

KYLOE-JOCK AND THE WEIRD OF WANTON-WALLS.

A LEGEND : IN SIX CHAPTERS.

BY GEORGE CUPPLES, AUTHOR OF "THE GREEN HAND," "HINCHBRIDGE HAUNTED," &c.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH THERE ARE HIGHER CHARACTERS REQUIRED, AND BETTER FRIENDS FOUND.

ON the forenoon of the day appointed by his master's letter, Andrew duly led forth Rutherford from the stable again; and, mounting him behind the house, rode out in sight of the parlour windows—though without sound on the snowy road—to take the horse as before to the town of Deerlaw. There it would be left, on the safe arrival of the coach. A steed of fate seemed Rutherford; and a herald of welcome to the destinies, Andrew; as they disappeared in a pow-

dery snow-dust on the brow of the hill. No holiday hour or minute was then sought by Hugh. With rapid effort, the arrears of knowledge were dealt with; nor did busy memory need urging, to get its dullest rote, if yet possible, by heart. And in comparison with direr things to be averted, how simple of escape did the very reproofs or penalties of tuition appear; which a little longer time for diligence, it now proved, would have helped to soften, amongst the excuses of weather, and the returning solitudes as to the health of the household during the master's absence. Too late, indeed, was it for Hugh to have a sudden hoarseness, like

little Hannah, or, like little Joey, to have ominous signs of the whooping that was abroad in the parish: for which two favoured little ones the spelling-book and primer had, in consequence, been closed, while Andrew was to bring medicines back with him. Earlier in the afternoon than nature would have countenanced any such quick infection of cold or hoarseness in Hugh after the most undeniable out-door activity, did Andrew come trudging home again, those six wintry miles. The snow-encumbered roads, he reported, were still open; not even the bleak, northern coach-road had been stopped, over dreary Soutra-hill; nor was Andrew's own caution so deficient in the slightest grain, but that, ere committing himself to walk back, he had seen the master comfortably into Deerlaw Manse, in the stable of which Rutherford was of course installed. *There* was it equally natural that the worthy minister of Deerlaw had entered on profitable discourse with a friend like Mr. Rowland, while Mrs. Boglehead hastened the dinner; nay, with her wonted hospitality, would have had the bed prepared. But, as Andrew said—still cordial from the “dram” he mentioned to Mrs. Rowland, (who could not do less than Mrs. Boglehead had done)—“their own minister was not given to changefulness of intent, being a firm man, and of authority, whereby he delayed not for ordinar’ convenience. Only the poor beast had stood in need of a bit half-feed of corn, however, well used to that road. And it was safer to bide at any rate till the moon got up—whilk, providentially, she was about the full; and the road no doubt was short. But notwithstanding, gif the weather should any way lose grip, a’ roads bude to be fully as chancy by a gude light as otherwise.” With which sayings, the man Andrew wished the mistress’s health before he took the second cordial, and left the kitchen for his own hind’s-cottage; there to sup and wait, in composed certainty as to the hour when the stable should require him.

So punctual were the fulfilments of

any resolution thus declared by Mr. Rowland, that to have seen contradictory symbols in the sky, would *here*—at home—scarce have shaken people’s trust. Often had the early sunset, through the foggy winter air, struck as gloomily of late, as that afternoon. Even somewhat so, formerly, in other winters, had the whole afternoon contracted before the door to a staring group of house and wall, and a few suppliant palms of branches, holding their small sacrifices of snow to unseen heaven—with the church belfry muffled, the neighbouring farmhouse gable seen as at the world’s end—all thrust distinctly, insignificant, from a leaden gulf in air, on which there fell, like proof of conflagration smothered by the palpable coming of the dark, a glare of redness that might have been elsewhere terrible. Mere children might have shrunk from such a ghastly gloom out of doors to love the fire within, and caress in their hearts the very candles that Nurse Kirsty brought. But the wild night found sympathy in a boy. He could have rushed into it with a fierce embrace, if it would have stretched even a finger to him; and there was a gloom within, a foreboding of the innermost heart, that now eclipsed the exaggerated old nursing-frowns.

Tea-time came, and Nurse Kirsty brought the tea-tray in: with her new spotted gown, so like the old, as if she clung to that—white spots in a deep-blue ground, like the starry sky once, now like the falling snow at midnight: *why* wearing it, except to be detested? With that high cap, all plaited, tufted, and floating behind in stream or looped bow, as if to remain oracular! With flannelled cheek, betraying her mortal nature, subject to toothache as to crossness—why still affect the prophetic, and say, when her mistress wonders it is so late without the master’s coming, that “the moon will be to rise ere long”? The curtains were not drawn, nor the shutters shut; and high outside, against the dark, flickered the fire and twinkled the candles, with the picture of their own inward waiting over tea. Gradually

the dark lightened up, as if the moon arose. It was nothing, however, but some slow flakes that wandered down, glistening faintly till they twinkled quicker, till they hurried down glaring, till they even at last whirled, circled, and fluttered aslant from the rising air, into the steady image of parlour brightness and comfort. It was snowing fast. The huge black night melted down thus before them, until Mrs. Rowland, by turns, rose and sat down again—looking out anxiously, expecting each moment the sound at the gate, settling at last in the confidence that he would not come. So were the shutters closed, and the curtains were drawn; and, as the time passed, they talked the less disturbedly together. Nay, going into the outer passage, to unclose the door a little, and peer out into the speckled darkness, it was almost terrifying in itself; the wind began to drift the snow beneath into the snow from above, and, sprinkling it in upon the face, even sent it sifting after, through the shut and bolted defence, upon the mat behind.

But the mother called to mind all the pressing hospitality and kindness of Mrs. Boglehead, with the profitable discourse of her reverend partner, ever most congenial to his intimate friend and clerical brother, her own husband. And she said something of it to Nurse Kirsty, at the younger children's bedtime, even although that gaunt figure entered, as was her wont, with a sudden burst of the door; nor had she of late invited much confidential talk, by her ungracious manner since Andrew's change of condition. Other things had imparted to Kirsty's aspect a mingled air of elevation and suffering; and, as was frequent with her, she caught the last words addressed to her, to repeat them as she answered.

"Prevailed upon for to stop at Deerlaw, mem," Kirsty said, austerely. "It's no more nor an hour's ride, or less, mem, fro' Deerlaw! You'll maybe not be aweer, Mistress Rowland, how the moon is nigh the full the-night? To them which knoweth the master best, being longest in the house, and

of the old family, mem, it ne'er could be said that *his* word was failed of, mem." Glancing aside at the boy, with portents in her glance, she took the two children each by a sleeve or cuff, and, like some friendly daughter of the giants, still fulsomely conciliating their inexperience, conveyed them away.

But when Andrew came at the time prefixed, he assented to his mistress's confirmed belief—wondering at the positiveness of Kirsty, which exceeded not only the minister's own, but went above what was becoming in frail creatures like the best of men. For moonlight though it might be at times, the night was "rather coarse"; still drifting when it did not snow as well. So that Andrew, though he waited over the due period, gave in his fullest corroboration at length to the certainty that Mr. Boglehead had prevailed. He opined that the mutual discourse of the two ministers was even then making up for a delay, which it might be trusted would prove brief. May be, as he shrewdly added, they would be none the worse of a single warm tumbler a-piece that night, at Deerlaw, ere they bedded. And Andrew—before departing to his own bed, some hundred yards or so along the open road—did not fail to profit partially by the thought; which Mrs. Rowland smiled at, as she acted upon it. A smile even remained behind the worthy factotum, after he had carefully closed the parlour door where he had stood, and after he had put on his wet shoes in the passage, to retire by the back-premises. This was partly, perhaps, at the respectful gravity with which he had paused, taking the full glass from Hugh, to suggest comfort by some apparent proverb or lines of a psalm—that "the best-laid plans o' mice an' men gang aft aje"—yet started when he had said it, and coughed, wishing their respective healths in due order, and swallowing the draught, and retreating.

After that they sat together at ease, talking more pleasantly, the mother and boy by themselves; passing with the indulged mood of talk into all kinds of cheering or remote topics, as when the

loneliness of a wild winter's night will make juvenility itself companionable, and the most ignorant questions about the world are welcome, if reviving a livelier past in the answers. Long answers were the mother's—bringing up, fuller than ever, the same well-known account of her English girlhood, with the streets, the crowds, the scenes, habits, and daily intercourse of the vast City, her own birth-world: all familiar to *her* once, as to *him* were now the solitude, the silence, the bareness, the stones and weeds, hills and fir-plantations and sky, and snow itself. It had grown late—how late they could not have said; the night sinking toward a stillness outside, as if the snow-fall ended, or the drift calmed. In the deep quiet of the room, when the mother passed from it on some household care before they went up to bed, it seemed that a dull tramp came muffled from the road, but ceased as the gate creaked faintly for a moment. Loudly, at all events, opened the house-door. It proved to be but his mother, hearing the sound too, and looking out. Calling Hugh to her, she took the lantern in the passage, lighted it, and bade him go out to see—to help with the gate, and with the horse, if it were really his father after all. Now, the boy still more thoroughly expected it was so—having believed strangely, under all opposite proofs, in his father's purpose. It was with a relief of feeling that he hastened out, though yet fearing to-morrow. All was very still—more still, because the snow-storm only lulled. Whether the snow itself gave out that light, or was helped by some weak suffusion of the hidden moon, through swelling loads of vapour, the lantern did but stain and peer, with rushing shadows, upon a shadowless distinctness. No spot was in it save what the lantern brought: at the gate no one; only, by the falling of a snow-burden from the trees, as the frame hung unfastened, had it been flung open to the place where it stuck fast. He could not shut it now. Inward turned the deep white road with untrodden purity; the large wandering flakes were

gently wafted in: more steadily, along the restless surface, from the viewless distance, came sifting on a small powdery drift, that scattered higher, as the gust increased, as it had been a dust before the feet of one who hastened out of the storm. A minute curious, breathless, did the looker stand and face it—gazing and listening. The sheeted hedge that revealed itself opposite gave him no eery trouble; he was not afraid of the shrouded arms of their own trees, with a shagged fir-branch or two; nor did it misgive him of the road that glared so vacant into the night, and vanished in its huge abyss. Out of the fresh fit of darkness, into the lantern-light when he set it down to push the gate again, thickened and rose that ceaseless drift, mingling with the flakes and feathers that whirled faster into motes; but, though he could not close the opened breach, he felt no consternation at the inveterate assailment. It was a vague and mighty terror that seized him when he had turned, taking him helpless in its grasp, and bearing him into the house, and seeming to shut the door and bar it, as he himself had done before. All night, even while they slept, they felt the influence of the snow still coming; and pleasanter would have been dreams of frozen ships, of Polar bears, Siberian exiles, of Lot departing from the Cities of the Plain, or monks and dogs of St. Bernard. When they awoke it was still whispering, hushing, whirring, to the fringed window-pane and throughout the narrow air. Not until the afternoon of that second day of expectation were Mrs. Rowland's anxieties joyfully relieved.

Even while they had sat talking on the previous night, however, Mr. Rowland had steadfastly resisted the last pressures of hospitality at Deerlaw Manse. By moonlight, during an interval of the snow, he had rapidly set out on his brief journey homeward. His wonted firmness was the more settled by the obvious argument, decisive even to Mrs. Boglehead, that, if he remained all night, then the pleasant delay, in their mutual region of

hills and hollows, of bleakness and blast, would to all appearance entail a stay of days or weeks—a thing perhaps unimportant to his snowed-up parish, and possibly not unserviceable to the pulpit now at hand, but yet, to a household without head, amidst its natural anxiety, very serious indeed! He mounted the horse Rutherford, therefore, with satisfaction at the spirited impatience of the animal, and was pleased to find no need of pressing him by the spur, while the rein still guided him most perfectly. Soon, indeed, as the snow-shower again began to fall, it was but dimly that the form of the road could be distinguished by the muffled shapes of the hedge-row that glided past—its shapes hurrying the other way, shrinking and cloaking themselves like the rider when he met the blast on more exposed places. Already there were gathered wreaths, below field-dykes now disguised, into which a false step might have plunged the horse with no small peril to itself; yet Rutherford quite justified the opinion that had warranted him on Andrew's part. Steadily he trotted on, where such a pace was feasible, or strained up, with his clogged energies the more exerted, to firmer footing on the open hill-road that rose in the drift. As they mounted thus together, horse and rider with one will, it was not the horse which questioned how to choose between two ways. Whether the shorter and bleaker were safest, or the more circuitous but comparatively sheltered, perplexed Mr. Rowland himself for a brief space; during which he lost the very power of preference. Even any distinction of a road at all from the trackless waste, passed from his mind, as he confessed, amidst the flying chaos that seemed to blind them both at that point. In such circumstances it became proper for him to encourage the horse, and to impart to him a composure drawn, perhaps, less from reason than from a higher quarter. Yet it was certainly not in the very slightest concession to brute stubbornness, scarcely with the least respect for tales of equine instinct, that the bridle was relaxed,

the mane patted, or the spur turned aside, when Rutherford raised his head, pricked his ears, and again strained briskly onward. As the blast diminished and the drift ceased to close the eyes, it appeared a most satisfactory proof of speed. Still it was doubtful if they were nearing home, or were even returning by sheer necessity to the precincts of Deerlaw Manse. An alternative which it seemed less derogatory for the beast to decide upon, than the course actually chosen by it: for at length the rider became aware of the abrupt descent of the more circuitous of the two roads, and of its long ascent again, behind the fir-plantations, round by solitary though sheltered slopes, toward the hollow by Kirkhill. A certain indignation in the rider was only tempered by the obvious confidence of his horse, quickening as if to deprecate reproof—with the chill remembrance, also, how unshaded was the direct way home, where not encumbered beyond expectation, and how, at the bridgeless ford of the stream across it, the water might have been too much swollen. Rapid and surely-footed did the creature become, for all the whirling hurry of the air and despite the showering obscurity and winking swarm of flakes and specks, where all the feeble moonlight spent itself. The wildness of the higher hills about them was safe to that speed which the fir-belts shielded and guided, while here neither the treacherous hollow nor flooded current was to be dreaded. Trusting perforce to such instinct then, at intervals almost blindly, Rutherford's master scarce checked his bridle, or knew his turns before they proved too accurate for prompting. Suddenly, in the midst of the thickest confusion, when gloom and glare were being stirred together, and winnowed out from each other again, with a strife almost as noiseless as tumultuous—the beast stopped short. As if uncertain at the last, gone out of the way and bewildered, it stood silent, with pricked and moving ears. A misgiving came upon the firm man, most unpleasant of all—possibly because he had so

yielded to inferior nature, to find it as idle as he had judged, and reap the penalty himself. He got down, doubtless sternly, and, taking the rein with his strong grasp, looked down, gazed round—peremptorily spoke to and led forward the obedient horse.

A single step, it appeared, disclosed to Mr. Rowland the most unexpectedly cheering tokens. It could be no mere fancy, that through the eddying stir of flakes there came the transient glimmer of a light. Close at hand were the furred branches of a great old tree or two, thrust forth from the spotted gloom; the loaded shape of a great old pillared gateway—dispelling the first puzzled impression that it was home, or Deerlaw again—opened before him as they passed on. Though satisfied to find any roof so near, that he might at least ask the way, even *he* started back, with a shiver through the blood, when the next pace had showed him—drearier than the night and storm; colder than winter—the ruined mass and fragments of some ancient building, some deserted fortress of the barbarous border-time, roofless, with dark loophole through the snow, the haunt of idle legends. What sort of spot for him, Mr. Rowland, the minister, to be brought to in the night, on his way home, by a froward beast and by the fault of Andrew! More incongruous must it have seemed than even ghastly! Yet not so incongruous or, perhaps, so ghastly and unmeaning, as when he recognized the very place and knew it; nay, by a step or two to the other hand, moved into distincter view of the ranged stackyard, full of bulky stacks beside the bulkier peaked threshing-mill, with sheds and farm-offices hard by, and, most conspicuous toward the front, the lighted mansion-like abode of the farmer himself. It was not to be longer masked, by snow or obscurity, from him who knew his parish so well. Indeed, long as it had been since he entered the door of that well-built house, with shrubby and garden like a mansion, yet often in the interval had his due visits been paid to the humble row of hinds'-cottages

beyond. Unaccountable as the accident still seemed—this place most indubitably was Wanton-Walls.

Its windows were indeed brightly lit, glowing so numerous through the busy flakes that hospitality appeared astir among the hills at night. Some jovial feast it might be, as before; some revel prolonged from the New Year, the less suitable to welcome such an unexpected guest. Nevertheless it became him not to recede in secret, or be daunted by the effrontery of evil. The trick of circumstance held him curious, till he partly wondered; and it might be that the pride within drew answer from the pride without, at length rousing a serious compunction for opportunities neglected before. Onward, at least, he passed to the house, whether to be content with some ordinary exchange of the courtesies natural in such a case, or, if need were, to present a sterner and more effectual testimony than of old. But, as if he had been an expected comer, or a late completion to the festive circle, the door opened at the first tread of his horse beside it—servants issuing to take the horse and receive the horseman, to bring lights, and remove the storm-spattered outer garments, though at the well-known aspect they revealed they recoiled with surprise. Not the less, however, forthwith was his entrance urged, and his progress ushered on and upward to the door that finally unclosed before him.

It was no noisy company or orgy that he beheld, notwithstanding. Solitary upon his bed, in the faintly-lit chamber, lay the master of the house, under the first burden of some winter ailment. Tossing upon a feverish pillow, he looked up gladly and welcomed his visitor, with hot arms thrown out; for he had thought it was the doctor, his familiar acquaintance, come at last, before the messenger that had been sent to bring him had even returned. He welcomed the supposed doctor with very free and familiar words, all but profane; while the frightened servant had fled and closed the door. Even through the closed door, before they had entered, had his voice

been heard so loud—ejaculating against this very doctor, and the weather, the roads, the darkness or the light—that the servant had shaken her head to Mr. Rowland, whispering that they were frightened at him ; and the room had seemed even full of orgies and profanity, and of the thirsty call for strong liquor instead of medicine. The sick man hurled an epithet after the woman as she went ; he struggled to his elbow, and tore aside the curtains to see his friend the doctor that had ridden to him, through the snow and drift, eight miles from Thirlstane ; but, when he perceived who it was thus drawing near, to stand erect and still, he stared at him with dismay, and gasped fretfully, almost angrily, with a burning face, and fell back again, and turned his face in sullenness to the wall.

It was a night *that*, of which Mr. Rowland never disclosed much. The snow-drift might lull or be renewed, and the snow-shower fall or cease, but it mattered not. For he remained all night at Wanton-Walls, staying up late by the bed of Mr. Murray, in order that by any means he might awake a dull conscience—a seared one, as he called it—and rouse a soul which might be near to die, for all the strong health of the bodily frame. *Now*, once for all, he was fain to have it awakened even by terror and remorse to the hope of a new life, whether here or hereafter. Very severe and solemn, probably, was the minister that night—too much like the prophet brought miraculously there, if not the avenging angel. There were certain points on which the minister of Kirkhill was austere and terrible almost to the pitch of fierceness in those days ; and at the sight or vicinity of such as Mr. Murray of Wanton-Walls, perhaps he was fiercer. At all events, he must have terrified the man, already drawing, as Mr. Murray was, to the elderly time of life, and unaccustomed to be unwell even for a day, after his worst excess. Fox-hunting had kept him healthy, it might be ; and probably he was not terrified by any reproach connected with that sport. But in the book of the records of the

parochial court, y-clept the Kirk-session, there was a thing written on suspicion and testimony against him ; which, although the only witness had long been dead, and he himself had always repudiated the whole charge with scorn, he that night did confess and own to. Thereafter terror must have possessed Mr. Murray, for he began to wander in his mind, and poured forth not only confessions, but many fragments of wild discourse and reminiscence, which were well nigh terrifying to Mr. Rowland—also exhausting him and unfitting him to await their end, or soothe them down, or offer cure. But, as the doctor did not come that night at all, the minister did not confine himself to the sphere of his own calling. He knew something of the physician's part ; and, having bled the patient, having prescribed convenient remedies and waited till he slept, he went to bed for the night himself, greatly wearied by all these offices.

Again in the morning he returned to Mr. Murray. The latter was then more composed. He welcomed the fresh visit in reality, and asked for the prayers that were offered beside him, closing his restless eyes as he lay still with difficulty, and putting together his hot hands openly above the bed-clothes. He, too, had been a child once, and had walked, it seemed, with his parents through Sabbath air in times very long before, when the days were pious by comparison, to a church where there was a good man preaching. Things which that good man had said he tried to repeat. He recollected parts of hymns or paraphrases set him by his mother to learn, and said to Mr. Rowland that he was sorry, and that some of these things had perhaps risen to him before. Nay, he said that if Mr. Rowland would not preach at him on account of the past, he would be regular at church in future, and offend no more. If possible, he would like to be readmitted to church privileges, some time—without too public a discipline, seeing it was now so long ago since his chief sin was done, and that the partner of the sin was gone long ago. Then the messenger for the doctor returned at

length, at some risk through the snow, which still fell or drifted—cheering them with the promise that the doctor would come soon, though another distant patient had required him, almost costing him his own life. So Mr. Rowland prepared himself to set out for home at the first opening in the weather that day. But, ere he left, he did not fail to speak of the terrors of an enemy whom the doctor might not be able to keep away. He spoke more mildly, also, than before, of cures beyond the power of both friend and enemy—at which Mr. Murray did his best to listen and provide himself; still eager at the hint, however, of a substantial reparation and a tangible proof of repentance. So eager was he on that point, that, ere the minister departed, he asked that a solemn statement should be written; which he could there formally subscribe before other witnesses, and deliver it to Mr. Rowland before he went, that the Kirk-session might believe his word upon good grounds. The reparation which he thus dictated was so far beyond what Mr. Rowland approved, that the latter objected to it as an excessive thing; but Mr. Murray said he had no friends who could rightly expect the property he thus disposed of, nor did he mind any greedy kindred, wishing for his decease before the time. The full purport of this paper was between him and Mr. Rowland for the present—except that before the others, who were called, he sat up and appended his tremulous signature. He then gave the paper to the minister, who folded it, looking upon him thoughtfully, and took it with him when he came away.

Through the still flying drift Mr. Rowland passed out from the fir-woods. The open road below was deeply wreathed—though then so plain above him stood Kirkhill that he rode up to its glebe hedge without swerving. When he came to the glebe hedge corner, whence the smoke was obvious, the very windows looking from under the trees, he thought he knew the level course upon one side the fence, from the sunken ditch upon the other, that lay within his own glebe field. Yet, pressing Ruther-

ford in haste, he found himself mistaken. For, shortly afterwards, he reached the front door on foot, and the first sound that announced him was the stamping that shook off the snow upon the mat, with the loud prefatory *hem!* which they all knew so well—a little louder this time, taking breath to speak. With a cry of sudden joy sprang out little Hannah—and lesser Joey shouted following—while the mother hurried speechless from beyond, Hugh silently drawing near—to greet papa through his wintry disguise; who stood erect, smiling, but calling first for Andrew, with spades and shovels, and all the help that could be, to dig out “Rutherford” from the snow-drift. Solicitude for Rutherford diffused even a tenderness around his gravity, covering or postponing numberless deeper words; and Andrew hastened—nay, with him also Hugh and his especial garden-spade—to follow for the work of rescue. Half merry work, half serious, how pleasantly breaking the icy forethought and pre-imagined distance of the paternal presence now brought back again! Rutherford is successfully led home, having given a deep sob through the snow, and struggled up by the help of his mane, with Andrew’s grasp upon the bridle, and then shaken himself till bit and stirrup rang. His master spoke of him to Andrew, who now inferred the exact truth about the animal’s previous ownership, not just clear to himself before. Meanwhile Rutherford had plunged his mouth into the smoking pail, with a bottle of strong ale in it, which Andrew held for him at the stable-door; and still, as the horse sucked and drank, it was looking out sideways at Andrew with its large liquid, patient eye, like one that could have told a tale. Then, after all, Andrew having put shrewd questions himself by turns, pawkily looked up askance at the minister, and said in his obstinate way, “Maybe, though, sir, it was just about as well the way it was, considering, ye’ll mind, Sir, that until now we were na just fully aware o’ the whole facks o’ the case.”

“True—true, Andrew,” was the musing answer. Indeed, the facts were

now by no means known to Andrew. "I aye missed Mr. Murray, mysel', Sir," the latter persisted. "But wi' siccan a decider leading, as we might say, Mr. Rowland, o' unseem powers, the Wanton-Walls pew canna be long vaucant after the thaw comes, I'se warrant it! Will there be ony orders then, Sir, the' night—ony errands or session-business thereanent?"

To which the Minister replied but curtly, turning toward the house—though few, save the *man*-Andrew, could have ventured to probe so far.

Fear was scarcely there that evening. They ran to unbutton the moist over-alls, to take off the spurs, to carry the cloak away and hang it up—all proud of their respective offices, only permitted to children who were good. Up the dark stair-case, without candle, ran the boy on his errand of peculiar privilege—to bring down the older sitting-coat, and fold up the best one, and also take it carefully away. The little parcels that lay still closed on a side-table, reserved till after dinner, scarce interfered with such a rapturous sense of favour; nor could it even be dispelled by impatience for those other packages, not yet taken from the port-manteau, which were more exciting yet. When the slippers were on, and the easy chair wheeled in from the study-room, it was again joyful as of old for Hugh. There would be no studious retirement that night; and they would hear for hours of the coach, the city, the news, the public business of the church—partly of the private business itself that concerned the Rowlands! Something was heard of Wanton-walls too; and a little of Mr. Murray—once an unheard-of man, a sheep departed beyond hope of the fold.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DREEING OF THE WEIRD.

TO-MORROW, what convenient aid there was from circumstance and nature, joint conspirators for Hugh's profit! For it was Saturday; and, although few could

come to church on the Sabbath, yet those few must have their spiritual sustenance provided, equally with the many, and so the Minister had to be busy with his sermon, and there was no time for the immediate resumption of the lessons and the other inquiries which Hugh dreaded. Moreover, there was work to do; seeing the very path to each out-house or shed had to be cleared again. Lesson-time itself would have had to be added, to permit complete access to be made to every imprisoned roost or hutch, crib or cote, the blocked store-places and the buried garden-herbs. But there was no likelihood of such a mistake again on Hugh's part as the idleness in which he had indulged during his father's absence. Rather subtracting from his lawful play-hours, to help the task-time in this most fortunate interval, he was eager in his diligence with Ruddiman; and, if Cornelius Nepos had a difficulty too hard to revise, there was a gracious glance at hand when explanation was requested, if the mental want of ability implied no moral failure of the will.

The Sabbath-day itself then became as a shining shield, behind which there was fresh immunity and new protection for the young Rowland; for, after that day was passed, day after day followed without too much retrospect on his father's part into the manner in which time had been employed during the period in which Hugh had been his own master. Nurse Kirsty seemed to press her lips together from a determination to reserve her impeachments to a future time, or to be kept mute by toothache. The cow-herd was not seen, nor the kyloe-herd and his dog, save when they had presented themselves at church. The snow locked up and sealed together everything for a time, even to the very possibility of slides, or the remains of fowls and foxes. Lying thus deep, though placid, for days and days together, it made other scenes fade in recollection, till they became as dreams. But a thousand sights and novelties of its own did it show forth to recompense the loss. Beauties

beyond utterance were about it—paradisaical or fairy splendours that cannot be told, taking back to infancy. There were sports above number in it. The new pleasure flowed from it, or at its suggestion, of imitating and of making. For, after lessons that seemed to pass more fluently and briefly, they ran out to build temples and shape colossal statues out of the snow; their father walking near, when walks were few and limited, to countenance or counsel the joint effort. In-doors, from frosted tracery of the panes, the younger ones covered their dark slate, with white arabesques, over and over, never the same: day was too short for the patience of the eldest, stooping where the glass was transparent, to set down, from snow to paper, those little blemishes and blacknesses, blots, spots, and shades and lines, that still delightfully distinguished between winter and an utter blank of things.

Meantime the parish wearied of this stillness, counting it a drear seclusion and weary vacancy that lasted too far toward the spring. All the people had begun to cut out roads, from every farm-stead and cottage-row, into the ways that led to village and market-town and the rest of the world. As for roads to the church, that each hill-path might be beaten and trodden to join them as before, it seemed a business left to chance, unless seen to by that man of many offices, Andrew. He alone appeared idle, alone unequal to the task required, alone deploring, by his looks, this preference of temporal things, amidst the very admonitions and signs to look elsewhere. His week-day duties were then but slight. When he rang the morning-bell on Sabbath, or rang-in at church-time, it had been a mere empty ceremony; and he bore in the books from the manse with a crest-fallen air, or spiritlessly shut the pulpit-door upon the minister—sitting down in his own place, like one who doubted the use of so ample a discourse, or even the likelihood of much essence in so full a doctrine, to a congregation so scanty and chill. It might have been gathered

from his manners, that for a short time he almost questioned the zeal which could content itself with awaiting the thaw, and would fain himself have anticipated it, whether by busy return to his laic functions, or by open exercise of the clerical.

With the increasing intercourse, however, and spread of news, some sudden official message did come to Andrew one morning, which brought him speedily to the alert. He hurried from the stable to the back-door of the manse, without preparatory delay, and kept his business, whatever it was, for the minister's private ear in the study. A Latin lesson with Hugh was interrupted there, and put by, for the business which Andrew secretly mentioned. Yet Andrew made amends to himself for unimportance that was past, by hiding now, from all idle curiosity, the reasons for importance that was present. Off he rode to summon meetings of the elders in session, or to set humbler parishioners at work on the church-road at last—mentioning to no one the reason for this renewed bustle and activity, but maintaining a reserve and gravity derived, as it seemed, from some authoritative source within.

Soon the scene was busy along the encumbered road outside—from the hill-brow, past the house and the stable-back, to the little lane that turned in toward the church gate, between the office gables and the farmer's barn-yard, with the threshing-mill. It was odd to watch, and lively to mingle with. All the strong hinds and sturdy lads who had nodded in the nearest pews about the pulpit, in the finest summer day, seemed there awake, and straining as they dug or shovelled; others there were, seen far off, busy in like manner and as assiduously upon the upland road, where it issued from the fir-plantation. So many willing men, so many spades and shovels, it had not before appeared that there were in all the parish. Ignorant of what could be done with snow, they yet turned it unmeaningly to curious accidents and diverting chances. In great slices they trenched it up, or heaved it high

in solid squares and longer blocks, thrown aside at random, piled above by joint efforts, till the passage went on deeper at the open turn, and entered broad, at length, into the track which had had been sheltered by the paddock-hedge and the young trees. Andrew, with spade, shovel, and mattock, had been seen, for a time, amongst the foremost, burdened with implement and weight of duty, as a leader well might be—accompanied by one inferior agent of his will, and also bearing the church keys. And what although Andrew afterwards proceeded out of view, and remained for hours absent—even shut in so long with his companions in the closed church that it seemed as if they had fallen asleep, or had secretly gone home through a window? His feigned reserve was now useless, save to eyes that pried but as short a distance as Nurse Kirsty's could. All this mute importance could not be explained by supposing only that he was making ready for the Kirk-session as for a grand new thing, or preparing for congregations again to meet as they had done before. It could be no bright intentional thought of Andrew's which had hit upon this unexpected avenue of novelty through the snow, this curious vista of beauty for the approach of old dull things,—a road which lay onward like pictures of Palmyra in the desert, of marble ruins or of a street disinterred from under ashes of volcanoes, with slabs thus glistening, and fragmentary pillars shining so, stained with iron rust, or fluted and marked by the tool,—the green mould brought up with them, or the weed clinging to their tops. The sight faded into the dark when day was done, and showed itself again, solitary, the next day and the next.

Trivially, with an unconnecting purport, do parish tidings spread and come, or Kirk-sessions meet, for children and boyhood. Whispers of vague church-business, or plain mention of decease that had nothing peculiar or surprising in it, bring no point of interest to that special quarter. Mr. Murray of Wanton-Walls was dead. So much was now

certainly known. Equally doubtless was the fact that the subsequent kirk-session had had some duty to perform in consequence, and that the funeral would take place that week. Possibly on grounds connected with this event, a more numerous congregation was expected to gather on the next day of rest to hear a sermon more impressive, more solemn, if not more moving and affectionate, than usual.

But the day which came before that last one was the most eventful. Already had Andrew's chief mystery been found out. Instead of the *church* having been his secret place with that companion, it was the end-aisle he had let himself into by the keys—locked in amongst the snow, and working quietly till night. If he did it to be unmolested, or did it out of considerateness for those who had never seen such work, it would have been kinder to have let them look in, at least, through the keyhole. All the morning, and all the forenoon, the greater dread of a nameless thing did but creep over the covered hills, under the wan brightness of the air—gathering beforehand near the back-gate, at the first sight of Andrew himself beyond, in his best black clothes. He looked out from the church-lane, as in hospitable expectation; and towards him there collected other waiting friends or spectators—while, out of the kitchen porch close by, stood Kirsty, with the children and the other servant, heedless of the cold, with lowered voices, gazing forth to the road. But on the other side of the road was a high hedge-bank, from above which, over the bare trees, one could see sooner far to the white hill-side, where the way from Wanton-Walls came first out of the plantation. There the boy Rowland ventured rashly, and stood on tiptoe till there came upon him a dreadful fascination. For he had seen *it* coming and disappearing. He thought that, at the very first re-appearance of the horses' heads above the brow of Kirkhill, he would spring back across the road, within the gates of home, content to see it pass, as others were. Yet, as in a helpless dream, he

beheld their heads, and heard them straining up. Horses! The steam of their nostrils hung in the frosty air; their hoofs were lifted and set down in order; their heads slowly tossed and swayed to each other, crested with sable plumes that had not been known of. Then a furious shadowy torrent ran before them along the shadowy gulf; and, like the fabled horrors of legend, like the hideous pomps of tyrants and executioners, there came on behind them an unimagined car—a thing of loathed resemblance to earthly equipages, as of Juggernaut and Moloch, but on noiseless wheels. At its unsubstantial nodding of midnight fir-boughs before him, amidst the light and glare of day, with blazoned bones below, and a winged but bodiless cherub, and a grinning scythe-bearer and trumpeting angel—it was as if the malice of darkness had devised an ambush for him, to overwhelm with terror and bear him inward to the end-aisle. Through all this, as through a mist, were hovering the placid looks of little Hannah, and the round childish face of Joey, with Kirsty at her ease, not many yards away. Whereupon he might have fainted ere it was well past, scarce noticing the familiar group which followed, the hearse, talking to each other carelessly, though under solemn guise, nor almost recognizing the elders of the kirk-session behind, and his own father mounted on Rutherford, with others in the rear—but that foremost of all there glowed up to him, and shone like a warm sun, one face most unexpected and surprisingly cordial. The form was the form of woe and mourning, with white-edged cuffs to the glossy suit of sable, with dolorous black streamer behind the sleek new hat—and to that form did Nurse Kirsty point with a wild surprise, while some climbed to see it, and others stifled their exclamations. Yet, from amidst that doleful vision did the face turn up glad recognition to little Hugh, as it looked about uneasily and awkwardly, with a quick gleam which expressed satisfaction at sight of him, till, borne onward inexorably with the procession, it was gone from view.

Hugh Rowland glanced involuntarily for Bauldie—though the dog was not there. It was certainly, at all events, Bauldie's master, so transformed to rueful seeming. A pride of attire, and a sense of important position, had given his gait a strutting air, while it was obvious that he had taken heed to previous counsel from the elders. But his eye had roamed sideways, and his restrained agility of tread evinced the captive only for a time. Even although he had kept a cautious distance next to the awful chariot he followed, yet it was not *that* which he had seemed to fear; but rather lest he should not be decorous to the end, nor be able to hide a sly wonder, a simmering and overflowing pleasure, a frequent motion of one hand to feel in one of his pockets. At the turning to the churchyard-lane, ere the sombre pageant stopped, it had been evident that he doubted what came next, and was not sure about his part. But an elder whispered to him, and he steadily disappeared.

It was said, at the end, that his name was now not Jock, but John Murray; and that all kyloe-keeping was for him at an end, to say nothing of more idle practices. He had been left money, it was declared, by Mr. Murray of Wanton-Walls, who had meant to own him as a son, and to have his schooling improved, so that he might be a credit to his prospects. The Kirk-session was now his guardian, and was equally bent upon his welfare. School did not promise to advance this much; but he made deliberate option to learn farming, and be in course of time a farmer. With that end, therefore, was it fixed to place him with the farmer at Kirk-hill, old David Arnot, who could teach him well, and at the same time would benefit most essentially, under the Kirk-session's very eye, by its pecuniary payment for his living, with the diligent labour it inculcated. Thus it came to pass that the quondam kyloe-herd, once mighty in the distance, became a near neighbour, and thenceforth, as a mere Jock Murray, began to fade into homely commonplace, while poor old Mr. Murray of Wanton-Walls, brought still nearer—laid in the

end-aisle with his ancestors—rose toward an epic force.

Nothing could altogether soften for the boy the strangeness of such vicinity, or make the path safe for him that crossed before the arched doorway, though it was closed and locked, until there came the returning grass, the blowing air, the growing light and breath of spring. But soon did the sun and wind work ravage on the soiled snow; and there came, ere many days, the universal thaw. Then it melted quickly, sinking down and breaking, while from under it the water trickled and ran. A perfect brook went coursing down the shrubby walk for a whole day, gurgling in beneath the garden door, spreading each way down the gravelled paths to the bottom wall, which emptied it to the field below, among the rotten leaves. White patches lingered on the freshening face of the green, indeed, where the first sharp snow-drop pierced, like a delight recalled, in the black mould round the mildewed roots of trees; and they grew grey on the uplands, where the whiter sheep scattered again beside them, till the radiant lambs suddenly appeared. The crocuses flamed up, or bubbled purple forth; the clammy purple sheaths of the plane-tree-buds were swelling; the straggly brown elm-twigs were tipped with a thousand breaking spots; the firs put out tender spikes of emerald from the olive-green and bronze. Be-

neath, the ground smelt fresh, and busy birds flitted with straws and stalks. The slow plough reddened its stripes into the dark breadth of every ridge, and the garden-work of Andrew was early at hand. Overhead were azure glimpses through the white; along the bleakest wall, too, went flying lights; upon the gable to be soonest obscured, through shaking shadows that were ragged and riddled still, came dappling in the warmest sunshine which could glow from the south. That moist and blossomy spring returned like a dear friend about the house—seeming only to have slept the while in its best and stillest bed-chamber, where guests were wont to sleep, where lavender smelt about the sheets, where the window-hangings were of muslin, the blinds were ever drawn down, the curtains were of marvellous roses entwined endlessly with birds surpassing mortal.

O life, life! and spring and childhood, ye are sweet! How sweeter after seeming death, and decay, and the earthy flavour of the dark underground, which has stones so chill, and ribbed shapes, and mouldering relics! Be covered in again, ye grim secrets, that the enchanted existence may hasten on again unchecked to its boundary, with no fears or conflicts but its own, no trouble from alien sources. Let quaint uncoutness melt to the past, alike with the dreariest weird it has helped to blend among fears departed.