GEORGE MACDONALD

SALTED WITH FIRE

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MacDonald G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

"Whaur are ye aff til this bonny mornin', Maggie, my doo?" said the soutar, looking up from his work, and addressing his daughter as she stood in the doorway with her shoes in her hand.

"Jist ower to Stanecross, wi' yer leave, father, to speir the mistress for a goupin or twa o' chaff: yer bed aneth ye's grown unco hungry-like."

"Hoot, the bed's weel eneuch, lassie!"

"Na, it's onything but weel eneuch! It's my pairt to luik efter my ain father, and see there be nae k-nots aither in his bed or his parritch."

"Ye're jist yer mither owre again, my lass!—Weel, I winna miss ye that sair, for the minister 'ill be in this mornin'."

"Hoo ken ye that, father?"

"We didna gree vera weel last nicht."

"I canna bide the minister—argle-barglin body!"

"Toots, bairn! I dinna like to hear ye speyk sae scornfulike o' the gude man that has the care o' oor sowls!"

"It wad be mair to the purpose ye had the care o' his!"

"Sae I hae: hasna ilkabody the care o' ilk ither's?"

"Ay; but he preshumes upo' 't—and ye dinna; there's the differ!"

"Weel, but ye see, lassie, the man has nae insicht—nane to speak o', that is; and it's pleased God to mak him a wee stoopid, and some thrawn (*twisted*). He has nae notion even o' the wark I put intil thae wee bit sheenie (*little shoes*) o' his—that I'm this moment labourin ower!"

"It's sair wastit upo' him 'at caana see the thoucht intil't!"

"Is God's wark wastit upo' you and me excep' we see intil't, and un'erstan't, Maggie?"

The girl was silent. Her father resumed.

"There's three concernt i' the matter o' the wark I may be at: first, my ain duty to the wark—that's me; syne him I'm working for—that's the minister; and syne him 'at sets me to the wark—ye ken wha that is: whilk o' the three wad ye hae me lea' oot o' the consideration?"

For another moment the girl continued silent; then she said—

"Ye maun be i' the richt, father! I believe 't, though I canna jist *see* 't. A body canna like a'body, and the minister's jist the ae man I canna bide."

"Ay could ye, gi'en ye lo'ed the *ane* as he oucht to be lo'ed, and as ye maun learn to lo'e him."

"Weel I'm no come to that wi' the minister yet!"

"It's a trowth—but a sair pity, my dautie *(daughter—darling)*."

"He provokes me the w'y that he speaks to ye, father—him 'at's no fit to tie the thong o' your shee!"

"The Maister would lat him tie his, and say *thank ye*!"

"It aye seems to me he has sic a scrimpit way o' believin'! It's no like believin' at a'! He winna trust him for naething that he hasna his ain word, or some ither body's for! Ca' ye that lippenin' til him?"

It was now the father's turn to be silent for a moment. Then he said,—

"Lea' the judgin' o' him to his ain maister, lassie. I ha'e seen him whiles sair concernt for ither fowk."

"'At they wouldna hand wi' *him,* and war condemnt in consequence—wasna that it?"

"I canna answer ye that, bairn."

"Weel, I ken he doesna like you—no ae wee bit. He's aye girdin at ye to ither fowk!"

"May be: the mair's the need I sud lo'e him."

"But noo *can* ye, father?"

"There's naething, o' late, I ha'e to be sae gratefu' for to *Him* as that I can. But I confess I had lang to try sair!"

"The mair I was to try, the mair I jist couldna."

"But ye could try; and He could help ye!"

"I dinna ken; I only ken that sae ye say, and I maun believe ye. Nane the mair can I see hoo it's ever to be broucht aboot."

"No more can I, though I ken it can be. But just think, my ain Maggie, hoo would onybody ken that ever ane o' 's was his disciple, gien we war aye argle-barglin aboot the holiest things—at least what the minister coonts the holiest, though may be I think I ken better? It's whan twa o' 's strive that what's ca'd a schism begins, and I jist winna, please God—and it does please him! He never said, Ye maun a' think the same gait, but he did say, Ye man a' loe are anither, and no strive!"

"Ye dinna aye gang to his kirk, father!"

"Na, for I'm jist feared sometimes lest I should stop loein him. It matters little about gaein to the kirk ilka Sunday, but it matters a heap aboot aye loein are anither; and whiles he says things aboot the mind o' God, sic that it's a' I can dee to sit still."

"Weel, father, I dinna believe that I can lo'e him ony the day; sae, wi' yer leave, I s' be awa to Stanecross afore he comes."

"Gang yer wa's, lassie, and the Lord gang wi' ye, as ance he did wi' them that gaed to Emmaus."

With her shoes in her hand, the girl was leaving the house when her father called after her—

"Hoo's folk to ken that I provide for my ain, whan my bairn gangs unshod? Tak aff yer shune gin ye like when ye're oot o' the toon."

"Are ye sure there's nae hypocrisy aboot sic a fause show, father?" asked Maggie, laughing, "I maun hide them better!"

As she spoke she put the shoes in the empty bag she carried for the chaff. "There's a hidin' o' what I hae—no a pretendin' to hae what I haena!—Is' be hame in guid time for yer tay, father.—I can gang a heap better withoot them!" she added, as she threw the bag over her shoulder. "I'll put them on whan I come to the heather," she concluded.

"Ay, ay; gang yer wa's, and lea' me to the wark ye haena the grace to adverteeze by weirin' o' 't."

Maggie looked in at the window as she passed it on her way, to get a last sight of her father. The sun was shining into the little bare room, and her shadow fell upon him as she passed him; but his form lingered clear in the close chamber of her mind after she had left him far. And it was not her shadow she had seen, but the shadow, rather, of a great peace that rested concentred upon him as he bowed over his last, his mind fixed indeed upon his work, but far more occupied with the affairs of quite another region. Mind and soul were each so absorbed in its accustomed labour that never did either interfere with that of the other. His shoemaking lost nothing when he was deepest sunk in some one or other of the words of his Lord, which he sought eagerly to understand—nay, I imagine his shoemaking gained thereby. In his leisure hours, not a great, he was yet an intense reader; but it was nothing in any book that now occupied him; it was the live good news, the man Jesus Christ himself. In thought, in love, in imagination, that man dwelt in him, was alive in him, and made him alive. This moment He was with him, had come to visit him—yet was never far from him—was present always with an individuality that never quenched but was continually developing his own. For the soutar absolutely believed in the Lord of Life, was always trying to do the things he said, and to keep his words abiding in him. Therefore was he what the parson called a mystic, and was the most practical man in the neighbourhood; therefore did he make the best shoes, because the Word of the Lord abode in him.

The door opened, and the minister came into the kitchen. The soutar always worked in the kitchen, to be near his daughter, whose presence never interrupted either his work or his thought, or even his prayers—which often seemed as involuntary as a vital automatic impulse.

"It's a grand day!" said the minister. "It aye seems to me that just on such a day will the Lord come, nobody expecting him, and the folk all following their various callings—as when the flood came and astonished them."

The man was but reflecting, without knowing it, what the soutar had been saying the last time they encountered; neither did he think, at the moment, that the Lord himself had said something like it first.

"And I was thinkin, this vera meenute," returned the soutar, "sic a bonny day as it was for the Lord to gang aboot amang his ain fowk. I was thinkin maybe he was come upon Maggie, and was walkin wi' her up the hill to Stanecross—nearer til her, maybe, nor she could hear or see or think!"

"Ye're a deal taen up wi' vain imaiginins, MacLear!" rejoined the minister, tartly. "What scriptur hae ye for sic a wanderin' invention, o' no practical value?"

"'Deed, sir, what scriptur hed I for takin my brakwast this mornin, or ony mornin? Yet I never luik for a judgment to fa' upon me for that! I'm thinkin we dee mair things in faith than we ken—but no eneuch! no eneuch! I was thankfu' for't, though, I min' that, and maybe that'll stan' for faith. But gien I gang on this gait, we'll be beginnin as we left aff last nicht, and maybe fa' to strife! And we hae to loe ane anither, not accordin to what the ane thinks, or what the ither thinks, but accordin as each kens the Maister loes the ither, for he loes the twa o' us thegither."

"But hoo ken ye that he's pleased wi' ye?"

"I said naething aboot that: I said he loes you and me!"

"For that, he maun be pleast wi' ye!"

"I dinna think nane aboot that; I jist tak my life i' my han', and awa' wi' 't til *Him*;—and he's never turned his face frae me yet.—Eh, sir! think what it would be gien ever he did!"

"But we maunna think o' him ither than he would hae us think."

"That's hoo I'm aye hingin aboot his door, luikin for him."

"Weel, I kenna what to mak o' ye! I maun jist lea' ye to him!"

"Ye couldna dee a kinder thing! I desire naething better frae man or minister than be left to Him."

"Weel, weel, see til yersel."

"I'll see to *him*, and try to loe my neebour—that's you, Mr. Pethrie. I'll hae yer shune ready by Setterday, sir. I trust they'll be worthy o' the feet that God made, and that hae to be shod by me. I trust and believe they'll nowise distress ye, sir, or interfere wi' yer comfort in preachin. I'll fess them hame mysel, gien the Lord wull, and that without fail."

"Na, na; dinna dee that; lat Maggie come wi' them. Ye wad only be puttin me oot o' humour for the Lord's wark wi' yer havers!"

"Weel, I'll sen' Maggie—only ye wad obleege me by no seein her, for ye micht put *her* oot o' humour, sir, and she michtna gie yer sermon fair play the morn!"

The minister closed the door with some sharpness.

CHAPTER II

In the meantime, Maggie was walking shoeless and bonnetless up the hill to the farm she sought. It was a hot morning in June, tempered by a wind from the north-west. The land was green with the slow-rising tide of the young corn, among which the cool wind made little waves, showing the brown earth between them on the somewhat arid face of the hill. A few fleecy clouds shared the high blue realm with the keen sun. As she rose to the top of the road, the gable of the house came suddenly in sight, and near it a sleepy old gray horse, treading his ceaseless round at the end of a long lever, too listless to feel the weariness of a labour that to him must have seemed unprogressive, and, to anything young, heart-breaking. Nor did it appear to give him any consolation to be aware of the commotion he was causing on the other side of the wall, where a threshing machine of an antiquated sort responded with multiform movement to the monotony of his round-and-round.

Near by, a peacock, as conscious of his glorious plumage as indifferent to the ugliness of his feet, kept time with undulating neck to the motion of those same feet, as he strode with stagey gait across the cornyard, now and then stooping to pick up a stray grain spitefully, and occasionally erecting his superb neck to give utterance to a hideous cry of satisfaction at his own beauty—a cry as unlike the beauty as ever was discord to harmony. His glory, his legs and his voice, perplexed Maggie with an unanalyzed sense of contradiction and unfitness.

Radiant with age and light, the old horse stood still just as the sun touched the meridian; the hour of repose and food was come, and he knew it; and at the same moment the girl, passing one of the green-painted doors of the farm house, stopped at the other, the kitchen one. It stood open, and in answer to her modest knock, a ruddy maid appeared, with a question in her eyes, and a smile on her lips at sight of the shoemaker's Maggie, whom she knew well. Maggie asked if She might see the mistress.

"Here's soutar's Maggie wanting ye, mem!" said the maid and Mistress Blatherwick who was close at hand, came; to which Maggie humbly but confidently making her request had it as kindly granted, and followed her to the barn to fill her pock with the light plumy covering of the husk of the oats, the mistress of Stonecross helping her the while and talking to her as she did so—for the soutar and his daughter were favourites with her and her husband, and they had not seen either of them for some while.

"Ye used to ken oor Maister Jeames I' the auld land-syne, Maggie!" for the two has played together as children in the same school although growth and difference in station had gradually put and end to their intimacy so that it became the mother to refer to him with circumspection, seeing that, in her eyes at least, Maister Jeames was now far on the way to becoming a great man, being a divinity student; for in the Scotch church, although it sets small store on apostolitic descent, every Minister, until he has shown himself eccentic or incapable of interesting a congregation, is regarded with quite as much respect as in England is accorded to the claimant of a phantom-priesthood; and therefore, prospectively, Jeames was to his mother a man of no little note. Maggie remembered how, when a boy, he had liked to talk with her father; and how her father would listen to him with a curious look on his rugged face, while the boy set forth the commonplaces of a lifeless theology with an occasional freshness of logical presentation that at least interested himself. But she remembered also that she had never heard the soutar on his side make any attempt to lay open to the boy his stores of what one or two in the place, one or two only, counted wisdom and knowledge.

"He's a gey clever laddie," he had said once to Maggie, "and gien he gets his een open i' the coorse o' the life he's hardly yet ta'en hand o', he'll doobtless see something; but he disna ken yet that there's onything rael to be seen, ootside or inside o' him!" When he heard that he was going to study divinity, he shook his head, and was silent.

"I'm jist hame frae peyin him a short veesit," Mrs. Blatherwick went on. "I cam hame but twa nichts ago. He's lodged wi' a dacent widow in Arthur Street, in a flat up a lang stane stair that gangs roun and roun till ye come there, and syne gangs past the door and up again. She taks in han' to luik efter his claes, and sees to the washin o' them, and does her best to hand him tidy; but Jeamie was aye that partic'lar aboot his appearance! And that's a guid thing, special in a minister, wha has to set an example! I was sair pleased wi' the auld body."

There was one in the Edinburgh lodging, however, of whom Mrs. Blatherwick had but a glimpse, and of whom, therefore, she had made no mention to her husband any more than now to Maggie MacLear; indeed, she had taken so little notice of her that she could hardly be said to have seen her at all—a girl of about sixteen, who did far more for the comfort of her aunt's two lodgers than she who reaped all the advantage. If Mrs. Blatherwick had let her eyes rest upon her but for a moment, she would probably have looked again; and might have discovered that she was both a good-looking and graceful little creature, with blue eyes, and hair as nearly black as that kind of hair, both fine and plentiful, ever is. She might then have discovered as well a certain look of earnestness and service that would at first have attracted her for its own sake, and then repelled her for James's; for she would assuredly have read in it what she would have counted dangerous for him; but seeing her poorly dressed, and looking untidy, which at the moment she could not help, the mother took her for an ordinary maid-of-all-work, and never for a moment doubted that her son must see her just as she did. He was her only son; her heart was full of ambition for him; and she brooded on the honour he was destined to bring her and his father. The latter, however, caring less for his good looks, had neither the same satisfaction in him nor an equal expectation from him. Neither of his parents, indeed, had as yet reaped much pleasure from his existence, however much one of them might hope for in the time to come. There were two things indeed against such satisfaction or pleasure—that James had never been open-hearted toward them, never communicative as to his feelings, or even his doings; and—which was worse—that he had long made them feel in him a certain unexpressed claim to superiority. Nor would it have lessened their uneasiness at this to have noted that the existence of such an implicit claim was more or less evident in relation to every one with whom he came in contact, manifested mainly by a stiff, incommunicative reluctance, taking the form now of a pretended absorption in his books, now of contempt for any sort of manual labour, even to the saddling of the pony he was about to ride; and now and always by an affectation of proper English, which, while successful as to grammar and accentuation, did not escape the ludicrous in a certain stiltedness of tone and inflection, from which intrusion of the would-be gentleman, his father, a simple, old-fashioned man, shrank with more of dislike than he was willing to be conscious of.

Quite content that, having a better education than himself, his son should both be and show himself superior, he could not help feeling that these his ways of asserting himself were signs of mere foolishness, and especially as conjoined with his wish to be a minister—in regard to which Peter but feebly sympathized with the general ambition of Scots parents. Full of simple paternal affection, whose utterance was quenched by the behaviour of his son, he was continuously aware of something that took the shape of an impassable gulf between James and his father and mother. Profoundly religious, and readily appreciative of what was new in the perception of truth, he was, above all, of a great and simple righteousness—full, that is, of a loving sense of fairplay—a very different thing indeed from that which most of those who count themselves religious mean when they talk of the righteousness of God! Little, however, was James able to see of this, or of certain other great qualities in his father. I would not have my reader think that he was consciously disrespectful to either of his parents, or knew that his behaviour was unloving. He honoured their character, indeed, but shrank from the simplicity of their manners; he thought of them with no lively affection, though not without some kindly feeling and much confidence—at the same time regarding himself with still greater confidence. He had never been an idler, or disobedient; and had made such efforts after theological righteousness as served to bolster rather than buttress his conviction that he was a righteous youth,

and nourished his ignorance of the fact that he was far from being the person of moral strength and value that he imagined himself. The person he saw in the mirror of his self-consciousness was a very fine and altogether trustworthy personage; the reality so twisted in its reflection was but a decent lad, as lads go, with high but untrue notions of personal honour, and an altogether unwarranted conviction that such as he admiringly imagined himself, such he actually was: he had never discovered his true and unworthy self! There were many things in his life and ways upon which had he but fixed eyes of question, he would at once have perceived that they were both judged and condemned; but so far, nevertheless, his father and mother might have good hope of his future.

It is folly to suppose that such as follow most the fashions of this world are more enslaved by them than multitudes who follow them only afar off. These reverence the judgments of society in things of far greater importance than the colour or cut of a gown; often without knowing it, they judge life, and truth itself, by the falsest of all measures, namely, the judgment of others falser than themselves; they do not ask what is true or right, but what folk think and say about this or that. James, for instance, altogether missed being a gentleman by his habit of asking himself how, in such or such circumstances, a gentleman would behave. As the man of honour he would fain know himself, he would never tell a lie or break a promise; but he had not come to perceive that there are other things as binding as the promise which alone he regarded as obligatory. He did not, for instance, mind raising expectations which he had not the least intention of fulfilling.

Being a Scotch lad, it is not to be wondered at that he should turn to Theology as a means of livelihood; neither is it surprising that he should do so without any conscious love to God, seeing it is not in Scotland alone that untrue men take refuge in the Church, and turn the highest of professions into the meanest, laziest, poorest, and most unworthy, by following it without any genuine call to the same. In any profession, the man must be a poor common creature who follows it without some real interest in it; but he who without a spark of enthusiasm for it turns to the Church, is either a "blind mouth," as Milton calls him—scornfullest of epithets, or an "old wife" ambitious of telling her fables well; and James's ambition was of the same contemptible sort—that, namely, of distinguishing himself in the pulpit. This, if he had the natural gift of eloquence, he might well do by its misuse to his own glory; or if he had it not, he might acquire a spurious facility resembling it, and so be every way a mere windbag.

Mr. Petrie, whom it cost the soutar so much care and effort to love, and who, although intellectually small, was yet a good man, and by no means a coward where he judged people's souls in danger, thought to save the world by preaching a God, eminently respectable to those who could believe in such a God, but to those who could not, a God far from lovely because far from righteous. His life, nevertheless, showed him in many ways a believer in Him who revealed a very different God indeed from the God he set forth. His faith, therefore, did not prevent him from looking upon the soutar, who believed only in the God he saw in Jesus Christ, as one in a state of rebellion against him whom Jesus claimed as his father.

Young Blatherwick had already begun to turn his back upon several of the special tenets of Calvinism, without, however, being either a better or a worse man because of the change in his opinions. He had cast aside, for instance, the doctrine of an everlasting hell for the unbeliever; but in doing so he became aware that he was thus leaving fallow a great field for the cultivation of eloquence; and not having yet discovered any other equally productive of the precious crop, without which so little was to be gained for the end he desired—namely, the praise of men, he therefore kept on, "for the meantime," sowing and preparing to reap that same field. Mr. Petrie, on the other hand, held the doctrine as absolutely fundamental to Christianity, and preached it with power; while the soutar, who had discarded it from his childhood, positively refused, jealous of strife, to enter into any argument upon it with the disputatious little man.

As yet, then, James was reading Scotch metaphysics, and reconciling himself to the concealment of his freer opinions, upon which concealment depended the success of his probation, and his license. But the close of his studies in divinity was now near at hand.

CHAPTER III

Upon a certain stormy day in the great northern city, preparing for what he regarded as his career, James sat in the same large, shabbily furnished room where his mother had once visited him —half-way up the hideously long spiral stair of an ancient house, whose entrance was in a narrow close. The great clock of a church in the neighbouring street had just begun to strike five of a wintry afternoon, dark with snow, falling and yet to fall: how often in after years was he not to hear the ghostly call of that clock, and see that falling snow!—when a gentle tap came to his door, and the girl I have already mentioned came in with a tray and the materials for his most welcomed meal, coffee with bread and butter. She set it down in a silence which was plainly that of deepest respect, gave him one glance of devotion, and was turning to leave the room, when he looked up from the paper he was writing, and said—

"Don't be in such a hurry, Isy. Haven't you time to pour out my coffee for me?"

Isy was a small, dark, neat little thing, with finely formed features, and a look of child-like simplicity, not altogether removed from childishness. She answered him first with her very blue eyes full of love and trust, then said—

"Plenty o' time, sir. What other have I to do than see that you be at your ease?"

He shoved aside his work, and looking up with some concentration in his regard, pushed his chair back a little from the table, and rejoined—

"What's the matter with you this last day or two, Isy? You're not altogether like yourself!"

She hesitated a moment, then answered—

"It can be naething, I suppose, sir, but just that I'm growin older and beginnin to think aboot things."

She stood near him. He put his arm round her little waist, and would have drawn her down upon his knees, but she resisted.

"I don't see what difference that can make in you all at once, Isy! We've known each other so long that there can be no misunderstanding of any sort between us. You have always behaved like the good and modest girl you are; and I'm sure you have been most attentive to me all the time I have been in your aunt's house."

He spoke in a tone of superior approval.

"It was my bare duty, and ye hae aye been kinder to me than I could hae had ony richt to expec'. But it's nearhan' ower noo!" she concluded with a sigh that indicated approaching tears, as she yielded a little to the increased pressure of his arm.

"What makes you say that?" he returned, giving her a warm kiss, plainly neither unwelcome nor the first.

"Dinna ye think it would be better to drop that kin' o' thing the noo, sir?" she said, and would have stood erect, but he held her fast.

"Why now, more than any time—I don't know for how long? Where does a difference come in? What puts the notion in your pretty little head?"

"It maun come some day, and the langer the harder it'll be!"

"But tell me what has set you thinking about it all at once?"

She burst into tears. He tried to soothe and comfort her, but in struggling not to cry she only sobbed the worse. At last, however, she succeeded in faltering out an explanation.

"Auntie's been tellin me that I maun luik to my hert, so as no to tyne't to ye a'thegither! But it's awa a'ready," she went on, with a fresh outburst, "and it's no manner o' use cryin til't to come back to me. I micht as weel cry upo' the win' as it blaws by me! I canna understan' 't! I ken weel ye'll soon be a great man, and a' the toon crushin to hear ye; and I ken jist as weel that I'll hae to sit still in my seat and luik up to ye whaur ye stan', no daurin to say a word—no daurin even to think a thoucht lest

somebody sittin aside me should hear't ohn me spoken. For what would it be but clean impidence o' me to think 'at there was a time when I was sittin whaur I'm sittin the noo—and thinkin 't i' the vera kirk! I would be nearhan' deein for shame!"

"Didn't you ever think, Isy, that maybe I might marry you some day?" said James jokingly, confident in the gulf between them.

"Na, no ance. I kenned better nor that! I never even wusst it, for that would be nae freen's wuss: ye would never get ony farther gien ye did! I'm nane fit for a minister's wife—nor worthy o' bein ane! I micht do no that ill, and pass middlin weel, in a sma' clachan wi' a wee bit kirkie—but amang gran' fowk, in a muckle toon—for that's whaur ye're sure to be! Eh me, me! A' the last week or twa I hae seen ye driftin awa frae me, oot and oot to the great sea, whaur never a thoucht o' Isy would come nigh ye again;—and what for should there? Ye camna into the warl' to think aboot me or the likes o' me, but to be a great preacher, and lea' me ahin ye, like a sheaf o' corn ye had jist cuttit and left unbun'!"

Here came another burst of bitter weeping, followed by words whose very articulation was a succession of sobs.

"Eh, me, me! I doobt I hae clean disgraced mysel!" she cried at last, and ended, wiping her eyes—in vain, for the tears would keep flowing.

As to young Blatherwick, I venture to assert that nothing vulgar or low, still less of evil intent, was passing through his mind during this confession; and yet what but evil was his unpitying, selfish exultation in the fact that this simple-hearted and very pretty girl should love him unsought, and had told him so unasked? A true-hearted man would at once have perceived and shrunk from what he was bringing upon her: James's vanity only made him think it very natural, and more than excusable in her; and while his ambition made him imagine himself so much her superior as to exclude the least thought of marrying her, it did not prevent him from yielding to the delight her confession caused him, or from persuading her that there was no harm in loving one to whom she must always be dear, whatever his future might bring with it. Isy left the room not a little consoled, and with a new hope in possession of her innocent imagination; leaving James exultant over his conquest, and indulging a more definite pleasure than hitherto in the person and devotion of the girl. As to any consciousness in him of danger to either of them, it was no more than, on the shore, the uneasy stir of a storm far out at sea. Had the least thought of wronging her invaded his mind, he would have turned from it with abhorrence; yet was he endangering all her peace without giving it one reasonable thought. He was acting with a selfishness too much ingrained to manifest its own unlovely shape; while in his mind lay all the time a half-conscious care to avoid making the girl any promise.

As to her fitness for a minister's wife, he had never asked himself a question concerning it; but in truth she might very soon have grown far fitter for the position than he was for that of a minister. In character she was much beyond him; and in breeding and consciousness far more of a lady than he of a gentleman—fine gentleman as he would fain know himself. Her manners were immeasurably better than his, because they were simple and aimed at nothing. Instinctively she avoided whatever, had she done it, she would at once have recognized as uncomely. She did not know that simplicity was the purest breeding, yet from mere truth of nature practised it unknowing. If her words were older-fashioned, that is more provincial than his, at least her tone was less so, and her utterance was prettier than if, like him, she had aped an Anglicized mode of speech. James would, I am sure, have admired her more if she had been dressed on Sundays in something more showy than a simple cotton gown; and I fear that her poverty had its influence in the freedoms he allowed himself with her.

Her aunt was a weak as well as unsuspicious woman, who had known better days, and pitied herself because they were past and gone. She gave herself no anxiety as to her niece's prudence, but continued well assured of it even while her very goodness was conspiring against her safety. It would have required a man, not merely of greater goodness than James, but of greater insight into the realities of life as well, to perceive the worth and superiority of the girl who waited upon him with a

devotion far more angelic than servile; for whatever might have seemed to savour of the latter, had love, hopeless of personal advantage, at the root of it.

Thus things went on for a while, with a continuous strengthening of the pleasant yet not altogether easy bonds in which Isobel walked, and a constant increase of the attraction that drew the student to the self-yielding girl; until the appearance of another lodger in the house was the means of opening Blatherwick's eyes to the state of his own feelings, by occasioning the birth and recognition of a not unnatural jealousy, which "gave him pause." On Isy's side there was not the least occasion for this jealousy, and he knew it; but not the less he saw that, if he did not mean to go further, here he must stop—the immediate result of which was that he began to change a little in his behaviour toward her, when at any time she had to enter his room in ministration to his wants.

Of this change the poor girl was at once aware, but she attributed it to a temporary absorption in his studies. Soon, however, she could not doubt that not merely was his voice or his countenance changed toward her, but that his heart had grown cold, and that he was no longer "friends with her." For there was another and viler element than mere jealousy concerned in his alteration: he had become aware of a more real danger into which he was rapidly drifting—that of irrecoverably blasting the very dawn of his prospects by an imprudent marriage. "To saddle himself with a wife," as he vulgarily expressed it, before he had gained his license—before even he had had the poorest opportunity of distinguishing himself in that wherein lay his every hope and ambition of proving his excellence, was a thing not for a moment to be contemplated! And now, when Isobel asked him in sorrowful mood some indifferent question, the uneasy knowledge that he was about to increase her sadness made him answer her roughly—a form not unnatural to incipient compunction: white as a ghost she stood a moment silently staring at him, then sank on the floor senseless.

Seized with an overmastering repentance that brought back with a rush all his tenderness, James sprang to her, lifted her in his arms, laid her on the sofa, and lavished caresses upon her, until at length she recovered sufficiently to know where she lay—in the false paradise of his arms, with him kneeling over her in a passion of regret, the first passion he had ever felt or manifested toward her, pouring into her ear words of incoherent dismay—which, taking shape as she revived, soon became promises and vows. Thereupon the knowledge that he had committed himself, and the conviction that he was henceforth bound to one course in regard to her, wherein he seemed to himself incapable of falsehood, unhappily freed him from the self-restraint then most imperative upon him, and his trust in his own honour became the last loop of the snare about to entangle his and her very life. At the moment when a genuine love would have hastened to surround the woman with bulwarks of safety, he ceased to regard himself as his sister's keeper. Even thus did Cain cease to be his brother's keeper, and so slew him.

But the vengeance on his unpremeditated treachery, for treachery, although unpremeditated, it was none the less, came close upon its heels. The moment that Isy left the room, weeping and pallid, conscious that a miserable shame but waited the entrance of a reflection even now importunate, he threw himself on the floor, writhing as in the claws of a hundred demons. The next day but one he was to preach his first sermon before his class, in the presence of his professor of divinity! His immediate impulse was to rush from the house, and home hot-foot to his mother; and it would have been well for him to have done so indeed, confessed all, and turned his back on the church and his paltry ambition together! But he had never been open with his mother, and he feared his father, not knowing the tender righteousness of that father's heart, or the springs of love which would at once have burst open to meet the sorrowful tale of his wretched son; and instead of fleeing at once to his one city of refuge, he fell but to pacing the room in hopeless bewilderment; and before long he was searching every corner of his reviving consciousness, not indeed as yet for any justification, but for what palliation of his "fault" might there be found; for it was the first necessity of this self-lover to think well, or at least endurably, of himself. Nor was it long before a multitude of sneaking arguments, imps of Satan, began to assemble at the agonized cry of his self-dissatisfaction—for it was nothing more.

For, in that agony of his, there was no detestation of himself because of his humiliation of the trusting Isobel; he did not loathe his abuse of her confidence, or his having wrapt her in the foul fire-damp of his miserable weakness: the hour of a true and good repentance was for him not yet come; shame only as yet possessed him, because of the failure of his own fancied strength. If it should ever come to be known, what contempt would not clothe him, instead of the garments of praise of which he had dreamed all these years! The pulpit, that goal of his ambition, that field of his imagined triumphs—the very thought of it now for a time made him feel sick. Still, there at least lay yet a possibility of recovery—not indeed by repentance, of which he did not seek to lay hold, but in the chance that no one might hear a word of what had happened! Sure he felt, that Isy would never reveal it, and least of all to her aunt! His promise to marry Isy he would of course keep! Neither would that be any great hardship, if only it had no consequences. As an immediate thing, however, it was not to be thought of! there could be at the moment no necessity for such an extreme measure! He would wait and see! he would be guided by events! As to the sin of the thing—how many had not fallen like him, and no one the wiser! Never would he so offend again! and in the meantime he would let it go, and try to forget it—in the hope that providence now, and at length time, would bury it from all men's sight! He would go on the same as if the untoward thing had not so cruelly happened, had cast no such cloud over the fair future before him! Nor were his selfish regrets unmingled with annoyance that Isy should have yielded so easily: why had she not aided him to resist the weakness that had wrought his undoing? She was as much to blame as he; and for her unworthiness was he to be left to suffer? Within an hour he had returned to the sermon under his hand, and was revising it for the twentieth time, to perfect it before finally committing it to memory; for so should the lie of his life be crowned with success, and seem the thing it was not—an outcome of extemporaneous feeling! During what remained of the two days following he spared no labour, and at last delivered it with considerable unction, and the feeling that he had achieved his end.

Neither of those days did Isy make her appearance in his room, her aunt excusing her apparent neglect with the information that she was in bed with a bad headache, while herself she supplied her place.

The next day Isy went about her work as usual, but never once looked up. James imagined reproach in her silence, and did not venture to address her, having, indeed, no wish to speak to her, for what was there to be said? A cloud was between them; a great gulf seemed to divide them! He wondered at himself, no longer conscious of her attraction, or of his former delight in her proximity. His resolve to marry her was not yet wavering; he fully intended to keep his promise; but he must wait the proper time, the right opportunity for revealing to his parents the fact of his engagement! After a few days, however, during which there had been no return to their former familiarity, it was with a fearful kind of relief that he learned she was gone to pay a visit to a relation in the country. He did not care that she had gone without taking leave of him, only wondered if she could have said anything to incriminate him.

The session came to an end while she was still absent; he took a formal leave of her aunt, and went home to Stonecross.

His father at once felt a wider division between them than before, and his mother was now compelled, much against her will, to acknowledge to herself its existence. At the same time he carried himself with less arrogance, and seemed humbled rather than uplifted by his success.

During the year that followed, he made several visits to Edinburgh, and before long received the presentation to a living in the gift of his father's landlord, a certain duke who had always been friendly to the well-to-do and unassuming tenant of one of his largest farms in the north. But during none of these visits did he inquire or hear anything about Isy; neither now, when, without blame he might have taken steps toward the fulfilment of the promise which he had never ceased to regard as binding, could he persuade himself that the right time had come for revealing it to his parents: he

knew it would be a great blow to his mother to learn that he had so handicapped his future, and he feared the silent face of his father at the announcement of it.

It is hardly necessary to say that he had made no attempt to establish any correspondence with the poor girl. Indeed by this time he found himself not unwilling to forget her, and cherished a hope that she had, if not forgotten, at least dismissed from her mind all that had taken place between them. Now and then in the night he would wake to a few tender thoughts of her, but before the morning they would vanish, and during the day he would drown any chance reminiscence of her in a careful polishing and repolishing of his sentences, aping the style of Chalmers or of Robert Hall, and occasionally inserting some fine-sounding quotation; for apparent richness of composition was his principal aim, not truth of meaning, or lucidity of utterance.

I can hardly be presumptuous in adding that, although growing in a certain popularity with men, he was not thus growing in favour with God. And as he continued to hear nothing about Isy, the hope at length, bringing with it a keen shoot of pleasure, awoke in him that he was never to hear of her more. For the praise of men, and the love of that praise, having now restored him to his own good graces, he regarded himself with more interest and approbation than ever; and his continued omission of inquiry after Isy, heedless of the predicament in which he might have placed her, was a far worse sin against her, because deliberate, than his primary wrong to her, and it now recoiled upon him in increased hardness of heart and self-satisfaction.

Thus in love with himself, and thereby shut out from the salvation of love to another, he was specially in danger of falling in love with the admiration of any woman; and thence now occurred a little episode in his history not insignificant in its results.

He had not been more than a month or two in his parish when he was attracted by a certain young woman in his congregation of some inborn refinement and distinction of position, to whom he speedily became anxious to recommend himself: he must have her approval, and, if possible, her admiration! Therefore in his preaching, if the word used for the lofty, simple utterance of divine messengers, may without offence be misapplied to his paltry memorizations, his main thought was always whether the said lady was justly appreciating the eloquence and wisdom with which he meant to impress her—while in fact he remained incapable of understanding how deep her natural insight penetrated both him and his pretensions. Her probing attention, however, he so entirely misunderstood that it gave him no small encouragement; and thus becoming only the more eager after her good opinion, he came at length to imagine himself heartily in love with her—a thing impossible to him with any woman—and at last, emboldened by the fancied importance of his position, and his own fancied distinction in it, he ventured an offer of his feeble hand and feebler heart;—but only to have them, to his surprise, definitely and absolutely refused. He turned from the lady's door a good deal disappointed, but severely mortified; and, judging it impossible for any woman to keep silence concerning such a refusal, and unable to endure the thought of the gossip to ensue, he began at once to look about him for a refuge, and frankly told his patron the whole story. It happened to suit his grace's plans, and he came speedily to his assistance with the offer of his native parish—whence the soutar's argumentative antagonist had just been removed to a place, probably not a very distinguished one, in the kingdom of heaven; and it seemed to all but a natural piety when James Blatherwick exchanged his parish for that where he was born, and where his father and mother continued to occupy the old farm.

CHAPTER IV

The soutar was still meditating on things spiritual, still reading the gospel of St. John, still making and mending shoes, and still watching the development of his daughter, who had begun to unfold what not a few of the neighbours, with most of whom she was in favour, counted beauty. The farm labourers in the vicinity were nearly all more or less her admirers, and many a pair of shoes was carried to her father for the sake of a possible smile from Maggie; but because of a certain awe that seemed to pervade her presence, no one had as yet dared a word to her beyond that of greeting or farewell: each that looked upon her became at once aware of a certain inferiority. Her beauty seemed to suggest behind it a beauty it was unable to reveal.

She was rather short in stature, but altogether well proportioned, with a face wonderfully calm and clear, and quiet but keen dark eyes. Her complexion owed its white-rose tinge to a strong, gentle life, and its few freckles to the pale sun of Scotland, for she courted every breeze bonnetless on the hills, when she accompanied her father in his walks, or carried home the work he had finished. He rejoiced especially that she should delight in feeling the wind about her, for he held it to indicate sympathy with that spirit whose symbol it was, and which he loved to think of as folding her about, closer and more lovingly than his own cherishing soul.

Of her own impulse, and almost from the moment of her mother's death, she had given herself to his service, first in doing all the little duties of the house, and then, as her strength and faculty grew, in helping him more and more in his trade. As soon as she had cleared away the few things necessary for a breakfast of porridge and milk, Maggie would hasten to join her father where he stooped over his last, for he was a little shortsighted.

When he lifted his head you might see that, notwithstanding the ruggedness of his face, he was a good looking man, with strong, well-proportioned features, in which, even on Sundays, when he scrubbed his face unmercifully, there would still remain lines suggestive of ingrained rosin and heelball. On week days he was not so careful to remove every sign of the labour by which he earned his bread; but when his work was over till the morning, and he was free to sit down to a book, he would never even touch one without first carefully washing his hands and face. In the workshop, Maggie's place was a leather-seated stool like her father's, a yard or so away from his, to leave room for his elbows in drawing out the lingels (*rosined threads*): there she would at once resume the work she had left unfinished the night before; for it was a curious trait in the father, early inherited by the daughter, that he would never rise from a finished job, however near might be the hour for dropping work, without having begun another to go on with in the morning. It was wonderful how much cleaner Maggie managed to keep her hands; but then to her fell naturally the lighter work for women and children. She declared herself ambitious, however, of one day making with her own hands a perfect pair of top-boots.

The advantages she gained from this constant intercourse with her father were incalculable. Without the least loss to her freedom of thought, nay, on the contrary, to the far more rapid development of her truest liberty, the soutar seemed to avoid no subject as unsuitable for the girl's consideration, but to insist only on its being regarded from the highest attainable point of view. Matters of indifferent import they seldom, if ever, discussed at all; and nothing she knew her father cared about did Maggie ever allude to with indifference. Full of an honest hilarity ever ready to break out when occasion occurred, she was at the same time incapable of a light word upon a sacred subject. Such jokes as, more than elsewhere, one is in danger of hearing among the clergy of every church, very seldom came out in her father's company; and she very early became aware of the kind of joke he would take or refuse. The light use, especially, of any word of the Lord would sink him in a profound silence. If it were an ordinary man who thus offended, he might rebuke him by asking if he remembered who said those words; once, when it was a man specially regarded who gave the

offence, I heard him say something to this effect, “The maister doesna forget whaur and whan he spak thae words: I houp ye do forget!” Indeed the most powerful force in the education of Maggie was the evident attitude of her father toward that Son of Man who was even now bringing the children of God to the knowledge of that Father of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named. Mingling with her delights in the inanimate powers of Nature, in the sun and the wind, in the rain and the growth, in the running waters and the darkness sown with stars, was such a sense of His presence that she felt like him, He might at any moment appear to her father, or, should it so please Him, even to herself.

Two or three miles away, in the heart of the hills, on the outskirts of the farm of Stonecross, lived an old cottar and his wife, who paid a few shillings of rent to Mr. Blatherwick for the acre or two their ancestors had redeemed from the heather and bog, and gave, with their one son who remained at home, occasional service on the farm. They were much respected by the farmer and his wife, as well as the small circle to which they were known in the neighbouring village—better known, and more respected still in that kingdom called of heaven; for they were such as he to whom the promise was given, that he should yet see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. They had long and heartily loved and honoured the soutar, whom they had known before the death of his wife, and for his sake and hers, both had always befriended the motherless Maggie. They could not greatly pity her, seeing she had such a father, yet old Eppie had her occasional moments of anxiety as to how the bairn would grow up without a mother’s care. No sooner, however, did the little one begin to show character, than Eppie’s doubt began to abate; and long before the time to which my narrative has now come, the child and the child like old woman were fast friends. Maggie was often invited to spend a day at Bogsheuch—oftener indeed than she felt at liberty to leave her father and their common work, though not oftener than she would have liked to go.

One morning, early in summer, when first the hillsides had begun to look attractive, a small agricultural cart, such as is now but seldom seen, with little paint except on its two red wheels, and drawn by a thin, long-haired little horse, stopped at the door of the soutar’s house, clay-floored and straw-thatched, in a back-lane of the village. It was a cart the cottar used in the cultivation of his little holding, and his son who drove it, now nearly middle-aged, was likely to succeed to the hut and acres of Bogsheuch. Man and equipage, both well known to the soutar, had come with an invitation, more pressing than usual, that Maggie would pay them a visit of a few days.

Father and daughter, consulting together in the presence of Andrew Cormack, arrived at the conclusion that, work being rather slacker than usual, and nobody in need of any promised job which the soutar could not finish by himself in good time, Maggie was quite at liberty to go. She sprang up joyfully—not without a little pang at the thought of leaving her father alone, although she knew him quite equal to anything that could be required in the house before her return—and set about preparing their dinner, while Andrew went to execute a few commissions that the mistress at Stonecross and his mother at Bogsheuch had given him. By the time he returned, Maggie was in her Sunday gown, with her week-day wrapper and winsey petticoat in a bundle—for she reckoned on being of some use to Eppie during her visit When they had eaten their humble dinner, Andrew brought the cart to the door, and Maggie scrambled into it.

“Tak a piece wi’ ye,” said her father, following her to the cart: “ye hadna muckle to yer denner, and ye may be hungry again or ye hae the lang road ahint ye!”

He put several pieces of oatcake in her hand, which she received with a loving smile; and they set out at a walking pace, which Andrew made no attempt to quicken.

It was far from a comfortable carriage, neither was her wisp of straw in the bottom of it altogether comfortable to sit upon; but the change from her stool and the close attention her work required, to the open air and the free rush of the thoughts that came crowding to her out of the wilderness, put her at once in a blissful mood. Even the few dull remarks that the slow-thinking Andrew made at intervals from his perch on the front of the cart, seemed to come to her from the

realm of Faerie, the mysterious world that lay in the folds of the huddled hills. Everything Maggie saw or heard that afternoon seemed to wear the glamour of God's imagination, which is at once the birth and the very truth of everything. Selfishness alone can rub away that divine gilding, without which gold itself is poor indeed.

Suddenly the little horse stood still. Andrew, waking up from a snooze, jumped to the ground, and began, still half asleep, to search into the cause of the arrest; for Jess, although she could not make haste, never of her own accord stood still while able to keep on walking. Maggie, on her part, had for some time noted that they were making very slow progress.

"She's deid cripple!" said Andrew at length, straightening his long back from an examination of Jess's fore feet, and coming to Maggie's side of the cart with a serious face. "I dinna believe the crater's fit to gang ae step furder! Yet I canna see what's happent her."

Maggie was on the road before he had done speaking. Andrew tried once to lead Jess, but immediately desisted. "It would be fell cruelty!" he said. "We maun jist lowse her, and tak her gien we can to the How o' the Mains. They'll gie her a nicht's quarters there, puir thing! And we'll see gien they can tak you in as weel, Maggie. The maister, I mak nae doobt, 'ill len' me a horse to come for ye i' the morning."

"I winna hear o' 't!" answered Maggie. "I can tramp the lave o' the ro'd as weel's you, Andrew!"

"But I hae a' thae things to cairry, and that'll no lea' me a ban' to help ye ower the burn!" objected Andrew.

"What o' that?" she returned. "I was sae fell tired o' sittin that my legs are jist like to rin awa wi' me. Lat me jist dook mysel i' the bonny win'!" she added, turning herself round and round. "—Isna it jist like awfu' thin watter, An'rew?—Here, gie me a haud o' that loaf. I s' cairry that, and my ain bit bundle as weel; syne, I fancy, ye can manage the lave yersel!"

Andrew never had much to say, and this time he had nothing. But her readiness relieved him of some anxiety; for his mother would be very uncomfortable if he went home without her!

Maggie's spirits rose to lark-pitch as the darkness came on and deepened; and the wind became to her a live gloom, in which, with no eye-bound to the space enclosing her, she could go on imagining after the freedom of her own wild will. As the world and everything in it gradually disappeared, it grew easy to imagine Jesus making the darkness light about him, and stepping from it plain before her sight. That could be no trouble to him, she argued, as, being everywhere, he must be there. He could appear in any form, who had created every shape on the face of the whole world! If she were but fit to see him, then surely he would come to her! For thus often had her father spoken to her, talking of the varied appearances of the Lord after his resurrection, and his promise that he would be with his disciples always to the end of the world. Even after he had gone back to his father, had he not appeared to the apostle Paul? and might it not be that he had shown himself to many another through the long ages? In any case he was everywhere, and always about them, although now, perhaps from lack of faith in the earth, he had not been seen for a long time. And she remembered her father once saying that nobody could even *think* a thing if there was no possible truth in it. The Lord went away that they might believe in him when out of the sight of him, and so be in him, and he in them!

"I dinna think," said Maggie aloud to herself, as she trudged along beside the delightfully silent Andrew, "that my father would be the least astonished—only filled wi' an awfu' glaidness—if at ony moment, walkin at his side, the Lord was to call him by his name, and appear til him. He would but think he had just steppit oot upon him frae some secret door, and would say,—'I thoucht, Lord, I would see you some day! I was aye greedy efter a sicht o' ye, Lord, and here ye are!'"

CHAPTER V

The same moment to her ears came the cry of an infant. Her first thought was, “Can that be Himsel, come ance again as he cam ance afore?”

She stopped in the dusky starlight, and listened with her very soul.

“Andrew!” she cried, for she heard the sound of his steps as he plodded on in front of her, and could vaguely see him, “Andrew, what was yon?”

“I h’ard naething,” answered Andrew, stopping at her cry and listening.

There came a second cry, a feeble, sad wail, and both of them heard it.

Maggie darted off in the direction whence it seemed to come; nor had she far to run, for it was not one to reach any distance.

They were at the moment climbing a dreary, desolate ridge, where the road was a mere stony hollow, in winter a path for the rain rather than the feet of men. On each side of it lay a wild moor, covered with heather and low berry-bearing shrubs. Under a big bush Maggie saw something glimmer, and, flying to it, found a child. It might be a year old, but was so small and poorly nourished that its age was hard to guess. “With the instinct of a mother, she caught it up, and clasping it close to her panting bosom, was delighted to find it cease wailing the moment it felt her arm. Andrew, who had dropped the things he carried, and started at once after her, met her half-way, so absorbed in her treasure trove, and so blind to aught else, that he had to catch them both in his arms to break the imminent shock; but she slipped from them, and, to his amazement, went on down the hill, back the way they had come: clearly she thought of nothing but carrying the infant home to her father; and here even the slow perception of her companion understood her.

“Maggie, Maggie,” he cried, “ye’ll baith be deid afore ye win hame wi’ ‘t! Come on to my mither. There never was wuman like her for bairns! She’ll ken a hantle better nor ony father what to dee wi’ ‘t!”

Maggie at once recovered her senses, and knew he was right—but not before she had received an instantaneous insight that never after left her: now she understood the heart of the Son of Man, come to find and carry back the stray children to their Father and His. When afterward she told her father what she had then felt, he answered her with just the four words and no more—

“Lassie, ye hae ‘t!”

Happily the moon was now up, so that Andrew was soon able to find the things they had both dropped in their haste, and Maggie had soon wrapped the baby in the winsey petticoat she had been carrying. Andrew took up his loaf and his other packages, and they set out again for Bogsheuch, Maggie’s heart all but overwhelmed with its exultation. Had the precious thing been twice the weight, so exuberant was her feeling of wealth in it that she could have carried it twice the distance with ease, although the road was so rough that she went in constant terror of stumbling. Andrew gave now and then a queer chuckle at the ludicrousness of their home-coming, and every second minute had to stop and pick up one or other of his many parcels; but Maggie strode on in front, full of possession, and with the feeling of having now at last entered upon her heavenly inheritance; so that she was quite startled when suddenly they came in sight of the turf cottage, and the little window in which a small cresset-lamp was burning. Before they reached it the door opened, and Eppie appeared with an overflow of question and anxious welcome.

“What on earth—” she began.

“Naething but a bonny wee bairnie, whause mither has tint it!” at once interrupted and answered Maggie, flying up to her, and laying the child in her arms.

Mrs. Cormack stood and stared, now at Maggie, and now at the bundle that lay in her own arms. Tenderly searching in the petticoat, she found at last the little one’s face, and uncovered the sleeping child.

"Eh the puir mither!" she said, and hurriedly covered again the tiny countenance.

"It's mine!" cried Maggie. "I faund it honest!"

"Its mither may ha' lost it honest, Maggie!" said Eppie.

"Weel, its mither can come for't gien she want it! It's mine till she dis, ony gait!" rejoined the girl.

"Nae doobt o' that!" replied the old woman, scarcely questioning that the infant had been left to perish by some worthless tramp. "Ye'll maybe hae't langer nor ye'll care to keep it!"

"That's no vera likly," answered Maggie with a smile, as she stood in the doorway, in the wakeful night of the northern summer: "it's ane o' the Lord's ain lammies 'at he cam to the hills to seek. He's fund this ane!"

"Weel, weel, my bonnie doo, it sanna be for me to contradick ye!—But wae's upo' me for a menseless auld wife! come in; come in: the mair welcome 'at ye're lang expeckit!—But bless me, An'rew, what hae ye dune wi' the cairt and the beastie?"

In a few words, for brevity was easy to him, Andrew told the story of their disaster.

"It maun hae been the Lord's mercy! The puir beastie bude to suffer for the sake o' the bairnie!"

She got them their supper, which was keeping hot by the fire; and then sent Maggie to her bed in the ben-end, where she laid the baby beside her, after washing him and wrapping him in a soft well-worn shift of her own. But Maggie scarcely slept for listening lest the baby's breath should stop; and Eppie sat in the kitchen with Andrew until the light, slowly travelling round the north, deepened in the east, and at last climbed the sky, leading up the sun himself; when Andrew rose, and set his face toward Stonecross, in full but not very anxious expectation of a stormy reception from his mistress before he should have time to explain. When he reached home, however, he found the house not yet astir; and had time to feed and groom his horses before any one was about, so that, to his relief, no rendering of reasons was necessary.

All the next day Maggie was ill at ease, in much dread of the appearance of a mother. The baby seemed nothing the worse for his exposure, and although thin and pale, appeared a healthy child, taking heartily the food offered him. He was decently though poorly clad, and very clean. The Cormacks making inquiry at every farmhouse and cottage within range of the moor, the tale of his finding was speedily known throughout the neighbourhood; but to the satisfaction of Maggie at least, who fretted to carry home her treasure, without any result; so that by the time the period of her visit arrived, she was feeling tolerably secure in her possession, and returned with it in triumph to her father.

The long-haired horse not yet proving equal to the journey, she had to walk home; but Eppie herself accompanied her, bent on taking her share in the burden of the child, which Maggie was with difficulty persuaded to yield. Eppie indeed carried him up to the soutar's door, but Maggie insisted on herself laying him in her father's arms. The soutar rose from his stool, received him like Simeon taking the infant Jesus from the arms of his mother, and held him high like a heave-offering to him that had sent him forth from the hidden Holiest of Holies. One moment in silence he held him, then restoring him to his daughter, sat down again, and took up his last and shoe. Then suddenly becoming aware of a breach in his manners, he rose again at once, saying—

"I crave yer pardon, Mistress Cormack: I was clean forgettin ony breedin I ever had!—Maggie, tak oor freen ben the hoose, and gar her rest her a bit, while ye get something for her efter her lang walk. I'll be ben mysel' in a meenute or twa to hae a crack wi' her. I hae but a feow stitches mair to put intil this same sole! The three o' 's maun tak some sarious coonsel thegither anent the upbringin o' this God-sent bairn! I doobtna but he's come wi' a blessin to this hoose! Eh, but it was a mercifu fittin o' things that the puir bairn and Maggie sud that nicht come thegither! Verily, He shall give his angels chairge over thee! They maun hae been aboot the muir a' that day, that nane but Maggie sud get a haud o' 'im—aiven as they maun hae been aboot the field and the flock and the shepherds and the inn-stable a' that gran' nicht!"

The same moment entered a neighbour who, having previously heard and misinterpreted the story, had now caught sight of their arrival.

“Eh, soutar, but ye *ir* a man by Providence sair oppressed!” she cried. “Wha think ye’s been i’ the faut here?”

The wrath of the soutar sprang up flaming.

“Gang oot o’ my hoose, ye ill-thouchtit wuman!” he shouted. “Gang oot o’ ‘t this verra meenit—and comena intil ‘t again ‘cep it be to beg my pardon and that o’ this gude wuman and my bonny lass here! The Lord God bless her frae ill tongues!—Gang oot, I tell ye!”

The outraged father stood towering, whom all the town knew for a man of gentlest temper and great courtesy. The woman stood one moment dazed and uncertain, then turned and fled. Maggie retired with Mistress Cormack; and when the soutar joined them, he said never a word about the discomfited gossip. Eppie having taken her tea, rose and bade them good-night, nor crossed another threshold in the village.

CHAPTER VI

As soon as the baby was asleep, Maggie went back to the kitchen where her father still sat at work.

"Ye're late the night, father!" she said.

"I am that, lassie; but ye see I canna luik for muckle help frae you for some time: ye'll hae eneuch to dee wi' that bairn o' yours; and we hae him to fen for noo as weel's oorsels! No 'at I hae the least concern aboot the bonny white raven, only we maun consider *him* like the lave!" "It's little he'll want for a whilie, father!" answered Maggie. "—But noo," she went on, in a tone of seriousness that was almost awe, "lat me hear what ye're thinkin:—what kin' o' a mither could she be that left her bairn theroot i' the wide, eerie nicht? and what for could she hae dene 't?"

"She maun hae been some puir lassie that hadna learnt to think first o' His wull! She had believt the man whan he promised to merry her, no kennin he was a leear, and no heedin the v'ice inside her that said *ye maunna*; and sae she loot him dee what he likit wi' her, and mak himsel the father o' a bairnie that wasna meant for him. Sic leeberties as he took wi' her, and she ouchtna to hae permittit, made a mither o' her afore ever she was merried. Sic fules hae an awfu' time o' 't; for fowk hardly ever forgies them, and aye luiks doon upo' them. Doobtless the rascal ran awa and left her to fen for hersel; naebody would help her; and she had to beg the breid for hersel, and the drap milk for the bairnie; sae that at last she lost hert and left it, jist as Hagar left hers aneath the buss i' the wilderness afore God shawed her the bonny wall o' watter."

"I kenna whilk o' them was the warst—father or mither!" cried Maggie.

"Nae mair do I!" said the soutar; "but I doobt the ane that lee'd to the ither, maun hae to be coontit the warst!"

"There canna be mony sic men!" said Maggie.

"'Deed there's a heap o' them no a hair better!" rejoined her father; "but wae's me for the puir lassie that believes them!"

"She kenned what was richt a' the time, father!"

"That's true, my dauty; but to ken is no aye to un'erstan'; and even to un'erstan' is no aye to see richt intil't! No wuman's safe that hasna the love o' God, the great Love, in her hert a' the time! What's best in her, whan the vera best's awa, may turn to be her greatest danger. And the higher ye rise ye come into the waur danger, till ance ye're fairly intil the ae safe place, the hert o' the Father. There, and there only, ye're safe!—safe frae earth, frae hell, and frae yer ain hert! A' the temptations, even sic as ance made the haivenly hosts themsels fa' frae haiven to hell, canna touch ye there! But whan man or wuman repents and heumbles himsel, there is He to lift them up, and that higher than ever they stede afore!"

"Syne they're no to be despised that fa'!"

"Nane despises them, lassie, but them that haena yet learnt the danger they're in o' that same fa' themsels. Mony ane, I'm thinking, is keepit frae fa'in, jist because she's no far eneuch on to get the guid o' the shame, but would jist sink farther and farther!"

"But Eppie tells me that maist o' them 'at trips gangs on fa'in, and never wins up again."

"Ou, ay; that's true as far as we, short-lived and short-sichtit craturs, see o' them! but this warl's but the beginnin; and the glory o' Christ, wha's the vera Love o' the Father, spreads a heap further nor that. It's no for naething we're tellt hoo the sinner-women cam til him frae a' sides! They needit him sair, and cam. Never ane o' them was ower black to be latten gang close up til him; and some o' sic women un'erstede things he said 'at mony a respectable wuman cudna get a glimp o'! There's aye rain eneuch, as Maister Shaksper says, i' the sweet haivens to wash the vera han' o' murder as white as snow. The creatin hert is fu' o' sic rain. Loe *him*, lassie, and ye'll never glaur the bonny goon ye broucht white frae his hert!"

The soutar's face was solemn and white, and tears were running down the furrows of his cheeks. Maggie too was weeping. At length she said—

"Supposin the mither o' my bairnie a wuman like that, can ye think it fair that *her* disgrace should stick til *him?*"

"It sticks til him only in sic minds as never saw the lovely greatness o' God."

"But sic bairns come na intil the warl as God wad hae them come!"

"But your bairnie *is* come, and that he couldna withoot the creatin wull o' the Father! Doobtless sic bairnies hae to suffer frae the prood jeedgment o' their fellow-men and women, but they may get muckle guid and little ill frae that—a guid naebody can reive them o'. It's no a mere veesitin o' the sins o' the fathers upo' the bairns, but a provision to haud the bairns aff o' the like, and to shame the fathers o' them. Eh, but sic maun be sair affrontit wi' themsels, that disgrace at ance the wife that should hae been and the bairn that shouldna! Eh, the puir bairnie that has sic a father! But he has anither as weel—a richt gran' father to rin til!—The ae thing," the soutar went on, "that you and me, Maggie, has to do, is never to lat the bairn ken the miss o' father or mother, and sae lead him to the ae Father, the only real and true ane.—There he's wailin, the bonny wee man!"

Maggie ran to quiet her little one, but soon returned, and sitting down again beside her father, asked him for a piece of work.

All this time, through his own cowardly indifference, the would-be-grand preacher, James Blatherwick, knew nothing of the fact that, somewhere in the world, without father or mother, lived a silent witness against him.

CHAPTER VII

Isy had contrived to postpone her return to her aunt until James was gone; for she dreaded being in the house with him lest anything should lead to the discovery of the relation between them. Soon after his departure, however, she had to encounter the appalling fact that the dread moment was on its way when she would no longer be able to conceal the change in her condition. Her first and last thought was then, how to protect the good name of her lover, and avoid involving him in the approaching ruin of her reputation. With this in view she vowed to God and to her own soul absolute silence with regard to the past: James's name even should never pass her lips! Nor did she find the vow hard to keep, even when her aunt took measures to draw her secret from her; but the dread lest in her pains she should cry out for the comfort which James alone could give her, almost drove her to poison, from which only the thought of his coming child restrained her. Enabled at length only by the pure inexorability of her hour, she passed through her sorrow and found herself still alive, with her lips locked tight on her secret. The poor girl who was weak enough to imperil her good name for love of a worthless man, was by that love made strong to shield him from the consequences of her weakness. Whether in this she did well for the world, for the truth, or for her own soul, she never wasted a thought. In vain did her aunt ply her with questions; she felt that to answer one of them would be to wrong him, and lose her last righteous hold upon the man who had at least once loved her a little. Without a gleam, without even a shadow of hope for herself, she clung, through shame and blame, to his scathlessness as the only joy left her. He had most likely, she thought, all but forgotten her very existence, for he had never written to her, or made any effort to discover what had become of her. She clung to the conviction that he could never have heard of what had befallen her.

By and by she grew able to reflect that to remain where she was would be the ruin of her aunt; for who would lodge in the same house with *her*? She must go at once! and her longing to go, with the impossibility of even thinking where she could go, brought her to the very verge of despair, and it was only the thought of her child that still gave her strength enough to live on. And to add immeasurably to her misery, she was now suddenly possessed by the idea, which for a long time remained immovably fixed, that, agonizing as had been her effort after silence, she had failed in her resolve, and broken the promise she imagined she had given to James; that she had been false to him, brought him to shame, and for ever ruined his prospects; that she had betrayed him into the power of her aunt, and through her to the authorities of the church! That was why she had never heard a word from him, she thought, and she was never to see him any more! The conviction, the seeming consciousness of all this, so grew upon her that, one morning, when her infant was not yet a month old, she crept from the house, and wandered out into the world, with just one shilling in a purse forgotten in the pocket of her dress. After that, for a time, her memory lost hold of her consciousness, and what befel her remained a blank, refusing to be recalled.

When she began to come to herself she had no knowledge of where she had been, or for how long her mind had been astray; all was irretrievable confusion, crossed with cloud-like trails of blotted dreams, and vague survivals of gratitude for bread and pieces of money. Everything she became aware of surprised her, except the child in her arms. Her story had been plain to every one she met, and she had received thousands of kindnesses which her memory could not hold. At length, intentionally or not, she found herself in a neighbourhood to which she had heard James Blatherwick refer.

Here again a dead blank stopped her backward gaze—till suddenly once more she grew aware, and knew that she was aware, of being alone on a wide moor in a dim night, with her hungry child, to whom she had given the last drop of nourishment he could draw from her, wailing in her arms. Then fell upon her a hideous despair, and unable to carry him a step farther, she dropped him from her helpless hands into a bush, and there left him, to find, as she thought, some milk for him. She could sometimes even remember that she went staggering about, looking under the great stones, and

into the clumps of heather, in the hope of finding something for him to drink. At last, I presume, she sank on the ground, and lay for a time insensible; anyhow, when she came to herself, she searched in vain for the child, or even the place where she had left him.

The same evening it was that Maggie came along with Andrew, and found the baby as I have already told. All that night, and a great part of the next day, Isy went searching about in vain, doubtless with intervals of repose compelled by utter exhaustion. Imagining at length that she had discovered the very spot where she left him, and not finding him, she came to the conclusion that some wild beast had come upon the helpless thing and carried him off. Then a gleam of water coming to her eye, she rushed to the peat-hag whence it was reflected, and would there have drowned herself. But she was intercepted and turned aside by a man who threw down his flauchter-spade, and ran between her and the frightful hole. He thought she was out of her mind, and tried to console her with the assurance that no child left on that moor could be in other than luck's way. He gave her a few half-pence, and directed her to the next town, with a threat of hanging if she made a second attempt of the sort. A long time of wandering followed, with ceaseless inquiry, and alternating disappointment and fresh expectation; but every day something occurred that served just to keep the life in her, and at last she reached the county-town, where she was taken to a place of shelter.

CHAPTER VIII

James Blatherwick was proving himself not unacceptable to his native parish, where he was thought a very rising man, inasmuch as his fluency was far ahead of his perspicuity. He soon came to note the soutar as a man far in advance of the rest of his parishioners; but he saw, at the same time, that he was regarded by most as a wild fanatic if not as a dangerous heretic; and himself imagined that he saw in him certain indications of a mild lunacy.

In Tiltowie he pursued the same course as elsewhere: anxious to let nothing come between him and the success of his eloquence, he avoided any appearance of differing in doctrine from his congregation; and until he should be more firmly established, would show himself as much as possible of the same mind with them, using the doctrinal phrases he had been accustomed to in his youth, or others so like that they would be taken to indicate unchanged opinions, while for his part he practised a mental reservation in regard to them.

He had noted with some degree of pleasure in the soutar, that he used almost none of the set phrases of the good people of the village, who devoutly followed the traditions of the elders; but he knew little as to what the soutar did not believe, and still less of what he did believe with all his heart and soul; for John MacLear could not even utter the name of God without therein making a confession of faith immeasurably beyond anything inhabiting the consciousness of the parson; and on his part soon began to note in James a total absence of enthusiasm in regard to such things of which his very calling implied at least an absolute acceptance: he would allude to any or all of them as merest matters of course! Never did his face light up when he spoke of the Son of God, of his death, or of his resurrection; never did he make mention of the kingdom of heaven as if it were anything more venerable than the kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

But the soul of the soutar would venture far into the twilight, searching after the things of God, opening wider its eyes, as the darkness widened around them. On one occasion the parson took upon him to remonstrate with what seemed to him the audacity of his parishioner:

"Don't you think you are just going a little too far there, Mr. MacLear?" he said.

"Ye mean ower far intil the dark, Mr. Blatherwick?"

"Yes, that is what I mean. You speculate too boldly."

"But dinna ye think, sir, that that direction it's plain the dark grows a wee thinner, though I grant ye there's nothing yet to ca' licht? Licht we may aye ken by its ain fair shinin, and by noucht else!"

"But the human soul is just as apt to deceive itself as the human eye! It is always ready to take a flash inside itself for something objective!" said Blatherwick.

"Nae doobt! nae doobt! but whan the true licht comes, ye aye ken the differ! A man *may* tak the dark for licht, but he canna take the licht for darkness!"

"And there must always be something for the light to shine upon, else the man sees nothing!" said the parson.

"There's thoucht, and possible insicht intil the man!" said the soutar to himself.—"Maybe, like the Ephesians, ye haena yet fund oot gien there be ony Holy Ghost, sir?" he said to him aloud.

"No man dares deny that!" answered the minister.

"Still a man mayna *ken't*, though he daursna deny't! Nane but them 'at follows whaur he leads, can ken that he verily is."

"We must beware of private interpretation!" suggested James.

"Gien a man hearsna a word spoken til his ain sel', he has na the word to lippen til! The Scriptur is to him but a sealed buik; he walks i' the dark. The licht is neither pairtit nor gethered. Gien a man has licht, he has nane the less that there's twa or three o' them thegither present.—Gien there be twa or three prayin thegither, ilk ane o' the three has jist what he's able to receive, and he kens 't in himsel as licht; and the fourth may hae nane. Gien it comena to ilk ane o' them, it comesna to a'. Ilk ane

maun hae the revelation intil his ain sel', as gien there wasna ane mair. And gien it be sae, hoo are we to win at ony trouth no yet revealed, 'cep we gang oot intil the dark to meet it? Ye maun caw canny, I admit, i' the mirk; but ye maun caw gien ye wad win at onything!"

"But suppose you know enough to keep going, and do not care to venture into the dark?"

"Gien a man hauds on practeesin what he kens, the hunger 'ill wauk in him efter something mair. I'm thinkin the angels had lang to desire afore they could luik intil certain things they sair wantit; but ye may be sure they warna left withoot as muckle licht as would lead honest fowk safe on!"

"But suppose they couldn't tell whether what they seemed to see was true light or not?"

"Syne they would hae to fa' back upo the wull o' the great Licht: we ken weel he wants us a' to see as he himsel sees! Gien we seek that Licht, we'll get it; gien we carena for't, we're jist naething and naegait, and are in sore need o' some sharp discipleen."

"I'm afraid I can't follow you quite. The fact is, I have been so long occupied with the Bible history, and the new discoveries that bear testimony to it, that I have had but little time for metaphysics."

"And what's the guid o' history, or sic metapheesics as is the vera sowl o' history, but to help ye to see Christ? and what's the guid o' seein Christ but sae to see God wi' hert and un'erstan'in baith as to ken that yer seein him? Ye min' hoo the Lord said nane could ken the Father but the man to whom the Son revealt him? Sir, it's fell time ye had a glimp o' that! Ye ken naething till ye ken God —the only ane a man can truly and railly ken!"

"Well, you're a long way ahead of me, and for the present I'm afraid there's nothing left but to say good-night to you!"

And therewith the minister departed.

"Lord," said the soutar, as he sat guiding his awl through sole and welt and upper of the shoe on his last, "there's surely something at work i' the yoong man! Surely he canna be that far frae waukin up to see and ken that he sees and kens naething! Lord, pu' doon the dyke o' learnin and self-richteousness that he canna see ower the tap o', and lat him see thee upo' the ither side o' 't. Lord, sen' him the grace o' oppen e'en to see whaur and what he is, that he may cry oot wi' the lave o' 's, puir blin' bodies, to them that winna see. 'Wauk, thoo that sleepest, and come oot o' thy grave, and see the licht o' the Father i' the face o' the Son.'"

But the minister went away intent on classifying the soutar by finding out with what sect of the middle-age mystics to place him. At the same time something strange seemed to hover about the man, refusing to be handled in that way. Something which he called his own religious sense appeared to know something of what the soutar must mean, though he could neither isolate nor define it.

Faithlessly as he had behaved to Isy, Blatherwick was not consciously, that is with purpose or intent, a deceitful man. He had, on the contrary, always cherished a strong faith in his own honour. But faith in a thing, in an idea, in a notion, is no proof, or even sign that the thing actually exists: in the present case it had no root except in the man's thought of himself, in his presentation to himself of his own reflected self. The man who thought so much of his honour was in truth a moral unreality, a cowardly fellow, a sneak who, in the hope of escaping consequences, carried himself as beyond reproof. How should such a one ever have the power of spiritual vision developed in him? How should such a one ever see God—ever exist in the same region in which the soutar had long taken up his abode? Still there was this much reality in him, and he had made this much progress that, holding fast by his resolve henceforward no more to slide, he was aware also of a dim suspicion of something he had not seen, but which he might become able to see; and was half resolved to think and read, for the future, with the intent to find out what this strange man seemed to know, or thought he knew.

Soon finding himself unable, however, try as hard as he might, to be sure of anything, he became weary of the effort, and sank back into the old, self-satisfied, blind sleep.

CHAPTER IX

Out of this quiescence, however, a pang from the past one morning suddenly waked him, and almost without consciousness of a volition, he found himself at the soutar's door. Maggie opened it with the baby in her arms, with whom she had just been having a game. Her face was in a glow, her hair tossed about, and her dark eyes flashing with excitement. To Blatherwick, without any great natural interest in life, and in the net of a haunting trouble which caused him no immediate apprehension, the young girl, of so little account in the world, and so far below him as he thought, affected him as beautiful; and, indeed, she was far more beautiful than he was able to appreciate. It must be remembered too, that it was not long since he had been refused by another; and at such a time a man is readier to fall in love afresh. Trouble then, lack of interest, and late repulse, had laid James's heart, such as it was, open to assault from a new quarter whence he foresaw no danger.

"That's a very fine baby you have!" he said. "Whose is he?"

"Mine, sir," answered Maggie, with some triumph, for she thought every one must know the story of her treasure.

"Oh, indeed; I did not know!" answered the parson, bewildered.

"At least," Maggie resumed a little hurriedly, "I have the best right to him!" and there stopped.

"She cannot possibly be his mother!" thought the minister, and resolved to question his housekeeper about the child.

"Is your father in the house?" he asked, and without waiting for an answer, went in. "Such a big boy is too heavy for you to carry!" he added, as he laid his hand on the latch of the kitchen door.

"No ae bit!" rejoined Maggie, with a little contempt at his disparagement of her strength. "And wha's to cairry him but me?"

Huddling the boy to her bosom, she went on talking to him in childish guise, as she lifted the latch for the minister:—

"Wad he hae my pet gang traivellin the warl' upo thae twa bonny wee legs o' his ain, wantin the wings he left ahint him? Na, na! they maun grow a heap stronger first. His ain mammie wad cairry him gien he war twice the size! Noo, we s' gang but the hoose and see daddy."

She bore him after the minister, and sat down with him on her own stool, beside her father, who looked up, with his hands and knees in skilful consort of labour.

"Weel, minister, hoo are ye the day? Is the yerd ony lichter upo' the tap o' ye?" he said, with a smile that was almost pauky.

"I do not understand you, Mr. MacLear!" answered James with dignity.

"Na, ye canna! Gien ye could, ye wouldna be sae comfortable as ye seem!"

"I cannot think, Mr. MacLear, why you should be rude to me!"

"Gien ye saw the hoose on fire aboot a man deid asleep, maybe ye micht be in ower great a hurry to be polite til 'im!" remarked the soutar.

"Dare you suggest, sir, that I have been drinking?" cried the parson.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.