

BLACK WILLIAM

STAND FAST,
CRAIG-ROYSTON!
(VOLUME II)

William Black

**Stand Fast, Craig-
Royston! (Volume II)**

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CHAPTER I. DOUBTS AND DREAMS

And at first Vincent was for rebelliously thrusting aside and ignoring this information that had reached him so unexpectedly. Was he, on the strength of a statement forwarded by an unknown correspondent in New York, to suspect – nay, to condemn unheard – this proud and solitary old man with whom he had all this while been on terms of such close and friendly intimacy? Had he not had ample opportunities of judging whether George Bethune was the sort of person likely to have done this thing that was now charged against him? He went over these past weeks and months. Was it any wonder that the old man's indomitable courage, his passionate love of his native land, and the constant and assiduous care and affection he bestowed on his granddaughter, should have aroused alike the younger man's admiration and his gratitude? What if he talked with too lofty an air of birth and lineage, or allowed his enthusiasm about Scotland and Scottish song to lead him into the realms of rodomontade: may not an old man have his harmless foibles? Any one who had witnessed Maisrie's devotion to her grandfather, her gentle forbearance and consideration, her skilful humouring of him, and her never-failing faith in him, must have got to know what kind of man was old George Bethune.

And yet, when Vincent turned to the letter, it seemed terribly simple, and straightforward, and sincere. There was no vindictiveness in it at all; rather there was a pained surprise on the part of the writer that a loyal Scot – one, too, who had been admitted into that fraternity of song-writing exiles over the water – should have been guilty of such a flagrant breach of trust. Then Lord Musselburgh's patronage, as the young man knew very well, had taken the form of a cheque; so that the charge brought by the writer of this letter practically was that George Bethune had obtained, and might even now be obtaining, money by fraud and false pretences. It was a bewildering thing – an impossible thing – to think of. And now, as he strove to construct all sorts of explanatory hypotheses, there seemed to stand in the background the visionary form of Mrs. Ellison; and her eyes were cold and inquiring. How had she come to suspect? It was not likely that she could be familiar with the Scotch-American newspaper offices of the United States.

No, he could make nothing of it; his perplexity only increased. All kinds of doubts, surmises, possible excuses went chasing each other through his brain. Perhaps it was only literary vanity that had prompted the old man to steal this project when it was placed before him? Or perhaps he thought he had a better right to it, from his wide knowledge of the subject? Vincent knew little of the laws and bye-laws of the literary world; perhaps this was but a bit of rivalry carried too far; and in any case, supposing the old man had erred in his eagerness to claim this topic as his own, surely that did not prove him to be a charlatan all the way through, still less a professional impostor? But then his making use of this scheme to obtain money – and that not only from Lord Musselburgh? Oh, well (the young man tried to convince himself) there might not be so much harm in that. No doubt he looked forward to issuing the volume, and giving his patrons value in return. Old George Bethune, as he knew, was quite careless about pecuniary matters: for example, if the bill for those little dinners at the various restaurants was paid by some one, that was enough; the old gentleman made no further inquiries. He was content to let his young friend settle these trivial details; and Master Vin was willing enough. In fact, the latter had devised a system by which the awkwardness of calling for the bill in Maisrie's presence was avoided; this system worked admirably; and Mr. Bethune asked no questions. Doubtless, if he had remembered, or taken the trouble, he would have paid his shot like anyone else.

But amid all these conflicting speculations, there was one point on which the mind of this young man remained clear and unswerving; and that was that whatever might be the character or career of old George Bethune, his principles or his practice, Maisrie was as far apart and dissociated from them as if worlds intervened. If there had been any malfeasance in this matter, she, at least, was no sharer in it. And the more he pondered, the more anxious he became to know whether Maisrie had any idea of the position in which her grandfather was placed. How much would he be entitled to tell her, supposing she was in ignorance? And when could he hope for an opportunity? And then again, failing an opportunity, how was he to go and spend the evening with those two friends of his, pretending to be entirely engrossed by their little amusements and occupations outdoors and in, while all the time there was lying in his pocket this letter, unanswered and perhaps unanswerable?

Fortune favoured him. Towards evening, a little before six o'clock, he heard a door shut on the other side of the street; and, lifting his head, he perceived that it was Mr. Bethune who had just come out of the house, alone. Here was a chance not to be missed. Waiting for a couple of minutes, to make sure that the coast was clear, he passed downstairs, crossed the little thoroughfare, and knocked. The landlady told him that Miss Bethune was upstairs, and upstairs he went. The next moment a voice that he knew well invited him to enter, and therewithal the two young people found themselves face to face.

"You are early," she said, with a little smile of welcome, as she stopped in her sewing.

"Yes," said he, and he added quite frankly, "I saw your father go out, and I wished to speak with you alone. The fact is, Maisrie," he continued, taking a chair opposite her, "I have heard from America to-day about that proposal I made – to get some one to collect materials for your grandfather's book; and the answer is rather a strange one – I don't quite understand – perhaps you can tell me something about it." He hesitated, and then went on: "Maisrie, I suppose it never occurred to you that – that some one else in America might be proposing to bring out a similar book?"

She looked up quickly, and with a certain apprehension in her eyes.

"Oh, yes, I knew. My grandfather told me there had been talk of such a thing. What have you heard?"

He stared at her.

"You knew?" said he. "Then surely you might have told me!"

There was something in his tone – some touch of reproach – that brought the blood to her face; and yet she answered calmly and without resentment —

"Did I not tell you? – nor my grandfather? But perhaps neither of us thought it of much importance. It was only some vague talk, as I understood; for everyone must have known that no one was so familiar with the subject as my grandfather, and that it would be foolish to try to interfere with him. At the same time I have always been anxious that he should get on with the book, for various reasons; and if you have heard anything that will induce him to begin at once, so much the better."

It was clear that she was wholly in ignorance of the true state of the case.

"No," said he, watching her the while. "What I have heard will not have that effect, but rather the reverse. To tell you the plain truth, the American or Scotch-American writer has finished his book, and it will be out almost directly."

She sprang to her feet with an involuntary gesture, and stood still for a moment, her lips grown suddenly pale, and her eyes bewildered: and then she turned away from him to hide her emotion, and walked to the window. Instantly he followed her.

"Maisrie, what is the matter!" he exclaimed in astonishment, for he found that tears had sprung to her eyes.

"Oh, it is a shame – it is a shame," she said, in broken accents, and her hands were clenched, "to steal an old man's good name from him, and that for so small a thing! What harm had he ever done them? The book was such a small thing – they might have left it to him – what can they gain from it –"

"But Maisrie – !"

"Oh, you don't understand, Vincent, you don't understand at all," she said, in a despairing sort of way, "how my grandfather will be compromised! He undertook to bring out the book; he got friends to help him with money; and now – now – what will they think? – what can I say to them? – what can I do? I – I must go to them – but – but what can I say?"

Her tears were running afresh now; and at sight of them the young man threw to the winds all his doubts and conjectures concerning George Bethune's honesty. That was not the question now.

"No, you shall not go to them!" said he, with indignant eyes. "You? – you go to any one – in that way? No, you shall not. I will go. It is a question of money: I will pay them their money back. Tell me who they are, and the amounts; and they shall have every farthing of their money back, and at once: what can they ask for more?"

For a second she regarded him with a swift glance of more than gratitude; but it was only to shake her head.

"No, how could I allow you to do that? What explanation could you make? There must be some other way – often I have wished that my grandfather would let me try to earn something – I am willing enough – and I am never sure of my grandfather, because he can believe things so easily." She had grown calmer now; and over her face there had come the curious look of resignation that he had noticed when first he saw her, and that seemed so strange in a young girl. "I might have expected this," she went on, absently and sadly. "My grandfather can persuade himself of anything: if he thinks a thing is done, that is enough. I am sure I have urged him to get on with this book – not that I thought anybody could be so mean and cruel as to step in and forestall him – but that he might get free from those obligations; but I suppose when he had once arranged all the materials in his own mind he felt that the rest was easy enough and that there was no hurry. He takes things so lightly – and now – the humiliation – well, I shall have to bear that – "

"I say you shall not," he said, hotly. "I claim the privilege of a friend, and you cannot refuse. Who are the people to whom your grandfather is indebted over this volume?" he demanded.

"For one, there is Lord Musselburgh," she said, but indifferently, as if no hope lay that way. "And there is Mr. Carmichael, who owns an Edinburgh paper – the *Chronicle*."

"Very well," said he, promptly. "What is to hinder my explaining to them that circumstances have occurred to prevent Mr. Bethune bringing out the volume he had projected; and that he begs to return them the money they had been good enough to advance?"

She shook her head again and sighed.

"No. It is very kind of you: You are always kind. But I could not accept it. I must try some way myself – though I am rather helpless: it is so difficult to get my grandfather to see things. I told you before: he lives in a world of imagination, and he can persuade himself that everything is well, no matter how we are situated. But it was shameful of them," she said, with her indignation returning, and her lips becoming at once proud and tremulous, "to cheat an old man out of so poor and small a thing! Why, they all knew he was going to write this book – all the writers themselves – they were known to himself personally – and glad enough they were to send him their verses. Well, perhaps they are not to blame. Perhaps they may have been told that he had given up the idea – that is quite likely. At all events, I don't envy the miserable creature who has gone and taken advantage of my grandfather's absence – "

She could say no more just then, for there was a sound below of the door being opened and shut; and the next minute they could hear old George Bethune coming with his active step up the flight of stairs, while he sang aloud, in fine bravura fashion, "'Tis the march – 'tis the march – 'tis the march of the Cameron men!"

The little dinner in the restaurant that evening was altogether unlike those that had preceded it. The simple and innocent gaiety – the sense of snugness and good-comradeship – appeared to have fled, leaving behind it a certain awkwardness and restraint. Vincent was entirely perplexed. The story he had heard from America was in no way to be reconciled with Maisrie's interpretation of her

grandfather's position; but it was possible that the old man had concealed from her certain material facts; or perhaps had been able to blind himself to them. But what troubled the young man most of all was to notice that the old look of pensive resignation had returned to Maisrie's face. For a time a brighter life had shone there; the natural animation and colour of youth had appeared in her cheeks; and her eyes had laughter in them, and smiles, and kindness and gratitude; but all that had gone now – quite suddenly, as it seemed – and there had come back that strange sadness, that look of unresisting and hopeless acquiescence. Alone of the little party of three George Bethune retained his usual equanimity; nay, on this particular evening he appeared to be in especial high spirits; and in his careless and garrulous good-humour he took little heed of the silence and constraint of the two younger folk. They made all the better audience; and he could enforce and adorn his main argument with all the illustrations he could muster; he was allowed to have everything his own way.

And perhaps Vincent, thinking of Maisrie, and her tears, and the hopelessness and solitariness of her position, may have been inclined to resent what he could not but regard as a callous and culpable indifference. At all events, he took the first opportunity that presented itself of saying —

"I hope I am not the bearer of ill-news, Mr. Bethune; but I have just heard from New York that someone over there has taken up your subject, and that a volume on the Scotch poets in America is just about ready, and will be published immediately."

Maisrie glanced timidly at her grandfather; but there was nothing to fear on his account; he was not one to quail.

"Oh, indeed, indeed," said he, with a lofty magnanimity. "Well, I hope it will be properly and satisfactorily done: I hope it will be done in a way worthy of the subject. Maisrie, pass the French mustard, if you please. A grand subject: for surely these natural and simple expressions of the human heart are as deeply interesting as the more finished, the more literary, productions of the professional poet. A single verse, rough and rugged as you like – and the living man stands revealed. Ay, ay, so the book is coming out. Well, I hope the public will be lenient; I hope the public will understand that these men are not professional poets, who have studied and written in leisure all their lives; it is but a homely lilt they offer; but it is genuine; it is from the heart – and it speaks to the heart – "

"But, grandfather," said Maisrie, "you were to have written the book!"

"What matters it who compiles the pages? – that is nothing at all; that is in a measure mechanical. I am only anxious that it should be well done, with tact, and discretion, and modesty," he continued – and with such obvious sincerity that Vincent was more than ever perplexed. "For the sake of old Scotland I would willingly give my help for nothing – a little guidance here and there – a few biographical facts – even an amended line. But after all the men must speak for themselves; and well they will speak, if the public will but remember that these verses have for the most part been thought of during the busy rush of a commercial life, and written down in a chance evening hour. It will be a message across the sea, to show that Scotland's sons have not forgotten her. MacGregor Crerar – Donald Ramsay – Hugh Ainslie – Evan MacColl – Andrew Wanless – I wonder if they have got Wanless's address to the robin that was sent to him from Scotland – you remember, Maisrie?"

'There's mair than you, my bonnie bird,
Hae crossed the raging main,
Wha mourn the blythe, the happy days,
They'll never see again.
Sweet bird, come sing a sang to me,
Unmindfu' o' our ills;
And let us think we're ance again
'Mang our ain heather hills!'

The book will be welcomed by many a proud heart, and with moist eyes, when it gets away up among the glens, to be read by the fireside and repeated at the plough; and I think, Maisrie, when you and I take a walk along Princes-street in Edinburgh we may see more than one or two copies in the bookseller's windows. Then I hope *Blackwood* will have a friendly word for it; and I am sure Mr. Carmichael will allow me to give it a hearty greeting in the *Weekly Chronicle*."

"But, grandfather," said Maisrie, almost piteously, "surely you forget that you undertook to bring out this book yourself!"

"Yes, yes," said he, with perfect good humour. "But 'the best laid schemes o' mice and men, gang aft agley.' And I do not grudge to some other what might have been mine – I mean the association of one's name with such a band of true and loyal Scotchmen. No; I do not grudge it; on the contrary I am prepared to give the volume the most generous welcome in my power; it is not for a brother Scot to find fault in such a case, or to be niggard of his praise. I hope we are capable of showing to the world that 'we're a' John Thampson's bairns.'"

Maisrie was growing desperate. Her grandfather would not understand; and how was she to speak plain – with Vincent listening to every word? And yet she knew that now he was aware of all the circumstances; concealment was impossible; and so she forced herself to utterance.

"Grandfather," said she – and her face was flushed a rose-red, though she seemed to take no heed of her embarrassment, so earnest and imploring was her speech, "You cannot forget the obligations you put yourself under – to Lord Musselburgh and Mr. Carmichael, and perhaps others. You undertook to write the book. If that is impossible now, it is a great misfortune; but at least there is one thing you must do; you must explain to them what has happened, and give them back the money."

The old man could no longer shelter himself behind his gay and discursive optimism; he frowned impatiently.

"I have already told you, Maisrie," said he, in severely measured accents, " – and you are grown up now, you might understand for yourself – that there are times and seasons when the introduction of business matters is uncalled for, and, in fact, unbecoming; and one of these is, surely, when we come out to spend a pleasant evening with our young friend here. I do not think it necessary that we should discuss our business affairs before him – I presume he would consider such a thing somewhat inappropriate at a dinner-table."

Maisrie's lips quivered; and her grandfather saw it. Instantly he changed his tone.

"Come, come," said he, with a cheerful good nature. "Enough, enough. I can quite comprehend how the *res angusta domi* may tend to give money, and questions of money, an over-prominence in the minds of women. But money, and the obligations that money may place us under, are surely a very secondary affair, to one who looks at human nature with a larger view. I thank God," he went on, with much complacency, "that I have never been the slave of avarice, that even in times of great necessity I have kept subsidiary things in their proper sphere. I do not boast; our disposition is as much a matter of inheritance as the shape of our fingers or feet; and that disposition may be handed down without the accompanying circumstances that developed it. You follow me, Mr. Harris?"

"Oh, yes," said the younger man, gloomily; that quiver of Maisrie's lips was still in his mind.

For the first time since he had known them Vincent was glad to get away from his companions that night: the situation in which he found them and himself alike involved was altogether so strange that he wanted time to think over it. And first of all he put aside that matter of the Scotch-American book as of minor importance: no doubt some kind of explanation was possible, if all the facts were revealed. It was when he came to consider the position and surroundings of Maisrie Bethune that the young man grew far more seriously concerned; indeed, his heart became surcharged with an immeasurable pity and longing to help. He began to understand how it was that a premature sadness and resignation was written on that beautiful face, and why her eyes so rarely smiled; and he could guess at the origin of that look of hopelessness, as though she despaired of getting her grandfather to acknowledge the realities and the responsibilities of the actual life around him. To Vincent the

circumstances in which this young girl was placed seemed altogether tragic; and when he regarded the future that might lie before her, it was with a blank dismay.

Moreover, he now no longer sought to conceal from himself the nature of this engrossing interest in all that concerned her, this fascination and glamour that drew him towards her, this constant solicitude about her that haunted him day and night. Love had originally sprung from pity, perhaps; her loneliness had appealed to him, and her youth, and the wistful beauty of her eyes. But even now that he knew what caused his heart to leap when he heard her footfall on the stairs, or when he happened to look up at the table to find her regard fixed on him, there was no wild desire for a declaration of his fond hopes and dreams. Rather he hung back – as if something mysteriously sacred surrounded her. He had asked her for a flower: that was all. Probably she had forgotten. There seemed no place for the pretty toyings of love-making in the life of this girl, who appeared to have missed the gaiety of childhood, and perhaps might slip on into middle-age hardly knowing what youth had been. And yet what a rose was ready to blow there – he said to himself – if only sunshine, and sweet rains, and soft airs were propitious! It was the wide, white days of June that were wanted for her, before the weeks and the months went by, and the darkness and the winter came.

No, he did not speak; perhaps he was vaguely aware that any abrupt disclosure on his part might startle her into maiden reserve; whereas in their present relations there existed the frankest confidence. She made no secret of the subdued and happy content she experienced in this constant companionship; her eyes lit up when he approached; oftentimes she called him 'Vincent' without seeming to notice it. She had given him a flower? – yes, as she would have given him a handful at any or every hour of the day, if she fancied it would please him, and without ulterior thought. They were almost as boy and girl together in this daily intercourse, this open and avowed comradeship, this easy and unrestricted familiarity. But sometimes Vincent looked ahead – with dim forebodings. He had not forgotten the murmur of that wide sea of separation that he had beheld as it were in a vision; the sound of it, faint, and sad, and ominous, still lingered in his ears.

It was in one of these darker moments that he resolved, at whatever risk, to acquaint old George Bethune with something of his irresolute hopes and fears. The opportunity arrived quite unexpectedly. One morning he was as usual on his way to his lodgings when, at the corner of Upper Grosvenor Street, he met Mr. Bethune coming into Park Lane alone.

"Maisrie is well?" Vincent asked, in sudden alarm, for it was the rarest thing in the world to find grandfather and granddaughter separated.

"Oh, yes, yes," the old man said. "She has some household matters to attend to – dressmaking, I think. Poor lass, she has to be economical; indeed, I think she carries it to an extreme; but it's no use arguing with Maisrie; I let her have her own way."

"I wanted to speak to you – about her," Vincent said, and he turned and walked with the old man, across the street into Hyde Park. "I have often wished to speak to you – and – and of course there was no chance when she herself was present –"

He hesitated, casting about for a beginning; then he pulled himself together, and boldly flung himself into it.

"I hope you won't take it for impertinence," said he. "I don't mean it that way – very different from that. But you yourself, sir, you may remember, you spoke to me about Maisrie when we were down at Henley together – about what her future might be, if anything happened to you – and you seemed concerned. Well, it is easy to understand how you should be troubled – it is terrible to think of a young girl like that – so sensitive, too – being alone in the world, and not over well-provided for, as you have hinted to me. It would be so strange and unusual a position for a young girl to be in – without relations – without friends – and having no one to advise her or protect her in any way. Of course you will say it is none of my business –"

"But you would like to have it made your business," said old George Bethune, with a bland and good-natured frankness that considerably astounded his stammering companion. "My dear young

friend, I know perfectly what you would say. Do you think I have been blind to the friendly and even affectionate regard you have shown towards my granddaughter all this while, or to the pleasure she has enjoyed in having you take part in our small amusements? No, I have not been blind. I have looked on and approved. It has been an added interest to our lives; between you and her I have observed the natural sympathy of similar age; and I have been glad to see her enjoying the society of one nearer her own years. But now – now, if I guess aright, you wish for some more definite tie."

"Would it not be better?" the young man said, breathlessly. "If there were some clear understanding, would not a great deal of the uncertainty with regard to the future be removed? You see, Mr. Bethune, I haven't spoken a word to Maisrie – not a word. I have been afraid. Perhaps I have been mistaken in imagining that she might in time – be inclined to listen to me – "

He stopped: then he proceeded more slowly – and it might have been noticed that his cheek was a little paler than usual. "Yes, it may be as you say. Perhaps it is only that she likes the companionship of one of her own age. That is natural. And then she is very kind and generous: I may have been mistaken in thinking there was a possibility of something more."

He was silent now and abstracted: as he walked on he saw nothing of what was around him.

"Come, come, my friend!" George Bethune exclaimed, with much benignity. "Do not vex yourself with useless speculations; you are looking too far ahead; you and she are both too young to burden yourselves with grave responsibilities. A boyish and girlish attachment is a very pretty and engaging thing; but it must not be taken too seriously – "

And here for a second a flash of resentment fired through Vincent's heart: was it well of this old man to speak so patronisingly of Maisrie as but a child when it was he himself who had thrust upon her more than the responsibilities and anxieties of a grown woman?

"Take things as they are! Do you consider that you have much cause to complain, either the one or the other of you?" old George Bethune resumed, in a still lighter strain. "You have youth and strength, good health, and a constant interest in the life going on around you: is not that sufficient? Why, here am I, nearing my three score years and ten; and every morning that I awake I know that there lies before me another beautiful, interesting, satisfactory day, that I am determined to enjoy to the very utmost of my power. To-morrow? – to-morrow never yet belonged to anybody – never was of any use to anybody: give me to-day, and I am content to let to-morrow shift for itself! Yes," he continued, in firm and proud and almost joyous accents, and he held his head erect, "you may have caught me in some unguarded moment – some moment of nervous weakness or depression – beginning to inquire too curiously into the future; but that was a transient folly; I thank God that it is not my habitual mood! Repining, complaining, anticipating: what good do you get from that? Surely I have had as much reason to repine and complain as most; but I do not waste my breath in remonstrating with 'fickle Fortune.' 'Fickle Fortune!'" he exclaimed, in his scorn – "if the ill-favoured jade were to come near me I would give her a wallop across the buttocks with my staff, and bid her get out of my road! 'Fickle Fortune!' She may 'perplex the poor sons of a day;' but she shall never perplex me – by God and Saint Ringan!"

He laughed aloud in his pride.

"Why," said he, suddenly changing into quite another vein, "have you not yet come to know that the one priceless thing to think of in the world – the one extraordinary thing – is that at this precise moment you can see? For millions and millions of years these skies have been shining, and the clouds moving, and the seas running blue all round the shores; and you were dead and blind to them; unknowing and unknown. Generation after generation of men – thousands and thousands of them – were looking at these things; they knew the hills and the clouds and the fields; the world existed for them; but you could see nothing, you were as if lying dead. Then comes your brief instant; it is your turn; your eyes are opened; and for a little while – a passing second – the universe is revealed to you. Don't you perceive that the marvellous thing is that out of the vast millions of ages it should be this one particular moment, this present moment, that happens to be given to you? And instead

of receiving it with amazement and wonder and joy, why, you must begin to fret and worry and lay schemes, as if you were unaware that the gates of the empty halls of Pluto were waiting to engulf you and shut you up once more in darkness and blindness. Look at those elm-trees – at the water down there – at the moving clouds: isn't it wonderful to think that in the immeasurable life of the world this should happen to be the one moment when these things are made visible to you?"

Vincent perceived in a kind of way what the old man meant; but he did not understand why this should make him less concerned about Maisrie's position, or less eagerly covetous of winning her tender regard.

"Well, well," said old George Bethune, "perhaps it is but natural that youth should be impatient; while old age may well be content with such small and placid comforts as may be met with. I should have thought there was not much to complain of in our present manner of life – if you will allow me to include you in our tiny microcosm. It is not exciting; it is simple, and wholesome; and I hope not altogether base and gross. And as regards Maisrie, surely you and she have enough of each other's society even as matters stand. Let well alone, my young friend; let well alone; that is my advice to you. And I may say there are especial and important reasons why I should not wish her to be bound by any pledge. You know that I do not care to waste much thought on what may lie ahead of us; but still, at the same time, there might at any moment happen certain things which would make a great difference in Maisrie's circumstances – "

Vincent had been listening in a kind of absent and hopeless way; but these few words instantly aroused his attention: perhaps this was the real reason why the old man wished Maisrie to remain free?

"A great and marvellous change indeed," he continued, with some increase of dignity in his manner and in his mode of speech. "A change which would affect me also, though that would be of little avail now. But as regards my granddaughter, she might be called upon to fill a position very different from that she occupies at present; and I should not wish her to be hampered by anything pertaining to her former manner of life. Not that she would ever prove forgetful of past kindness; that is not in her nature; but in these new circumstances she might find herself confronted by other duties. Enough said, I hope, on that point. And well I know," he added, with something of a grand air, "that in whatever sphere Maisrie Bethune may be placed, she will act worthily of her name and of the obligations it entails."

He suddenly paused. There was a poorly-clad woman going by, carrying in one arm a baby, while with the other hand she half dragged along a small boy of five or six. She did not look like a professional London beggar, nor yet like a country tramp; but of her extreme wretchedness there could be no doubt; while there was a pinched look as of hunger in her cheeks.

"Wait a bit! – where are you going?" old George Bethune said to her, in blunt and ready fashion.

The woman turned round startled and afraid.

"I am making for home, sir," she said, timidly.

"Where's that?" he demanded.

"Out Watford way, sir – Abbot's Langley it is."

"Where have you come from?"

"From Leatherhead, sir."

"On foot all the way?"

"Yes, indeed, sir," she said, with a bit of a sigh.

"And with very little food, I warrant?" said he.

"Little indeed, sir."

"Have you any money?"

"Yes, sir – a matter of a few coppers left. I gave what I had to my old mother – she thought she was dying, and sent for me to bring the two little boys to see her – but she's better, sir, and now I'm making for home again."

"Oh, you gave what you had to your mother? Well," said he, deliberately, "I don't know whether what I have will amount to as much, but whatever it is you are welcome to it."

He dived into his trousers pockets and eventually produced about half a handful of shillings and pence; then he searched a small waistcoat-pocket and brought forth two sovereigns. It was all his wealth.

"Here, take that, and in God's name get yourself some food, woman!" said he, unconsciously lapsing into a pronounced Scotch accent. "You look starved. And this bit of a laddie, here – buy him some sweet things as well as bread and butter when you get up to the shops. And then when you're outside the town, you'll just give some honest fellow a shilling, and you'll get a cast of an empty cart to help you on your road. Well, good-day to ye – no, no, take what there is, I tell ye, woman! – bless me, you'll need most of it before you get to your own fireside. On your ways, now! – and when you reach the shops, don't forget the barley-sugar for this young shaver."

So he turned away, leaving the poor woman so overwhelmed that she had hardly a word of thanks; and when he had gone for some little distance all he said was – with something of a rueful laugh —

"There went my luncheon; for I promised Maisrie I should not return home till near dinner-time."

"And you have left yourself without a farthing?" the young man exclaimed. "Well, that's all right – I can lend you a few sovereigns."

"No, no," said old George Bethune, with a smile, and he held up his hand in deprecation. "I am well pleased now; and if I should suffer any pangs of starvation during the day, I shall be glad to think that I can endure them better than that poor creature with the long tramp before her. To-night," said he, rubbing his palms together with much satisfaction, "to-night, when we meet at Mentavisti's, I shall be all the hungrier and all the happier. Ah, must you go now? – good-bye, then! We shall see you at half-past six, I suppose; and meantime, my friend, dismiss from your mind those cares and anxious thoughts about the future. 'To the gods belongs to-morrow!'"

Now this little incident that had just happened in Hyde Park comforted Vincent exceedingly. Here was something definite that he could proudly set against the vague and unworthy suspicions of Mrs. Ellison. Surely the man was no plausible impostor, no charlatan, no crafty schemer, who could so readily empty his pockets, and look forward to a day's starvation, in order to help a poor and unknown vagrant-woman? No doubt it was but part and parcel of his habitual and courageous disregard of consequences, his yielding to the generous impulse of the moment; but, if the truth must be told, Master Vin was at times almost inclined to envy old George Bethune his splendid audacity and self-confidence. Why should the younger man be the one to take forethought for the morrow; while the venerable gray beard was gay as a lark, delighted with the present hour, and defiant of anything that might happen? And what if the younger man were to follow the precepts of the elder, and lapse into a careless content? Their way of living, as George Bethune had pointed out, was simple, happy, and surely harmless. There were those three forming a little coterie all by themselves; enjoying each other's society; interested in each other's pursuits. The hours of the daytime were devoted to individual work; then came the glad reunion of the evening and the sallying forth to this or the other restaurant; thereafter the little dinner in the corner, with its glimpses of foreign folk, and its gay talk filled with patriotism and poetry and reminiscences of other lands; finally the hushed enchantment of that little parlour, with Maisrie and her violin, with dominoes, and discussions literary and political, while always and ever there reigned a perfect frankness and good-fellowship. Yes, it seemed a happy kind of existence, for these three. And was not old George Bethune in the right in thinking that the young people should not hamper themselves by any too grave responsibilities? A boyish and girlish attachment (as he deemed it to be) was a pretty and amusing and engaging thing; quite a little idyll, in fact – but not to be taken too seriously. And where the future was all so uncertain, was it not better to leave it alone?

Specious representations, indeed! But this young man, who had his own views and ways of thinking, remained stubbornly unconvinced. It was because the future was so vague that he wanted it made more definite; and as he thought of Maisrie, and of what might befall her when she was alone in the world, and as he thought of his own far-reaching resolves and purposes, he did not in the least consider the relationship now existing between him and her as being merely a pretty little pastoral episode, that would lead to nothing. No doubt their present way of living had many charms and fascinations, if only it would last. But it would not last; it was impossible it should last. Looking back over these past months, Vincent was surely grateful enough for all the pleasant and intimate companionship he had enjoyed; but his temperament was not like that of George Bethune; the passing moment was not everything to him. He had an old head on young shoulders; and it needed no profound reflection to tell him that life could not always consist of the Restaurant Mentavisti and *La Claire Fontaine*.

CHAPTER II. BY NORTHERN SEAS

Here, in front of the great, square, old-fashioned Scotch mansion, which was pleasantly lit up by the morning sun, stood the family waggonette which had just been filled by those of the house-party who were bound for church; and here, too, in the spacious porch, was Mrs. Ellison, smiling her adieux with rather a sad air.

"Good-bye, dear," said her kindly hostess. "I hope you will have got rid of your headache by the time we get back." And therewith the carriage was driven away along the pebbled pathway, through an avenue of magnificent wide-spreading elms.

Then the tall and graceful young widow, who carried a book in her hand, glanced around her. There was no living thing near except a white peacock that was solemnly stalking across the lawn. Mrs. Ellison strolled towards a hammock slung between two maples, and stood there for a moment, and considered. Should she attempt it? There was no onlooker, supposing some slight accident befell. Finally, however, her courage gave way; she returned to the front of the house; and took possession of a long, low lounging-chair, where she could sit in the sun, and yet have the pages of her book in shadow.

There was a footfall behind her: Lord Musselburgh made his appearance, smoking a cigarette.

"Why," said she, with a prettily affected surprise, "haven't you gone to church? I made sure you had walked on."

"How could I leave you all by yourself," said the young man, with tender sympathy, "and you suffering from a headache?"

Then she professed to be vexed and impatient.

"Oh, do go away to church!" she said. "You can be in plenty of time, if you walk fast enough. If you stop here you know what will go on at lunch. Those Drexel girls can look more mischief than any other twenty girls could say or do."

"Oh, no," said he, plaintively, "don't send me away! Let us go for a walk rather. You know, a woman's headache is like her hat – she can put it on or off when she likes. Come!"

"I consider you are very impertinent," said she, with something of offended dignity. "Do you think I shammed a headache in order to stay behind?"

"I don't think anything," said he, discreetly.

"You will be saying next that it was to have this meeting with you?"

"Why, who could dare to imagine such a thing!"

"Oh, very well, very well," said she, with a sudden change to good-nature, as she rose from the chair. "I forgive you. And I will be with you in a second."

She was hardly gone a couple of minutes; but in that brief space of time she had managed to make herself sufficiently picturesque; for to the simple and neat grey costume which clad her tall and slim and elegant figure she had added a bold-sweeping hat of black velvet and black feathers, while round her neck she had wound a black boa, its two long tails depending in front. Thus there was no colour about her, save what shone in her perfect complexion, and in the light and expression of her shrewd, and dangerous, and yet grave and demure blue eyes.

"And really and frankly," said she, as they left the house together, "I am not sorry to have a chance of a quiet talk with you; for I want to tell you about my nephew; I am sure you are almost as much interested in him as I am; and you would be as sorry as I could be if anything were to happen to him. And I am afraid something is going to happen to him. His letters to me have entirely changed of late. You know how proud Vin is by nature – and scornful, too, when you don't act up to his lofty standard; and when I ventured to hint that he might keep his eyes open in dealing with that old

mountebank and his pretty granddaughter, oh! the tempestuous indignation of my young gentleman! He seemed to think that a creature such as I – filled with such base suspicions – was not fit to live. Well, I did not quarrel with my handsome boy; in fact, I rather admired his rage and disdain of me; it was part of the singleness of his nature; for he believes everybody to be as straightforward and sincere as himself; and he has a very fine notion of loyalty towards his friends. And vindictive, too, the young villain was; I can tell you I was made to feel the enormity of my transgression; I was left to wallow in that quagmire of unworthy doubt in which I had voluntarily plunged myself. So matters went on; and I could only hope for one of two things – either that he might find out something about those people that would sever his connection with them, or that his passing fancy for the girl would gradually fade away. I made sure he would tire of that oracular old humbug; or else he would discover there was nothing at all behind the mysterious eyes and the tragic solemnity of that artful young madam. Oh, mind you," she continued, as they walked along under the over-branching maples, amid a rustle of withered October leaves, "mind you, I don't suspect her quite as much as I suspect the venerable Druid; and I don't recall anything that I said about her. I admit that she beglamoured me with her singing of a French Canadian song; but what is that? – what can you tell of any one's moral or mental nature from a trick of singing – the thrill of a note – some peculiar quality of voice? Why, the greatest wretch of a man I ever knew had the most beautiful, innocent, honest brown eyes – they could make you believe anything – all the women said he was so good, and so different from other men – well, I will tell you that story some other time – I found out what the honesty of the clear brown eyes was worth."

Here she was interrupted by his having to open an iron gate for her. When they passed through, they came in sight of a solitary little bay of cream-white sand, touched here and there with russet weed, and ending in a series of projecting rocky knolls covered with golden bracken; while before them lay the wide plain of the sea, ruffled into the intensest blue by a brisk breeze from the north. Still further away rose the great mountains of Mull, and the long stretch of the Morven hills, all of a faint, ethereal crimson-brown in the sunlight, with every glen and water-course traced in lines of purest ultramarine. They had all this shining world to themselves; and there was an absolute silence save for the continuous whisper of the ripples that broke along the rocks; whilst the indescribable murmur – the strange inarticulate voices – of the greater deep beyond seemed to fill all the listening air.

"And I might have known I was mistaken in Vin's case," she went on, absently. "He was never the one to be caught by a pretty face, and be charmed with it for a time, and pass on and forget. He always kept aloof from that kind of thing – perhaps with a touch of impatient scorn. No; I might have known it was something more serious: so serious, indeed, is it, that he has at last condescended to appeal to me – fancy that! – fancy Vin coming down from his high horse, and appealing to me to be reasonable, to be considerate, and to stand his friend. And the pages he writes to persuade me! Really, if you were to believe him, you would think this old man one of the most striking and interesting figures the world has ever seen – so fearless in his pride, so patient in his poverty, so stout-hearted in his old age. Then his splendid enthusiasm about fine things in literature; his magnanimity over the wrongs he has suffered; his pathetic affection for his granddaughter and his tender care of her – why, you would take him to be one of the grandest human creatures that ever breathed the breath of life! Then about the girl: don't I remember *La Claire Fontaine*? Oh, yes, I remember *La Claire Fontaine* – and little else! You see, that is just where the trouble comes in as regards my nephew. Hard-headed as he is, and brusque of speech – sometimes, not always – he is just stuffed full of Quixotism; and I daresay it is precisely because this girl is shy and reserved, and has rather appealing eyes, that he imagines all kinds of wonderful things about her, and has made a saint of her, to be worshipped. A merry lass, with a saucy look and a clever tongue, would have no chance with Vin; he would stare at her – perhaps only half-disguising his contempt; and then, if you asked him what he thought of her he would probably say, with a curl of the lip, 'Impertinent tomboy!' But when he comes to speak of this one, why, you would think that all womanhood had undergone some process of deification in her

solitary self. Come here, and by this divine lamp you shall read and understand whatever has been great and noble and pure and beautiful in all the song and story of the world! And yet perhaps it is not altogether absurd," the pretty Mrs. Ellison continued, with a bit of a sigh. "It is pathetic, rather. I wish there were a few more such men as that; the world could get on very well with a few more of them. But they don't seem to exist nowadays."

"Ah, if you only knew! Perhaps your experience has been unfortunate," her companion said, wistfully: whereupon the young widow, without turning her head towards him, perceptibly sniggered.

"Oh, *you!*" she exclaimed, in derision. "You! You needn't pretend to come into that exalted category – no, indeed –"

"I suppose people have been saying things about me to you," said he, with a certain affectation of being hurt. "But you needn't have believed them all the same."

"People!" she said. "People! Why, everybody knows what you are! A professional breaker of poor young innocent girls' hearts. Haven't we all heard of you? Haven't we all heard how you went on in America? No such stories came home about Vin, I can assure you. Oh, we all know what you are!"

"You may have heard one story," said he, somewhat stiffly; "but if you knew what it really was, you would see that it was nothing to joke about. Some time I will tell you. Some other time when you are in a more friendly, a more believing and sympathetic, mood."

"Oh, yes," she said, laughing. "A very heart-rending story, no doubt! And you were deeply injured, of course, being so extremely innocent! You forget that I have seen you in a good many houses; you forget that I have been watching your goings-on with Louie Drexel, in this very place. Do you think I can't recognise the old hand – the expert – the artist? Lord Musselburgh, you can't deceive me."

"Probably not," said he, sharply. "If all tales be true you have acquired some experience yourself."

"Oh, who said that about me!" she demanded, with indignation (but her eyes were not indignant, they were rather darkly amused, if only he had made bold to look at them.) "Who dared to say such a thing? And of course you listened without a word of protest: probably you assented! What it is to have friends! But perhaps some day I, also, may have a little story to tell you; and then you may understand me a little better."

Here there was another farm-gate for him to open, so that their talk was again interrupted. Then they passed under a series of lofty grey crags hung with birch, and hazel, and rowan, all in their gorgeous autumnal tints; until they came in sight of another secluded little bay, with silver ripples breaking along the sand, and with small outlying islands covered with orange seaweed where they were not white with gulls. And here was a further stretch of that wind-swept, dark blue, striated sea, with the lonely hills of Morven and Kingairloch, sun-dappled and cloud-dappled, rising into the fair turquoise sky. There was a scent of dew-wet grass mingling with the stronger odour of the seaweed the breeze was blowing freshly in. And always there came to them the long, unceasing, multitudinous murmur of those moving waters, that must have sounded to them so great and vast a thing beside the small trivialities of their human speech.

"Have you read Vin's article in the *Imperial Review*?" said Mrs. Ellison, flicking at a thistle with her sun-shade.

"Not yet. But I saw it announced. About American State Legislatures, isn't it, or something of that kind?"

"It seemed to me very ably and clearly written," she said. "But that is not the point. I gather that Vin has been contemplating all kinds of contingencies; and that he is now trying to qualify for the post of leader-writer on one of the daily newspapers. What does that mean? – it means that he is determined to marry this girl, and that he thinks it probable there may be a break between himself and his father in consequence. There may be? – there will be, I give you my word! My amiable brother-in-law's theories of Socialism and Fraternity and Universal Equality are very pretty toys to play with

– and they have even gained him a sort of reputation through his letters to the *Times*; but he doesn't bring them into the sphere of actual life. Of course, Vin has his own little money; and I, for one, why, I shouldn't see him starve in any case; but I take it that he is already making provision for the future and its responsibilities. Now isn't that dreadful? I declare to you, Lord Musselburgh, that when I come down in the morning and find a letter from him lying on the hall-table, my heart sinks – just as if I heard the men on the stair bringing down a coffin. Because I know if he is captured by those penniless adventurers, it will be all over with my poor lad; he will be bound to them; he will have to support them; he will have to sacrifice friends and fortune, and a future surely such as never yet lay before any young man. Just think of it! Who ever had such possibilities before him? Who ever had so many friends, all expecting great things of him? Who ever was so petted and caressed and admired by those whose slightest regard is considered by the world at large an honour; and – I will say this for my boy – who ever deserved it more, or remained all through it so unspoiled, and simple, and manly? Oh, you don't know what he has been to me – what I have hoped for him – as if he were my only brother, and one to be proud of! His father is well known, no doubt; he has got a sort of academic reputation; but he is not liked; people don't talk about him as if – as if they cared for him. But Vincent could win hearts as well as fame: ah, do you think I don't know? – trust a woman to know! There is a strange kind of charm and fascination about him: I would put the most accomplished lady-killer in England in a drawing-room, and I know where the girls' eyes would go the moment my Vin made his appearance: perhaps it is because he is so honestly indifferent to them all. And it isn't women only; it isn't merely his good looks; every one, young and old, man and woman, is taken with him; there is about him a sort of magic and glamour of youth – and – and bright promise – and straightforward intention – oh, I can't tell you what! – but – but – it's something that makes me love him!"

"That is clear enough," said he; and indeed there was a ring of sincerity in her tone, sometimes even a tremor in her voice – perhaps of pride.

"Well," she resumed, as they strolled along under the beetled crags that were all aflame with golden-yellow birch and blood-red rowan, "I am not going to stand aside and see all that fair promise lost. I own I am a selfish woman; and hitherto I have kept aloof, as I did not want to get myself into trouble. I am going to hold aloof no longer. The more I hear the more I am convinced that Vin has fallen into the hands of an unscrupulous sharper – perhaps a pair of them; and I mean to have his eyes opened. Here is this new revelation about that American book, which simply means that you were swindled out of £50 – "

"One moment," her companion said hastily, and there was a curious look of mortification on his face. "I had no right to tell you that story. I broke confidence: I am ashamed of myself. And I assure you I was not swindled out of any £50. When the old man came to me, with his Scotch accent, and his Scotch patriotism, and his Scotch plaid thrown over his shoulder – well, 'my heart warmed to the tartan'; and I was glad of the excuse for helping him. I did not want any book; and I certainly did not want the money back. But when Vin came to me, and made explanations, and finally handed me a cheque for £50, there was something in his manner that told me I dared not refuse. It was something like 'Refuse this money, and you doubt the honour of the woman I am going to marry.' But seeing that I did take it, I have now nothing to say. My mouth is shut – ought to have been shut, rather, only you and I have had some very confidential chats since we came up here."

"All the same, it was a downright swindle," said she, doggedly; "and the fact that Vin paid you back the money makes it none the less a swindle. Now I will tell you what I am about to do. I must be cruel to be kind. I am going to enlist the services of George Morris – "

"Sir George?" he asked.

"No, no; George Morris, the solicitor – his wife and I are very great friends – and I know he would do a great deal for me. Very well; he must get to know simply everything about this old man – his whole history – and if it turns out to be what I imagine, then some of us will have to go to Vin and tell him the truth. It won't be a pleasant duty; but duty never is pleasant. I know I shall be

called a traitor for my share in it. Here is Vin appealing to me to be his friend – as if I were not his friend! – begging me to come and take this solitary and friendless girl by the hand, and all the rest of it; and instead of that I go behind his back and try to find out what will destroy his youthful romance for ever. But it's got to be done," said the young widow, with a sigh. "It will be a wrench at first; then six months' despair; and a life-time of thankfulness thereafter. And of course I must give George Morris all the help I can. He must make enquiries, for one thing, at the office of the *Edinburgh Chronicle*: I remember at Henley the old gentleman spoke of the proprietor as a friend of his. Then the man you know in New York, who gave Mr. Bethune a letter of introduction to you: what is his name and address?"

"Oh, no," said Lord Musselburgh, shrinking back, as it were. "No; I don't want to take part in it. Of course, you may be acting quite rightly; no doubt you are acting entirely in Vin's interests; but – but I would rather have nothing to do with it."

"And yet you call yourself Vin's friend! Come, tell me!" she said, coaxingly.

Again he refused.

"Mind you, I believe I could find out for myself," she went on. "I know that he is the editor of a newspaper in New York – a Scotch newspaper: come, Lord Musselburgh, give me his name, or the name of the newspaper!"

He shook his head.

"No – not fair," he said.

Then she stopped, and faced him, and regarded him with arch eyes.

"And yet it was on this very pathway, only yesterday morning, that you swore that there was nothing in the world that you wouldn't do for me!"

"That was different," said he, with some hesitation. "I meant as regards myself. This concerns some one else."

"Oh, very well," said she, and she walked on proudly. "I dare say I can find out."

He touched her arm to detain her.

"Have you a note-book?" he asked.

She took from her pocket a combined purse and note-book; and without a word – or a smile – she pulled out the pencil.

"Hugh Anstruther, *Western Scotsman* Office, New York," said he, rather shamefacedly.

"There, that is all right!" she said, blithely, and she put the note-book in her pocket again. "That is as far as we can go in that matter at present; and now we can talk of something else. What is the name of this little bay?"

"Little Ganovan, I believe."

"And the other one we passed?"

"Port Bân."

"What is the legend attached to the robber's cave up there in the rocks?"

"The legend? Oh, some one told me the gardener keeps his tools in that cave."

"What kind of a legend is that!" she said, impatiently; and then she went on with her questions. "Why doesn't anybody ever come round this way?"

"I suppose because they know we want the place to ourselves."

"And why should we want the place to ourselves?"

This was unexpected. He paused.

"Ah," said he, "what is the use of my telling you? All your interest is centred on Vin. I suppose a woman can only be interested in one man at any one time."

"Well, I should hope so!" the young widow said, cheerfully. "Shall we go round by the rocks or through the trees?"

For they were now come to a little wood of birch and larch and pine; and without more ado he led the way, pushing through the outlying tall bracken and getting in underneath the branches.

"I suppose," said he, in a rather rueful tone, "that you don't know what is the greatest proof of affection that a man can show to a woman? No, of course you don't!"

"What is it, then?" she demanded, as she followed him stooping.

"Why, it's going first through a wood, and getting all the spider's-webs on his nose."

But presently they had come to a clearer space, where they could walk together, their footfalls hushed by the carpet of withered fir-needles; while here and there a rabbit would scurry off, and again they would catch a glimpse of a hen-pheasant sedately walking down a glade between the trees. And now their talk had become much more intimate and confidential; it had even assumed a touch of more or less affected sadness.

"It's very hard," he was saying, "that you should understand me so little. You think I am cold, and cynical, and callous. Well, perhaps I have reason to be. I have had my little experience of womankind – of one woman, rather. I sometimes wonder whether the rest are anything like her, or are capable of acting as she did."

"Who was she?" his companion asked, timidly.

And therewith, as they idly and slowly strolled through this little thicket, he told his tragic tale, which needs not to be set down here: it was all about the James river, Virginia, and a pair of southern eyes, and betrayal, and farewell, and black night. His companion listened in the deep silence of sympathy; and when he had finished she said, in a low voice, and with downcast eyes —

"I am sorry – very sorry. But at least there was one thing spared you: you did not marry out of spite."

He glanced at her quickly.

"Oh, yes," she said, and she raised her head, and spoke with a proud and bitter air, "I have my story too! I do not tell it to everyone. Perhaps I have not told it to anyone. But the man I loved was separated from me by lies – by lies; and I was fool and idiot enough to believe them! And the one I told you about – the one with the beautiful, clear, brown eyes – so good and noble he was, as everyone declared! – it was he who came to me with those falsehoods; and I believed them – I believed them – like the fool I was! Oh, yes," she said, and she held her head high, for her breast was heaving with real emotion this time, "it is easy to say that every mistake meets with its own punishment; but I was punished too much – too much; a life-long punishment for believing what lying friends had said to me!" She furtively put the tips of her fingers to her eyes, to wipe away the tears that lay along the lashes. "And then I was mad; I was out of my senses; I would have married anybody to show that – that I cared nothing for – for the other one; and – and I suppose he was angry too – he would not speak – he stood aside, and knew that I was going to kill my life, and never a single word! That was his revenge – to say nothing – when he saw me about to kill my life! Cruel, do you call it? Oh, no! – what does it matter? A woman's heart broken – what is that? But now you know why I think so of men – and – and why I laugh at them –"

Well, her laughing was strange: she suddenly burst into a violent fit of crying and sobbing, and turned away from him, and hid her face in her handkerchief. What could he do? This was all unlike the gay young widow who seemed so proud of her solitary estate and so well content. Feeble words of comfort were of small avail. And then, again, it hardly seemed the proper occasion for offering her more substantial sympathy – though that was in his mind all the while, and very nearly on the tip of his tongue. So perforce he had to wait until her weeping was over; and indeed it was she herself who ended the scene by exclaiming impatiently —

"There – enough of that! I did not intend to bother you with my small troubles when I stayed behind for you this morning. Come, shall we go out on to the rocks, and round by the little bay? What do you call it – Ganovan?"

"Yes; I think they call it Little Ganovan," he said, absently, as he and she together emerged from the twilight of larch and pine, and proceeded, leisurely and in silence, to cross the semicircular sweep of yellow sand.

When they got to the edge of the rocks, they sat down there: apparently they had nothing to do on this idle morning but to contemplate that vast, far-murmuring, dark blue plain – touched here and there with a sharp glimmer of white – and the range upon range of the Kingairloch hills, deepening in purple gloom, or shining rose-grey and yellow-grey in the sun. In this solitude they were quite alone save for the sea-birds that had wheeled into the air, screaming and calling, at their approach; but the terns and curlews were soon at peace again; a cloud of gulls returned to one of the little islands just in front of them; while a slow-flapping heron winged its heavy flight away to the north. All once more was silence; and the world was to themselves.

And yet what was he to say to this poor suffering soul whose tragic sorrows and experiences had been thus unexpectedly disclosed? He really wished to be sympathetic; and, if he dared, he would have reminded her that only he knew how difficult it is to quote poetry without making one's self ridiculous; and also he knew that the pretty young widow's eyes had a dangerous trick of sudden laughter. However, it was she who first spoke.

'Whispering tongues can poison truth;
And constancy lives in realms above;
And life is thorny; and youth is vain;
And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain.'

"I wonder what those who have gone to church will say when they discover that we have spent all the morning here?"

"They may say what they like," he made answer, promptly. "There are things one cannot speak about in drawing-rooms, among a crowd. And how could I ever have imagined that you, with your high spirits and merry temperament, and perpetual good-humour, had come through such trials? I wonder that people never think of the mischief that is done by intermeddling – "

"Intermeddling?" said she proudly. "It wasn't of intermeddling I had to complain: it was a downright conspiracy – it was false stories – I was deceived by those who professed to be my best friends. There is intermeddling and intermeddling. You might say I was intermeddling in the case of my nephew. But what harm can come of that? It is not lies, it is the truth, I want to have told him. And even if it causes him some pain, it will be for his good. Don't you think I am right?"

He hesitated.

"I hope so," he said. "But you know things wear such a different complexion according to the way you look at them – "

"But facts, Lord Musselburgh, facts," she persisted. "Do you think a man like George Morris would be affected by any sentimental considerations one way or the other? Won't he find out just the truth? And that is all I honestly want Vin to know – the actual truth: then let him go on with his eyes open if he chooses. Facts, Lord Musselburgh: who can object to facts?" Then she said – as she gave him her hand that he might assist her to rise —

"We must be thinking of getting back home now, for if we are late for lunch, those Drexel girls will be grinning at each other like a couple of fiends."

Rather reluctantly he rose also, and accompanied her. They made their way across a series of rough, bracken-covered knolls projecting into the sea until they reached the little bay that is known as Port Bân; and here, either the beauty and solitude of the place tempted them, or they were determined to defy sarcasm, for instead of hastening home, they quietly strolled up and down the smooth cream-white beach, now and again picking up a piece of rose-red seaweed, or turning over a limpet-shell, or watching a sandpiper making his quick little runs alongside the clear, crisp-curling ripples. They did not speak; they were as silent as the transparent blue shadows that their figures cast on the soft-yielding surface on which they walked. And sometimes Lord Musselburgh seemed inclined to write

something, with the point of his stick, on that flawless sand; and then again he desisted; and still they continued silent.

She took up a piece of pink seaweed, and began pulling it to shreds. He was standing by, looking on.

"Don't you think," said he at last, "that there should be a good deal of sympathy – a very unusual sympathy – between two people who have come through the same suffering?"

"Oh, I suppose so," she said, with affected carelessness – her eyes still bent on the seaweed.

"Do you know," said he, again, "that I haven't the least idea what your name is!"

"My name? Oh, my name is Madge," she answered.

"Madge?" said he. "I wonder if you make the capital M this way?" and therewith he traced on the sand an ornamental *M* in the manner of the last century.

"No, I don't," she said, "but it is very pretty. How do you write the rest?"

Thus encouraged, he made bold to add the remaining letters, and seemed rather to admire his handiwork when it was done.

"By the way," she said, "I don't know your Christian name either!"

"Hubert."

"Can you write that in the same fashion?" she suggested, with a simple ingenuousness.

So, grown still bolder, he laboriously inscribed his name immediately underneath her own. But that was not all. When he had ended he drew a circle right round both names.

"That is a ring to enclose them," said he: and he turned from the scored names to regard her downcast face. "But – but I know a much smaller ring that could bring them still closer together. Will you let me try – Madge?"

He took her hand.

"Yes," she said, in a low voice.

And then – Oh, very well, then: then – but after a reasonable delay – then they left those creamy sands, and went up by the edge of the blue-green turnip-field to the pathway, and so to the iron gate; and as he opened the gate for her, she said —

"Oh, I don't know what happened down there, and what I've pledged myself to; but at all events there will now be one more on my side, to help me about Vin, and get him out of all this sad trouble. You will help me, won't you – Hubert?"

Of course he was eager to promise anything.

"And you say he is sure to get in for Mendover? Why, just think of him now, with everything before him; and how nice it would be for all of us if he had a smart and clever wife, who would hold her own in society, and do him justice, and make us all as proud and fond of her as we are of him. And just fancy the four of us setting out on a winter-trip to Cairo or Jerusalem: wouldn't it be simply too delicious? The four of us – only the four of us – all by ourselves. Louie Drexel is rather young, to be sure; yet she knows her way about; she's sharp; she's clever; she will have some money; and she has cheek enough for anything. And by the way – Hubert – " said she (and always with a pretty little hesitation when she came to his Christian name) "I must really ask you – with regard to Louie Drexel – well – you know – you have been – just a little – "

He murmured something about the devotion of a lifetime – the devotion which he had just promised to her – being a very different thing from trivial drawing-room dallyings; whereupon she observed —

"Oh, yes, men say so by way of excuse – "

"How many men have said so to you?" he demanded, flaring up.

"I did not say they had said so to me," she answered sweetly. "Don't go and be absurdly jealous without any cause whatever. If any one has a right to be jealous, it is I, considering the way you have been going on with Louie Drexel. But of course if there's nothing in it, that's all well and done

with; and I am of a forgiving disposition, when I'm taken the right way. Now about Vin: can you see anybody who would do better for him than Louie Drexel?"

Be sure it was not of Vin Harris, much as he was interested in him, that Lord Musselburgh wished to talk at this moment; but, on the other hand, in the first flush of his pride and gratitude, any whim of hers was law to him; and perhaps it was a sufficient and novel gratification to be able to call her Madge.

"I'm afraid," said he, "that Vin is not the kind of person to have his life arranged for him by other people. And besides you must remember, Madge, dear, that you are assuming a great deal. You are assuming that you can show Vin that this old man is an impostor – "

"Oh, can there be any doubt of it!" she exclaimed. "Isn't the story you have told me yourself enough?"

Lord Musselburgh looked rather uncomfortable; he was a good-natured kind of person, and liked to think the best of everybody.

"I had no right to tell you that story," said he.

"But now I have the right to know about that and everything else, haven't I – Hubert?" said she, with a pretty coyness.

"And besides," he continued, "Vin has a perfect explanation of the whole affair. There is no doubt the old man was just full of this subject, and believed he could write about it better than anyone else, even supposing the idea had occurred to some other person; he was anxious above all things that his poetical countrymen over there in the States and Canada should be done justice to; and when he heard that the volume was actually published he immediately declared that he would do everything in his power to help it – "

"But what about the £50 – Hubert?"

"Oh, well," her companion said, rather uneasily, "I have told you that that was a gift from me to him. I did not stipulate for the publication of any book."

She considered for a moment: then she said, with some emphasis —

"And you think it no shame – you think it no monstrous thing – that our Vin should marry a girl who has been in the habit of going about with her grandfather while he begged money, and accepted money, from strangers? Is that the fate you wish for your friend?"

"No, I don't wish anything of the kind," said he, "if – if matters were so. But Vin and you look at these things in a very different light; and I can hardly believe that he has been so completely imposed on. I confess I liked the old man: I liked his splendid enthusiasm, his magnificent self-reliance, yes, and his Scotch plaid; and I thought the girl was remarkably beautiful – and more than that – refined and distinguished-looking – something unusual about her somehow – "

"Oh, yes, you are far too generous, Hubert," his companion said. "You accept Vin's representations without a word. But I see more clearly. And that little transaction about the book and the £50 gives me a key to the whole situation. You may depend on it, George Morris will find out what kind of person your grandiloquent old Scotchman is like. And then, when Vin's eyes are opened – "

"Yes, when Vin's eyes are opened?" her companion repeated.

"Then he will see into what a terrible pit he was nearly falling."

"Are you so sure of that?" Musselburgh said. "I know Vin a little. It isn't merely a pretty face that has taken his fancy, as you yourself admit. If he has faith in that girl, it may not be easy to shake it."

"I should not attempt to shake it," she made answer at once, "if the girl was everything she ought to be, and of proper upbringing and surroundings. But even if it turned out that she was everything she should be, wouldn't it be too awful to have Vin dragged down into an alliance with that old – oh, I don't know what to call him! – "

"Madge, dear," said he, "don't call him anything, until you learn more about him. And in the meantime," he continued, rather plaintively, "don't you think we might talk a little about ourselves, considering what has just happened?"

"There is such a long time before us to talk about ourselves," said she. "And you know – Hubert – you've come into our family, as it were; and you must take a share in our troubles."

They were nearing the house: five minutes more would bring them in sight of the open lawn.

"Wait a minute, Madge, dear," said he, and he halted by the side of a little bit of plantation.

"Don't be in such a hurry. I wish to speak to you about – "

"About what?" she asked, with a smile.

"Oh, a whole heap of things! For example, do you want the Somervilles to know?"

"I don't particularly want them to know," she answered him, "but I fear they will soon find out."

"I should like you to tell Mrs. Somerville, anyway."

"Very well."

"Indeed, I don't care if all the people in the house knew!" said he, boldly.

"Hubert, what are you saying!" she exclaimed, with a fine simulation of horror. "My life would be made a burden to me! Fancy those Drexel girls: they would shriek with joy at the chance of torturing me! I should have to fly from the place. I should take the first train for the South to-morrow morning!"

"Really!" said he, with considerable coolness. "For I have been thinking that those names we printed on the sands – "

"That you printed, you mean!"

" – were above high-water mark. Consequently they will remain there for some little time. Now it is highly probable that some of our friends may be walking along to Port Bân this afternoon; and if they were to catch sight of those hieroglyphics – "

"Hubert," said she, with decision. "You must go along immediately after luncheon and score them out. I would not for the world have those Drexel girls suspect what has happened!"

"Won't you come with me, Madge, after luncheon?"

"Oh, we can't be haunting those sands all day like a couple of sea-gulls!"

"But I think you might come!" he pleaded.

"Very well," said she, "I suppose I must begin with obedience."

And yet they seemed in no hurry to get on to the house. A robin perched himself on the wire fence not four yards away, and jerked his head, and watched them with his small, black, lustrous eye. A weasel came trotting down the road, stopped, looked, and glided noiselessly into the plantation. Two wood-pigeons went swiftly across an opening in the trees; a large hawk soared far overhead. On this still Sunday morning there seemed to be no one abroad; and then these two had much to say about a ring, and a locket, and similar weighty matters. Moreover, there was the assignation about the afternoon to be arranged.

But at length they managed to tear themselves away from this secluded place; they went round by the front of the big grey building; and in so doing had to pass the dining-room window.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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