

BLACK WILLIAM

DONALD ROSS OF
HEIMRA (VOLUME 2 OF
3)

William Black
Donald Ross of Heimra
(Volume 2 of 3)

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24168876
Donald Ross of Heimra (Volume 2 of 3):*

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	43

William Black

Donald Ross of Heimra

(Volume 2 of 3)

CHAPTER I

A VISITOR

Black night lay over sea and land; there was a low continuous murmur round the rocks and shores; and out here, at the end of the little wooden quay, two men were slowly pacing up and down in the dark. They were the serious-visaged Coinneach Breac and his taller and younger companion Calum-a-Bhata. The whereabouts of the village, across the bay, was revealed by a solitary light in one of the windows: no doubt the man who looked after the pier was enjoying the comfort of his own home as long as was possible, before coming down to make ready for the expected steamer.

The influence of the hour was upon Coinneach.

"I will tell you this, Calum," he was saying, in his native tongue – and speaking in rather a low tone, as if he did not wish to be overheard – "that there are many strange things happen to them that have to watch through the night; and they are never

mentioned; for it is not safe to mention them. You do not know who may hear – perhaps some one at the back of your shoulder. And the speaking of such things is harmful. When I was telling you, Calum, about the Woman and her overtaking me as I was on the way home from Ru Gobhar, well, it all came over me again, and it was as if someone had me by the throat again, and I could not move, no, nor say some good words to get free from her and escape. But I will tell you of another strange thing now, that did not happen to me, so that I can talk of it, and without danger to anyone. It happened to my uncle, Angus Roy, that used to be out at Ardavore Lighthouse. Ah, well, now, if they would only speak, it is the lighthouse-men that could be telling you of strange things – ay, like the ringing of the fog-bell on clear nights, and the men looking at each other. Well, now, about my uncle, Calum; you know the men at the lighthouse have little occupation or amusement when they are not attending to the lamps; and sometimes, when it was getting dark, my uncle would go away down the iron ladder on to the rocks, and he would have a rod and a stout line and a big white fly, and he would go to where the water was deep, and maybe he would get a lythe or two for his supper. Well, one night, he came up the ladder, and when he came in he was nearly falling down on the floor, and he was all trembling, and his face was white. 'Duncan,' says he, 'I have been bitten by a dog.' 'You are dreaming, Angus,' said the other, 'for how could there be a dog on the Ardavore rocks?' 'See that,' says my uncle, and he was holding out his hand. And there, sure

enough, was the mark of the dog's teeth. 'It was trying to pull me into the water,' says he, 'and when I escaped from it, it followed me, and when I got up the ladder, I looked down, and there it was, with its fore-paws on the first rung, and its eyes glaring on me. God help us all this night, Duncan,' – that is what my uncle was saying, 'if there is a dog on the island.' Now you know, Calum, there is no whisky or brandy allowed in the lighthouses, except for medicine; and Duncan MacEachran, he was the captain of the lighthouse, and he went to the chest and got a glass of brandy for my uncle, and says he, 'Drink that, Angus, and do not think any more of the dog, and in the morning we will search for the dog' – and so that was all for that night. Then the next day they searched and searched, and there was not any sign of a dog; for how could a dog get out to Ardavore, that is fourteen miles from the mainland? And another thing I must tell you, Calum, is that the marks of the dog's teeth on my uncle's hand they were almost away the next morning, and white. Very well. Duncan would think no more of it; and my uncle would think no more of it; and the marks would go away altogether. But now I will tell you what happened, and you will see whether it would not make a strong man afraid. As the evening came on, my uncle he was getting more and more uneasy; and he was looking at his hand; and the marks were becoming red now, instead of white. My uncle he could not sit still; and he could not do his work; what he said was, 'Duncan, it is the dog coming for me, to drag me into the water.' Then says Duncan, 'How can he come for you? How can he climb

up the ladder? But when it is the same hour that you were down on the rocks last night, then I will look out and see what I can see.' And he did that. He opened the door, and looked down; and there was the dog, with its fore-paws on the first rung of the ladder, and its eyes glaring up. I can tell you, Calum, he did not wait long, he was himself like to fall down with fright; and when he got the door closed again, he put in all the iron stanchions as quickly as he could. And then he went and sate down. My uncle he was a little better by this time. 'The dog has gone away now,' says he. 'I know it. But to-morrow night it will be back – and the next night – and the next night – until it drags me into the water. What is the use of fighting against it, Duncan? I might as well go down, and be drowned now; for the dog is coming back for me.' But Duncan would not say that. He said 'I will contrive something. Perhaps it is not only drowning that is meant. And a man must not give up his life.' And Duncan MacEachran was right there, Calum," continued Coinneach, in an absent kind of way, "for you know what the proverb says – '*There may be hopes of a person at sea, but none of one in the grave.*' Very well, then, the next day he went into the store-room and he searched about till he found a trap they had brought out to see if they could get an otter; and during the afternoon he took down the trap to the rocks, and he was placing it at the foot of the ladder, and concealing the most of it with seaweed. But do you know what he put into the trap, Calum? No, you do not know; and if you were guessing for a hundred years, you would not guess. He put a New Testament –

ay, that is what he was putting into the trap – a New Testament with a dark cover, in among the seaweed. 'Because,' says he, 'if he sets his foot in the trap, then he will be caught, and we will see what kind of a dog he is; but if he is a kind of dog that cannot be caught in a trap, then the New Testament will burn his foot for him, and we will hear of him no more.' That is what he was saying to my uncle. Then the evening came, and my uncle he got worse. He could not sit still; and he could not do his work. The marks on his hand were red again; and he knew that the dog was coming. Duncan MacEachran, perhaps he was frightened; but he would not say he was frightened; all that day, my uncle was telling me, Duncan was hardly speaking a word. My uncle he was sitting in the chair, and looking at his hand, and moaning; and the redder and redder grew the marks; and at last he got up, and says he, 'Duncan,' says he, 'something has come over me; something is drawing me; will you open the door, for I have no strength to open the door?' His teeth were chattering, as he was telling me long after, and himself shaking, and sweat on his forehead. 'No, by God, Angus,' says Duncan, 'I will not open the door this night – nor you either – and if you come near the door, it will be a fight between you and me.' 'I am not wishing for any fight,' says my uncle, 'but there is something in my head – and I would like to look down the ladder – to see what is at the foot of the ladder.' 'Be still, for a foolish man!' says Duncan. 'Would you fall and smash yourself on the rocks?' Well, the time was come. My uncle's teeth were chattering; but he did not speak now; he was

sitting and moaning, for he knew the beast had put something over him, and was coming now to claim him. And then they were listening; and as they were listening there was a terrible clap of thunder, and another, and another – three there were – and then silence. My uncle was telling me he did not speak; and Duncan looked at him. They waited a while. And then my uncle rose, and says he, 'Duncan, the beast has gone away. Do you see the marks? – they are white now.' And perhaps, Calum, you would have opened the door and gone down the iron ladder to see what had happened at the foot of the ladder – although it was dark – and the dog might still be there; but let me tell you this, that if you had been living in a lighthouse, you would not have gone down; for the men who live in the lighthouses they think of many things. It was not till the next morning that they went down the ladder; and do you know what was there? – the otter-trap was closed together, and yet there was nothing in it. Do you see that, now – that the trap had closed together and caught nothing; but I am thinking that the beast, whatever kind of beast it was, had got a fine burn on his foot when he touched the New Testament. I am thinking that. And the marks on my uncle's hand, they went away almost directly; and the dog was never heard of again: I tell you, Calum, I tell you it was a clever thing of Duncan MacEachran to put the otter-trap and the New Testament at the foot of the ladder. But those men at the lighthouses, they come upon strange things, and they will not always speak of them, because it is safer not to speak of them."

"I am glad I am not at a lighthouse," said Calum, slowly; and thereafter for some little time the two men walked up and down in silence.

The dim red light in the distant cottage went out; and presently another and stronger appeared – moving along by the side of the shore. They watched its course as it drew nearer and nearer; then in the silence of the night they could make out footsteps; finally, with a slow tramp along the wooden structure, the pier-keeper came up – and greatly surprised was he to find the two men there.

"Well, it was this weh, Thomas," said Coinneach, in English, "Calum and me we were thinking it was as easy waiting here for the steamer as on board the yat, and less trouble in pulling ashore in a hurry. And the steamer, will she be late now, do you think?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," said the pier-keeper, as he proceeded to sling up the big lantern he carried, "for there has been heavy weather in the south. And you might have been sleeping in your beds for some while to come."

Coinneach did not like this reproach.

"Then perhaps you are not knowing what it is to have a good master," said he, "or perhaps you are your own master, which is better. But listen to what I am telling you now: if my master wishes to have things put on board, or brought ashore from the steamer, then it's me that is willing to wait up half the night, or ahl the night, to be sure to catch the steamer; for I know he will seh when I go out to the yat again, 'Coinneach, go below now, and have a sleep.' That is when you have a good master; but if

you had a bad master, would you be for walking up and down a dark pier through the night? It's me that would see him going to the tuffle first!"

"Can you give me a fill of a pipe, Coinneach?" asked the pier-keeper; and then he added, facetiously: "for they say there's always plenty of tobacco at Eilean Heimra."

"Ay, are they sehing that?" answered Coinneach, as he drew out a piece of tobacco from his waistcoat pocket. "And mebbe they'd better not be sehing that to me, or they'll have to swallow their words —*and the bulk of my fist as well!*"

The three men sate and talked together, and smoked; and as the time went by, a faint, half-bluish light began to appear over the low-lying hills in the east; the cottages across the water became visible; there were gulls flying about. The dawn broadened up and declared itself; something of a warmer hue prevailed; a solitary thin thread of smoke began to ascend from one of the chimneys. The pier-master lowered his lantern and extinguished it. And yet there was no sign of the coming steamer — no far-off hoarse signal startling the silence of the new-born day.

Then, as the morning wore on, and the sleeping village awoke to life, Coinneach said: —

"I think we will pull out to the yat, Calum, to see if the master will be for coming ashore; and if we should hear the steamer we can turn back."

"Very well, then, Coinneach," said the younger man, "for sure

I am the master will be wanting to come ashore to meet the steamer."

And away they went to the boat. But indeed all Lochgarra was astir this morning; for it was not often the villagers had a chance of seeing the steamer come in by daylight; and in any case it was a rare visitor – once in three weeks at this time of the year. So that the long-protracted booming of the steam-pipe brought even the old women out to the doors; and by the time the two red funnels were sighted coming round the distant headland, quite a small crowd of people had come down to the quay.

And here were the two ladies from Lochgarra House, hastening along to be in time: why should they not also join in the general excitement? But just as they arrived at the pier Mary Stanley suddenly stopped short: the very first person she had caught sight of – among that straggling assemblage – was the young laird of Heimra Island.

"Mary, you are not afraid of him!" said Käthchen.

It was but a momentary irresolution, of which she was instantly ashamed; she continued on her way; nay, she went boldly up to him, and past him, and said "Good morning!" as she went by.

"Good morning!" said he – and he raised his cap: that was all.

Then, after a second of vacillation and embarrassment, Mary turned – he was barely a couple of yards distant.

"Mr. Ross," said she, "I suppose you – you heard of what happened at Ru-Minard."

"Yes, I am sorry you should have been troubled," he said, in a formal kind of way.

"But they have built up the huts again!" she exclaimed. "And I suppose the people here will go back and burn them down, and there will be riot after riot – never ending!"

He did not answer her: indeed, there was no question to answer. And K athchen, standing a little bit apart, was watching these two with the keenest interest; and she was saying to herself – "Well, she has met her match at last. She has been all-conquering hitherto; every man who has come near her has been all complaisance and humility and gratitude for a smile or a friendly look; but this one – this one is as proud as herself! And what will she do? – become angry and indignant, and astonish my young Lord Arrogance? Or become humbly submissive, and beg for a little favour and consideration? – and Mary Stanley, of all people!"

Mary regarded the young man, and seeing that he did not speak, she said —

"A never-ending series of riots, is that what it is coming to? And if not, what is to be done? What am I to do?"

He answered her very respectfully – and very coldly:

"I think you should hardly ask me, Miss Stanley. If you consider, you will see that I could not well interfere – even so far as to offer advice. You will find Mr. Purdie will know how to deal with such a case."

"Mr. Purdie!" she said. "I cannot have Mr. Purdie here the

whole year round. Surely I can do something myself? Cannot you tell me what to do?"

He hesitated. But here was a very beautiful young woman, appealing to him, and apparently in distress.

"Well," said he, at length, "I am not quite sure, but I fancy if you wish to have those men removed, you would have to take proceedings under the Vagrant Act. I am not quite sure; I fancy that is so. But then, if you do that, you will be denounced by the Highland Land League, and by plenty of the newspapers – natural enough on the part of the newspapers, for they would know nothing of the circumstances."

Käthchen thought that the outlaw and savage (as he had been described to her) talked very reasonably and intelligently; but Mary Stanley was quite as much perplexed as before.

"I don't want to bring the law to bear on anybody," she said. "I don't want to injure anybody. Surely there are other ways. If I go to those men, and show them they have no right to be there, and pay them for the lobster-traps that were burned, and give them each a sum of money, surely they would go away home to their own island?" And then she added (for she wasn't a fool), "Or might not that merely induce a lot more to come in their place?"

"I am afraid it would," said he.

But by this time the big steamer was slowing in to the pier.

"Miss Stanley," said young Ross, "would you mind coming this way a little – to be out of the reach of the rope?"

She politely thanked him, and moved her position; then he left

her, making his way through the people; and the next she saw of him was that he was on the bridge, talking to the captain.

There was a good deal of cargo – barrels, bales, and what not – to be landed; but only one passenger came ashore, a white-haired little woman, whose luggage consisted of an American-looking trunk and also the head and enormous horns of a Wapiti deer, the head swathed in canvas. The little dame was of a most pleasant appearance, with her silvery hair, her bright eyes, and a complexion unusually fresh and clear for one of her age; and she was smartly and neatly dressed, too; but when once she had come along the gangway, and passed through the crowd, hardly any further notice was taken of her, all attention being concentrated on what was going forward on board the steamer. The poor old woman seemed bewildered – and agitated; her hands were trembling; she was staring back in a curious way at the vessel she had just left. Mary (of course) went up to her.

"Can I be of any assistance to you?" she said, in her gentle way.

And then perhaps she would rather have drawn back; for she found that the old dame's eyes were overflowing with tears.

"That – is the young master?" the old woman asked, in tones of eager and yet subdued excitement – and she was still staring at the two figures on the bridge.

"That is Mr. Ross of Heimra," Mary said, "who is talking to the captain."

The silver-haired old dame clasped her trembling hands

together.

"Dear, dear me!" she said – and there were tears trickling down her face – "the fine gentleman he has grown! And we were all saying that long ago – we were all saying that – but who could have told? – so fine and handsome he has grown up as a man! – Ay, ay, I made sure it was young Donald himself, when he came on board, but he was not looking my way – "

"Would you like to speak to Mr. Ross?" said Mary, in the same gentle fashion.

Then the little white-haired old woman turned to this tall and beautiful young creature who was addressing her; and a curious, wondering, and glad light shone through her tears.

"You, mem," said she, timidly – "perhaps you are his good lady, mem?"

Mary's face flushed.

"I hardly know Mr. Ross," said she coldly. "But if you wish to see him, I will fetch him – or send for him – "

"Mem," said the old dame, piteously, and the tears were now running freely down her face, "I have come all the way from Canada, just – just to have one look at young Donald – that – that was the lamb of my heart! My two boys, mem, they were thinking I should go and pay a visit to their uncle, who is in Sacramento; and they are very good boys: one of them – one of them would have gone as far with me as Detroit, and put me safe there on the line; but – but I said to them, if there is so much money to be spent, and if your old mother can go travelling

anywhere, well, then, it is just away back to Lochgarra I am going, to see the young master once again before I die. But no, mem," she said, somewhat anxiously, "I do not wish to speak to him, in case he is not remembering me. I will wait a little. Maybe he will be remembering me, and maybe not – it is sixteen years since I left this place – and he was just ten, then – but such a young gentleman as you never saw, mem! – and the love of every one! And I will just wait and see, mem – perhaps he is not remembering me at all – but that is no matter – I will go back to my boys and tell them I saw the young master, and him grown to be such a fine gentleman – it is all I was coming here for – ay, and I knew it was young Donald the moment I saw him – but – but maybe he is not remembering me – "

"Oh, but indeed you must speak to him!" said Mary. "I will go and fetch him myself."

For at this moment the steamer was making preparations to be off again – there being little traffic at Lochgarra. The bell was rung, but merely as a matter of form; there was no passenger going on board. Donald Ross bade good-bye to the captain, and stepped ashore. The gangway was withdrawn. Then the captain signalled down to the engine-room; the blades of the screw began to churn up the clear green water into seething foam; and the great steamer was slowly moving out to sea again.

"Mr. Ross," said Mary (and he turned round in quick surprise) "there is some one here who wishes to speak to you."

He looked towards the old dame who was standing there in

piteous expectancy – went up to her – and, after a moment of scrutiny and hesitation, said —

"Why, surely you are Ann!"

The sudden shock of joy was almost too much for her; she could not speak; she clung to the hand he had frankly offered her, and held it between her trembling palms; she was laughing and crying at the same time – great tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Well, well," said he, with a very friendly and pleasant smile lighting up his face, "you have come a long way. And are you going to live in the old place now – and leave the farm to your sons? They must be great big fellows by this time, I suppose. And that – what is that you have brought with you? You don't have beasts like that coming about the house at night, do you?"

She tried to speak; but it was only in detached and incoherent sentences – and there was a bewilderment of gladness in the shining eyes with which she gazed on him.

"I was feared, sir, you might not be remembering me – and – and you have not forgotten Ann, after all these years – oh, yes, yes, a long way – and every night I was saying 'Will the young master be remembering Ann?' And the deer's head, sir? – oh, no, there are no deer at all in our part of the country – but – but it was my boy Andrew, he had to go down to Toronto, and he saw the head, and he brought it back, and says he, 'Mother, if you are going away back to Lochgarra, take this head with you, and tell the young master it is a present from the whole of us, and maybe he will hang it up in the hall.'"

"We have no hall to hang it up in now," said he, but quite good-naturedly – for Mary Stanley was standing by, not unnaturally interested. "However, you must come out and see where I am living now – at Heimra Island. You remember Martha?"

"Oh, yes, yes," said the old dame, who had dried her tears now, and was looking most delighted and proud and happy.

"But you have not told me yet what has brought you all the way back to Lochgarra," said he.

She seemed astonished – and even disappointed.

"You cannot tell that, sir? Well, it was just to see yourself – nothing else but that – it was just to see young Donald, that I used to call the lamb of my heart. But that was when you were very young, sir."

Donald Ross laughed.

"Come away, Ann," said he, and he put his hand affectionately on the old dame's shoulder. "You must come out to Heimra Island, and Martha will look after you, after all your travelling. Now let me see; we shan't be getting up anchor for an hour or an hour and a half; but I shall have your things put on board, and in the meanwhile you can go round to the inn and wait for me there. Tell them to give you a room with a good fire in it. And, by the way, you don't want me to call you by your married name, do you? – for to tell you the truth, I don't remember it!"

"Oh, no, no, no, sir!" said the trim little old lady, who could not take her glad, and wondering, and admiring eyes off 'the young master.' "I'm just Ann, if you please, sir – just Ann, as I used

to be."

Young Ross turned to call up Coinneach and Calum, who were waiting at the end of the quay, in order to give them instructions about the luggage; and it was at this moment that Mary stepped up to the stranger.

"Instead of going to wait at the inn," said she, "wouldn't you rather come with me? Lochgarra House is quite as near – and you would not be sitting alone."

It was a gentle face that was regarding her, and a gentle voice that spoke.

"Oh, yes, mem, if you will be so kind," was the answer.

"Then tell Mr. Ross you have gone on with me; and he can send one of the men for you when he is ready," Mary said; and by this little arrangement she was saved the necessity of having any further conversation with young Ross of Heimra, if such was her intention.

They moved away.

"Do you think you will know many of the people about here, after so long a time?" asked Mary of her new acquaintance, as they left the quay – the silent, but not unobservant, nor yet unamused, Käthchen accompanying.

"Oh, no, mem," was the answer (but, as she talked, the old woman turned from time to time to see if she could not get some brief further glimpse of her heart's idol) "my people they were all about Dingwall; and it was from Dingwall I came over here to serve with Mrs. Ross. Ah, she was the noble lady,

that!" continued the faithful Ann, looking back over many years. "When we heard of her death, it was then, more than ever, that I thought I must go away to Lochgarra, to see the young master. For she was so careful of his upbringing; and they were just constant companions; and he was always the little gentleman, and polite to everyone – except when Mrs. Ross had a headache – and then he would come down stairs, ay, into the servants' hall, or even to the door of the kitchen – and proud and fierce, as if he would kill some one, and he would say 'What is this noise? I order you to be quiet, when my mamma is asleep!' And you would have heard a pin drop after that, mem. Rather too fond of books he was," continued the silver-haired old dame, whose newly-found happiness had made her excitedly talkative, "and rather delicate in health; and then Mrs. Ross would be talking to him in different languages, neither the Gaelic nor the English, and he would be answering her as well as he could – the little gentleman! – when they were sitting at the table. Indeed, now, that was making the old Admiral – that was Mrs. Ross's uncle – very angry; and he was swearing, and saying there was no use for any language but the English language; and many's and many's the time he was taking young Donald away with him in his yacht, and saying he would make a sailor and a man of him. Well, well, now, who would think the young master had ever been delicate like that, and fond of books – so fine and handsome he has grown – and the laugh he has – ay, a laugh that carries a good story of health and happiness with it!"

"No, he does not look as if he had ever been very delicate," said Mary, absently. "Perhaps the rough life out there on that island was the very best thing for him."

When they got to the house, Mary escorted her guest up to the drawing-room in the tower, and was most assiduous in her pretty little attentions, and had wine and biscuits brought in, for Mrs. Armour (as the old woman's name turned out to be) had breakfasted early on board the steamer. And Mrs. Armour repaid these kindnesses by eagerly talking about young Donald and nothing else; she seemed to think that the two young ladies were as interested as herself in that wonderful subject; and here was the very house in which she had lived to suggest innumerable reminiscences. She did not say anything about Miss Stanley's occupation of the house; nor did she ask how it came about that Donald Ross was now living on the island they could see from this room: no doubt she had heard something, in her remote Canadian home, of the misfortunes that had befallen the old family. But even while she talked her eyes would go wandering to the window that commanded a view of the village; it was like a girl of eighteen watching for her first sweetheart: she was talking to these very kind ladies – but it was young Donald of Heimra that her heart was thinking of all the time.

Then the welcome summons came, and away she went with Coinneach Breac. The two girls watched them go along to the boat in which 'the young master' was waiting; then the men took to the oars, and made for the yacht. The mainsail and jib of the

Sirène had already been hoisted; very soon the anchor was got up; and with a light southerly breeze favouring them they had set out for the solitary island that was now Donald Ross's home.

"Well, Mamie," said Käthchen, who was still standing at the window and looking at the gradually receding yacht, "that is a very strange young man. I have been a spectator this morning; and I have been interested. I have seen a young man approached by a beautiful young woman – a damsel in distress, you might almost say – who condescends to appeal to him; and in return he is barely civil – oh, yes, let us say civil – and even polite, but in a curiously stand-off manner. And then an old Highland servant appears; and behold! his face lights up with pleasure; and he is as kind as kind can be, and affectionate; he puts his hand on her shoulder as if she were some old school-mate, and nothing will do but that she must go away out to see his home. To tell you the truth, I did not think he had so much human nature in him. I thought living in that lonely island would have made him a misanthrope. But I shall never forget the expression of his face when he recognised the old woman that had been his mother's servant."

Mary Stanley was silent for a little while; then she said —

"It is a wonderful thing, the affection and devotion that could bring an old woman like that all the way across the Atlantic for a glimpse of one she had known only as a child. And it seems to be a thing you cannot purchase with money, nor yet with good intentions, nor by anything you can do, however hard you may

try." She turned away from the window. "But – but I haven't given up yet, Käthchen."

"You never will give up, Mamie," said her friend; and then she added complacently: "For you don't know how."

CHAPTER II

A DEFORCEMENT

But wonders will never cease. It was a couple of days after these occurrences, and Mary Stanley and Kate Glendinning were just about to sit down to lunch, when the Highland maid Barbara came into the room, with a curious expression on her face. And it was in almost awe-stricken tones that she spoke:

"It's Mr. Ross, mem," said she – her pretty, soft, shy eyes now full of a vague astonishment.

"Mr. Ross? – Mr. Ross of Heimra? Well, what about him?" Mary demanded, little guessing at the true state of affairs.

"He's in the hall, mem," said the startled Barbara. "He says would Miss Stanley speak with him for a moment, and he would not keep you more than a moment, mem."

The blood rushed to Mary's forehead, and for a second she was embarrassed and speechless; then, with a certain impatience of her own confusion, she said —

"Well, ask Mr. Ross to go into the drawing-room, Barbara – and tell him I will be there directly."

She turned quickly to her friend. "Käthchen, would you mind going and speaking to him? – I shall be down in a minute."

Possibly Käthchen did not quite like this commission; but then she was in the habit of reflecting that as a salaried companion she

had duties to perform; and so with much good nature she went away into the drawing-room, to receive this unexpected visitor. It was some minutes before Mary reappeared. The male eye could not have detected any difference between the Mary Stanley of the dining-room and the Mary Stanley of the drawing-room; but Käthchen instantly perceived the minute alteration. Mary had whipped off to her room to exchange the stiff linen collar that she wore for a piece of soft frilling – a more feminine adornment. Moreover, she came into the room, not radiant in her beauty and self-possessed as was her wont, but with a kind of timid, modest, almost shamefaced gratitude for this act of neighbourliness, and in her clear eyes a manifest pleasure shone. Käthchen, now relieved of her duties, and become a mere onlooker, said to herself: "I don't know what Mamie means; but that young man had better take care."

He, on his side, certainly showed no lack of self-possession – though he still remained standing, his yachting cap in his hand.

"I hope I am not inconveniencing you," said he to Miss Stanley. "The fact is, we got becalmed just outside the bay –"

"But won't you be seated?" said she, and she herself took a chair. Käthchen retired to one of the windows – not to look out, however.

"First of all, I wish to thank you for your kindness to Mrs. Armour," said he. "She is very grateful to you; for of course it was pleasant to the old dame to have a friendly hand held out to her, when she was rather frightened she might be coming back

among strangers."

"Oh, that is nothing," said Mary; and then she was emboldened to add, "The wonderful thing was to find anyone connected with this place who would accept of any civility. But then she has been away a long time."

If this was a taunt, unintentional or otherwise, he took no heed of it.

"What I really wished to see you about, however, was this," he went on. "It was only last night that I heard of the sheriff's judgment in the case of James Macdonald – James Macdonald, the crofter, at Cruagan – "

"I know him," said Mary. "But what case? I never heard of it!"

"An action brought by Mr. Purdie on your behalf," he answered briefly.

"Why was I not told of this?" she said.

"The proceedings began some little time ago," he said. "And, indeed, Miss Stanley, I must apologise to you for seeming to interfere. I do not wish to interfere in any way whatever; it would be most impertinent on my part; and besides – besides, I have no desire to interfere. But in this particular case I think you should know what is going on, for Macdonald is a determined man; and if the sheriff's officer and his concurrents come out this afternoon by the mail-car, as they are likely to do, I'm afraid there will be trouble. The sheriff has granted a decree of removal; but I don't think Macdonald will go; while it is just possible the other crofters may back him up. I thought if you would go along

and ask the sheriff's officer to stay proceedings until Macdonald could be talked to by his own friends – "

"Well, of course I will!" said she, instantly. "But I want to know what this action is all about! It seems to me that I ought to be consulted before Mr. Purdie takes to evicting any of the tenants."

There was a curious, covert gleam of satisfaction in the young man's lustrous black eyes; but he went on to say very quietly —

"I am afraid Macdonald has put himself entirely in the wrong. For one thing, he is over two years in arrear with his rent; and that of itself, according to the Crofters Holding Act, forfeits his tenancy. And then, again, he refuses to pay because of reasons that won't hold water. He claims compensation for improvements — "

"Why not?" said she – promptly taking the side of the tenant, and talking to young Ross as if he were advocating the landlord's interest.

"Well," said Young Donald, "he has cut a few drains and covered them in; but the sheriff found that this was counterbalanced by his neglect of other parts of the croft, and that there was no just claim. His other reason for refusal was that he wanted an allowance made to him for Mr. Watson's sheep being permitted to graze over the Cruagan crofts after the crops were reaped."

"And why not?" said Mary again. "Why should Mr. Watson's sheep graze over the crofts? That seems to me a great injustice

– unless compensation is given."

"Well, it is a practice of long standing," said the young man (and Käthchen, who cared very little about rents and holdings and drains, nevertheless thought he had so agreeable a voice that it was quite a pleasure to listen to him). "The crofters took the crofts knowing of this condition, and the rents were fixed accordingly. However, this is the present state of affairs, that the sheriff-substitute has decided against Macdonald – as he was bound to do, I admit. He has found him liable for arrears of rent, with interest and costs; and he has granted a warrant to turn him out. Now Macdonald is a stiff-necked man, a difficult man to deal with; and he doesn't know much English; it will be no use for the sheriff-officer to argue, and say he is only doing his duty –"

"I disapprove of the whole proceedings," said Mary, with decision. "Mr. Purdie had no right to go to such extremes without consulting me – and I will take care that it does not happen again. By the mail-car, did you say? Well, that won't be coming by Cruagan before half-past two; and I can be there by then. The sheriff's officer and his – his what did you call them?"

"His concurrents – assistants."

"They must wait for further instructions; and I will inquire into the matter myself."

He rose.

"I hope you will forgive me, Miss Stanley," said he, as he had said before, "for seeming to interfere. I have no wish to do anything of the kind. But I thought you ought to know in case

there might be any trouble – which you could prevent."

"Mr. Ross," said she, "I am very much obliged to you. I – I don't get very much help – and – and I want to do what little I can for the people."

"Good morning!" said he; and he bowed to Kate Glendinning. he was going away without so much as shaking hands with either of them, so distant and respectful was his manner. But Mary, in a confused kind of fashion, did not seem to think this was right. She accompanied him to the door; and that she left open; then she went out with him into the hall.

"I cannot believe that James Macdonald should have any serious grudge against me," she said, "for I told Mr. Purdie to tell him that the tax for the dyke was abolished, and also that fifteen years of it was to be given back. And, besides that, I said to Macdonald myself that thirty shillings an acre was too much for that land; and I propose to have it reduced to a pound an acre when I have all the rents of the estate looked into."

"Do you think Purdie did tell him?" young Donald Ross asked coldly.

"If he has not!" said Mary ... "But I am almost sure he did – I spoke to Macdonald myself almost immediately afterwards. And – and I wished to tell you, Mr. Ross," she continued (as if she were rather pleading for favour, or at least expecting approval), "that I have been down to the stranger fishermen at Ru-Minard, and I think it is all settled, and that they are going away peaceably. I am paying them for the lobster-traps that were burned – and

perhaps a little more; and they understand that the Vagrant Act can be brought to bear on any others who may think of coming."

"Oh, they are going away?" said he.

"Yes."

"Mr. Purdie will be sorry for that."

"Why?"

"He could have had them removed, if he had wanted; but so long as they were an annoyance and vexation to the people here, he allowed them to remain – naturally."

These accents of contemptuous scorn: she was sorry to hear them somehow; and yet perhaps they were justified – she did not know.

"Good-bye," said she, at the hall door, and she held out her hand. "I am so much obliged to you."

And then of course he did shake hands with her in bidding her farewell – and raised his cap – and was gone.

Mary returned to the dining-room.

"Well, Mamie," said Käthchen, with a demure smile, "that is about the most extraordinary interview I ever heard of. A most handsome young gentleman calls upon a young lady – his first visit – and there is nothing talked of on either side but sheriff officers and summonses, rent, compensation, drains, crofts, grazing, and Acts of Parliament. Of course he was quite as bad as you; but all the same, you might at least have asked the poor man to stay to lunch."

"Oh, Käthchen!" Mary exclaimed, starting to her feet, her face

on fire. "Shall I send Barbara after him? I never thought of it! How frightfully rude of me – and he has come all the way over from Heimra to tell me about this eviction. What shall I do? Shall I send after him?"

"I don't think you can," said Käthchen; "it would make the little oversight all the more marked. You'd better ask him the next time you see him – if you have forgotten certain warnings."

"What warnings?"

"Why, about his general character and his occupations," said Kate Glendinning, regarding her friend.

Mary was silent for a moment or two; then she said —

"We need not believe the worst of any one; and when you think of that old woman coming all the way from Canada to see him, that of itself is a testimonial to character that not many could bring forward – "

"But you must remember," said Käthchen, "the young master was a little boy of ten when Mrs. Armour left; and little boys of ten haven't had time to develop into dangerous criminals."

"Dangerous criminal?" said Mary, rather sharply; "that is hardly the – the proper phrase to use – with regard to – to a stranger. However, it is not of much consequence. Käthchen, are you going to drive with me to Cruagan to get that sheriff's officer and his men sent back?"

"Yes, certainly," said Käthchen, in her usual business-like fashion, "as soon as we have had lunch. And remember, Mamie, it wasn't *I* who forgot to ask him to stay."

Luncheon did not detain them long, and immediately thereafter they got into the waggonette that was waiting for them, and drove off. But it was not of the eviction and the possibility of another riot that Mary was mostly thinking; something very different was weighing, and weighing heavily, on her mind. They drove through the village in silence; they crossed the bridge; and they had begun the ascent of the steep hill before she spoke.

"The more I consider it," she said, "the more ashamed I am."

"Consider what?" said Käthchen.

"Why, neglecting to ask him to stay to lunch," she made answer – for this was what she had been brooding over.

"Why should you worry about such a trifle!" Käthchen protested.

"It isn't a trifle – in a Highlander's estimation, as you know well enough. They pride themselves on their hospitality; and they judge others by their own standards; so that I cannot but keep wondering what he must be thinking of me at this moment. Remember, Käthchen, when we went over to Heimra, even the old housekeeper entertained us, and did her best for us, in that out-of-the-world place; and here he comes to Lochgarra House – his first visit – he comes to do me a kindness – he comes to prevent mischief – and comes into the house that once was his own – and I don't offer him even a biscuit and a glass of sherry –"

"Really, Mary, you needn't worry about such a mere trifle!" Käthchen protested again.

"But I do worry!" she said. "I can imagine what he thought of

me as he went away. For you must not forget this, Käthchen: it was a very awkward position he put himself into in order to do me a good turn. Think of his coming to the house, that ought to be his own – asking the servants if he might be admitted – sending up his name as a stranger – then he remains standing in the drawing-room – and he is for going away without shaking hands – as if he were hardly to be considered one's fellow-creature." She was silent for a second or two; then she said, with a sudden touch of asperity: "At the same time there is this to be remembered, that the pride that apes humility is the very worst kind of pride. Often it simply means that the person is inordinately vain."

"Poor young man!" said Käthchen, with a sigh. "He is always in the wrong. But I'm sure I did not object to his manner when he showed us the way out of the Meall-na-Fearn bog."

About a couple of hundred yards on the Lochgarra side of Cruagan they met the mail-car; and when, a minute or two thereafter, they came in sight of the scattered crofts, it was obvious from the prevailing commotion that the sheriff's officer and his assistants had arrived. Indeed, when Mary and Käthchen descended from the waggonette and walked up to James Macdonald's cottage, the business of getting out the few poor sticks of furniture had already begun – the only onlooker being an old white-haired man, Macdonald's father, who was standing there dazed and bewildered, as if he did not understand what was going forward. Just as Mary got up, one of the concurrents brought out a spinning-wheel and put it on the

ground.

"Here – what are you doing?" she said, angrily, to the man who appeared to be the chief officer. "Leave that spinning-wheel alone: that is the very thing I want to see in every cottage!"

"I've got the sheriff's warrant, ma'am," said the man, civilly enough. "And we must get everything out and take possession."

"Oh, no, you mustn't!" she said. "This man Macdonald claims compensation – the case must be inquired into – "

"I have nothing to do wi' that, ma'am," said the officer, who seemed a respectable, quiet-spoken, quiet-mannered kind of a person. "I'm bound to carry out the warrant – that's all I've to heed."

"But surely I can say whether I want the man turned out or not?" she protested. "He is my tenant. It is to me he owes the money. Surely, if I am satisfied, you can leave the man alone. But where is he? Where is Macdonald?"

"As for that, ma'am," said the officer, "he is away down the road, and he says he is going to fetch a gun. Very well. If he presents a gun at either me or my concurrents I will declare myself deforced, and he will have to answer for it before the sheriff."

"A gun?" said Mary, rather faintly. "Do you mean to drive the poor man to desperation?"

But there was a more immediate danger to be considered. As the two girls had driven up they had heard a good deal of shrill calling from croft to croft and from house to house; and

now there had assembled a crowd of women – a crowd hostile and menacing – that came swarming up, uttering all sorts of angry and reproachful cries. Each time that the sheriff's officer's assistants appeared at the door of the cottage there was another outburst of hooting and groaning; while here and there a bare-armed virago had furnished herself with an apron-full of rubbish – potato-peelings, cabbage-stalks, stale fish, and the like – and these unsavoury missiles began to hurtle through the air, though for the most part they were badly aimed. The sheriff's officer affected to pay no heed. He calmly watched the proceedings of his men; the rubbish flew past him unregarded; and the women had not yet taken to stones.

But Käthchen beheld this advancing crowd with undisguised alarm.

"Mary," she said, hurriedly, "don't you think we should go back to the waggonette? Those people think it is you who are setting the sheriff's officers on – they are hooting at us as well –"

There could be no doubt of the fact; and the infuriated women were drawing nearer and nearer; while, if their taunts and epithets were to her unintelligible, their wrathful glances and threatening gestures were unmistakable. Mary Stanley found herself helpless. She could not explain to them. She had not the self-possession with which to address this exasperated mob, even if she knew the language in which alone it was possible to appeal to them. Nor dared she retreat, for would not that be simply inviting a general attack? So she was standing, irresolute

and bewildered, when there was a new diversion of interest: the man Macdonald made his appearance. She looked at him; she hardly recognised him – so ashen-grey had his cheeks become with excitement and wrath. One trembling hand held a gun; the other he clenched and shook in the face of the officer as he went up to him.

"I – not owing any money!" said the Russian-looking crofter, and his features were working with passion, and his eyes were filled with a baleful light under his shaggy eyebrows. "No – no – God's curse to me if I pay money when I not owing any money! Go away, now – go away back to Dingwall – or it is murder there will be – "

Mary was very pale; but she went forward to him all the same.

"Put away that gun," she said, and she spoke with firmness, though her lips had lost their natural colour. "Put away that gun! These men are doing their duty – you have brought it on yourself."

He turned upon her savagely.

"You – it's not you – my laird – Ross of Heimra, he my laird – you come here, ay, to steal the land – and – and put me from my croft – ay – will you be putting me from my croft?"

In his fury he could find no more English; but he advanced towards her, his clenched fist raised; and here it was that Käthchen (though her heart was beating wildly) thrust herself forward between them.

"How dare you!" she said, indignantly. "Stand back! How dare

you!"

For an instant the man's eyes glared at her – as if in his indescribable rage he knew neither what to do or say; but just at this moment his attention was drawn else-whither; a volley of groans and yells from the crowd had greeted the reappearance of the assistants. At sight of these enemies bringing out his poor bits of things, Macdonald's wrath was turned in a new direction; he made a dash for the cottage – managed to get inside – and the next second the two men were flung headlong out, while the door was instantly slammed to behind them. A great shout of triumph and laughter arose from the crowd, while the discomfited officers picked themselves up and gazed blankly at the barred way.

"I call you to witness," said their chief to Miss Stanley – and he spoke in the calmest manner, as if this were quite an everyday occurrence – "that I have been deforced in the execution of my duty. This man will have to answer for it at Dingwall."

But his assistants were not so imperturbable. Smarting under the jeers of the crowd, they proceeded to cast about for some implement with which to effect an entrance; and presently they found an axe. With this one of them set to work; and crash! crash! went the weight of iron on to the trembling door. The wood began to yield. Splinters showed – then a narrow breach was made – the hole grew wider – and just as it became evident that the demolition of the door was but a matter of a few minutes, a heavier stroke than usual snapped the shaft of the axe in twain, the iron head falling inside the cottage. By this time the

attitude of the crowd had again altered – from derision to fierce resentment; there were groans renewed again and again; missiles flew freely. And then again, and quite suddenly, an apparently trivial incident entirely changed the aspect of affairs. At that ragged opening that had been made in the door there appeared two small black circles, close together; and these were pushed outward a few inches. The concurrents fell back – and the crowd was silent; well they perceived what this was; those two small circles were the muzzle of a gun; at any moment, a violent death – a shattered corpse – might be the next feature of the scene.

"What does that madman mean to do!" Mary exclaimed, in a paralysis of terror – for it appeared to her that she was responsible for all that was happening or might happen.

"Mary," said Käthchen, under her breath – and she was all trembling with excitement, "you must come away at once – now – while they are watching the gun. Perhaps they won't interfere with us – we may get down to the waggonette – we may have to run for it, too, if those women should turn on us."

"I cannot go and leave these poor men here," Mary said, in her desperation. "They will be murdered. That man in there is a madman – a downright madman – "

Käthchen lowered her voice still further.

"There is Mr. Ross coming – and oh! I wish he would be quick!"

Indeed it was no other than Donald Ross, who, immediately after leaving Lochgarra House, had struck off across the hills,

hoping by a short cut to reach Cruagan not long after Miss Stanley's arrival. And now that he appeared, all eyes were turned towards him; there was no further groaning, or hooting, or hurling of missiles. He seemed to take in the situation at a glance. He asked a question of the sheriff's officer.

"I'll just have to come back, sir," said the man, "with an inspector and a dozen police; but in the meantime I declare that I have been deforced, and this man Macdonald must answer for it. I hope ye'll give evidence, sir, if the leddies would rather not come over to Dingwall. You were not here when my assistants were thrown out of the house; but at least you can see a gun pointed at us – there it is – through that door."

Young Ross did not go directly forward to the muzzle of the gun – which would have been the act of a lunatic, for the man inside the cottage might make a mistake; but he went towards the front of the house, then approached the door, and struck up the gun with his fist. One barrel went off – harmlessly enough.

"Hamish!"

He called again; and added something in Gaelic. The door was opened. There was some further speech in the same tongue; the shaggy-browed crofter laid aside the gun, and came out into the open air, looking about him like a wild-beast at bay, but following the young master submissively enough. Donald Ross went up to Miss Stanley.

"I was afraid there might be a little trouble," said he. "Well, I can answer for this man – if you will get the sheriff's officer and

his assistants to go away."

"I want them to go away!" she said. "I have no wish at all to put James Macdonald out of his croft – not in the least – and I will give him time to pay up arrears, especially as there is to be a re-valuation. I wish you would tell him that. I wish you would tell him that I had nothing to do with these proceedings. Tell him I want to deal fairly with everybody. You can talk to him – I cannot – I cannot explain to him –"

But Macdonald had been listening all the same.

"That woman," said he, sullenly, "she – no business here. The land – Ross of Heimra's –"

Young Ross turned to him with a muttered exclamation in Gaelic, and with a flash of flame in the coal-black eyes that did not escape Käthchen's notice. The stubborn crofter was silent after that – standing aside in sombre indifference.

"The officer can bring his action for deforcement, if he likes," Ross said, "and I suppose Macdonald will be fined forty shillings. But no one has been hurt; and it seems a pity there should be any further proceedings, if, as you say, you are going to have a re-valuation of the crofts" – and then he suddenly checked himself. "I hope you will forgive me for interfering," he said, quite humbly; "I did not intend to say anything; it is Mr. Purdie's business – and I do not wish even to offer you advice."

"I wish I could tell you how much I am obliged to you," she said, warmly. "If you had not let me know about those men coming, and if you had not appeared yourself, I believe there

would have been murder done here this day. And now, Mr. Ross, would you get them to go on at once to Lochgarra, so as to be out of harm's way – and to-morrow they can go back by the mail-car? I will write to Mr. Purdie. There must be no further proceedings; and James Macdonald will not be put out of his croft – not if I have any say in the matter."

So the three officials were started off for the village; the morose crofter proceeded to pick up his bits of furniture and get them into the house again; and the crowd of women began to disperse – not silently, however, but with much shrill and eager decision – towards their own homes. Young Ross of Heimra went down with the two young ladies to the waggonette, which was waiting for them below in the road.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.