of his years being that taken up with a bonnie face! I never can understand thae men.’

‘They’re a’ the same,’ said Jenny; ‘gie them a lass of twenty and they ask for nae mair; but Isabel is no a common lass. I wouldna wonder at the man that made a fool of himself for the like of her.’

‘Woman, it’s no that!’ said Jean, ‘but he might be her faither. Eh, if us women were as foolish! Let alone the like of us—if Miss Catherine now was to take up with a man twenty years younger than herself!’

‘Miss Catherine’s awfu’ masterful and fond of her ain way,’ said Jenny, with indignation; ‘but ye ken little about her, Jean Campbell, if ye would even her to the like of that.’

‘Isna that just what I’m saying?’ said Jean. ‘Figure her, or figure me, Jenny Spence, that am a widow woman—and eh, the cry that would be raised! There’s no a man in the parish but would have his word on the silly woman; but it’s no silly in the man. A young lass that wasna

born when he ought to have gotten a wife! but it's a' right when it's a man.'

'They ken we've mair sense,' said Jenny.

'And we would just need to have mair sense! Here have I my bairns to think of, and how they're to be bred, and where the siller's to come from—and yonder is yon man, that is half as auld again, and has naething better in his head but making love and speaking nonsense to a young lass! I would think shame—and him the minister! But it's my opinion that ministers are nae better than ither men.'

'It's no for folk like you and me, that are professing Christians, to say sae,' said Jenny; 'the lads are aye ready enough to talk. But Mr. Lothian's a real good man, let other ministers be what they will. He'll no be hard on you nor Jamie neither. I would trust him with gold untold if it was me.'

'But no to give up his ain way of thinking,' said Jean. 'Na, woman, that's what I am feared for. He'll have Jamie to the Manse and examine him, as they call it. And the callant will get frightened and forget what he should say; and then Mr. Lothian will come to me, and maybe the Dominie, and they'll say, 'He's a good callant and a braw callant, and will do very well behind the plough; but as for bringing him up to be a

minister, Mrs. Diarmid—' they 'll say, ' I wouldna think mair of that.'

' And if it's true,' said Jenny, ' it would be the best thing for both Jamie and you.'

' But it's no true,' said Jean; ' and I'll no have it true,' she added, ' no if a' the ministers in the world were to swear it. Do you think I dinna ken my ain laddie the best?'

Meanwhile Isabel, with her head swimming, had gone back to the other sphere for which she had sighed, and found herself the object of a thousand little regards and observations. Miss Catherine, after her neglect, did not seem able to do enough to show her affection; and ere long the minister, now no longer her friend and adviser, but her lover and affianced husband, joined the party. The sight of him had the most curious effect on Isabel; she was immediately covered, as by a shield, from Miss Catherine's too demonstrative satisfaction, from the overwhelming comments of the others; but for herself her head swam more than ever, and the solid earth seemed to have grown unsteady under her feet. She was in a dream; not such a sweet dream as he was walking about in, his head in the clouds; and not painful either, as one doomed and going to the sacrifice. It was only confusion—a mist which she could not penetrate—something which blurred all the outlines

and confounded one object with another. She kept apart, and kept silent, feeling that if she spoke she would be incoherent, and if she moved might totter. It was all so new. When she had time to use herself to 'what had happened,' things would be different; such, at least, was what she said to herself.

But things were very little different until the wedding took place, which was a few days after the completion of the year of mourning for her sister. During the interval she scarcely ever regained her balance. She was as composed as usual, and took everything with outward calm; but she did not know what she was doing. The notes of her being were jangled out of tune—not harshly, but vaguely. The effect upon her was not to distort, but to dim everything. The world became vague, and all that was in it. It did not seem to her that she was to begin only a new chapter of existence; but that a new book, mysterious and strange, lay before her, beyond the crisis which she slowly approached. There was a little fear of it, a little longing to have it over—sometimes a sick weariness of everything in her mind; but the days passed, and the weeks, and the ordinary preparations were made, and no one knew how far out of the ordinary were her thoughts. And at last the day came; a September

day, early in the month, when the heather had just died out of bloom, and the crack of the sportsman's gun was heard on the hills. There was no church-going procession, no pretty stream of bridal maidens from the Glebe to the church. The marriage took place in the little grey parlour, with the decorations in it which the bridegroom had put up, and with the associations that were so sacred to both. They stood where Margaret's sofa had stood, where she had died, and were made man and wife. And when it was done and had become irrevocable the bride woke up with a little cry—the mist vanished from her eyes and she saw things clear;—a cloud of interested, smiling faces around her, a man by her side who was her husband,—the new life, no longer a matter of the future, but present, had begun.

‘Did you speak, my darling?’ said her new husband, drawing her arm through his, and looking at her with the ineffable satisfaction in his eyes of a man who had attained all his desires, and reached the summit of content.

Isabel gazed up at him, attracted and touched in spite of herself by that wonderful look of happiness, scarcely able to refrain from being glad for him, notwithstanding the sharp and new impression of reality which weighed so strangely on herself. ‘I never thought it would come true,’ she sighed,

turning her head away with momentary petulance, and burst into uncontrollable tears.

The bystanders were too much interested in the bride to notice if any cloud passed over the minister's face. Had there been so, it would have been foolish; for was it not to be expected that a bride the moment she was married should signalise that wonderful event by the most natural sign of emotion? It was but what every one looked for, an almost duty of her position. The women took her from her husband and kissed and blessed and cried over her in their turn. 'And nae mother to support her at sic a time,' the humbler wedding guests said to each other as they stood about the door. There were two lines of sympathetic gazers all round the post-chaise when it came to take the bridal pair away; fashion was not urgent on that point on Loch Diarmid—but Mr. Lothian, with all the poetry of youth still in him, was eager to carry his love away and have her all to himself. She was very pale and trembled excessively as she was led out of her father's house; but at last she had fully awakened out of all her dreamings, and felt the force of the change she had made. And Isabel did not turn from, but to, her husband in that dangerous crisis of her being. Whatever might happen, she was conscious that he was her support and comforter. She put her hand

into his trustfully, and went away—not happy as he was, yet at peace. Into the long summer stretch of life, the existence without passion, without suffering, that lay before her now all was over; taking farewell—was it for ever?—of the cottage in which she had been born.

CHAPTER XV.

THE wedding tour was but a short one ; and when the snow appeared on the hills in October, and the early winter began to isolate Loch Diarmid from the rest of the world, Isabel stood by the Manse window, as she had pictured herself standing, and looked for her husband coming home. She had dreamed of it all ; and somehow, out of a dream it had come to a reality, and she found herself in the very position she had imagined, still somewhat wistful, but no longer sad, or distracted by any of the doubts of the past. It would be impossible to say how good he was to her, as good as a good man of the most generous and delicate instincts could be to a young creature whom he loved with all his heart, and with a certain touch of compunction and compassion, and a ghost of remorse mingling in his love. He was not, he knew, the kind of man she should have married ; he was old enough to be her father ; and the consciousness gave to his love a soft delicacy, and reverence, and

tenderness, which are rare in the world. Had she been unreasonable he would have made himself a very slave to her caprices; but Isabel was not unreasonable. She was even yet a little timid of expressing her own wishes or opinions. It had been a great struggle to her to call him by his Christian name, and to recognise the fact that he was brought to her level, or she to his. But gradually she accustomed herself to it. And as the mate of a man so much older than herself by degrees learned to put on that soft dignity, that innocent, transparent assumption of age and sobriety, which makes the young wife of a middle-aged man look not older, but younger still, though she herself thinks otherwise. She put a little cap over her pretty hair, to look more like the minister's wife. She wore sober-coloured dresses, quiet shawls, played at being her own grandmother, as became (she thought) her position. And succeeded, by so doing, in looking more fair, more youthful, more quaintly poetic and girlish, than before. But the device pleased herself. And she found herself launched into society,—such society as is practicable on Loch Diarmid. Miss Catherine's carriage conveyed her to dinner at all the 'good' houses in the neighbourhood. She had good blood by her mother's side, as everybody knew; and when she ceased to be the Captain's Isabel and became Mrs.

Lothian, and was no longer dangerous in her beauty to the young Lairdlings of these parts, the Loch, and even the country, rose up to do her honour. The aristocracy of Lochshire was not remarkable for any great intellectual qualities any more than other rural aristocracies; neither was it the highest possible school of manners and social grace. But yet it was a great advance to Isabel of the Glebe Cottage, who had no training in the ways of the world. She was a lady born, as Jean Campbell, with pride, had so often asserted; and the gentle blood, or the gentle mind, or both, asserted themselves. Imperceptibly the change crept over Isabel. Mr. Lothian was 'well connected' in his own person, and he was well off, having had something to begin upon, and so many years of frugal bachelor life to provide him with means for the gratification of his young wife. And Miss Catherine, proud of her *protégée* and of the match she had made, superintended Isabel's toilette, and watched over her comings and goings. So that the winter passed away in a pleasant flutter of social occupation, and the new Mrs. Lothian had such share of *succés* as is agreeable to a young wife setting out upon the world.

But yet, on the whole, what she preferred was the long winter nights when she watched for her husband coming home by the waning twilight, and

sat down with him at the table to which her own hands had added what decoration was possible. If her eyes did not light up at his approach, they yet smiled softly on him with that serenity which was so new to hasty Isabel. She was glad when he liked his dinner, and listened with a sweet impartial satisfaction while he praised the dishes she had ordered for him, and sometimes helped to prepare, and her own blooming looks. She 'took his kiss sedately,' not more moved by it than she was by the whisper into her ear that the tea was ready, of the pretty housemaid, whom she had known all her life. And then the Dominie would stray in and deposit his gaunt length in one of the easy-chairs by the drawing-room fire, and the two men would talk of all they knew, and all they had seen, and all they thought, while she sat working between them, saying now and then her half-dozen words, listening with all the fresh curiosity of her age. Her husband would pause now and then to explain to her some special subject of discourse, and Isabel would listen, smiling, looking up from her work. At first she had said, 'Never mind, I like best to find it out from what you say; I like to hear what Mr. Galbraith thinks, and what you think, and put them together.' But Mr. Lothian was not satisfied with that. If he had a weakness, it was to instruct his wife, and make her understand everything he was interested

in. And he was a little vexed that he could not persuade her, as he said, 'to take a part.' But that was a slight,—a very slight vexation. And Isabel did not care to take a part. She listened, and she pursued her own thoughts; and sometimes but half heard the talk, thinking of how to plant a new-flower-bed as spring was coming, or whether little Mary would not be better for a new frock; or how to arrange the ladies and the gentlemen at the great dinner-party which she was shortly to give in return for the civilities of the Loch. Her mind went away, in short, upon all those matters of fact which it is one of the first effects of marriage to render delightful to a young woman, especially if her heart is not very profoundly moved by any *grande passion*. All uncertainties, all dreams, were over for ever. The wide, vague horizon of youth was shut in within certain unchangeable limits. No one and no thing could now come over the hills to change her fate. That was fixed, and she was softly contented and happy. Sometimes it even occurred to her to think that one of the great advantages of being married was this contentment with external things. These had become the real things—the dinners, and the servants, and her husband's crimped frills and shirt-buttons, and the arrangements of the house. As for the fancies and dreams of old, they were

over along with her youth; and the speculations in which 'these two' were indulging, were they not partly a sign of a want on their part of something active to do? If the men could have that pleasant weight of the dinner on their shoulders, or were obliged to see that everything went smoothly, without break or interruption in the house, or even to hem and crimp and keep in perfect order these cambric ruffles! Then she would glance at her husband, who was looking at her with his eyes so full of love. His hair was getting white, it was true; but then his cheek was still like a rose, and was set off by the white hair. And Isabel's eye dwelt admiringly on the ruffles which she had hemmed, which she had crimped, and in which she had placed the little pin she had given him when they were married. It was not a very valuable ornament. It was a small oblong brooch, set round with pearls, which she had herself worn with Margaret's hair in it, as long as she could remember. Now it held a little curl of her own intertwined with Margaret's, and had been placed on a pin to fit it for its present use. It was the only ornament of the kind the minister ever wore. And it was Isabel herself who had to put it into the delicate cambric every morning. He was so particular about his frills. And she was proud of them, and let no hand touch them but her own.

This was the very centre of her quiet, unemotional happiness. The fire-light and the pretty bright glow of the lamp, and Mr. Lothian and the Dominie talking, arguing, commenting upon everything, while she sat, half listening, hemming her cambric. It was not necessary to her comfort to have her husband to herself. There were no little outbursts of feeling one way or another to make the presence of a third party disagreeable. The wedded calm of life, silencing all vexing thoughts, putting all uncertainties to flight, composing her mind to unexciting prose and matter of fact, had come upon Isabel. She had not a doubt that it was always so, and the quiet had even a good moral effect upon her, subduing her hasty petulance and impetuosity of temper. The wedding had been a shock to her, as it is to most young women; but when she became used to herself in her new character, the repose and the safety stole into her soul. She was happy during that winter, as perhaps she had never been before in her life. Happy in her house, in her ruffles, in her dinner-parties, in the sense of importance, and use, and dignity; and happy in her husband, too, very affectionate to him, as his daughter might have been, though scarcely so familiar as would have become a daughter; and glad of the Dominie to come in of nights and talk, and leave her free for her hem-

ming, to listen a little if she liked. This was how the winter went by.

And when spring came a great idea had developed in Mr. Lothian's mind. He had been thinking of it all the time, though he had said nothing. It was to take his wife to London, to see everything that could be seen, to go to the theatre, and the opera, and make acquaintance with the big world. It took away Isabel's breath when the suggestion was made to her. Going to London to her was something like what going to Constantinople would be to a young woman in her position now—only so much more dazzling and splendid to think of. When Jean Campbell heard of it, it brought tears of pride to her eyes. 'Eh, Isabel, my bonnie woman, ye have a life like a fairy tale!' she cried, and such was the effect produced upon the Loch in general by the news of this wonderful project.

'His young wife has turned his head,' said John Macwhirter. 'There's nae fool like an auld fool, especially when there's a wife in the case.'

'If it had been in to the Assembly in May, ane could understand,' said old Sandy Diarmid, 'to see the Lord Commissioner and a' the sights; but London's a different story. It would suit him better to save his siller for the family, when they come.'

'But I hear there's nae word of a family,'

said another gossip, 'and he has been saving since ever he came to the parish. So long as the pulpit's well supplied I see nae harm in't for my part.'

At the village doors the question was still more hotly discussed.

'Set her up with her trips to London!' cried one of the neighbours, 'and her only Duncan Diarmid's daughter, as we a' ken, and with nae right to such extravagance.'

'But by the mother's side Isabel's a lady born,' cried Jenny Spence, 'and her father was an officer, as grand as young Kilcranion, that you think so much of. When ye marry an auld man ye may well expect mair consideration at the least. A' he can do is but little for bonnie Isabel.'

'If they were to spend the siller on God's service it would set them better—and him a minister,' said Mary White.

And in higher circles there were a good many smiles and gentle jokes about the minister's uxorious fondness. Even Miss Catherine was not quite sure about such an extravagant notion. But all the criticism did not affect Mr. Lothian. He had made all his plans, and arranged everything without regard to the popular babble. 'I mean my Isabel to see everything, and have everything I can give her,' he said. He had lived in that mysterious world himself when he was young. He had been

tutor to the Marquis, the tutelary deity of the district, who came to church always when he was on the Loch, and had the minister to dine with him and showed him every sort of attention. London was no such wonder and enigma to him as it was to most of his parishioners. And Isabel, for the first time since her marriage, was moved with an excitement which almost renewed her impetuosity. The thought of going 'to England' stirred up all her dormant faculties for pleasure. She made him tell her all about it, where they should go; what the Park was like where the ladies rode; if he was sure it was quite right to go to a theatre—and a hundred other particulars; and when at last the moment came for setting out, the young creature almost threw off her wifely gravity and felt herself a girl again.

They went by sea, which was a somewhat awful experience; but yet, when she had recovered the first frightful consequences of acquaintance with the unsteady waters, even the fact of 'the voyage' added something to Isabel's sense of growing experience and knowledge of life. She walked about the deck, leaning on her husband's arm as the steamer went up the peaceable Thames, quite recovered from all unpleasant sensations, and full of bright wonder and curiosity. 'You know everything as if you had lived here all your life,'

she said, in unfeigned admiration for her husband's cleverness, and hung upon him asking a thousand questions, pleased with all the novelty about her, proud of his unbounded information, a sweeter picture he thought than all London besides could produce.

'I was here when I was young like you,' he said, 'when everything takes hold of one's mind—when I did not know I was to be so happy as to bring my bonnie Isabel. I suppose it was before you were born.'

'And perhaps you were thinking of some other Isabel,' she said, looking up in his face, with the laughing half-jealousy of the wife, a something more like love and less like simple affection (he thought) than he had seen in her before.

'Never,' he said, bending down over the sweet face that was his own, 'my darling, I never loved woman till I saw you. And when I saw you, you were no woman, but a child. I kept my heart young for you, Isabel.'

She gave him a wondering glance, and then a little flush came over her face, and she turned to ask him a question about something else which struck her on the other side of the river. She had not kept her heart fresh for him. She felt, with a momentary sense of guiltiness, that they were not equal on that point. But her very thoughts were as innocently

and simply true to him now as if he had been—her father. Something like this was what Isabel thought, but not with any conscious sense that her love for her husband should have been different. She was quite happy standing there with her hand drawn closely within his arm, proud of him and of everything about him, from his boundless knowledge down to his spotless ruffles; and felt at the present moment no need of anything else for the happiness of her life.

And Isabel enjoyed all the sights of London with the same proud satisfaction. He could tell her about everything, from Westminster and St. Paul's down to the old gentlemen riding in the Row, among whom he pointed out to her the Duke and Sir Robert Peel, and at least a dozen more, as if he had known them all his life, she said to herself. He was not so learned in respect to the ladies, it was true. But still to know so much was a great thing. And then it made his wife so independent. She had no need to ask, to consult books, to remain in ignorance of anything. It gave her the sweetest sense of superiority when she met a young country lady in the Row with her husband who was not so clever as the minister, and saw them gaze and gape at the notabilities. 'Mr. Lothian will tell you who they are,' said Isabel, proudly. And when her countrywoman confided to her how little she

knew about the places she had seen, the gratification of the minister's wife grew stronger and stronger. 'Mr. Lothian was here when he was young,' she said; 'and I never need to ask anybody but him—he knows everything.'

'Here when he was young, indeed!' young Mrs. Diarmid, of Ardgartan, exclaimed to her husband, when they parted company. 'Here as a tutor, I suppose; but Isabel gives herself as many airs as if he were the Marquis himself.'

'Well, at least he was the Marquis's tutor,' said young Ardgartan; 'and if she is pleased with her old man, it is very lucky for her.'

And the fact was that Isabel was thoroughly pleased with her old man, and enjoyed her expedition with all her heart. The Marquis asked his old tutor to dinner, and gave Isabel his arm, and placed her by his side with much admiration of her sweet looks. 'I used to know your father,' he told her, 'when I was a lad. What an eye he had! and would tire us all out shooting over the Kilcranion moors.' This acknowledgment of Captain Duncan as himself in some way received by the local deities, was balm to Isabel's soul, and opened her shy intelligence to the Marquis, who found her little sayings as piquant as sayings usually are which fall from pretty lips. And the Marchioness offered Mrs. Lothian her box at the

Opera to Isabel's great confusion and perplexity. The young ladies of the house clustered round her, telling her what the music was to be, and how she would enjoy it, and how much they envied her her first opera. 'You will think you are in heaven,' cried one enthusiastic girl. When she left the grand house in Park Lane, with this ecstatic prospect before her, Isabel felt that her life, as her stepmother had said, was indeed like a fairy tale.

'But is it so nice as they say?' she asked her husband, as they went home.

'To them it is,' said that man of universal information, 'for they have been brought up to it. I am not so sure about you; but you must ask me no more questions, for I want you to judge of it for yourself.'

And it was with a sense of responsibility that Isabel set out for this new felicity. She had put on one of her wedding dresses, the blue one which her husband loved—and had white flowers in her pretty brown hair. Her sense of her present judicial position took from her the pretty girlish excitement into which she had fallen about all the novelties that surrounded her, and restored that soft dignity of the old man's wife, the look of age she had tried to put on when she first realized Mrs. Lothian's responsibility. She looked, perhaps,

rather more girlish in this state of importance and seriousness than she did in her livelier mood. And there was another reason, too, for unusual dignity. Lady Mary was to go with her under her charge. 'And I trust to you, Mrs. Lothian, to take care of her,' the Marchioness had said, with a sense of the joke which was far from being shared by Isabel. It was the first time she had ever acted as chaperone, and her mind was disturbed by the awful question what she should do if any one approached the young lady who was under her charge. 'Is she not to speak to any one?—and am I to keep everybody away?' she asked her husband, and if possible admired Mr. Lothian's knowledge more than ever when he instructed her in her easy duties. As for Lady Mary herself, she was quite excited by the prospect of witnessing Isabel's delight. 'Oh I wish I were you!' she cried, 'I am *blasée*, you know. I know them all off by heart, and exactly how they will look, and how Grisi will bring out her notes. But you will think you are in heaven.' And then they all got into the lordly carriage, with the powdered footmen, and went to this earthly paradise, with no thought of any evil awaiting them, or harm which could enter there.

There were many opera-glasses directed to the box when Isabel in her simplicity and pretty dig-

nity, half matron half child, took her seat in it. Lady Mary was no beauty, and the eyes of the world directed themselves to the fresh, new face with a rustle of curiosity and interrogation. Isabel gave one glance round her in acknowledgment of the fine assembly, and the ladies in their pretty dresses, and then turned her face intent upon the stage. The opera was *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Her companions both watched her with much more interest than they did the scene—Lady Mary with delightful expectation at first, then with a shade of disappointment and surprise: while the minister looked on amused, and yet conscious of the least little shade of anxiety, lest his wife should compromise herself by a total want of susceptibility to the entertainment. Neither of them observed, at first, among the gazers below and around one pair of opera-glasses, which the owner with a sudden start had directed full upon the box at the commencement of the performance, and which remained fixed, held with rigid hands, during the whole of the first act. When the curtain fell, Isabel drew breath and heart, her eyes somewhat strained and dilated with the intense gaze she had been fixing on the stage.

‘Don’t you feel, then, as if *this* was all a dream, and *that* was true?’ said Lady Mary, who was a musical enthusiast.

‘I don’t know,’ said Isabel. ‘I don’t understand; if I could see what they all mean.’ She glanced round her and down at the stalls as she spoke, and there she caught a glimpse of—what was it?—a face, part of a face staring up at her, almost hidden by the black circles of the glasses, but yet with something in its aspect that seemed familiar to her. ‘Do they always stare like that?’ she said, drawing back with the sense of having received a shock, though she could not tell how.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Lady Mary, hastily. ‘No one minds—don’t think of that. But tell me, don’t you feel it—doesn’t it go to your heart?’

‘I think, if there was anything in my heart, I would say it, and not sing it,’ said Isabel. ‘I think they are all mad. Is she Lucy Ashton? But Lucy would not have the heart to sing. Oh, how could she sing when she could scarcely speak?’

‘Oh, don’t you see,’ said Lady Mary, ‘that is just what music is? When you cannot speak, you can burst out in music. You can go to the piano, and say everything that is in your heart—you can sing——’

‘Yes,’ said Isabel, softly; ‘Auld Robin Gray, or that Irish song the poor girl sang when her heart was breaking; but all that music, full of shakes, and trills, and great bursts like the organ made on purpose—oh, no; not if her heart was breaking!’

‘But, my dear,’ said the minister, ‘how can you tell? an Italian heart may break in music?’

‘Perhaps an Italian heart, but not Lucy Ashton’s,’ said Isabel, a wave of sudden colour passing over her face. How strange it was, out of this crown of her happy, peaceful existence to look back on the time when she had first read about Lucy Ashton, and understood. She was an uninstructed rustic, and had never heard any music in her life before. This historian says not a word in support of her way of thinking; but such was her ignorant opinion, out of the depths of her reticent Scotch heart, in which there lay so deep a sense of every emotion. It was her ignorance, no doubt, which suggested it. Any one who had read the ‘Bride of Lammermoor’ to her, with the very least power of characteristic representation, could have played on her as on a delicate instrument; but she did not know how to understand the other form of the poem. It bewildered her. She was not in heaven, but in the most curious artificial sphere. And then, what was that thing—those two black motionless glasses, fixed upon her from below? Whose was the turn of the head that seemed to appear to her behind them—the aspect of the half-seen figure lost among the crowd? She could not tell; but it all awoke the strangest thrill of uneasiness in her heart.

‘I should like to go home,’ she whispered to

her husband. 'Who is that always staring? And the music makes me dizzy. I should like to go home.'

'Staring, my darling! There are so many people staring,' said Mr. Lothian; 'and I am not surprised,' he added, looking down upon her with fond admiration. The speech and the movement brought him forward to the front of the box. He took no notice of anything else, having his whole attention fixed upon his wife; but she saw a sudden movement below, and the direction of the opera-glasses change a little, as if the gaze was turned on her husband. The sensation to her was as if some dangerous being in a mask were watching them. And everything was so unreal—those people on the stage going through what was supposed to be the business of life in music, and the spectators periodically rousing themselves to a little paroxysm of frenzy, according to Isabel's opinion. She had never seen anything so unreal and so strange; and it might be some enemy who was watching them for anything she knew——

But she sat out the performance bravely, trying to conceal her first impressions, now and then carried away by a splendid outburst of melody, but still keeping close to her text that Lucy Ashton could not have had the heart. 'How could she have remembered to sing like that, if her heart was

breaking?' said Isabel; and there was a painful pang in her own which she could not explain. She seemed to see those glasses before her even on the way out, gazing at her from behind a pillar. They were before her eyes all the way home, and withdrew her attention even from Lady Mary's lamentations over her want of musical taste. 'But I see it is because you are not used to it,' Lady Mary said at last. 'Half-a-dozen more evenings would make you think so differently. Oh, Mr. Lothian, stay a little longer, and let us educate your wife!'

'It would take a longer time than we can spare,' said the minister, only half pleased with the suggestion; and Isabel gave a little shudder in her corner. She was thinking of that opera-glass, and of the high crest of hair rising behind it, and the air of the half-seen figure. Could it be ——? Whom could it be? It was the only unsuccessful attempt at pleasure she had made since they went to town.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE Loch was in full beauty when the minister and his wife returned home. It was a clear, lovely summer night, with stretches of daffodil sky over the blue hills towards the west, and a pale young moon glimpsing at herself in the water. The flowers were all bright in the Manse garden, the villagers nodding pleasant recognition, the Loch all cheerful with boats skimming like seabirds over the water. Just such a lingering, lovely eve as that on which Isabel had stood solitary at the door of the Glebe Cottage a year ago, wondering if she were cut off altogether from life. Since that she had (she thought) been drinking her full of it, enjoying and making use of her existence as it is given to few people to do. And how sweet it was to come home! 'This is worth London twenty times over,' the minister said, when they had rested after their journey, standing with his wife beside him on the little garden terrace before the windows of the Manse drawing-room, looking out upon the

water which lay so bright under the soft young moon. Daylight had not gone yet, though the moon was shining; over the braes towards the west the sky was still the colour of daffodils, with breaks of blue all about and around, and the light palpitating within it, ready at a moment's notice to break forth again, and illuminate earth and heaven. The colour was still bright in all the flowers, though it was ten o'clock. 'This is worth London twenty times over,' Mr. Lothian said. 'Are you glad or sorry, Isabel, to come home?'

'Glad,' she said, standing by his side, looking out well pleased on the scene she knew so well. 'But I am glad we went, too. Seeing things makes people experienced; it is like growing old. But you should not laugh at everything I say.'

'It is not at you, my dear,' said the minister; 'but do not get old on my account, my darling. I like my bonnie Isabel to be young.'

'I should like to be thirty,' she said, with a soft laugh; 'then I would be nearer you.'

'You could be no nearer me,' he said, drawing her close to him, 'my bonnie darling! Remember always that I could not be happier, Isabel. I have the desire of my heart.'

Why this little scene should have taken so solemn a tone, neither could tell. One moment

they had laughed, and the very next moment he was making this little confession of supreme happiness as if for her comfort when he should be away from her. But he was not going away from her; neither was there any possibility of estrangement in their future. There was no passion in Isabel's mind to make her exacting or difficult. She held up her soft cheek to him, and he kissed her as if she had been his daughter. She was proud of him, so erect and handsome as he was, though not young. His white locks set off the fresh colour on his cheeks; his arm was as good a support and as strong a defence as if he had been but twenty-five; and though his ruffles were slightly out of order with the journey, and the little pin not quite straight in the cambric, his appearance was not impaired by that touch of carelessness. And then, he knew so much!—Isabel by his side began to feel that she, too, was a different creature, developing new faculties every day.

‘If we were behaving as the people do in your favourite opera,’ said the minister, ‘we would sing a duet of felicity. My dear, you’ve got a pretty, sweet little voice. I think you must learn to sing.’

‘Oh, don’t speak of that opera,’ said Isabel; ‘I hated it. The men singing about everything—even their dinner! And Lucy Ashton——’

‘My dear, it was not Lucy Ashton; it was Lucia di Lammermoor.’

‘I know; but it was meant to be all one,’ said Isabel. ‘Lucy sing like yon! Oh, they cannot tell what it is to be in despair.’

‘My darling, and how should you know?’ said the minister, looking at her with his admiring smile.

‘I don’t think I know; but I can divine,’ said Isabel; and her eyes seemed to deepen so, that her husband gazing into them could not make out their meaning. But he saw a little shudder, quite slight and momentary, pass over her. And his first thought was that she must be ill.

‘Come in,’ he said; ‘it is growing cold. How is it we have twice become so serious this pleasant night, after coming home?’

‘It is that opera; I never like to think of it,’ said Isabel, and shivered again, and went in, her husband following. It was very childish of her; and yet somehow she felt just as she had felt at the opera, as if some one were watching them—looking at their tranquil life with unkindly eyes.

Next day, Mr. Lothian stayed at home, going no further than the village to see the wives and ask after the men; and in the evening came Mr. Galbraith to resume with delight his long-interrupted ‘cracks.’ Instead of the fire they sat at the open window, Isabel gliding out and in cutting

flowers, and looking after her garden. 'There is some comfort in this—now we have got our pleasant nights back again,' said the Dominie. 'You saw many fine things in London, but I'll be bound you saw nothing so bonnie as the Loch, and that young moon.'

'No,' said Isabel; 'nothing but streets, and churches, and ladies riding. Yet I am glad to have gone; now I will never feel ignorant when you speak. It was as good as jumping ten years.'

'All her thought is to make herself thirty,' said the minister, with a laugh of happiness; 'but I tell her, Galbraith, I like her best as she is. Sometimes I think I am too happy,' he went on as she flitted out into the garden; 'I have everything I can desire.'

'I never knew the feeling myself,' said the Dominie; 'but they say it is of kin to melancholy. No more to wish for. I cannot say I wish for much myself; but that's no out of satisfaction, but out of despair.'

'Despair is a hard word,' said the minister.

'Oh, ay; far too hard a word. I've not vigour enough left to nourish a passion. It's more a sense of the impossibility of any change, and a kind of content; and, minister, I'm free to acknowledge it—I thought you were but an old fool, setting your heart on a young thing; but I see now you were a wise man.'

‘ A happy one at least,’ said Mr. Lothian ; ‘ but it would be harder now to leave this life than ever it was before.’

‘ Well, well, there’s little likelihood,’ said the Dominie, with some impatience ; ‘ let us be thankful—you are as likely to live till a hundred as any man I know.’

The minister shook his head, and then he repeated softly a verse out of one of the mournfullest, sweetest poems that ever was breathed out of a broken heart. It was Leopardi’s *Amore e Morte* that had come into Mr. Lothian’s mind, for he was a man not without some elegancies of culture, though he was but a Scotch minister, and Italian was one of them. But as the Dominie did not understand it, and some readers might be as unlearned as the Dominie, here is the English of what he said :—

‘ When in the heart profound
 New Love first draws his breath,
 Languid and faint, is with it found
 A wish for death.
 Such is the first effect, I know not why,
 When Love is pure and high ;
 Perhaps because the eye takes fright
 Then at this desert, and earth seems
 A waste in which no man can dwell
 Without that new sole infinite
 Joy that has dawned upon his dreams——’

Mr. Lothian said the lines in the sweet Italian,

and his heart gave that exquisite ache of mortal terror and prevision to which every loving heart is subject. If anything should happen to his Isabel!—what would life be worth to him more? The Dominie sat looking on with just that touch of good-natured contempt, natural to the man who had never known any of these emotions, and found them half amusing and somewhat weak. But just then Isabel came hastily up and brushed past them almost running, as if in fear.

‘I thought I saw a man in the garden,’ she said, shedding, for the first time for ever so long, a few hasty tears.

‘My darling,’ cried the minister, starting up, ‘where?’

‘Oh, down among the trees,’ she said, ‘down there—outside the garden wall. I saw the branches stir,—and I thought——’

‘But, my dear, any man that likes may be on the other side of the wall,’ said her husband: ‘why should that frighten you?’

And then Isabel dried her tears. ‘It was very foolish,’ she said, ‘I know it might be anybody; but it gave me a fright—as if he were going to jump over the wall and come in to us here.’

‘And if he had?’ said the minister, smiling—till Isabel smiled too, seeing the absurdity of her alarm. But she watched anxiously when Mr.

Mr. Lothian and the Dominie made the round of the garden. Of course, there was no man to be seen, and they went in and closed the windows, and talked very comfortably for an hour before they separated, with no more interest or solemnity. Mr. Lothian had to attend a meeting of Presbytery next day. This pleasant evening was the end of his holiday: and such a holiday as it had been,—a poem in his life.

Next morning he rode away from the Manse door, looking, his wife thought, a very picture of what a man of 'his years' ought to be. She had smoothed down the cambric ruffles in which she took so much interest with her own hand, and put the gold pin carefully into the clean, well-starched, daintily-crimped folds. There was not a spot upon him, nor upon the glossy hide of the horse, which was a recent acquisition, and, in the opinion of the neighbourhood, 'too spirity a beast' for the minister. 'I shall be back as soon as I can,' he said, as he turned from the door; 'but I may be obliged to stop and dine somewhere, so don't be alarmed, my dear, if I am late.' And he took off his hat to his darling, and rode away saluting her as if she had been the Queen. All this adoration and tender respect had their effect upon Isabel, though she was not conscious of it. She went in and put away some of the things from the breakfast-table,

the little silver tea-caddy, the pretty crystal dishes for the butter and jam, things too dainty to be touched by the hands of the servants, and put the room into more delicate order, moving about in her summer morning dress, like a bit of light in the solid mahogany-furnished dining-room. And then she went and gave her orders for the dinner, which for that day was to be something which would not spoil by waiting, and which could be eaten cold on the morrow, if Mr. Lothian was not back in time. 'The minister may stop to dine with the Presbytery,' his wife said; and lingered a little in the clean, bright kitchen, hearing some scraps of news from Kirstin, and arranging about various things that had to be done. 'If Janet gets her work finished soon, we might put up the curtains in the spare room, not to lose the day,' said the mistress of the Manse, 'as the minister is away.' It was a day of leisure, with no special point in it, a day for odd little pieces of business, and the sweet silent leisure which breaks so pleasantly into the routine of a settled life. After she had given her orders, Isabel took her work and went to the seat outside the drawing-room window, on the little terrace gay with flowers. It is cold sitting out on Loch Diarmid even in June, but the sun was full on the front of the house, and she was young and felt no chill. She gave a thought or two to the spare-room and its curtains,

which had been taken down to preserve their freshness; and upon the probability of guests arriving if this lovely weather lasted, and upon the pleasant ride the minister must be having along the sunshiny road to Maryburgh, which was some miles off. It was down the Loch, along the waterside all the way. And then Isabel's mind floated off to the work in her hands, to the flowers at her feet, to that soft, pleased consciousness of her own being and well-being, which was natural to a young creature under such circumstances. She was so different from what she had been at the Glebe, so smoothed and opened out and developed—able to talk familiarly of things she would have thought altogether out of her sphere, looking a different creature, used to be served, and copied, and admired. And it is so good to be admired and made much of!—the inner being expands under it as flowers do under the sunshine. Isabel could figure nothing to herself more sweet than to sit there in the morning leisure with the sweet air blowing the light locks on her forehead, and the long summer holiday before her.

It was not that she was glad of her husband's absence—but still there was a certain holiday feeling about it: nothing was expected from her—she had nothing to think of—nothing but to sit in the sunshine and see the water playing on the beach, and the boats on the water, and watch the

shadows flying, flying, like some giant's breath, over the braes; and yet to know all the same that her domestic duties were being accomplished, and that he would come back in the evening with all the news of the country-side, with papers, and books, and a hundred bits of gossip. It might have been dreary to be left at home alone every day,—but once, now and then—the long forenoon felt stationary and unfathomable, like those blue depths of sky she gazed up into, and never could get to the heart of. 'You will think you are in heaven!' How was it those words came back to her ear? In heaven indeed! in a painted, blazing, artificial place, with men singing at each other, and Lucy Ashton,—pensive Lucy,—with her hair on her shoulders, shrieking her heart out in musical despair. Isabel, the ignorant, was offended for her saddest heroine. That tender creature frozen up by her misery! 'But I could think I was in heaven now,' she said softly, to herself, raising her eyes to sweet Loch Diarmid, and the shining sun, and the summer air, which made every sound into a note of music. And then her wandering fancies suggested to her, that heaven itself would be no sweeter—and she felt a momentary depression in that she could not desire heaven, earth being so sweet. And so the pleasant day ran on.

It was about dusk in the long summer evening,

when, listening for her husband's return, and growing a little weary of her solitude, Isabel heard some one ride past the Manse gate, and a few minutes after the Dominie came in to tell her, that Mr. Lothian had just passed,—that he had been sent for by some one who was sick up towards Kilcranion, but did not expect to be long. 'He dined at Maryburgh,' the Dominie said, 'and here's some parcels he threw to me as he passed. If you'll put on your hat, Mrs. Lothian, it's a bonnie night—we might take a stroll among the heather, and meet him as he comes home?'

He had called her Mrs. Lothian scrupulously ever since her marriage. Isabel went out with him, well pleased, into the soft night, which was musical with the rustle of the trees, and the splash of the water on the shore, and the voices from the village.

'But I think it will rain,' she said, looking up to the sky.

'And that's true,' said the Dominie, turning sharp round, as a sudden blast, for which he was unprepared, came in his face. Clouds had been gathering overhead during all the evening, but now it came down all at once, with an evident intention of continuing for the rest of the night. They stood for a moment uncertain, hearing, as Isabel long remembered, the sound of the horse's hoofs carrying her husband over the hill in the stillness of the night.

‘And nobody could run after him now with a plaid or a cloak,’ she said, throwing her gown over her head, as was the fashion of the country, to shield her from the rain.

‘He would be a clever runner that would make up to them,’ said Mr. Galbraith; ‘but after sixteen years at Loch Diarmid, a drop or two, more or less, will do him no harm.’

And then they went back into the dining-room where the lamp was lighted. The lamp did not give a very brilliant light when there was no fire to help it, and the room had a dusky look, as rooms will have of summer evenings after all the light and gladness of the day.

‘I think I will light the fire,’ said Isabel. ‘He’ll be cold, and he likes to see it. Here,’ she added, with a little pride in her London experience, ‘it is never too warm for a fire.’

‘All the better,’ said the Dominie, stretching his hands over the crackling, cheerful blaze, when Isabel had lifted away the ornaments on the hearth, and set light to the fire, which, in conformity with the necessities of the climate, was laid ready below. ‘A fire is a kind of Christian creature, and keeps a lonely man company; but, if I were you, Mrs. Lothian, considering the long day he’s had, and a wetting at the end of it, I would have ben the kettle too.’

‘And so I will,’ said Isabel, who was nowise shocked by the suggestion. The kettle was brought accordingly, and placed on the hob, where the old man contemplated it with much satisfaction; and she opened her press, and brought out the silver liqueur-stand which had been Mr. Galbraith’s present to her on her marriage, and the silver sugar-basin, and the toddy ladles, and all that was necessary. She was so pleased with her pretty silver things, that it was a pleasure to her to have to take them out, and see them reflecting the light on the table; and the fire began to brighten up all the dark corners of the room, and to glance upon her pretty hair, which reflected it, and her ornaments, which made little gleams about her as she went and came.

‘And a lucky man he is to have such a home-coming,’ the Dominie said, half to himself, with a growl which he intended for a sigh. And Isabel smiled without taking any further notice, seeing herself pass in the glass on the mantelpiece with all the reflexions about her, and all the ruddy light dancing about the room;—better than a batchelorden with two men over the fire; there could not be much doubt about that. And she made all her preparations, and had her tea-tray brought in and placed at one end of the table, and bent her ear through all her activity to hear her husband come home.

While the entire household was thus engaged, both servants and mistress preparing for the master's arrival, it was the Dominie who first noticed that the little fire they had made for him was beginning to burn out, and the kettle to puff away all its contents in steam. He made a little joke over it, and had both renewed, but began to feel uneasy in his heart. The night had grown very dark all at once, and the rain would drive right in the horse's face as it came down the brae. 'And such a spirity beast!' Mr. Galbraith glanced out from the window when Isabel was not looking, and saw that the Loch had got up in a white foam, and that the sky was growing blacker and blacker. Just then the sound of the horse's hoofs was heard again. It approached, dashing furiously down the hill, and echoed past the house towards the stable which was at the back.

'There he is at last!' said Isabel cheerfully, not noting in the easiness of her mind the precipitate gallop, or that there was anything out of the ordinary in her husband dismounting at the stable-door.

'It will be for the wet,' the Dominie said, feeling a sudden pang of alarm. 'I'll go and see, with your permission——'

It seemed to Isabel that he was never coming back, and that her husband took the most unreason-

able time to make his appearance. 'He'll be telling David about the horse,' she said to herself. 'He is so particular to make the poor beast comfortable.' Then she poked up the fire to make it blaze, and drew his easy chair to its side. 'He'll be taking off his wet things,' she went on half aloud, accounting to herself for his delay: 'He'll be warming himself at the kitchen fire—but why not here? He'll have gone upstairs to change.' At last she ran out to the door losing patience. The Dominie met her coming back. She could not imagine what was the matter with him. If he could have been drinking—and if there had been time for him to intoxicate himself—that might have explained the glazed look in his eye, and the imbecile smile about his lips.

'It was not him at all,' said the Dominie, with a jaunty air, which made her wonder again—could he have taken a dram in the kitchen?' 'It was all a mistake. It was some one riding post-haste to Maryburgh,—somebody from—Kilcranion, I suppose. You do not think the minister would come down upon us at a break-neck gallop like that?'

'But it went to the stable-door,' said Isabel, astonished, but not yet roused to alarm.

'No, no, nothing of the kind. Sounds are deceiving in the night. It's a man and horse away

to Maryburgh. 'Ye can hear them echoing down the road now,' he said, throwing the windows suddenly open. A gust of wind and rain suddenly came in, and he closed it again hurriedly, with a nervous haste, which made the identification of any sound impossible. 'There's a storm brewing,' he said, 'but we'll draw to the fire, and be all the cozier within.'

And with a curious gallantry, which took Isabel entirely by surprise, he placed a chair by the fire for her, and made her sit down. Then he resumed his own, and held his hands, which she could see were trembling, over the blaze. 'I think I'll go and look if I can see him,' he said, after a moment. 'Don't you stir, Mrs. Lothian. It's no a night for you to put your bonnie head out of doors. Promise me you'll no stir!'

Isabel could make no answer in her amaze. And he went away closing the door carefully after him, and left her, beginning to hear her heart beat, and wondering what it could mean. No doubt, had her love been of a more passionate description, it would have taken fright before now. But it was so difficult to realize that anything could happen to the husband-father — the man who had encountered all the risks of country life unharmed as long as she could remember. She asked herself, what could be the matter with the Dominie?—and then

she wondered what ailed the Diarmids of Glen-corrie, where Mr. Lothian had gone, that they should have sent for him so late. And then she listened intently in the silence, till her heart fluttered up in her ears, and she could hear nothing else. She sat, it seemed to her for a long time, over the fire, waiting and wondering, and then she heard the kitchen-door open and shut, and a sound as of voices. By this time alarm had begun to take possession of her,—not terror so much as uneasiness, wonder,—a sense that in this night, which was so dark, and through which the wind began to howl, something—anything, might happen. This only—but it worked sharply upon Isabel. She sprang up and ran to the door, and out into the hall. There she caught a glimpse for one moment of her maids, and the Dominie, and the gardener, all clustered about a drenched figure, with a face as pale as death, which she recognised to be her stepmother, Jean Campbell. When they heard her, they fell apart, with looks of fright, and Mr. Galbraith advanced towards her. He was pale too, white to the very lips, and pointed to her to go back into the room she had left.

‘My dear,’ he said, taking her hand, leading her in, with gentle force, ‘don’t go there just now. Keep up your courage. He has met with an accident.’

‘An accident!’ said Isabel, rousing at once, ‘oh, Mr. Gilbraith, let David get out the old gig—that would help him home.’

‘They’re bringing him home, my dear,’ he said, looking at her wistfully. ‘You must keep up your courage; they are coming.’

‘Let me run and see that his room is ready,’ said Isabel, trying to break from him; ‘he will be wet, and there should be a fire. I like to see to everything myself. Oh, Mr. Galbraith, let me go and see that his room is right!’

‘The women are looking to that,’ he said, with a suppressed groan; ‘my dear, I fear it’s a bad accident. You must summon your courage.’

‘Is he not able to walk?’ said Isabel, her face blanching suddenly as there came to her through the pauses of the wind sounds as of the tramp of men approaching. This time the Dominie groaned aloud. He took both her hands and placed her trembling in the chair she had placed by the fire-side for *him*.

‘Stay still here,’ he said; ‘you must not go out to—agitate him. I will bring you your stepmother—she will tell you all about it.’ And he rushed away from her once more closing the door. Oh, what was it? Isabel’s brow began to throb, and her heart jumped wildly against her breast. A bad accident! It would be the new horse that was so ‘spirity.’ Oh,

why was she shut in and not to go to him? She could not bear it; she was the fit person to receive him, whatever had happened. And who but herself could see that the room was all right and everything in order? A second time she rose and ran to the door, but once more was met as she opened it, not this time by the Dominie, but by Jean Campbell, who came in, all wet and shivering, with such a distraught look in her face as Isabel had never seen there before.

‘O my bonnie lamb!’ cried Jean, throwing her arms round and detaining her. ‘No yet, you mustna go yet. O my bonnie woman! You that I thought so safe and free of all trouble! But it canna be, Isabel,—it canna be—stay here with me.’

‘I will go,’ said Isabel, struggling with her. ‘I will see what is wrong. If he has hurt himself, he wants me all the more.’

‘He’s feeling nae hurt,’ cried Jean, holding her stepdaughter fast; her pale face working and her eyes straining. ‘He’s in nae pain—O my bonnie Isabel!’

‘What do you mean?’ said Isabel, with inward horror, under her breath.

‘O my lamb!’ Jean answered, clasping her in her arms. The young wife broke out of the embrace with her old petulant impatience. She

threw the door wide open, rushing upon the knowledge of her fate. At the very moment when she did so, the men had entered the hall moving slowly with their burden. She stood uttering not a word, like a creature made out of stone. It was not that she was stupified. She recognised the men individually one by one, and through her mind there passed the curious speculation how they could all have been found together at such a time. And they carried—what? Something all covered over with a great grey plaid, stretched out upon a broad plank of the wood which had been lying by the roadside fresh from the sawmill—something which neither moved, nor groaned, nor betrayed the least uneasiness at the unsteady progress of its bearers. She gave a cry, as much of wonder as of misery. What was it? And then Mr. Galbraith tottered to her, staggering like a drunken man, with tears rolling down his grey ashy cheeks. ‘O my child!’ cried the old man, taking her into his arms. She looked him piteously in the face; she could not understand his tears, strange though the sight of them was. She would believe nothing but words. ‘What is it?’ she cried, ‘what does it mean?’

By degrees it was got into her mind,—she never knew how; they did not tell her he was dead, though they believed so: but that the doctor had

been sent for, and would tell what was to be done. Isabel did not faint—such an escape from the consciousness of evil was not possible to her. She retained all her faculties in an acuteness beyond all previous knowledge.

‘I should be there,’ she said, struggling with them, ‘to do what is wanted. Let me go—nobody shall nurse him, but me.’ But she was stopped again by the doctor, who had arrived at once, and who put her back, exchanging a look of pity with the Dominie.

‘You must stay here, Mrs. Lothian,’ he said; ‘I must see him alone, and I’ll come and tell you.’ When he was gone, Isabel walked about the room with the fierce impatience of suspense. ‘You’ll no tell what it is,’ she said, wringing her hands. ‘Oh, tell me what it is. Is it his head or a leg broken, or what is it? Is it only me that must not know?’

And then Jean came to her and took her in her arms; but all that she said was, ‘My bonnie woman! my bonnie lamb!’ words that meant nothing. They waited, it seemed for an hour or more, and then a man’s steps sounded slowly and solemnly on the stair, and the doctor with a troubled face looked in. He did not look at Isabel, eagerly as she was confronting him; but cast an appealing glance over her head at Jean Camp-

bell. 'Tell her!' he said, with agitation in his voice. And then the young widow knew.

'God preserve us!' the men were saying in the passage, 'two hours ago he passed, as fine a man as ye could see—and now he's a heap o' motionless clay.'

'There's been foul play,' said John Macwhirter. 'Ye'll never tell me but there's been foul play.'

'But wha could have an ill thought to the minister? He hadna an enemy in the world. Oh, neebors,' said Andrew White, 'we've lost a God-fearing man.'

'It maun have been for robbery,' said another.

'There's nae signs of robbery, except the cambric ruffles a' torn from his shirt, and the breastpin he aye wore.'

'That wasna worth much,' said Macwhirter, 'but nae doubt the villain was disturbed and grabbit at the first thing he saw. As ye say, Andrew, he hadna an enemy in the world.'

This conversation the Dominie overheard—the low bass voices of the men sounding strangely concentrated and solemn amid the wailing and tears of the house. Isabel herself had been taken away, capable of no tears as yet. And there was the cheerful kettle singing and steaming, the fire blazing, all the preparations upon the table for the return of the master of the house. And it was

thus the minister had come home. The depths of desolation had opened all at once in the mysterious world, and swallowed up this house with all its joys and hopes. But a touch and the whole fairy palace had crumbled into dust and ashes. 4

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