BLACK WILLIAM

WHITE HEATHER: A NOVEL (VOLUME 3 OF 3)

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A MESSAGE

Clear and brilliant in their blue and white are these shining northern skies; and the winds that come blowing over the moorland are honey-scented from the heather; and the wide waters of the loch are all of a ruffled and shimmering silver, with a thin fringe of foam along the curving bays. And this is Love Meenie that comes out from the cottage and comes down to the road; with perhaps less of the wild-rose tint in her cheeks than used to be there, and less of the ready light of gladness that used to leap into her blue-gray eyes; but still with that constant gentleness of expression that seems to bring her into accord with all the beautiful things in the landscape around her. And, indeed, on this particular morning she is cheerful enough; walking briskly, chatting to the ancient terrier that is trotting at her side, and equably regarding now the velvet-soft shadows that steal along the sunlit slopes of Clebrig, and now the wheeling

and circling of some peewits that have been startled from their marshy haunts by the side of the stream.

'And who knows but that there may be a message or a bit of news for us this morning?' she says to the faithful Harry. 'For yonder comes the mail. And indeed it's well for you, my good little chap, that you can't understand how far away Glasgow is; I suppose you expect to see your master at any minute, at every turn of the road. And if he should send you a message – or Maggie either – how am I to tell you?'

The pretty Nelly is at the door of the inn, scattering food to the fowls.

'It's a peautiful moarning, Miss Douglas,' she says.

And here is Mr. Murray, with his pipe, and his occultly humorous air.

'And are you come along for your letters, Miss Meenie?' he says. 'Ay, ay, it is not an unusual thing for a young leddy to be anxious about a letter – it is not an unusual thing at ahl.'

And now the mail-car comes swinging up to the door; the one or two passengers alight, glad to stretch their legs; the letter bags are hauled down, and Miss Douglas follows them indoors. Mrs. Murray, who acts as post-mistress, is not long in sorting out the contents.

'Two for me?' says Meenie. 'And both from Glasgow? Well, now, that does not often happen.'

But of course she could not further interrupt the post-mistress in the performance of her duties; so she put the letters in her

pocket; passed out from the inn and through the little crowd of loiterers; and made for the high-road and for home. She was in no hurry to open these budgets of news. Such things came but once in a while to this remote hamlet; and when they did come they were leisurely and thoroughly perused – not skimmed and thrown aside. Nevertheless when she got up to the high-road she thought she would pause there for just a second, and run her eye over the pages, lest there might be some mention of Ronald's name. She had heard of him but little of late; and he had never once written to her – perhaps he had no excuse for doing so. It was through Maggie that from time to time she got news of him; and now it was Maggie's letter that she opened first.

Well, there was not much about Ronald. Maggie was at school; Ronald was busy; he seldom came over to the minister's house. And so Meenie, with a bit of a sigh, put that letter into her pocket, and turned to the other. But now she was indifferent and careless. It was not likely that her sister had anything to say about Ronald; for he had not yet called at the house. Moreover, Mrs. Gemmill, from two or three expressions she had used, did not seem anxious to make his acquaintance.

And then the girl's breath caught, and she became suddenly pale. '*Drinking himself to death, in the lowest of low company*' – these were the words confronting her startled eyes; and the next instant she had darted a glance along the road, and another back towards the inn, as if with a sudden strange fear that some one had overseen. No, she was all alone; with the quickly closed letter

in her trembling hand; her brain bewildered; her heart beating; and with a kind of terror on her face. And then, rather blindly, she turned and walked away in the other direction – not towards her own home; and still held the letter tightly clasped, as if she feared that some one might get at this ghastly secret.

'*Ronald! – Ronald!*' – there was a cry of anguish in her heart; for this was all too sharp and sudden an end to certain wistful dreams and fancies. These were the dreams and fancies of long wakeful nights, when she would lie and wonder what was the meaning of his farewell look towards her; and wonder if he could guess that his going away was to change all her life for her; and wonder whether, if all things were to go well with him, he would come back and claim her love – that was there awaiting him, and would always await him, whether he ever came back or no. And sometimes, indeed, the morning light brought a joyous assurance with it; she knew well why he had not ventured to hand her that tell-tale message that he had actually written out and addressed to her; but in the glad future, when he could come with greater confidence and declare the truth – would she allow father, or mother, or any one else to interfere? On these mornings the Mudal-Water seemed to laugh as it went rippling by; it had a friendly sound; she could hear it

> 'Move the sweet forget-me-nots
> That grow for happy lovers.'

And at such times her favourite and secret reading was of women who had been bold and generous with their love; and she feared she had been timid and had fallen in too easily with her mother's schemes for her; but now that she understood herself better – now that her heart had revealed itself plainly to her – surely, if ever that glad time were to come – if ever she were to see him hasten along to the little garden-gate – on the very first moment of his arrival – she would not stint her welcome of him? White, white were the mornings on which such fancies filled her head; and the Mudal laughed along its clear brown shallows; and there was a kind of music in the moorland air.

'*Drinking himself to death, in the lowest of low company:*' black night seemed to have fallen upon her, and a wild bewilderment, and a crushing sense of hopelessness that shut out for ever those fair visions of the future. She did not stay to ask whether this might not be a woman's exaggeration or the mere gossip of a straitlaced set; the blow had fallen too suddenly to let her reason about it; she only knew that the very pride of her life, the secret hope of her heart, had been in a moment extinguished. And Ronald – Ronald that was ever the smartest and handsomest of them all – the gayest and most audacious, the very king of all the company whithersoever he went – was it this same Ronald who had in so short a time become a bleared and besotted drunkard, shunning the public ways, hiding in ignoble haunts, with the basest of creatures for his only friends? And she – that had been so proud of him – that had been so assured of his future – nay,

that had given him the love of her life, and had sworn to herself that, whether he ever came to claim it or no, no other man should take his place in her heart – she it was who had become possessed of this dreadful secret, while all the others were still imagining that Ronald was as the Ronald of yore. She dared not go back to Inver-Mudal – not yet, at least. She went away along the highway; and then left that for a path that led alongside a small burn; and by and by, when she came to a place where she was screened from all observation by steep and wooded banks, she sat down there with some kind of vague notion that she ought more carefully to read this terrible news; but presently she had flung herself, face downward, on the heather, in an utter agony of grief, and there she lay and sobbed and cried, with her head buried in her hands. '*Ronald! Ronald!*' her heart seemed to call aloud in its despair; but how was any appeal to be carried to him – away to Glasgow town? And was this the end? Was he never coming back? The proud young life that promised so fair to be sucked under and whirled away in a black current; and as for her – for her the memory of a few happy days spent on Mudal's banks, and years and years of lonely thinking over what might have been.

A sharp whistle startled her; and she sprang to her feet, and hastily dried her eyes. A Gordon setter came ranging through the strip of birch-wood, and then its companion; both dogs merely glanced at her – they were far too intent on their immediate work to take further notice. And then it quickly occurred to her that, if this were Lord Ailine who was coming along, perhaps she might

appeal to him – she might beg of him to write to Ronald – or even to go to Glasgow – for had not these two been companions and friends? And he was a man – he would know what to do – what could she do, a helpless girl? Presently Lord Ailine appeared, coming leisurely along the banks of the little stream in company with a keeper and a young lad; and when he saw her, he raised his cap and greeted her.

'Don't let us disturb you, Miss Douglas,' said he. 'Gathering flowers for the dinner-table, I suppose?'

'I hope I have done no harm,' said she, though her mind was so agitated that she scarcely knew what she said. 'I – I have not seen any birds – nor a hare either.'

'Harm? No, no,' he said good-naturedly. 'I hope your mamma is quite well. There's a haunch of a roe-buck at the lodge that Duncan can take along this afternoon – '

'Your lordship,' said the keeper reprovingly, 'there's Bella drawing on to something.'

'Good morning, Miss Douglas,' he said quickly, and the next moment he was off.

But even during that brief interview she had instinctively arrived at the conclusion that it was not for her to spread about this bruit in Inver-Mudal. She could not. This news about Ronald to come from her lips – with perhaps this or that keeper to carry it on to the inn and make it the topic of general wonder there? They would hear of it soon enough. But no one – not even any one in her own household – would be able to guess what it meant

to her; as yet she herself could hardly realise it, except that all of a sudden her life seemed to have grown dark.

She had to get back to the cottage in time for the mid-day dinner, and she sate at table there, pale and silent, and with a consciousness as of guilt weighing upon her. She even did her best to eat something, in order to avoid their remarks and looks; but she failed in that, and was glad to get away as soon as she could to the privacy of her own room.

'I'm sure I don't know what's the matter with Williamina,' Mrs. Douglas said with a sigh. 'She has not been looking herself for many a day back; and she seems going from bad to worse – she ate hardly a scrap at dinner.'

Of course it was for the Doctor to prescribe.

'She wants a change,' he said.

'A change,' the little dame retorted with some asperity, for this was a sore subject with her. 'She would have had a change long before now, but for her and you together. Three months ago I wanted her sent to Glasgow – '

'Glasgow – for any one in indifferent health – ' the highland Doctor managed to interpolate; but she would not listen.

'I'm sure I don't understand the girl. She has no proper pride. Any other girl in her position would be glad to have such chances, and eager to make use of them. But no – she would sooner go looking after a lot of cottar's children than set to work to qualify herself for taking her proper place in society; and what is the use of my talking when you encourage her in her idleness?'

'I like to have the girl at home,' he said, rather feebly.

'There,' she said, producing a letter and opening it – although he had heard the contents a dozen times before. 'There it is – in black and white – a distinct invitation. "Could you let Meenie come to us for a month or six weeks when we go to Brighton in November?"'

'Well,' said the good-natured Doctor, 'that would be a better kind of a change. Sea-air – sunlight – plenty of society and amusement.'

'She shall not go there, nor anywhere else, with my cousin and his family, until she has fitted herself for taking such a position,' said the little woman peremptorily. 'Sir Alexander is good-nature itself, but I am not going to send him a half-educated Highland girl that he would be ashamed of. Why, the best families in England go to Brighton for the winter – every one is there. It would be worse than sending her to London. And what does this month or six weeks mean? – Surely it is plain enough. They want to try her. They want to see what her accomplishments are. They want to see whether they can take her abroad with them, and present her at Paris and Florence and Rome. Every year now Sir Alexander goes abroad at Christmas time; and of course if she satisfied them she would be asked to go also – and there, think of that chance!'

'The girl is well enough,' said he.

She was on the point of retorting that, as far as he knew anything about the matter, Williamina was well enough. But she

spared him.

'No, she has no proper pride,' the little Dresden-china woman continued. 'And just now, when everything is in her favour. Agatha never had such chances. Agatha never had Williamina's good looks. Of course, I say nothing against Mr. Gemmill – he is a highly respectable man – and if the business is going on as they say it is going, I don't see why they should not leave Queen's Crescent and take a larger house – up by the West End Park. And he is an intelligent man, too; the society they have is clever and intellectual – you saw in Agatha's last letter about the artists' party she had – why, their names are in every newspaper – quite distinguished people, in that way of life. And, at all events, it would be a beginning. Williamina would learn something. Agatha is a perfect musician – you can't deny that.'

But here the big Doctor rebelled; and he brought the weight of his professional authority to bear upon her.

'Now, look here, Jane, when I said that the girl wanted a change, I meant a change; but not a change to singing-lessons, and music-lessons, and German lessons, and Italian lessons, and not a change to an atmosphere like that of Glasgow. Bless my soul, do you think *that* kind of change will bring back the colour to her cheek, and give her an appetite, and put some kind of cheerfulness into her? Queen's Crescent! She's not going to Queen's Crescent with my will. Brighton, if you like.'

'Brighton? To get herself laughed at, and put in the background, as a half-educated ignorant Highland peasant girl?

So long as she is what she is, she shall not go to Brighton with my will.'

So here was an absolute dead-lock so far as Meenie's future was concerned; but she knew nothing of it; and if she had known she would not have heeded much. It was not of her own future she was thinking. And it seemed so terrible to her to know that there was nothing she would not have adventured to save this man from destruction, and to know that she was incapable of doing anything at all. If she could but see him for a moment – to make an appeal to him; if she could but take his hand in hers; would she not say that there had been timidity, doubt, misapprehension in the past, but that now there was no time for any of these; she had come to claim him and save him and restore him to himself – no matter what he might think of her? Indeed she tried to put all thought of herself out of the matter. She would allow no self-pride to interfere, if only she could be of the smallest aid to him, if she could stretch out her hand to him, and appeal to him, and drag him back. But how? She seemed so helpless. And yet her anxiety drove her to the consideration of a hundred wild and impossible schemes, insomuch that she could not rest in her own room, to which she had retreated for safety and quiet. She put on her bonnet again and went out – still with that guilty consciousness of a secret hanging over her; and she went down the road and over the bridge; and then away up the solitary valley through which the Mudal flows. Alas! there was no laughing over the brown shallows now; there was no thinking of

'the sweet forget-me-nots,
That grow for happy lovers';

all had become dark around her; and the giant grasp of Glasgow had taken him away from her, and dragged him down, and blotted out for ever the visions of a not impossible future with which she had been wont to beguile the solitary hours. '*Drinking himself to death, in the lowest of low company:*' could this be Ronald, that but a few months ago had been the gayest of any, with audacious talk of what he was going to try for, with health and happiness radiant in his eyes? And it seemed to her that her sister Agatha had been proud of writing these words, and proud of the underlining of them, and that there was a kind of vengeance in them; and the girl's mouth was shut hard; and she was making vague and fierce resolutions of showing to all of them – far and near – that she was not ashamed of her regard for Ronald Strang, gamekeeper or no gamekeeper, if ever the chance should serve. Ashamed! He had been for her the very king of men – in his generosity, his courage, his gentleness, his manliness, his modesty, and his staunch and unfaltering fealty to his friends. And was he to fall away from that ideal, and to become a wreck, a waif, an outcast; and she to stand by and not stretch out a hand to save?

But what could she do? All the day she pondered; all the evening; and through the long, silent, and wakeful night. And

when, at last, as the gray of the dawn showed in the small window, she had selected one of these hundred bewildered plans and schemes, it seemed a fantastic thing that she was about to do. She would send him a piece of white heather. He would know it came from her – he would recognise the postmark, and also her handwriting. And if he took it as a message and an appeal, as a token of good wishes and friendliness, and the hope of better fortune? Or if – and here she fell a-trembling, for it was a little cold in these early hours – if he should take it as a confession, as an unmaidenly declaration? Oh, she did not care. It was all she could think of doing; and do something she must. And she remembered with a timid and nervous joy her own acknowledged influence over him – had not Maggie talked of it a thousand times? – and if he were to recognise this message in its true light, what then? '*Ronald! Ronald!*' her heart was still calling, with something of a tremulous hope amid all its grief and pity.

She was out and abroad over the moorland long before any one was astir, and searching with an anxious diligence, and as yet without success. White heather is not so frequently met with in the North as in the West Highlands; and yet in Sutherlandshire it is not an absolute rarity; many a time had she come across a little tuft of it in her wanderings over the moors. But now, search as she might, she could not find the smallest bit; and time began to press; for this was the morning for the mail to go south – if she missed it, she would have to wait two more days. And as half-hour after half-hour went by, she became more anxious

and nervous and agitated; she went rapidly from knoll to knoll, seeking the likeliest places; and all in vain. It was a question of minutes now. She could hear the mail-cart on the road behind her; soon it would pass her and go on to the inn, where it would remain but a brief while before setting out again for Lairg. And presently, when the mail-cart did come along and go by, then she gave up the quest in despair; and in a kind of bewildered way set out for home. Her heart was heavy and full of its disappointment; and her face was paler a little than usual; but at least her eyes told no tales.

And then, all of a sudden, as she was crossing the Mudal bridge, she caught sight of a little tuft of gray away along the bank and not far from the edge of the stream. At first she thought it was merely a patch of withered heather; and then a wild hope possessed her; she quickly left the bridge and made her way towards it; and the next moment she was joyfully down on her knees, selecting the whitest spray she could find. And the mail-cart? – it would still be at the inn – the inn was little more than half a mile off – could she run hard and intercept them after all, and send her white-dove message away to the south? To think of it was to try it, at all events; and she ran as no town-bred girl ever ran in her life – past the Doctor's cottage, along the wide and empty road, past the keeper's house and the kennels, across the bridge that spans the little burn. Alas! there was the mail-cart already on its way.

'Johnnie, Johnnie!' she called.

Happily the wind was blowing towards him; he heard, looked back, and pulled up his horses.

'Wait a minute – I have a letter for you to take!' she called, though her strength was all gone now.

And yet she managed to get quickly down to the inn, and astonished Mrs. Murray by breathlessly begging for an envelope.

'Tell Nelly – tell Nelly,' she said, while her trembling fingers wrote the address, 'to come and take this to the mail-cart – they're waiting – Johnnie will post it at Lairg.'

And then, when she had finished the tremulous address, and carefully dried it with the blotting-paper, and given the little package to Nelly, and bade her run – quick, quick – to hand it to the driver, then the girl sank back in the chair and began laughing in a strange, half-hysterical way, and then that became a burst of crying, with her face hidden in her hands. But the good-hearted Mrs. Murray was there; and her arms were round the girl's neck; and she was saying, in her gentle Highland way —

'Well, well, now, to think you should hef had such a run to catch the mail-cart – and no wonder you are dead-beat – ay, ay, and you not looking so well of late, Miss Meenie. But you will just rest here a while; and Nelly will get you some tea; and there is no need for you to go back home until you have come to yourself better. No, you hef not been looking well lately; and you must not tire yourself like this – dear me, the place would be quite different althogether if anything was to make you ill.'

CHAPTER II
IN GLASGOW TOWN

It was as late as half-past ten o'clock – and on a sufficiently gray and dull and cheerless morning – that Ronald's landlady, surprised not to have heard him stirring, knocked at his room. There was no answer. Then she knocked again, opened the door an inch or two, and dropped a letter on the floor.

'Are ye no up yet?'

The sound of her voice aroused him.

'In a minute, woman,' he said sleepily; and, being thus satisfied, the landlady went off, shutting the door behind her.

He rose in the bed and looked around him, in a dazed fashion. He was already partially dressed, for he had been up two hours before, but had thrown himself down on the bed again, over-fatigued, half-stupefied, and altogether discontented. The fact is, he had come home the night before in a reckless mood, and had sate on through hour after hour until it was nearly dawn, harassing himself with idle dreams and idle regrets, drinking to drown care, smoking incessantly, sometimes scrawling half-scornful rhymes. There were all the evidences now on the table before him – a whisky-bottle, a tumbler, a wooden pipe and plenty of ashes, a sheet of paper scrawled over in an uncertain hand. He took up that sheet to recall what he had written:

King Death came striding along the road,
And he laughed aloud to see
How every rich man's mother's son
Would take to his heels and flee.

Duke, lord, or merchant, off they skipped,
Whenever that he drew near;
And they dropped their guineas as wild they ran,
And their faces were white with fear.

But the poor folk labouring in the fields
Watched him as he passed by;
And they took lo their spades and mattocks again,
And turned to their work with a sigh.

Then farther along the road he saw
An old man sitting alone;
His head lay heavy upon his hands,
And sorrowful was his moan.

Old age had shrivelled and bent his frame;
Age and hard work together
Had scattered his locks, and bleared his eyes —
Age and the winter weather.

'Old man,' said Death, 'do you tremble to know
That now you are near the end?'
The old man looked: 'You are Death,' said he,

'And at last I've found a friend.'

It was a strange kind of mood for a young fellow to have fallen into; but he did not seem to think so. As he contemplated the scrawled lines – with rather an absent and preoccupied air – this was what he was saying to himself —

'If the old gentleman would only come striding along the Port Dundas Road, I know one that would be glad enough to go out and meet him and shake hands with him, this very minute.'

He went to the window and threw it open, and sate down: the outer air would be pleasanter than this inner atmosphere, impregnated with the fumes of whisky and tobacco; and his head was burning, and his pulses heavy. But the dreariness of this outlook! – the gray pavements, the gray railway station, the gray sheds, the gray skies; and evermore the dull slumberous sound of the great city already plunged in its multitudinous daily toil. Then he began to recall the events of the preceding evening; and had not Mrs. Menzies promised to call for him, about eleven, to drive him out to see some of her acquaintances at Milngavie? Well, it would be something to do; it would be a relief to get into the fresher air – to get away from this hopeless and melancholy neighbourhood. Kate Menzies had high spirits; she could laugh away remorse and discontent and depression; she could make the hours go by somehow. And now, as it was almost eleven, he would finish his dressing and be ready to set out when she called; as for breakfast, no thought of that entered his mind.

Then he chanced to see something white lying on the floor – an envelope – perhaps this was a note from Kate, saying she was too busy that morning and could not come for him? He went and took up the letter; and instantly – as he regarded the address on it – a kind of bewilderment, almost of fear, appeared on his face. For well he knew Meenie's handwriting: had he not pondered over every characteristic of it – the precise small neatness of it, the long loops of the *l*'s, the German look of the capital R? And why should Meenie write to him?

He opened the envelope and took out the bit of white heather that Meenie had so hastily despatched: there was no message, not the smallest scrap of writing. But was not this a message – and full of import, too; for surely Meenie would not have adopted this means of communicating with him at the mere instigation of an idle fancy? And why should she have sent it – and at this moment? Had she heard, then? Had any gossip about him reached Inver-Mudal? And how much had she heard? There was a kind of terror in his heart as he went slowly back to the window, and sate down there, still staring absently at this token that had been sent him, and trying hard to make out the meaning of it. What was in Meenie's mind? What was her intention? Not merely to give him a sprig of white heather with wishes for good luck; there was more than that, as he easily guessed; but how much more? And at first there was little of joy or gladness or gratitude in his thinking; there was rather fear, and a wondering as to what Meenie had heard of him, and a sickening sense of shame.

The white gentleness of the message did not strike him; it was rather a reproach – a recalling of other days – Meenie's eyes were regarding him with proud indignation – this was all she had to say to him now.

A man's voice was heard outside; the door was brusquely opened; Jimmy Laidlaw appeared.

'What, man, no ready yet? Are ye just out o' your bed? Where's your breakfast? Dinna ye ken it's eleven o'clock?'

Ronald regarded him with no friendly eye. He wished to be alone; there was much to think of; there was more in his mind than the prospect of a rattling, devil-may-care drive out to Milngavie.

'Is Kate below?' said he.

'She is that. Look sharp, man, and get on your coat. She doesna like to keep the cob standing.'

'Look here, Laidlaw,' Ronald said, 'I wish ye would do me a good turn. Tell her that – that I'll be obliged if she will excuse me; I'm no up to the mark; ye'll have a merrier time of it if ye go by yourselves; there now, like a good fellow, make it straight wi' her.'

'Do ye want her to jump doon ma throat?' retorted Mr. Laidlaw, with a laugh. 'I'll tak' no sic message. Come, come, man, pull yoursel' thegither. What's the matter? Hammer and tongs in your head? – the fresh air 'll drive that away. Come along!'

'The last word's the shortest,' Ronald said stubbornly. 'I'm not going. Tell her not to take it ill – I'm – I'm obliged to her, tell

her – '

'Indeed, I'll leave you and her to fight it out between ye,' said Laidlaw. 'D'ye think I want the woman to snap my head off?'

He left, and Ronald fondly hoped that they would drive away and leave him to himself. But presently there was a light tapping at the door.

'Ronald!'

He recognised the voice, and he managed to throw a coat over his shoulders – just as Kate Menzies, without further ceremony, made her appearance.

'What's this now?' exclaimed the buxom widow – who was as radiant and good-natured and smartly dressed as ever – 'what does this daft fellow Laidlaw mean by bringing me a message like that? I ken ye better, Ronald, my lad. Down in the mouth? – take a hair o' the dog that bit ye. Here, see, I'll pour it out for ye.'

She went straight to the bottle, uncorked it, and poured out about a third of a tumblerful of whisky.

'Ronald, Ronald, ye're an ill lad to want this in the morning; but what must be, must; here, put some life into ye. The day'll be just splendid outside the town; and old Jaap's with us too; and I've got a hamper; and somewhere or other we'll camp out, like a band of gypsies. Dinna fear, lad; I'll no drag ye into the MacDougals' house until we're on the way back; and then it'll just be a cup o' tea and a look at the bairns, and on we drive again to the town. What's the matter? Come on, my lad! – we'll have a try at "Cauld Kail in Aberdeen" when we get away frae the houses.'

'Katie, lass,' said he, rather shamefacedly, 'I'm – I'm sorry that I promised – but I'll take it kind of ye to excuse me – I'm no in the humour someway – and ye'll be better by yourselves – '

'Ay, and what good 'll ye do by pu'ing a wry mouth?' said she tauntingly. '"The devil was ill, the devil a saint would be." Here, man! it's no the best medicine, but it's better than none.'

She took the whisky to him, and gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder. There was a gleam of sullen fire in his eye.

'It's ill done of ye, woman, to drive a man against his will,' he said, and he retreated from her a step or two.

'Oh,' said she proudly, and she threw the whisky into the coal-scuttle, and slammed the tumbler down on the table, for she had a temper too, 'if ye'll no be coaxed, there's them that will. If that's what Long John does for your temper, I'd advise you to change and try Talisker. Good morning to ye, my braw lad, and thank ye for your courtesy.'

She stalked from the room, and banged the door behind her when she left. But she was really a good-hearted kind of creature; before she had reached the outer door she had recovered herself; and she turned and came into the room again, a single step or so.

'Ronald,' she said, in quite a different voice, 'it 'll no be for your good to quarrel wi' me —

'I wish for no quarrel wi' ye, Katie, woman – '

'For I look better after ye than some o' them. If ye'll no come for the drive, will ye look in in the afternoon or at night, if it suits ye better? Seven o'clock, say – to show that there's no ill feeling

between us.'

'Yes, I will,' said he – mainly to get rid of her; for, indeed, he could scarcely hear what she was saying to him for thinking of this strange and mysterious message that had come to him from Meenie.

And then, when she had gone, he rapidly washed and dressed, and went away out from the house – out by the Cowcaddens, and Shamrock Street, and West Prince's Street, and over the Kelvin, and up to Hillhead, to certain solitary thoroughfares he had discovered in his devious wanderings; and all the time he was busy with various interpretations of this message from Meenie and of her reasons for sending it. At first, as has been said, there was nothing for him but shame and self-abasement; this was a reproach; she had heard of the condition into which he had fallen; this was to remind him of what had been. And indeed, it was now for the first time that he began to be conscious of what that condition was. He had fled to those boon-companions as a kind of refuge from the hopelessness of the weary hours, from the despair with regard to the future that had settled down over his life. He had laughed, drunk, smoked, and sung the time away, glad to forget. When haunting memories came to rebuke, then there was a call for another glass, another song. Nay, he could even make apologies to himself when the immediate excitement was over. Why should he do otherwise? The dreams conjured up by the Americans had no more charms for him. Why should he work towards some future that had no interest for him?

Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labour be?

And so Kate Menzies's dog-cart became a pleasant thing, as it rattled along the hard stony roads; and many a merry glass they had at the wayside inns; and then home again in the evening to supper, and singing, and a good-night bacchanalian festival at the Harmony Club. The hours passed; he did not wish to think of what his life had become; enough if, for the time being, he could banish the horrors of the aching head, the hot pulse, the trembling hands.

But if Meenie had heard of all this, how would it appear to her? and he made no doubt that she had heard. It was some powerful motive that had prompted her to do this thing. He knew that her sister had been making inquiries about him; his brother's congregation was a hot-bed of gossip; if any news of him had been sent by that agency, no doubt it was the worst. And still Meenie did not turn away from him with a shudder? He took out the envelope again. What could she mean? Might he dare to think it was this – that, no matter what had happened, or what she had heard, she still had some little faith in him, that the recollection of their old friendship was not all gone away? Reproach it might be – but perhaps also an appeal? And if Meenie had still some interest in what happened to him – ?

He would go no farther than that. It was characteristic of

the man that, even with this white token of goodwill and remembrance and good wishes before his eyes – with this unusual message just sent to him from one who was generally so shy and reserved – he permitted to himself no wildly daring fancies or bewildering hopes. Nor had the majesty of the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay anything to do with this restraint: it was the respect that he paid to Meenie herself. And yet – and yet this was a friendly token; it seemed to make the day whiter somehow; it was with no ill-will she had been thinking of him when she gathered it from one of the knolls at the foot of Clebrig or from the banks of Mudal-Water. So white and fresh it was; it spoke of clear skies and sweet moorland winds: and there seemed to be the soft touch of her fingers still on it as she had pressed it into the envelope; and it was Meenie's own small white hand that had written that rather trembling '*Mr. Ronald Strang*.' A gentle message; he grew to think that there was less of reproach in it; if she had heard evil tidings of him, perhaps she was sorry more than anything else; Meenie's eyes might have sorrow in them and pain, but anger – never. And her heart – well, surely her heart could not have been set bitterly against him, or she would not have sent him this mute little token of remembrance, as if to recall the olden days.

And then he rose and drove against the bars that caged him in. Why should the ghastly farce be played any longer? Why should he go through that dull mechanical routine in which he had no interest whatever? Let others make what money they

choose; let others push forward to any future that they might think desirable; let them aim at being first in the world's fight for wealth, and having saloon-carriages, and steam-yachts on Lake Michigan, and cat-boats on Lake George: but as for him, if Lord Ailine, now, would only let him go back to the little hamlet in the northern wilds, and give him charge of the dogs again, and freedom to ask Dr. Douglas to go with him for a turn at the mountain hares or for a day's salmon-fishing on the Mudal – in short, if only he could get back to his old life again, with fair skies over him, and fresh blowing winds around him, and wholesome blood running cheerily through his veins? And then the chance, at some hour or other of the long day, of meeting Meenie, and finding the beautiful, timid, Highland eyes fixed on his: 'Are you going along to the inn, Ronald?' he could almost hear her say. 'And will you be so kind as to take these letters for me?'

But contracted habits are not so easily shaken off as all that; and he was sick and ill at ease; and when the hour came for him to go down and see Kate Menzies and her friends, perhaps he was not altogether sorry that he had made a definite promise which he was bound to keep. He left the envelope, with its piece of white heather, at home.

Nevertheless, he was rather dull, they thought; and there was some facetious raillery over his not having yet recovered from the frolic of the previous night; with frequent invitations to take a hair of the dog that had bitten him. Kate was the kindest; she had been a little alarmed by the definite repugnance he had shown in

the morning; she was glad to be friends with him again. As for him – well, he was as good-natured as ever; but rather absent in manner; for sometimes, amid all their boisterous *camaraderie*, he absolutely forgot what they were saying; and in a kind of dream he seemed to see before him the sunlit Strath-Terry, and the blue waters of the loch, and Mudal's stream winding through the solitary moorland waste – and a young girl there stooping to pick up something from the heather.

CHAPTER III
A RESOLVE

The days passed; no answer came to that mute message of hers; nay, how could she expect any answer? But these were terrible days to her – of mental torture, and heart-searching, and unceasing and unsatisfied longing, and yearning, and pity. And then out of all this confusion of thinking and suffering there gradually grew up a clear and definite resolve. What if she were to make of that bit of white heather but an *avant-courier*? What if she were herself to go to Glasgow, and seek him out, and confront him, and take him by the hand? She had not overrated her old influence with him: well she knew that. And how could she stand by idle and allow him to perish? The token she had sent him must have told him of her thinking of him; he would be prepared; perhaps he would even guess that she had come to Glasgow for his sake? Well, she did not mind that much; Ronald would have gentle thoughts of her, whatever happened; and this need was far too sore and pressing to permit of timid and sensitive hesitations.

One morning she went to her father's room and tapped at the door.

'Come in!'

She was rather pale as she entered.

'Father,' she said, 'I would like to go to Glasgow for a while.'

Her father turned in his chair and regarded her.

'What's the matter with ye, my girl?' he said. 'You've not been looking yourself at all for some time back, and these last few days you've practically eaten nothing. And yet your mother declares there's nothing the matter. Glasgow? I dare say a change would do you good – cheer you up a bit, and that; but – Glasgow? More schooling, more fees, that would be the chief result, I imagine; and that's what your mother's driving at. I think it's nonsense: you're a grown woman; you've learned everything that will ever be of any use to you.'

'I ought to have, any way, by this time,' Meenie said simply. 'And indeed it is not for that, father. I – I should like to go to Glasgow for a while.'

'There's Lady Stuart would have ye stay with them at Brighton for a few weeks; but your mother seems to think you should go amongst them as a kind of Mezzofanti – it's precious little of that there's about Sir Alexander, as I know well. However, if you're not to go to them until you are polished out of all human shape and likeness, I suppose I must say nothing – '

'But I would rather go and stay with Agatha, father,' the girl said.

He looked at her again.

'Well,' said he, 'I do think something must be done. It would be a fine thing for you – you of all creatures in the world – to sink into a hopeless anæmic condition. Lassie, where's that eldritch laugh o' yours gone to? And I see you go dawdling along the

road – you that could beat a young roedeer if you were to try. Glasgow? – well, I'll see what your mother says.'

'Thank you, father,' she said, but she did not leave at once. 'I think I heard you say that Mr. Blair was going south on Monday,' she timidly suggested.

This Mr. Blair was a U.P. minister from Glasgow, who was taking a well-earned holiday up at Tongue – fishing in the various lochs in that neighbourhood – and who was known to the Douglases.

'You're in a deuce of a hurry, Miss,' her father said, but good-naturedly enough. 'You mean you could go to Glasgow under his escort?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I will see what your mother says – I suppose she will be for making a fuss over the necessary preparations.'

But this promise and half permission had instantly brought to the girl a kind of frail and wandering joy and hope; and there was a brief smile on her face as she said —

'Well, you know, father, if I have to get any things I ought to get them in Glasgow. The preparations at Inver-Mudal can't take much time.'

'I will see what your mother thinks about it,' said the big, good-humoured Doctor, who was cautious about assenting to anything until the ruler and lawgiver of the house had been consulted.

The time was short, but the chance of sending Meenie to Glasgow under charge of the Rev. Mr. Blair was opportune; and

Mrs. Douglas had no scruple about making use of this temporary concern on the part of her husband about Meenie's health for the working out of her own ends. Of course the girl was only going away to be brightened up by a little society. The change of air might possibly do her good. There could be no doubt she had been looking ill; and in her sister's house she would have every attention paid her, quite as much as if she were in her own home. All the same, Mrs. Douglas was resolved that this opportunity for finally fitting Meenie for that sphere in which she hoped to see her move should not be lost. Agatha should have private instructions. And Agatha herself was a skilled musician. Moreover, some little society – of a kind – met at Mr. Gemmill's house; the time would not be entirely lost, even if a little economy in the matter of fees was practised, in deference to the prejudices and dense obtuseness of one who ought to have seen more clearly his duty in this matter – that is to say, of Meenie's father.

And so it was that, when the Monday morning came round, Meenie had said good-bye to every one she knew, and was ready to set out for the south. Not that she was going by the mail. Oh no, Mr. Murray would not hear of that, nor yet of her being sent in her father's little trap. No; Mr. Murray placed his own large waggonette and a pair of horses at her disposal; and when the mail-cart came along from Tongue, Mr. Blair's luggage was quickly transferred to the more stately vehicle, and immediately they started. She did not look like a girl going away for a holiday. She was pale rather, and silent; and Mr. Blair, who had memories

of her as a bright, merry, clear-eyed lass, could not understand why she should be apparently so cast down at the thought of leaving her father's home for a mere month or so. As for old John Murray, he went into the inn, grumbling and discontented.

'It is a strange thing,' he said, – for he was grieved and offended at their sending Meenie away, and he knew that Inver-Mudal would be a quite different place with her not there, – 'a strange thing indeed to send a young girl away to Glasgow to get back the roses into her cheeks. Ay, will she get them there? A strange thing indeed. And her father a doctor too. It is just a teffle of a piece of nonsense.'

The worthy minister, on the other hand, was quite delighted to have so pretty a travelling companion with him on that long journey to the south; and he looked after her with the most anxious paternal solicitude, and from time to time he would try to cheer her with the recital of ancient Highland anecdotes that he had picked up during his fishing excursions. But he could see that the girl was preoccupied; her eyes were absent and her manner distraught; sometimes her colour came and went in a curious way, as if some sudden fancy had sent a tremor to her heart. Then, as they drew near to the great city – it was a pallid-clear morning, with some faint suggestions of blue overhead that gave the wan landscape an almost cheerful look – she was obviously suffering from nervous excitement; her answers to him were inconsequent, though she tried her bravest to keep up the conversation. The good man thought he would not bother her.

No doubt it would be a great change – from the quiet of Inver-Mudal to the roar and bustle of the vast city; and no doubt the mere sight of hundreds and hundreds of strangers would in itself be bewildering. Meenie, as he understood, had been in Glasgow before, but it was some years ago, and she had not had a long experience of it; in any case, she would naturally be restless and nervous in looking forward to such a complete change in her way of life.

As they slowed into the station, moreover, he could not help observing how anxiously and eagerly she kept glancing from stranger to stranger, as they passed them on the platform.

'There will be somebody waiting for you, Miss Meenie?' he said at a venture.

'No, no,' she answered, somewhat hurriedly and shame-facedly as he thought – and the good minister was puzzled; 'Agatha wrote that Mr. Gemmill would be at the warehouse, and – and she would be busy in the house on a Monday morning, and I was just to take a cab and come on to Queen's Crescent. Oh! I shall manage all right,' she added, with some bravado.

And yet, when they had seen to their luggage, and got along to the platform outside the station, she seemed too bewildered to heed what was going on. Mr. Blair called a cab and got her boxes put on the top; but she was standing there by herself, looking up and down, and regarding the windows of the houses opposite in a kind of furtive and half-frightened way.

'This is Port Dundas Road?' she said to the minister (for had

not Maggie, in her voluminous communications about Ronald, described the exact locality of his lodging, and the appearance of the station from his room?).

'It is.'

She hesitated for a second or two longer; and then, recalling herself with an effort, she thanked the minister for all his kindness, and bade him good-bye, and got into the cab. Of course she kept both windows down, so that she could command a view of both sides of the thoroughfares as the man drove her away along the Cowcaddens and the New City Road. But alas! how was she ever to find Ronald – by accident, as she had hoped – in that continuous crowd? She had pictured to herself her suddenly meeting him face to face; and she would read in his eyes how much he remembered of Inver-Mudal and the olden days. But among this multitude, how was such a thing possible? And then it was so necessary that this meeting should be observed by no third person.

However, these anxious doubts and fears were forcibly driven from her head by her arrival at Queen's Crescent, and the necessity of meeting the emergencies of the moment. She had but a half recollection of this secluded little nook, with its semicircle of plain, neat, well-kept houses, looking so entirely quiet and respectable; and its pretty little garden, with its grass-plots, and its flower-plots, and its trim walks and fountain – all so nice and neat and trim, and at this minute looking quite cheerful in the pallid sunshine. And here, awaiting her at the just opened door,

was her sister Agatha – a sonsy, sufficiently good-looking young matron, who had inherited her buxom proportions from her father, but had got her Highland eyes, which were like Meenie's, from her mother. And also there were a smaller Agatha – a self-important little maiden of ten – and two younger children; and as the advent of this pretty young aunt from Sutherlandshire was of great interest to them, there was a babble of inquiries and answers as they escorted her into the house.

'And such a surprise to hear you were coming,' her sister was saying. 'We little expected it – but ye're none the less welcome – and Walter's just quite set up about it. Ay, and ye're not looking so well, my father says? – let's see.'

She took her by the shoulders and wheeled her to the light. But, of course, the girl was flushed with the excitement of her arrival, and pleased with the attentions of the little people, so that for the moment the expression of her face was bright enough.

'There's not much wrong,' said the sister, 'but I don't wonder at your being dull in yon dreadful hole. And I suppose there's no chance of moving now. If my father had only kept to Edinburgh or Glasgow, and got on like anybody else, we might all have been together, and among friends and acquaintances; but it was aye the same – give him the chance of a place where there was a gun or a fishing-rod handy, and that was enough. Well, well, Meenie, we must wake ye up a bit if you've been feeling dull; and Walter – he's as proud as a peacock that you're come; I declare it's enough to make any other woman than myself jealous, the

way he shows your portrait to anybody and everybody that comes to the house; and I had a hint from him this morning that any bit things ye might need – mother's letter only came on Saturday – that they were to be a present from him, and there's nothing stingy about Wat, though I say it who shouldn't. And you'll have to share Aggie's bed for a night or two until we have a room got ready for you.'

'If I had only known that I was going to put you about, Agatha – '

'Put us about, you daft lassie!' the elder sister exclaimed. 'Come away, and I'll show you where your things will have to be stored for the present. And my father says there are to be no finishing lessons, or anything of that kind, for a while yet; you're to walk about and amuse yourself; and we've a family-ticket for the Botanic Gardens – you can take a book there or some knitting; and then you'll have to help me in the house, for Walter will be for showing you off as his Highland sister-in-law, and we'll have plenty of company.'

And so the good woman rattled on; and how abundantly and secretly glad was Meenie that not a word was said of Ronald Strang! She had felt guilty enough when she entered the house; she had come on a secret errand that she dared not disclose; and one or two things in her sister's letters had convinced her that there were not likely to be very friendly feelings towards Ronald in this little domestic circle. But when they had gone over almost every conceivable topic, and not a single question

had been asked about Ronald, nor any reference even made to him, she felt immensely relieved. To them, then, he was clearly of no importance. Probably they had forgotten that she had once or twice asked if he had called on them. Or perhaps her sister had taken it for granted that the piece of news she had sent concerning him would effectually and for ever crush any interest in him that Meenie may have felt. Anyhow, his name was not even mentioned; and that was so far well.

But what a strange sensation was this – when in the afternoon she went out for a stroll with the smaller Agatha – to feel that at any moment, at the turning of any corner, she might suddenly encounter Ronald. That ever-moving crowd had the profoundest interest for her; these rather grimy streets a continuous and mysterious fascination. Of course the little Agatha, when they went forth from the house, was for going up to the West End Park or out by Billhead to the Botanic Gardens, so that the pretty young aunt should have a view of the beauties of Glasgow. But Meenie had no difficulty in explaining that green slopes and trees and things of that kind had no novelty for her, whereas crowded streets and shops and the roar of cabs and carriages had; and so they turned city-wards when they left the house, and went away in by Cambridge Street and Sauchiehall Street to Buchanan Street. And was this the way, then, she asked herself (and she was rather an absent companion for her little niece), that Ronald would take on leaving his lodgings to get over to the south side of the city, where, as she understood from his sister's letters,

lived the old forester who was superintending his studies? But there were so many people here! – and all seemingly strangers to each other; scarcely any two or three of them stopping to have a chat together; and all of them apparently in such a hurry. Argyll Street was even worse; indeed, she recoiled from that tumultuous thoroughfare; and the two of them turned north again. The lamplighter was beginning his rounds; here and there an orange star gleamed in the pallid atmosphere; here and there a shop window glowed yellow. When they got back to Queen's Crescent they found that Mr. Gemmill had returned; it was his tea-time; and there was a talk of the theatre for the older folk.

Well, she did not despair yet. For one thing, she had not been anxious to meet Ronald during that first plunge into the great city, for Agatha was with her. But that was merely because the little girl had obtained a holiday in honour of her aunt's coming; thereafter she went to school every morning; moreover, the household happened to be a maidservant short, and Mrs. Gemmill was busy, so that Meenie was left to do pretty much as she liked, and to go about alone. And her walks did not take her much to the Botanic Gardens, nor yet to the West End Park and Kelvin Grove; far rather she preferred to go errands for her sister, and often these would take her in by Sauchiehall Street and the top of Buchanan Street; and always her eyes were anxious and yet timorous, seeking and yet half-fearing to find. But where was Ronald? She tried different hours. She grew to know every possible approach to that lodging in the Port Dundas

Road. And she had schooled herself now so that she could search long thoroughfares with a glance that was apparently careless enough; and she had so often pictured to herself their meeting, that she knew she would not exhibit too great a surprise nor make too open a confession of her joy.

And at last her patient waiting was rewarded. It was in Renfield Street that she suddenly caught sight of him – a long way off he was, but coming towards her, and all unconscious of her being there. For a moment her schooling of herself gave way somewhat; for her heart was beating so wildly as almost to choke her; and she went on with her eyes fixed on the ground, wondering what she should say, wondering if he would find her face grown paler than it used to be, wondering what he would think of her having sent him the bit of white heather. And then she forced herself to raise her eyes; and it was at the very same instant that he caught sight of her – though he was yet some distance off – and for the briefest moment she saw his strange and startled look. But what was this? Perhaps he fancied she had not seen him; perhaps he had reasons for not wishing to be seen; at all events, after that one swift recognition of her, he had suddenly slunk away – down some lane or other – and when she went forward, in rather a blind and bewildered fashion, behold! there was no Ronald there at all. She looked around – with a heart as if turned to stone – but there was no trace of him. And then she went on, rather proudly – or perhaps, rather, trying to feel proud and hurt; but there was a gathering mist coming into her eyes;

and she scarcely knew – nor cared – whither she was walking.

CHAPTER IV
A BOLDER STEP

As for him, he slunk aside hurriedly and all abashed and dismayed. He did not pause until he was safe away from any pursuit; and there was a lowering expression on his face, and his hand shook a little. He could only hope that she had not seen him. Instantly he had seen her, he knew that he dared not meet the beautiful clear eyes, that would regard him, and perhaps mutely ask questions of him, even if there was no indignant reproach in them. For during these past few days he had gradually been becoming conscious of the squalor and degradation into which he had sunk; and sometimes he would strive to raise himself out of that; and sometimes he would sink back despairing, careless of what might become of him or his poor affairs. But always there was there in his room that mystic white token that Meenie had sent him; and at least it kept him thinking – his conscience was not allowed to slumber; and sometimes it became so strong an appeal to him – that is to say, he read into the message such wild and daring and fantastic possibilities – that he would once more resume that terrible struggle with the iron bands of habit that bound him.

'What is the matter wi' Ronald?' Kate Menzies asked of her cronies. 'He hasna been near the house these three or four days.'

'I'm thinking he's trying to earn the Blue Ribbon,' said old Mr. Jaap.

'And no thriving weel on't, poor lad,' said Jimmy Laidlaw. 'Down in the mouth's no the word. He's just like the ghost o' himsel'.'

'I tell ye what, Mistress,' said the big skipper, who was contemplating with much satisfaction a large beaker of hot rum and water, 'the best thing you could do would be just to take the lad in hand, and marry him right off. He would have somebody to look after him, and so would you; as handsome a couple as ever stepped along Jamaica Street, I'll take my oath.'

The buxom widow laughed and blushed; but she was bound to protest.

'Na, na, Captain, I ken better than that. I'm no going to throw away a business like this on any man. I'll bide my ain mistress for a while longer, if ye please.'

And then mother Paterson – who had a handy gift of facile acquiescence – struck in —

'That's right, Katie dear! Ye're sich a wise woman. To think ye'd throw away a splendid place like this, and a splendid business, on any man, and make him maister! And how long would it be before he ate and drank ye out o' house and ha'? – set him up with a handsome wife and a splendid business thrown at his heed, and scarcely for the asking! Na, na, Katie, woman, ye ken your own affairs better than that; ye're no for any one to come in and be maister here.'

'But I'm concerned about the lad,' said Kate Menzies, a little absently. 'He met wi' none but friends here. He might fa' into worse hands.'

'Gang up yersel', Mistress, and hae a talk wi' him,' said the skipper boldly.

Kate Menzies did not do that; but the same evening she wrote Ronald a brief note. And very well she could write too – in a dashing, free handwriting; and gilt-edged was the paper, and rose-pink was the envelope.

'DEAR RONALD – Surely there is no quarrel between us. If I have offended you, come and tell me; don't go away and sulk. If I have done or said anything to offend you, I will ask your pardon. Can I do anything more than that? Your cousin and friend,

'KATE MENZIES.'

Of course he had to answer such an appeal in person: he went down the next morning.

'Quarrel, woman? What put that into your head? If there had been anything of that kind, I would have told you fast enough; I'm not one of the sulking kind.'

'Well, I'm very glad to ken we're just as good friends as before,' said Kate, regarding him, 'but I'm not glad to see the way ye're looking, Ronald, my lad. Ye're not yourself at all, my man – what's got ye whitey-faced, limp, shaky-looking like that? See here.'

She went to the sideboard, and the next instant there was on the table a bottle of champagne, with a couple of glasses, and a

flask of angostura bitters.

'No, no, Katie, lass, I will not touch a drop,' said he: and he rose and took his cap in his hand.

'You will not?' she said. 'You will not? Why, man, you're ill – you're ill, I tell ye. It's medicine!'

He gripped her by the hand, and took the bottle from her, and put it down on the table.

'If I'm ill, I deserve to be, and that's the fact, lass. Let be – let be, woman; I'm obliged to ye – some other time – some other time.'

'Then if you winna, I will,' she said, and she got hold of the bottle and opened it and poured out a glass of the foaming fluid.

'And dinna I ken better what's good for ye than ye do yersel'?' said she boldly. 'Ay, if ye were ruled by me, and drank nothing but what ye get in this house, there would be little need for ye to be frightened at what a wean might drink. Ye dinna ken your best friends, my lad.'

'I know you wish me weel, Katie, lass,' said he, for he did not wish to appear ungrateful, 'but I'm better without it.'

'Yes,' said she tauntingly. 'Ye're better without sitting up a' night wi' a lot o' roystering fellows, smoking bad tobacco and drinking bad whisky. What mak's your face sae white? It's fusel-oil, if ye maun ken. Here, Ronald, what canna hurt a woman canna hurt a man o' your build – try it, and see if ye dinna feel better.'

She put a good dash of bitters into the glass, and poured out

the champagne, and offered it to him. He did not wish to offend her; and he himself did not believe the thing could hurt him; he took the glass and sipped about a teaspoonful, and then set it down.

Kate Menzies looked at him, and laughed aloud, and took him by the shoulders and pushed him back into his chair.

'There's a man for ye! Whatna young ladies' seminary have ye been brought up at?'

'I'll tell ye, lass,' he retorted. 'It was one where they taught folk no to force other folk to drink against their will.'

'Then it was different frae the one where I was brought up, for there, when the doctor ordered anybody to take medicine, they were made to take it. And here's yours,' she said; and she stood before him with the glass in her hand. She was good-natured; it would have been ungracious to refuse; he took the glass from her and drank off the contents.

Now a glass of champagne, even with the addition of a little angostura bitters, cannot be called a very powerful potion to those accustomed to such things; but the fact was that he had not touched a drop of any alcoholic fluid for two days; and this seemed to go straight to the brain. It produced a slight, rather agreeable giddiness; a sense of comfort was diffused throughout the system; he was not so anxious to get away. And Kate began talking – upbraiding him for thinking that she wanted to see him otherwise than well and in his usual health, and declaring that if he were guided by her, there would be no need for him to

torture himself with total abstinence, and to reduce himself to this abject state. The counsel (which was meant in all honesty) fell on yielding ears; Kate brought some biscuits, and filled herself out another glass.

'That's what it is,' she said boldly, 'if you would be ruled by my advice there would be no shaking hands and white cheeks for ye. Feeling better, are ye? – ay, I warrant ye! Here, man, try this.'

She filled his glass again, adding a good dose of bitters.

'This one I will, but not a drop more,' said he. 'Ye're a desperate creature, lass, for making folk comfortable.'

'I ken what's the matter wi' you better than ye ken yoursel', Ronald,' said she, looking at him shrewdly. 'You're disappointed – you're out o' heart – because thae fine American friends o' yours hae forgotten you; and you've got sick o' this new work o' yours; and you've got among a lot o' wild fellows that are leading ye to the devil. Mark my words. Americans! Better let a man trust to his ain kith and kin.'

'Well, Katie, lass, I maun say this, that ye've just been ower kind to me since ever I came to Glasgow.'

'Another glass, Ronald – '

'Not one drop – thank ye' – and this time he rose with the definite resolve to get away, for even these two glasses had caused a swimming in his head, and he knew not how much more he might drink if he stayed.

'Better go for a long walk, then,' said Kate, 'and come back at three and have dinner with us. I'll soon put ye on your legs again

– trust to me.'

But when he went out into the open air, he found himself so giddy and half-dazed and bewildered that, instead of going away for any long walk, he thought he would go back home and lie down. He felt less happy now. Why had he taken this accursed thing after all his resolves?

And then it was – as he went up Renfield Street – that he caught his first glimpse of Meenie. No wonder he turned and slunk rapidly away – anxious to hide anywhere – hoping that Meenie had not seen him. And what a strange thing was this – Meenie in Glasgow town! Oh, if he could only be for a single day as once he had been – as she had known him in the happy times when life went by like a laugh and a song – how wonderful it would be to go along these thoroughfares hoping every moment to catch sight of her face! A dull town? – no, a radiant town, with music in the air, and joy and hope shining down from the skies! But now – he was a cowering fugitive – sick in body and sick in mind – trembling with the excitement of this sudden meeting – and anxious above all other things that he should get back to the seclusion of his lodging unseen.

Well, he managed that, at all events; and there he sate down, wondering over this thing that had just happened. Meenie in Glasgow town! – and why? And why had she sent him the white heather? Nay, he could not doubt but that she had heard; and that this was at once a message of reproach and an appeal; and what answer had he to give supposing that some day or other he should

meet her face to face? How could he win back to his former state, so that he should not be ashamed to meet those clear, kind eyes? If there were but some penance now – no matter what suffering it entailed – that would obliterate these last months and restore him to himself, how gladly would he welcome that! But it was not only the bodily sickness – he believed he could mend that; he had still a fine physique; and surely absolute abstention from stimulants, no matter with what accompanying depression, would in time give him back his health – it was mental sickness and hopelessness and remorse that had to be cured; and how was that to be attempted? Or why should he attempt it? What care had he for the future? To be sure, he would stop drinking, definitely; and he would withdraw himself from those wild companions; and he would have a greater regard for his appearance; so that, if he should by chance meet Meenie face to face, he would not have to be altogether so ashamed. But after? When she had gone away again? For of course he assumed that she was merely here on a visit.

And all this time he was becoming more and more conscious of how far he had fallen – of the change that had come over himself and his circumstances in these few months; and a curious fancy got into his head that he would like to try to realise what he had been like in those former days. He got out his blotting-pad of fragments – not those dedicated to Meenie, that had been carefully put aside – and about the very first of them that he chanced to light upon, when he looked down the rough lines,

made him exclaim —

'God bless me, was I like *that*– and no longer ago than last January?'

The piece was called 'A Winter Song'; and surely the man who could write in this gay fashion had an abundant life and joy and hope in his veins, and courage to face the worst bleakness of the winter, and a glad looking-forward to the coming of the spring?

Keen blows the wind upon Clebrig's side,
And the snow lies thick on the heather;
And the shivering hinds are glad to hide
Away from the winter weather.

Chorus: But soon the birds will begin to sing,
And we will sing too, my dear,
To give good welcoming to the spring
In the primrose time o' the year!

Hark how the black lake, torn and tost,
Thunders along its shores;
And the burn is hard in the grip of the frost,
And white, snow-white are the moors.

Chorus: But soon the birds will begin to sing, etc.

O then the warm west winds will blow,
And all in the sunny weather,
It's over the moorlands we will go,

You and I, my love, together.

Chorus: And then the birds will begin to sing,
And we will sing too, my dear,
To give good welcoming to the spring,
In the primrose-time o' the year!

Why, surely the blood must have been dancing in his brain when he wrote that and the days white and clear around him; and life merry and hopeful enough. And now? Well, it was no gladdening thing to think of: he listlessly put away the book.

And then he rose and went and got a pail of water and thrust his head into that – for he was glad to feel that this muzzy sensation was going; and thereafter he dried and brushed his hair with a little more care than usual; and put on a clean collar. Nay, he began to set the little room to rights – and his life in Highland lodges had taught him how to do that about as well as any woman could; and he tried to brighten the window panes a little, to make the place look more cheerful; and he arranged the things on the mantel-shelf in better order – with the bit of white heather in the middle. Then he came to his briar-root pipe; and paused. He took it up, hesitating.

'Yes, my friend, you must go too,' he said, with firm lips; and he deliberately broke it, and tossed the fragments into the grate.

And then he remembered that it was nearly three o'clock, and as he feared that Kate Menzies might send some one of her friends to fetch him, or even come for him herself, he put on

his cap, and took a stick in his hand, and went out. In half an hour or so he had left the city behind him and was lost in that melancholy half-country that lies around it on the north; but he cared little now how the landscape looked; he was wondering what had brought Meenie to Glasgow town, and whether she had seen him, and what she had heard of him. And at Inver-Mudal too? Well, they might think the worst of him there if they chose. But had Meenie heard?

He scarcely knew how far he went; but in the dusk of the evening he was again approaching the city by the Great Western Road; and as he came nearer to the houses, he found that the lamps were lit, and the great town settling down into the gloom of the night. Now he feared no detection; and so it was that when he arrived at Melrose Street he paused there. Should he venture into Queen's Crescent? – it was but a stone's throw away. For he guessed that Meenie must be staying with her sister; and he knew the address that she had given him, though he had never called; nay, he had had the curiosity, once or twice in passing, to glance at the house; and easily enough he could now make it out if he chose. He hesitated for a second or two; then he stealthily made his way along the little thoroughfare; and entered the crescent – but keeping to the opposite side from Mrs. Gemmill's dwelling – and there quietly walked up and down. He could see the windows well enough; they were all of them lit; and the house seemed warm and comfortable; Meenie would be at home there, and among friends, and her bright laugh would be heard from

room to room. Perhaps they had company too – since all the windows were ablaze; rich folk, no doubt, for the Gemmills were themselves well-to-do people; and Meenie would be made much of by these strangers, and they would come round her, and the beautiful Highland eyes would be turned towards them, and they would hear her speak in her quiet, gentle, quaint way. Nor was there any trace of envy or jealousy in this man's composition – outcast as he now deemed himself. Jealousy of Meenie? – why, he wished the bountiful heavens to pour their choicest blessings upon her, and the winds to be for ever soft around her, and all sweet and gracious things to await her throughout her girlhood and her womanhood and her old age. No; it did not trouble him that these rich folk were fortunate enough to be with her, to listen to her, to look at the clear, frank eyes; it might have troubled him had he thought that they might not fully understand the generous rose-sweetness of her nature, nor fully appreciate her straightforward, unconscious simplicity, nor be sufficiently kind to her. And it was scarcely necessary to consider that; of course they all of them would be kind to her, for how could they help it?

But his guess that they might be entertaining friends was wrong. By and by a cab drove up; in a few minutes the door was opened; he ventured to draw a little nearer; and then he saw three figures – one of them almost assuredly Meenie – come out and enter the vehicle. They drove off; no doubt they were going to some concert or theatre, he thought; and he was glad that Meenie was being amused and entertained so; and was among friends.

And as for himself? —

'Well,' he was inwardly saying, as he resumed his walk homeward, 'the dreams that look so fine when one is up among the hills are knocked on the head sure enough when one comes to a town. I'll have no more to do with these books; nor with the widow Menzies and her friends either. To-morrow morning I'm off to the recruiting-sergeant – that's the best thing for me now.'

By the time he had got home he was quite resolved upon this. But there was a note lying there on the table for him. 'That woman again,' he said to himself. 'Katie, lass, I'm afraid you and I must part, but I hope we'll part good friends.'

And then his eyes grew suddenly startled. He took up the note, staring at the outside, apparently half afraid. And then he opened it and read – but in a kind of wild and breathless bewilderment – these two or three lines, written in rather a shaky hand —

'DEAR RONALD – I wish to see you. Would it trouble you to be at the corner of Sauchiehall Street and Renfield Street to-morrow morning at eleven? – I will not detain you more than a few minutes. Yours sincerely,

'MEENIE DOUGLAS.'

There was not much sleep for him that night.

CHAPTER V
A MEETING

Indeed there was no sleep at all for him that night. He knew not what this summons might mean; and all the assurance and self-confidence of former days was gone now; he was nervous, distracted, easily alarmed; ready to imagine evil things; and conscious that he was in no fit state to present himself before Meenie. And yet he never thought of slinking away. Meenie desired to see him, and that was enough. Always and ever he had been submissive to her slightest wish. And if it were merely to reproach him, to taunt him with his weakness and folly, that she had now sent for him, he would go all the same. He deserved that and more. If only it had been some one else – not Meenie – whose resolute clear eyes he had to meet!

That brief interview over – and then for the Queen's shilling: this was what was before him now, and the way seemed clear enough. But so unnerved was he that the mere idea of having to face this timid girl made him more and more restless and anxious; and at last, towards three o'clock in the morning, he, not having been to bed at all, opened the door and stole down the stair and went out into the night. The black heavens were pulsating from time to time with a lurid red sent over from the ironworks in the south; somewhere there was the footfall of a

policeman unseen; the rest was darkness and a terrible silence. He wandered away through the lonely streets, he scarcely knew whither. He was longing that the morning should come, and yet dreading its approach. He reached the little thoroughfare that leads into Queen's Crescent: but he held on his way without turning aside; it was not for this poor trembling ghost and coward to pass under her window, with 'Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast' as his unspoken benediction. He held on his way towards the open country, wandering quite aimlessly, and busy only with guesses and forebodings and hopeless desires that he might suddenly find before him the dark-rolling waters of Lethe, and plunge into them, and wash away from him all knowledge and recollection of the past. When at length he turned towards the city, the gray dawn was breaking in the dismal skies; the first of the milk-carts came slowly crawling into the town; and large waggons laden with vegetables and the like. He got back to his lodgings; threw himself on the bed; and there had an hour or two of broken and restless sleep.

When he awoke he went quickly to the window. The skies were heavy; there was a dull drizzle in the thick atmosphere; the pavements were wet. It was with a sudden sense of relief that he saw what kind of a day it was. Of course Meenie would never think of coming out on so wet and miserable a morning. He would keep the appointment, doubtless; she would not appear – taking it for granted he would not expect her; and then – then for the recruiting-sergeant and a final settlement of all these ills

and shames. Nevertheless he dressed himself with scrupulous neatness; and brushed and rebrushed his clothes; and put on his deerstalker's cap – for the sake of old days. And then, just as he was leaving, he took a little bit of the white heather, and placed it in his waistcoat pocket; if the talisman had any subtle power whatever, all the good luck that he could wish for was to find Meenie not too bitter in her scorn.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.