JOSEPH LAING WAUGH

BETTY GRIER

Joseph Laing Waugh
Betty Grier

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=34336946
Betty Grier:

Содержание

Joseph Waugh
Betty Grier

CHAPTER I

When I look round my little bedroom and note the various familiar items that make up its furnishings, when my eye lights on much that I associate with the days o' Auld Langsyne, I am conscious of a feeling of homeliness, a sense of chumship with my surroundings, and I can scarcely realise that fourteen years have come and gone since last I laid my head on the pillow of this small truckle-bed.

So far as I can recall the arrangement of its old-fashioned, ordinary-looking plenishings, everything remains exactly as I left it. My trout and salmon rods, all tied together—each cased in its own particular-coloured canvas—stand there in the corner beside an old out-of-date gaff and a capacious landing-net which that king of fishers, Clogger Eskdale, gifted to me when the 'rheumatics' prevented his ever again participating in his favourite sport. My worn leather school-bag, filled with the last batch of books I used, is still suspended from a four-inch nail driven into a 'dook' at the cheek of the mantelpiece. It is a long time ago, but it seems only yesterday since I stood in the middle of this room, unstrapping that bag from my shoulders for the last time. My schooldays were over; with eager, anxious feet I was standing on the threshold of a new life, and to satchel and lesson-book I was bidding farewell.

I well remember Deacon Webster, at my mother's request,

inserting that dook and driving home that nail; and he laughed unfeelingly when she explained to him the purpose it was to serve. The deacon could not understand the sentiment which prompted her to assign the bag a place upon the wall; and when, after the nail was secure, he made to hang my 'boy's burden' upon it in much the same callous spirit in which he would screw the last nail in a coffin-lid, my mother stepped forward.

'One moment, Webster,' she said. 'Allow me.' With her own hands she placed the bag where it hangs now. My old nurse, Betty Grier, straightened it and wiped it with her duster; and the deacon took a pinch of snuff, blew his nose in a big spotted handkerchief, and muttered *sotto voce*, as his nostrils quivered, 'Well, I'm d–!'

Against the back wall, in the centre, between the door and the corner, stands the old black oak chest of drawers which for sixteen years held the whole outfit of my boyhood's days; while the mahogany looking-glass, with the grooved square standards and the swivel mirror, monopolises still, as it always has done, the whole top shelf thereof.

To the left is a framed photograph of my father and mother, and to the right a rosewood-framed sampler, worked long ago by my grandmother, on which, in faded green, against a dull drab background, are still decipherable the words of Our Lord's Prayer. And there, between the fireplace and the window, is my book-rack, and from its shelves old friends look down upon me. The gilt titles are tarnished and worn, but I know each book by the place it occupies, and I feel that, even after the long, long

years that have separated us, *Tom Brown*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *David Copperfield* will speak to me again, laugh with me, cry with me, as they did in days of yore.

Often has Betty, I know, swept and tidied this little room. Every article has been lifted, dusted, and carefully returned to its place. I know with what feelings of reverence the dear old soul has fingered every ornament. I am conscious of the loving care she has exercised on all my old belongings, and somehow I feel consoled and comforted, my physical weakness depresses me less, my mother's presence seems nearer me, and unbidden tears of thankfulness come to my eyes and trickle from my cheek to my pillow.

This has been to me a day of great events. I have travelled by rail from Edinburgh to Elvanfoot, thence by horse-carriage to Thornhill—during the last stage driven by Charlie Walker, the 'bus Jehu I envied in my schoolboy years, and tended by my fail-me-never Betty. To her also this has been a memorable day, for when we were driving down the Dalveen Pass she told me that never before had she seen a Caledonian train, and that her last memory of Traloss dated back to a Sabbath-school trip about the year 1868. Such a long ride in a well-sprung, well-upholstered carriage was also a novelty to her, a new experience which only with great difficulty I could persuade her to enjoy to the full. She insisted on sitting forward on the extreme edge of the seat, and it was only after I had told her that her uncomfortable-looking position made me uneasy and unhappy that she sat well back, till

her shoulders rested on the cushion behind.

Contrary to my expectations, I am suffering neither pain nor inconvenience from my long journey; and as I lie here in my little bed, looking through the curtained window to the long, low range of the Lowther Hills, and listening to the familiar sounds in the village street below, a blissful peace which I cannot express in words possesses me, my physical and my mental organisation seem to have undergone a change, my experience of city life is blotted out and forgotten, and, strangely enough, I feel myself, as of old, a unit of the village community. Queerer still, this placid acceptance of altered circumstances, this dovetailing into a different condition of life and living, seems to me so natural as to be hardly worth noting; and without a pang of regret I leave behind me urban pleasures and duties, and contemplate with equanimity retirement to this rural retreat, a twelvemonth's sojourn midst scenes to me for ever dear.

Nor does the fact that this rustication is compulsory distress or annoy me. My physical weakness has reduced me to a state of indifference towards former pursuits. A long illness, following a deplorable accident, has impaired my appetite for social joys; so much so, indeed, that when my doctors—rather apologetically, I thought—informed me that if ever I wished to be well again I must give up my profession and town residence for twelve months at least, and live quietly somewhere in the country, I hailed their verdict with delight, and my yearning heart at once went out to my native village and the home of my old nurse, Betty Grier.

Dear old Betty! To whom else could I turn? She is all—of the human element at least—I have left to me of my home life of long ago. My memories of my father are vague and hazy. I was only five when he died; and, through the misty veil of long-gone years, two pictures only of him are impressed upon my mind. In one I see him standing in the narrow whitewashed pantry, his head 'screeving' the ceiling, and his broad shoulders almost excluding the waning western light that glimmered through the small four-paned window. Betty, white-capped and white-aproned, is there also, with a large ashet in her hands, on which lies a long, thick silver fish—a salmon, as I afterwards learned—one of the many he lured from the depths of Mattha's Pool. My mother's arm is lovingly linked in his, and there is a pleased and happy expression on her face, which somehow is transmitted to me, because, with her, I feel proud of the great big man I call my daddy, who has battled so successfully with the strong-looking monster now lying so quiet, with gaping mouth, on Betty's ashet.

Then there is a long, dark blank before the next picture appears, and I see him sitting in a big arm-chair at the dining-room fire. His back is cushioned, and a shepherd-tartan plaid is round his shoulders, the ends folded across his knees. My mother is writing letters to his dictation on a small bureau, which has been placed near his chair. I am playing with a Noah's Ark, marshalling the animals in pairs on the rug; and when my mother goes out of the room to the little office adjoining, I leave my toys and stand at his knee, looking up to a face which to me seems

very white and pinched. A long, thin hand is placed on my curly head, and with difficulty he bends down and kisses me. I wonder who has been unkind to him, for I see a tear trickling down his cheek, and it falls unheeded on his plaid.

I cannot focus him in my mind's eye in any subsequent event, though I remember perfectly the old doctor with the foxskin cap and the clattering clogs, and the smell of 'Kendal brown' he always left behind. Then a day came when the window-blinds were pulled down and all the rooms were darkened; when Betty's voice was, even to my childish ears, low and husky; when my mother cuddled me in a tight embrace, and a wet, wet cheek was laid against mine. Oh, how she trembled and sobbed! I felt bewildered and unhappy, and I remember putting my wee, helpless arms round her neck and asking her why she was crying. She told me that daddy had gone away—away to heaven; and when I asked if he wouldn't come back to us again, she said, 'No, no,' and her embrace tightened, and she wept afresh. In a short time the door was hesitatingly opened, and Betty came noiselessly in with a book in her hand which I had often seen her read. She stood behind my mother's chair with her tear-stained face turned away, and her red hand on my mother's shoulder; but she didn't speak. Then she came round, and, 'hunkering' down beside us, opened her book and in a low voice began to read.

I often think it is strange how indelibly imprinted on some childish minds are little incidents of long ago—little glimpses of landscape, snatches of songs, details here and there of passing

events. Not that I consider the foregoing a little incident. To me it was at the time of outstanding moment, and even yet in my retrospect of life it looms large and prominent; but, though I have often endeavoured to recall Betty's ministrations on this occasion, all I can remember is that when she came to the verse, 'I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you,' she spoke the words without referring to her Bible, and she repeated them, the while looking with big, hopeful eyes up to my mother's face. And my mother smiled through her tears; and, stroking Betty's strong brown hair, she called her 'Betty the Comforter.'

A time came in the short after years when she was, by the same dear lips, again called 'Betty the Comforter.' It was when my saintly mother was passing into the spiritland, and, without fear or trepidation, lay calmly awaiting her call. But of this I cannot speak; it is a subject sacred to Betty and to me.

To-night, when I had undressed and was settling myself down for the night, Betty came upstairs, carrying that self-same Bible in her hand. She stood on the threshold for a minute, wiping its covers with the corners of her apron, though well she knew that from frequent use the Book required no dusting.

'Maister Weelum,' she began, 'eh!—I'–

'"William," Betty, please, without the "Mister,"' I said smilingly.

'Yes! yes! so be it—imphm! Eh, this type is clear and big; and I was thinking that maybe ye micht want to read a verse or twae. I'll lay it doon here;' and she reverently placed the precious

volume on the top of the chest of drawers.

'Are ye a' richt noo? Ye said ye wanted to speak to me when ye got settled doon. Is there ocht else I can do for ye?'

'I'm feeling fine, Betty,' I said cheerily, 'and not a bit the worse for my long journey, not too tired to have a quiet chat with you. So sit down, please, in the basket chair there, and give me ten minutes of your valuable time.'

'Ten meenits! Certie, hear him noo! Ten meenits, an' the soo's no suppered yet, an' I've the morn's broth to prepare, an' wi' me bein' oot o' the hoose a' day there's a hunner an' ten things starin' me in the face to be dune. But what want ye to speak aboot? I daur say the soo, puir thing, will ha'e to wait, noo that you're here. Daylight, too, is haudin' lang, an' I'll sune mak' up the ten meenits. What want ye noo?' And she sat down, with a query in her eye, into the basket chair.

'Well, Betty,' I began, 'you and I have gone over all the old times pretty thoroughly since we met to-day, and we've taken a peep into the future as well; but there's one subject We haven't touched upon, and before I go to sleep to-night I wish to come to some understanding with you regarding my board and lodgings.'

'Board an' lodgings?' Betty queried. 'Board an'–What d'ye mean, Maister Weelum?' and her lip trembled.

'Well, Betty, by board and lodgings I mean the price of my food and the rent of my room here, and whatever sum you'–

'Weelum, stop at once noo; I'll no' ha'e that mentioned;' and she rose excitedly to her feet. 'I'll no' hear o't! The very idea o'

speakin' to me—to me, abune a' fouk—o' board an' lodgings! A bonny-like subject that to discuss atween us! Dod, man, yin wad think that ye were a Moniaive mason workin' journeyman in Thornhill. Megstie me! Lovanenty! heard ye ever the like?—imphm! Mair than that, whae's the owner o' this hoose? Whae has refused rent for it a' these years, eh?'

'Betty, Betty,' I feebly protested, 'that's not fair, and you know it. Did you and I not settle that matter long, long ago, and agree that it would never be referred to again?'

Betty had suddenly assumed both the defensive and the aggressive. She had pulled her black-beaded muffettees up over her wrists, and flung her mutch-strings over her shoulders. I knew of old what these actions meant. She came up to my bedside, and in the fading light I saw a tear coursing down her cheek. 'Maister Weelum,' she said earnestly, 'I'm safe in sayin' that ye canna look back on a single phase o' your early life in which I didna tak' a pairt. Lang before this world was ony reality to ye, I nursed ye, fed ye, an' dressed ye. In thae early days the greatest pleasure to me on earth was to cuddle an' care for ye. But I needna tell ye o' that, ye ken yoursel'. Ye mind hoo much my presence meant to you; that I'm sure o'. As for your mother—weel, I never had ony ither mistress. She took me, a young lass, oot o' a most unhappy hame. It was a pleasure—ay, a privilege—to serve her. Weel, on that day that she was ta'en frae you an' me, she said in your hearin' an' mine, "Betty, this has been the only home you ever knew—never leave it. Promise me you'll accept it.—Willie, my

son, you agree?" An' we baith knelt doon at her bedside, an' she went hame happy, kennin' I was provided for. I didna forget that on the nicht o' the funeral day you an' me talked it ower, that I promised to stay here, that it was arranged between us that rent wad never be spoken o', an' that my occupancy wad never be referred to. An', Maister Weelum, it wadna ha'e been noo, had you yoursel' no' talked to me aboot board an' lodgings. My he'rt will break, that will it, if ye persist'–

For a time we were both silent, both busy with many sacred thoughts and memories. Then Betty, without looking into my face, 'stapped' the sheets round my shoulders and well round my sides. 'There noo,' she said at length, 'you're weel happit an' comfortable-lookin', an' sairly, I'm thinkin', in need o' the sleep an' rest which I trust this nicht will be yours. Guid-nicht noo;' and she patted me on the shoulder, as she used to do in the old days when she had put me to bed and was taking my candle away.

'One moment, Betty,' I said promptly. 'Sit down here on the bed beside me, like the good soul you are, and listen to me.—Yes, you may raise my pillow a little. There now, that's better. Are you listening now?'

She nodded and reseated herself, as I had requested.

'I admit all you say, Betty, about your tenancy of the house, and I am sorry if what I have said has reopened a question which was settled so long ago to our mutual satisfaction. When this rest-cure was prescribed—when I was told that it was absolutely necessary I should take up my abode in the country—it was to

you and to this room that my thoughts were at once directed. I wrote you I was coming—didn't even say by your leave—and planted myself, as it were, down on you, without inquiring whether or not it was agreeable and convenient to you. Now, believe me, Betty, I acted thus without a thought of your free tenancy of this my old home.'

'I ken that fine, Weelum,' she quickly said, and she looked thoughtfully towards me.

'Well, you see, Betty, if you won't allow me to contribute to my living here, you give me reason to assume that you consider you are in your own way working off an obligation; else why should I live on your—forgive the word, Betty—on your charity?'

'But then, Maister Weelum, you forget that I'm sittin' here rent free.'

'Now, Betty, there you go again. Was not that my mother's request?'

'Yes.'

'Well, she imposed no obligation on you?'

'No.'

'Then, Betty, none exists between us; and, in that case, if I remain here I must be allowed to contribute to the family expenses. Besides, Betty, it is not as if I were a poor man. Thank goodness! I can well afford it; for, between you and me and that bedpost against which you are leaning, I've made over a thousand pounds a year for these last four years.'

'Lovanenty, Weelum, a—a thoosan' pounds!' and she held up

her hands in astonishment. 'Bless my life, is that possible? I hope ye made it honestly, my boy?'

'I certainly did,' I said glibly. 'I assure you, Betty, I made it honestly.'

'Imphm, an' you a lawyer!' said she dryly. She smiled, and after some reflection began to laugh heartily.

'Oh, come now, Betty, don't round on an old friend like that.' But Betty heard me not, for she was holding her sides and hotching with convulsive laughter.

'Oh, Weelum! oh, my boy!' she said, between her kinks, 'it's no' you—it's no' you I'm lauchin' at. It's something that happened at the weekly prayer-meetin' in Mrs Shankland's last Wednesday nicht. D' ye mind o' Dauvid Tamson the draper?'

I nodded in the affirmative.

'Weel, as ye dootless ken, Dauvid has been a' his days a conceited, fussy, arguin' man, aye desperate honest and well-meanin', but terr'ble unreasonable and heidstrong, and he's never dune takin' to the law or consultin' his agent, as he ca's it. Weel, he was at the prayer-meetin' last Wednesday nicht, and, as it happened, it was his turn to officiate. After we had sung a psalm and engaged in a word o' prayer, he began to read the last pairt o' the fifth chapter o' Mattha, and when he cam' to the fortieth verse: "And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also," Dauvid hovered a blink. Then he re-read it very slowly, and says he, "Freens, I've aye prided mysel' in my knowledge o' the Bible; but I'm forced to admit

that this is the first time I ever noticed that there was evidence in Scripture o' oor Saviour havin' been ployin' wi' litigations and in the lawyers' hauns. I dinna ken hoo far He carrit His case, but if my experience was His, He need not have said *let* him have thy cloak, for the hungry deevils wad ha'e ta'en it whether or no'."'

I wonder, did Betty imagine that the recital of that story would divert my mind from the subject of our conversation and the purpose I had in view? Somehow I think, as an inspiration, the means to this end had suddenly occurred to her; but, if such was her aim, the hastily conceived plot failed.

By a good deal of argument and a modicum of cajolery, I gained my point. What the terms are which we have arranged is Betty's concern and mine only. All I may say here is that the weekly amount has to be paid to Nathan, of whom more anon, and that the subject of pounds, shillings, and pence has never to be broached in her hearing again.

She said 'Good-night' to me an hour ago. The impatient sounds of remonstrance from the soo-cruive at the head of the garden subsided shortly after she left me, from which I argued that the inner wants of the occupant had been attended to. The chop-chopping of vegetables on the kitchen table below ceased half-an-hour ago, and I know that a little at least of to-morrow's dinner has ceased to trouble Betty's anxious mind.

The shades of night are gathering round me. A soft breeze stirs the branches of the lime-trees, and through my open window it fans my face where I lie. Somewhere away Rashbrigward, I

hear the quivering yammer of a startled whaup, and the crooning lullaby of the whispering Nith falls like music on my ear. In the ryegrass field at the top of the Gallowsflat a wandering landrail, elusive and challenging, craiks his homeward way; while from Cample Strath or Closeburn Heights is fitfully wafted to me the warning bark of a farmer's dog. The clamp-clamp of a cadger's tired-out horse and the rattle of an empty cart sound loud and long in the deserted street. Hurrying footsteps echo and re-echo, and gradually die away into silence. Then evening's wings are folded o'er me, a blissful peace and a quiet contentment fill my heart, and under the glamour and spell of nature's benediction I turn my head on my grateful pillow.

CHAPTER II

Nathan Hebron is Betty Grier's husband; or, rather, I should say, Betty Grier is Nathan Hebron's wife. This may possibly be considered a distinction without a difference; but when you have been introduced into the inner courts of these two worthies' acquaintance, you will somehow feel that the latter assertion is the more correct and appropriate.

Nathan is a tall, loosely built man, with a fresh, healthy complexion, mild blue eyes, and a slightly hanging under-lip. For some considerable time he has been employed on what is locally known as 'the Duke's wark,' but in what particular capacity I cannot very well say. When first I knew him he was one of Archie Maxwell's employés in the nursery, and when our garden required professional attention it was always Nathan who was sent to do the necessary digging and titivating.

Three or maybe four times a year he spent a few days at a stretch among our vegetables and fruit-trees; and I remember with what eager interest I used to anticipate his visits, for, though he was a man of few words, and from a story-telling standpoint had little to commend him to a boy, he carried a quiet, companionable atmosphere with him, and, as a more dominating recommendation, he was the possessor of one of the sharpest and most formidable-looking 'gullies' I had ever seen.

How I envied him at pruning-time, when, with his easy,

indifferent gait, he moved about among our rose-bushes with his keen hooked blade, and with one deft cut lopped off twigs and branches as if they were potato-suckers. Sometimes at my request he would lay his long gleaming weapon in the palm of my little hand, but he usually retained possession of it by a slight finger-and-thumb grip; and I always heaved a sigh of satisfaction, not unmixed with relief, when he lifted it, closed the blade with a click, and returned it to his sleeved-vest pocket.

When Nathan was thus employed in our garden he always had dinner with Betty in the kitchen. Betty's forte in the culinary department was broth-making, and my mother used to say, with a smile, that when Nathan was her guest Betty always put her best foot foremost. Betty, with a blushing cheek, mildly repudiated the charge; and once, when in my presence my mother told Nathan of this, he blushed too, and to hide his confusion bent his head and tightened the trousers-straps under his knees.

Broth, with boiled beef and potatoes to follow, as a rule constituted Betty's menu on these occasions, and there was always a 'word' between them when the beef was served, as Nathan insisted on retaining his soup-plate from which to eat it, and to this Betty strenuously objected. She declared 'it wasna the thing;' but he retorted that 'that was possible, but it was aye ae plate less to wash, and he liked the broth brae wi' the barley piles in it, as it moistened the tatties.'

Immediately after his repast he retired to the stick-house; and there, seated on the chopping-log, he smoked his pipe in silence

and meditation till the Auld Kirk clock chimed the hour of one.

Betty was no vocalist; but on those days when Nathan worked in our garden she indulged much in what, out of gallantry towards her, I may call sweet sounds. She had only one song—it is her sole musical possession still—and during the years I spent far from the friends and scenes of my boyhood, as often as I heard the familiar strains of 'The Farmer's Boy,' Betty's timmer rendering came homely-like to my ear, and I saw a print-gowned, pensive-faced young woman subjecting newly washed delf to a vigorous rubbing, and watching through the kitchen window a big eident gardener turning over with gleaming spade the rich loamy garden soil.

My mind harks back on these little scraps of memory as I sit here in my bedroom listening to Betty's ceaseless prattle and Nathan's monosyllabic responses. He is the same gaunt, silent Nathan, only much grayer, and his short beard, fringe-like, now covers a chin which once was clean-shaven and ruddy. He still wears leather straps on his workaday trousers; and, though I haven't seen it, I am confident the keen-bladed gully is somewhere about the recesses of his ample pockets. And he is Betty's 'man,' and Betty is his busy, careful wife, and as such they sit together in that kitchen taking their meals off that self-same table, and looking out on that same garden which long ago was the scene of his periodical labours.

Sometimes of a morning I waken about five o'clock, and even thus early I hear Betty downstairs making preparations for

Nathan's breakfast. I know full well from the different sounds how she is employed; and, in rotation, I note the 'ripein' oot' of the previous evening's fire, the filling of the kettle from the kitchen tap, the opening and closing of the corner cupboard door, and the clatter of cups, plates, and cutlery. Then the merry song of the boiling kettle, the clink of the frying-pan on the crooks, the sizzling of frying ham, the splutter of gravy-steeped eggs, and the drawing forward of white, well-scrubbed kitchen chairs.

I know, too, when Nathan has finished his meal, as he always puts his empty cup and saucer with a 'clank' into his bread-plate, gives a hard throat 'hoast,' backs his chair away from the table, and says 'Imphm! juist so!' very contentedly and cheerily. Soon the appetising aroma of fried ham and eggs, which has been all the time in my nostrils, gives place to the more pungent smell of strong brown twist smoked through a clean clay pipe. This, however, is merely a whiff in passing, because Nathan 'stands not upon the order of his going,' and in clean-smelling corduroys and a cloud of fragrant pipe-reek he goes out into the early morning sunshine, closing the door with a lingering, hesitating turn of the handle, which, though gentle, seems loud and grating in the hush of the dawning day.

How I wish I could walk with him these beautiful fresh sunny mornings along the Carronbrig road! I follow him, alas! in imagination only; and as he leaves the empty echoing street and passes under the leafy canopy of the Cundy Wood I feel the pure caller air on my brow, I listen to the hum of the bees in the limes,

the sportive chatter of the sparrows in the bushes, the rich, full-throated melody of the blackbird and mavis from the wooded recesses of the Gillfoot—each feathered minstrel piping his own song in his own way, and all in unison singing their pæans of praise in their leafy, sun-kissed bowers. Gossamer-webs, silvered with countless pearls of dew, stretch their glistening threads from leaf to leaf, and cover the shady side of the hawthorn hedgerows as with a gray-meshed silken veil. From rank, dewy grass humble blue-bells raise their heads, and nod good-morning to white and blue-red stately foxgloves standing sentinel o'er scarred red-earth banks and tangled bramble thickets. Lowing cows, knee-deep in meadow grass and buttercups, with swishing tails and pawing forelegs, impatiently await the opening gate. And over all, on field and wood and hill and dale, lie the glorious rays of God's own sunshine, diffusing warmth and gladness, and filling nature anew with pulsing life.

The road lies broad and white before me, and I see Nathan's tall, gaunt figure passing Longmire Mains, and I know the smell of the sweet American gean is in his nostrils, and his gardener's eye is on the fronded hart's-tongue ferns which here and there peep from the crevices of the lichen-covered dike; by Meadow Bank, where the purple bloom still crowns the spiked leaf branch of the rhododendron; on between the hollies and silver birches at Dabton; through the sleepy village of Carronbrig, where he is joined by moleskin-clad fellow-workers.

Staff in hand and pipe in mouth, at that regulation pace which

is well known as 'the Duke's step,' each wends his way through the green turf holm, across the Nith by the stepping-stones, under the shadow of the ruin-crowned Tibbers mound. As they near the scene of their daily darg, tobacco 'dottles' are paper-padded and made secure, pipes are deposited in sleeved-vest pockets, and where the white iron wicket clicks and admits them to the low-lying stretch of fairy garden plots and multi-coloured perfumed bowers I take my leave of them. God grant I may soon be able to see with the living eye, and feel with the nature-loving heart, the beauties and joys which now in imagination only are mine!

By degrees, and at rare intervals, Betty has relieved her mind to me regarding Nathan. When I say 'relieved her mind,' I do not imply that there is anything in Nathan's conduct or any remissness in his mode of living which burdens Betty's thoughts. Far from it. Nathan is the best of husbands—appreciative, kind, steady, and considerate. His wages—to the uttermost farthing—are regularly given up to Betty's safe keeping. All his spare hours are devoted to the large garden, whose produce from January till December makes Betty's daily dinner of the bienest. Her slightest wish is a command which he obeys with cheerfulness and alacrity, and the quiet and composure of his presence is, I know, her secret pride and mainstay. Yet she seems to be ever apologising for his being about, and in speaking of him to me she invariably refers to him as 'Nathan, puir falla,' with just the slightest suggestion of commiseration in her tone.

I wonder why this should be, and it is beginning to dawn upon

me that Betty somehow imagines—wrongly, needless to say—that I look upon him as an intruder, something foreign to the element of our home-life of long ago; and, stranger still, I am conscious of that feeling in Nathan also. Though I have been resident here for over two weeks, and though he has cried upstairs to me every evening, he has only been twice in my room; and on both occasions he stood awkwardly at the door, holding on by the handle, and answering my questions with his head turned toward the landing. During the past week I have managed to limp my way downstairs, and on passing through the kitchen have stayed my steps to ca' the crack with him. But 'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir,' 'Ay, ay; imphm!' have so far been the sum-total of his contribution to the conversation. Some day, however, I know Nathan will thaw; some day soon they will both know the high esteem in which I hold him. In due season he will rid himself of his backwardness and shyness, and I shall be glad, for his honest blue eye and his pleasing serenity appeal to me, and I feel I want a friend like Nathan Hebron.

To-night, after she had cleared away the remains of my homely supper, Betty sat down with her knitting at my little attic window. I have two pots of flowering musk and a lovely pelargonium in full bloom on my sill, and under pretence of procuring Nathan's advice as to their culture and well-being I inquired of Betty if she would ask him to come upstairs.

'Most certainly, Maister Weelum,' said she, with a pleasant nod; and she went out, returning a minute later with Nathan in

her wake. I know he had been sitting in his easy-chair smoking in silence, with his stem-bonnet on and his shirt-sleeves rolled up, inactive, yet alert and ready to fulfil any of Betty's little behests; but at Betty's summons he had hastily donned a coat, and his head was bare.

After leisurely examining my plants and drawling out a few disjointed directions, he turned to go downstairs; but I motioned him to a seat, and, rather reluctantly, I thought, he sat down. I urged him to join me in a smoke, and offered him a fill of my Edinburgh mixture; but he declined my pouch; and, taking out a deerskin spleuchan, he nipped a full inch of brown twist, teased it, rolled it in the palm of his rough, horny hand, and meditatively filled the bowl of his clay cutty.

Betty noticed my little act of civility; but she plied her needles in silence till Nathan had struck a light and begun smoking.

'Ay, Maister Weelum,' she said, as Nathan fitted the glowing bowl of his pipe with a perforated metal cover, 'thae fancy ready-cut tobaccos are no' much in the line o' oor Nathan, puir falla.'

'Is that so? Well, every man to his own taste; but, Betty, excuse my asking so personal a question, why do you always refer to your goodman here as "Nathan, puir falla"?'

Nathan looked surprisedly from me to Betty, and, after fumbling with his match-box, struck another light when there was no necessity to do so; while Betty laid her knitting on the table and thoughtfully pressed it out lengthwise with the palm of her open hand.

'When ye mention it, noo, I daur say I div say "puir falla,"' she answered; 'but, though I say that, I dinna mean it in ony temporal sense, Maister Weelum. So far as this world is concerned, I've got the very best man that ever lived; but'–and she looked at Nathan as if in doubt how to proceed.

Nathan blew pipe-reek most vigorously; then he turned round to me with a faint smile on his sober face, and he actually winked. 'She's—she's sterted again, Maister Weelum,' he said with a side-nod toward Betty.

'Started what, Nathan?'

'Oh, the auld subject—imphm!'

'Ay,'—chimed in Betty, now sure of her opening, 'it's an auld subject, but it's ever a new yin, a' the same. "'Tis old, yet ever new," as the hymn-book has it. Ay, an' that *is* true. As I said before, Maister Weelum, I've nae concern regairdin' Nathan's welfare in this world. We're promised only bread an' water, an' look hoo often he gets tea an' chops, an' on what we ha'e saved there's every chance o' that diet bein' continued as lang as he has teeth to chew wi'. But what o' the next world? As Tammas Fraser aince said when he was takin' the Book, "Ah, that's where the rub comes in!"' and she shook her head dolefully, as much as to say, 'Nathan, you're a gone corbie!'

I looked from husband to wife in blank astonishment, not knowing what to say. I had always looked upon Betty as a deeply religious woman, a true disciple of the Great Master, but partaking more of the loving John than the assertive Peter;

and, often as I had heard her say a word in season, I could not remember having listened to her expressing so pointedly her fears and convictions.

She interpreted my thoughts aright; and after Nathan had, without necessity, sparked another match, and almost succeeded in turning toward us the full length and breadth of his long tankard back, she resumed.

'Your mother was a guid woman, Maister Weelum, an' I ken that often, often, you were the burden o' her prayers. I never talked much on this subject to you, kennin' that you were her ain particular chairge, an' that her prayers, withoot my interference, wad be answered. But it's different in the case o' Nathan here. He belangs to me, an' me to him. My calling an' election 's sure, an' I juist canna bide the thocht o' us bein' separated at the lang hinner-en'. It's no' that he 's a bad man—far from it. Or it 's no' that he 's careless. I gi'e him credit for bein' concerned in his ain wey; but he juist saunters on through life, trustin' that things will somewey work oot a' richt, an' lettin' the want, if there 's ony, come in at the wab's end. Ay, an' for a man like him, that 's sae fond o' flo'ers an' dogs an' ither folks' weans, it simply passes my comprehension hoo it is that he 's sae indifferent to the greatest o' a' love an' the things that so closely concern his immortal soul's salvation. Nae wonder I say, "Nathan, puir falla."'

Notwithstanding the gravity of the charge she had laid at Nathan's door, I felt relieved to know that my surmises regarding the cause of his attitude toward me were unfounded; and, with a

note of encouragement in my voice, I hinted to Betty that, after all, it was possible she was unnecessarily worrying herself, as with two advocates like her and my mother it would surely be well with both Nathan and me.

'Ah, Maister Weelum,' she said impressively, 'I ken fine that the prayers o' the just availeth much; but aye bear in mind—Nathan, are ye listenin'?—Ay—weel, bear in mind that every herrin' maun hing by its ain heid. Mind that, the twae o' ye noo.'

This direct personal appeal rather discomposed me, and I didn't know what to say. As for Nathan, he rose slowly from his chair, and, turning round, he solemnly winked to me again. That wink somehow sealed a compact between us. It placed us on a common platform, and established a feeling of camaraderie which it would be hard for me to define.

'Ay, Betty,' he said, as he raised himself to his full height, 'you're a wonderfu' woman—a wonderfu' woman!' and he yawned audibly; 'an' when it comes to gab wark on sic a subject as ye 've ta'en in haun', John Clerk the colporteur canna haud a cannel to ye. When ye stert on me like this I aye gi'e ye plenty o' rope, an' I never gi'e it a tug; but ye 've gi'en me a gey tatterin' afore Maister Weelum here, an' I wad just like to put in my yelp noo.'

Betty gave him a surprised look, and I nodded and smiled encouragingly toward him.

'I don't misdoot,' he continued, after he had loosened his cravat at his throat, 'that there 's some truth in a few o' your

remarks; but, dod, lass, dinna forget that I'm tryin' my best.'

'In what wey, Nathan?' she promptly asked.

'Weel, let me consider noo. Ay, I don't think I ha'e missed a day at the kirk since we were mairret. That's ae thing, onywey. Then we tak' the Beuk regularly; an' forby that, Betty,' he said impressively, 'I was five times at the prayer-meetin's wi' ye last year, and'–

'Prayer-meetin's!' said Betty; 'prayer-meetin's!' and she raised her voice. 'Nathan Hebron, I'm astonished ye ha'e the audacity to mention prayer-meetin's to me!'

'Hoo that, Betty?' he gravely asked.

'Hoo that? As if ye didna ken! My word, but that 's yin an' a half!—Do you know this Maister Weelum; I had to stop takin' him to to the prayer-meetin's, for he aye fell asleep. The last yin I took him to was at Mrs Kennedy's. Not only did he sleep, but he snored wi' his heid lyin' back an' his face to the ceilin'; an' when he waukened, it was in the middle o' a silent prayer, an' he glimmered an' blinked at the gaslicht, an' said he, wi' his een half-shut, "Betty, that 's rank wastery burnin' the gas when we 're in oor sleepin' bed." Ashamed? I was black affronted, Maister Weelum, an' among sae mony earnest folk, too.'

Goodness knows, I hold no brief for Nathan, but I ventured to say on his behalf that, as he had been working in the open all day, and the room was quiet and warm, he was, in a way, to be excused if he unconsciously dovered.

'Ay, that's a' very weel; but I notice he never dovers, as ye ca'

it, at an Oddfellows' soiree.'

Nathan had quietly slipped downstairs before she reached the end of her story, and in his absence she became confidential and communicative.

'I somewey think he means weel, but the road to hell is paved wi' guid intentions. He's maybe the best specimen of the natural man that I ken o'; but wae's me, that's no' sufficient. The seeds o' carelessness were sown lang before I kenned him; an' tho' I maun alloo he has improved in my haun', I see wee bit touches noo an' than o' the he'rt at enmity which sometimes mak' me despair. For instance, the ither Sabbath-day nae faurer gane, he sat doon efter his denner wi' a book, an' he looked neither to left nor richt, but read on and on. "Nathan," says I, "what's the book you're sae intent on?" "Oh, Betty," says he glibly, weel kennin' that I didna gi'e in wi' orra readin' on the Lord's Day, "I've faun in wi' a splendid book the day. It's ca'ed Baxter's—eh—*Saunts' Everlastin' Rest*, an' it's the kind o' readin' I like." "Ay," says I, weel pleased wi' the soond o' the title, "read on at that, Nathan. Baxter's fu' o' rich refreshin' truths. Read slow noo, Nathan, an' tak' it a' in." Weel, he never put it oot o' his haun till bedtime, except when he was at his tea, an' then he slipped it into his coat-pocket; an' the next day, when he was away at his wark, I cam' on it stappit doon behin' the cushion o' his easy-chair; an' what think ye it was, Maister Weelum? Guess noo what it was.'

'Baxter's *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, of course,' I said.

'Weel,' said Betty, 'that was printed on the loose covers that

had aince been the boards o' the holy volume o' that name; but the paper-covered book that was inside was *The Experiences o' an Edinburgh Detective*, by James MacGovan; an' d'ye ken this, Maister Weelum, I juist sat doon in the middle o' my wark an' grat my he'rt-fill.'

Poor, dear Betty, she wept anew at the remembrance of Nathan's lapse, then rolled her knitting into her apron, and went downstairs into the kitchen. Ten minutes later, when I was having my last pipe for the night, I heard her voice raised in the Beuk, and she was reading, with a point and emphasis which I am sure Nathan could not misunderstand, the story from the Acts of Ananias and his wife Sapphira.

CHAPTER III

I am as yet only on the threshold of my stay in Thornhill, and I am beginning my long vacation as I intend to end it. Dr Balfour's orders were short and to the point; and, in bidding a temporary farewell to professional work and preparing for a long holiday, I know I am following his instructions and furthering my own interests and future well-being. Time was when this enforced inaction would have been irksome indeed. I have always been alert mentally and physically; but since my accident I have been incapable of any prolonged mental effort, and I have welcomed the languor of this quiet retreat, which has possessed me and claimed me as its own. Betty's ministrations I feel I stand in need of; and Nathan's company, unresponsive and grudging though it be, is all I desire. Betty has no patience with useless, idling folks, for she is herself a bustler, and she talks contemptuously of the hangers-on who daily and nightly support our village corners. Once she told me they were troubled with a complaint called the 'guyfaul.' I had never heard the queer word before, and asked its meaning. 'An inclination for meat, but nane for wark,' she promptly replied; and as I lie abed these beautiful sunny forenoons I wonder if Betty considers that I also am afflicted with the 'guyfaul.'

Correspondence of an official character is tabooed; but a day or two ago I received a long newsy letter from my partner, Murray

Monteith, not one line of which had any reference to business. This morning I had a further communication, almost equally free from 'shop;' but in a footnote he remarks as follows: 'We had a call yesterday from our client the Hon. Mrs Stuart, and in course of conversation she informed me that she had leased a house in the vicinity of Thornhill, and that her niece, the late General Stuart's daughter, was staying with her over the autumn. I was strongly tempted to tell her you were at present resident in that village, but refrained, knowing it would be unwise of you in the present circumstances to occupy yourself with her affairs. Our inability to find a will or to trace the record of the General's marriage troubles her very much.'

This postscript set me a-thinking, and I lay long pondering obscure points in a case which had worried and perplexed every one concerned. Not only was the good name of the Stuart family involved; but, in the absence of proof, the General's daughter must be—well, nameless, and the estate must pass to another branch of the family.

So absorbed was I in my train of reflection that I failed to note Betty's entrance with my breakfast-tray. A short cough and the clatter of china recalled my wandering thoughts, and I began a rather disjointed apology. Holding up my firm's letter with the familiar light-blue envelope, I laughingly said, 'Blame this, Betty, and forgive my inattention.'

'Hoots, ay,' said Betty, 'it's a' richt; but ye maunna pucker your broo an' worry your brain. Deil tak' thae lang blue letters,

onywey! Nane o' them that ever I got spelt weel to me; an' when Milligan the postman handed this yin in this mornin', an' when I thocht o' taxes an' sic fash, I was sairly tempted to back the fire wi' it. Imphm! that's so, noo. Eh! by the by, the doctor's Mary looked in on the bygaun, an' she tells me Dr Grierson will likely be doon to see ye the day. He has had a letter frae a Dr Balfour o' Edinbro, tellin' him a' aboot ye, an' askin' him to keep his eye on ye. Imphm! Ay, an', Maister Weelum, ye didna tell me that ye lay a week in the infirmary insensible.'

'No, Betty,' I said, 'I dare say I didn't; but—well, the fact is I didn't wish to worry you with details or'–

'Ay, an' naether did ye tell me it was to save your wee dog's life ye gaed back into the burnin' hoose,' she said in the same inquisitive tone. I stirred my coffee vigorously, but said nothing. 'An' is it the case that the stair fell in when ye were on the middle o't, an' that the wee dog was foun' deid in your airms?'

'That is so, Betty,' I said sadly.

Betty was silent for a minute, and she fumbled aimlessly with the corner of her apron. 'Lovan,' she said at length, 'it has been a mair terrible affair than I had ony thocht o'. The heid an' the spine are kittle to get hurt, but it's a guid's blessin' ye werena burnt beyond recognition. Efter siccan an experience it's a wonder ye didna relieve your mind to me regairdin' it lang ere noo. Naebody in this world wad ha'e been mair interested or sympathetic. What wey did ye no'?'

Her concern and loving interest were unmistakable; but from

the tone of her questionings I opined she was smarting under the sense of a slight, real or imagined, and I hastened to reassure her. 'My dear Betty,' I said, 'believe me I had no motive in withholding such news other than that of saving your feelings. At one time I was minded to tell you all about it; but when you met me at Elvanfoot I noted at a glance the pained, surprised look on your face, and I at once decided not to say more than was absolutely necessary. Besides, Betty, everything happened so quickly that I can scarcely remember the details.' In a few words I described what had taken place. 'And now, Betty,' I concluded, 'let us change the subject. Even now the recollection of my experience is like a nightmare, and I would rather not speak of it.'

'Imphm!' said Betty abstractedly; 'that I daur say is no' to be wondered at. I'm sorry if my curiosity has been the means o' bringin' it a' back again; but, oh man, Maister Weelum, it gaed sair against the grain to hear o' a' this frae fremit lips. The doctor's Mary has a' the particulars at her tongue-tap, an' she gaed through it this mornin' like A B C. I could see she was under the impression that I kenned a' aboot it, an' I didna seek to disabuse her mind on that, but juist said, "Imphm! that is so, Mary—what ye say is true;" and she left my doorstep thinkin' I was farer ben in your confidences than I am. But that's a' richt, Maister Weelum. I respect your motives, an' I understaun exactly hoo ye were placed. But, oh, my boy! in ocht that may in the future distress ye dinna leave Betty oot, an' dinna forget that her he'rt is big eneuch to haud your sorrows as weel as her ain.

Wheesht! Is that the ooter door openin'? It is; an', dod, that's Dr Grierson's cheepin' buits on the lobby flaer, an' me no' snodit yet. He's an awfu' dingle-doozie in the mornin', is the doctor.'

Moistening the tips of her fingers on her lip and keeking into my little oval looking-glass, she deftly arranged a stray lock of gray-black hair under the neatly goffered border of her white morning-mutch.' Juist a word wi' ye, Maister Weelum, before I gang doon. Are ye quite agreeable that Dr Grierson should veesit ye? He's an auld freen o' your Edinbro doctor, an' that's hoo he cam' to be written to, so the doctor's Mary tells me.'

'Oh, I'm quite agreeable, Betty—delighted, indeed,' I replied.

'Eh—ay—imphm! An' ye've nae feelin' on that point?'

'Most assuredly not,' I said. 'But why do you ask?'

She tiptoed across the floor and half-closed the door.

'That's him rappin' wi' his stick on the kitchen flaer,' she said in a whisper. 'An' tell me this; did the mistress—your mother, I mean—ever say ocht to ye aboot the doctor an'—an' ony o' her ain folks?'

'Not that I remember of'

'Ay, aweel, that's a' richt. When he comes up, dinna refer to my speirin' ye this;' and she hurriedly left me and went downstairs.

Thornhill has never been without its Gideon Gray. Had Dr John Brown been acquainted with its record in this particular respect he could have added to that remarkable chapter of his *Horæ Subsecivæ* the names of not a few medical benefactors, the

memory of whose services is yet fragrant in our midst. Scattered here and there in many a quiet country kirkyard are the graves of heroes of science who in their day ungrudgingly gave of their very best, faithfully ministering to the wants of the poor and needy without thought of fee or reward; men of ability, intellect, tact, and courage of heart, whose life-work lay in the sequestered bypaths, and whose names were unknown outside the glen they called their home. Of such was Dr Grierson; and as he stood by my bedside the thought momentarily flashed through my mind, would that he had been limned by Scott or by the creator of Rab and Ailie!

A little over medium height; wiry, spare, and alert; broad shoulders slightly stooped; long dark hair streaked with gray, without a parting, brushed straight back from his forehead and hanging in clustering locks above his stock; his face serious almost, yet not void of humour, and lit up by kindly, blue, thoughtful eyes; a presence cheering and reassuring, and a bearing which bespoke the scholar and the gentleman. His clothes were of rough gray homespun, badly fitted and carelessly worn. A thin shepherd-tartan plaid, arranged herdwise, hung from his shoulder, and he held in his hand a round soft hat, gray-green from exposure to summer sun and winter rains. Such was the man who stood by my bedside—a Gideon Gray indeed—strong of purpose, keenly observant; shy, yet not suspicious; revelling in his power of doing good; inured to cold and privation; buoyant and hopeful in the face of difficulties; daily in close and

loving communion with all nature around him; and girt about with truthfulness and integrity as with a cloak. Though I had never before been in his presence, I hailed him within my heart as a true and honoured friend.

He shook hands without saying good-morning, and seated himself on a chair at the foot of my bed. Betty, who had preceded him upstairs, and announced him, walked across the room, took up a position at the gable window, and feigned an interest in our grocer neighbour's back-yard. He looked at me pointedly and earnestly, the while stroking his long straggling beard, and then, half-turning his head toward Betty, he said with a low, little laugh, and with a pronounced yet euphonious 'burr,' 'Our young friend, Betty, is more of a Kennedy than a Russell.'

'Ay, doctor, that he is,' said Betty, without taking her eyes from the window. 'He aye took efter his mither's folk. When he was a bairn o' three he was the very spit o' his aunt Marget. Not that I ha'e ony recollection o' her, but that's what I mind the mistress used to say.'

'He's like her yet,' the doctor promptly added.—'And in saying so I can pay no higher compliment to you, my young man.'

'I've heard it said, doctor, that ye kenned the Kennedys aince on a time,' said Betty, and she changed the position of a pot of musk on the window-sill.

He looked quickly and questioningly at Betty; but she was busying herself with the flowers, the while humming, timmer-tuned as usual, the opening lines of 'The Farmer's Boy.'

Then he looked from her to me, slowly and deliberately crossed his legs, and, putting his long, thin hands lengthwise on his knee, he said, more to himself than to Betty, 'Yes, yes, I, as you say, once knew them well.'

'Ye wad ken Miss Marget, then?' asked Betty after a pause.

To me Betty's questioning was an enigma; but I wasn't slow to notice it was distinctly disconcerting to the doctor, who quickly changed his position and sat with his back to the light.

'Miss Marget and I were very, very dear friends,' he said, 'very dear friends, a long, long time ago;' and he abstractedly traced with the tip of his finger an irregular circle round the brim of his old soft hat.

Betty with a flick of her apron removed imaginary dust from the window-sill, and then, coming up to the doctor, she laid her hand on the back of his chair. 'In that case, then, doctor,' she earnestly said, 'for her sake, for Miss Marget's sake, ye'll do your best for her nephew, for it breaks my he'rt to see him lyin' there amaist as helpless as a bairn.' And she hurriedly left the room, and I don't know for certain, but I think she was crying.

The doctor rose, quietly closed the door, and resumed his seat.

'Betty has undoubtedly your welfare at heart, Mr Russell,' he said. 'Unconsciously, or maybe consciously, she has awakened many memories of the long ago—memories of times and people that are with me now only in dreams. Ay, ay;' and he passed his hand slowly adown his face. 'But this is not getting on with my work,' he said, after a pause.

Putting his hand in his coat pocket, he brought out, not a handkerchief, as he had intended or as I expected, but a rather sickly-looking hart's-tongue fern, the root of which was carefully wrapped in a piece of newspaper and tied with a bootlace.

'Well, well!' he said reproachfully, turning it over in his hand, 'that is indeed stupid of me. I ought to have planted this immediately on my arrival this morning; but fortunately I was careful to take sufficient soil with it, and maybe it is not yet too late.'

'Have you been from home, doctor?' I asked.

'Oh, only for twelve hours,' he said, returning the plant to his pocket. 'I was on the point of going to bed last night, when the Benthead shepherd called me out to attend his wife. He was driving an old nag I knew well, a Mitchelslacks pensioner —willing enough, you may be sure, or he wouldn't have been owned by a Harkness, but long past his best; so, in order to be as soon as possible beside my patient, I quickly saddled my own mare, and was trotting down the Gashouse Brae when the kirk clock was striking eleven. I passed the old nag near Laught; but unfortunately at Camplemill Daisy cast a shoe; so, rather than trouble the smith at such an untimely hour, I put her into his stable, the door of which was unlocked, waited the upcoming of the shepherd, and drove the rest of the journey with him in his spring-cart. After sitting for an hour or two at a smoky peat fire, reading by the aid of a guttering tallow-candle a back-number of the *Agricultural Gazette*, I was called

to work, and very soon added another arrow—the tenth—to the shepherd's quiver. When everything was "a' bye," as we say locally, Benthead kindly offered to drive me down to the mill; but, as the early morning was so delightfully fine, and nature outside so pleading and inviting, I took to the moor on "Shanks' naigie." Ah, the delight of that moorland walk! the exhilarating air of the uplands! Why, man, it was like quaffing wine, and the cobwebs—warp and woof of the sleepless hours—were charmed away as if by magic. The sun was just peeping over the crest of Bellybucht, and his rays were lying lovingly athwart the budding heather and the silver mist-wreathed bents. Bracken and juniper, blaeberry and crowberry; dewdrops here, dewdrops there, sparkling and shimmering; tiny springs of crystal water oozing out from whinstone chinks, gurgling and trickling down pebbled ruts, seen awhile, then unseen, lost in spongy moss and tangled seggs. Overhead the morning song of the gladsome lark; to my right the *wheep* of the snipe and the quack of a startled duck; to my left the *yittering* of the curlew and the *chirrup* of the flitting, restless cheeper; and over all the spirit of the wild which isolates and draws within her mantle-folds all those who cuddle close to Nature's breast. Ah, what a morning! what a scene! Hat in hand I walked, with my head bared to the throbbing air and the glorious sunshine. "Surely, surely," I said to myself, "it is good for me to be here;" and with a sense of thankfulness in my heart, and turning my face to the shadowy Lowthers, I sang with the Psalmist, "I to the hills will lift mine eyes."

'I struck the Crichope about six o'clock; wandered leisurely down the linn; pulled this hart's-tongue fern, and a few more which I must have lost; picked up this fossil—part of a frog, I think—which will make a welcome addition to my collection.' He hesitated for a moment, with half-closed eyes and his chin resting on his folded stock. Then he suddenly looked toward me and asked, 'Have you ever walked down Crichope alone?'

'No, not alone,' I replied.

'Then Crichope has never spoken to you. You have never heard its message. To me, this morning, it was the mouthpiece of the Creator—the great Architect; *for I was alone*. With those who love and admire His handiwork He is ever in communion, and He speaks in the rustle of the leaf, the tinkle of the stream, the whisper of the grass, and the echo of the linn. But you must be alone, humble, reverent, stripped to the pelt, as it were, of everything sordid, boastful, and vainglorious; and then that old ravine will be a sanctuary where in its solitude you will find solace, comfort in its caverns, food for reflection in its story and traditions.'

Again he paused, and I lay with eager eyes fixed on his animated face. Betty's cat, with arched back and long tail, brushed slowly past his knee. With an ingratiating 'Pussy, puss,' he stroked her fur.

'About half-past seven,' he continued, 'I reached the smithy, had a cup of tea with Smith Martin and his wife, got Daisy's shoe made siccar, and was mounting for home, when news was

brought from Dresserland that a farm-worker had fallen from his cart and broken his leg. Off Daisy and I trotted up the brae. But, tut! tut! why should I waste my precious time, and weary and fatigue you to boot, by detailing all my morning round?'

'Oh, doctor, don't stop!' I pleaded. 'I know and love that whole countryside, and a talk with you is like a walk in the open. Indeed, my limbs twitched as you strode along, and I felt as if I were keeping step with you.'

'Ay, your limbs twitched, did they? That's a good sign.'

'A sign of my appreciation of your love of nature and poetry of language, doctor?' I asked.

'No, no; something far more important than appreciation. But this is not business. I know you will be anxious to learn in how far Dr Balfour and I agree, so let me have a look at that damaged spine of yours.'

Betty tells me that she's 'feart the doctor's a careless, godless man, for he never enters a kirk door.' I could have told her that he had attended church that morning, and that he had had communion with God and a glimpse of heaven which would have been an unknown experience and an unfamiliar sight to many who occupy a church pew every Sunday; but Betty wouldn't have understood—nay, wouldn't have believed me—and I was silent.

His visit has cheered and encouraged me, and his conversation has made me proud of his acquaintance. He is to call on me again in a few days; and meanwhile I have to take more exercise; so with the aid of a friendly hazel I shall have a daily 'daunder' and

an opportunity of renewing my acquaintance with Douglas the barber in his wee back-room, John Sterling the shoemaker at his souter's stool, and Deacon Webster at his tool-laden bench.

CHAPTER IV

Tom Jardine the grocer—Betty's next-door neighbour—will be thirty-four years old on the 23rd of January next. He is to a day exactly four years my senior. I remember it was when his mother and Betty were putting out clothes together in the back-green that I, a boy of five, heard for the first time that we had a birthday in common.

To me the fact vested Tom with a special interest. I looked upon him in more than a mere neighbourly spirit. Though we were rarely associated in our boys' games, we often casually met about the doors or had disjointed conversations through the garden hedge; and on these occasions the desire was always strong within me to talk of our birthday, and to ask if he wasn't wearying for the 23rd to come round. And when that auspicious date was ushered in, and my birthday-cake, in all its white-iced glory, was ceremoniously placed before me at table, I used to wonder if Tom had one also, and if he, like me, had the honour of cutting and distributing it.

On looking back, I cannot remember when the Jardines were not our neighbours. Long ago Robert Jardine, Tom's father, was a tenant of ours, and twice a year, at the Martinmas and Whitsunday terms, he called upon us; and when the rent had been paid and sundry repairs and alterations agreed upon, he and my father drank a glass of wine together. It had, however, long been

the height of Robert's ambition to be the owner of his own roof-tree. Times then being good, he soon saved the amount necessary to effect a purchase; and after many calls and conferences, terms were ultimately arranged to the satisfaction of both vender and buyer.

Tom was the youngest of a large family, the other members of which had all emigrated; and when Robert Jardine died—his wife had predeceased him by a few years—there was no one else to look after affairs. Tom at once gave up a responsible position in a wholesale grocery establishment in Glasgow, came south with a wife and three young children, and took over what I now understand every Thornhill villager believed to be a dying, if not an altogether dead, concern.

All these changes had taken place in my absence during these past fourteen years; but it was nevertheless pleasing to me to know from Betty, shortly after my return, that as neighbours the family was still represented, the more so as the representative in question was none other than my old friend Tom.

In describing my attic room I omitted to say that it has a little, round, gable window through which, from my fireside chair, I can look down upon the Jardines' back-yard. Long ago I used to sit here and watch old Robert grooming his horse, cleaning his harness, and packing his long-bodied spring-cart with bags of flour or meal, and grocery parcels of tea and sugar, for distribution on his long cadger rounds.

During the past few weeks my interest has often been centred

on his son similarly employed. Tom sings and whistles cheery tunes as he works, and his iron-shod clogs make a merry clatter on the stone-paved court. His wife and the two eldest children—blue-eyed, curly-haired bairns they are—give him willing help, and, standing in his cart or on a chair placed beside the wheel, he cheerily receives and checks off in a weather-beaten note-book the various articles for his country clients.

Like Nathan, Tom is no lie-abed in the morning. Of necessity he must be up betimes, for his journeys are often long and his days are always too short. When Betty is preparing the early breakfast I hear Tom's ringing footstep outside, the taming of the key in the stable-door lock, and the anticipating whinny of the gray mare. Then a horse-pail is filled from the tap at the stable-door; a minute later it is returned empty and deposited outside; the lid of the corn-bin, which has been poised on its creaky hinges, descends with a bang, and I know that his faithful dappled friend has her nose buried in countless piles of sweet-smelling corn.

Betty is not an inquisitive woman, nor does she interest herself in a meddling way in her neighbours' concerns; yet her big, kindly heart and her never-failing sympathetic nature invite many confidences, and she is therefore more fully versed in what I might call the inward life of those around her than many of a more zealously prying and newsvending disposition.

We were talking one day about the Jardines of a past generation, and our conversation naturally turned to Tom. I

commended him for his industry, for his sobriety, and for the undivided attention he gave to his business, and finished up by asking if he was a successful man. Betty made no reply; but she shook her head doubtfully, from which I argued that it was not all sunshine and whistling and singing with our young grocer neighbour; and as she showed no desire to continue the conversation, I allowed the matter to drop.

After tea, however, she reverted to the subject, and reopened our chat by asking if it was usual in business for a son to take over his dead father's debts.

In my short professional career I remembered one such case, in which I was interested, but only one, and I told her of it. I didn't go into details, but gave her the bald outstanding points; and after I had finished she said, 'Ay, and that's the only case ye ever heard o'?'

'Yes, that is so, Betty,' I replied.

She was standing at the round gable window, vacantly looking down into our neighbour's back-yard. Then I saw her eyebrows begin to pucker, and I knew there was something on her mind.

'Maister Weelum,' she said at length, 'I've nae concern in the ongauns o' the folks aboot me, an' I never talk aboot them. But ye asked me regairdin' Tom Jardine, an' I'm no' betrayin' ony confidences when I tell ye that young Tom took ower his dead faither's debts, so that will be twae cases ye ken o'.'

'Tom Jardine!' I said with surprise. 'Surely Robert Jardine wasn't in debt when he died?'

'That he was, Maister Weelum—the mair's the pity. Ye see, for a lang time—I micht say for at least five years afore he died—he wasna able to gang his roons; in fact, he was barely able to stand ahint the coonter. Younger an' mair active competitors took up the same gr'und; an' what wi' failin' trade, increasin' competition, an' cuttin' prices, there wasna a livin' in it. Then his wife had a lang, lingerin' illness, an' when she slippit away he kind o' lost he'rt. I was often wae for him, puir man, an' I did a' I could for him in my ain sma' wey. Except to yin or twae he keepit a smilin' face, though, aye wrote cheerily to Tom, an' gaed to kirk an' market as lang as he was able wi' his heid in the air; but, losh me! when his time cam' it was nae surprise to me an' yin or twae mair that the whole affair—shop, hoose, an' business—didna show much mair than ten shillin's in the pound. Tom—him that's doon there noo—was in a guid wey o' doin' in Glesca, an' nothing wad ser' him but he bood come hame an' tak' things in haun. He was strongly advised to have nothing to do wi' it, an' to let the creditors handle what was left as best it was likely to pay them. But Tom said, "No." All he asked frae the creditors was time an' secrecy as far as was possible as to how things stood, an' frae the Almighty health an' strength, an', given these, he promised to clear his dead faither's name an' see every yin get his ain. That's three years ago past the May term, an', honour an' praise to the puir laddie, he's nearly succeeded. But it has been a terrible struggle for him; an' had it no' been for his determination, his sobriety, his pride in his faither's guid

name, an' abune a' the help o' a lovin' wife wha's a perfect mother in Israel, he wad ha'e gi'en it up lang or noo as an impossible, thankless job. Nathan and me lent his faither sixty pounds. We had nae writin' to speak o', only his signed name. I showed the paper to Tom shortly efter he had settled doon here, an' instead o' questionin' it he thanked us for our kindness an promised to pay it back in the same proportion as the ithers. Up to noo we've got back thirty pounds. I was in his shop the ither day, an' he said he thocht he wad be able to gi'e's anither ten pounds at the November term. What think ye o' that noo, Maister Weelum?'

'I think your neighbour is a splendid fellow, Betty, and I would like to shake hands with him. Have you the paper beside you on which his father's name appears for sixty pounds?'

'Ay, that I have,' said Betty. She went downstairs, and returned a minute later with a sheet of notepaper.

I glanced at the unstamped promise, and smiled. 'Betty,' I said seriously, 'are you aware this is not worth the paper it is written on?'

'Ay, perfectly,' she said with unconcern.

'How did you find that out?' I inquired.

'Oh, when I showed it to Tom Jardine he used exactly the same words as you did; but, said he, "My faither signed that. I have every confidence in you an' Nathan. My faither an' mither thought the world o' ye, an' wi' my assurance that ye'll be paid back, I tender you my best thanks for your kindness in time o' need."'

Betty folded up her worthless document and put it in the breast of her gown. 'An honest man like Tom Jardine makes up for a lot o' worthless yins, Maister Weelum,' she said as she lifted her tea-tray; and I looked through the wee round window to Tom's back-yard with an increased appreciation of the coatless and hatless grocer, who was sitting down on an empty soap-box with a long needle and a roset-end, mending his old gray mare's collar.

It has rained continuously for three days, and according to Nathan something has gone very far wrong, as St Swithin's Day from early morn to dewy eve was cloudless and fair, and accordingly we had every right to anticipate forty days of dry, fine weather.

Harvest is early with us this year. The corn, which was waving green when Betty and I drove south from Elvanfoot, is already studding the fields in regular rows of yellow stooks, and but for this break in the weather it would even now be on its way to the stackyard in groaning, creaking carts. The Newton pippins on the apple-tree at the foot of the garden are showing a bright red cheek, and the phloxes and gladioli in the plot at the kitchen window are crowned with a mass of bloom so rich and luxuriant that every one of Betty's cooking utensils reflects their colourings and appears to be blushing rosy-red. During these past three days I have missed Tom's cheery song, and I am beginning to wonder if the gloomy weather has chilled his lightsome heart and silenced the chords of his tuneful throat.

Time was when I loved to be abroad on a rainy day, whether

as an unprotected boy fishing away up Capel Linn and Cample Cleugh, with the rain dribbling down the neckband of my shirt and oozing through the lace-holes of my boots, or as a man with waterproof and hazel staff, breasting the scarred side of Caerketton or the grassy slopes of Allermuir, with the pelting, pitiless raindrops blinding my eyes and stinging my cheek, and the vivid fire of heaven lighting up Halkerside and momentarily showing the short zigzag course of that 'nameless trickle' whose rippling music the Wizard of Swanston loved.

How I enjoyed these Pentland rambles, alone in the rain and the soughing winds! Underfoot, the dank, sodden grass and the broken fern; overhead, the sombre sky, the scurrying clouds, and the drifting mist; on every side the grassy mounds of the Dunty Knowes, with their shivering birks tossing to windward, and a rain-soaked hogg beneath every sheltering crag. Alone, yet not alone; for a Presence was with me, guiding me on, showing me through the gathering gloom the sun-bathed crown of Allermuir, bringing to my ear from out the rage of the storm the wail of the curlew, and summoning to my side the plaided shepherd 'Honest John' and his gray, rough-coated collie Swag.

Ah, these are memories only! memories only! for Cample Cleugh and Capel Linn are lost to me with my boyhood. No more am I the strong, able-bodied lover of the open, moving with firm, sure step among scenes which a master's touch has made immortal; but a poor, crippled, pain-racked invalid, as parochial in feeling as in outlook, sitting in an easy-chair by an attic fire,

watching through a rain-washed window-pane a scene which fills me with forebodings and touches my heart to the very quick.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.