

CHAPTER XI

MY MARRIAGE

WE were at Stonefield one day, when our host suddenly thus addressed my father: "John, Ballimore is to let. How would it do for you? Let us go and have a look at it!"

No sooner said than done. A large rowing-boat was ordered out, and the tide being propitious, it took something under two hours for four sturdy boatmen to pull us across Loch Fyne in a long slant, when we landed in a small creek below Ballimore House.

No one being in residence there, it was not necessary to go as far as Otter Ferry and make a ceremonious entrance by the lower avenue, and accordingly we marched straight up from the shore by means of a steep, little footpath—how well we grew to know that path!—and, emerging from a belt of wood, found ourselves among grassy slopes surrounding a solid-looking, grey-stone mansion with a handsome portico.

A nice enough place, but still! Naturally it was not at its best, with shuttered windows and no signs of life about; and it had none of the fanciful charm of Kames, none of its historic associations.

On the other hand, it was pleasantly secluded among sheltering woods, and had all the appendages of a comfortable country house. The youthful brigade looked at their elders anxiously.

And the elders were critical, suspending judgment ; finally, we started on a tour of inspection.

How long that tour seemed !—how endless the things we had to see !—how tiresome the numerous inquiries ! how slow and halting the replies ! Little we cared about stables and kennels, drain-pipes and water-pipes—all we cousins thought about was to escape being torn from each other when Kames should be given up ; and as this was more than likely to happen, from my father's known taste for contrasting a new sporting-field with its predecessor, we were now on tenter-hooks lest any fatal stumbling-block should arise to dash our hopes to the ground.

All, however, went well in the end. After a few more preliminary ups and downs, the usual three years' lease was signed, and we went down to begin our fresh Highland sojourn in the following July (1867).

It was rather later in the year than usual, but we had been in London for the season first. And here I may just remark that it must seem strange in these days that when a break so often occurred in our annual routine, it was never taken advantage of for foreign travel. The truth is that though there were plenty of adventurous spirits among the young ones of the family, no representations could prevail against the rooted disinclination of the higher powers to move aside from the path their feet had trodden for so many years.

It had become a rut, and they loved their rut. My father had never crossed the Channel—never would, and never did, to the end of his days. My mother, before her marriage, had once been taken the conventional, continental tour in the ponderous barouche (courier on the box, servants and luggage behind—every sort of pompous convenience and inconvenience, as aptly described by Thackeray in *The Newcomes*), and that once was enough for her. She would

sometimes talk of her solitary experience, but never wished to repeat it.

And, of course, modern facilities were unknown and undreamt of in those days ; and we were considered exceptionally lucky by our contemporaries in that we moved about as we did, while our yearly migrations south were always a source of envy. Very, very few of the Scottish gentry, however well able to afford it, took their families regularly across the Border, unless there were particular reasons for doing so, and certainly we should not have gone but for our English grandmother's forethought, and material aid—for, if I recollect aright, she always bore the full expense of the trip. She was a very rich woman, my father only a second son, *et voilà tout !* Everything else then being out of the question, we went cheerfully down to Ballimore at the time appointed.

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It was July, as I have said—when the long, light summer evenings are at their longest and lightest ; and for once a hard-and-fast rule of the house—that of never going out of doors after dinner—was set aside in consideration of a new kind of sport. This was fishing with hand-lines in the sea loch just below ; and as it could be indulged in most successfully when the sun was declining, and as my father was as keen as the rest to try it, he pooh-poohed objections, and headed a procession down to the bay as soon as dinner was over. We still dined at half-past six, so had plenty of time before us.

All around a breathless landscape would be sunk in golden haze ; the brown sails of the herring-trawlers would be stealing out from behind point and promontory to take up position whence they could begin their work directly darkness set in—(trawling was still illegal then),—the curlews

would be crying, the gulls wading and chattering—all would be beauty and animation, and all would be more than appreciated from the fact that it was in a way a stolen joy.

Only in August, when our sportsmen were too late on the hill to admit of the terribly early dinner-hour being adhered to, were we ever free to wander forth at sunset—though I ought to add that we often, nay usually, had fine views from the windows of the drawing-room wherein we were expected to assemble. But at the time we could perhaps hardly be expected to see with my mother's eyes, and understand that she wished to inculcate habits of refinement, and feared our losing them if allowed to run about too wild during the impressionable days of early youth.

These were over now—and we felt—but no matter. The law was there, fixed as that of the Medes and Persians,—and a temporary escape from it was all we could look for.

How delightful it was! Old Tom Currie, the fisherman, would be in waiting at the water side; and soon we were hanging over the fishing-bank, one boat vying with the other, and on good nights drawing in almost as fast as we threw out. Codling, whiting, flounders, and “Goldies” were the usual take; but occasionally a strong, fighting nibble would send a shiver of excitement through the veins, only to be succeeded by ineffable disappointment and disgust as there presently rose to the surface at the end of the line a horrible dogfish, with something like a grin of defiance upon its ugly, cruel face.

Old Tom would then out with his knife. The dogfish was no use to us, but it should not be suffered to depart in peace and go on working its wicked will below.

“Here's the last o' ye, ma freen,” the old man would mutter viciously, ripping up his “freen's” belly as he spoke,—“ye'll no eat nae mair o' better folks' food”; and a second twist of the knife would take off the head—after

which plop would go the corpse overboard. "A lesson to the others,"—Tom would nod, returning the instrument of vengeance to his pocket, and seizing his discarded line again.

We soon shared his hatred of the dogfish. There was an indescribable ferocity and intelligence in its loathsome countenance, which made it hardly seem that of a fish at all ; and great was our amazement when one day my eldest brother, who had an original and independent mind, refused to allow an unusually large "freen" to be flung back defunct into its native element, alleging that he saw no reason why the flesh, properly cooked, should not be good to eat.

Accordingly he himself bore it to the kitchen, and presided over the cooking—which, I believe, resembled that accorded eels. First it was parboiled, then boned, cut in slices, and fried ; after which the self-constituted chef triumphantly awaited its appearance in the dining-room.

To please him, I, who admired everything he did, took a helping on my plate, and swallowed a mouthful.

It was eatable. Eatable—that was all that could be said. On a sudden a remembrance of the horrid, grinning, intelligent face came over me, causing such a revulsion of feeling, that what disastrous effects a second attempt might have met with, history sayeth not, for my good brother carried away my plate—and his own !

At another hour of the day, and when the sun was shining in his strength, we had another kind of sea sport—namely, that of flounder-spearing.

The bay at Ballimore abounded—abounds still—in large red-spotted flounders, locally termed "dabs," which in the autumn months, when they reach their maturity, often turn the scale of a weighing-machine at three or even four pounds apiece.

These frequent the flat, sandy bottom of the bay, skim-

ming from one spot to another so lightly as to pass just under the surface of the sand, their eyes alone protruding above. Thus a sandy shape alone is seen.

The tide must be low, and the water absolutely still, for the spearman to have his best chance—nay, even then he can only hope for success by approaching with the utmost caution, no oars being used. He stands in the bow of the boat, his long pole with its barbed spear in his hands, elevated at an angle whence it will strike the water slantwise, when the right moment arrives—and he is propelled by a confederate, gently pushing from the stern.

Even the shadow of the oncoming boat will sometimes alarm the timid flounder, which then darts from its retirement, raising a sandy dust that obliterates its movements for the time being, and it has to be sought for anew. If the direction has been noted, however, this is not a difficult quest, as it seldom flits far before settling again.

We will now suppose that it is lying still; the spearman spies it, and lifts an indicating finger—he never speaks—and the boat sidles noiselessly in the required direction.

Down comes the death weapon—*well* down, just behind the eyes if possible—and up it comes with the flapping, twisting, brown-and-white flounder firmly attached, the barb on the spear preventing its dropping off when lifted out of the water.

Once acquired, the art of flounder-spearing is not easily lost. After a lapse of thirty years, I took a spear in my hand one day at Arrochar on Loch Long, to try if any remnants of ancient skill yet remained, and accounted for—as Jorrocks hath it—the first five flounders we came across.

Yet again, in ten years after that, I had similar luck in the old Ballimore Bay. I may add that the flounders in the latter place had so increased in numbers that Major Macrae-Gilstrap, the present owner of the estate, draws them in

with the scringe-net—a form of fishing not introduced there, though practised in other places, at the time I write of.

And the oyster bed, which was so prolific (in a small amateur way) during our sojourn on Loch Fyne, has now disappeared. To us it was a source of endless pleasure; and as it was not of sufficient importance to attract the notice of authorities, we had the whole fun of the fair to ourselves.

In the same sunny bay frequented by the flounders, oysters peacefully rocked to and fro with every motion of the water, and were easily to be discerned at low tide. As they never troubled to detach themselves from rock or shingle, even when laid bare, we often collected two or three dozen without going beyond the water's edge; but if, more adventurous, we waded in, or, more luxurious, dredged with a hand-net over the boat side, the catch was proportionately greater.

As, however, this sport was precarious, we presently constructed on the shore a small enclosure below high-water mark, and deposited therein a consignment of captive oysters, which could be drawn upon at need—and there are some who yet remember the oyster suppers with which the dancing evenings closed at Ballimore in those merry days.

Of course, the Stonefield party often came over; and on one occasion our old Aiky exclaimed, shading her eyes as a boat shot round the point: "Eh, see—thonders the wee bishop wi' them the day!" and there was the then Bishop of Bangor (Stonefield's younger brother), a "wee" man, it is true, but sturdy, pulling his oar with the best. Although no longer young, he had not forgotten how to row on a Highland loch.

The Ordes of Kilmorey also came to us by boat, and we went to them—and whatever Kilmorey may be now, it was

a curious place full of surprises and oddities in the time of the well-known old Sir John.

One of these, the first to be encountered, was of a somewhat alarming character. Supposing you drove up to the entrance gates, you did not pause to have them opened in the usual fashion—you might wait long enough if you did ; your horses were expected to dash straight ahead, when the gates sank of themselves out of sight ! By some ingenious, mechanical contrivance, the horses' hoofs, striking a sheet of metal stretched across the road, effected this result ; and as soon as the carriage had passed through, the gates, again without any extraneous aid, resumed their normal position. What would have happened had the machinery gone wrong, as machinery has a happy knack of doing, was a constant source of speculation ; but I must own we never heard of any accident. In the house every door had its own mode of opening peculiar to itself, while the windows resembled the portholes of a ship.

The whimsical Sir John had also a taste of his own in the matter of his driving apparatus. Having been a sailor in his youth, he had naturally a high opinion of *ropes*, and testified to this by using them in lieu of harness—so that a familiar sight upon the roads would be that of the jolly baronet perched aloft on a vehicle of unique construction (at one time I believe the seats for himself and his attendant were nothing more nor less than a couple of *saddles*, on which they rode as if on horseback ; but I never saw this, so can only speak from hearsay). What I did see many a time and oft was our eccentric neighbour driving tandem with harness composed entirely of ropes, and flourishing a whip like no other whip ever seen before or since.

To this may be added that he invariably drove at a breakneck pace, and bawled salutations right and left as he passed through Ardrishaig, or any frequented place.

Of course, strangers and tourists stared delightedly ; while the aborigines, with whom their original neighbour was popular enough, readily answered questions and supplied information—esteeming, indeed, a sight of Sir John and his queer turnout one of the assets of the place—a fact of which he was fully aware, and did not in the least resent. He seldom failed to put in an appearance when the midday boat from Glasgow brought its complement of passengers to the entrance of the Crinan Canal, *en route* for the north—and as often as not, would be there again to meet the returning freight discharged by the small canal steamer. He had many friends, and was continually being hailed on both occasions.

We, on the other and lonelier side of Loch Fyne, had no such daily excitement as that provided by these comings and goings over the way. We were “out of it” at Ballimore—could not have been more completely disregarded by the main stream of traffic if we had been a hundred miles off ; and I fancy that my mother at least had hardly realised, on going to this species of backwater, what it would be to have no landing-stage nearer than Tigh-na-Bruaich, fourteen miles off, and no drivable road except the one up the loch side.

A pier at Otter Ferry has since been built, which would have made a vast difference to us ; but as it was, we had to do without it, and my poor mother to get over the hills as best she could in the Irish car.

She also lamented the “sailless sea” beneath her windows, which really was singularly devoid of life in those days ; and I think we all felt a little stranded and isolated when the “red and sere” leaf of November began to drop from the trees, and the steady drizzle of the west to shut out the landscape on every side.

Nobody could then get at us, and we could get at nobody in an easy, informal way. Every kind of neighbourly

intercourse could only be brought about by effort and pre-meditation, and even those were continually being thwarted by untoward conditions. Neighbours there were in abundance : Campbells to right of us, Campbells to left of us—(it was something to have a name of our own amidst the bewildering numbers who could alone be distinguished by their territorial designations) ; but of what good were they on the other side of a stormy loch ?

On our own side we had only one family within hail, consisting of a retired physician and his son and daughter ; and we liked the Nicols of Ardmarnock very much. But Dr Nicol was an old man, his daughter delicate, and his son often away—add to which Ardmarnock, a nice, cosy, little place, was between seven and eight miles off. Seven or eight miles of a rough-and-tumble hill road is a considerable barrier.

We met regularly once a week, however, at church on Sundays—Kilfinan Church was almost exactly midway between us—and it will be admitted that we all contrived to turn that weekly meeting to good account. The Nicols had a lobster fishery ; we, our oyster bed. On Sundays, while their masters and mistresses were attending to their devotions within the little whitewashed kirk, or chatting in the kirkyard without, their servants on both sides effected an exchange of sundry hampers, with the result that presently each party trotted merrily home with a treat for the Sunday evening supper.

Occasionally, too, we dined and slept at Ardmarnock, and Ardmarnock did the like at Ballimore. How odd it sounds ! Nowadays motors fly between—backwards and forwards, several times a day, if desired. No one thinks of consulting the state of the roads or the sky, or is tethered and hindered and bothered in a hundred ways as we of a by-gone generation were ; they jeer at our primeval torments,

—ah, but the oysters are gone, and I rather think the lobsters are too !

No post arrived at Ballimore till five o'clock in the afternoon—and, to be candid, it was rather wonderful that it should have arrived safely even then. Old Posty was blind of an eye, lame of a leg, and bereft of an arm—having been blown up in a powder-mill—and obtained the situation in consequence. Not only was he entrusted with our leather bag, but with the entire mail of Otter Ferry ; and not only did he contrive to satisfy Otter Ferry as to his capabilities, but wooed and won a damsel there, and made her his wife. We were told she married him for an “establishment” ; but whether or not, the union proved a good business arrangement, since when the poor old man could no longer hirple along, Meg succeeded to his place. This was not, however, in our day.

There was a recess in the hall to which the post-bag was brought while tea was going on—we had advanced to afternoon tea by this time,—and though I suppose no one would be willing to go back to that solitary mail-delivery at that late hour of the day, it had a certain charm. Leisure and tranquillity prevailed ; no one was on the rush, eager only to know if there were anything for him or her personally—snatching up what there was, stuffing it out of sight on the way to the door, and forgetting all about it when next met : contrariwise, at the Ballimore tea-table, every letter, every circular, every bill or receipt, had its full value meted out to it.

Not always desirable, you say ? Well, no, I cannot allege that it always was ; there were occasional awkward moments, uncommonly awkward moments, as to which a veil had best be drawn ; but, in general, the jumble of the

bag, stuffed to overflowing as it often was, played a beneficent part. We were furthermore a harmonious family party, and one would always screen another at a pinch.

So that I really think that quaint postal hour grew to be liked among us, and that we missed it when returning to civilisation, like the Vizier of Morocco. (Perhaps my readers may not have heard of that dignitary's tribute to his own country after a stay in London for the late Queen's Jubilee? Impressed, as he avowed himself, by all he saw, he wound up by affirming that though England was a very fine country and London a very fine city, he was not sorry to be going back to *civilisation*.)

One great source of pleasure we had at Ballimore, the library. Everybody could find books in it to read—not merely to possess and look at. Of these last, indeed, there was a fair proportion; but of course we young people let them severely alone, and ransacked the more inviting shelves.

My mother, who was both a reader and a thinker, was in the habit of recommending each of her daughters as she emerged from the schoolroom and could call her time more or less her own, to sit down every morning directly after breakfast, when the mind is clear and vigorous, for an hour or so's study of some classic author. She did not select the author, nor any particular subject—which I take to have been the secret of her success in this matter.

Naturally, we had all different likings and dislikings; naturally, too, we were not all students. Yet I know that even those who have not since applied themselves with any remarkable assiduity to the pursuit of knowledge, read *then*, and for myself I can aver that what I read then has been a gain to me in all after life. One hour's solid reading a day does not sound a very severe strain on mental energy; yet steadily adhered to, week in, week out, it does amount to

something—it must leave *some* mark ; I would fain commend the practice to those who have not tried it.

There was also a quiet period towards the close of the day, which at Ballimore began to be with me a reading-time—either by the side of the shaded lamp in winter, or by the mellow light of the sinking sun in summer. At that hour the old library was deserted by its usual occupants, and one of my sisters, who was a musician, was apt to resort thither to play and sing, untrammelled by an audience—at what time I also would steal in by another door, and sink into a deep armchair unnoticed.

But it was not tough old Gibbon or Rollin that invaded those peaceful moments. They had been fairly dealt with, and now—shall I confess it?—I was making acquaintance for the first time with a writer who was to exercise an abiding influence over all my own future efforts. *Pride and Prejudice* and its fellows had hitherto been unknown to me.

How delightful I found them ! How quickly each well-defined and exquisitely worked-out character impressed its image on my mind ! How vivid were the scenes—how irresistible the humour—how natural and lifelike the whole panorama ! In short, I had reached the best age for appreciating Jane Austen's wonderful studies of still life, and when my devouring of them and quoting from them—for how could I hold my tongue?—presently provoked some good-natured ridicule, was there not a ready retort ? Had not the great Macaulay himself said he esteemed it a test of a person's capacity, whether or no he could appreciate Miss Austen ?

Bulwer Lytton's novels were also to me pastures new ; but Bulwer Lytton was too prolix, too grandiloquent, and wrote too much of a world I knew little about, to be easily assimilated, while few of his characters, to my view, breathed the breath of life. This may have proceeded from the audacity

of youth and ignorance ; still, the subsequent neglect of an author at one time widely read would seem to endorse it ; certainly it is not generally considered that *My Novel*, admirable of its kind though it be, is a book for all time, while the rest—where are they ? However, I could read them at Ballimore, and in a manner enjoy them.

I also found a number of old sporting books, of which I was then—and am still—very fond ; Scrope's *Days of Salmon-Fishing*, Scrope's *Days of Deer-Stalking*, Colonel Thornton's *Sporting Tour*, and a most thrilling narrative by a big-game hunter (name unknown), *Tales of an Old Shikari*, were among my special favourites, one chapter of the last, yclept "The Man-Eater," being conned almost by heart !

Added to these, were shelves of poetry and the drama, all of which had their turn, Sheridan's plays—tell it not in Gath!—appealing to me more than Shakespeare's, for I enjoyed the smartness, the epigrammatic piquancy of the dialogue ; and the charm of this and all the rest were enhanced by the quiet room, the reposeful chair, the pleasant sense of fatigue, (we were far afield most afternoons), and, above all, my sister's sweet voice singing in the distance. It was an ideal combination : I can see, I can hear, I can feel it now.

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At this time, too, we were all much taken up with drawing in water-colours, the scenery around tempting the brush at every turn, and the spring succeeding our first term of residence at Ballimore I had two pictures in the Scottish Academy—or "The Exhibition," as it was called—one being hung upon the line. It was also noticed in the first review thus : "Miss L. Colquhoun's *Herring-boat becalmed in Mist* is very clever, though the mist is rather solid."

We were sitting in our morning-room at 1 Royal

Terrace, when my father appeared in the doorway with a newspaper—probably the *Scotsman* or *Courant*—in his hand. He waved it at me : “ Here ! What d’ye say to that ? A monkey like you ! But I had a kind of feeling there would be a notice in this paper, and—— ” ; but I heard no more.

Such a little thing to mean so much—a mere kindly word—yet how I treasured it ! The previous day I had indeed had a great moment, when, armed with my own complimentary season-ticket, and escorted by my proud and pleased parents, I had found my way to the *Herring-boat* (what a long way off I saw it !) ; but its being included in the first notice filled my cup to the full !

Being so long ago, I may perhaps also add that a purchaser—we never heard who—desired to buy the little picture, but was promptly informed it was not for sale. My parents had old-fashioned notions on the subject.

For several successive years I exhibited ; then stopped abruptly, a new world having opened ; but it was the success of these endeavours in one direction which emboldened me to reveal attempts in another. To explain this we must return to Ballimore.

It may be remembered that no one as yet knew of, or at least took account of, any writing proclivities on my part. As we all more or less dabbled in album literature, it provoked no notice ; but at last, at long last, the desire came to confide my secret to one—that one from whom I could hope for most sympathy and also for best judgment, my mother.

It was a great step ; one to cause infinite trembling and shrinking ; but an opportunity suddenly offered itself, and, scarcely daring to breathe, I approached her sofa—from behind. I could not look at her. Over her shoulder I put the brown albums into her hand, and, after a brief and stammering explanation, fled.

But now she had them ! She had in the kindest manner promised to read them, and to read by herself, and tell me the result—by ourselves.

All the remainder of that day I was in a ferment. I wandered about alone (for the rest of the party were off on a long expedition), and, while hoping and longing to be sent for, could not summon up resolution to present myself unsolicited before the arbiter of my fate.

Accordingly, prepared for anything, I was as much non-plussed as the expectant Scrooge when no ghost appeared—I was unprepared for nothing, and it was “nothing” that transpired. The others came home ; the time passed as usual ; night fell ; and nothing had happened.

Next day it was the same. I hung about expectantly, anxious, fearful, and hopeful by turns ; but again the hours went by, and bore no fruit. Suspense at length became intolerable, and, taking my courage in both hands, I made for the sofa once more—my mother was usually to be found there—and broached the awe-inspiring subject.

And now I am almost afraid to write it, lest I misrepresent that dear parent who was ever so affectionate and sympathetic ; but truth will out—she had forgotten the brown albums altogether ! There they lay—my heart thumped at the sight of them—beneath her pillow, where they had slipped unobserved after the first interview, and where no doubt the housemaids had replaced them, presuming it a selected hiding-place.

Ah, well, I had no cause thenceforth to complain. Her contrition and self-reproach were far, far beyond what was warranted by so trifling an offence, which she was now all eagerness to atone for. Once again I left the albums, and retired. She was to read them at once—at once : what could I wish for more ?

I had yet to learn what. The promise was kept, but it

was not all plain sailing even then. My poor mother, now full of the subject, and eager to discuss it further, laid down the books by her side, awaiting my reappearance; and as luck would have it, there they were, staring not only me in the face, but a bevy of others who entered at the same moment by another door! In an agony I whipped them out of sight, feeling sure I was betrayed at last; but at last my dear accomplice understood. Thenceforth she and I were bound together by a new tie, and, her interest being now fully aroused, we had many and delightful confabs upon the subject.

She praised, but with discrimination; she stimulated me to further effort; she pointed out wherein I failed; and when I had done my best to profit by her criticisms, she went beyond my hopes, for of her own accord she put one which she considered the most suitable of the little tales, into the hands of her old friend, Sir James Simpson, whom she knew to be on intimate terms with an editor of repute. His reply was immediate. He had handed the MS. over to Dr Blaikie with a request that he would read it *soon*.

And soon came another note. Dr Blaikie had accepted *The Merchant's Sermon* for the *Sunday Magazine*. Need I say how happy we both were?

About six months elapsed; then came the proofs, and in May of the following year I first appeared in print.

But another event of still greater significance to me was just about to happen. This first literary venture, upon which so many thoughts had erst been fixed, did not create quite such a stir in the household, or even within my own heart, as it would have done at another time. It was a day's wonder, and quickly passed. For why, I was on the eve of my wedding!

We were in the third and last year of our Ballimore tenancy (and wintering in the Isle of Wight, where we had

a sort of swallow's-nest house on the Undercliff) when I became engaged to Mr Alfred Saunders Walford, and the marriage took place within a few months—namely, on the 23rd of June 1869, at St John's Episcopal Church, Edinburgh.

As, however, my husband and I gladly gave my parents the same promise that had been given by them on their wedding-day, there was no very stringent severance on my part from the old Scottish home, for every year found me there, wherever it was, accompanied by one welcomed and beloved by all.

I can, therefore, continue to write of it as before.