

THE BOURTREE.

CHAPTER I.

THE cottage stood with its gable to the street. It was old and dilapidated, the thatch overgrown with moss, and chickweed, and groundsel. A narrow lane led from the street to the humble door, and in the lane and opposite to the door, stood a well-grown, well-branched elder-tree—the “bourtrees” of my story; and its branches overshadowed both the door and window, “Rickle-trickle-tick-rickle-trickle-tick” played the loom of the weaver who dwelt within, and the sounds were often uncertain, for both the weaver and his loom were old. “Rickle-trickle-tick” and “heu-heu-heugh,” a dry hard cough, followed by the laboured breathing of asthmatic old age—came and passed out by open door and fast closed window, spreading a circle of rickety sound round the stem and branches of the elder.

“Ye’re hoastin’ bad the nicht,” said a woman, seated on a low stool in the trance. “Ye’re hoastin’ bad, weyvar! Tak’ a moufu’ o’ het watter;” but she rose not to proffer the suggested palliative, and her voice

was sharp and unsympathising. She bore the look of age, but in reality had not passed her forty-seventh year. She was "ill put-on" and "ill-cleaned," and the appearances of age come early with ingrained dirt and poverty. She sat on her stool idly and with clasped hands, in thought apparently; and ever and anon her thin lips were compressed and her body quivered, as if she was inwardly shivering. Her head was a fine head, too; and her face had been handsome; but her arched aquiline nose had grown into a beaked and unpleasant feature, and her strong yet tapered jaw and chin seemed curving upwards to meet the nose. Her eye, once a flashing orb, hazel brown shaded into black, still shone, but cold and glassily, as she peremptorily repeated, "Tak' a drenk, I tell ye," as the "rick-trickle-tick" of the loom ceased, and the "heu-heu-heu-heuch-heuch" went on in severer fit than before.

The weaver left his loom, and filled himself a pannikin of boiling water. He took off his woollen night-cap for a moment as he reverently muttered to himself, "Lord, bless thy mercies!" He drank some mouthfuls of the water, and then he went into the trance and stood at the door. He was a tall and wasted man, large of bone and gentle of aspect. Ill-conditioned age had bleached his hair and puckered his face, but had not destroyed its pleasant expression. Bright shone the evening sun on the bourtree, and bright beams, escaping through the moving branches, filled the trance with quivering light.

"Ah!" said the old man, "It's a bricht evenin', an' the tree is brawer this year than ever! Five an' twenty year sin' ye planted it, noo, woman. A year aulder than oor Bella. Whaur's she noo? whaur's she noo? Oor little Bella!"

"Wheesht!" said the woman; "Ye always coun ower yer spilt milk! Gang in frae the win'." Very crossly and imperiously she spoke, and the old man sighed and went in at her bidding; and the song of the loom and his cough passed out to the tree as before.

The woman sat and rocked herself, moving her body with a stiffened monotonous swing, as she still sat with lips compressed and clasped hands. Was she also "couning ower spilt milk?" It was even so; for the evening and the shadows of the tree had recalled to her, before her husband spoke of it, the time, long ago, when the tree was planted—a time which had seen planted not the wand only which had grown into the tree, but roots of bitterness also which had grown up and overshadowed her life.

Who would have thought it? Twenty-five years ago the beaked beldame, now seated in the cottage door, was the brightest, blithest lass of the village. All the village swains and the country lads for miles around tried to square their shoulders, and marched less slovenly along when she was in the path; and a proud man was he to whom "out ower her shouther" Bella Lumsden gave a blink of those lustrous eyea. Daughter of the village bowman, she knew every soul in the village,

and was liked and made of by many. Even those who, envious of her personal charms or of her popularity, dared to depreciate her, could say no more evil of her than that she was "a pert cuttie," or "a saucy baggage." Foremost suitors for her favour were William Mowat, then a brisk mason lad, and James Bisset, the weaver, the latter a douce man, fifteen years her senior, and well favoured of her father, the bowman. Then, the cottage was new and trim; Mowat, in his apprenticeship recently "out," had laboured in building it. And the weaver was well-to-do, and had a cow, which his "bit lassie"—for he kept a girl to attend to it and him—at early morning, when the well-known horn filled the street with shrieks, delivered over to the bowman's charge, receiving it again at nightfall with the same un-earthly noise. Mute is the bowman's horn. He and it are things of the past; but both were useful, nay important in their day. The maid preferred the mason, penniless but "pluckie," to the tall and amiable man of thrums, with his cow and his carefulness. How far the young man and Bella had pledged love to each other, it is needless to inquire. Suffice it, he was her favoured suitor.

In the sunshine of an early October evening, a heap of potatoes, pinky and white-eyed potatoes, lay at the bowman's door; and half-a-dozen girls of different ages were busy, down on their knees, filling baskets at the heap, or eagerly conveying the full baskets into the bowman's cottage. Fairest and most active of them all was

Bella Lumsden ; and her young friends were quizzing her in respect of William Mowat.

“ Naething lik’ guid pittaties for new mairried folk,” said one.

“ Ye can haud Willie’s wame fu’ for a towmonth, ony rate, Bell,” said a second.

“ Since the fret’s sae guid, ye’ll surely be cried neist Sunday,” said another.

And “ Here he comes,” said they all, as Mowat came along the back street towards the cottage of the bowman. He bore a branch of elder-tree in his hand.

“ What’s he aifter wi’ the wattle ? ” said one.

“ Come an’ earn yer supper, lad,” said another.

“ An’ maybe a kiss forbye,” slyly said a third.

“ I’ll tak’ the kiss noo, lassie, and wark for it aifter,” said Mowat, and he threw down the elder branch, and clasped the last speaker in his arms, and they struggled and tumbled over on the heap of “ crops ”—the hulms or stems of the potatoes ; and the proud Bella Lumsden waxed angry at the sight.

The potatoes were stored and the crops deposited on “ the midden,” and the helpers had dispersed. The sun was down, and the moon, fiery yellow, barred with belts of cloud, was shining in autumnal splendour, and Bella Lumsden and William Mowat were together in its light. She had not asked him to stay when the others departed. She had been sullen and tart to him, but still he had stayed.

“ Bella,” said he, “ I have brought you this branch

of bourtree. I'm gain to plant it in the corner o' the yaird."

"Ye needna fash yersel'. It's lik' yer love, lad, licht and boss, and nae root."

"It will thrive like my love, if ye dinna pluck it up," said he, and he stuck the stem into the earth.

"I can please masel about my faither's yaird, wi' yer leave maybe," said she. "An' I dinna see that a bourtree in that corner will in any way impriv' it."

"You'll vex me if you don't let it grow, pretty Bell; gude nicht!" said the lad, and he walked away.

"Tak a basket o' the pink taties tae James Bisset," said the bowman to his daughter. "They're no coman."

She obeyed this order; and when going to Bisset's with the basketful, half in wilfulness, half in thoughtlessness, she plucked up the bourtree branch and carried it to Bisset's cottage, and stuck it in the soil, where it is growing now. Jess Cameron (in after years Mrs. Balders) helped her to carry the basket, and recognised the branch as that which Mowat had brought to the bowman's that evening; and meeting Mowat next day, she brought him to the weaver's cottage, and pointed out "the spaik," and Mowat's heart was filled both with bitterness and anger.

How small are the things oft times that affect and colour whole lives. Here were two hearts, both warm and prepared each to cleave to the other, put asunder by this miserable sprig of bourtree, and because Mowat

had frolicked with a little girl on the potato-heap. Next time these two met, said Bella—

“Hoo are ye’ve gettin’ on wi’ black Bess Leitch? I’m telt ye’ve fun oot hoo mony bawbees she’s got.”

“Dinna fash yersel about it,” said he. “If ye glup the auld weyvar, ye’ll no ding me.”

And so they parted.

Before Christmas, in waywardness and self-despite, Bella Lumsden married James Bisset, and was dressed in a silk gown, which seemed not too much for the wife of “the gentle weaver.” Perhaps, too, love did not altogether guide William Mowat when he took unto himself a wife.

What was it all to her now, as she sat, with the old bitterness blackening both soul and body, rocking herself in the old man’s ruinous doorway? Darker many times than the shadow of the tree at midnight was the blackness of her spirit. How often, do you fancy, she had cursed the tree, as it grew up to darken her door? Why had she suffered it to grow? Why not torn it up while yet the roots were young, and her hand could grasp the stem? It is hard to say. Perhaps, at first the bitterness of memory had in it a little of sweetness. Do not some palates take pleasure in bitter things, and we, not seldom, hug our miseries?

The darkness of her spirit, too, like the tree, was not the growth of a night, nor yet a year. Five-and-twenty years it took growing and spreading its shadows, until now it stood, in gnarled deformity, darkening her

door and life. At first she perceived it not—the shadow reached not to her door or heart; and she knew not that it was bound to grow and overspread her life. The novelty of her silk gown had scarcely passed away, when the little bourtree, a sapling of a year, shed its first leaves. Then came her only child, the weaver's little Bella, like a fresh burst of sunshine on her life. She first felt the shadow and shivered—when, thereafter, at her “kirking,” she saw William Mowat lead his bride, Bess Leitch, up the aisle. The shadow, then first felt and recognised, year by year deepened as the weaver's trade fell off, and his asthma developed itself, and his power of working decreased, and the cow died, and means were wanting to purchase another, and the fact was apparent to the village that James Bisset was a poor and a sickly man. All this time the woman's heart was hardening. At first, when she perceived the shadow, she had comforted herself thinking in her heart, “He is not strong; he is old, and my burden can't be for ever”—dimly, hazily thinking of his death—her husband's death—and her freedom. But death came and went around her, and made many weeping widows, or widows who seemed to weep; but she was still the spouse of James Bisset. Meanwhile, Mowat, like the bourtree, had grown and spread prosperously near her door. By the time she had learned to curse the tree, it had grown beyond her grasp and power to uproot it.

Yet, though dourly, she did the work that fell to

her to do. She tended her ailing husband, if not lovingly, yet so that no one could reproach her. If her child did not evolve her tenderness, she had at least as much care and tending as the neighbours gave to their bairns. If the well of the woman's sympathies was built up, there appeared no total lack of the waters that are necessary for the household lives of us all. None but the weaver and his child knew that the water they drank was bitter, even as the water of Marah. For the woman, when webs came not, went out into the fields to labour, and earned bread for both father and child. Had not the shadow deepened on her life and door when she had come to this? But what of her husband? He, poor man, had wondered as much as any one when Bella Lumsden—the high-spirited Bella Lumsden—had consented to be his. No words, save words of love, had he ever addressed to her since they twain had become one flesh; yet a stone-cold wall of separation had grown up between them; and his heart, that would have welled forth love, was ice-bound. Then, when sickness and poverty came upon him, he bore both without a murmur for himself, but with keen soreness for *her* sake—a soreness made acute by his perception that she felt she had wedded poverty with him, while she might have done otherwise. He never spoke, however, of that, while all her hard kindnesses he acknowledged gratefully. The child grew with much of her mother's beauty and more than her father's gentleness, beloved of him

with a love passing the love of woman ; and ere she had grown to understand it, love was all he had to bestow on her. Thus it happened that the little one betimes learned many things which only the children of poverty learn early.

Once on a summer day she was loitering about a cottage which William Mowat was building, a mile distant from the village, gathering a bundle of "spales" to carry home to help her mother's fire, and Mowat seeing her, and ascertaining who she was, perhaps regretfully tracing the mother's lineaments in the face of the child, gave her a shilling. Elated with this rich gift, she hurried home to deliver it to her mother with the spales ; and with eager speech she told how Mr. Mowat gave it to her. The mother smote her, and uttered bitter curses on Mowat and all that was his—wildly and passionately cursed them ; but necessity makes shillings valuable, and the woman, cursing, retained the coin. Before then, the child had felt that bitterness lay at her mother's heart. Now, with uncomprehending stare, she knew that the bitterness flowed out in angry torrent at the name of Mowat. But, no doubt, on her young mind, both the blow and the bitterness made but a short-lived impression. To this also tended her father's mournful love, for even his "petting" had with it somewhat of a wail ; but his love comforted and brightened her young life, whose pleasure and gladness came mainly from it. So it was, that when her mother sternly called her in at nights from

her playmates—"It is bed-time; wash yer feet"—for she used to run about bare-footed; and when she obeyed the harsh-toned command, every night unfailingly she climbed to the breast-beam of the loom, to her father's arms and bosom, to say her prayers and to have her hair combed and shaded, and to be kissed and caressed, and blest, too, before she lay down at the foot of her parents' bed. Indeed, in the hard and dull round of the weaver's life, this little girl was the one thing of goodness and brightness and unqualified love that gave colour and warmth to it—that made many harsh things appear as mercies, for which in all humility he offered thanks to God. Thus, with scanty fare and much love from her father, with much of maternal hardness and governance, Bella Bisset grew up a child of beauty, enjoying the life she had come unto; daily climbing into the bourtree at the door, having no thought that the little tree whose stem scarce bore her weight, was connected with the broken hopes and bitter memories of her mother, from which came that harshness which too often threw shadow and gloom on the unreflective mind of the impetuous child.

Meal at thirty shillings a boll! How few of those who read the words comprehend their full import. In the homes of the poor they compel an entire apprehension. The careful "haining" of every spoonful of the treasured meal, the jealous watchfulness of the expenditure of every penny—to many the half rations and pale faces of times of famine—to all a weighting sense of present

exigency. Meal was at thirty shillings a boll in the spring following Bella Bisset's fourteenth birthday, and her mother expressed the necessity there was for Bella to earn her own porridge. The weaver was often for weeks without a web. "Folk dinna pit muckle in claes whan meal's dear;" and eight or nine shillings a-week were his earnings at the best. So out "tae the herding" the lassie went. "Lik' mony a better lass afore her," said her mother, with many a sigh and prayer from the bereaved father, who felt as if the lamp of life had run out of oil, and light and pleasantness had departed. "But we maun pairt some day, dear bairn!" said he, as he kissed her, and they both were weeping.

How painful is such a severance to certain natures, even in the lowest ranks! Bella—little Bella Bisset—felt as if her heart-strings were broken, and she went, pained, and moanful, and with tears, out into the fields and sunshine, following her beasts; and with silent weeping she fell asleep at night, ever mindful in the daytime of her father's love, every hour of separation increasing her love of her mother; of nights, still dreaming of her father. Bodily ailment, too, was added to her inward malady, for the full diet of meal and milk which she now received, coupled, perhaps, with her mental derangement, brought on boils and blains, very painful and irritating. In their rough way, the people with whom she was were kind to her. Having poulticed one bad boil on the back of her neck until it broke, the farmer's wife squeezed it according to rule,

and the young girl fainted—fainted and had a delicious moment, for as the tide of life flowed on again, she fancied she was in her father's arms. Poor child! Is a superior nervous organisation in such circumstances better than a curse?

But time, the great curative of evils, mental or physical, which admit of cure, soothed and softened the life of Bella Bisset, and in the spring of her seventeenth year, she was a bright little maid, with the peculiar beauty of her mother, the arched nose, protuberant chin, and brilliant eye of her mother, and her father's sweetness of expression. She had shifted her service, and was now in the household of Mr. Cameron, tenant at Lyne, and close by Lyne was the shop of Donald Leitch, merchant there, brother of that Bessie Leitch who was the wife of William Mowat. Leitch was a man well-to-do in the world. In early life he had succeeded to a few hundred pounds by the death of an uncle, and had thriftily made the most of it by his shop, in which he sold not only meal, the staple requisite of the district as food, but cloth, ribbons, groceries, and ironmongery, in fact, his shop was a store, from which all the wants of the district were supplied. A hard, skinflint man was Leitch, now verging on his sixtieth year, a widower with several children, of whom Thomas the eldest, attended to the store.

Thomas Leitch was a red haired lad of twenty years, blue-eyed, fair skinned, a good-looking country laddie, but gowky withal, and soft of head and heart. He saw

Bella Bisset, and straightway fell in love with her, and he firmly believed that his love was real. Proximity of residence made opportunity of love-making easy and frequent; and Bella, to whom her father's tenderness had made love very acceptable, readily yielded herself to the lad's proffered affection. Before either knew the importance of the matter which engaged them, and without a thought that the conditions of their lives were widely different, they had vowed, each to the other, unalterable love. It was a summer of intense delight to them. What dreams they had and told of coming times, when Tom should have a shop of his own, and a tidy house, and unshackled right to love, and a little wife to love ever and so dearly. They gave significance and a seal to their visions by kisses unnumbered! It is the old story, played out by lad and lass since the world began.

But true love seldom runs smoothly. Old Donald Leitch observed that his son now regularly left the house after shop-closing and supper, and did not give direct replies to his sister, when interrogated, as to whither he went. Keen-eyed, too, in business, he one evening noticed that a small blue silk shawlet or neckerchief, price half-a-crown, had disappeared, and he was certain it had not been sold that day. When Thomas went out whistling, after supper, the old man followed him, and came upon him in a clump of hazel, down by the burn at Lyne, with his arms around Mrs. Cameron's servant. The missing neckerchief was

round her neck, fastened with a twopenny-halfpenny brooch. And the father was furious, and struck his son, and ordered him home; and the girl he called "jaud" and "thief." But Tom kept his arms round the lassie, and said she was honest and true, and should be his wife, while the words faltered on his tongue, as his father struck him again and again, until with shouts of derision he drove him from the copse. Then old Donald Leitch gripped the girl's arm, and, repeating the name of thief, he tore the shawlet from her neck, and led her away to her mistress. Speechless she went with him.

There was much and grievous ado about this untoward business. Old Leitch gave the girl in charge to her mistress as the seducer of his son, and as having suborned him to rob his father's shop. Mrs. Cameron, too, unhappily took an evil view of the matter, sympathised with her neighbour, both as a parent and a merchant, and resolved to turn the girl off next day, as the most certain way to end the affair. With many hard words she locked her up in the kitchen when the family went to prayers. She "wadna trust her amang decent folk's bairns, e'en tae hear the word o' God," and the lassie, amazed and stupefied, lay down on her truckle-bed, and heard the family psalm sung "ben the hoose" with a strangely pained yet apathetic heart. She would fain have cried. "The cry was in her throat, choking her," but the tears came not; and, at length, wearily, she fell asleep. Her sleep was not for long, however.

At midnight, Donald Leitch came battering at the door. "Thomas has not come home. Is he here?" Of course he was not; and bitter were the reproaches which the old man heaped upon the girl, the cause of his grief, as he esteemed her. In her midnight sorrow it somewhat comforted her, that her lover had thus shown his spirit and sense of the injury done to her and him. But where was he now? Out in the dark by the burnside, perhaps; in evil case somewhere undoubtedly; and she tossed on her narrow bed and wept for him who was thus suffering for her sake. For herself she had no grief, no pity, uttered no moan. By her mistress' orders, next day, she collected her few articles of clothing and quietly awaited the afternoon, when it suited Mrs. Cameron to have the cart yoked to convey them to the village. "I'll return her tae her mither," said Mrs. Cameron; "let God and her mither guide her after that."

It was evening as the cart rumbled into the inn-yard. There they left it, and the girl followed the woman along the long village street, so well known, but which now somehow seemed strange to her, past persons and places which all seemed foreign, to the lane and the door where, as a child, she was wont to play. Mrs. Cameron entered the house, but the girl hung back and went to the stem of the elder-tree, and once more stood in its shadow. The tree was in full flower, and filled the still evening air with fragrance, heavy and bitter. What Mrs. Cameron said the girl heard not, but her mother's

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voice was loud and angry ; and as Mrs. Cameron returned to the door, the mother followed her, and cursing was in her mouth. "Ma curse on Donald Leitch an' a' his belongin's."

"Na, na, wife," gently interposed Bisset ; "curse not at all ! The Lord reigneth."

"Gang in, ye dottrell !" cried the furious woman.

"There she's till ye, ony gait, as I got her, for aught I know," said Mrs. Cameron, walking away.

And the mother stood in the doorway, just where she is sitting now, and scowled at her only child, calling her "base limmer" and "strumpet."

"If ye haed a true drap o' ma bluid in ye, ye wad curse Leitch an' a' his. Ye would spat in their face ! Ye'll no com' in here ! It's nae place for ye ! Oor meal is scant enow wi'oot uphaudin' the lik' o' ye, ye mon'ment o' sorrow !" and she shut to the door.

Poor Bella laid down the bundle of her clothes, and wearily leaned against the tree. What had she done ? Was love so sinful a thing as to merit all this ? She was crushed and stunned beyond power to think ; and crushed and stunned she stood there, she knew not for how long. But it seemed a long, long time, when she was roused from her stupor by the sounds of singing ; and she knew again the cracked voices of her parents singing the psalms of her childhood. They had shut her out before God ! A terrible pang went through the lassie's heart, and all her body quivered. Then she heard her father's voice in prayer—heard it once more ;

and at the well-remembered tones she could have gone down on her knees in the lane beside the tree, as often she had knelt at her father's chair, overshadowed by the figure of her father. Now father and mother had cast her from them. The shadows of evening were closing.

"God guide me, poor wretch!" she cried. "All are turned against me!" and she took up her bundle and fled away.

Three times before worship had James Bisset essayed to go to his child, and as often, imperiously, had his wife ordered him to let her alone.

"Lippen her till me. It'll dae her na ill tae cool a bit in the skin she haeted in."

But when he rose from his knees, the old man was not to be restrained.

"I can haud nae langer frae ma bairn an' her nigh han' me in distress," he said; and he went out to her; but found her not. He went round the end of the cottage, but she was not there. He searched the empty, tumble-down cow-shed behind, but found her not. He went wildly out into the street, staring anxiously through the mirky gloaming, but she was not seen of him; and he came back frantic to his door, crying, "Whaur is she? Whaur is she? Ma bairn, ma bairn!"

Seven years had passed since then, and brought no tidings of the lost one. Was not this another bitter association to engraft on the tree?

And the seven years had been years of suffering.

Poor old James! With the loss of his child all joy in his life was extinguished. He felt, and felt sharply, that it was his unkindness in her "trouble" that had driven her away. His asthma and his cough made more frequent visits, and the periods of their stay were longer. A nervous tremor, almost a palsy, seized his large, thin limbs, and many days of suffering and scanty food lay within the circle of those seven years. No wonder that the old woman, lean and uncleanly, at times let her wretchedness have voice. Thus, once in the house of a neighbour, whose pot, full of boiled potatoes, stood at the hearth, she made free to select one for eating, and the potato she chose was externally mealy and enticing. It proved hollow and unsound of heart. Then the ever-present sense of her fate found utterance.

"Lass!" she said; "whan young as ye, I could wale the country for a husband, an' I did sae, lik' wi' yer pot the noo. An' I choiced fairly tae think o', but disappointment, an' sorrow, an' dool, wus what I gat for ma portion."

No wonder, too, that now she sat in the doorway and rocked herself, full of black, bitter thought. She had crushed within her every expectation of good for herself, every hope that her child might be doing well! Could aught that belonged to her prosper? Nay, all her life had been evil, and that continually, and her heart was hardened. She was without hope. The shadows had indeed fallen heavily on her. And as evening advanced, and the sloping sun-rays ceased to

penetrate the foliage of the tree, she got up off her stool with a shivering, and went in.

"Wife," said James, "I feel ma trouble comin' on me heavy. I canna bide at it;" and he left his loom. "Lord be merciful!" he added.

"Ye're aye aillin', aillin'," said she, crossly.

Now no ray of hope came to her even at the thought of the old man's death; and the man and woman sat down together beside the smouldering peat on their desolate hearth.

In came Luckie Balders.

"Hoo are ye the nicht, Jemmus?" asked she.

"Hoch, hoastin' awa', aye hoastin'," answered Mrs. Bisset.

"Weel, neighbors," said Luckie, "I hae news for ye. I seed a hawker, tap o' the day, wha cam' throo Elgin toun, an' wha dae ye think he seed? Yer dochtar Bella there, brow an' brave."

"Oor Bella, woman?" said old Bisset, eagerly grasping the woman's arm.

"Yes, yer Bella, weyvar! Taen up tae be mairried wi' her maister, wha haes a public, an' flirtin' awa' wi' a' the lads o' the toon an' roun aboot. She's in a gran' way, she is, says the hawker."

"Thank God! she's amang the leevin'," ejaculated Bisset, piously.

"We're naething the better o' that, nor o' the news o't either," said the woman through her teeth.

CHAPTER II.

How often and how far do many wander from happiness, in purest wilfulness, closing their hearts against the promptings of reason; case-hardening themselves by the compression of natural emotion. We are injured by him we love; but our hearts are soft, and we long to forgive and embrace again the dear one who has sinned against our love and his own, but this prompting is set at nought, and our love made fuel for the flame of resentment. How alien to human nature this teaching, "If thy brother sin against thee, forgive him; I say not unto thee seven times, but seventy times seven." And how difficult it is, when once we have set out on the wrong path, and got accustomed to it, to go back upon it, or even think of doing so. So it was with Bella Bisset. With her heart full of despair, which hardened while it pained her sorely, she had rushed from her father's door—that vague and reckless feeling of despair, which, when sin and shame are its exciting causes, too often seeks death. But the girl had no consciousness of wrong. She had done no wrong. She had been wounded sorely in the house of her parents; and thus it was that her innocence, her filial love, her passion for the boy Leitch, all went to work in the hardening of her heart against the home of her childhood and the parents she loved. Thank God that in our natures such

fires burn themselves out, and that by-and-by we come to listen again to the still small voice which prompts and pleads for the right.

Bella had one pound five shillings in her pocket when she faced the world alone and in pain, that sum being the moiety of her wages which Mrs. Cameron had paid to her. Perhaps if the woman had paid the money to her mother, the girl might have taken her buffeting and submitted tamely. But she had in her much of her mother's waywardness, and was capable of doing that which pained herself, if unhappily it distressed others. So it was that, thus provided and thus instigated, she set her face towards "the low country," to seek work and forgetfulness in distant places. Youth, and the capacity to do a full day's work for a fair day's wage, were in her favour. Her prettiness also, and her cleverness, for she was both pretty and clever, were great recommendations; and thus she had passed from sphere to sphere of life and labour, until now, nearly seven years after that unhappy evening, she was, as Mrs. Balders, on the authority of the pedlar, had stated, barmaid of the White Horse Inn in the old town of Elgin, and had been there nigh eighteen months.

"The pretty barmaid," "The belle barmaid," "The white and pink Bell," and twenty other pleasant and flowery names applied to her, indicated the high appreciation of Bella Bisset as a pretty and a pleasant girl in the eyes of the strapping sons of Morayshire, who thronged the White Horse Inn on market-days. Equally

sweet were the names bestowed on her by the young men of the town, and the coachmen and coach-guards, who mustered at the White Horse of evenings, and imbibed its fuming whisky punch or its creamy malt liquors. The White Horse was the second inn of the good town, and its frequenters were consequently second-rate men also; but in that pleasant garden of the north all men are polite, many courteous, so that the general admiration of our Bella was never mixed with rudeness towards her. In truth, her quickness of reply, and a certain lady-like deportment, the natural grace of a fine girl, were her ample protection against unmannerly bearing. And, as happens to girls in such a situation, many gratuities, pence and sixpences and larger coins, found their way to her oft-pressed hand, and were unhesitatingly accepted, ay, and boarded, for, would you believe it? our gushing Bella had become sordid and worldly, and desirous of adding coin to coin. She had laid by a nice sum, too.

But, if she had thus become sordid and a lover of money, her forgetfulness of her parents could scarcely be accounted for by mistake of head or heart. So judging, however, we should much mistake her. Her heart and thoughts had very soon come right, and now they ever turned back to earlier days, and to the distant village. Indeed, here is one of the great puzzles of humanity, that hearts are tender and true, and are pained, and yearn for objects which the arms *can* reach to and embrace, and yet no loving arm is stretched out, no effort

made to clasp the object longed for. Or the heart is full of messages of love, full to overflowing, and the words falter on the tongue and remain unspoken. It needs the will, prompt and strong, to do or utter, and strong wills are not so common as sound hearts. But never did the busy girl, harassed all day long, uttering the ever ready "Coming, sir," and handing brimming glasses, oppressed by thronging faces, changing and strange, and the turmoil of market or gala day, never did she, weary at night, lie down, without her thoughts wandering back to the home of her childhood. Never did she add a pound-note to her increasing hoard without the wish and hope to share it with her father, whose love still overflowed her with hallowed tenderness, even with the mother, whom association made sacred in her heart and recollection. Often, too, did the throng of faces in tap-room or parlour flit away from under the gaze of the barmaid at the sound of a voice which recalled the tones of her father's voice; and not seldom, after a fit of frivolity and laughter, did she seek solitude and weeping, to wash away her sense of undutiful neglect of her distant home. Why then did she not return to it, not communicate with her parents? The bridge between them had been broken down. Humanity is full of contradictory emotions, and the pressure or enjoyment of the present moment almost always prevails over sentiment from the past.

"Hillo, ho, ho! What's adoin' now? My glaik Bob an' my perty Bell! What the so-row are ye up till, ye twa?"

Such was the exclamation of Mrs. M'Linton, the jolly mistress of the White Horse. She had come into a chamber and found her son and the barmaid alone, and lackadaisical. Bella was for shuffling past her, but the portly old lady set her person in the doorway and prevented her escape.

Then said Bell, "Maister Robert is very foolish."

"Tell me something, lassie, that I dinna ken! I hae reared him, the wild colt, an' ken his folly! What are ye up till noo, ye rascal?"

"Faith, mother," answered Bob, "I'm doing a wise thing. I'm courting Bella Bisset, but she winna hae me. You're just in time to put in a good word for your son."

"Be aff, ye scamp! Ye mak' love! If ye haed a tythe pairt o' yer faither's pluck, it's na Bell Bisset, nor ony ither Bell wad say ye nay. Be aff till I see about it;" and Bob went out.

The old lady went on coaxingly, "Ye warnna gluffed wi' the lik' o' him?"

"Not at all, ma'am; he is always very kind and thochtful."

"That's richt noo; that's jist what ilka gay sooter sud be, ay an' always kind and thochtfu'. Nae doot, ye'll buckle till him, ye'll tak' him surely?"

"I cannot, mistress, I cannot," said the girl with tears in her eyes, for the landlady was speaking very lovingly.

"No tak' my Ro-bert! My ain blythe Robie! Ye'll no tak' him! Why, noo, winna ye, Bell?"

"I'm forespoken," said Bell, lowly and slowly.

"Forespoken! Forespoken, lass!" cried the mistress, "Hoo that, an' wha till? An' hoo camna Rob tae ken?"

"It's lang syne an' an auld story, and nane kens it but ane and me."

But little by little the pawky old matron drew from the girl her secret. Seven years before she had loved and plighted her troth to a young man far away, and the love, carefully folded and laid up in her heart, looked as fresh and true now as on that night when she last kissed her lover in the hazel copse at Lyne.

"Oh me! sic fules we are! Loein', loein' on an' on for seven year, an' nar a sicht nor a scrap o' the chiel! Gude guide us! What will lassies be by-and-by? My Bob aside her tae! Why, Bell, be reasonable. I wad hae fourteen sweethearts sin' syne, ane ilka half-year, ony gate! Ye're dementit, lass."

"Na dementit; but bound baith by heart and word."

"An' gif the chiel cam' tae woo ye ne'er again, I wish tae ask ye, are ye tae coop yersel' up in a garret, an' gang till yer grave unmairried? I'm funny tae ken yer mind on a pint like that."

The lassie "didna ken" her mind on that point; but she hoped and trusted that her lover was true, and "If God brings it otherwise till ma sicht, it'll be time enow tae mind it then."

Mrs. M'Linton was wellnigh hysterical. If a stout lady like her were a subject for so trifling a derangement,

I am certain she must have "gone off." As it was, half with the fun of the thing, she laughed till her sides ached, while, on the other hand, she had vexation enough; for she wished her son well married, and entirely approved of his choice of this girl. But the absurd absorption of Bella, in what appeared a mythical attachment, was certainly calculated to diminish the value which the old lady had heretofore set on her. "The dementit bit lass! Her head's as full o' nonsense as a skep o' bees! She canna see a sensible chance afore her een. It'll vex her yet, nae doot!"

Now, all this was pure sentiment in Bella Bisset; and sentiment is often delusive. The facts were, that Robert M'Linton had made love to her, open and manly love, for full twelve months past; and she knew his merits, and, in her heart, she was flattered by his love and prized it. But she had pledged her affections long ago; and although that old love had died down well nigh into a dead love, utterly starved as it was, still its memory was sacred. There is much in the nature of a genuine woman which makes her feel and say, "I have spoken and will hold to it." Yet, in circumstances like hers, such sentiment is illusory, and its life is only in the wayward womanliness of the woman, not in her living love.

Great was the din and row in the White Horse Inn on the evening of the Hallow Fair. The parlour was crowded, the tap-room was crowded, the whole house was full, for there had been a cattle-show at the

Ladyhill, as well as a market. In the midst of the throng moved the active barmaid, with numerous assistants specially retained, delivering liquors of all sorts to all sorts of people, and receiving coins of all sorts with smiles and pleasant words.

"The rale Cardow," said one, smacking his lips over his whisky; "pure and pleasant as yersel', Miss Bell!"

"Capital stuff!" said another, admiring his pint of stout; "wi' a beautifu' heid lik' yer ain, pretty Bell!"

And for all there were smart and agreeable answers.

"Genelmen!" shouted one stentorian grazier. His name was Cruickshanks, and he was "half-screwed." "Genelmen, fill ya bumpa! Drink health of pret girl, ver' purt girl! Purt Bell of White Ho-orse!"

And in an instant all round were singing out, "Pretty Bell of the White Horse!" and "Hip-hip-hurrah!"

Bella was bowing, and simpering, and smiling, and Bob M'Linton among the farmers was yelling for "One cheer more," when a little girl, one of the assistants, told Bella "she was wanted" in the bar-room.

"What for now?" she asked.

"A commercial gentleman and his wife have come from the Caledonian wanting rooms for the night."

"Bother! That comes of the town being full. They would not come near us if they could help it!"

But Bella went towards the bar, resolving to charge double the ordinary rates for a bedroom. In the bar-room was a showily dressed woman, with such predomi-

nance of white lace and white ribbon in her costume as indicated recent marriage. She held the arm of a smartly-got-up commercial man, with yellow hair and bushy red whiskers.

“Can my wife and I have a room?” asked the man.

There came no reply from the pretty Bella Bisset. She stared hard for a moment, turned death-like pale, staggered out of the room, and, endeavouring to ascend the stairs, fell down in a faint. The commercial man was the Thomas Leitch of her absurd affections. She had been harassed and excited all day, yet her thoughts were of him, and “far away,” when the long parlour was ringing at the toast of her beauty;—and here and thus was the cruel end of her delusion.

“Master Robert, Master Robert, ye’re wanted. Bella haes faun ill, and ye must see till the lasses an’ the liquors. The mistress is wi’ Bella, seeing her tae bed.”

The portly old landlady had learned the commercial man’s name, and that he was a native of Northshire; and knowing that the dream which held Bella Bisset’s life was broken, she sympathised and ministered to her.

But by-and-by the young woman lay alone in her chamber, not in pain of mind or heart, but in a stupor which numbed her emotions and deadened her sensibility. Hoarsely hollow the din of the revellers came to her from the rooms below, like the moan of a wailing crowd, and she heard it with loathing and disgust. Her pleasant things had all become insipid and sickening. The whole

objects of living, nay, life itself, seemed to her, once again, hopeless and hateful. But slowly, on her bed, her mind crept back to the days and scenes of her girlhood, past those days of early passionate love which she had nourished into part of her being. Was she dreaming? She was again under the bourtree, and her mother was calling her in—"It is time for bed;" and she climbed again to her father's knee and bosom, and found herself weeping for love. Ah! she was really awake and weeping now, and there was but one purpose in her heart. "I will arise and go to my father!" and her heart was full of penitence, for that she, too, had been unmindful of her first love, and had forsaken father and mother, who had given her life and childhood's love and nurturing, and had clung to and cherished this delusion, which had come to her in a few summer nights of girlhood, she scarcely knew how. "I must go back to them! I will arise and return to my father!" was what her heart and voice kept saying; and good old Mrs. M'Linton thought, too, that she should go.

"Rob, my son," said the old lady; "dinna speak a word o' love tae Bell jist noo. She's no fit for it! Dinna joke her for yer life, or yer love rather, man. She's sair hurted wi' that rid-haired chiel! but a week or twa will bring her roond; an' we'll a' cam' stracht by-and-by."

So Robert, like a sensible lad, was entirely kind and no more. In a few days all was arranged for the girl's homeward journey. "Benjie" would see her to Inverness

by his three-horse coach, and "auld Johnnie Stewart" would take her thence by the night-mail. And so, in a sort of dreamy fever, she was set down at Inverwick on a fine frosty November forenoon.

"Twenty miles to Kirktown," Bella Bisset could walk them, and her boxes could follow by the carrier. Thus, nightfall found her near the village, and the crisp light of a November moon guided her steps to the old cottage door. The old bourtree stood in the moonlight leafless and bare from the early frosts. The cottage door was shut, and there was no light within: and the dilapidation and too evident misery of the place gave the girl great pain. The window was broken, the thatch was mouldered, and in part swept away by winds. She heard once and again the old man's cough—"heu-heu-heu-heuch-heuch"—come from within, and it smote her heart sharply and painfully. She could not go in until she was more composed. So she stepped stealthily from the door to the tree-stem, and stood trying to calm herself, and to forgive herself for all her neglect and sin. What would her grief have been if she knew how sad a day that day had been with her parents? It had been a sad day with them indeed—the darkest of their sad lives. Pinched by cold and hunger, for their little meal cask was empty, the woman had been forced to apply to the Inspector of the Poor. He would give relief, but only on condition that the feu-charter of the poor old cottage should be delivered to him; and with tears the old couple resolved not to

part with that, although feu-duties were for several years unpaid. "I'll no sell ma bairn's birthright for a mess o' pottage," exclaimed old James. "She may yet come back an' need its shelter."

The poor woman was entirely crushed, and full of moans and plaints; while old James, as he supped his gruel, made of a handful of meal, "borrowed" by his wife, said, "Oh, woman! We can still thank the Lord. His mercies in the past were more than we poor sinners deserved!" Then there came a low tapping at the door and, in a minute, mother and daughter stood face to face.

"What's yer wull, mem?" asked the old woman in the trance, of "the lady," who stood silently at the doorstep—silently, for "a gathering at her throat" choked her speech. "What's yer wull, mem?" again asked the crone.

With a sob, the daughter said, "Mother! I've come back ta see father and you!"

"Mither! faither!" said the old woman bewildered; but James had caught the voice and the words, and had rushed to the door, crying, "Ma bairn! Ma bairn!" and the whole difficulty of the interview was over, as the father clasped the daughter in his arms, and she was weeping on his breast.

He lead her into the cheerless, blackened home, lighted only by the moon, and she sat on a stool at his side, and he was restless and ettling to clasp her in his arms again, and to hold her there, while the mother said, "Oor hearth's cauld, an' we're auld an' puir.

There's no a candle in the hoose, nor noucht tae welcome ye. We're low down in pourtith!"

"I hae money enough and tae spair. God forgie me for no coming tae you lang syne!" and the daughter gave money to the mother, and she went out to procure food and comforts.

We will not linger on the daughter's return, so full of sorrow and of rejoicing. Plenty, so long a stranger to the hearth of the weaver, again came to it, to make life worth living. But, indeed, James Bisset's religious mind had always viewed the facts of the present and the fears of the future all as the acceptable dealings of Providence with him, "the clay in the hands of the Great Potter." The cottage was re-thatched, the window repaired, the room whitewashed, and the home of Bella's childhood looked as bright as in its best days. But more to James Bisset than all the comfort, and plenty, and warmth that now were his, was the fact that it was done for him, and to him, by the child of his love. "Bless, O my soul, the Lord thy God!" he would ejaculate, as he sat by the ruddy ingle, "And, O Lord, bless the dear one thou gavest me tae be the stay o' my auld age!" Was it strange that while the father "took" so lovingly and confidently to his daughter, so long estranged from him, her mother was still distant and shy, and so frequently called her "Mem?"

But there was a movement in the old woman's heart of feelings quite natural in her case, but feelings entirely new to her. This unexpected relief from the iron gripe

of want, this unlooked-for elevation both in her own eyes and those of her neighbours, came to her from the child whom her own hands had driven from her door. Could she accept it without conscious demerit and humility? But better feelings, too, were moving within her; for she could not see this great deliverance, so providentially wrought out for her, without reflecting that, in all probability, it was her own act that had so long caused her to suffer. And while she thus felt humbled and shy before her child, she could not keep her eyes off the comely and serene woman who so gently called her "mother," wondering now at her composure and beauty; now, mentally tracing the strong likeness that she bore to her, the mother, ere darkness and distress befell her.

What of Bella's seven years' dream of love? It was wholly gone, no trace of it remaining—gone like a long-continued dream, broken and recognised wholly as a dream, followed, of course, by the stupor of first awaking—a stupor soon shaken off by the activity of life. Christmas came, and Bella had now been at home six weeks; her objects had been mainly accomplished, and she was beginning to think again of the world she had left and of the future, and to scheme for her own maintenance and her parents', for her little hoard of wealth would not suffice for long. She began, too, to have a feeling that her Elgin friends were neglecting her. Why had Mr. Robert M'Linton not written to her? He had not said he would; but his mother had asked for her address, and she had written

to tell that she had got safely home. All this was weighting her on Christmas morning, while she was beating up the egg with milk and whisky—"the auld man's milk," for her father. The cheering and shouts of the village boys on the street, the explosion, from time to time, of their pistols and crackers, came to her with dreamy recollections of her early days. The world was still full of young and free hearts. To many life was still a succession of Christmas knotty matches, the future—devoid of fear or care—a thing longed for. But Bella felt more changed than ever in her life before. No longer to be numbered among the young and thoughtless, recollections of the past and the uncertainty of the future, pressed upon and disturbed her. Meantime, she knew she was in "the path of duty," and felt much peace in that, and in the fact that her parents were in comfort. All these things she thought over and over again, at noon and at night; and with such mingled thoughts and feelings her Christmas was withal a dull day.

Next day she sat at the window patching her father's drawers, and the stitches were all confusedly running into each other before her wavering eyes; for she was still thinking such thoughts as those. "Ho! what's that?" said her father, for the sound was unmistakable—a carriage of some sort had stopped at the end of the house. Immediately two men, well wrapped-up, hastily passed the cottage window, and the foremost was Robert M'Linton of the White Horse Inn.

Why did Bella's heart now leap into her mouth and she feel unable to rise from her chair—she who had so calmly rejected this same Robert M'Linton two months ago? Well, we are strange mortals! At anyrate, there was Robert M'Linton; and there was she, palpitating and agitated, so that any one might have seen it. Briefly he told his tale. Mrs. M'Linton, his mother, had slipped her foot on the stairs and had badly sprained it—Robert was not quite sure but it was broken—and he was come, if possible, to induce "Miss Bisset" to return to the White Horse to superintend and conduct it as heretofore, and to comfort his mother. She must go. She must not deny his mother if it was possible for her to go; and on that he introduced his companion, "Mr. Morrison, the writer from Inverwick, who had business with her father," and with whom M'Linton had shared the hire of a conveyance. What was Mr. Morrison's business? That raised some apprehensions of evil, for "Lawyers' visits are onchancey." But it was soon satisfactorily explained. Old Bisset's brother John, from whom he had not heard for thirty years, had recently died at Glasgow, having long been foreman in a factory there, and James, his sole next of kin, was successor to about £1400 of money. Well, well; why had James suffered want so long? Perhaps the bitter things which he had experienced in the past now made pleasant providences more pleasant and more gratefully accepted.

This unexpected change from poverty to what seemed riches immense affected our various friends differently.

Mrs. Bisset was silent, and her conscience was smiting her for having often, too often, thought and said hard things of her husband, and of her fate, and of God's governance. James, who, in the depths of adversity, was ever tuned to thanksgiving, broke out, "Wherewithal shall I come before the Lord? What shall I render to the Lord for all his gifts? Verily, I am less than the least of all His mercies!"

M'Linton, on the other hand, regarded himself as ill-used. "Sir," said he to Mr. Morrison, "if I had kent your errand, it's not with *you* I'd have come here! No but I'm glad to hear there's money coming to them, but I'd hear it more gladly neist week."

"Robert!" said Bella reprovingly; "is it not well, since I must go wi' ye, that I can go wi' my mind at ease?"

And the "Robert" was spoken so softly, that Bob M'Linton forgot himself and answered, "Richt, Bella, dear! It is a' for the best!"

These events occasioned a revolution in the mind and feelings of Mrs. Bisset, a great change and a happy one. She, who had so often said, "All things are against me," came to see that much of the unhappiness which she had suffered flowed from her own heart, and from the bad, black fancies with which she had so long fed her soul. The cold of adversity had frozen up her better nature. The sunshine of better times now thawed and set it free. The choice of her youth was, after all, far better in a worldly sense, than she looked for when

she "waled" James Bisset for a husband, infinitely better than she deserved. His gentleness and excellence of heart she thoroughly knew. She was wont to despise them as "poorness of spirit." Now she saw that they should have excited in herself corresponding humility and goodness. Thus quickened and softened in her heart, she set herself to tend him and to love him as much as she could; and so it was that when, with returning spring, the bourtree again put forth its leaves, she looked and saw not the dismal shadows which it had cast so long, and which had so oppressed her. The day of right-thinking, which had dawned on her, had dissipated them for ever.

Peace and plenty soothed the remaining years of James Bisset, and have been continued to his widow; for he has been gathered to his fathers, and she still survives. The last time I was at Elgin I put up at the White Horse Inn, and was charmed with the old landlady, and with the comely young matron, her daughter-in-law. The latter discharged the whole duties of mistress of the house, and ministered to the old lady with much tenderness and love. Pretty faces, I thought, may win husbands, but gentle hearts and true natures create and continue that genial affection which makes love a life's real joy, and spreads happiness all around.