BLACK WILLIAM

WHITE HEATHER: A NOVEL (VOLUME 1 OF 3)

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A JOURNEY NORTHWARD

On a certain cold evening in January, and just as the Scotch night-mail was about to start for the north, a stranger drove up to Euston and alighted, and was glad enough to escape from the chill draughts of the echoing station into the glow and warmth and comfort of a sleeping-car. He was a man of means apparently; for one half of this carriage, containing four berths, and forming a room apart, as it were, had been reserved for himself alone; while his travelling impedimenta – fur-lined coats and hoods and rugs and what not – were of an elaborate and sumptuous description. On the other hand, there was nothing of ostentation about either his dress or appearance or demeanour. He was a tall, thin, quiet-looking man, with an aquiline nose, sallow complexion, and keen but not unkindly gray eyes. His short-cropped hair was grizzled, and there were deep lines in the worn and ascetic face; but this may have been the result of an exhausting climate rather than of

any mental care, for there was certainly no touch of melancholy in his expression. His costume was somewhat prim and precise; there was a kind of schoolmasterish look about the stiff white collar and small black tie; his gloves were new and neat. For the rest, he seemed used to travelling; he began to make himself at home at once, and scarcely looked up from this setting of things to rights when the conductor made his appearance.

'Mr. Hodson, sir?' the latter said, with an inquiring glance.

'That's about what they call me,' he answered slowly, as he opened a capacious dressing-bag covered with crocodile-hide.

'Do you expect any friends to join you farther along, sir?'

'Not that I know of,' was the answer – and a pair of dark-blue velvet slippers, with initials worked in gold, were fished out and thrown upon the seat beside him.

But when the conductor had got one of the lower sleeping-berths made ready and the traveller had completed his leisurely arrangements for passing the night in comfort, a somewhat one-sided conversation ensued. This gaunt, slow-speaking, reserved man proved to be quite talkative – in a curious, measured, dry, and staccato fashion; and if his conversation consisted chiefly of questions, these showed that he had a very honest and simple concern in the welfare of this other human being whom chance had thrown in his way, and that he could express his friendly interest without any touch of patronage or condescension. He asked first about the railway-line; how the company's servants were paid; what were their hours on duty; whether they had

formed any associations for relief in case of sickness; what this particular man got for his work; whether he could look forward to any bettering of his lot, and so forth. And then, fixing his eyes more scrutinisingly on his companion, he began to ask about his family affairs – where he lived; what children he had; how often he saw them; and the like; and these questions were so obviously prompted by no idle curiosity, but by an honest sympathy, and by the apparent desire of one human being to get to understand fully and clearly the position and surroundings and prospects of this other fellow-creature, that it was impossible for any one to take offence.

'And how old is your little girl?'

'Eight, sir: she will be nine in May next.'

'What do you call her?'

'Caroline, sir.'

'Why, you don't say!' he exclaimed, with his eyes – which were usually calm and observant – lighting up with some surprise. 'That is the name of my girl too – though I can't call her little any more. Well now,' he added, as he took out his purse and selected a sovereign from the mass of coins, 'I think this is about what you ought to do. When you get back to Camden Town, you start an account in the Post Office Savings Bank, in your little girl's name, and you put in this sovereign as a first deposit. Then, whenever you have an odd sixpence or shilling to give her – a birthday present, or that – you keep adding on and on; and there will be a nice little sum for her in after years. And if ever she

asks, you can tell her it was the father of an American Caroline who made her this little present; and if she grows up to be as good a girl as the American Carry, she'll do very well, I think.'

The conductor scarcely knew how to express his thanks, but the American cut him short, saying coolly —

'I don't give the sovereign to you at all. It is in trust for your daughter. And you don't look to me the kind of man who would go and drink it.'

He took out an evening newspaper, and, at the hint, the conductor went away to get ready the berths in the other end of the car. When he came back again to see if the gentleman wanted anything further for the night, they had thundered along the line until they were nearing Rugby.

'Why, yes,' Mr. Hodson said, in answer to the question, 'you might get me a bottle of soda-water when we get to the station.'

'I have soda-water in the car, sir.'

'Bring me a bottle, then, please.'

'And shall I get anything else for you, sir, at Rugby?'

'No, I thank you.'

When the man returned with the soda-water, the traveller had taken from his dressing-bag a bottle labelled 'Bromide of Potassium' and he was just about to mix his customary sleeping-draught when it occurred to him that perhaps this conductor could tell him something of the new and far country into which he was about to adventure for the first time. And in making these inquiries he showed that he was just as frank-spoken about his

own plans and circumstances as he expected other people to be about theirs. When the conductor confessed that he knew next to nothing about the north of Scotland, never having been farther than Perth, and even then his knowledge of the country being confined to the railway-line and the stations, Mr. Hodson went on to say – in that methodical way of his, with little rising inflexions here and there —

'Well, it's bound to be different from London, anyway. It can't be like London; and that's the main thing for me. Why, that London fog, never moving, same in the morning, same at night, it's just too dismal for anything; the inside of a jail is a fool to it. 'Pears to me that a London afternoon is just about as melancholy as they make it; if there's anything more melancholy than that anywhere, I don't know it. Well, now, it can't be like that at Cape Wrath.'

'I should think not, sir.'

'I daresay if I lived in the town, and had my club, and knew people, it might be different; and my daughter seems to get through the time well enough; but young folks are easily amused. Say, now, about this salmon fishing in the north: you don't know when it begins?'

'No, sir.'

'You haven't seen anybody going yet with a bundle of rods?'

'No, sir, not this year yet.'

'Hope they haven't been playing it on me – I was told I could begin on the eleventh. But it don't signify much so long's I get

out of that infernal cut-throat atmosphere of London.'

At this point the train began to slow into Rugby station, and the conductor left to attend to his duties; and by the time they were moving out again and on their way to the far north, Mr. Hodson had mixed and drunk his nightly potion, and, partially undressed, was wrapped up in the thick and warm coverings of the sleeping-berth, where, whether owing to the bromide of potassium, or the jog-trot rattle of the wheels, he was soon plunged in a profound slumber.

Well, if part of his design in thus venturing upon a journey to the north in mid-winter was to get away from the monotonous mists of London, the next morning showed him that so far he had been abundantly successful. The day breaking caused him to open his eyes; and instinctively he turned to the window. There before him was a strange, and unusual, and welcome sight. No more dismal grays, and the gathering down of a hopeless dusk; but the clear, glad light of the morning – a band of flashing gold all along the eastern horizon, behind the jet-black stems and branches of the leafless trees; and over that the heavens were all of a pale and luminous lilac, with clouds hanging here and there – clouds that were dark and almost thunderous in their purple look, but that really meant nothing but beauty, as they lay there soft and motionless in the glowing and mystical dawn. Quickly he got up. The windows were thrown open. And this air that rushed in – so fresh, so sweet, so full of all kinds of mellow and fragrant messages from the hills, and the pine-woods, and the wide-lying

straths – did it not bring a strange kind of joy and surprise with it?

'A beautiful morning, sir; we are getting near to Perth now,' the conductor said, when he made his appearance.

'Are we in time?'

'Yes, in very good time.'

'And no hurry about breakfast?'

'No, sir; you don't start again till nine o'clock.'

Even this big hollow station, with its wide stone platforms and resounding arch: was it the white light that filled it, or the fresh air that blew through it, that made it quite a cheerful place? He was charmed with the accent of the timid handmaiden who brought him his breakfast in the refreshment room, and who waited on him in such a friendly, half-anxious, shy fashion; and he wondered whether he would dare to offer so pretty and well-mannered a young lady anything over the customary charge in token of his gratitude to her for her gentle ways. Perth itself: well, there had been rain in the night, and the streets near the station were full of mud; but then the cart ruts in the mud were gleaming lines of gold; and the beautiful sky hung over the slowly rising smoke of the houses; and the air was everywhere so sweet and welcome. He had got into a new world altogether; the weight of the London atmosphere was lifted from him; he whistled 'Auld Lang Syne' – which was the only Scotch air he knew – and the lugubrious tune sounded quite pleasant on so joyous a morning.

Moreover, these were but first and commonplace experiences. For by and by, when he had again taken his seat to prosecute his

journey – and he found himself the sole occupant of the carriage – the sunrise had widened into the full splendour of a sunlit day; and as the train sped away to the north, he, sitting at the window there, and having nothing to do but examine the new country he was entering, was wholly amazed at the intensity and brilliancy of the colouring around, and at the extraordinary vividness of the light. The wide stretches of the Tay shone like burnished silver; there were yellow straths and fields; and beech hedges of a rich russet-red; and fir-woods of a deep fresh green; and still farther away low-lying hills of a soft and ruddy purple, touched sharp here and there with patches of snow; and over all these a blue sky as of summer. The moist, warm air that blew in at the window seemed laden with pine odours; the country women at the small stations had a fresh pink colour in their cheeks; everywhere a new and glad and wholesome life seemed to be abroad, and cheerfulness, and rich hues, and sunlight.

'This is good enough,' he said to himself. 'This is something like what I shipped for.'

And so they sped on: through the soft, wide-stretching woods of Murthly, and Birnam, and Dunkeld; through the shadow and sudden gleams of Killiecrankie Pass; on by Blair Athol and the banks of the Garry; until, with slow and labouring breath, the train began to force its way up the heights of the Grampians, in the lone neighbourhood of the Drumouchter Forest. The air was keener here; the patches of snow were nearer at hand; indeed, in some places the line had evidently been cleared, and large snow

banks heaped up on each side. But by and by the motion of the train seemed to become easier; and soon it was apparent that the descent had begun; presently they were rattling away down into the wide and shining valley of Strathspey; and far over there on the west and north, and keeping guard over the plain, as it were, rose the giant masses of the Cairngorm Hills, the snow sparkling here and there on their shoulders and peaks.

It was not until half-past four in the afternoon that the long railway journey came to an end; and during that time he had come upon many a scene of historical interest and pictorial beauty. He had been within a short distance of the mournful 'haughs of Cromdale;' he had crossed Culloden Moor. Nearing Forres, he had come within sight of the Northern Sea; and thereafter had skirted the blue ruffled waters of the Moray, and Cromarty, and Dornoch Firths. But even when he had got to Lairg, a little hamlet at the foot of Loch Shin, his travelling for the day was not nearly over; there still remained a drive of four-and-twenty miles; and although it was now dusk and the weather threatened a change, he preferred to push on that night. Travelling did not seem to tire him much; no doubt he was familiar with immeasurably greater distances in his own country. Moreover, he had learned that there was nothing particular to look at in the stretch of wild moorland that lay between him and his destination; and then again, if it was dark now, there would be moonlight later on. So he ate his dinner leisurely and in content, until a waggonette with two stout horses was brought round; then

he got in; and presently they were away from the little hamlet and out in a strange land of darkness and silence, scarcely anything visible around them, the only sound the jog-trot clatter of the horses' feet.

It was a desperately lonely drive. The road appeared to go over interminable miles of flat or scarcely undulating moorland; and even when the moonlight began to make the darkness faintly visible, that only increased the sense of solitude, for there was not even a single tree to break the monotony of the sombre horizon line. It had begun to rain also: not actual rain, but a kind of thin drizzle, that seemed to mix itself up with the ineffectual moonlight, and throw a wan haze over these far-reaching and desolate wastes. Tramp, tramp went the horses' feet through this ghostly world; the wet mist grew thicker and thicker and clung around the traveller's hair; it was a chilling mist, moreover, and seemed to search for weak places about the throat. The only sharply defined objects that the eye could rest on were the heads and upthrown ears of the horses, that shone in the light sent forward by the lamps: all else was a formless wilderness of gloom, shadows following shadows, and ever the desolate landscape stretching on and on, and losing itself in the night.

The American stood up in the waggonette, perhaps to shake off for a second the clammy sensation of the wet.

'Say, young man,' he observed – but in an absent kind of way, for he was regarding, as far as that was possible, the dusky undulations of the mournful landscape – 'don't you think now,

that for a good wholesome dose of God-forsakenness, this'll about take the cake?'

'Ah beg your paurdon, sir,' said the driver, who was apparently a Lowlander.

The stranger, however, did not seem inclined to continue the conversation; he sank into his seat again; gathered his rugs round him; and contented himself as heretofore by idly watching the lamplight touching here and there on the harness and lighting up the horses' heads and ears.

Mile after mile, hour after hour, went by in this monotonous fashion; and to the stranger it seemed as if he were piercing farther and farther into some unknown land unpeopled by any human creatures. Not a ray of light from any hut or farmhouse was visible anywhere. But as the time went on, there was at least some little improvement in the weather. Either the moonlight was growing stronger, or the thin drizzle clearing off; at all events he could now make out ahead of him – and beyond the flat moorland – the dusky masses of some mountains, with one great peak overtopping them all. He asked the name.

'That is Ben Clebrig, sir.'

And then through the mist and the moonlight a dull sheet of silver began to disclose itself dimly.

'Is that a lake down there?'

'Loch Naver, sir.'

'Then we are not far from Inver-Mudal?'

'No far noo; just a mile or two, sir,' was the consoling answer.

And indeed when he got to the end of his journey, and reached the little hostelry set far amid these moorland and mountain wilds, his welcome there made ample amends. He was ushered into a plain, substantially furnished, and spacious sitting-room, brightly lit up by the lamp that stood on the white cloth of the table, and also by the blazing glare from the peats in the mighty fireplace; and when his eyes had got accustomed to this bewilderment of warmth and light, he found, awaiting his orders, and standing shyly at the door, a pretty, tall, fair-haired girl, who, with the softest accent in the world, asked him what she should bring him for supper. And when he said he did not care to have anything, she seemed quite surprised and even concerned. It was a long, long drive, she said, in her shy and pretty way; and would not the gentleman have some hare-soup – that they had kept hot for him? and so forth. But her coaxing was of no avail.

'By the way, what is your name, my girl?' he said.

'Nelly, sir.'

'Well, then, Nelly, do you happen to know whether Lord Ailine's keeper is anywhere in the neighbourhood?'

'He is in the unn, sir, waiting for you.'

'Oh, indeed. Well, tell him I should like to see him. And say, what is his name?'

'Ronald, sir.'

'Ronald?'

'That is his first name,' she explained.

'His "first name"? I thought that was one of our

Americanisms.'

She did not seem to understand this.

'Ronald Strang is his name, sir; but we jist call him Ronald.'

'Very well, Nelly; you go and tell him I want to see him.'

'Ferry well, sir,' she said; and away she went.

But little indeed did this indefatigable student of nature and human nature – who had been but half interested by his observations and experiences through that long day's travel – know what was yet in store for him. The door opened; a slim-built and yet muscular young man of eight-and-twenty or so appeared there, clad in a smart deer-stalking costume of brownish green; he held his cap in his hand; and round his shoulder was the strap from which hung behind the brown leather case of his telescope. This Mr. Hodson saw at a glance; and also something more. He prided himself on his judgment of character. And when his quick look had taken in the keen, sun-tanned face of this young fellow, the square, intellectual forehead, the firm eyebrows, the finely cut and intelligent mouth, and a certain proud set of the head, he said to himself, 'This is a *man*: there's something here worth knowing.'

'Good evening, sir,' the keeper said, to break the momentary silence.

'Good evening,' said Mr. Hodson (who had been rather startled out of his manners). 'Come and sit down by the fire; and let's have a talk now about the shooting and the salmon-fishing. I have brought the letters from the Duke's agent with me.'

'Yes, sir,' said Strang; and he moved a bit farther into the room; but remained standing, cap in hand.

'Pull in a chair,' said Mr. Hodson, who was searching for the letters.

'Thank ye, sir; thank ye,' said the keeper; but he remained standing nevertheless.

Mr. Hodson returned to the table.

'Sit down, man, sit down,' said he, and he himself pulled in a chair. 'I don't know what your customs are over here, but anyhow I'm an American citizen; I'm not a lord.'

Somewhat reluctantly the keeper obeyed this injunction, and for a minute or two seemed to be rather uncomfortable; but when he began to answer the questions concisely put to him with regard to the business before them, his shyness wholly wore away, for he was the master of this subject, not the stranger who was seeking for information. Into the details of these matters it is needless to enter here; and, indeed, so struck was the American with the talk and bearing of this new acquaintance that the conversation went far afield. And the farther afield it went, the more and more was he impressed with the extraordinary information and intelligence of the man, the independence of his views, the shrewdness and sometimes sarcasm of his judgments. Always he was very respectful; but in his eyes – which seemed singularly dark and lustrous here indoors, but which, out of doors and when he was after the wary stag, or the still more wary hinds, on the far slopes of Clebrig, contracted and became of a keen

brownish gray – there was a kind of veiled fire of humour which, as the stranger guessed, might in other circumstances blaze forth wildly enough. Mr. Hodson, of Chicago, was entirely puzzled. A gamekeeper? He had thought (from his reading of English books) that a gamekeeper was a velveteen-coated person whose ideas ranged from the ale-house to the pheasant-coverts, and thence and quickly back again. But this man seemed to have a wide and competent knowledge of public affairs; and, when it came to a matter of argument (they had a keen little squabble about the protection tariffs of America) he could reason hard, and was not over-compliant.

'God bless me,' Mr. Hodson was driven to exclaim at last, 'what is a man of your ability doing in a place like this? Why don't you go away to one of the big cities – or over to America – where a young fellow with his wits about him can push himself forward?'

'I would rather be "where the dun deer lie,"' said he, with a kind of bashful laugh.

'You read Kingsley?' the other said, still more astonished.

'My brother lends me his books from time to time,' Ronald said modestly. 'He's a Free Church minister in Glasgow.'

'A Free Church minister? He went through college, then?'

'Yes, sir; he took his degree at Aberdeen.'

'But – but – ' said the newcomer, who had come upon a state of affairs he could not understand at all – 'who was your father, then? He sent your brother to college, I presume?'

'Oh no, sir. My father is a small farmer down the Lammermuir way; and he just gave my brother Andrew his wages like the rest, and Andrew saved up for the classes.'

'You are not a Highlander, then?'

'But half-and-half, like my name, sir,' he said (and all the shyness was gone now: he spoke to this stranger frankly and simply as he would have spoken to a shepherd on the hillside). 'My mother was Highland. She was a Macdonald; and so she would have me called Ronald; it's a common name wi' them.'

Mr. Hodson stared at him for a second or two in silence.

'Well,' said he, slowly, 'I don't know. Different men have different ways of looking at things. I think if I were of your age, and had your intelligence, I would try for something better than being a gamekeeper.'

'I am very well content, sir,' said the other placidly; 'and I couldna be more than that anywhere else. It's a healthy life; and a healthy life is the best of anything – at least that is my way of thinking. I wadna like to try the toun; I doubt it wouldn't agree wi' me.' And then he rose to his feet. 'I beg your pardon, sir; I've been keeping ye late.'

Well, Mr. Hodson was nothing loth to let him go; for although he had arrived at the conviction that here was a valuable human life, of exceptional quality and distinction, being absolutely thrown away and wasted, still he had not formed the arguments by which he might try to save it for the general good, and for the particular good of the young man himself. He wanted time to

think over this matter – and in cool blood; for there is no doubt that he had been surprised and fascinated by the intellectual boldness and incisiveness of the younger man's opinions and by the chance sarcasms that had escaped him.

'I could get him a good opening in Chicago soon enough,' he was thinking to himself, when the keeper had left, 'but upon my soul I don't know the man who is fit to become that man's master. Why, I'd start a newspaper for him myself, and make him editor – and if he can't write, he has got mother-wit enough to guide them who can – but he and I would be quarrelling in a week. That fellow is not to be driven by anybody.'

He now rang the bell for a candle; and the slim and yellow-haired Nelly showed him upstairs to his room, which he found to be comfortably warm, for there was a blazing peat fire in the grate, scenting all the air with its delicious odour. He bade her good-night, and turned to open his dressing-bag; but at the same moment he heard voices without, and, being of an inquiring turn of mind, he went to the window. The first thing he saw was that outside a beautiful clear moon was now shining; the leafless elm-trees and the heavy-foliaged pines throwing sharp black shadows across the white road. And this laughing and jesting at the door of the inn? – surely he heard Ronald's voice there – the gayest of any – among the jibes that seemed to form their farewells for the night? Then there was the shutting of a door; and in the silence that ensued he saw the solitary, straight-limbed, clean-made figure of a man stride up the white road, a little dog trotting

behind him.

'Come along, Harry, my lad,' the man said to his small companion – and that, sure enough, was the keeper's voice.

And then, in the stillness of the moonlight night, this watcher and listener was startled to hear a clear and powerful tenor voice suddenly begin to sing – in a careless fashion, it is true, as if it were but to cheer the homeward going —

'Come all ye jolly shepherds,
That whistle through the glen,
I'll tell ye of a secret
That courtiers dinna ken.
What is the greatest bliss
That the tongue o' man can name? —
'Tis to woo a bonnie lassie
When the kye come hame.'

'Great heavens!' said Mr. Hodson to himself, 'such a voice – and all Europe waiting for a new tenor! But at seven or eight and twenty I suppose he is beyond training.'

The refrain became more and more distant:

'When the kye come hame,
When the kye come hame,
'Twixt the gloamin' and the mirk,
When the kye come hame.'

Both the keeper and the little trotting terrier had disappeared

now, having turned a corner of the road where there was a clump of trees. The traveller who had wandered into these remote wilds sate down for a minute or two to sum up his investigations of the evening, and they were these:

'Accounts of the deer seem shaky; but there may have been bad shooting this last year, as he says. The salmon-fishing sounds more likely; and then Carry could come with us in the boat – which would make it less dull for her. Anyhow, I have discovered the most remarkable man I have met with as yet in the old country; and to think of his being thrown away like that!'

CHAPTER II
MEENIE

We may now follow Ronald Strang as he walks along to his cottage, which, with its kennels and its shed for hanging up the slain deer, stands on a little plateau by the roadside, a short distance from the inn. The moonlight night is white and beautiful, but far from silent; for the golden plover are whistling and calling down by the lochside, and the snipe are sending their curious harsh note across the moorland wastes. Moreover, he himself seems to be in a gay mood (perhaps glad to be over the embarrassment of a first meeting with the stranger), and he is conversing amicably with his little terrier. The subject is rats. Whether the wise little Harry knows all that is said need not be determined; but he looks up from time to time and wags his stump of a tail as he trots placidly along. And so they get up to the cottage and enter, for the outer door is on the latch, thieves being unheard of in this remote neighbourhood; though here Harry hesitates, for he is uncertain whether he is to be invited into the parlour or not. But the next moment all consideration of this four-footed friend is driven out of his master's head. Ronald had expected to find the parlour empty, and his little sister, at present his sole housekeeper, retired to rest. But the moment he opens the door, he finds that not only is she there, sitting by the table

near to the solitary lamp, but that she has a companion with her. And well he knows who that must be.

'Dear me, Miss Douglas,' he exclaimed, 'have I kept you so late!'

The young lady, who now rose, with something of a flush over her features – for she had been startled by his sudden entrance – was certainly an extraordinarily pretty creature: not so much handsome, or distinguished, or striking, as altogether pretty and winning and gentle-looking. She was obviously of a pure Highland type: the figure slender and graceful, the head small and beautifully formed; the forehead rather square for a woman, but getting its proper curve from the soft and pretty hair; the features refined and intelligent; the mouth sensitive; the expression a curious sort of seeking to please, as it were, and ready to form itself into an abundant gratitude for the smallest act of kindness. Of course, much of this look was owing to her eyes, which were the true Highland eyes; of a blue gray these were, with somewhat dark lashes; wide apart, and shy, and apprehensive, they reminded one of the startled eyes of some wild animal; but they were, entirely human in their quick sympathy, in their gentleness, in their appeal to all the world, as it were, for a favouring word. As for her voice – well, if she used but few of the ordinary Highland phrases, she had undoubtedly a considerable trace of Highland accent; for, although her father was an Edinburgh man, her mother (as the elderly lady very soon let her neighbours know) was one of the Stuarts of Glengask and

Orosay; and then again Meenie had lived nearly all her life in the Highlands, her father never having risen above the position of a parish doctor, and welcoming even such local removals as served to improve his position in however slight a way.

'Maggie,' said Miss Douglas (and the beautiful wide-apart eyes were full of a shy apology), 'was feeling a little lonely, and I did not like to leave her.'

'But if I had known,' said he, 'I would not have stayed so late. The gentleman that is come about the shooting is a curious man; it's no the salmon and the grouse and the deer he wants to know about only; it's everything in the country. Now, Maggie, lass, get ye to bed. And I will see you down the road, Miss Douglas.'

'Indeed there is no need for that,' said Meenie, with downcast eyes.

'Would ye have a bogle run away with ye?' he said good-naturedly.

And so she bade good-night to the little Maggie, and took up some books and drawings she had brought to beguile the time withal; and then she went out into the clear night, followed by the young gamekeeper.

And what a night it was – or rather, might have been – for two lovers! The wide waters of the loch lay still and smooth, with a broad pathway of silver stretching away into the dusk of the eastern hills; not a breath of wind stirred bush or tree; and if Ben Clebrig in the south was mostly a bulk of shadow, far away before them in the northern skies rose the great shoulders of Ben

Loyal, pallid in the moonlight, the patches of snow showing white up near the stars. They had left behind them the little hamlet – which merely consisted of a few cottages and the inn; they were alone in this pale silent world. And down there, beneath the little bridge, ran the placid Mudal Water: and if they had a Bible with them? – and would stand each on one side of the stream? – and clasp hands across? It was a night for lovers' vows.

'Maggie is getting on well with her lessons,' the pretty young lady said, in that gentle voice of hers. 'She is very diligent.'

'I'm sure I'm much obliged to ye, Miss Douglas,' was the respectful answer, 'for the trouble ye take with her. It's an awkward thing to be sae far from a school. I'm thinking I'll have to send her to my brother in Glasgow, and get her put to school there.'

'Oh, indeed, indeed,' said she, 'that will be a change now. And who will look after the cottage for you, Ronald?'

She addressed him thus quite naturally, and without shyness; for no one ever dreamed of calling him anything else.

'Well, I suppose Mrs. MacGregor will give the place a redd[1] up from time to time. But a keeper has but half learned his business that canna shift for himself; there's some of the up-country lodges with ne'er a woman-body within a dozen miles o' them.'

'It is your brother the minister that Maggie will be going to?' she said.

[1] 'Redd,' a setting to rights.

'Oh yes; he is married, and has a family of his own; she will be comfortable there.'

'Well, it is strange,' said she, 'that you should have a brother in Glasgow, and I a sister, and that your mother should be Highland and mine too.'

But this was putting himself and her on much too common a footing; and he was always on his guard against that, however far her gentleness and good-nature might lead her.

'When is your father coming back, Miss Douglas?' said he.

'Well, I really do not know,' she said. 'I do not think he has ever had so wide a district to attend to, and we are never sure of his being at home.'

'It must be very lonely for a young lady brought up like you,' he ventured to say, 'that ye should have no companions. And for your mother, too; I wonder she can stand it.'

'Oh no,' she said, 'for the people are so friendly with us. And I do not know of any place that I like better.'

By this time they were come to the little wooden gate of the garden, and he opened that for her. Before them was the cottage, with its windows, despite the moonlight on the panes, showing the neat red blinds within. She gave him her hand for a second.

'Good night, Ronald,' said she pleasantly.

'Good night, Miss Douglas,' said he; 'Maggie must not keep you up so late again.'

And therewith he walked away back again along the white road, and only now perceived that by some accident his faithful

companion Harry had been shut in when they left. He also discovered, when he got home, that his sister Maggie had been so intent puzzling over some arithmetical mysteries which Meenie had been explaining to her, that she had still further delayed her going to bed.

'What, what?' said he, good-humouredly. 'Not in bed yet, lass?'

The little red-headed, freckled-faced lassie obediently gathered up her belongings, but at the door she lingered for a moment.

'Ronald,' said she, timidly, 'why do ye call Meenie "Miss Douglas?" It's not friendly.'

'When ye're a bit older, lass, ye'll understand,' he said, with a laugh.

Little Maggie was distressed in a vague way, for she had formed a warm affection for Meenie Douglas, and it seemed hard and strange that her own brother should show himself so distant in manner.

'Do you think she's proud? for she's not that,' the little girl made bold to say.

'Have ye never heard o' the Stuarts of Glengask?' said he; and he added grimly, 'My certes, if ye were two or three years older, I'm thinking Mrs. Douglas would have told ye ere now how Sir Alexander used to call on them in Edinburgh every time he came north. Most folk have heard that story. But however, when Meenie, as ye like to call her, goes to live in Edinburgh

or Glasgow, or some o' the big towns, of course she'll be Miss Douglas to every one, as she ought to be here, only that she's taken a fancy to you, and, my lass, fairly spoils ye with her kindness. Now, off with ye, and dinna fash your head about what I or any one else calls her; if she's content to be Meenie to you, ye should be proud enough.'

As soon as she was gone he stirred up the peats, lit his pipe, and drew in a chair to the small table near the fire. It was his first pipe that evening, and he wished to have it in comfort. And then, to pass the time, he unlocked and opened a drawer in the table, and began to rummage through the papers collected there – all kinds of shreds and fragments they were, scored over mostly in pencil, and many of them bearing marks as if the writing had been done outside in the rain.

The fact was, that in idle times, when there was no trapping to be done, or shooting of hoodie-crows, or breaking-in of young dogs, he would while away many an hour on the hillside or along the shores of the loch by stringing verses together. They were done for amusement's sake. Sometimes he jotted them down, sometimes he did not. If occasionally, when he had to write a letter to a friend of his at Tongue, or make some request of his brother in Glasgow, he put these epistles into jingling rhyme, that was about all the publication his poetical efforts ever achieved; and he was most particular to conceal from the 'gentry' who came down to the shooting any knowledge that he scribbled at all. He knew it would be against him. He had no wish to

figure as one of those local poets (and alas! they have been and are too numerous in Scotland) who, finding within them some small portion of the afflatus of a Burns, or a Motherwell, or a Tannahill, are seduced away from their lawful employment, gain a fleeting popularity in their native village, perhaps attain to the dignity of a notice in a Glasgow or Edinburgh newspaper, and subsequently and almost inevitably die of drink, in the most abject misery of disappointment. No; if he had any ambition it was not in that direction; it was rather that he should be known as the smartest deerstalker and the best trainer of dogs in Sutherlandshire. He knew where his strength lay, and where he found content. And then there was another reason why he could not court newspaper applause with these idle rhymes of his. They were nearly all about Meenie Douglas. Meenie-olatry was written all across those scribbled sheets. And of course that was a dark secret known only to himself; and indeed it amused him, as he turned over the loose leaves, to think that all the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay (and that most severe and terrible of them all, Mrs. Douglas) could not in the least prevent his saying to Meenie just whatever he pleased – within the wooden confines of this drawer. And what had he not said? Sometimes it was but a bit of careless singing —

> Roses white, roses red,
> Roses in the lane,
> Tell me, roses red and white,
> Where is Meenie gane?

O is she on Loch Loyal's side?
Or up by Mudal Water?
In vain the wild doves in the woods
Everywhere have sought her.

Roses white, roses red,
Roses in the lane,
Tell me, roses red and white,
Where is Meenie gane?

Well, now, supposing you are far away up on Ben Clebrig's slopes, a gun over your shoulder, and idly looking out for a white hare or a ptarmigan, if you take to humming these careless rhymes to some such tune as 'Cherry Ripe,' who is to hinder? The strongest of all the south winds cannot carry the tidings to Glengask nor yet to Orosay's shores. And so the whole countryside – every hill and stream and wood and rock – came to be associated with Meenie, and saturated with the praise and glory of her. Why, he made the very mountains fight about her!

Ben Loyal spake to Ben Clebrig,
And they thundered their note of war:
'You look down on your sheep and your sheepfolds;
I see the ocean afar.

'You look down on the huts and the hamlets,
And the trivial tasks of men;

I see the great ships sailing
Along the northern main.'

Ben Clebrig laughed, and the laughter
Shook heaven and earth and sea:
'There is something in that small hamlet
That is fair enough for me —

'Ay, fairer than all your sailing ships
Struck with the morning flame:
A fresh young flower from the hand of God —
Rose Meenie is her name!'

But at this moment, as he turned over this mass of scraps and fragments, there was one, much more audacious than the rest, that he was in search of, and when he found it a whimsical fancy got into his head. If he were to make out a fair copy of the roughly scrawled lines, and fold that up, and address it to Meenie, just to see how it looked? He took out his blotting-pad, and selected the best sheet of note-paper he could find; and then he wrote (with a touch of amusement, and perhaps of something else, too, in his mind the while) thus —

O wilt thou be my dear love?
(Meenie and Meenie),
O wilt thou be my ain love?
(My sweet Meenie),
Were you wi' me upon the hill,

It's I would gar the dogs be still,
We'd lie our lane and kiss our fill,
(My love Meenie).

Aboon the burn a wild bush grows
(Meenie and Meenie),
And on the lush there blooms a rose
(My sweet Meenie);
And wad ye tak the rose frae me,
And wear it where it fain would be,
It's to your arms that I would flee,
(Rose-sweet Meenie!)

He carefully folded the paper and addressed it outside – so:

Miss Wilhelmina Stuart Douglas,
Care of James Douglas, Esq., M.D.,
Inver-Mudal,
Sutherlandshire.

And then he held it out at arm's length, and regarded it, and laughed, in a contemptuous kind of way, at his own folly.

'Well,' he was thinking to himself, 'if it were not for Stuart of Glengask, I suppose the day might come when I could send her a letter like that; but as it is, if they were to hear of any such madness, Glengask and all his kith and kin would be for setting the heather on fire.'

He tossed the letter back on the blotting-pad, and rose and went and stood opposite the blazing peats. This movement

aroused the attention of the little terrier, who immediately jumped up from his snooze and began to whimper his expectation. Strang's heart smote him.

'God bless us!' he said aloud. 'When a lass gets into a man's head, there's room for nothing else; he'll forget his best friends. Here, Harry, come along, and I'll get ye your supper, my man.'

He folded up the blotting-pad and locked it in the drawer, blew out the candles, called Harry to follow him into the kitchen, where the small terrier was duly provided for and left on guard. Then he sought out his own small room. He was whistling as he went; and, if he dreamt of anything that night, be sure it was not of the might and majesty of Sir Alexander Stuart of Glengask and Orosay. These verses to Meenie were but playthings and fancies – for idle hours.

CHAPTER III
ON THE LOCH

A considerable wind arose during the night; Mr. Hodson did not sleep very well; and, lying awake towards morning, he came to the conclusion that he had been befooled, or rather that he had befooled himself, with regard to that prodigy of a gamekeeper. He argued with himself that his mental faculties must have been dulled by the long day's travel; he had come into the inn jaded and tired; and then finding himself face to face with an ordinarily alert and intrepid intellect, he had no doubt exaggerated the young man's abilities, and made a wonder of him where no wonder was needed. That he was a person of considerable information and showed common sense was likely enough. Mr. Hodson, in his studies of men and things, had heard something of the intelligence and education to be found among the working classes in Scotland. He had heard of the handloom weavers who were learned botanists; of the stone-masons who were great geologists; of the village poets who, if most of their efforts were but imitations of Ferguson and Burns and Tannahill, would here and there, in some chance moment of inspiration, sing out some true and pathetic song, to be taken to the hearts of their countrymen, and added to a treasure-store of rustic minstrelsy such as no other nation in the world has ever produced.

At the same time he was rather anxious to meet Strang again, the better to get the measure of him. And as he was also curious to see what this neighbourhood into which he had penetrated looked like, he rose betimes in the morning – indeed, before the day was fully declared.

The wind still moaned about the house, but outside there was no sign of any storm; on the contrary, everything was strangely calm. The lake lay a dark lurid purple in the hollow of the encircling hills; and these, along the eastern heavens, were of the deepest and softest olive green; just over them was a line of gleaming salmon-red, keen and resplendent as if molten from a furnace; and over that again soft saffron-dusky clouds, deepening in tone the higher they hung in the clear pale steel hues of the overhead sky. There was no sign of life anywhere – nothing but the birch woods sloping down to the shore; the moorland wastes of the lower hills; and above these the giant bulk and solemn shadows of Ben Clebrig,[2] dark against the dawn. It was a lovely sight; he began to think he had never before in his life felt himself so much alone. But whence came the sound of the wind that seemed to go moaning down the strath towards the purple lake?

Well, he made no doubt that it was up towards the north and west that the storm was brewing; and he remembered that a window in the sitting-room below looked in that direction; there he would be able to ascertain whether any fishing was practicable. He finished his dressing and went down. The

[2] That is, the Hill of the Playing Trout.

breakfast table was laid; a mighty mass of peats was blazing cheerfully in the spacious fireplace. And the storm? Why, all the wide strath on this northern side of the house was one glow of yellow light in the now spreading sunrise; and still farther away in the north the great shoulders of Ben Loyal[3] had caught a faint roseate tinge; and the same pale and beautiful colour seemed to transfuse a large and fleecy cloud that clung around the snow-scarred peak. So he came to the conclusion that in this corner of the glen the wind said more than it meant; and that they might adventure on the loch without risk of being swamped or blown ashore.

The slim tall Highland lass made her appearance with further plenishings for the table, and 'Good moarning!' she said, in her pretty way, in answer to his greeting.

'Say, now, has that man come down from Tongue yet?'

'No, sir,' said Nelly, 'he wass no come down yet.' And then she looked up with a demure smile. 'They would be keeping the New Year at Tongue last night.'

'Keeping the New Year on the 14th of January?'

'It's the twelfth is the usual day, sir,' she explained, 'but that was Saturday, and they do not like a Saturday night, for they have to stop at twelve o'clock, and so most of them were for keeping it last night.'

'Oh, indeed. Then the festive gentleman won't show up to-day?'

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[3] More properly Ben Laoghal, the Hill of the Calves.

'But it is of no matter whateffer whether he comes or no; for I am sure that Ronald will be willing to lend a hand. Oh, I am sure of it. I will ask him myself.'

'*You* will ask him?' was Mr. Hodson's internal soliloquy. 'It is to *you* he will grant the favour. Indeed!'

He fixed his eyes on her,

'He is a good-looking young fellow, that Ronald.'

She did not answer that; she was putting the marmalade, and the honey, and the cream on the table.

'He is not married?'

'No, sir.'

'Well, now, when he thinks about getting married, I suppose he'll pretty well have his choice about here?'

'Indeed there iss others besides him,' said Nelly rather proudly, but her face was red as she opened the door.

Well, whether it was owing to the intervention of Nelly or not, as soon as Mr. Hodson was ready to start he found Ronald waiting for him without; and not only that, but he had already assumed command of the expedition, having sent the one gillie who had arrived down to bale the boat. And then he would overhaul Mr. Hodson's fishing-gear – examining the rods, testing the lines and traces, and rejecting all the spoon baits, angels, sand-eels, and what not, that had been supplied by the London tackle-maker, for two or three of the familiar phantom minnows. Mr. Hodson could scarcely believe that this was the same man who last night had been discussing the disestablishment of state churches and

the policy of protecting native industries. He had not a word for anything but the business before him; and the bold fashion in which he handled those minnows, all bristling with hooks, or drew the catgut traces through his fingers (Mr. Hodson shivered, and seemed to feel his own fingers being cut to the bone), showed that he was as familiar with the loch as with the hillside or the kennel.

'I'm not much on salmon-fishing myself,' the American remarked modestly.

'It's rather early in the season, sir, I'm afraid,' was the answer. 'But we might get a fish after all; and if we do it'll be the first caught in Scotland this year, I warrant.'

They set out and walked down to the shore of the loch, and there Mr. Hodson seated himself on the gunwale of the flat-bottomed coble, and watched the two men putting the rods together and fixing the traces. The day had now declared itself; wild and stormy in appearance, but fair on the whole; great floods of sunshine falling suddenly on the yellow slopes and the russet birch woods; and shadows coming as rapidly across the far heights of Clebrig, steeping the mountains in gloom. As for the gillie who had been proof against the seductions of keeping the New Year, and who was now down on one knee, biting catgut with his teeth, he was a man as tall and as sallow as Mr. Hodson himself, but with an added expression of intense melancholy and hopelessness. Or was that but temporary?

'Duncan doesna like that boat,' Ronald said, glancing at Mr.

Hodson.

The melancholy man did not speak, but shook his head gloomily.

'Why?'

As the gillie did not answer, Ronald said —

'He thinks there is no luck with that boat.'

'That boat?' the gillie said, with an angry look towards the hapless coble. 'She has the worst luck of any boat in Sutherland —*tam her*,' he added, under his breath.

'In my country,' the American said, in his slow way, 'we don't mind luck much; we find perseverance about as good a horse to win with in the end.'

He was soon to have his perseverance tried. Everything being ready they pushed off from the shore, Ronald taking stroke oar, the gillie at the bow; Mr. Hodson left to pay out the lines of the two rods, and fix these in the stern, when about five-and-thirty yards had gone forth. At first, it is true, he waited and watched with a trifle of anxiety. He wanted to catch a salmon; it would be something to write about to his daughter; it would be a new experience for himself. But when time passed and the boat was slowly rowed along the loch at a measured distance from the shore, without any touch of anything coming to make the point of either rod tremble, he rather gave up his hope in that direction, and took to talking with Ronald. After all, it was not salmon-fishing alone that had brought him into these wilds.

'I suppose it is really too early in the season,' he observed,

without much chagrin.

'Raythеr,' said Ronald.

'Rawthеr,' said the melancholy gillie.

But at that instant something happened that startled every one of them out of their apathy. The top of one of the rods was violently pulled at, and then there was a long shrill yell of the reel.

'There he is, sir! there he is, sir!' Ronald called.

Mr. Hodson made a grab blindly – for he had been looking at the scenery around – at one of the rods. It was the wrong one. But before he knew where he was, Ronald had got hold of the other and raised the top so as to keep a strain on the fish. The exchange of the rods was effected in a moment. Then when Ronald had wound in the other line and put the rod at the bow, he took to his oar again, leaving Mr. Hodson to fight his unknown enemy as best he might, but giving him a few words of direction from time to time, quietly, as if it were all a matter of course.

'Reel in, sir, reel in – keep an even strain on him – let him go – let him go if he wants – '

Well, the fish was not a fierce fighter; after the first long rush he scarcely did anything; he kept boring downwards, with a dull, heavy weight. It seemed easy work; and Mr. Hodson – triumphant in the hope of catching his first salmon – was tempted to call aloud to the melancholy gillie —

'Well, Duncan, how about luck now?'

'I think it's a kelt,' the man answered morosely.

But the sinister meaning of this reply was not understood.

'I don't know what you call him,' said Mr. Hodson, holding on with both hands to the long, lithe grilse-rod that was bent almost double. 'Celt or Saxon, I don't know; but I seem to have got a good grip of him.'

'Then he heard Ronald say, in an undertone, to the gillie —

'A kelt? No fears. The first rush was too heavy for that.'

And the gillie responded sullenly —

'He's following the boat like a cow.'

'What is a kelt, anyway?' the American called out. 'Something that swims, I suppose? It ain't a man?'

'I hope it's no a kelt, sir,' said Ronald – but doubtfully.

'But what is a kelt, then, when he's at home?'

'A salmon, sir, that hasna been down to the sea; we'll have to put him back if he is.'

Whirr! went the reel again; the fish, kelt or clean salmon, had struck deep down. But the melancholy creature at the bow was taking no further interest in the fight. He was sure it was a kelt. Most likely the minnow would be destroyed. Maybe he would break the trace. But a kelt it was. He knew the luck of this 'tammed' boat.

The struggle was a tedious one. The beast kept boring down with the mere force of its weight, but following the coble steadily; and even Ronald, who had been combating his own doubts, at length gave in: he was afraid it was a kelt. Presently the last suspicion of hope was banished. With a tight strain on him, the now exhausted animal began to show near the surface of the

water – his long eel-like shape and black back revealing too obviously what manner of creature he was. But this revelation had no effect on the amateur fisherman, who at last beheld the enemy he had been fighting with so long. He grew quite excited. A kelt? – he was a beautiful fine fish! If he could not be eaten he could be stuffed! Twenty pounds he was, if an ounce! – would he throw back such a trophy into the loch?

Ronald was crouching in the stern of the boat, the big landing-net in his hand, watching the slow circling of the kelt as it was being hauled nearer and nearer. His sentiments were of a different kind.

'Ah, you ugly brute! – ah, you rascal! – ah – ah!' – and then there was a deep scoop of the landing-net; and the next minute the huge eel-like beast was in the bottom of the boat, Duncan holding on to its tail, and Ronald gripping it by the gills, while he set to work to get the minnow out of its jaws. And then without further ado – and without stopping to discuss the question of stuffing – the creature was heaved into the water again, with a parting benediction of 'Bah, you brute!' It took its leave rapidly.

'Well, it's a pity, sir,' Ronald said; 'that would have been a twenty-four-pound salmon if he had been down to the sea.'

'It's the luck of this tammed boat,' Duncan said gloomily.

But Mr. Hodson could not confess to any such keen sense of disappointment. He had never played so big a fish before, and was rather proud that so slight a grilse-rod and so slender a line should (of course, with some discretion and careful nursing on

his part) have overmastered so big a beast. Then he did not eat salmon; there was no loss in that direction. And as he had not injured the kelt in any way, he reflected that he had enjoyed half-an-hour's excitement without doing harm to anything or anybody, and he was well content. So he paid out the two lines again, and set the rods, and began to renew his talk with Ronald touching the customs connected with the keeping of the New Year.

After all, it was a picturesque kind of occupation, kelts or no kelts. Look at the scene around them – the lapping waters of the loch, a vivid and brilliant blue when the skies were shining fair, or black and stormy again when the clouds were heavy in the heavens; and always the permanent features of the landscape – the soft yellows of the lower straths, where the withered grass was mixed with the orange bracken; the soft russet of the leafless birch woods fringing the shores of the lake; the deep violet shadows of Ben Clebrig stretching up into the long swathes of mist; and then the far amphitheatre of hills – Ben Hee, and Ben Hope, and Ben Loyal – with sunlight and shade inter-mingling their ethereal tints, but leaving the snow-streaks always sparkling and clear. He got used to the monotony of the slow circling of the upper waters of the lake. He forgot to watch the points of the rods. He was asking all kinds of questions about the stags and the hinds, about ptarmigan, and white hares, and roe, about the price of sheep, the rents of crofts, the comparative wages of gillies, and shepherds, and foresters, and keepers, and stalkers,

and the habits and customs of land-agents and factors. And at length, when it came to lunch-time, and when they landed, and found for him a sheltered place under the lee of a big rock, and when Ronald pointed out to him a grassy bank, and said rather ruefully —

'I dinna like to see that place empty, sir. That's where the gentlemen have the salmon laid out, that they may look at them at lunch-time – '

Mr. Hodson, as he opened the little basket that had been provided for him, answered cheerfully enough —

'My good friend, don't you imagine that I feel like giving it up yet. I'm not finished with this lake, and I'll back perseverance against luck any day. Seems to me we've done very well so far; I'm con-tent.'

By and by they went back into the coble again, and resumed their patient pursuit; and there is little doubt that by this time Ronald had come to the conclusion that this stranger who had come amongst them was a singularly odd and whimsical person. It was remarkable enough that he should have undertaken this long and solitary journey in order to fish for salmon, and then show himself quite indifferent as to whether he got any or not; and it was scarcely human for any one to betray no disappointment whatever when the first fish caught proved to be a kelt; but it was still stranger that a man rich enough to talk about renting a deer-forest should busy himself with the petty affairs of the very poorest people around. Why, he wanted to

know how much Nelly the housemaid could possibly save on her year's wages; whether she was supposed to lay by something as against her wedding-day; or whether any of the lads about would marry her for her pretty face alone. And when he discovered that Mr. Murray, the innkeeper, was about to give a New Year supper and dance to the lads and lasses of the neighbourhood, he made no scruple about hinting plainly that he would be glad of an invitation to join that festive party.

'Not if I'm going to be anything of a wet blanket,' he said candidly. 'My dancing days are over, and I'm not much in the way of singing; but I'll tell them an American story; or I'll present them with a barrel of whisky – if that will keep the fun going.'

'I'm sure they'll be very glad, sir,' Ronald said, 'if ye just come and look on. When there's gentlemen at the Lodge, they generally come down to hear the pipes, and the young gentlemen have a dance too.'

'What night did you say?'

'Monday next, sir.'

Well, he had only intended remaining here for a day or two, to see what the place was like; but this temptation was too great. Here was a famous opportunity for the pursuit of his favourite study – the study of life and manners. This, had Ronald but known it, was the constant and engrossing occupation that enabled this contented traveller to accept with equanimity the ill-luck of kelt-catching; it was a hobby he could carry about with him everywhere; it gave a continuous interest to every hour of

his life. He cared little for the analyses of science; he cared less for philosophical systems; metaphysics he laughed at; but men and women – the problems of their lives and surroundings, their diverse fortunes and aspirations and dealings with each other – that was the one and constant subject that engrossed his interest. No doubt there was a little more than this; it was not merely as an abstract study that he was so fond of getting to know how people lived. The fact was that, even after having made ample provision for his family, he still remained possessed of a large fortune; his own expenditure was moderate; and he liked to go about with the consciousness that here or there, as occasion served, he could play the part of a little Providence. It was a harmless vanity; moreover, he was a shrewd man, not likely to be deceived by spurious appeals for charity. Many was the young artist whom he had introduced to buyers; many the young clerk whom he had helped to a better situation; more than one young woman in the humblest of circumstances had suddenly found herself enabled to purchase her wedding outfit (with a trifle over, towards the giving her greater value in her lover's eyes), through the mysterious benevolence of some unknown benefactor. This man had been brought up in a country where every one is restlessly pushing forward; and being possessed of abundant means, and a friendly disposition, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that here or there, at a fitting opportunity, he should lend a helping hand. And there was always this possibility present to him – this sense of power – as he made those minute inquiries of his into

the conditions of the lives of those amongst whom he chanced to be living.

The short winter day was drawing to a close; the brilliant steely blue of the driven water had given place to a livid gray; and the faint gleams of saffron-yellow were dying out in the western skies.

'Suppose we'd better be going home now,' Mr. Hodson remarked at a venture, and with no great disappointment in his tone.

'I'm afraid, sir, there's no much chance now,' Ronald said.

'We must call again; they're not at home to-day,' the other remarked, and began with much complacency to reel in one of the lines.

He was doing so slowly, and the men were as slowly pulling in for the shore in the gathering dusk, when *whirr!* went the other reel. The loud and sudden shriek in this silence was a startling thing; and no less so was the springing into the air – at apparently an immense distance away – of some creature, kelt or salmon, that fell into the water again with a mighty splash. Instinctively Mr. Hodson had gripped this rod, and passed the other one he had been reeling in to Strang. It was an anxious moment. *Whirr!* went another dozen yards of line; and again the fish sprang into the air – this time plainly visible.

'A clean fish, sir! a clean fish!' was the welcome cry.

But there was no time to hazard doubts or ask questions; this sudden visitor at the end of the line had not at all made up his

mind to be easily captured. First of all he came sailing in quietly towards the boat, giving the fisherman all he could do to reel in and keep a strain on him; then he whirled out the line so suddenly that the rod was nearly bent double; and then, in deep water, he kept persistently sulking and boring, refusing to yield an inch. This was a temporary respite.

'Well, now, is this one all right?' Mr. Hodson called out – but he was rather bewildered, for he knew not what this violent beast might not be after next, and the gathering darkness looked strange, the shadows of Clebrig overhead seeming to blot out the sky.

'A clean fish, sir,' was the confident answer.

'No doubt o' that, sir,' even the melancholy Duncan admitted; for he foresaw a dram now, if not a tip in actual money.

Then slowly and slowly the salmon began to yield to the strain on him – which was considerable, for this was the heavier of the two rods – and quickly the line was got in, the pliant curve of the rod remaining always the same; while Mr. Hodson flattered himself that he was doing very well now, and that he was surely becoming the master of the situation. But the next instant something happened that his mind was not rapid enough to comprehend: something dreadful and horrible and sudden: there was a whirring out of the reel so rapid that he had to lower the point of the rod almost to the water; then the fish made one flashing spring along the surface – and this time he saw the creature, a gleam of silver in the dusk – and then, to his

unspeakable dismay and mortification, he felt the line quite slack. He did utter a little monosyllable.

'He's off, sir,' the melancholy gillie said in a tone of sad resignation.

'Not a bit, sir, not a bit! Reel in, quick!' Ronald called to him: and the fisherman had sense enough to throw the rod as far back as he could to see if there was yet some strain on it. Undoubtedly the fish was still there. Moreover, this last cantrip seemed to have taken the spirit out of him. By and by, with a strong, steady strain on him, he suffered himself to be guided more and more towards the boat, until, now and again, they could see a faint gleam in the dark water; and now Ronald had relinquished his oar, and was crouching down in the stern – this time not with the landing-net in his hand, but with the bright steel clip just resting on the gunwale.

'He's showing the white feather now, sir; give him a little more of the butt.'

However, he had not quite given in yet: each time he came in sight of the boat he would make another ineffectual rush, but rarely getting down deeper than three or four yards. And then, with a short line and the butt well towards him, he began to make slow semicircles this way and that; and always he was being steadily hauled nearer the coble; until with one quick dip and powerful upward pull Ronald had got him transfixed on the gaff and landed – the huge, gleaming, beautiful silver creature! – in the bottom of the boat.

'Well done, sir! – a clean fish! – a beauty – the first caught in Scotland this year, I know!' – these were the exclamations he heard now; but he scarcely knew how it had all happened, for he had been more excited than he was aware of. He felt a vague and general sense of satisfaction; wanted to give the men a glass of whisky, and had none to give them; thought that the capture of a salmon was a noble thing; would have liked his daughter Carry to hear the tidings at once; and had a kind of general purpose to devote the rest of that year to salmon-fishing in the Highlands. From this entrancement he was awakened by a dispute between the two men as to the size of the fish.

'He's twelve pounds, and no more,' the melancholy Duncan said, eyeing him all over.

'Look at his shoulders, man,' Ronald rejoined. 'Fourteen pounds if he's an ounce. Duncan, lad, ye've been put off your guessing by the sight of the kelt.'

'He's a good fish whateffer,' Duncan was constrained to admit – for he still foresaw that prospect of a dram when they returned to the inn, with perhaps a more substantial handselling of good luck.

Of course, they could do no more fishing that afternoon, for it was nearly dark; but it was wonderful how the capture of this single salmon seemed to raise the spirits of the little party as they got ashore and walked home. There was a kind of excitement in the evening air. They talked in a rapid and eager way – about what the fish had done; what were the chances of such and such

a rush; the probable length of time it had been up from the sea; the beauty of its shape; the smallness of its head; the freshness of its colour, and so forth – and there was a kind of jubilation abroad. The first fish caught in Scotland that year! – of course, it must be packed forthwith and sent south to his daughter Carry and her friends. And Mr. Hodson was quite facetious with the pretty Nelly when she came in to lay the table for dinner; and would have her say whether she had not yet fixed her mind on one or other of these young fellows around. As for the small hamlet of Inver-Mudal, it was about as solitary and forlorn a habitation as any to be found in the wilds of northern Scotland; and he was there all by himself; but with the blazing peat-fire, and the brilliant white cloth on the dinner-table, and the consciousness that the firm, stout-shouldered, clean-run fourteen-pounder was lying in the dairy on a slab of cold stone, he considered that Inver-Mudal was a most enjoyable and sociable and comfortable place, and that he had not felt himself so snug and so much at home for many and many a day.

CHAPTER IV
A LETTER

After dinner he found himself with a pretty long evening before him, and thought he could not do better than devote the major part of it to writing to his daughter. He would not confess to himself that he wanted her to know at once that he had caught his first salmon; that was but a trivial incident in the life of a philosopher and student of mankind; still she would be glad to hear of his adventures; and it was not an unpleasant way of passing the time. So he wrote as follows: —

'MY DARLING CARRY – You will be rejoiced to learn that I have discovered a harbour of refuge for you, where that minute organ you call your mind may lay aside its heaviest load of trouble. Here, at last, is one corner of Europe where you need have no fear of anybody mistaking you for one of the Boston girls of fiction; indeed you might go about all day talking your beloved Texas with impunity; although, my dear young lady, that is a habit you would do well to drop, for sooner or later it will get you into trouble when you are least expecting it. But short of scalping children or using a bowie-knife for a fork, I think you might do or say anything you pleased here; it is the most out-of-the-world sort of place; a community of fifteen or twenty, I should guess, hidden away in a hole of a valley, and separated

from the rest of the universe by great ranges of mountains and interminable miles of moorland. The people seem very friendly, but shy; and I don't quite catch on to them yet, for their speech bothers me – scarcely any two of them seem to have the same accent; but I hope to get to know something more about them next Monday, when they have a New Year celebration, which I am invited to the same. Would you like to join in? By all means come if you care to; the station is Lairg; wire, and I will meet you there. You will miss the wild excitement of paying afternoon calls and drinking tea; but you will get sunlight and fresh air into your lungs. The talk about the fierce weather is all nonsense. There is a sprinkling of snow on the higher hills, but the temperature is quite agreeable. In any case I expect you to come here with me in March, when the salmon-fishing will begin in earnest; and I have no doubt you will have made the acquaintance of the whole of the people in a couple of days, shy as they are. There is another point I have not forgotten. As you seem determined to set yourself up for your lifetime with reminiscences of your travels in Europe, I have had to consider what you could carry away from here. I am afraid that Inver-Mudal jewellery wouldn't make much of a show; and I haven't seen any shell necklaces or silk scarves or blue pots about. But what about a Highland maid? I suppose the N.Y. Customs officers wouldn't charge much for that article of *vertu*. Now the maid who waits on me here is very pretty and gentle in manner; and I suppose she could be induced to go – for a proper consideration; and you could begin the training of her

now, and have her quite accomplished by the time we got home. Sounds rather like slavery, don't it? – but she would be going to the land of the free, and the banner would wave over her. She gets eighty dollars a year and her board; I'd go better than that, if you took a fancy to her.

'But the most remarkable person here – perhaps it is the contrast between his personal abilities and his position that is the striking thing – is a deerstalker and gamekeeper whom they familiarly call Ronald; and I confess that, with all I had heard of the intelligence of the Scotch peasantry, this fellow, before I had been talking with him ten minutes, rather made me open my eyes. And yet, looking back over the different subjects we fell upon, I don't know that he said anything so very remarkable on any one of them. I think it is rather the personal character of the man that is impressive – the manliness and independence of his judgment, and yet his readiness to consider the other side if you can convince him; his frank (and, I should say, foolish) recognition of the differences of social position; and then a kind of curious self-respect he has which refuses to allow him to become quite friendly, though you may be willing enough to forget that you are talking of taking a shooting on which he is one of the *employés*, and anxious only to converse with him as man to man. I'm afraid this is rather mixed, but you would have to see him to understand quite well what manner of person he is – a good-looking fellow too, well knit together, with a keen, hard face, full of life and a half-concealed force of humour. I

should judge he would make a pretty fair king of good company in the unrestrained intercourse of a few boon companions; and I imagine he has a hard head if there should be any drinking going on. What to do with him I don't know. It is absurd he should be where he is. His brother has been to college, taken his degree, and is now in the Scotch Church somewhere. But this fellow seems quite content to trap foxes and shoot gray crows, and, in the autumn, look after the grouse-shooting and deerstalking of other people. A man of his brains would not be in that position for a fortnight in our country. Here everything is fixed. He thinks it is *natural* for him to be in a subservient position. And yet there is a curious independence about the fellow; I don't know what inducement I could put before him to get him out of it. Suppose we said, "Come you with us to America, and we'll run you for President;" I'm afraid he'd quote Kingsley in our face, and be off to "where the dun deer lie." In fact his reverence for the star-spangled banner appears to be of a mitigated description. I found he knew more than I expected about our wire-pulling gentry at home; but then, on the other hand, I discovered that he knew nothing about the necessity of protecting the industries of a young country beyond what he had read in the English papers, and you know what high old Mother Hubbardism that is. Now I want to do something for this fellow, and don't know how. He's too good a man to be thrown away – a kind of upper servant, as it were, of his lordship. He has plenty of ability and he has plenty of knowledge in a dozen different directions, if they could only

be *applied*. But then he is a dogged kind of a creature – he is not pliant; if you can show him sufficient reason for changing he might change, otherwise not one inch will he budge. What is the inducement to be? It is useless offering him an allotment of land in Nebraska; here he has miles and miles of the most picturesque territory conceivable, of which, save for a month or two in the autumn, he is the absolute master. He enjoys an ownership over these hills and moors and lochs more obvious than that of the Duke himself; he would not exchange that for the possession of a bit of table-land on the Platte Valley, unless he were a fool, and that he is far from being. The Presidentship? Well, I waved your beloved banner over him, but he didn't enthuse worth a cent. However, I must cast about and see what is to be done with him, for I am really interested in the man.'

At this moment there was a tapping at the door, and Nelly appeared with a huge armful of peats, which she began to build up dexterously in the fireplace, always leaving a central funnel open.

'Say, my girl, when will this letter go south?' Mr. Hodson asked.

'To-morrow moarning,' was the answer.

'And the fish, too?'

'Yes, sir, by the mail cart.'

'Has Duncan packed it in the rushes yet?'

'Oh no, sir, Ronald will do that; he can do it better as any of them; he would not let any one else do it, for they're saying it

iss the first fish of the year, and he's very proud of your getting the fish, sir.'

'*Ich auch!*' observed Mr. Hodson to himself; and he would probably have continued the conversation, but that suddenly a strange noise was heard, coming from some distant part of the inn – a harsh, high, note, all in monotone.

'What's that now, Nelly?'

'It will be Ronald tuning his pipes,' said she, as she was going to the door.

'Oh, he can play the pipes too?'

'Indeed, yes, sir; and better as any in Sutherland, I hef heard them say,' she added.

Just as she opened the door the drones and chanter broke away into a shrill and lively march that seemed to flood the house with its penetrating tones.

'I think it's "Dornoch Links" he's playing,' Nelly said, with a quiet smile, 'for there's some of the fisher-lads come through on their way to Tongue.'

She left then; but the solitary occupant of the sitting-room thought he could not do better than go to the door and listen for a while to this strange sort of music, which he had never heard played properly before. And while he could scarcely tell one tune from another except by the time – the slow, wailing, melancholy Lament, for example, was easily enough distinguished from the bright and lively Strathspey – here and there occurred an air – the '79th's Farewell,' or the 'Barren Rocks of Aden,' or the 'Pibroch

of Donald Dhu,' had he but known the names of them – which had a stately and martial ring about it; he guessed that it was meant to lead the tramp of soldiers. And he said to himself —

'Here, now, is this fellow, who might be piper to a Highland regiment, and I daresay all the use he makes of his skill is to walk up and down outside the dining-room window of the Lodge and play to a lot of white-kneed Englishmen when they come down for the autumn shooting.'

He returned to his letter.

'I have the honour to inform you that the first salmon caught on any Scotch loch this year was caught by me this afternoon, and to-morrow will be on its way to you. If you don't believe the story, look at the salmon itself for evidence. And as regards this loch-fishing, it appears to me you might have a turn at it when we come up in March – taking one of the two rods; a little practice with Indian clubs meanwhile would enable you to make a better fight of it when you have to keep a continuous strain on a fourteen-pound fish for twenty minutes or half an hour. You must have some amusement or occupation; for there is no society – except, by the way, the doctor's daughter, who might be a companion for you. I have not seen her yet; but the handmaiden I have mentioned above informs me that she is "a ferry pretty young lady, and ferry much thought of, and of a ferry great family too." I should not imagine, however, that her Highland pride of blood would bar the way against your making her acquaintance; her father is merely the parish doctor – or rather, the district

doctor, for he has either two or three parishes to look after – and I don't suppose his emoluments are colossal. They have a pretty cottage; it is the swell feature of the village, if you can call the few small and widely scattered houses a village. You could practise Texas talk on her all day long; I daresay she wouldn't know.

'Good-night; it's rather sleepy work being out in that boat in the cold. Good-night, good-night; and a kiss from the Herr Papa.'

Well, by this time the fisher-lads had left the inn and were off on the way to Tongue – and glad enough to have a moonlight night for the weary trudge. Ronald remained behind for a while, drinking a glass of ale with the inn-keeper; and generally having to keep his wits about him, for there was a good deal of banter going on. Old John Murray was a facetious person, and would have it that Nelly was setting her cap at Ronald; while the blushing Nelly, for her part, declared that Ronald was nothing but a poor south-country body; while he in fair warfare had to retort that she was 'as Hielan's a Mull-drover.' The quarrel was not a deadly one; and when Ronald took up his pipes in order to go home, he called out to her in parting —

'Nelly, lass, see you get the lads to clean out the barn ere Monday next; and put on your best ribbons, lassie; I'm thinking they'll be for having a spring o' Tullochgorum.'

The pipes were over his shoulder as he walked away along the moonlit road; but he did not tune up; he had had enough playing for that evening. And be sure that in his mind there was no discontent because he had no allotment of land on the Platte

Valley, nor yet a place in a Chicago bank, nor the glory of being pipe-major to a Highland regiment. He was perfectly content as he was; and knew naught of these things. If there was any matter troubling him – on this still and moonlight night, as he walked blithely along, inhaling the keen sweet air, and conscious of the companionship of the faithful Harry – it was that the jog-trot kind of tune he had invented for certain verses did not seem to have sufficient definiteness about it. But then the verses themselves – as they kept time to his tramp on the road – were careless and light-hearted enough:

> The blossom was white on the blackthorn tree,
> And the mavis was singing rarely;
> When Meenie, Love Meenie, walked out wi' me,
> All in the springtime early.
>
> 'Meenie, Love Meenie, your face let me see,
> Meenie, come answer me fairly;
> Meenie, Love Meenie, will you wed me,
> All in the springtime early?'
>
> Meenie but laughed; and kentna the pain
> That shot through my heart fu' sairly:
> 'Kind sir, it's a maid that I would remain,
> All in the springtime early.'

And 'Hey, Harry, lad,' he was saying, as he entered the cottage and went into the little parlour, where a candle had been left

burning, 'we'll have our supper together now; for between you and me I'm just as hungry as a gled.'

CHAPTER V
BEGINNINGS

Next day promised to give them sharper work on the loch. The weather had changed towards the morning; showers of hail had fallen; and now all the hills around – Ben Hee and Ben Hope and Ben Loyal – had their far peaks and shoulders powdered over, while the higher slopes and summit of the giant Clebrig were one solid mass of white. It was much colder, too; and the gusts of wind that came hurling along Strath Terry[#] struck down on the loch, spreading out like black fans, and driving the darkened water into curling crisp foam. It was a wild, changeable, blowy morning; sunlight and gloom intermingled; and ever the wind howled and moaned around the house, and the leafless trees outside bent and shivered before the wintry blast.

[#] No doubt corrupted from *Strath Tairibh*, the Strath of the Bull.

When the tall Highland lass brought in breakfast it appeared that the recusant gillie had not yet come down from Tongue; but it was no matter, she said; she would call Ronald. Now this exactly suited Mr. Hodson, who wanted to have some further speech with the young man – in view of certain far-reaching designs he had formed; and what better opportunity for talk than the placid trolling for salmon on the lake there? But courtesy demanded

some small protest.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.