

КОЛЛЕКТИВ АВТОРОВ

STORIES BY ENGLISH
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Stories by English
Authors: Scotland

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Stories by English Authors: Scotland (Selected by Scribners):*

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**Stories by English
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**THE COURTING
OF T'NOWHEAD'S
BELL, By J. M. Barrie**

For two years it had been notorious in the square that Sam'l Dickie was thinking of courting T'nowhead's Bell, and that if Little Sanders Elshioner (which is the Thrums pronunciation of Alexander Alexander) went in for her, he might prove a formidable rival. Sam'l was a weaver in the tenements, and Sanders a coal-carter, whose trade-mark was a bell on his horse's neck that told when coal was coming. Being something of a public man, Sanders had not, perhaps, so high a social position as Sam'l, but he had succeeded his father on the coal-cart, while the weaver had already tried several trades. It had always been against Sam'l, too, that once when the kirk was vacant he had advised the selection of the third minister who preached for it

on the ground that it became expensive to pay a large number of candidates. The scandal of the thing was hushed up, out of respect for his father, who was a God-fearing man, but Sam'l was known by it in Lang Tammas's circle. The coal-carter was called Little Sanders to distinguish him from his father, who was not much more than half his size. He had grown up with the name, and its inapplicability now came home to nobody. Sam'l's mother had been more far-seeing than Sanders's. Her man had been called Sammy all his life because it was the name he got as a boy, so when their eldest son was born she spoke of him as Sam'l while still in the cradle. The neighbours imitated her, and thus the young man had a better start in life than had been granted to Sammy, his father.

It was Saturday evening – the night in the week when Auld Licht young men fell in love. Sam'l Dickie, wearing a blue glengarry bonnet with a red ball on the top, came to the door of the one-story house in the tenements, and stood there wriggling, for he was in a suit of tweed for the first time that week, and did not feel at one with them. When his feeling of being a stranger to himself wore off, he looked up and down the road, which straggles between houses and gardens, and then, picking his way over the puddles, crossed to his father's hen-house and sat down on it. He was now on his way to the square.

Eppie Fergus was sitting on an adjoining dyke knitting stockings, and Sam'l looked at her for a time.

“Is't yersel', Eppie?” he said at last.

“It’s a’ that,” said Eppie.

“Hoo’s a’ wi’ ye?” asked Sam’l.

“We’re juist aff an’ on,” replied Eppie, cautiously.

There was not much more to say, but as Sam’l sidled off the hen-house he murmured politely, “Ay, ay.” In another minute he would have been fairly started, but Eppie resumed the conversation.

“Sam’l,” she said, with a twinkle in her eye, “ye can tell Lisbeth Fergus I’ll likely be drappin’ in on her aboot Mununday or Teisday.”

Lisbeth was sister to Eppie, and wife of Tammis McQuhatty, better known as T’nowhead, which was the name of his farm. She was thus Bell’s mistress.

Sam’l leaned against the hen-house as if all his desire to depart had gone.

“Hoo d’ ye kin I’ll be at the T’nowhead the nicht?” he asked, grinning in anticipation.

“Ou, I’s e warrant ye’ll be after Bell,” said Eppie.

“Am no sae sure o’ that,” said Sam’l, trying to leer. He was enjoying himself now.

“Am no sure o’ that,” he repeated, for Eppie seemed lost in stitches.

“Sam’l!”

“Ay.”

“Ye’ll be speerin’ her sune noo, I dinna doot?”

This took Sam’l, who had only been courting Bell for a year

or two, a little aback.

“Hoo d’ ye mean, Eppie?” he asked.

“Maybe ye’ll do ‘t the nicht.”

“Na, there’s nae hurry,” said Sam’l.

“Weel, we’re a’ coontin’ on ‘t, Sam’l.”

“Gae ‘wa’ wi’ ye.”

“What for no?”

“Gae ‘wa’ wi’ ye,” said Sam’l again.

“Bell’s gei an’ fond o’ ye, Sam’l.”

“Ay,” said Sam’l.

“But am dootin’ ye’re a fell billy wi’ the lasses.”

“Ay, oh, I d’na kin; moderate, moderate,” said Sam’l, in high delight.

“I saw ye,” said Eppie, speaking with a wire in her mouth, “gaein’ on terr’ble wi’ Mysy Haggart at the pump last Saturday.”

“We was juist amoosin’ oorsel’s,” said Sam’l.

“It’ll be nae amoosement to Mysy,” said Eppie, “gin ye brak her heart.”

“Losh, Eppie,” said Sam’l, “I didna think o’ that.”

“Ye maun kin weel, Sam’l, ‘at there’s mony a lass wid jump at ye.”

“Ou, weel,” said Sam’l, implying that a man must take these things as they come.

“For ye’re a dainty chield to look at, Sam’l.”

“Do ye think so, Eppie? Ay, ay; oh, I d’na kin am onything by the ordinar.”

“Ye mayna be,” said Eppie, “but lasses doesna do to be ower-partikler.”

Sam'l resented this, and prepared to depart again.

“Ye'll no tell Bell that?” he asked, anxiously.

“Tell her what?”

“About me an' Mysy.”

“We'll see hoo ye behave yersel', Sam'l.”

“No 'at I care, Eppie; ye can tell her gin ye like. I widna think twice o' tellin' her mysel'.”

“The Lord forgie ye for leein', Sam'l,” said Eppie, as he disappeared down Tammy Tosh's close. Here he came upon Henders Webster.

“Ye're late, Sam'l,” said Henders.

“What for?”

“Ou, I was thinkin' ye wid be gaen the length o' T'nowhead the nicht, an' I saw Sanders Elshioner makkin' 's wy there an 'oor syne.”

“Did ye?” cried Sam'l, adding craftily, “but it's naething to me.”

“Tod, lad,” said Henders, “gin ye dinna buckle to, Sanders'll be carryin' her off.”

Sam'l flung back his head and passed on.

“Sam'l!” cried Henders after him.

“Ay,” said Sam'l, wheeling round.

“Gie Bell a kiss frae me.”

The full force of this joke struck neither all at once. Sam'l

began to smile at it as he turned down the school-wynd, and it came upon Henders while he was in his garden feeding his ferret. Then he slapped his legs gleefully, and explained the conceit to Will'um Byars, who went into the house and thought it over.

There were twelve or twenty little groups of men in the square, which was lit by a flare of oil suspended over a cadger's cart. Now and again a staid young woman passed through the square with a basket on her arm, and if she had lingered long enough to give them time, some of the idlers would have addressed her. As it was, they gazed after her, and then grinned to each other.

"Ay, Sam'l," said two or three young men, as Sam'l joined them beneath the town clock.

"Ay, Davit," replied Sam'l.

This group was composed of some of the sharpest wits in Thrums, and it was not to be expected that they would let this opportunity pass. Perhaps when Sam'l joined them he knew what was in store for him.

"Was ye lookin' for T'nowhead's Bell, Sam'l?" asked one.

"Or mebbe ye was wantin' the minister?" suggested another, the same who had walked out twice with Chirsty Duff and not married her after all.

Sam'l could not think of a good reply at the moment, so he laughed good-naturedly.

"Ondootedly she's a snod bit crittur," said Davit, archly.

"An' mighty clever wi' her fingers," added Jamie Deuchars.

"Man, I've thocht o' makkin' up to Bell mysel'," said Pete

Ogle. "Wid there be ony chance, think ye, Sam'l?"

"I'm thinkin' she widna hae ye for her first, Pete," replied Sam'l, in one of those happy flashes that come to some men, "but there's nae sayin' but what she micht tak' ye to finish up wi'."

The unexpectedness of this sally startled every one. Though Sam'l did not set up for a wit, however, like Davit, it was notorious that he could say a cutting thing once in a way.

"Did ye ever see Bell reddin' up?" asked Pete, recovering from his overthrow. He was a man who bore no malice.

"It's a sicht," said Sam'l, solemnly.

"Hoo will that be?" asked Jamie Deuchars.

"It's weel worth yer while," said Pete, "to ging atower to the T'nowhead an' see. Ye'll mind the closed-in beds i' the kitchen? Ay, weel, they're a fell spoiled crew, T'nowhead's litlins, an' no that aisy to manage. Th' ither lasses Lisbeth's haen had a mighty trouble wi' them. When they war i' the middle o' their reddin' up the bairns wid come tum'lin' aboot the floor, but, sal, I assure ye, Bell didna fash lang wi' them. Did she, Sam'l?"

"She did not," said Sam'l, dropping into a fine mode of speech to add emphasis to his remark.

"I'll tell ye what she did," said Pete to the others. "She juist lifted up the litlins, twa at a time, an' flung them into the coffin-beds. Syne she snibbit the doors on them, an' keepit them there till the floor was dry."

"Ay, man, did she so?" said Davit, admiringly.

"I've seen her do 't mysel'," said Sam'l.

“There’s no a lassie mak’s better bannocks this side o’ Fetter Lums,” continued Pete.

“Her mither tocht her that,” said Sam’l; “she was a gran’ han’ at the bakin’, Kitty Ogilvy.”

“I’ve heard say,” remarked Jamie, putting it this way so as not to tie himself down to anything, “at Bell’s scones is equal to Mag Lunan’s.”

“So they are,” said Sam’l, almost fiercely.

“I kin she’s a neat han’ at singein’ a hen,” said Pete.

“An’ wi’ ‘t a’,” said Davit, “she’s a snod, canty bit stocky in her Sabbath claes.”

“If onything, thick in the waist,” suggested Jamie.

“I dinna see that,” said Sam’l.

“I d’na care for her hair, either,” continued Jamie, who was very nice in his tastes; “something mair yallowchy wid be an improvement.”

“A’body kins,” growled Sam’l, “at black hair’s the bonniest.” The others chuckled.

“Puir Sam’l!” Pete said.

Sam’l, not being certain whether this should be received with a smile or a frown, opened his mouth wide as a kind of compromise. This was position one with him for thinking things over.

Few Auld Lights, as I have said, went the length of choosing a helpmate for themselves. One day a young man’s friends would see him mending the washing-tub of a maiden’s mother. They

kept the joke until Saturday night, and then he learned from them what he had been after. It dazed him for a time, but in a year or so he grew accustomed to the idea, and they were then married. With a little help he fell in love just like other people.

Sam'l was going the way of the others, but he found it difficult to come to the point. He only went courting once a week, and he could never take up the running at the place where he left off the Saturday before. Thus he had not, so far, made great headway. His method of making up to Bell had been to drop in at T'nowhead on Saturday nights and talk with the farmer about the rinderpest.

The farm kitchen was Bell's testimonial. Its chairs, tables, and stools were scoured by her to the whiteness of Rob Angus's sawmill boards, and the muslin blind on the window was starched like a child's pinafore. Bell was brave, too, as well as energetic. Once Thrums had been overrun with thieves. It is now thought that there may have been only one, but he had the wicked cleverness of a gang. Such was his repute that there were weavers who spoke of locking their doors when they went from home. He was not very skilful, however, being generally caught, and when they said they knew he was a robber, he gave them their things back and went away. If they had given him time there is no doubt that he would have gone off with his plunder. One night he went to T'nowhead, and Bell, who slept in the kitchen, was awakened by the noise. She knew who it would be, so she rose and dressed herself, and went to look for him with a candle. The thief had

not known what to do when he got in, and as it was very lonely he was glad to see Bell. She told him he ought to be ashamed of himself, and would not let him out by the door until he had taken off his boots so as not to soil the carpet.

On this Saturday evening Sam'l stood his ground in the square, until by-and-by he found himself alone. There were other groups there still, but his circle had melted away. They went separately, and no one said good-night. Each took himself off slowly, backing out of the group until he was fairly started.

Sam'l looked about him, and then, seeing that the others had gone, walked round the town-house into the darkness of the brae that leads down and then up to the farm of T'nowhead.

To get into the good graces of Lisbeth Fargus you had to know her ways and humour them. Sam'l, who was a student of women, knew this, and so, instead of pushing the door open and walking in, he went through the rather ridiculous ceremony of knocking. Sanders Elshioner was also aware of this weakness of Lisbeth's, but though he often made up his mind to knock, the absurdity of the thing prevented his doing so when he reached the door. T'nowhead himself had never got used to his wife's refined notions, and when any one knocked he always started to his feet, thinking there must be something wrong.

Lisbeth came to the door, her expansive figure blocking the way in.

"Sam'l," she said.

"Lisbeth," said Sam'l.

He shook hands with the farmer's wife, knowing that she liked it, but only said, "Ay, Bell," to his sweetheart, "Ay, T'nowhead," to McQuhatty, and "It's yersel', Sanders," to his rival.

They were all sitting round the fire; T'nowhead, with his feet on the ribs, wondering why he felt so warm; and Bell darned a stocking, while Lisbeth kept an eye on a goblet full of potatoes.

"Sit into the fire, Sam'l," said the farmer, not, however, making way for him.

"Na, na," said Sam'l; "I'm to bide nae time." Then he sat into the fire. His face was turned away from Bell, and when she spoke he answered her without looking round. Sam'l felt a little anxious. Sanders Elshioner, who had one leg shorter than the other, but looked well when sitting, seemed suspiciously at home. He asked Bell questions out of his own head, which was beyond Sam'l, and once he said something to her in such a low voice that the others could not catch it. T'nowhead asked curiously what it was, and Sanders explained that he had only said, "Ay, Bell, the morn's the Sabbath." There was nothing startling in this, but Sam'l did not like it. He began to wonder if he were too late, and had he seen his opportunity would have told Bell of a nasty rumour that Sanders intended to go over to the Free Church if they would make him kirk officer.

Sam'l had the good-will of T'nowhead's wife, who liked a polite man. Sanders did his best, but from want of practice he constantly made mistakes. To-night, for instance, he wore his hat in the house because he did not like to put up his hand and

take it off. T'nowhead had not taken his off, either, but that was because he meant to go out by-and-by and lock the byre door. It was impossible to say which of her lovers Bell preferred. The proper course with an Auld Licht lassie was to prefer the man who proposed to her.

“Ye’ll bide a wee, an’ hae something to eat?” Lisbeth asked Sam’l, with her eyes on the goblet.

“No, I thank ye,” said Sam’l, with true gentility.

“Ye’ll better.”

“I dinna think it.”

“Hoots aye, what’s to hender ye?”

“Weel, since ye’re sae pressin’, I’ll bide.”

No one asked Sanders to stay. Bell could not, for she was but the servant, and T’nowhead knew that the kick his wife had given him meant that he was not to do so, either. Sanders whistled to show that he was not uncomfortable.

“Ay, then, I’ll be stappin’ ower the brae,” he said at last.

He did not go, however. There was sufficient pride in him to get him off his chair, but only slowly, for he had to get accustomed to the notion of going. At intervals of two or three minutes he remarked that he must now be going. In the same circumstances Sam’l would have acted similarly. For a Thrums man, it is one of the hardest things in life to get away from anywhere.

At last Lisbeth saw that something must be done. The potatoes were burning, and T’nowhead had an invitation on his tongue.

“Yes, I’ll hae to be movin’,” said Sanders, hopelessly, for the fifth time.

“Guid-nicht to ye, then, Sanders,” said Lisbeth. “Gie the door a fling-to ahent ye.”

Sanders, with a mighty effort, pulled himself together. He looked boldly at Bell, and then took off his hat carefully. Sam’l saw with misgivings that there was something in it which was not a handkerchief. It was a paper bag glittering with gold braid, and contained such an assortment of sweets as lads bought for their lasses on the Muckle Friday.

“Hae, Bell,” said Sanders, handing the bag to Bell in an offhand way as if it were but a trifle. Nevertheless he was a little excited, for he went off without saying good-night.

No one spoke. Bell’s face was crimson. T’nowhead fidgeted on his chair, and Lisbeth looked at Sam’l. The weaver was strangely calm and collected, though he would have liked to know whether this was a proposal.

“Sit in by to the table, Sam’l,” said Lisbeth, trying to look as if things were as they had been before.

She put a saucerful of butter, salt, and pepper near the fire to melt, for melted butter is the shoeing-horn that helps over a meal of potatoes. Sam’l, however, saw what the hour required, and, jumping up, he seized his bonnet.

“Hing the tatties higher up the joist, Lisbeth,” he said, with dignity; “I’s be back in ten meenits.”

He hurried out of the house, leaving the others looking at each

other.

“What do ye think?” asked Lisbeth.

“I d’na kin,” faltered Bell.

“Thae tatties is lang o’ comin’ to the boil,” said T’nowhead.

In some circles a lover who behaved like Sam’l would have been suspected of intent upon his rival’s life, but neither Bell nor Lisbeth did the weaver that injustice. In a case of this kind it does not much matter what T’nowhead thought.

The ten minutes had barely passed when Sam’l was back in the farm kitchen. He was too flurried to knock this time, and, indeed, Lisbeth did not expect it of him.

“Bell, hae!” he cried, handing his sweetheart a tinsel bag twice the size of Sanders’s gift.

“Losh preserve ‘s!” exclaimed Lisbeth; “T’se warrant there’s a shillin’s worth.”

“There’s a’ that, Lisbeth – an’ mair,” said Sam’l, firmly.

“I thank ye, Sam’l,” said Bell, feeling an unwonted elation as she gazed at the two paper bags in her lap.

“Ye’re ower-extravegint, Sam’l,” Lisbeth said.

“Not at all,” said Sam’l; “not at all. But I widna advise ye to eat thae ither anes, Bell – they’re second quality.”

Bell drew back a step from Sam’l.

“How do ye kin?” asked the farmer, shortly, for he liked Sanders.

“I speered i’ the shop,” said Sam’l.

The goblet was placed on a broken plate on the table, with the

saucer beside it, and Sam'l, like the others, helped himself. What he did was to take potatoes from the pot with his fingers, peel off their coats, and then dip them into the butter. Lisbeth would have liked to provide knives and forks, but she knew that beyond a certain point T'nowhead was master in his own house. As for Sam'l, he felt victory in his hands, and began to think that he had gone too far.

In the meantime Sanders, little witting that Sam'l had trumped his trick, was sauntering along the kirk-wynd with his hat on the side of his head. Fortunately he did not meet the minister.

The courting of T'nowhead's Bell reached its crisis one Sabbath about a month after the events above recorded. The minister was in great force that day, but it is no part of mine to tell how he bore himself. I was there, and am not likely to forget the scene. It was a fateful Sabbath for T'nowhead's Bell and her swains, and destined to be remembered for the painful scandal which they perpetrated in their passion.

Bell was not in the kirk. There being an infant of six months in the house it was a question of either Lisbeth or the lassie's staying at home with him, and though Lisbeth was unselfish in a general way, she could not resist the delight of going to church. She had nine children besides the baby, and, being but a woman, it was the pride of her life to march them into the T'nowhead pew, so well watched that they dared not misbehave, and so tightly packed that they could not fall. The congregation looked at that pew, the mothers enviously, when they sang the lines:

“Jerusalem like a city is
Compactly built together.”

The first half of the service had been gone through on this particular Sunday without anything remarkable happening. It was at the end of the psalm which preceded the sermon that Sanders Elshioner, who sat near the door, lowered his head until it was no higher than the pews, and in that attitude, looking almost like a four-footed animal, slipped out of the church. In their eagerness to be at the sermon many of the congregation did not notice him, and those who did put the matter by in their minds for future investigation. Sam'l however, could not take it so coolly. From his seat in the gallery he saw Sanders disappear, and his mind misgave him. With the true lover's instinct he understood it all. Sanders had been struck by the fine turnout in the T'nowhead pew. Bell was alone at the farm. What an opportunity to work one's way up to a proposal! T'nowhead was so overrun with children that such a chance seldom occurred, except on a Sabbath. Sanders, doubtless, was off to propose, and he, Sam'l, was left behind.

The suspense was terrible. Sam'l and Sanders had both known all along that Bell would take the first of the two who asked her. Even those who thought her proud admitted that she was modest. Bitterly the weaver repented having waited so long. Now it was too late. In ten minutes Sanders would be at T'nowhead;

in an hour all would be over. Sam'l rose to his feet in a daze. His mother pulled him down by the coat-tail, and his father shook him, thinking he was walking in his sleep. He tottered past them, however, hurried up the aisle, which was so narrow that Dan'l Ross could only reach his seat by walking sideways, and was gone before the minister could do more than stop in the middle of a whirl and gape in horror after him.

A number of the congregation felt that day the advantage of sitting in the loft. What was a mystery to those downstairs was revealed to them. From the gallery windows they had a fine open view to the south; and as Sam'l took the common, which was a short cut through a steep ascent, to T'nowhead, he was never out of their line of vision. Sanders was not to be seen, but they guessed rightly the reason why. Thinking he had ample time, he had gone round by the main road to save his boots – perhaps a little scared by what was coming. Sam'l's design was to forestall him by taking the shorter path over the burn and up the common.

It was a race for a wife, and several onlookers in the gallery braved the minister's displeasure to see who won. Those who favoured Sam'l's suit exultingly saw him leap the stream, while the friends of Sanders fixed their eyes on the top of the common where it ran into the road. Sanders must come into sight there, and the one who reached this point first would get Bell.

As Auld Lights do not walk abroad on the Sabbath, Sanders would probably not be delayed. The chances were in his favour.

Had it been any other day in the week Sam'l might have run. So some of the congregation in the gallery were thinking, when suddenly they saw him bend low and then take to his heels. He had caught sight of Sanders's head bobbing over the hedge that separated the road from the common, and feared that Sanders might see him. The congregation who could crane their necks sufficiently saw a black object, which they guessed to be the carter's hat, crawling along the hedge-top. For a moment it was motionless, and then it shot ahead. The rivals had seen each other. It was now a hot race. Sam'l dissembling no longer, clattered up the common, becoming smaller and smaller to the onlookers as he neared the top. More than one person in the gallery almost rose to their feet in their excitement. Sam'l had it. No, Sanders was in front. Then the two figures disappeared from view. They seemed to run into each other at the top of the brae, and no one could say who was first. The congregation looked at one another. Some of them perspired. But the minister held on his course.

Sam'l had just been in time to cut Sanders out. It was the weaver's saving that Sanders saw this when his rival turned the corner; for Sam'l was sadly blown. Sanders took in the situation and gave in at once. The last hundred yards of the distance he covered at his leisure, and when he arrived at his destination he did not go in. It was a fine afternoon for the time of year, and he went round to have a look at the pig, about which T'nowhead was a little sinfully puffed up.

"Ay," said Sanders, digging his fingers critically into the

grunting animal, "quite so."

"Grumph," said the pig, getting reluctantly to his feet.

"Ou, ay, yes," said Sanders thoughtfully.

Then he sat down on the edge of the sty, and looked long and silently at an empty bucket. But whether his thoughts were of T'nowhead's Bell, whom he had lost for ever, or of the food the farmer fed his pig on, is not known.

"Lord preserve 's! are ye no at the kirk?" cried Bell, nearly dropping the baby as Sam'l broke into the room.

"Bell!" cried Sam'l.

Then T'nowhead's Bell knew that her hour had come.

"Sam'l," she faltered.

"Will ye hae 's, Bell?" demanded Sam'l, glaring at her sheepishly.

"Ay," answered Bell.

Sam'l fell into a chair.

"Bring 's a drink o' water, Bell," he said. But Bell thought the occasion required milk, and there was none in the kitchen. She went out to the byre, still with the baby in her arms, and saw Sanders Elshioner sitting gloomily on the pigsty.

"Weel, Bell," said Sanders.

"I thocht ye'd been at the kirk, Sanders," said Bell.

Then there was a silence between them.

"Has Sam'l speered ye, Bell?" asked Sanders, stolidly.

"Ay," said Bell again, and this time there was a tear in her eye. Sanders was little better than an "orra man," and Sam'l was

a weaver, and yet – But it was too late now. Sanders gave the pig a vicious poke with a stick, and when it had ceased to grunt, Bell was back in the kitchen. She had forgotten about the milk, however, and Sam'l only got water after all.

In after-days, when the story of Bell's wooing was told, there were some who held that the circumstances would have almost justified the lassie in giving Sam'l the go-by. But these perhaps forgot that her other lover was in the same predicament as the accepted one – that of the two, indeed, he was the more to blame, for he set off to T'nowhead on the Sabbath of his own accord, while Sam'l only ran after him. And then there is no one to say for certain whether Bell heard of her suitors' delinquencies until Lisbeth's return from the kirk. Sam'l could never remember whether he told her, and Bell was not sure whether, if he did, she took it in. Sanders was greatly in demand for weeks to tell what he knew of the affair, but though he was twice asked to tea to the manse among the trees, and subjected thereafter to ministerial cross-examinations, this is all he told. He remained at the pigsty until Sam'l left the farm, when he joined him at the top of the brae, and they went home together.

"It's yersel', Sanders," said Sam'l.

"It is so, Sam'l," said Sanders.

"Very cauld," said Sam'l.

"Blawy," assented Sanders.

After a pause —

"Sam'l," said Sanders.

“Ay.”

“I’m hearing ye’re to be mairit.”

“Ay.”

“Weel, Sam’l, she’s a snod bit lassie.”

“Thank ye,” said Sam’l.

“I had ance a kin o’ notion o’ Bell mysel’,” continued Sanders.

“Ye had?”

“Yes, Sam’l; but I thocht better o’ ‘t.”

“Hoo d’ ye mean?” asked Sam’l, a little anxiously.

“Weel, Sam’l, mairitch is a terrible responsibeelity.”

“It is so,” said Sam’l, wincing.

“An’ no the thing to tak’ up withoot conseederation.”

“But it’s a blessed and honourable state, Sanders; ye’ve heard the minister on ‘t.”

“They say,” continued the relentless Sanders, “at the minister doesna get on sair wi’ the wife himsel’.”

“So they do,” cried Sam’l, with a sinking at the heart.

“I’ve been telt,” Sanders went on, “at gin ye can get the upper han’ o’ the wife for a while at first, there’s the mair chance o’ a harmonious exeistence.”

“Bell’s no the lassie,” said Sam’l, appealingly, “to thwart her man.”

Sanders smiled.

“D’ ye think she is, Sanders?”

“Weel, Sam’l, I d’na want to fluster ye, but she’s been owerlang wi’ Lisbeth Fergus no to hae learned her ways. An’ a’body

kins what a life T'nowhead has wi' her."

"Guid sake, Sanders, hoo did ye no speak o' this afore?"

"I thocht ye kent o' 't, Sam'l."

They had now reached the square, and the U. P. kirk was coming out. The Auld Licht kirk would be half an hour yet.

"But, Sanders," said Sam'l, brightening up, "ye was on yer wy to speer her yersel'."

"I was, Sam'l," said Sanders, "and I canna but be thankfu' ye was ower-quick for 's."

"Gin 't hadna been you," said Sam'l, "I wid never hae thocht o' 't."

"I'm saying naething agin Bell," pursued the other, "but, man, Sam'l, a body should be mair deleeberate in a thing o' the kind."

"It was mighty hurried," said Sam'l wofully.

"It's a serious thing to speer a lassie," said Sanders.

"It's an awfu' thing," said Sam'l.

"But we'll hope for the best," added Sanders, in a hopeless voice.

They were close to the tenements now, and Sam'l looked as if he were on his way to be hanged.

"Sam'l!"

"Ay, Sanders."

"Did ye – did ye kiss her, Sam'l?"

"Na."

"Hoo?"

"There's was varra little time, Sanders."

“Half an ‘oor,” said Sanders.

“Was there? Man Sanders, to tell ye the truth, I never thocht o’ ‘t.”

Then the soul of Sanders Elshioner was filled with contempt for Sam’l Dickie.

The scandal blew over. At first it was expected that the minister would interfere to prevent the union, but beyond intimating from the pulpit that the souls of Sabbath-breakers were beyond praying for, and then praying for Sam’l and Sanders at great length, with a word thrown in for Bell, he let things take their course. Some said it was because he was always frightened lest his young men should intermarry with other denominations, but Sanders explained it differently to Sam’l.

“I hav’na a word to say agin’ the minister,” he said; “they’re gran’ prayers; but, Sam’l, he’s a mairit man himsel’.”

“He’s a’ the better for that, Sanders, isna he?”

“Do ye no see,” asked Sanders, compassionately, “at he’s trying to mak’ the best o’ ‘t?”

“O Sanders, man!” said Sam’l.

“Cheer up, Sam’l,” said Sanders; “it’ll sune be ower.”

Their having been rival suitors had not interfered with their friendship. On the contrary, while they had hitherto been mere acquaintances, they became inseparables as the wedding-day drew near. It was noticed that they had much to say to each other, and that when they could not get a room to themselves they wandered about together in the churchyard. When Sam’l had

anything to tell Bell he sent Sanders to tell it, and Sanders did as he was bid. There was nothing that he would not have done for Sam'l.

The more obliging Sanders was, however, the sadder Sam'l grew. He never laughed now on Saturdays, and sometimes his loom was silent half the day. Sam'l felt that Sanders's was the kindness of a friend for a dying man.

It was to be a penny wedding, and Lisbeth Fergus said it was the delicacy that made Sam'l superintend the fitting up of the barn by deputy. Once he came to see it in person, but he looked so ill that Sanders had to see him home. This was on the Thursday afternoon, and the wedding was fixed for Friday.

"Sanders, Sanders," said Sam'l, in a voice strangely unlike his own, "it'll a' be ower by this time the morn."

"It will," said Sanders.

"If I had only kent her langer," continued Sam'l.

"It wid hae been safer," said Sanders.

"Did ye see the yallow floor in Bell's bonnet?" asked the accepted swain.

"Ay," said Sanders, reluctantly.

"I'm dootin' – I'm sair dootin' she's but a flichty, light-hearted crittur after a'."

"I had aye my suspecions o' 't," said Sanders.

"Ye hae kent her langer than me," said Sam'l.

"Yes," said Sanders, "but there's nae getting' at the heart o' women. Man Sam'l, they're desperate cunnin'."

"I'm dootin' 't; I'm sair dootin' 't."

"It'll be a warnin' to ye, Sam'l, no to be in sic a hurry i' the futur'," said Sanders.

Sam'l groaned.

"Ye'll be gaein' up to the manse to arrange wi' the minister the morn's mornin'," continued Sanders, in a subdued voice.

Sam'l looked wistfully at his friend.

"I canna do 't, Sanders," he said; "I canna do 't."

"Ye maun," said Sanders.

"It's aisy to speak," retorted Sam'l, bitterly.

"We have a' oor troubles, Sam'l," said Sanders, soothingly, "an' every man maun bear his ain burdens. Johnny Davie's wife's dead, an' he's no repinin'."

"Ay," said Sam'l, "but a death's no a mairitch. We hae haen deaths in our family too."

"It may a' be for the best," added Sanders, "an' there wid be a mighty talk i' the hale country-side gin ye didna ging to the minister like a man."

"I maun hae langer to think o' 't," said Sam'l.

"Bell's mairitch is the morn," said Sanders, decisively.

Sam'l glanced up with a wild look in his eyes.

"Sanders!" he cried.

"Sam'l!"

"Ye hae been a guid friend to me, Sanders, in this sair affliction."

"Nothing ava," said Sanders; "doun't mention 'd."

“But, Sanders, ye canna deny but what your rinnin’ oot o’ the kirk that awfu’ day was at the bottom o’ ‘d a’.”

“It was so,” said Sanders, bravely.

“An’ ye used to be fond o’ Bell, Sanders.”

“I dinna deny ‘t.”

“Sanders, laddie,” said Sam’l, bending forward and speaking in a wheedling voice, “I aye thocht it was you she likit.”

“I had some sic idea mysel’,” said Sanders.

“Sanders, I canna think to pairt twa fowk sae weel suited to ane anither as you an’ Bell.”

“Canna ye, Sam’l?”

“She wid mak’ ye a guid wife, Sanders. I hae studied her weel, and she’s a thrifty, douce, clever lassie. Sanders, there’s no the like o’ her. Mony a time, Sanders, I hae said to mysel’, ‘There’s a lass ony man micht be prood to tak’.’ A’body says the same, Sanders. There’s nae risk ava, man – nane to speak o’. Tak’ her, laddie; tak’ her, Sanders; it’s a gran’ chance, Sanders. She’s yours for the speerin’. I’ll gie her up, Sanders.”

“Will ye, though?” said Sanders.

“What d’ ye think?” asked Sam’l.

“If ye wid rayther,” said Sanders, politely.

“There’s my han’ on ‘t,” said Sam’l. “Bless ye, Sanders; ye’ve been a true frien’ to me.”

Then they shook hands for the first time in their lives, and soon afterward Sanders struck up the brae to T’nowhead.

Next morning Sanders Elshioner, who had been very busy the

night before, put on his Sabbath clothes and strolled up to the manse.

“But – but where is Sam’l?” asked the minister; “I must see himself.”

“It’s a new arrangement,” said Sanders.

“What do you mean, Sanders?”

“Bell’s to marry me,” explained Sanders.

“But – but what does Sam’l say?”

“He’s willin’,” said Sanders.

“And Bell?”

“She’s willin’ too. She prefers ‘t.”

“It is unusual,” said the minister.

“It’s a’ richt,” said Sanders.

“Well, you know best,” said the minister.

“You see the hoose was taen, at ony rate,” continued Sanders, “an’ I’ll juist ging in til ‘t instead o’ Sam’l.”

“Quite so.”

“An’ I cudna think to disappoint the lassie.”

“Your sentiments do you credit, Sanders,” said the minister; “but I hope you do not enter upon the blessed state of matrimony without full consideration of its responsibilities. It is a serious business, marriage.”

“It’s a’ that,” said Sanders, “but I’m willin’ to stan’ the risk.”

So, as soon as it could be done, Sanders Elshioner took to wife T’nowhead’s Bell, and I remember seeing Sam’l Dickie trying to dance at the penny wedding.

Years afterward it was said in Thrums that Sam'l had treated Bell badly, but he was never sure about it himself.

"It was a near thing – a mighty near thing," he admitted in the square.

"They say," some other weaver would remark, "'at it was you Bell liked best."

"I d'na kin," Sam'l would reply; "but there's nae doot the lassie was fell fond o' me; ou, a mere passin' fancy, 's ye micht say."

“THE HEATHER LINTIE”, By S. R. Crockett

Janet Balchrystie lived in a little cottage at the back of the Long Wood of Barbrax. She had been a hard-working woman all her days, for her mother died when she was but young, and she had lived on, keeping her father's house by the side of the single-track railway-line. Gavin Balchrystie was a foreman plate-layer on the P.P.R., and with two men under him, had charge of a section of three miles. He lived just where that distinguished but impecunious line plunges into a moss-covered granite wilderness of moor and bog, where there is not more than a shepherd's hut to the half-dozen miles, and where the passage of a train is the occasion of commotion among scattered groups of black-faced sheep. Gavin Balchrystie's three miles of P.P.R. metals gave him little work, but a good deal of healthy exercise. The black-faced sheep breaking down the fences and straying on the line side, and the torrents coming down the granite gullies, foaming white after a water-spout, and tearing into his embankments, undermining his chairs and plates, were the only troubles of his life. There was, however, a little public-house at The Huts, which in the old days of construction had had the license, and which had lingered alone, license and all, when its immediate purpose in life had been fulfilled, because there was nobody but the whaups and the

railway officials on the passing trains to object to its continuance. Now it is cold and blowy on the west-land moors, and neither whaups nor dark-blue uniforms object to a little refreshment up there. The mischief was that Gavin Balchrystie did not, like the guards and engine-drivers, go on with the passing train. He was always on the spot, and the path through Barbrax Wood to the Railway Inn was as well trodden as that which led over the bog moss, where the whaups built, to the great white viaduct of Loch Merrick, where his three miles of parallel gleaming responsibility began.

When his wife was but newly dead, and his Janet just a smart elf-locked lassie running to and from the school, Gavin got too much in the way of “slippin’ doon by.” When Janet grew to be woman muckle, Gavin kept the habit, and Janet hardly knew that it was not the use and wont of all fathers to sidle down to a contiguous Railway Arms, and return some hours later with uncertain step, and face pricked out with bright pin-points of red – the sure mark of the confirmed drinker of whisky neat.

They were long days in the cottage at the back of Barbrax Long Wood. The little “but an’ ben” was whitewashed till it dazzled the eyes as you came over the brae to it and found it set against the solemn depths of dark-green firwood. From early morn, when she saw her father off, till the dusk of the day, when he would return for his supper, Janet Balchrystie saw no human being. She heard the muffled roar of the trains through the deep cutting at the back of the wood, but she herself was entirely out

of sight of the carriagefuls of travellers whisking past within half a mile of her solitude and meditation.

Janet was what is called a “through-gaun lass,” and her work for the day was often over by eight o’clock in the morning. Janet grew to womanhood without a sweetheart. She was plain, and she looked plainer than she was in the dresses which she made for herself by the light of nature and what she could remember of the current fashions at Merrick Kirk, to which she went every alternate Sunday. Her father and she took day about. Wet or shine, she tramped to Merrick Kirk, even when the rain blattered and the wind raved and bleated alternately among the pines of the Long Wood of Barbrax. Her father had a simpler way of spending his day out. He went down to the Railway Inn and drank “ginger-beer” all day with the landlord. Ginger-beer is an unsteady beverage when taken the day by the length. Also the man who drinks it steadily and quietly never enters on any inheritance of length of days.

So it came to pass that one night Gavin Balchrystie did not come home at all – at least, not till he was brought lying comfortably on the door of a disused third-class carriage, which was now seeing out its career anchored under the bank at Loch Merrick, where Gavin had used it as a shelter. The driver of the “six-fifty up” train had seen him walking soberly along toward The Huts (and the Railway Inn), letting his long surface-man’s hammer fall against the rail-keys occasionally as he walked. He saw him bend once, as though his keen ear detected a false

ring in a loose length between two plates. This was the last that was seen of him till the driver of the “nine-thirty-seven down” express – the “boat-train,” as the employees of the P.P.R. call it, with a touch of respect in their voices – passed Gavin fallen forward on his face just when he was flying down grade under a full head of steam. It was duskily clear, with a great lake of crimson light dying into purple over the hills of midsummer heather. The driver was John Platt, the Englishman from Crewe, who had been brought from the great London and Northwestern Railway, locally known as “The Ell-nen-doubeleyou.” In these remote railway circles the talk is as exclusively of matters of the four-foot way as in Crewe or Derby. There is an inspector of traffic, whose portly presence now graces Carlisle Station, who left the P.P.R. in these sad days of amalgamation, because he could not endure to see so many “Sou’west” waggons passing over the sacred metals of the P.P.R. permanent way. From his youth he had been trained in a creed of two articles: “To swear by the P.P.R. through thick and thin, and hate the apple green of the ‘Sou’west.’” It was as much as he could do to put up with the sight of the abominations; to have to hunt for their trucks when they got astray was more than mortal could stand, so he fled the land.

So when they stopped the express for Gavin Balchrystie, every man on the line felt that it was an honour to the dead. John Platt sent a “gurring” thrill through the train as he put his brakes hard down and whistled for the guard. He, thinking that the Merrick Viaduct was down at least, twirled his brake to such purpose that

the rear car progressed along the metals by a series of convulsive bounds. Then they softly ran back, and there lay Gavin fallen forward on his knees, as though he had been trying to rise, or had knelt down to pray. Let him have “the benefit of the doubt” in this world. In the next, if all tales be true, there is no such thing.

So Janet Balchrystie dwelt alone in the white “but an’ ben” at the back of the Long Wood of Barbrax. The factor gave her notice, but the laird, who was not accounted by his neighbours to be very wise, because he did needlessly kind things, told the factor to let the lassie bide, and delivered to herself with his own handwriting to the effect that Janet Balchrystie, in consideration of her lonely condition, was to be allowed the house for her lifetime, a cow’s grass, and thirty pound sterling in the year as a charge on the estate. He drove down the cow himself, and having stalled it in the byre, he informed her of the fact over the yard dyke by word of mouth, for he never could be induced to enter her door. He was accounted to be “gey an’ queer,” save by those who had tried making a bargain with him. But his farmers liked him, knowing him to be an easy man with those who had been really unfortunate, for he knew to what the year’s crops of each had amounted, to a single chalder and head of nowt.

Deep in her heart Janet Balchrystie cherished a great ambition. When the earliest blackbird awoke and began to sing, while it was yet gray twilight, Janet would be up and at her work. She had an ambition to be a great poet. No less than this would serve her. But not even her father had known, and no other had any chance of

knowing. In the black leather chest, which had been her mother's, upstairs, there was a slowly growing pile of manuscript, and the editor of the local paper received every other week a poem, longer or shorter, for his Poet's Corner, in an envelope with the New Dalry postmark. He was an obliging editor, and generally gave the closely written manuscript to the senior office boy, who had passed the sixth standard, to cut down, tinker the rhymes, and lope any superfluity of feet. The senior office boy "just spread himself," as he said, and delighted to do the job in style. But there was a woman fading into a gray old-maidishness which had hardly ever been girlhood, who did not at all approve of these corrections. She endured them because over the signature of "Heather Bell" it was a joy to see in the rich, close luxury of type her own poetry, even though it might be a trifle tattered and tossed about by hands ruthless and alien – those, in fact, of the senior office boy.

Janet walked every other week to the post-office at New Dalry to post her letters to the editor, but neither the great man nor yet the senior office boy had any conception that the verses of their "esteemed correspondent" were written by a woman too early old who dwelt alone at the back of Barbrax Long Wood.

One day Janet took a sudden but long-meditated journey. She went down by rail from the little station of The Huts to the large town of Drum, thirty miles to the east. Here, with the most perfect courage and dignity of bearing, she interviewed a printer and arranged for the publication of her poems in their

own original form, no longer staled and clapper-clawed by the pencil of the senior office boy. When the proof-sheets came to Janet, she had no way of indicating the corrections but by again writing the whole poem out in a neat print hand on the edge of the proof, and underscoring the words which were to be altered. This, when you think of it, is a very good way, when the happiest part of your life is to be spent in such concrete pleasures of hope, as Janet's were over the crackly sheets of the printer of Drum. Finally the book was produced, a small rather thickish octavo, on sufficiently wretched gray paper which had suffered from want of thorough washing in the original paper-mill. It was bound in a peculiarly deadly blue, of a rectified Reckitt tint, which gave you dazzles in the eye at any distance under ten paces. Janet had selected this as the most appropriate of colours. She had also many years ago decided upon the title, so that Reckitt had printed upon it, back and side, "The Heather Lintie," while inside there was the acknowledgment of authorship, which Janet felt to be a solemn duty to the world: "Poems by Janet Balchrystie, Barbrax Cottage, by New Dalry." First she had thought of withholding her name and style; but, on the whole, after the most prolonged consideration, she felt that she was not justified in bringing about such a controversy as divided Scotland concerning that "Great Unknown" who wrote the Waverley Novels.

Almost every second or third day Janet trod that long lochside road to New Dalry for her proof-sheets, and returned them on the morrow corrected in her own way. Sometimes she got a lift

from some farmer or carter, for she had worn herself with anxiety to the shadow of what she had once been, and her dry bleached hair became gray and grayer with the fervour of her devotion to letters.

By April the book was published, and at the end of this month, laid aside by sickness of the vague kind called locally “a decline,” she took to her bed, rising only to lay a few sticks upon the fire from her store gathered in the autumn, or to brew herself a cup of tea. She waited for the tokens of her book’s conquests in the great world of thought and men. She had waited so long for her recognition, and now it was coming. She felt that it would not be long before she was recognised as one of the singers of the world. Indeed, had she but known it, her recognition was already on its way.

In a great city of the north a clever young reporter was cutting open the leaves of “The Heather Lintie” with a hand almost feverishly eager.

“This is a perfect treasure. This is a find indeed. Here is my chance ready to my hand.”

His paper was making a specialty of “exposures.” If there was anything weak and erring, anything particularly helpless and foolish which could make no stand for itself, the “Night Hawk” was on the pounce. Hitherto the junior reporter had never had a “two-column chance.” He had read – it was not much that he *had* read – Macaulay’s too famous article on “Satan” Montgomery, and, not knowing that Macaulay lived to regret the spirit of that

assault, he felt that if he could bring down the “Night Hawk” on “The Heather Lintie,” his fortune was made. So he sat down and he wrote, not knowing and not regarding a lonely woman’s heart, to whom his word would be as the word of a God, in the lonely cottage lying in the lee of the Long Wood of Barbrax.

The junior reporter turned out a triumph of the new journalism. “This is a book which may be a genuine source of pride to every native of the ancient province of Galloway,” he wrote. “Galloway has been celebrated for black cattle and for wool, as also for a certain bucolic belatedness of temperament, but Galloway has never hitherto produced a poetess. One has arisen in the person of Miss Janet Bal – something or other. We have not an interpreter at hand, and so cannot wrestle with the intricacies of the authoress’s name, which appears to be some Galwegian form of Erse or Choctaw. Miss Bal – and so forth – has a true fount of pathos and humour. In what touching language she chronicles the death of two young lambs which fell down into one of the puddles they call rivers down there, and were either drowned or choked with the dirt:

““They were two bonny, bonny lambs,
That played upon the daisied lea,
And loudly mourned their woolly dams
Above the drumly flowing Dee.’

“How touchingly simple!” continued the junior reporter, buckling up his sleeves to enjoy himself, and feeling himself born

to be a “Saturday Reviewer.”

“Mark the local colour, the wool and the dirty water of the Dee – without doubt a name applied to one of their bigger ditches down there. Mark also the over-fervency of the touching line,

“‘And loudly mourned their woolly dams,’

“Which, but for the sex of the writer and her evident genius, might be taken for an expression of a strength hardly permissible even in the metropolis.”

The junior reporter filled his two columns and enjoyed himself in the doing of it. He concluded with the words: “The authoress will make a great success. If she will come to the capital, where genius is always appreciated, she will, without doubt, make her fortune. Nay, if Miss Bal – but again we cannot proceed for the want of an interpreter – if Miss B., we say, will only accept a position at Cleary’s Waxworks and give readings from her poetry, or exhibit herself in the act of pronouncing her own name, she will be a greater draw in this city than Punch and Judy, or even the latest American advertising evangelist, who preaches standing on his head.”

The junior reporter ceased here from very admiration at his own cleverness in so exactly hitting the tone of the masters of his craft, and handed his manuscript in to the editor.

It was the gloaming of a long June day when Rob Affleck, the woodman over at Barbrax, having been at New Dalry with a

cart of wood, left his horse on the roadside and ran over through Gavin's old short cut, now seldom used, to Janet's cottage with a paper in a yellow wrapper.

"Leave it on the step, and thank you kindly, Rob," said a weak voice within; and Rob, anxious about his horse and his bed, did so without another word. In a moment or two Janet crawled to the door, listened to make sure that Rob was really gone, opened the door, and protruded a hand wasted to the hard, flat bone – an arm that ought for years to have been full of flesh and noble curves.

When Janet got back to bed it was too dark to see anything except the big printing at the top of the paper.

"Two columns of it!" said Janet, with great thankfulness in her heart, lifting up her soul to God who had given her the power to sing. She strained her prematurely old and weary eyes to make out the sense. "A genuine source of pride to every native of the ancient province," she read.

"The Lord be praised!" said Janet, in a rapture of devout thankfulness; "though I never really doubted it," she added, as though asking pardon for a moment's distrust. "But I tried to write these poems to the glory of God and not to my own praise, and He will accept them and keep me humble under the praise of men as well as under their neglect."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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