WILLIAM BLACK

STAND FAST, CRAIG-ROYSTON! (VOLUME I)

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Stand Fast, Craig-Royston! (Volume I):

Содержание

CHAPTER I. 4
CHAPTER II. 27
CHAPTER III. 54
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 56

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CHAPTER I.
THE WANDERERS

On a certain sunny afternoon in May, when all the world and his wife were walking or driving in Piccadilly, two figures appeared there who clearly did not belong to the fashionable crowd. Indeed, so unusual was their aspect that many a swift glance, shot from carefully impassive faces, made furtive scrutiny of them as they passed. One of the strangers was an old man who might have been a venerable Scandinavian scald come to life again – a man thick-set and broad-shouldered, with features at once aquiline and massive, and with flowing hair and beard almost silver-white. From under his deeply lined forehead and shaggy eyebrows gleamed a pair of eyes that were alert and confident as with the audacity of youth; and the heavy white moustache and beard did not quite conceal the cheerful firmness of the mouth. For the rest, he wore above his ordinary attire a plaid of shepherd's tartan, the ends loosely thrown over his

shoulders.

By his side there walked a young girl of about seventeen, whose singular, if somewhat pensive and delicate beauty, could not but have struck any passer-by who happened to catch sight of her. But she rarely raised her eyes from the pavement. What was obvious to every one was, first of all, the elegance of her walk – which was merely the natural expression of a perfectly moulded form; and then the glory of her hair, which hung free and unrestrained down her back, and no doubt added to the youthfulness of her look. As to the colour of those splendid masses – well, it was neither flaxen, nor golden, nor brown, nor golden-brown, but apparently a mixture of all these shades, altering in tone here and there according to sunshine or shadow, but always showing a soft and graduated sheen rather than any definite lustre. Her face, as has been said, was mostly downcast; and one could only see that the refined and sensitive features were pale; also that there was a touch of sun-tan over her complexion, that spoke of travel. But when, by inadvertence, or by some forced overcoming of her native diffidence, she did raise her eyes, there flashed a revelation upon the world; for these blue-grey deeps seemed to hold light; a mild-shining light, timid, mysterious, appealing almost; the unconsciousness of childhood no longer there, the self-possession of womanhood not yet come: then those beautiful, limpid, pathetic eyes, thus tremblingly glancing out for a second, would be withdrawn, and again the dark lashes would veil the mystic, deep-shining wells. This was

Maisrie Bethune; the old man beside her was her grandfather.

The young girl seemed rather to linger behind as her companion went up the steps towards a certain door and rang the bell; and her eyes were still downcast as she followed him across the hall and into an ante-room. When the footman came back with the message that his lordship was disengaged and would see Mr. Bethune, and when he was about to show the way upstairs, the girl hung back, and said, with almost a piteous look —

"I will stay here, grandfather."

"Not at all," the old man answered, impatiently. "Not at all. Come along!"

There were two persons in this large and lofty room on the first floor; but just as the visitors arrived at the landing, one of these withdrew and went and stood at a front window, where he could look down into the street. The other – a youngish-looking man, with clear eyes and a pleasant smile – remained to receive his guests; and if he could not help a little glance of surprise – perhaps at the unusual costume of his chief visitor, or perhaps because he had not expected the young lady – there was at all events nothing but good-nature in his face.

"My granddaughter, Maisrie, Lord Musselburgh," the old man said, by way of introduction, or explanation.

The young nobleman begged her to be seated; she merely thanked him, and moved away a little distance, to a table on which were some illustrated books; so that the two men were left free to talk as they chose.

"Well now, that seems a very admirable project of yours, Mr. Bethune," Lord Musselburgh said, in his frank and off-hand way. "There's plenty of Scotch blood in my own veins, as you know; and I am glad of any good turn that can be done to poor old Scotland. I see you are not ashamed of the national garb."

"You remember what was said on a famous occasion," the old man made answer, speaking methodically and emphatically, and with a strong northern accent, "and I will own that I hoped your lordship's heart would 'warm to the tartan.' For it is a considerable undertaking, after all. The men are scattered; and their verses are scattered; but, scattered or no scattered, there is everywhere and always in them the same sentiment – the sentiment of loyalty and gratitude and admiration for the land of the hills and the glens. And surely, as your lordship says, it is doing a good turn to poor old Scotland to show the world that wherever her sons may be – in Canada, in Florida, out on the plains, or along the Californian coast – they do not forget the mother that bore them – no, but that they are proud of her, and think always of her, and regard her with an undying affection and devotion."

He was warming to his work. There was a vibration in his voice, as he proceeded to repeat the lines —

> "From the lone shieling on the misty island,
> Mountains divide them and a world of seas;
> But still their hearts are true, their hearts are Highland,
> And they in dreams behold the Hebrides."

"Is that by one of your Scotch-American friends?" Lord Musselburgh asked, with a smile; for he was looking curiously, and not without a certain sympathetic interest, at this old man.

"I do not know, your lordship; at the moment I could not tell you," was the answer. "But this I do know, that a man may be none the less a good Canadian or American citizen because of his love for the heather hills that nourished his infancy, and inspired his earliest imagination. He does not complain of the country that has given him shelter, nor of the people who have welcomed him and made him one of themselves. He only says with Crichton's emigrant shepherd —

> "'Wae's me that fate us twa has twined'

– 'twined' is severed: perhaps your lordship is not so familiar with the dialect —

> "'Wae's me that fate us twa has twined;
> And I serve strangers ower the sea;
> Their hearts are leal, their words are kind,
> But, lass, it isna hame to me!'

Good men they are and true," he went on, in the same exalted strain; "valued and respected citizens – none more so; but cut their hearts open, and you will find *Scotland* written in every fibre. It is through no ingratitude to their adopted country that a spray of white heather, a few bluebells, a gowan or two, anything

sent across the seas to them to remind them of the land of their birth, will bring hot tears to their eyes. As one of them has written —

'What memories dear of that cot ye recall,
Though now there remains neither rooftree nor wall!
Alack-a-day! lintel and threshold are gone,
While cold 'neath the weeds lies the hallowed hearthstone!
'Twas a straw-roofed cottage, but love abode there,
And peace and contentment aye breathed in its air;
With songs from the mother, and legends from sire,
How blithe were we all round the cheery peat-fire!
– Caledonia's blue-bells, O bonnie blue-bells!'"

"You have an excellent memory," Lord Musselburgh said, good-naturedly. "Those patriotic effusions seem to have impressed you."

"That was written by the Bard of Amulree, your lordship," continued the garrulous old man; "and a truer Scotchman does not breathe, though America has been his home nearly all his life. And there is many another, both in Canada and the United States. They may be in happier circumstances than they would have been in the old country; they may have plenty of friends around them: but still their hearts turn back to

'Where I've watched the gloamin' close
The long bright summer days;
And doubted not that fairies dwelt

On Cathkin's bonnie braes;
Auld Ruglin Brig and Cathkin braes
And Clyde's meandering streams,
Ye shall be subject of my lays
As ye are of my dreams.'

Nor are they ashamed of their Scottish way of speech – ye may observe, my lord, that I've kept a twang of it myself, even among all my wanderings; and loth would I be to lose it. But I'm wearying your lordship," the old man said, in a suddenly altered tone. "I would just say that a collection of what the Scotch poets in America have written ought to be interesting to Scotchmen everywhere, and perhaps to others as well; for patriotism is a virtue that commands respect. I beg your pardon for encroaching on your lordship's time – "

"Oh, that's nothing," Lord Musselburgh said, easily; "but we must not keep the young lady waiting." He glanced in the direction of the girl who was standing by the table. She was turning over the leaves of a book. Then he resumed the conversation – but in a much lower key.

"I quite understand, Mr. Bethune," he said, so that she should not overhear, "what you wrote to me – that the bringing out of such a volume will require time, and expense. And – and you must allow me to join in, in the only way I can. Now what sum – ?"

He hesitated. Mr. Bethune said —

"Whatever your lordship pleases."

The young man went into the front portion of the long apartment (where his friend was still discreetly standing behind the window curtains) and opened a despatch-box and sat down. He drew out a cheque for £50, enclosed it in an envelope, and, coming back, slipped it into the old man's hands.

"I hope that will help; and I shall be glad to hear of the progress of the work."

"I thank your lordship," Mr. Bethune said, without any obsequiousness, or profusion of gratitude.

And then he turned to his granddaughter.

"Maisrie!"

The girl came away at once. She bowed to Lord Musselburgh in passing, without lifting her eyes. He, however, put out his hand, and said "Good-bye!" Nay, more than that, although he had previously rang the bell, he accompanied them both downstairs, and stood at the door while a four-wheeled cab was being called for them. Then, when they had left, he returned to the room above, and called lightly to his friend who was still standing at the window:

"Ready, Vin? Come along, then! Did you hear the old man and his poetry? – a harmless old maniac, I think. Well, let's be off to Victoria; we'll get down to the Bungalow in time for a good hour's lawn-tennis before dinner."

Meanwhile old George Bethune and his granddaughter were being driven away eastward in the cab; and he was chatting gaily to her, with the air of one who had been successful in some

enterprise. He had doffed his Scotch plaid; and, what is more, he had also abandoned the Scotch accent in which he had addressed 'his loardship.' It was to be a great book, this collection of Scotch-American poetry. It would enable him to pay a well-deserved compliment to many an old friend of his in Toronto, in Montreal, in New York. He was warm in his praises of this young Lord Musselburgh; and predicted a great future for him. Then he put his head out of the window and bade the driver stop – opposite the door of a wine-merchant's office.

"Grandfather," said the girl, "may I wait for you in the cab?"

"Certainly not," he answered with decision. "I wish you to see men and things as part of your education. Live and learn, Maisrie – every moment of your life."

Leaving the Scotch plaid in the cab, he crossed the pavement and went into the office, she meekly following. The wine-merchant was sent for, and presently he made his appearance.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Glover," old George Bethune said, with something of an air of quiet patronage, "I wish to order some claret from you."

The tall, bald, bland-looking person whom he addressed did not seem to receive this news with any joy; but the young lady was there, and he was bound to be courteous; so he asked Mr. Bethune to be kind enough to step into the back-premises where he could put some samples before him. Maisrie was for remaining where she stood; but her grandfather bade her come along; so she also went with them into the back portion of the

establishment, where she was accommodated with a chair. At this table there were no illustrated books to which she could turn; there were only bottles, glasses, corkscrews, and a plateful of wine-biscuits; so that she kept her eyes fixed on the floor – and was forced to listen.

"Claret, Mr. Glover," said the old man, with a certain sententiousness and assumption of importance that he had not displayed in speaking to Lord Musselburgh, "claret was in former days the national drink of Scotland – owing to the close alliance with France, as you know – and the old Scotch families naturally preserve the tradition. So that you can hardly wonder if to one of the name of Bethune a sound claret is scarcely so much a luxury as a necessity. Why, sir, my ancestor, Maximilien de Bethune, duc de Sully, had the finest vineyards in the whole of France; and it was his privilege to furnish the royal table – "

"I hope he got paid," the bland wine-merchant said, with a bit of a laugh; but happening to glance towards the young girl sitting there, and perceiving that the pale and beautiful face had suddenly grown surcharged with colour, he, instantly, and with the greatest embarrassment, proceeded to stumble on —

"Oh, yes, of course," he said, hastily: "a great honour – naturally – the royal table – a great honour indeed – I quite understand – the duc de Sully, did you say? – oh, yes – a great statesman – "

"The greatest financier France has ever possessed," the old man said, grandly. "Though he was by profession a soldier,

when he came to tackle the finances of the country, he paid off two hundred millions of livres – the whole of the king's debts, in fact – and filled the royal treasury. It is something to bear his name, surely; I confess I am proud of it; but our family goes far further back than the duc de Sully and the sixteenth century. Why, sir," he continued, in his stately manner, "when the royal Stewarts were known only by their office —*Dapifer*or *Seneschallus* they were called – the Beatons and Bethunes could boast of their territorial designation. In 1434, when Magister John Seneschallus, Provost of Methven, was appointed one of the Lords Auditors, it was Alexander de Beaton who administered the oath to him – the same Alexander de Beaton who, some two years thereafter, accompanied Margaret of Scotland to France, on her marriage with the Dauphin. Yes, sir, I confess I am proud to bear the name; and perhaps it is the more excusable that it is about the last of our possessions they have left us. Balloray – " He paused for a second. "Do you see that child?" he said, pointing with a trembling forefinger to his granddaughter. "If there were any right or justice, there sits the heiress of Balloray."

"It was a famous lawsuit in its time," the wine-merchant observed – but not looking in Maisrie's direction.

"It killed my father, and made me a wanderer on the face of the earth," the old man said; and then he raised his head bravely. "Well, no matter; they cannot rob me of my name; and I am Bethune of Balloray – whoever has the wide lands."

Now perhaps there still dwelt in the breast of the suave-

looking wine-merchant some remorse of conscience over the remark that had caused this pale and sensitive-looking young creature to flush with conscious shame; at all events he had quite abandoned the somewhat grudging coldness with which he had first received his customer; and when various samples of claret had been brought from the cellar and placed on the table, it was the more expensive that he frankly and fully recommended. Nay, he was almost pressing. And again he called to his assistant, and bade him fetch a particular bottle of champagne; and when that was opened, he himself poured out a glass and offered it to the young lady, with a biscuit or two, and seemed concerned and distressed when she thanked him and declined. The end of this interview was that old George Bethune ordered a considerable quantity of claret; and carried away with him, for immediate use, a case of twelve bottles, which was put into the four-wheeled cab.

Park Street, Mayfair, occupies a prominent position in the fashionable quarter of London; but from it, at intervals, run one or two smaller thoroughfares – sometimes ending in stables – the dwellings in which are of a quite modest and unpretentious appearance. It was to one of these smaller thoroughfares that George Bethune and his granddaughter now drove; and when they had entered the quiet little house, and ascended to the first floor, they found that dinner was laid on the table, for the evening was now well advanced. When they were ready, the frugal banquet was also ready; and the old man, seated at the head of the table, with Maisrie on his right, soon grew eloquent about

the virtues of the bottle of claret which he had just opened. The girl – who did not take any wine – seemed hardly to hear. She was more thoughtful even than usual – perhaps, indeed, there was a trace of sadness in the delicate, pensive features. When the fresh-coloured servant-lass brought in the things, and happened to remain in the room for a second or two, Maisrie made some pretence of answering her grandfather; then, when they were left alone again, she relapsed into silence, and let him ramble on as he pleased. And he was in a satisfied and garrulous mood. The evening was fine and warm – the window behind them they had left open. He approved of the lodging-house cookery; he emphatically praised the claret, with the conviction of one who knew. Dinner, in fact, was half way over before the girl, looking up with her beautiful, clear, limpid eyes – beautiful although they were so strangely wistful – ventured to say anything.

"Grandfather," she asked, with obvious hesitation, "did – did Lord Musselburgh – give you – something towards the publication of that book?"

"Why, yes, yes, yes, certainly," the old man said, with much cheerfulness. "Certainly. Something substantial too. Why not?"

The hot blood was in her face again – and her eyes downcast.

"Grandfather," she said, in the same low voice, "when will you set about writing the book?"

"Ah, well," he made answer, evasively, but with perfect good humour, "it is a matter to be thought over. Indeed, I heard in New York of a similar volume being got together; but I may

be first in the field after all. There is no immediate hurry. A thing of that kind must be thought over and considered. And indeed, my dear, I cannot go back to America at present; for my first and foremost intention is that you should begin to learn something of your native country. You must become familiar with the hills and the moorlands, with the roaring mountain-torrents, and the lonely islands amid the grey seas. For of what account is the accident of your birth? Omaha cannot claim you. There is Scotch blood in your veins, Maisrie – the oldest in the land; and you must see Dunfermline town, where the King sate 'drinking the blood-red wine'; and you must see Stirling Castle, and Edinburgh, and Holyrood, and Melrose Abbey. Nebraska has no claim over you – you, a Bethune of Balloray. And you have some Highland blood in your veins too, my dear; for if the Grants who intermarried with the Bethunes were not of the northern Grants whose proud motto is 'Stand fast, Craigellachie!' none the less is Craig-Royston wild and Highland enough, as I hope to show you some day. And Lowland or Highland, Maisrie, you must wear the snood when you go north; a young Scotch lass should wear the snood; yes, yes, the bit of blue ribbon will look well in your hair. Melrose," he rambled on, as he filled his glass again, "and Maxwellton Braes; Yarrow's Banks; and fair Kirkconnel Lea: a storied country: romance, pathos, tragic and deathless music conjured up at every footstep. Instead of the St. Lawrence, you shall have the murmur of the Tweed: instead of Brooklyn – the song-haunted shores of Colonsay! But there is

one place that with my will you shall never visit – no, not while there are strangers and aliens there. You may wander all over Scotland – north, south, east, and west – but never, never while I am alive, must you ask to see 'the bonny mill-dams o' Balloray.'"

She knew what he meant; she did not speak. But presently – perhaps to draw away his thoughts from that terrible law-suit which had had such disastrous consequences for him and his – she said —

"I hope, grandfather, you won't think of remaining in this country on my account. Perhaps it is better to read about those beautiful places, and to dream about them, than to see them – you remember 'Yarrow Unvisited.' And indeed, grandfather, if you are collecting materials for that book, why should we not go back at once? It would be dreadful if – if – the other volume were to come out first – and you indebted to Lord Musselburgh, or any one else; but if yours were written and published – if you could show them you had done what you undertook to do, then it would be all perfectly right. For you know, grandfather," she continued, in a gently persuasive and winning voice, "no one could do it as well as you! Who else has such a knowledge of Scotland and Scottish literature, or such a sympathy with Scottish music and poetry? And then your personal acquaintance with many of those writers – who used to welcome you as one of themselves – who else could have that? You could do it better than any one, grandfather; and you have always said you would like to do something for the sake of Scotland; and here is the very thing

ready to your hand. Some other time, grandfather," she pleaded, with those beautiful clear eyes turned beseechingly upon him, "some other time you will take me to all those beautiful places. It is not as if I had come back home; I have hardly ever had a home anywhere; I am as well content in Montreal or Toronto as anywhere else. And then you could get all the assistance you might need over there – you could go to your various friends in the newspaper offices, and they would give you information."

"Yes, yes; well, well," he said, peevishly; "I am not a literary hack, to be driven, Maisrie. I must have my own time. I made no promise. There, now, get me my pipe; and bring your violin; and play some of those Scotch airs. Yes, yes; you can get at the feeling of them; and that comes to you through your blood, Maisrie – no matter where you happen to be born."

Twilight had fallen. At the open window, with a long clay pipe, as yet unlit, in his fingers, old George Bethune sate and stared out into the semi-darkness, where all was quiet now, for the carriages from the neighbouring mews had long ago been driven away to dinner-parties and operas and theatres. And in the silence, in the dusky part of the room, there arose a low sound, a tender-breathing sound of most exquisite pathos, that seemed to say, as well as any instrument might say —

"I'm wearin' awa', Jean,
Like snaw-wreaths in thaw, Jean,
I'm wearin' awa',
To the land o' the leal;

There's nae sorrow there, Jean,
There's neither cauld nor care, Jean,
The day's aye fair
In the land o' the leal."

Most tenderly she played, and slowly; and with an absolute simplicity of tone.

"There's Scotch blood in your veins, Maisrie – Scotch blood," he said, approvingly, as the low-vibrating notes ceased.

And then again in the darkness another plaintive wail arose – it was the Flowers o' the Forest this time – and here the old man joined in, singing in a sort of undertone, and with a sufficiently sympathetic voice:

"I've heard the liltin' at our yowe-milkin',
Lasses a-liltin, before the dawn o' day;
But now there's a moanin' on ilka green loanin';
The Flowers o' the Forest are a' wede away.

* * * * *

"We hear nae mair liltin' at our yowe-milkin',
Women and bairns are dowie and wae;
Sighin' and moanin', on ilka green loanin' —
The Flowers o' the Forest are a' wede away."

"Yes, yes," he said, as he rose and came away from the window, "it is the Scotch blood that tingles, it is the Scotch heart that throbs. 'Yestreen, when to the trembling strings, the dance gaed through the lichted ha' – ' Who but a Scotchman could have written that? Well, now, Maisrie, we'll have the gas; and you can get out the spirits; and we'll try some of the livelier airs. There's plenty of them, too, as befits a daring and energetic people – a nation of fighters. They were not always bewailing their losses in the field." And therewith the old man, pacing up and down before the empty fire-place, began to sing, with upright head and gallant voice —

"London's bonnie woods and braes,
I maun leave them a', lassie;
Wha can thole when Britain's faes
Would gie Briton law, lassie?
Wha would shun the field o' danger?
Wha to fame would live a stranger?
Now when freedom bids avenge her,
Wha would shun her ca', lassie?"

Maisrie Bethune had laid aside her violin; but she did not light the gas. She stood there, in the semi-darkness, in the middle of the room, timidly regarding her grandfather, and yet apparently afraid to speak. At last she managed to say —

"Grandfather – you will not be angry – ?"

"What's this, now?" he said, wheeling round and staring at her, for the peculiarity of her tone had caught his ear.

"Grandfather," she continued, in almost piteous embarrassment. "I – I wish to say something to you – I have been thinking about it for a long while back – and yet afraid you mightn't understand – you might be angry – "

"Well, well, what is it?" he said, impatiently. "What are you dissatisfied with? I don't see that you've much to complain of, or I either. We don't live a life of grandeur; nor is there much excitement about it; but it is fairly comfortable. I consider we are very well off."

"We are too well off, grandfather," she said, sadly.

He started at this, and stared at her again.

"What do you mean?"

"Grandfather," she said, in the same pathetic voice, "don't you see that I am no longer a child? I am a woman. And I am doing nothing. Why did you give me so careful an education if I am not to use it? I wish to earn something – I – I wish to keep you and me, grandfather – "

The stammering sentences ceased: he replied slowly, and perhaps a trifle coldly.

"Why did I have you carefully educated? Well, I should have thought you might have guessed – might have understood. But I will tell you. I have given you what education was possible in our circumstances in order to fit you for the station which some day you may be called upon to fill. And if not, if it is fated

that injustice and iniquity are to be in our case perpetual, at all events you must be worthy of the name you bear. But it was not as an implement of trade," he continued, more warmly, "that I gave you such education as was possible in our wandering lives. What do you want to do? Teach music? And you would use your trained hand and ear – and your trained soul, which is of more importance still – to drum mechanical rudiments into the brats of some bourgeois household? A fit employment for a Bethune of Balloray!"

She seemed bewildered – and agonised.

"Grandfather, I must speak! I must speak! You may be angry or not – but – but I am no longer a child – I can see how we are situated – and – and if it is pride that causes me to speak, remember who it is that has taught me to think of our name. Grandfather, let us begin a new life! I can work – I am old enough to work – I would slave my fingers to the bone for you! Grandfather, why should you accept assistance from any one? – from Lord Musselburgh or any one? No, I do not blame you – I have always thought that everything you did was right – and kind and good; but I cannot be a child any longer – I must say what I think and feel. Grandfather – "

But here the incoherent appeal broke down; she fell on her knees before him, and clasped her hands over her face; and in the dark the old man – stern and immovable – could hear the sound of her violent sobbing.

"I will work – oh, I will work night and day, grandfather," she

continued, wildly, "if only you will take my money and not from any one else! I will go on the stage – I will turn dressmaker – I will go anywhere or do anything – and work hard and hard – if only you will consent! There would not be so much sacrifice, grandfather – a little, not much – and don't you think we should be all the happier? I have spoken at last, grandfather – you will forgive me! I could not keep silent any longer. It has been weighing on my heart – and now – now you are going to say yes, grandfather – and to-morrow – to-morrow we begin differently. We are so much alone – let us live for each other – let us be independent of every one! Now you are going to say yes, grandfather – and indeed, indeed I will work for both of us, oh, so gladly! – "

"Have you finished?" he asked.

She rose, and would have seized his hand to enforce her appeal, but he withdrew a step, and motioned her to be seated.

"I am glad of this opportunity," he said, in a formal and measured fashion. "You say you have become a woman; and it is natural you should begin and think for yourself; hitherto I have treated you as a child, and you have obeyed and believed implicitly. As for your immediate wish, I may say at once that is impossible. There is no kind of work for which you are fitted – even if I were prepared to live on your earnings, which I am not. The stage? What could you do on the stage! Do you think an actress is made at a moment's notice? Or a dress-maker either? How could you turn dressmaker to-morrow? – because you can

hem handkerchiefs? And as for making use of your education, do you know of the thousands of girls whose French and Italian and music are as good as yours, and who can barely gain their food by teaching? – "

He altered his tone; and spoke more proudly.

"But what I say is this, that you do not understand, you have not yet understood, my position. When George Bethune condescends to accept assistance, as you call it, he receives no favour, he confers an honour. I know my rights, and stand on them; yes, and I know my wrongs – and how trifling the compensations ever likely to be set against them. You spoke of Lord Musselburgh; but Lord Musselburgh – a mushroom peer – the representative of a family dragged from nothingness by James VI. – Lord Musselburgh knew better than you – well he knew – that he was honouring himself in receiving into his house a Bethune of Balloray. And as for his granting me assistance, that was his privilege, his opportunity, his duty. Should not I have done the like, and gladly, if our positions had been reversed? *Noblesse oblige*. I belong to his order – and to a family older by centuries than his. If there was a favour conferred to-day at Musselburgh House, it was not on my shoulders that it fell."

He spoke haughtily, and yet without anger; and there was a ring of sincerity in his tones that could not be mistaken. The girl sate silent and abashed.

"No," said he, in the same proud fashion; "during all my troubles, and they have been more numerous than you know or

need ever know, I have never cowered, or whimpered, or abased myself before any living being. I have held my head up. My conscience is clear towards all men. 'Stand fast, Craig-Royston!' it has been with me – and shall be!"

He went to the window and shut it.

"Come, light the gas, Maisrie; and let us talk about something else. What I say is this, that if anyone, recognising the injustice that I and mine have suffered, should feel it due to himself, due to humanity, to make some little reparation, why, that is as between man and man – that ought to be considered his privilege; and I take no shame. I ask for no compassion. The years that I can hope for now must be few; but they shall be as those that have gone before. I abase myself before no one. I hold my head erect. I look the world in the face; and ask which of us has the greater cause to complain of the other. 'Stand fast, Craig-Royston!' – that has been my motto; and so, thank God, it shall be to the end!"

Maisrie lit the gas, and attended to her grandfather's other wants – in a mechanical sort of way. But she did not take up the violin again. There was a strangely absent look on the pale and beautiful and pensive face.

CHAPTER II.
NEIGHBOURS

The young man whom Lord Musselburgh had hailed came into the middle of the room. He was a handsome and well-made young fellow of about three or four-and-twenty, with finely-cut and intelligent features, and clear grey eyes that had a curiously straightforward and uncompromising look in them, albeit his manner was modest enough. At the present moment, however, he seemed somewhat perturbed.

"Who were those two?" he said, quickly.

"Didn't you listen while the old gentleman was declaiming away?" Lord Musselburgh made answer. "An enthusiastic Scot, if ever there was one! I suppose you never heard of the great Bethune lawsuit?"

"But the other – the girl?"

"His granddaughter, I think he said."

"She is the most beautiful human creature I ever beheld!" the young man exclaimed, rather breathlessly.

His friend looked at him – and laughed.

"That's not like you, Vin. Take care. The Hope of the Liberal Party enmeshed at four-and-twenty – that wouldn't do! Pretty – oh, yes, she was pretty enough, but shy: I hardly saw anything of her. I dare say her pretty face will have to be her fortune; I

suspect the poor old gentleman is not overburdened with worldly possessions. He has his name, however; he seems proud enough of that; and I shouldn't wonder if it had made friends for him abroad. They seem to have travelled a good deal."

While he was speaking his companion had mechanically lifted from the table the card which old George Bethune had sent up. The address in Mayfair was pencilled on it. And mechanically the young man laid down the card again.

"Well, come along, Vin – let's get to Victoria."

"No, if you don't mind, Musselburgh," said the other, with downcast eyes, and something of embarrassment, "I would rather – not go down to the Bungalow to-night. Some other time – it is so good of you to be always asking me down – "

"My dear fellow," the young nobleman said, looking at his friend curiously, "what is the matter with you? Are you in a dream? Are you asleep? Haven't I told you that – is coming down by a late train to-night; and isn't all the world envying you that the great man should make such a protégé and favourite of you? Indeed you must come down; you can't afford to lose such a chance. We will sit up for him; and you'll talk to him during supper; and you'll listen to him for hours after if he is in the humour for monologues. Then to-morrow morning you'll take him away bird's-nesting – he is as eager for any new diversion as a school-boy; and you'll have him all to yourself; and one of these days, before you know where you are, he'll hand you a Junior Lordship. Or is it the Under-Secretaryship at the Home

Office you're waiting for? You know, we're all anxious to see how the new experiment will come off. The young man unspoiled by Oxford or Cambridge – untainted by landlord sentiment – trained for public life on first principles: one wants to see how all this will work in practice. And we never dictate – oh, no, we never dictate to the constituencies; but when the public notice from time to time in the newspapers that Mr. Vincent Harris was included in – 's dinner-party on the previous evening, then they think; and perhaps they wonder when that lucky young gentleman is going to take his seat in the House of Commons. So really, my dear Vin, you can't afford to throw away this chance of having – all to yourself. I suppose he quite understands that you are not infected with any of your father's Socialistic theories? Of course it's all very well for an enormously rich man like your father to play with Communism – it must be an exciting sort of amusement – like stroking a tiger's tail, and wondering what will happen in consequence; but you must keep clear of that kind of thing, my boy. Now, come along – "

"Oh, thank you, Musselburgh," the young man said, in the same embarrassed fashion, "but if you'll excuse me – I'd rather stay in town to-night."

"Oh, very well," the other said, good-naturedly, "I shall be up in a day or two again. By the way, the Four-in-Hand Club turns out on Saturday. Shall I give you a lift – and we'll go down to Hurlingham for the polo? Mrs. Ellison is coming."

"Oh, thanks – awfully good of you – I shall be delighted,"

the young man murmured; and a few seconds thereafter the two friends had separated, Lord Musselburgh driving off in a hansom to Victoria-station.

This young Vincent Harris who now walked away along Piccadilly towards Hyde Park was in a sort of waking trance. He saw nothing of the people passing by him, nor of the carriages, nor of the crowd assembled at the corner of the Row, expecting the Princess. He saw a pale and pathetic face, a dimly-outlined figure standing by a table, a chastened splendour of girlish hair, an attitude of meekness and diffidence. Once only had he caught a glimpse of the beautiful, clear, blue-grey eyes – when she came in at the door, looking startled almost; but surely a man is not stricken blind and dumb by a single glance from a girl's wondering or enquiring eyes? Love at first sight? – he would have dismissed the suggestion with anger, as an impertinence, a profanation. It was not love at all: it was a strange kind of interest and sympathy she had inspired – compassionate almost, and yet more reverent than pitiful. There appeared to be some mysterious and subtle appeal in her very youth: why should one so young be so solitary, so timid, sheltering herself, as it were, from the common gaze? Why that touch of pathos about a mouth that was surely meant to smile? – why the lowered eyelashes? – was it because she knew she was alone in this great wilderness of strangers, in this teeming town? And he felt in his heart that this was not the place for her at all. She ought to have been away in sunny meadows golden with buttercups, with the laughter of

young children echoing around her, with the wide air fragrant with the new-mown hay, with thrushes and blackbirds piping clear from amidst the hawthorn boughs. Who had imprisoned this beautiful child, and made a white slave of her, and brought her into this great roaring market of the world? And was there no one to help?

But it was all a perplexity to him; even as was this indefinable concern and anxiety about one to whom he had never even spoken a word. What was there in that pensive beauty that should so strangely trouble him? She had made no appeal to him; their eyes could scarcely be said to have met, even in that brief moment; her cruel fate, the tyranny of her surroundings, her pathetic resignation, were all part and parcel of a distracted reverie, that seemed to tear his heart asunder with fears, and indignation, and vows of succour. And then – somehow – amidst this chaos and bewilderment – his one desire was that she should know he wished to be her friend – that some day – oh, some wild white day of joy! – he should be permitted to take her hand and say "Do not be so sad! You are not so much alone. Let me be by your side for a little while – until you speak – until you tell me what I can do – until you say 'Yes, I take you for my friend!'"

He had wandered away from the fashionable crowd – pacing aimlessly along the unfrequented roadways of the Park, and little recking of the true cause of the unrest that reigned in his bosom. For one thing, speculations about love or marriage had so far concerned him but slightly; these things were too

remote; his aspirations and ambitions were of another sort. Then again he was familiar with feminine society. While other lads were at college, their thoughts intent on cricket, or boating, or golf, he had been kept at home with masters and teachers to fit him for the practical career which had been designed for him; and part of the curriculum was that he should mix freely with his kind, and get to know what people of our own day were thinking, not what people of two thousand years ago had been thinking. One consequence of this was that 'Vin' Harris, as he was universally called, if he did not know everything, appeared to know everybody; and of course he was acquainted with scores on scores of pretty girls – whom he liked to look at when, for example, they wore a smart lawn tennis costume, and who interested him most perhaps when they were saucy; and also he was acquainted with a considerable number of young married ladies, who were inclined to pet him, for he was good-natured, and easy-mannered, and it may be just a little careless of their favour. But as for falling seriously in love (if there were such a thing) or perplexing himself with dreams of marriage – that was far from his scheme of life. His morning companions were Spencer, Bain, John Mill, Delolme, Hallam, Freeman, and the like; during the day he was busy with questions relating to food supply, to the influence of climate on character, the effect of religious creeds on mental development, the protection and cultivation of new industries, and so forth; then in the evening he was down at the House of Commons a good deal, especially

when any well-known orator was expected to speak; and again he went to all kinds of social festivities, particularly when these were of a political cast, or likely to be attended by political people. For Vin Harris was known to be a young man of great promise and prospects; he was received everywhere; and granted a consideration by his elders which was hardly justified by his years. That he remained unspoiled – and even modest in a degree unusual at his age – may be put down to his credit, or more strictly to the fortunate accident of his temperament and disposition.

How long he walked, and whither he walked, on this particular evening, he hardly knew; but as daylight waned he found himself in Oxford-street, and over there was Park-street. Well enough he remembered the address pencilled on the visiting-card; and yet he was timorous about seeking it out; he passed and went on – came back again – glanced nervously down the long thoroughfare – and then resumed his aimless stroll, slowly and reluctantly. To these indecisions and hesitations there came the inevitable climax: with eyes lowered, but yet seeming to see everything around him and far ahead of him, he went down Park-street until he came to the smaller thoroughfare named on the card; and there, with still greater shamefacedness, he paused and ventured to look at the house that he guessed to be the abode of the old man and his granddaughter. Well, it was a sufficiently humble dwelling; but it was neat and clean; and in the little balcony outside the first floor were a number of pots of flowers – lobelias, ox-eye daisies, and musk. The window was open, but he could

hear nothing. He glanced up and down the small street. By this time the carriages had all been driven away to dinner-party and theatre; a perfect silence prevailed everywhere; there was not a single passer-by. It was a quiet corner, a restful haven, these two lonely creatures had found, after their varied buffetings about the world. And to this young man, who had just come away from the roar of Oxford-street and its surging stream of human life, there seemed something singularly fascinating and soothing in the stillness. He began to think that he, too, would like to escape into this retreat. They would not object to a solitary companion? – to a neighbour who would be content to see them, from the other side of the way, at the window now and again, or perhaps to say "Good morning!" or "Good evening!" as they passed him on the pavement? He could bring his books; here would be ample opportunity for study; there were far too many distractions and interruptions at his father's house. And then – after weeks and weeks of patient waiting – then perhaps – some still evening – he might be invited to cross over? In the hushed little parlour he would take his seat – and – oh! the wonder and enhancement of it – be privileged to sit and listen, and hear what the wanderers, at rest at last, had to say of the far and outer world they had left behind them. He did not know what she was called; but he thought of several names; and each one grew beautiful – became possessed of a curious interest – when he guessed that it might be hers.

Suddenly the silence sprung into life; some one seemed to

speak to him; and then he knew that it was a violin – being played in that very room. He glanced up towards the open window; he could just make out that the old man was sitting there, within the shadow; therefore it must be the girl herself who was playing, in the recess of the chamber. And in a sort of dream he stood and listened to the plaintive melody – hardly breathing – haunted by the feeling that he was intruding on some sacred privacy. Then, when the beautiful, pathetic notes ceased, he noiselessly withdrew with bowed head. She had been speaking to him, but he was bewildered; he hardly could tell what that trembling, infinitely sad voice had said.

He walked quickly now; for in place of those vague anticipations and reveries, a more definite purpose was forming in his brain; and there was a certain joyousness in the prospect. The very next morning he would come up to this little thoroughfare, and see if he could secure lodgings for himself, perhaps opposite the house where the old man and his granddaughter lived. It was time he was devoting himself more vigorously to study; there were too many people calling at the big mansion in Grosvenor Place; the frivolities of the fashionable world were too seductive. But in the seclusion of that quiet little quarter he could give himself up to his books; and he would know that he had neighbours; he might get a glimpse of them from time to time; that would lighten his toil. Then when Mary Bethune – he had come to the conclusion that Mary was her name, and had made not such a bad guess, after all – when Mary Bethune played

one of those pathetic Scotch airs, he would have a better right to listen; he would contentedly put down Seaman's "Progress of Nations," and go to the open window, and sit there, till the violin had ceased to speak. It was a most excellent scheme; he convinced himself that it would work right well – because it was based on common sense.

When he arrived at the great house in Grosvenor Place, he went at once into the dining-room, and found, though not to his surprise, that dinner was just about over. There were only three persons seated at the long table, which was sumptuously furnished with fruit, flowers, and silver. At the bead was Vin Harris's father, Mr. Harland Harris, a stout, square-set, somewhat bourgeois-looking man, with a stiff, pedantic, and pompous manner, who nevertheless showed his scorn of conventionalities by wearing a suit of grey tweed; on his right sate his sister-in-law, Mrs. Ellison, a remarkably pretty young widow, tall and elegant of figure, with wavy brown hair, shrewd blue eyes, and a most charming smile that she could use with effect; the third member of the group being Mr. Ogden, the great electioneerer of the north, a big and heavy man, with Yorkshire-looking shoulders, a bald head, and small, piggish eyes set in a wide extent of face. Mr. Ogden was resplendent in evening dress, if his shining shirt-front was somewhat billowy.

"What's this now?" said the pretty Mrs. Ellison to the young man, as he came and pulled in a chair and sate down by her. "Haven't you had any dinner?"

"Good little children come in with dessert," said he, as he carelessly helped himself to some olives and a glass of claret. "It's too hot to eat food – unusual for May, isn't it? Besides I had a late luncheon with Lord Musselburgh."

"Lord Musselburgh?" put in Mr. Ogden. "I wonder when his lordship is going to tell us what he means to be – an owner of racehorses, or a yachtsman, or a statesman? It seems to me he can't make up his own mind; and the public don't know whether to take him seriously or not."

"Lord Musselburgh," said Vincent, firing up in defence of his friend, "is an English gentleman, who thinks he ought to support English institutions: – and I dare say that is why he does not find saving grace in the caucus."

Perhaps there was more rudeness than point in this remark; but Mrs. Ellison's eyes laughed – decorously and unobserved. She said aloud —

"For my part, I consider Lord Musselburgh a very admirable young man: he has offered me the box-seat on his coach at the next Meet of the Four-in-Hand Club."

"And are you going, aunt?" her nephew asked.

"Yes, certainly."

"Rather rash of Musselburgh, isn't it?" he observed, in a casual sort of way.

"Why?"

"What attention is he likely to pay to his team, if you are sitting beside him?"

"None of your impertinence, sir," said she (but she was pleased all the same). "Boys must not say such things to their grandmothers."

Now the advent of Master Vin was opportune; for Mr. Harris, finding that his sister-in-law had now some one of like mind to talk to, left those two frivolous persons alone, and addressed himself exclusively to his bulky friend from the north. And his discourse took the form of pointing out what were the practical and definite aims that Socialism had to place before itself. As to general principles, all thinking men were agreed. Every one who had remarked the signs of the times knew that the next great movement in modern life must be the emancipation of the wage-slave. The tyranny of the capitalist – worse than any tyranny that existed under the feudal system – must be cribbed and confined: too long had he gorged himself with the fruits of the labours of his fellow-creatures. The most despicable of tyrants, he; not only robbing and plundering the hapless beings at his mercy, but debasing their lives, depriving them of their individualism, of the self-respect which was the birthright of the humblest handicraftsman of the middle ages, and making of them mere machines for the purpose of filling his pockets with useless and inordinate wealth. What was to be done, then? – what were the immediate steps to be taken in order to alter this system of monstrous and abominable plunder. It was all very well to make processions to Père Lachaise, and wave red flags, and wax eloquent over the graves of the Communists; but there was

wanted something more than talk, something more than a tribute to the memory of the martyrs, something actual to engage our own efforts, if the poor man was not to be for ever ground to the dust, himself and his starving family, by the relentless plutocrat and his convenient freedom of contract. Let the State, then – that engine of oppression which had been invented by the rich – now see whether it could not do something for all classes under its care: let it consider the proletariat as well as the unscrupulous landlords and the sordid and selfish bourgeoisie. Already it was working the Telegraphs, the Post Office, the Parcels Post, the Dockyards, and Savings Banks; and if it regulated the wages it paid by the wage-rate of the outside market, that was because it followed the wicked old system of unequal distribution of profit that was soon to be destroyed. That would speedily be amended. What further, then? The land for the people, first of all. As clear as daylight was the right of the people to the land: let the State assume possession, and manage it – its mines and minerals, its agriculture, its public grounds and parks – for the benefit of all, not for the profit of a pampered few. The State must buy and own the railways, must establish Communal centres of distribution for the purchase and exchange of goods, must establish systems of credit, must break down monopoly everywhere, and the iron power of commercialism that was crushing the life out of the masses of the population. The State must organise production, so that each man shall do his share of work demanded by the community, and no more —

But here Mrs. Ellison, who had doubtless heard or read all this before, turned away altogether. She asked her nephew to give her some more strawberries.

"I say, Vin," she remarked, incidentally, "what very beautiful dessert-plates these are. I don't remember them. Where did you get them?"

"I thought you would admire them," said he. "They are my father's own design."

"Really! I call them very handsome – and so quaint and unusual. He must tell me where I can get some of them: when I go back to Brighton I should like to take a few with me for my small establishment."

"But you can't, aunt," he said.

"Why?"

"Because my father had the moulds broken."

She looked at him for a moment and then sniggered – yes, sniggered, but discreetly, so that the two perfervid politicians should not see.

"That is pretty well," she observed in an undertone, "for a Socialist and Communist – to have the moulds broken so that nobody else should have any!"

Presently she said, in the same undertone —

"I'm going to catch your eye in a minute, Vin. Are you coming upstairs to the drawing-room with me?"

"Yes, of course, aunt," said he, instantly. "Get up now, and let's be off."

She rose: so did her brother-in-law. Mr. Ogden remained in his chair – perhaps through inattention, or perhaps he was bewildered by the consciousness that he ought to make, as a relic of his ancient worship of *laissez faire*, some protest against this wholesale intervention of the State. Then Vincent opened the door for the tall and bright-eyed young widow; and he and she passed out and went upstairs together.

When they entered the spacious and richly-furnished room, the atmosphere of which was heavy with the scent of flowers, Mrs. Ellison seated herself in a low lounging-chair, while her nephew stood some little way off, his hands behind his back, his eyes absently staring into a rose-shaded lamp as if he could see pictures there. When she spoke, no doubt he heard; but he did not answer or interrupt: he allowed her to ramble on. And she was in a talkative and vivacious mood.

"I'm going to the Drawing Room to-morrow, Vin," said she, "to present Louie Drexel; and if you were kind and civil you would come down to St. James's Park and find out our brougham and talk to us while we are waiting. I do so want you to get to know Miss Drexel well; it would be worth your while, I can tell you. You see, those American girls have such excellent good sense. This evening, before you came in, your father was treating us to a dissertation on the iniquity of riches – or rather the absurdity of people revelling in wealth, and at the same time professing to be Christians. He asked – and I'm sure I couldn't answer him – how a Bishop can reconcile his enjoyment of

£10,000 a year with Christ's plain injunction, 'Sell all that thou hast and distribute unto the poor.' And while I was listening to the sermon, I was thinking of you, Vin. I don't know how far you have accepted your father's theories – which he himself takes precious good care not to put into practice. But some day – for young men are so impulsive and wilful and uncertain – you might suddenly take it into your head to do some wild thing of that kind; and then don't you see how well it would be for you to be married to a sensible American girl; for if you were to sell all that you have and give to the poor, she would make pretty certain you didn't sell all that she had – so long as the Married Women's Property Act was in force. There's no mad Quixotism about a girl like that – level-headed, isn't that what they call it over there? Then think what a help such a wife as that would be to you in public life. Think of an election, for example – why, Louie Drexel could talk the voters out of their five senses – bamboozle the women, and laugh the men into good humour. I wonder you didn't pick up one of those bright American girls when you were over in the States: I suppose you were too busy examining the political machine, and the machinists. But I'm glad you didn't; I couldn't trust you; and I'm going to do it for you myself. You are my boy: I'm going to provide for you. And I haven't fixed on Louie Drexel yet; but at the same time you might come down to-morrow to St. James's Park and talk to her."

He withdrew his eyes from the crimson lamp, and came and took a chair near her.

"I am thinking of making a little change in my arrangements," said he. "There is too much distraction here; especially at this time of the year, when everybody's in town. I am going to take rooms elsewhere."

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed the pretty young widow, with a smile. "Is that it? The restraint of home has been found too much at last – we must have freedom, and wine-parties, and cards? Well, who can wonder at it? I warned your father years ago of the folly of not sending you to college; you would have had all that over by this time, like other young men; but no, the future Champion of the Proletariat was not to have his mind contaminated by the sons of squires. Well, and where have the princely apartments been chosen? In Piccadilly, of course – yellow satin and golden goblets."

"You are quite mistaken, aunt," he said, simply. "The rooms I hope to get to-morrow are in a quiet little street that I dare say you never heard of: if you saw it, you might probably call it shimmy."

"Oh, is that it?" she said again, for her brain was nimble and swift in the construction of theories. "Then you are really going to put some of your father's principles into practice, and to consort with the masses? I've often wondered when he was going to begin himself. You know how he declares it to be monstrous that there should be people of your own race, and colour, and religion, whom you would hesitate to ask to sit down at the same table as yourself; but I have not heard him as yet invite Jack the crossing-sweeper or Tom from the stable-yard to come in and dine with

him. And if they came in without an invitation, taking him at his word, as it were, I'm afraid their reception wouldn't be warm – yes, it would be remarkably warm – they'd be thrown out of the front-door in a couple of seconds. So you are going slumming, is that it? You want to understand the great heart of the people – before you lead them on to anarchy and universal plunder?"

"Aunt," said he, with a smile, "you mustn't say such things to me; you mustn't pour reactionary poison into my young mind. No; I am going to retire into that quiet little corner of London simply to get on with my books; and as I shan't let anybody know where it is, I can't be disturbed."

"Do you mean to live there altogether?" she asked, glancing quickly at him. "Shall you sleep there?"

"Oh, no. I shall come home here each evening."

"To dinner? But it is no use asking you that; for you never seem to care where you dine, or whether you dine at all. Have you told your father of this scheme?"

"No, not yet," he made answer; and he could say nothing further just then, for at this moment Harland Harris and his guest came upstairs from the dining-room, and Mr. Ogden proceeded to engage the young widow in ponderous conversation.

As good luck would have it, when Vincent went up next morning to the little thoroughfare leading from Park-street, he found exactly the rooms he wanted, and engaged them there and then, paying a fortnight's rent in advance in order to calm the good landlady's mind, for he had not a scrap of luggage with

him. The sitting-room was all he really required, to be sure; but he did not wish to be disturbed by having the adjoining bedroom occupied; so he took that too, money not being of much consequence to this young man. And then, when the landlady left, he sate down to look at his new possessions. The apartments must have looked poorly furnished to eyes familiar with the splendour of Grosvenor Place; but at all events they seemed clean. Cheap German lithographs adorned the walls; the fireplace was gay with strips of pink paper. But when he approached the window – which he did stealthily – there was more to interest him: the opposite two windows, behind the balcony filled with flowers, were both open: at any moment a figure might appear there – perhaps looking out absently and vaguely with those beautiful and wistful eyes. Or perchance he might hear the tender strains of the unseen violin? He remained there for some time, rather breathless and nervous, until he recollected that he had come hither for the purposes of study; and then he thought he would go away down to Grosvenor Place and seek out such books and writing-materials as he might want, and bring them along forthwith.

He went downstairs and was just about to step outside when he caught sight of something across the way which caused him instantly to shrink back and shelter himself within the shadow of the door – his heart beating quickly. He had nearly been face-to-face with the pensive-eyed young girl, for she had come forth from the opposite house, and was waiting for her grandfather

to follow. He remained concealed – fearful of being seen, and yet scarcely knowing why. Then, when he heard the door on the other side shut, and when he had allowed them a few seconds' grace, he stepped forth from his hiding, and saw that they were just turning the corner into Park-street.

Why this perturbation that caused his hands to tremble, that caused his eyeballs to throb, as he looked and looked, and yet hardly dared to look? He was doing no harm – he was thinking no harm. These thoroughfares were open to all; the May morning was warm and fine and clear; why should not he take his way to Hyde Park as well as another? Even in furtively watching whither they went – in keeping a certain distance between them and him – there was no sort of sacrilege or outrage. If they had turned and confronted him, they could not have recognised him: it was almost impossible they could have observed the young man who was half concealed by the curtains of the room in Musselburgh House. And yet – yet – there was some kind of tremulous wonder in his being so near her – in his being allowed, without let or hindrance, to gaze upon the long-flowing masses of hair, that caught a sheen of light here and there, and stirred with the stirring of the wind. And then the simple grace and ease of her carriage: she held her head more erect in these quiet thoroughfares; sometimes she turned a little to address the old man, and then her refined and sensitive profile became visible, and also the mysterious charm of the long and drooping lashes. He noticed that she never looked at any passer-by; but she did

not seem so sad on this fresh morning; she was talking a good deal – and cheerfully, as he hoped. He wished for more sunlight – that the day might brighten all around her – that the warm airs might be sweet with the blossoms of the opening summer.

For now they were nearing Hyde Park; and away before them stretched the pale blue vistas of atmosphere under the wide-swaying branches of the maples. They crossed to Grosvenor Gate; they left the dull roar of Park Lane behind them; they passed beneath the trees; and emerged upon the open breadths of verdure, intersected by pale pink roads. Though summer had come prematurely, this was almost an April-like day: there was a south-west wind blowing, and flattening the feathery grasses; there were shafts of misty sunlight striking here and there; while a confusion of clouds, purple and grey and silver, floated heavily through the surcharged sky. The newly-shorn sheep were quite white – for London. A smart young maidservant idly shoving a perambulator had a glory of Spring flowers in her bonnet. The mild air blowing about brought grateful odours – was it from the green-sward all around, or from the more distant masses of hawthorn white and red?

The old man, marching with uplifted head, and sometimes swinging the stick that he carried, was singing aloud in the gaiety of his heart, though Vincent, carefully keeping at a certain distance, could not make out either the words or the air. The young girl, on the other hand, was simply looking at the various objects, animate and inanimate, around her – at the birds picking

up straws or shreds of wool for the building of their nests, at the wind shivering through the grey spikelets of the grass, at the ever-changing conformation of the clouds, at the swaying of the branches of the trees; while from time to time there came floating over from Knightsbridge the sound of a military band. No, she did not appear so sad as she had done the day before; and there was something cheerful, too, about her costume – about the simple dress of dark blue-and-white-striped linen and the sailor's hat of cream-white with a dark blue band. Mary, he made sure her name was – Mary Bethune. Only a name to him; nothing more: a strange, indefinable, immeasurable distance lay between them; not for him was it to draw near to her, to breathe the same air with her, to listen to the low tones of her voice, to wait for the uplifting of the mysteriously shaded eyes. And as for fancies become more wildly audacious? – what would be the joy of any human being who should be allowed to touch – with trembling fingertips – with reverent and almost reluctant fingertips – the soft splendour of that shining and beautiful hair?

George Bethune and his granddaughter made their way down to the Serpentine, and took their places on a bench there, while the old man proceeded to draw from his pocket a newspaper, which he leisurely began to read. The girl had nothing to do but sit placidly there and look around her – at the shimmering stretch of water, at the small boys sailing their mimic yachts, at the quacking ducks and yelping dogs, at the ever-rustling and murmuring trees. Vincent Harris had now dared to draw

a little nearer; but still he felt that she was worlds and worlds away. How many yards were there between him and her? – not yards at all, but infinities of space! They were strangers to each other; no spoken word was possible between them; they might go through to the end of life with this impalpable barrier for ever dividing them. And yet it seemed a sort of miraculous thing that he was allowed to come so close – that he could almost tell the individual threads of that soft-shining hair. Then, more than once, too, he had caught a glimpse of her raised eyes, as she turned to address her grandfather; and that was a startling and bewildering experience. It was not their mere beauty; though, to be sure, their clear and limpid deeps seemed all the more clear and limpid because of the touch of sun-tan on her complexion; it was rather that they were full of all ineffable things – simplicity, submission, gratitude, affection, and even, as he rejoiced to think, some measure of mild enjoyment. For the moment there was little of that pensive and resigned look that had struck him in the figure standing with bowed head at Lord Musselburgh's table. She appeared to be pleased with the various life around her and its little incidents; she regarded the sailing of the miniature yachts with interest. When a brace of duck went whirring by overhead, she followed their flight until they were lost to view; she watched two small urchins furtively fishing for minnows, with an eye on the distant park-keeper. There was a universal rustling of leaves in the silence; and sometimes, when the wind blew straight across, the music of the military band became more distinct.

How long they remained there, the young man did not know; it was a golden morning, and all too brief. But when at last they did rise to go he was very nearly caught; for instead of returning by the way they had come, they struck westward; and he suddenly saw with alarm that there was no time for him to get behind one of the elms. All he could do was to turn aside, and lower his eyes. They passed within a few yards of him; he could distinctly hear the old man singing, with a fine note of bravado in his voice, "The standard on the braes o' Mar, is up and streaming rarely"; then, when he was sure they were some way off, he made bold to raise his eyes again. Had she taken any notice of him? He hoped not. He did not wish her to think him a spy; he did not wish to be known to her at all. He should be her constant neighbour, her companion almost, without any consciousness on her part. And again and again he marvelled that the landlady in the little thoroughfare should have given him those treasures of rooms – should have put such happiness within his reach – for so trivial a sum. Seventeen shillings a week! – when each moment would be a diamond, and each evening hour a string of diamonds!

But nevertheless there were his studies to be thought of; so now he walked away down to Grosvenor Place, gathered his books together, and took them up in a hansom to his newly-acquired lodgings. That afternoon he did loyally stick to his work – or tried to do so, though, in fact, his ears were alert for any sound coming from the other side of the way. He had left his window open; one of the windows of the opposite house was also

left open. Occasionally he would lay down Draper's Civil War in America, and get up and stretch his legs, and from a convenient shelter send a swift glance of scrutiny across the street. There was no sign. Perhaps they had gone out again, shopping, or visiting, or, as likely as not, to look at the people riding and driving in the Park. He returned to Draper, and to President Jackson's Proclamation – but with less of interest: his annotations became fewer. He was listening as well as reading.

Then all of a sudden there flashed into his brain a suggestion – a suggestion that had little to do with Clay's Compromise, or the project to arrest Mr. Calhoun. On the previous evening it had seemed to him as though the unseen violinist were speaking to him: why, then, should he not answer, in the same language? There could be no offence in that – no impertinence: it would be merely one vague voice responding to the other, the unknown communicating in this fleshless and bloodless way with the unknown. And now he was abundantly grateful to his aunt for having insisted on his including music among his various studies and accomplishments: a use had come for his slight proficiency at last: most modern languages he knew, but he had never expected to be called upon to speak in this one. And yet what more simple, as between neighbours? He was not thrusting his society on any one; he was invading no privacy; he was demanding no concession of friendship or even acquaintance. But at least the dreadful gulf of silence would be bridged over by this mystic means.

It was nearly six o'clock; London was busy when he went out on this hot evening. He walked along to a music-publisher's place in Regent-street; and hired a piano on the express stipulation that it was to be in his rooms within one hour. Then, as he had only had a biscuit for lunch, and wished to leave himself untrammelled later on, he turned into a restaurant, and dined there, simply enough, and had a cigarette and a look at the evening papers. Thereafter he strolled back to his lodgings, and took to his book, though his thoughts were inclined to wander now and again.

Twilight had fallen; but he did not light the gas. Once, for a brief second or two, he had quietly run his fingers over the keys of the piano, to learn if it was tolerably in tune; then the room relapsed into silence again. And was there to be silence on the other side as well? He waited and listened, and waited and listened, in vain. Perhaps, while he was idling away his time in the Regent-street restaurant, they had come out from the house and gone off to some theatre. The street was so still now that he could almost have heard any one speaking in that room on the other side; but there was no sound.

Then his heart leapt and his brain grew giddy. Here was that low-breathing and vibrating wail again: – and was she alone now? – in the gathering darkness? He recognised the air; it was "Auld Robin Gray;" but never before had he known that it was so beautiful and so ineffably sad as well. Slowly she played and simply; it was almost like a human voice; only that the trembling

strings had a penetrating note of their own. And when she ceased, it seemed to him that it would be profanation to break in upon the hushed and sacred stillness.

And yet was he not to answer her, in the only speech that could not offend? Was he to act the coward, when there offered a chance of his establishing some subtle link with, her, of sending a message, of declaring his presence in this surely unobtrusive fashion? Quickly he sat down to the piano; and, in rather a nervous and anxious fashion, began. He was not a brilliant performer – anything but that; but he had a light touch and a sensitive ear; and he played with feeling and grace. It was "Kathleen Mavourneen" – and a sort of appeal in its way, did she but remember the words. He played the melody over only once, slowly and as sympathetically as he could; then he rose and retired from the piano; and stood in the darkness, listening.

Alas! there was no response. What had he done? He waited, wondering; but all was still in the little street. It was as if some bird, some mellow-throated thrush or nightingale, had been warbling to itself in the dim security of the leaves, and been suddenly startled and silenced by an alien sound, not knowing what that might portend.

CHAPTER III.
AN APPROACH

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" called out old George Bethune.

There appeared a middle-aged man, of medium height, who looked like a butler out of employment; he was pale and flabby of face, with nervous eyes expressive of a sort of imbecile amiability.

"Ah, Hobson!" said Mr. Bethune, in his lofty manner. "Well?"

The landlady's husband came forward in the humblest possible fashion; and his big, prominent, vacuous eyes seemed to be asking for a little consideration and goodwill.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said he, in the most deplorable of Cockney accents, "I 'umbly beg your pardon for making so bold; but knowing as you was so fond of everything Scotch, I took the liberty of bringing you a sample of something very special – a friend of mine, sir, recommended it – and then says I to him, 'Lor bless ye, I don't know nothing about Highland whiskey; but there's a gentleman in our 'ouse who is sure to be a judge, and if I can persuade him to try it, he'll be able to say if it's the real sort.'"

"All right, Hobson," said George Bethune, in his grand way. "Some other time I will see what it is like."

"Thank you, sir, thank you!" said the ex-butler, with earnest

gratitude; and he went and placed the bottle on the sideboard. Then he came back, and hesitatingly took out an envelope from his pocket. "And if I might ask another favour, sir. You see, sir, in this 'ot weather people won't go to the theatres; and they're not doing much; and my brother-in-law, the theatrical agent, he's glad to get the places filled up, to make a show, sir, as you might say. And I've got two dress-circle seats, if you and the young lady was thinking of going to the theatre to-morrow night. It's a great favour, sir, as my brother-in-law said to me as he was a-giving me the tickets and arsking me to get 'em used."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.