Oliphant Margaret

Merkland: or, Self Sacrifice

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

"BUT may not Mrs. Catherine's visitor belong to another family? The name is not uncommon."

"You will permit me to correct you, Miss Ross. The name is by no means a common one; and there was some very distant connexion, I remember, between the Aytouns and Mrs. Catherine. I have little doubt that this girl is his daughter."

"Mother! mother!" exclaimed the first speaker, a young lady, whose face, naturally grave and composed, bore tokens of unusual agitation. "It is impossible; Mrs. Catherine, considerate and kind as she always is, could never be so cruel."

"I am quite at a loss for your meaning, Anne."

"To bring her *here*– to our neighborhood," said Anne Ross, averting her eyes, and disregarding her step-mother's interruption, "where we must meet her continually, where our name, which must be odious to her, will be ringing in her ears every day. I cannot believe it. Mrs. Catherine could not do anything so barbarous."

Mrs. Ross, of Merkland, threw down her work, and pushed back her chair from the table:

"Upon my word, Anne Ross, you turn more absurd every day. What is the meaning of this? —*our* name odious! I should not like Lewis to hear you say so."

"But Lewis does not know this terrible story," said Anne.

"And never shall," replied Mrs. Ross. "Neither can your brother's crime make my son's name odious to any one. I fancied you knew that Norman was called by your mother's name; and this Aytoun girl, if she knows anything of it at all, will have heard of him as Rutherford, and not as Ross."

"But Mrs. Catherine – she at least cannot be ignorant, cannot have forgotten: who could forget this? and my mother was her friend!"

"The friendship has descended, I think," said Mrs. Ross, with a sneer, "as you seem to imagine feuds should. I suppose you think this girl's brother, if she has one, would be quite doing his duty if he demanded satisfaction from Lewis, for a thing which happened when the poor boy was a mere infant? But be not afraid, most tender and scrupulous sister. People have better sense in *these* days."

Anne Ross turned away, grieved and silenced; her conversations with her step-mother too often terminated so: and there was a long pause. At last she said, timidly, as if desirous, and yet afraid of asking further: "And my father never knew how he died?"

Mrs. Ross glanced hurriedly at the door: "He did not die."

Anne started violently. "Norman, my brother? I beseech you

to tell me, mother, is he not dead?"

"Ah, there is Duncan back, from Portoran," said Mrs. Ross, rising. "Letters from Lewis, no doubt. How slow they are!" And she rang the bell vehemently.

The summons brought in a maid, struggling with the buckle of Duncan's letter-bag, which was opened at length, and gave to Mrs. Ross's delighted eyes the expected letters from her only son: but Anne sat apart, shivering and trembling with a great dread – a secret, most sad and terrible; a tale of dishonor, and crime, and misery, such as might chill the very heart to hear.

"And there's a letter from the Tower, Miss Anne," said the maid, giving her a note. "Duncan got it at the Brig, from Johnnie Halflin, and Johnnie was to wait, till Duncan got back with the answer, if there was to be any."

"There is no answer, May," said Anne, glancing over the brief epistle; and May withdrew reluctantly, having obtained no news of Maister Lewis, or his wanderings, wherewith to satisfy her expectant audience in the kitchen.

The letter of Lewis was a long one, and Anne had time to travel listlessly again and again over the angular and decided characters of her ancient friend.

"My friend," said the singularly-folded black letter-looking note, "you will come to the Tower to-morrow. I am expecting Alison Aytoun at night; and seeing the world has gotten two new generations (to keep within the truth) since I myself was done with the company of children, I am in need of your counsel how

we are to brighten the bed-chamber and other apartments, so as will become the presence of youth. For undoubtedly in this matter, if I am like any mortal person, it is like Issachar in the prophecy (not to be profane,) for there is Elspat Henderson, my own woman, that would have out the old red satin curtains (that are liker black than red now, as you will mind,) to put upon the bed, and Euphan Morison, her daughter, is for no curtains at all, for the sake of health, (pity me, Anne, that have doctors among my serving-women!) and Jacky, Euphan's daughter (bethanked that she has but one!) has been gathering dahlias and sunflowers, and such other unwholesome and unyouthful things, to put in the poor bairn Alison's room, wherewith I have near brought a fever upon myself, first with the evil odor of them, and then with flying upon the elf Jacky. So mind you come to the Tower, like a good bairn, as you are, and have always been, as early in the day as you can; and before twelve of the clock, if possible, seeing that I have many things to say to you.

"Catherine Douglas."

For the third or fourth time, Anne's eyes had travelled down to that firm and clear signature, when an exclamation from her step-mother roused her. "Lewis will be home before his birthday! Lewis will be here on Friday! I believe you are more concerned about that girl coming to the Tower. Do you hear me, Anne? On Friday your brother will be home."

There were only two days to prepare for his coming; and before Anne had finished her hasty perusal of the letter which

Mrs. Ross permitted her to see, the house was full of joyful bustle and unwonted glee – for the frigid soul of its mistress melted under the influence of her son, as if his words had been very sunbeams. By nature she was neither amiable nor generous; but the mother's love, in its first out-gushing, almost made her both.

And she had known the details of that dark mystery too long, and had too little liking for her husband's unhappy son, to sympathize at all with Anne's horror and agony. And so Mrs. Ross, of Merkland, bustled and rejoiced in her selfish gladness, while Anne, longing to ask, and yet afraid of rude repulse or angry reprimand, sat silently, with a heavy heart, beside her. At length, when they were about to separate for the night, Anne took courage.

"Mother," she said, "I do not wish to disturb you, in so happy an occupation as this, but only one word – Norman, poor Norman, you said he did not die."

"Upon my word, Anne, I think you might choose a better time for those disagreeable inquiries," said Mrs. Ross, impatiently.

"He is my brother," said Anne, "and with such a dreadful history. Mother, is Norman alive?"

"How can I tell?" cried Mrs. Ross. "You ought to desire most earnestly, Anne, both for his sake and your own, that he may be peacefully dead. Your father, I know, received a letter from him, secretly, after the ship was lost. He had escaped the wreck; but that is seventeen years ago."

"And did he confess?" said Anne, eagerly.

"Confess! Criminals do not generally do that. No, no, he professed his innocence. I may find you the letter sometime. There, will not that do? Go to your room now."

"And will you not tell Lewis?" said Anne.

"Tell Lewis!" exclaimed Mrs. Ross, "why should I grieve my boy? He is but his half-brother."

Anne turned away without another word and went quietly up stairs – not to her own apartment first, but to a dusty attic lumber-room, seldom entered, except by herself. In one dark corner stood a picture, its face to the wall. Anne placed her candle on the floor, and kneeling down turned the portrait – a frank, bold, generous face, half boy, half man, with its unshadowed brow and clear eyes, that feared no evil.

"Lewis is but my half-brother also," said Anne Ross, replacing the picture with a sigh; "but Norman was my mother's son."

The house and small estate of Merkland were situated in one of the northern counties of Scotland, within some three or four miles of a little post-town which bore the dignified name of Portoran. The Oran water swept by the side of its small port, just before it joined its jocund dark-brown waters to the sea, and various coasting vessels carried its name and its traffic out (a little way) into the world. The parish in which Merkland stood, boasted at least its three Lairds' houses – there was Strathoran, the lordliest of all, with its wide acres extending over three or four adjacent parishes. There was the Tower, with its compact and richly-cultivated lands, the well-ordered property of Mrs.

Catherine Douglas; and, lastly, there was Merkland – the home of a race of vigorous Rosses, renowned in former generations for its hosts of sons and daughters, and connected by the spreading of those strong and healthful off-shoots, with half of the families of like degree in Scotland. The children of the last Ross of Merkland had not been vigorous – one by one, in childhood, and in youth, they had dropped into the family grave, and when the infant Anne was born, her worn-out mother died, leaving besides the newborn child, only one son. His mother's brother long before had made this Norman, his heir. At the same time, in consideration of his independent inheritance, and his changed name, he had been excluded from the succession to his father's lands. So Mr. Ross of Merkland, in terror lest his estate should have no worthier proprietor than the sickly little girl whose birth had cost her mother's life, married hastily again. When Lewis and Anne were still only infants, Norman Rutherford left his father's house to take possession of his own – and then some terrible blight had fallen upon him, spoken of in fearful whispers at the time, but almost wholly forgotten now. A stranger in the district at the time our history begins would only have learned, after much inquiry, that Norman, escaping from his native country with the stain of blood upon his hands, proved a second Jonah to the ship in which he had embarked, and so was lost, and that grief for his crime had brought his father's grey hairs in sorrow to the grave. But the difference of name, and the entire silence maintained by his family concerning him, had puzzled country

gossips, and restrained the voice of rumor, even at the time. Now his remembrance had almost entirely passed away, and in another week Lewis Ross, Esq., of Merkland, would be of age.

But the whole dreadful tale in all the darkness of its misery had been poured into Anne's ears that day. She had known nothing of it before. Now, her stepmother thought, it was full time she should know, because – a reason that made Anne shrink and tremble – Mrs. Ross felt convinced that the girl who was so soon to be a visitor at the Tower, could be no other than the daughter of the murdered man.

"The south room, May – he had it when he was a boy," said Mrs. Ross, as Anne entered their breakfast-room the next morning. "I wish there had been time to get some of the furniture renewed; but I dare say Lewis will like to see it as he left it. Do you not think so, Anne?"

"He was always such a kindly heart," interposed May.

Mrs. Ross looked dubious.

"You must remember, May, that my son is no longer a boy. This day week he will take the management of his affairs into his own hands. He left us a youth, but he returns a man."

"And I was just thinking that myself, ma'am," said May; "and Duncan says it behoves us to call the young Lord by his own name, Merkland, – and not Mr. Lewis; but I always think the old way's the kindliest."

"Lewis will be changed, if he does not like the kindliest best," said Anne.

"Ah, that may be," said Mrs. Ross; "but there is something due to – Well, where were we. Ay, the south room. I know you keep it in good order, May, but we must have it on Friday shining like – "

"Like a new pin, ma'am," said May, as Mrs. Ross paused for a simile; "and so it shall, and you may trust that to me."

"Yes, Lewis will be quite a man," said Mrs. Ross, leaning back in her chair with a smile. "I should think he would be a good deal browned, Anne – I have been thinking so all the morning."

"Oh! and he'll have a lordly presence," said May, "like his father before him. The Rosses have always been grand men to look upon. They say the young Laird – "

"Was not in the least degree like what my son will be," said Mrs. Ross, stiffly, while Anne grew pale. "You will see that my orders are strictly attended to, May, and let Duncan come to me whenever we have had breakfast. Take your place, Anne."

Discomfited by her abrupt dismissal, May took her departure, muttering between her teeth:

"One would think it was a crime to speak a good word of the old lady's bairns! Well, if one but knew what became of him at last, I would like to see the man in all Strathoran like the young Lord."

"Anne," said Mrs. Ross, somewhat sternly, as May withdrew, leaving Anne's heart vibrating painfully with her indiscreet reference; "was it to-day that Mrs. Catherine expected her visitor?"

"Yes, mother."

"And to-day you are engaged to go to the Tower?"

"Yes," said Anne. "But I can send Duncan with an apology, if you wish it. I did not know that Lewis was likely to arrive so soon when I received Mrs. Catherine's note."

"Send Duncan! no, indeed!" said Mrs. Ross. "There would be little profit in wasting *his* time to save yours. Duncan is the most useful person about Merkland."

"And I the most useless," said Anne, sighing. "It grieves me deeply, mother, that it should be so."

Mrs. Ross threw back her head slightly, expressing the peevish scorn which she did not speak, and Anne returned to her tea-making; and so they sat till their joyless meal was ended: each the sole companion and nearest connexion of the other, and yet so utterly separated in all that constitutes true fellowship.

The clear light of the October sun was shining on the waters of Oran, and its tinted, overshadowing leaves, when Anne emerged from among the trees that surrounded Merkland, and took her solitary way to the Tower. Her heart was heavy within her, her step irregular, her brow clouded. The great secret of the family had fallen upon her spirit with all the stunning force of a first grief, and vainly she looked about her for comfort, finding none.

How many times had May's admiring mention of the "young Laird" called forth upon her lips a sad smile of affectionate sorrow for the dead brother whom she never saw. How often had she marvelled at the old nurse's stern summary of his end:

"He died a violent death!" How often lingered with sorrowful admiration over his picture in the attic lumber-room! And now his name had become a name of fear! The stain of blood was upon him! A Cain! a murderer!

Not dead! Anne's hasty steps passed quick over the narrow pathway, with its carpeting of fallen leaves. In what pain – what misery, must that blighted life have passed! Whither might that guilty soul have wandered, seeking, in crowd or in solitude, to hide itself from its own fearful consciousness, and from its angry God! In privation, in danger, in want in sin, unfriended and accursed, and alone, with none to speak to him of mercy, of hope, of Divine forgiveness! And this was her brother! her mother's son!

It was like some dreadful dream – but not like a dream could it be shaken off. How often in her childish imaginings, long ago, had she dreamed of the dead Norman living again, her friend and protector! Now how bitter and strong that unavailing wish, that God had indeed stricken him in his early youth, and laid him in the peaceful family grave unstained. Again and again those dark particulars rolled back upon her in bitter waves, swelling her grief and horror up to agony. And that the daughter of the slain man should come here – here, to have daily intercourse with the nearest kindred of her father's murderer! The idea was so terrible, that it produced a revulsion. She tried to believe that it was not so – that it could not be possible.

Again and again she stopped, and would have turned back,

and yet a strange fascination drew her on. There was a link of terrible connexion between herself and this girl, and Anne's spirit throbbed to bursting with undefined and confused purposes. She could not trust herself alone, therefore she put force upon her struggling heart, as she had learned to do long years ago, and passed on to the Tower.

For the step-daughter of Mrs. Ross, of Merkland, had small reason to think of this many-sided world as a place of happiness. In a household which had barely means enough to support its station, and provide for the somewhat expensive wanderings of its heir, she was the one dependent, and Anne had ripened into some three-and-twenty years, and was no longer a girl. She felt how useless she was in the eyes of her clever step-mother; she felt the lethargic influence of having no aim, and deep down in that hidden heart of hers, which few others knew, or cared to know, sorrow and pain had been dwelling long, like Truth, in the well of their own solitary tears.

She was now proceeding to the house of her most dear and especial friend: an ancient lady, whose strong will swayed, and whose warm heart embraced all who came within their influence, and whose healthful and vigorous spirit was softened in a manner most rare and beautiful by those delicate perceptions and sympathies which form so important an element in the constitution of genius. Mrs. Catherine Douglas had seen the snows of sixty winters. For more than thirty of these, her strong and kindly hand had held absolute dominion at the Tower, yet of

the few admitted to her friendship and confidence, Anne Ross, the neglected step-daughter of Mrs. Ross, of Merkland, an ill-used child, a slighted woman, held the highest place.

The Tower was a gray, old, stately place, defiant alike of storm and siege, with deep embrasures on its walls meant for no child's play, and a court-yard that had rung to martial music centuries ago, in the days of the unhappy Stuarts. Deep woods stretched round it, tinted with autumn's fantastic wealth of coloring. The Oran ran so close to the strong, heavy, battlemented wall, that in the old warlike days, it had been the castle-moat, but the drawbridge was gone, and there was peaceful access now, by a light bridge of oak. A boat lay on the stream, moored to an over-hanging rock, by which Mrs. Catherine herself was wont to make the brief passage of the Oran. It was a favorite toy of Anne's also, in her happier moods, but she was too heavy of heart to heed it now.

"Mrs. Catherine is in the library, Miss Anne," said Mrs. Euphan Morison, the portly, active housekeeper, whose medical propensities so frequently annoyed her mistress; and threading the dark passages familiarly, Anne passed on alone.

"Mrs. Catherine is in the library, Miss Anne," repeated a dark, thin, elfin-like girl, who sat on the sill of a deep window, reading, and hiding her book beneath the stocking which she ought to have been knitting, as she threw furtive glances to the door of the housekeeper's especial sanctum: "but there's gentlemen with her. It's a business day."

"I suppose you may admit me, Jacky," said Anne. "Mrs. Catherine expects me."

"Mr. Walter Foreman's in, Miss Anne," said Jacky.

"And what then?" said Anne, smiling.

"And Mr. Ferguson, the factor from Strathoran," said the girl, gravely, taking up, with a look of abstraction, some dropt loops in her neglected stocking.

"Then I will go to the drawing-room," said Anne. "Tell me, Jacky, when Mrs. Catherine is disengaged."

"And Miss Anne," said Jacky, starting, as Anne was about to pass on, "the young lady's coming."

"So I have heard," said Anne.

"And she's to get the mid-chamber," said Jacky, "and the chairs have come out of the big room in the west tower. You never saw them, Miss Anne. Will you come?" And Jacky jerked her thin, angular frame off her seat, and threw down book and stocking.

"What have you been reading, Jacky?" said Anne.

The sharp, dark face owned an involuntary flush, and the furtive eyes glanced back to the housekeeper's closed door. "It was only the Faery Queen."

"The Faery Queen! Jacky, these are strange studies for you."

"There's no harm in it," muttered the girl, angrily.

"I did not say there was," said Anne; "and you need not transfix me with those sharp eyes of yours, because I wondered. But, Jacky, your mother would not be pleased with this."

"It's not the chief end of woman to work stockings," murmured the girl.

"No, surely," said Anne; "nor yet to read poems. Come, Jacky, let me see the mid-chamber."

Jacky seized the book, deposited it in a dark niche below the window, and glided away before Anne up the broad stone stairs, to the room which the united skill of the household had been decking for a bower to little Alice Aytoun. The mid-chamber, as its name imports, occupied the front of the building, between the two round towers, that rose grimly with their dark turrets on either side. It was a room of good proportions, with two deep windows, looking out on the windings of the Oran, and commanding a view of the little town, seated on the point where the river poured itself into the sea. The country looked rich and gay in its russet coloring, and here and there you could see the harvest labourers in a half-reaped field – for the harvests were late beneath the northern sky of Strathoran. A little way below, the unpretending house of Merkland stood, peacefully among its trees; on the left hand, the plain church and substantial Manse basked in the sunbeams; and the broad sea, flashing beneath the light, belted its blue breadths around the landscape. Anne stood at the window, and looked out, as in a dream; dim, misty, spectral visions floating before her, in which were ever mingling her unhappy wandering brother, and the unconscious girl who should look forth on that same scene to-night.

"It's not so much here," said Jacky, glancing round, and

looking complacently on a great bunch of dahlias and hollyhocks, rudely inserted in an uncouth china vase. “The room’s just as it always is, except the flowers – will you come in here, Miss Anne?”

Anne followed, thinking little of the arrangements which she came to superintend. The room they entered was small and rounded, occupying as it did, a corner of the eastern tower. Its deep-set window was toward the sunrising – towards the hills, too, and the sea – and Anne paused upon the threshold, in wonder at the unwonted preparations made for this youthful visitor. In one end of the room stood a great wardrobe of richly-carved oak. There was an ancient piano, also, and little tables laden with well-chosen books, and the antique chairs looked richly sober in their renovation, heightening the air of olden romance which hung about this lady’s bower. The blooming plants in the window were the only things new, and pertaining to the immediate present. Graceful and pure in its antique delicacy, the small apartment was a bower indeed.

“But Mrs. Catherine,” said Jacky, “would let me put no flowers here – only a big branch of barberries that I slipped in myself.”

The branch of barberries was, indeed, projecting fantastically from the rich frame of the mirror on the wall.

“I think you may let Mrs. Catherine have the whole merit of this, Jacky,” said Anne, taking it down; “and do you have a ramble through the garden, and find something more fragrant

than those sunflowers. You will get some roses yet – run, Jacky. Mrs. Catherine – "

"Is troubled with undutiful bairns," said the lady herself entering the room. "Wherefore did you not come to me, Anne, and me in urgent need of counsel? And wherefore did you not open the door, you elf, Jacky, unless you be indeed a changeling, as I have always thought you, and were feared for learned words? Come down with me this moment, Anne! You can fiddle about these trifling things when there is no serious matters in hand. I am saying, Come with me!"

Mrs. Catherine Douglas was tall and stately, with a firm step, and a clear voice, strong constitutioned, and strong spirited. In appearance she embodied those complexional peculiarities which gave to the fabled founder of her house his far-famed name – black hair, streaked with silver, the characteristic pale complexion, and strongly-marked features, harmonising perfectly in the hue – she was dark-grey. It seemed her purpose, too, to increase the effect by her dress. At all times and seasons, Mrs. Catherine's rich, rustling, silken garments were grey, of that peculiar dark-grey which is formed by throwing across the sable warp a slender waft of white. In winter, a shawl of the finest texture, but of the simple black and white shepherd's check, completed her costume. In summer, its soft, fine folds hung over her chair. No rejoicing, and no sorrow, changed Mrs. Catherine's characteristic dress. The lustrous silken garment, the fine woollen shawl, the cap of old and costly lace remained

unchanged for years.

"It is a new vocation for me, child," said Mrs. Catherine, as Anne followed her down stairs, "to set myself to the adorning of rooms; but when my serving-women must have their divers notions concerning them, I should put to my own hand, unless I had wanted the stranger to be terrified with the aspect of my house – which I do not, for – Look back, child, is that elf Jacky behind you with her sharp eyes. But I have matters more important on my hand to-day."

They reached the library door as Mrs. Catherine spoke, and she entered, while Anne lingered behind. Another voice, the brisk one of Walter Foreman, the young Portoran writer, began to speak immediately, but was summarily interrupted by Mrs. Catherine's clear tones:

"I tell you you're a fool, Walter Foreman, as was your father before you – it's in the blood. You say he was a kinsman. Ay, doubtless, as if I did not known that. And was not James Aytoun as near of kin to him as me, and Ralph Falconer nearer. To think of any mortal, in his senses, passing over the promising lads, to leave siller to me! Me, that have an abundance for my own turns, and none to be heir to either my land or my name. Speak not to me. Walter Foreman, I say the man was crazy!"

"But even if he were," said Mr. Walter Foreman, as Anne entered the library, "you would surely never think, Mrs. Catherine, of contesting the validity of a will made in your own favor."

"And who said I would not, if it seemed right in my own eyes?" said Mrs. Catherine, indignantly. "Come here, Anne; you are not blinded with the sight of siller, as this youth is. Robert Falconer, the merchant (the third son of old Falcon's Craig,) is dead, and passing over his own near kin, that needed it (besides leaving the most part of his siller to hospitals, which may be was right, and may be not, I have not time to enter upon it,) the auld fool – that I should speak so of a man that is gone to his account – has left by his will a portion of siller, ten thousand pounds, no less, to me: me, that have no manner of use for it; that know not even what to do with it. I am thankful to you, Mr. Ferguson, you would learn me an easy way of putting it out of my hand; but I must consider, first, with your permission, whether I have any right to take it in."

Mr. Ferguson, the Strathoran factor, smiled. "It is not often, Mrs. Catherine, that people receive legacies as you do."

"No – neither, I am hoping, are there many left like this," said Mrs. Catherine; "but truly, gentlemen, that is no fault of yours, that I should fall upon you for it. Come back to me this day week, Mr. Ferguson; and you can come also, Walter Foreman, unless your father, who has more discretion, has the time to spare; and in that space, I will have taken counsel what I should do."

Mr. Ferguson and the young lawyer took their leave; and Mrs. Catherine turned to Anne: "Heard you ever the like of it, child? To leave siller to me! You did not know the man; but Ralph Falconer, of Falcon's Craig, is his grand-nephew, and James Aytoun is also allied to him by the mother's side: and I, that am

but his cousin, three times removed, and having my own share of this world's goods, and none to come after me – undoubtedly the man was crazy!"

CHAPTER II

THE October sun rose brilliantly upon ancient Edinburgh, throwing the strong radiance of its russet gold upon the noble outline and antique grandeur of the historic city, and shone joyously into a family room, where a small household round their breakfast table were discussing the journey which that fair-haired, smiling girl, half-timorous, half-exultant, was to undertake that day. The white hair upon the mother's placid forehead was belied by the fresh cheek and dewy liquid eye, from which time had not taken the brightness. Her son was entering upon the strongest years of manhood, with sense and intelligence shining in his face. Her daughter was a girl, just emerging from the child's mirth and unrestrained gaiety, into those sensitive, imaginative years, which form the threshold of graver life —

> "Standing with reluctant feet,
> Where the brook and river meet,
> Womanhood and childhood sweet."

"But, mother," exclaimed Alice Aytoun, suddenly, "Miss Douglas will see at once that Bessie has not been my maid at home."

"*Miss* Douglas!" cried her mother. "Alice, did I not tell you that you were on no account to call her *Miss*. Remember always,

Mrs. Catherine. And she knows very well that we are not able to keep a maid for you, and will understand that Bessie is for a companion on the way, and in some sense a protector. If you stay long, you can send her home."

"And be alone in the strange place, mother," said Alice, the sunshine fading, for a moment, from her face.

"How long will it be strange, Alice?" said her brother. "How many acquaintances will you make in a week?"

The sunshine flushed back again.

"And Mrs. Catherine – is she very eccentric, mother? I hope I shall like her."

"I hope still more, Alice," said Mrs. Aytoun, smiling, "that she may like you. Mrs. Catherine has many friends who could serve James; and then, you know, she has no heir. So be as fascinating as possible."

"Mother!" exclaimed James, "this worldly wisdom sounds strangely from your lips. We do not send Alice away to pay court to Mrs. Catherine Douglas for her estate's sake."

"By no means," said Mrs. Aytoun. "I have heard Mrs. Catherine spoken of often as a most kind, loveable person, in her own peculiar way; and I accepted her invitation to Alice gladly, not because she has an estate unheired, but because – for various reasons, indeed – but the other, by the way. You are a landless laird yourself, James, and I am not quite so stoical as to despise a good inheritance."

"Do you know any of Mrs. Catherine's neighbors, mother?"

said Alice, whose attention, sadly distracted by anticipation, had altogether wandered during this discussion of motives. “The people I am likely to meet, do you know any of them?”

“No,” said Mrs. Aytoun, “I never was at the Tower; and my mother left the neighborhood young, and died so soon, too, that I have had very little connexion with her friends or native place. Indeed, it surprised me, that Mrs. Catherine should remember our relationship at all: but she is one of the most generous persons possible, I have heard often; and no doubt wishes to give you a glimpse, Alice, of the world you should enter on now.” And Mrs. Aytoun gave a very quiet sigh.

“Nonsense, mother!” said her son, energetically. “Alice stands in no need of generosity: and I should fancy a set of North Country lairds could be very little superior to the society we have here, landless though we be.”

“There are most gentlemanly and intellectual men in the North Country, James,” said Mrs. Aytoun, quietly shifting her premises.

“No doubt of it, mother; but not better than we have in Edinburgh.”

Mrs. Aytoun drew her hand over her daughter’s fair curls, and made no answer; confessing to herself, that a North Country laird would be, in her eyes, a more suitable partner for her Alice, than any rising W.S., or poor advocate of all James Aytoun’s friends.

Alice’s trunks were standing, corded and ready. Little Bessie, the daughter of a woman who had been Mrs. Aytoun’s nurse in

better times, and who was her humble agent and assistant in all emergencies now, sat in the kitchen in all the glory of a new shawl and bonnet, a brevet ladies-maid; and it was nearly time to start. Mrs. Aytoun had yet to pack some small, forgotten tendernesses in a basket, with tremulous mother-anxiety, half-pleased, half-sorrowful, while James stood, watch in hand, warning her of the flight of those quick moments and of the possible starting of the coach before her cares were at an end.

At last, they left the house, established Alice in the cosiest corner, set little Bessie by her side, gave the guard all manner of instructions to attend to their comfort, and waited till the vehicle should start.

"Mind, Alice," whispered Mrs. Aytoun, anxiously; "always to call her Mrs. Catherine," and, in a moment more, Alice had lost sight of the compelled smile on her mother's pale face, and had started on her first journey from home.

She was seventeen only, and her heart was bounding high within her. The October morning was so bright and invigorating, the beautiful world so new and so unknown. A transitory qualm passed over the unclouded, youthful spirit, as she thought it not right, perhaps, to rejoice at leaving home, but that passed speedily. A temporary anxiety as to the unknown Mrs. Catherine, whom she was hastening to see: but that disappeared also. The brilliant dreams that had been rising by day and night, since that momentous invitation came, floated together in indistinct brightness before her. The red October sunbeams, the bracing

October breeze, the beautiful landscapes on that northern road – though these danced but indistinctly in her eyes, a part of the exhilaration of spirit, yet scarcely things rejoiced in for their own beauty – filled up her gladness to overflowing. The little heart at her side danced too, in its degree, as blithely, for after the young lady herself, in the great house to which they journeyed, was not the young lady's maid next in dignity.

At one of the stages of the journey, a hypochondriac old gentleman, who had been the only other tenant of the coach, became faint, and declared himself unable to remain in the inside; whereupon, after some delay, an outside passenger was prevailed upon to exchange. A by no means unpleasant exchange, for the new comer was a young man of good looks, and frank, prepossessing manners, to whom the innocent, youthful face, with its blue eyes and fair curls might, or might not, have been an inducement to descend.

The beauty of the road became more articulate after that, as the polite stranger, apparently well-acquainted with the way, took care to point out to his young fellow-traveller its various points of interest, and imperceptibly, Alice scarce knew how, they glided into confidential conversation. For Strathoran, the stranger said, was his home and birth-place, whither he was returning after a long absence, and Mrs. Catherine Douglas was one of his oldest friends – he had known her all his life. So the hours went on, quick and pleasantly, and the long miles gradually dwindled down. Her new friend talked, Alice thought, as few

could talk, and interspersed his comments on their present road so gracefully, with anecdotes of other roads, world-famed and wonderful, which she had read of often, but which he had seen.

He told her of her kinswoman, too, and of the Tower, and hinted how her own gentle presence would brighten the old walls and recall its youth again, till Alice, with all these magic influences about her, began to discover that this journey, instead of the weary means of reaching a wished-for destination, was in itself a young Elysium, unthought of, and delightful – the first homage rendered to the youthful woman, no longer a child: the first sign of her entrance into that fair world of more eventful life, whose air seemed now so golden with smiles and sunshine.

The dim lights of Portoran began to blink at last through the mists of the October night, and by and bye, the coach stopped at the door of the principal inn, in the main street. Already Alice could perceive various individual loungers without, touching their hats as they caught a glimpse of her companion, and while she herself began to wonder how she was to travel the remaining five or six miles to the Tower, the head of a tall and gaunt, elderly woman, dressed in stiff old-fashioned garments, looked in at the coach window.

"Is Miss Aytoun here?" said a harsh voice.

Alice answered timidly to her name.

"Quite safe; but very weary I am afraid," said the gentleman, "Mistress Elspat, you have forgotten me, I see. How are they all at the Tower?"

"Bless me, Mr. Lewis, is't you?" said the stately Mrs. Elspat Henderson, own woman to Mrs. Catherine Douglas, of the Tower. "Who would have thought of meeting you here? They're a' well, Sir. I left Miss Anne there even now; but the carriage is waiting for the young lady. The carriage is waiting, Miss Aytoun."

And, beginning to tremble, with a revulsion of all her simple apprehensions and timidity, Alice Aytoun was transferred to Mrs. Catherine's comfortable carriage, and leaving Lewis Ross at the inn door, looking after her, rolled away through the darkness to the Tower.

It was not a pleasant change; to leave the cheerful voice and vivacious conversation of Lewis, for those formal questions as to her journey, and the terrified stillness of little Bessie, as she sat tremulously by Mrs. Elspat's side. Alice had scarcely ever seen before the dense darkness of starless nights in so wide and lonely a country, as she looked out through the carriage window, and saw, or fancied she saw the body of darkness floating round about her, the countless swimming atoms of gloom that filled the air, her bounding heart was chilled. The faint autumnal breeze, too, pouring its sweeping, sighing lengths, through those endless walls of trees; the excited throb of her pulse when in some gaunt congregation of firs, she fancied she could trace the quaint gables and high roof of some olden dwelling-place; the disappointment of hearing in answer to her timid question that the Tower was yet miles away! Alice sank back into her corner in silence, and closed

her eyes, feeling now many fears and misgivings, and almost wishing herself at home.

At last the voice of the Oran roused her; there was something homelike in its tinkling musical footsteps, and Alice looked up. – Dimly the massy Tower was rising before her, planting its strong breadth firmly upon its knoll, like some stout sentinel of old. The great door was flung wide open as they approached, and a flood of light, and warmth, and kindliness beaming out, dazzled and made denser the intervening gloom. Foremost on the broad threshold, stood a young lady, whose graver and elder womanhood, brought confidence to the throbbing girlish heart; behind stood the portly Mrs. Euphan Morison – the elfin Jacky, and furthest back of all, a tall figure, enveloped in the wide soft folds of the gray shawl, Mrs. Catherine's characteristic costume. Little Alice alighted, half stumbling in bashful awkwardness, the young lady on the threshold came forward, took her hand, and said some kindly words of welcome. Jacky curtsied; the tall figure advanced.

"I have brought ye the young lady – Miss Aytoun, ma'am," said Mrs. Elspat Henderson, and Alice lifted her girlish face, shy and blushing, to the scrutiny of her ancient kinswoman. Mrs. Catherine drew the young stranger forward, took her hand, and looked at her earnestly.

"A right bonnie countenance it is," she said at last, bending to kiss the white forehead of the tremulous Alice. "You are welcome to my house, Alison Aytoun. Anne, the bairn is

doubtless cold and wearied. Do you guide her up the stair."

Up the fine old staircase, into the inner drawing-room, which was Mrs. Catherine's especial sanctum, with its warm colors, and blazing fire, and shining tea equipage. Little Alice had to close her blue eyes perforce, dazzled as they were, that no one might see the happy dew that gathered in them. The contrast was so pleasant, and forthwith the bounding of that gay heart, and all its bright dreams and sunshiny anticipations came flushing back again.

"And so you had a pleasant journey," said Mrs. Catherine, kindly, when after half an hour which Alice had spent arranging her dress, half in awe, and more than half in pleasure, in the beautiful apartment called her dressing-room, they were seated at table – Anne Ross presiding over the massy silver tea-pot, and hissing urn: "and were not feared to travel your lane? Jacky, you elf! what call had you to open that door, and let in a draft upon us? The bairn will get her death of cold."

"If you please, Miss Anne," said Jacky, resolutely holding the door of the outer room open, as she kept her ground.

"Come in, ye fairy, and shut the door," commanded Mrs. Catherine.

The girl obeyed, casting long sharp glances from under her dark eye-brows at the wondering Alice.

"If you please, Miss Anne, my grandmother says – "

"What, Jacky?"

Jacky had paused to ascertain who it was that the young

stranger was like, and muttered a private memorandum of her discovery before she went on.

"It's the little picture in the west room – my grandmother says, Miss Anne, that Mr. Lewis – but she bade me say, Merkland – "

"What of him, Jacky?" said Anne, rising hastily.

"If ye please, Miss Anne, he came to Portoran in the coach with a young lady to-night."

"Came to Portoran to-night!" repeated Anne, "then you must let me leave you immediately, Mrs. Catherine. I must hasten to tell my mother, if indeed Lewis is not at home already."

"Away with you down the stairs, you elf," cried Mrs. Catherine, "and see if the horses are put up yet; and if they're not, let Simon be ready to drive Miss Ross to Merkland. Anne, doubtless you must go, but mind the bairn Alison is not used to such company as a staid auld wife like me, and be soon back again."

"I will bring Lewis to see you to-morrow, Mrs. Catherine," said Anne, as she hastily bade Alice good night.

"It must have been your brother who travelled with me, Miss Ross," said Alice. "He said he had been abroad, and knew Mrs. Catherine – and he was very kind. Will you thank him for me?"

Anne Ross felt herself shrink and tremble from the touch of the small soft hand, the innocent frank look of the girlish face – the child of the slain man, whose blood was on Norman's hand.

A strange contrast – the little throbbing happy heart, whose slight fears, and shy apprehensions, scarcely graver than a child's,

had trembled and palpitated so short a time before, in the same vehicle which carried down to Merkland, so grave a burden of grief, so few hopes, so many sorrows, in Anne's maturer spirit – for before *her* there lay no brilliant heritage of unknown good to come. One vision was in her very heart continually – a wandering, sorrowing, sinning man, buffeting the wind, striving through the tempest, enveloped with every physical attribute of misery, and carrying its essence in his soul. It is only those who have mourned and yearned for such, who can know how the sick heart, in its anxious agonies, conjures up storm, and blast, and desolation, to sweep around the beloved head, of whose sin and wanderings it knows, yet knows not where those wanderings are – the pain without, symbolizing and heightening the darker pain within, with one of those touches of tragic art, which grief does so strangely excel in.

Lewis had not arrived when Anne reached Merkland, but he came shortly after; and the stir of joy incident on his arrival united the family more closely together than was usual for them. Mrs. Ross's cold bright eyes were wet with tears of joy that night, and her worldly spirit melted into kindliness; and the presence of Lewis gave his only sister a greater share in the household and its rejoicings. He stood between her step-mother and her, the nearest relation of each, linking them together. Lewis had been two years away. He had gone, a fairhaired youth, with a gay party from Strathoran, who, seizing the first opportunity of restored peace, set out to those sunny continental countries

from which mere tourists had been excluded so long. He was a man now, bronzed and bearded, and with the independent manners of one who had been accustomed in all matters to guide and direct himself. There were various particulars of that same independence which jarred upon Anne's delicate feelings. A considerable remainder of boyish self-importance, and braggadocio – a slight loudness of tone, and flippancy of expression; but there was the excitement of his home-coming, to excuse these faults in some degree.

"And the Duncombes, Lewis," asked Mrs. Ross, when the first burst of welcome was over, and they were seated by the fireside, discussing his journey – "where are they now?"

"Oh, Duncombe's in Gibraltar," said Lewis, "with his regiment of course. Duncombe can't afford to choose his residence – he must have his full pay. A dull life they have of it, yonder."

"And how does Isabel Sutherland like that, Lewis?" said Anne.

"Isabel Sutherland? Mrs. Duncombe, do you mean? Why you don't think *she's* one of the garrison! She's not such a fool, I can tell you!"

"Where is she then, if she is not with her husband?" said Anne, wonderingly.

"What an innocent you are, sister Anne!" said Lewis, laughing. "Why, she's one of the 'unattached,' as Gordon says. I left her in Paris with Archie. You have no idea what a moody,

gloomy fellow Duncombe's grown. I should think he was enough to frighten anybody!"

"He was always a bilious-looking man," said Mrs. Ross; "and yet Isabel ran away with him."

"Ah! there's no accounting for the taste of young ladies," said Lewis, lightly. "I should think she would be more likely to run away *from* him, than *with* him, now. But you should see their *menage* in Paris! Archie's the man for all that."

"How do you mean, Lewis?" said Anne.

"You used to like him – eh, Annie?" said Lewis. "Don't break your heart – it's all up with that now. But, I can tell you, he makes the money fly finely."

Anne's face flushed deeply – perhaps with the faintest shadow of pain at that intelligence, more than did merely belong to her regret for the folly of an old neighbor and early companion – but certainly with a painful feeling of the levity and carelessness of Lewis.

"Well, Lewis," said Mrs. Ross; "I should think Archibald Sutherland could afford it pretty well. The old people must have saved a great deal, they lived so quietly. Strathoran is a good estate. Archie does not need to be so frugal as you."

"Frugal!" echoed her son. "I wish you only saw. But, unless you did, with your quiet Scotch notions, you could have no idea of it. If Archie Sutherland is not poorer than we are, I'm mistaken."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Ross; "that will be the reason they are thinning the woods. Then why don't they come home and

economize?"

"Come home!" cried Lewis. "Home to this dull Strathoran after Paris! It's not such an easy thing, I can tell you, mother. But, to be sure, one never knows the true reason. I've heard Archie often wishing for home – perhaps he is afraid of falling in love with Anne."

"At all events, Lewis," said Anne, gravely, "whatever Archie Sutherland fears, you are not afraid of giving me pain."

"Don't be absurd, Anne," said Mrs. Ross. "The poor boy's first night at home, to begin with these airs of yours!"

Lewis saw the painful flush upon Anne's face – the look of deep humiliation with which she turned away her head, and his heart smote him.

"I did not think you were so easily hurt. Nonsense, Anne! It was mere thoughtlessness, I assure you. I would not give you pain for anything."

Alas! there were many things for which Lewis Ross would have been content to pain any one in the world. But Anne was easily mollified, and he ran on:

"I met a little fairy of a girl in the coach, to-day. She was going to the Tower, to visit Mrs. Catherine. Hallo! what's the matter, Anne?"

"Nothing," said Anne, forcing a smile on the lip which she had felt quiver a moment before.

"How pale you were!" said Lewis. "I thought you were ill. I must go up to see Mrs. Catherine to-morrow. How does she wear,

the old lady? She must be getting very ancient now. But that girl is a pretty little thing. Who can she be – do you know, Anne? I thought of her being a companion, or something of that kind; but there was a little maid with her."

"A relative of Mrs. Catherine's," said Anne, faintly.

"A relative – oh! What if she cuts you out!" said Lewis. – "I should have thought you sure of a good place in Mrs. Catherine's will, Anne. But there is no saying what a little fairy like that may do."

Anne Ross felt the pang of dependence bitterly that night. Lewis was too like his mother to make it light to her; and portionless, with her plain face, and fastidious taste, what could she ever look for but dependence. Marriage, that necessity, often enough an unhappy one, to which so many young women in her position must look, as to a profession, for home and means, could never be a matter of mercenary convenience to Anne, and honorable earning of her own bread was an impossibility. And from her own sombre prospects she could turn for relief to so few of the things or people around. Lewis, so carelessly unfeeling and indifferent, so blunted in perception – Norman, whose very life was so great a dread to her, remaining before her mind's eye for ever – and even the sunny, youthful face at the Tower, which had lifted its blue eyes so trustfully to her own – why did its remembrance, and Lewis's light words of comment on its girlish comeliness, strike so deep a chill of fear into her heart? Ah! clouds deeply gathering, heavily brooding over this nook of still

and peaceful country, what new combinations were your dark mists to form?

Alice Aytoun by this time was snugly settled in the Tower, and had already written a little note, overflowing with innocent pride and joyousness to her mother at home, describing that most cheerful of all inner drawing-rooms, and dwelling fully upon the glories of her own apartments, the carved wardrobe, the old piano, the beautiful flowers; mentioning, too, in the postscript, in the very slightest manner, a "young gentleman," who had pointed out all the places to her on the way, and who turned out to be Miss Ross's brother, though who Miss Ross was, Alice did not stay to particularize. And after the letter was written, Mrs. Catherine, whose eyes had been lingering on the youthful face with most genial kindliness, began to play with her in talk, half childish, and wholly affectionate, as with some toy of unknown construction, whose capabilities she did not yet quite see. Jacky, too, with those quick, sidelong glances, as she went jerking in and out at every possible opportunity, had commenced her study of the young stranger's character, and quickened by admiration of the simple pretty face, was advancing in her study as quickly as her mistress. The minds of the stately old lady and the elfin girl came to conclusions strangely similar. There rose in them both an instinctive impulse of kindly protection, natural enough in Alice Aytoun's aged kinswoman, but contrasting oddly with the age and position of Jacky Morison.

Anne and Lewis visited the Tower next day. In the

Sutherlands, of whom Lewis brought tidings so unfavorable, Mrs. Catherine was deeply interested, and listened while he spoke of them, with many shakings of her head, and doubts and fears.

"Trysted to evil," she exclaimed, as Lewis told her in his careless way, of Mrs. Duncombe's Paris life. "Did I not say nothing good could come of the bairn that left the sick bed of her mother, for the sake of a strange man; ay, and made the sick-bed – a death-bed by the deed. Lewis, is't the lad's fault, think you, or is't hers?"

"Oh, I don't know that there is much fault in it," said Lewis. "It's not a formal separation, you know; only Isabel's living with her brother, because it is, beyond dispute, pleasanter to live in Paris than in Gibraltar. You don't know really – you can have no idea."

"Think you so?" said Mrs. Catherine, quickly, "but maybe there are folk living who knew such places and things, before you were born! Why does Isabel Sutherland not return to the house of her fathers, if she cannot dwell with the man she left father and mother for?"

"There is no accounting for these things," said Lewis, with a slight sneer.

"Lewis Ross," said Mrs. Catherine, "hold your peace; you are but a boy, and should leave that to your elders. Anne, I am sore grieved for Archie Sutherland; if evil comes to the lad, it will be as hard to me, as if evil were coming upon you."

CHAPTER III

DURING the following week there were great preparations and much bustle in Merkland, for Lewis's birthday was to be celebrated with unwonted festivities, and all Mrs. Ross's energies were aroused to make an appearance worthy the occasion. All the Lairds' families round about had received invitations to the solemn dinner-party, at which Lewis Ross was, for the first time, to take his father's place. There was to be a dinner, too, in the Sutherland Arms, at Portoran, of the not very extensive tenantry of Merkland, at which the landlord and his underlings laughed in their sleeves, contrasting it secretly with the larger festivities which had hailed the majority of the youthful Sutherland of Strathoran, whose continued absence from his own home, gave occasion for so many surmisings. But yet, on a small scale, as they were, these same Merkland festivities were a matter of some moment in the quiet country-side. Alice Aytoun's gay heart leaped breathlessly at the thought of them, and many anxious cogitations had risen under her fair curls, touching that pretty gown of light silk, which was her only gala dress. Whether it was good enough to shine in that assemblage of rural aristocracy, and how it would look beside the beautiful robes which, Bessie reported, the Misses Coulter, of Harrows, had ordered from Edinburgh for the occasion. Alice had serious doubts – her only consolation under which was Bessie's genuine admiration; and

thought within herself, with a sigh, that if she had to go to *many* parties, the same dress would not do always, and her mother, at home, could not afford to order beautiful robes for her, as Mrs. Coulter could; however, that was still in the future, and but a dim prospective evil.

Lewis Ross, in those busy days, had many errands to the Tower, and on his fine horse, looked, as Alice thought, the very impersonation of youthful strength, and courage, and gay spirits. And Merkland was a pretty house, with its deep bordering of woods, and its quiet home-landscape, of cultivated fields and scattered farm-houses. Alice almost thought she preferred its tamer beauty, to the wide expanse of hills and valleys, of wandering river, and broad sea, upon which she looked out, from the deepest window of her chamber in the eastern tower.

All the parish was stirred to welcome Lewis, and other parishes surrounding Strathoran, added the pressure of their kindliness. He was in the greatest request everywhere. From gay Falcon's Craig to the sober Manse, from drowsy Smoothlie to the bustling homestead of Mr. Coulter, of Harrows, everybody delighted to honor the youthful heir of Merkland. Lewis did all that goodwill and good horsemanship could do, to renew his acquaintance with them all. He gallopped to Falcon's Craig, and spent a gay night with the bold Falconers. He met Ralph by appointment next day, to follow the hounds. He made a visit to Smoothlie, and curbed his horse into compulsory conformity to the sober paces of Mr. Ambler's respectable pony, as that

easy, quiet old gentleman, who was conjoined with Mrs. Ross in the guardianship of her son, accompanied him to Merkland. And Lewis inspected the stock at Harrows, and dropped in at the Manse, to chat awhile with Mrs. Bairn's father; yet, with all these labors on his hand, did yet insist, in the excess of his brotherly solicitude, on accompanying his reluctant sister Anne to the Tower, the day before he became of age.

Mrs. Catherine sat in her library, that day, in grave deliberation – with young Walter Foreman, and Mr. Ferguson, the Strathoran factor, again beside her. The table was strewed with papers, and the two gentlemen were pressing something to which she objected, upon the firm old lady.

"The siller is mine," she said, "be it so. The man (I will say no ill of him, seeing he was a kinsman of my own, but that he was a fool, which is in no manner uncommon) is dead, and his will can have no more changes; frail folk as we are, that can never be counted on for our steadfastness, till we are in our graves! But allowing that the siller is my own – is it a lawful purpose, I ask of you, Mr. Ferguson, to build up with it, the foolish pleasures of a prodigal – alack, that I should call his mother's son so! while I may have other righteous errands to send it forth upon?"

"It is to build up the old house of Strathoran. It is to save your friend's son," said the factor, with an appealing motion of his hand.

Mrs. Catherine was moved, and did not answer for a moment.

"The lad was left well in this world's goods," she said, at last.

"A fairer course was never before mortal man. An honorable name, a good inheritance, the house of his fathers over his head, and a country-side looking up to him. What could he seek more, I ask you, Mr. Ferguson? And where is the lad? Revelling in yon land of playactors, and flunkies, and knicknackets: consorting with a herd of buzzing things, that were worms yesterday, and will be nothing in the morn. Speak not to me; I have seen suchlike with my own eyes. He must have his feasts, and his flatterers, forsooth! and the good land, that God gave him, eaten up for it. Bonnie-dyes, and paintings, and statues said he? And if it were even so (and the youth, Lewis Ross, says otherwise,) should he take the poor man's lamb for that, think ye? – the farmer's honest gains, that he toils for, with the care of his mind, and the sweat of his brow?"

The lawyer and the factor exchanged glances.

"I beg you to do us justice, Mrs. Catherine," said Mr. Ferguson, deprecatingly: "that was done in no case but in Mr. Ewing's; and the land is really worth considerably more now than when he got his former lease."

"And whose praise is that?" said Mrs. Catherine, sharply. "Not the laird's, who never put a finger to the land. Do you not know well yourself, Robert Ferguson, that Andrew Ewing's lease had but four years to run, when by the good hand of Providence, giving him a discreet wife, with siller, he was set on improving the land? Has he not spent his profits twice told upon it? And, before he has time to reap a just harvest, the prodigal must come

in, to take a tithe off the gains of the honest man. I take ye to witness, that the welfare of the lad, Archie Sutherland, Isabel Balfour's son, lies near my own heart, but I cannot shut my eyes to this evil."

"It was done in no other case," repeated Mr. Ferguson.

"Was there any other lease out," retorted Mrs. Catherine, "that the hunger of siller could have its aliment on? You are a discreet man, Mr. Ferguson, and you, Walter Foreman, with your business-breeding, should have some notion of the value of siller. Is it not a deep sea that ye are asking me to throw this portion into? A hungry mouth that, the more ye fill it, will but gape and gaunt the more? So far as the siller is mine, have I not gotten it to use it well, as my light goes? – to succour the widow and fatherless, maybe – not to pamper the unnatural wants of a waster and a prodigal?"

"Mrs. Catherine," said the factor, "hear me speak before you make this decision. I do not, by any means, defend Strathoran. I have taken it upon me, indeed, both to warn and to entreat him to give up this ruinous – I will not say criminal course, he is embarked on: and I have received from him, in return, letters that would melt your heart. Why he persists in what he acknowledges to be wrong, I cannot tell; and I do not defend him. He has got into the vortex, I suppose, and cannot extricate himself. But his father built up my fortunes, Mrs. Catherine, and so long as anything can be done, I will not forsake his son. This seasonable relief may save him: without this, his affairs are

hopelessly entangled, and Strathoran must cease to be the home of the Sutherlands."

Mrs. Catherine leaned her head upon her hand, and did not speak. At length, looking up, she saw, through the opposite window, Anne Ross and Lewis coming up the waterside, to the Tower.

"You will leave me a time, for further thought," she said, slowly. "Put the papers out of yon keen gallant's sight, or go into another room. You will hear tidings of your prodigal from Lewis, Mr. Ferguson; and doubtless you know him well enough, Walter, being birds of a feather. Euphan Morison, send lunch for the gentlemen into the dining-parlor, and tell Miss Ross I am waiting for her, in the little room."

So speaking, Mrs. Catherine rose and left the library, her face shadowed with deeper gravity than was its wont – her step slow and heavy, and proceeded through many winding passages, to a locked door, in the furthest angle of the western wing. She opened it with a key which hung from her neck, and entered a small apartment furnished with the most meagre simplicity. It contained but two chairs and a small table, and from the deep diamond-paned window, you could only see the steep side of a hill, rough with whins and crags, which sprang sheer upward from the back of the Tower. Upon the wall hung a fine portrait – a noble, thoughtful, manly face, resembling Mrs. Catherine's except in so far as its flush of strong manhood was different from the aspect of her declining years. It was her brother, whose

untimely death had cast its heavy shadow over her own womanly maturity; and the room was Mrs. Catherine's especial retirement, whither she was wont to come in her seasons of most solemn and secret prayerfulness, or at some crisis when her deliberations were grave enough to require the entire attention of her whole earnest mind. Upon the table lay a large Bible – other furniture or adornments there were none. In elder days, when the Douglases of the Tower professed the faith of Rome, it might have been called the lady's oratory; in these plainer times it was only "the little room;" yet was surrounded with the awe, which must always environ the strugglings of a strong spirit, however faintly known to the weaker multitude around. Mrs. Catherine paced up and down its narrow limits, moved in her spirit, and expressing often her strong emotion aloud.

"Isabel Balfour," she murmured to herself, stopping as she passed, to turn upon the picture a look of deep and sorrowful affection. "Ay, Sholto, it is her bairn, her firstborn, the son of her right hand. If ye were here, Sholto Douglas, where you should have been, but for God's pleasure, what would you spare for Isabel's son, that should have been yours also, and a Douglas? I envied you your bride and your bairns, Strathoran, for *his* sake that I left lying in foreign earth, and now your home is left to you desolate – woe's me! woe's me!"

Mrs. Catherine turned away and paced the room again, with quick and uneasy steps: "Unrighteous? I know it is unrighteous; but if he had been Sholto's son, what would I not have done for

him, short of sin? and he *is* Isabel's – "

A footstep approached, through the passage, as she spoke, and controlling herself instantly, Mrs. Catherine opened the door to admit Anne Ross.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed Anne, as she entered. "What has happened, Mrs. Catherine, that you are here?"

"Nothing, but that I am in a sore strait, and am needing counsel," said Mrs. Catherine, closing the door; "sit down upon that seat, child, that I may speak to you."

Anne silently took the chair, and Mrs. Catherine seated herself at the other side of the small table, with her dead brother's picture looking down upon her from the wall.

"Anne," she said, gravely, "you have heard the history of Sholto Douglas, and I need not begin and tell it here again. Look upon him there, in the picture, and see what manner of man he was. And you have heard of Isabel Balfour, the trysted bride of the dead, and how, when he had been in his grave but two twelvemonths, she was wedded to Strathoran. I blamed her not, Anne, though I myself was truer to the memory of my one brother; but wherefore am I speaking thus? There are two lads, Anne, to whom I may do service. One is, as I have heard, an honorable and upright young man, born to better fortune than he has inherited, and toiling manfully, as becomes the son of a good house; besides that, there is a kindred of blood between us. And the other is a rioter, wasting his substance, and dishonoring his name in a strange country. I am in a strait between, the two,

which will I help, and which will I pass by?"

"Mrs. Catherine," said Anne, anxiously, "what can I say? I fear that I can see whom you mean; but how can I advise?"

"The well-doing lad is James Aytoun, the brother of the bairn Alice," said Mrs. Catherine, "who is working an honorable and just work to win back the inheritance of his fathers. The rioter is Isabel Balfour's one son – that might have been your first-born, Sholto Douglas! and I am in a sore struggle between my reason and my liking. The boy has gotten in to my inmost heart, as if he had been truly Sholto's son, and I cannot see him fall."

There was a long silence – for many motives deterred Anne from attempting, what at any time she would have done with reluctance, to offer counsel to the clear and mature judgment of Mrs. Catherine; and she rightly judged that her ancient friend had all the strength of secretly-formed resolution to combat the scruples which Anne could not help sympathizing with, though in her also, so many kindly feelings pleaded for Archibald Sutherland – a prodigal, indeed, but still the frank and joyous comrade of her childish days, the "young Strathoran" of her native district.

At last, Mrs. Catherine rose.

"It must be done," she exclaimed. "Bear me witness, Anne, that I do it against my judgment. I take the siller to feed the false wants of the waster, that should help the honorable man in his travail. I do it, knowing it is ill, but I cannot see the lad a ruined man. Let us away. I will blind myself with no more false

reasonings; the thing is wrong, but we must do it – come!"

Anne followed without speaking. Mrs. Catherine locked the door, and, leaning on her heavily, led her up stairs. Alice Aytoun was in the drawing-room; Mrs. Catherine sent Anne thither, and went herself to seek for something in her own room. She had intended offering substantial help to James Aytoun, and now, when the warmth of her feelings for Archibald Sutherland baulked her benevolent intent, she turned with an involuntary impulse to make some atonement to Alice.

It had been a very dull morning for Alice – Mrs. Catherine was unusually grave at breakfast, and since breakfast Alice had been alone – then she saw Lewis and Anne walking arm-in-arm up Oranside to the Tower, and for a long half-hour had waited and wondered in tantalising loneliness, vainly expecting that they would join her, or she be summoned to them. But they did not come, and Alice, wearied and disappointed, was venting some girlish impatience on the piano, and indulging in a sort of fretful wish for home – quiet, affectionate home, where such slight neglects and forgetfulness never could take place – but, while the thought was being formed, Anne stood beside her.

"Oh! Miss Ross," exclaimed Alice, "I thought you were never coming," and through the fair curls the slightest side-glance was thrown to the closed door, which testified that Anne now came alone. "I saw you coming up by the water, and I have waited so long."

"Mrs. Catherine had some business with me," said Anne: "and

Lewis, I think, is detained below with other visitors. And what do you think of our Strathoran now, Miss Aytoun?"

"Oh! a great deal," said Alice; "only I have not seen Strathoran itself – Mr. Sutherland's house – yet. I am to go to Falcon's Craig, Mrs. Catherine says, after to-morrow. Miss Falconer was here yesterday – riding."

"And you liked her, did you not?" said Anne, smiling.

Alice looked dubious.

"Yes, very well. But is she not more like a gentleman than a lady, Miss Ross?"

"Tell her so yourself to-morrow," said Anne, "and she will think you pay her a high compliment."

Alice shook her head.

"I should not mean it for that, Miss Ross; but Mrs. Catherine said you would perhaps go with me to Falcon's Craig. Will you? I should be half afraid if I went alone."

"Feared for Marjory Falconer!" said Mrs. Catherine, entering the room. "If once she knew her own spirit, it is not an ill one; and I see not wherefore she should scare folk. I know well *you* are not feared, Anne. See, bairns, here are some bonnie dyes to look at, while I am away. Ye are to wear them the morn's night, Alison Aytoun, according to your pleasure. They belong to yourself. And see you go not away, Anne, till I come back again. I will send Lewis up to hold you in mirth. For myself, I have things to make me up, other than mirthful."

Alice advanced timidly to the table as Mrs. Catherine left

the room. What might be within that mysterious enclosure of morocco? Anne smilingly anticipated her. Rich ornaments of pearls, more beautiful than any thing the simple, girlish eyes had ever looked upon before. Alice did not know how to look, or what to say; only her heart made one great leap of delight – all these were her own! How pleased and proud, not for the gift alone, but for the kindness that gave it, would be the mother's heart at home!

Mrs. Catherine descended slowly, and, resuming her seat in the library, called the young lawyer and the factor to her presence, and dismissed Lewis to the pleasanter company up stairs. Mr. Ferguson, one of those acute, sagacious, well-informed men, who are to be met with so frequently in the middle class of rural Scotland, came with looks of anxious expectation, and Walter Foreman, of whom his independent client did not deign to ask counsel, took his place again, with secret pique, fancying himself at least as good an adviser as the plain and quiet stepdaughter of Mrs. Ross, of Merkland.

"Mr. Ferguson," said Mrs. Catherine, "I have made up my mind. You shall have the siller. Thank me not. I do that which I know is wrong, and which I would have done for no mortal but Isabel Balfour's son. You can get the papers made out at your convenience, and tell me the name of his dwelling. I will write to the ill-doer myself."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Ferguson, eagerly, "I beg you will not give yourself so much trouble, Mrs. Catherine. I will myself write

to Strathoran immediately, and tell him of your kindness."

"Doubtless," said Mrs. Catherine: "but wherefore should I not have my word of exhortation, as well as another? Write me down Archie Sutherland's address. I could get it from Lewis Ross, but I do not choose that; and let the siller be paid to Mr. Ferguson, Walter Foreman – that is, when the papers are ready – for mind that I do not *give* this siller, I only lend it."

"On the lands of Lochend and Loelyin," said Mr. Ferguson. "Of course, Mrs. Catherine."

A slight smile of triumph hovered about the factor's mouth. – Mrs. Catherine perceived it.

"On which I will have the annual rent paid to a day," she said, with some sternness, "as if I were the coldest stranger that ever heard of Archie Sutherland's needs or ill-doings, and, I trow, that is a wide word. If I had not purposed so, I might have given him the siller, for what is it to a woman of years like me? Truly, my own spirit bears me witness, that I would give that threefold, if it were mine to give, with a light heart, to restore the prodigal to the house of his fathers, as innocent as he went away. Let the business be done, Walter Foreman; doubtless, you will be taken up with the ploy to-morrow, and will be putting it off till after that."

"We can get it done immediately," said Walter, somewhat sullenly.

"What ails you, sir?" said Mrs. Catherine. "Should I have taken counsel with you on the secrets of my own spirit, think

you? – I that am given to take counsel of no man. Be content, Walter Foreman – you are not an ill gallant, but have overmuch favor for your own wisdom, as is common at your years. If you live to count threescore, you will be an humbler man."

"Our success is a most fortunate thing for Strathoran," said Mr. Ferguson, as they left the Tower. "But the letter – I would not receive such a letter as Mrs. Catherine will write, on such a subject, for the half of his estate."

Walter Foreman shrugged his shoulders.

"And yet she has the greatest regard for him. Mrs. Sutherland was betrothed to Mrs. Catherine's brother, when he died, people say; and it is her strange adoration of his memory that makes her so fond of young Strathoran. A singular consequent, one would think."

"Mrs. Catherine is altogether singular," said Mr. Ferguson, "and not to be judged as people of the world are."

And when the night was far spent, and Alice had carried her bounding heart, and her new possessions, into her own bright apartment, and was electrifying little Bessie there, with a glimpse of the wonderous beauty of those pearls, and trying them on before the mirror on the walls, and listening with bursts of gay laughter to Bessie's guesses of their value – sums immense and fabulous to the simplicity of both, yet, nevertheless, in truth, not greatly exceeding their true worth – Mrs. Catherine sat in the library alone, writing her letter, her strong features swept by deep emotion often, and her steady hand shaken. The course

which the young man was pursuing, was in every way the most repulsive to her feelings. Sin it appeared in the eyes of her strong, unswerving, pure religion – dishonor to her nice sense of uprightness and independence. His foreign residence and likings shocked her warm, home-affections, her entire nationality, and the possible alienation of his lands from the name and family in whose possession they had been so long, alarmed alike fear and prejudice; for Mrs. Catherine, boasting her own pure descent from the "dark-grey man," was no enemy to the law of entail. His sister, too, and her separation from the husband for whom she had left her mother's sick-bed – all these things poured in upon Mrs. Catherine's mind, increasing her agitation, and hallowed, as all her fears were, by that strange visionary tenderness, so thoroughly in unison with her strong character, despite its romance, which clung around those who might have been the children of that dearest brother Sholto, whose mortality, so much as remained of it, lay treasured in yon lone burying-ground in far Madeira, upon whose sunny shore he died.

"Archibald Sutherland," wrote Mrs. Catherine, "I have been hearing tidings of you, which have carried a sword into my inmost heart; and though I might well write in anger, seeing that though I am not of your kin, you were in my arms a helpless bairn, before you were in the arms of any mortal – it is in grief rather that I speak to you. Wherefore is there neither firelight nor candlelight in the house of Strathoran? Is the home of your fathers not good enough for a son that puts in jeopardy their good

fame? Is the roof that sheltered Isabel Balfour in her bridal days, too mean for Isabel Sutherland? or wherefore is it, that with your fair lands and good possessions you are dwelling in a strange and ungodly country? Father and mother you have none to warn you. Answer to me, Archie Sutherland, who have known you all your days, wherefore it should be so. Think you that among the flattering fools that are about you, there is one that would lose a night's sleep, if Strathoran and all belonging to it, were swept into the sea? Come back to your own dwelling-place: witless and prodigal as you have been, there is not a hind in the parish but would lament over the desolate house of your fathers. Think you that it is a small thing, the leal liking and respect of a whole countryside, come down to you as a heritage? or is it your will to give up that for the antics of a papistical and alien race? I say to you, come back to your own house, Archie Sutherland. There is neither healthfulness nor safety – let alone good fame and godliness, a man's best plenishing for this world and the next – in the course you are running now.

"Think not that I write this because I have served you with siller. Over the son of Isabel Balfour, the sister of Sholto Douglas has a right of succor and counsel, warning and reproof. Boy! if you had been my own – if in God's good pleasure you had borne the name of my own brother – the dearest name upon this earth to me – what is there that you might not have claimed at my hands? What is there now, that would be for your own good, that I would hesitate to do? – but far be it from me, who mind your mother's

travail for the new birth in you, the which in all mortal seeming has not yet been granted to her prayers – to prop up your goings in a way of ill-doing. Of what good is it to the world, I ask you, Archie Sutherland, that you have been made upon it, a living man with a mind within you, and a heaven over you? Who is the better for the light that God has put into your earthen vessel? A crowd of dancing, singing fools, that know not either the right honor, or the grave errand of a man into this world. Shame upon you, the son of a stalwart and good house, to be wasting in bairnly diversion, the days you will never see again, till you meet them before the Throne. Listen to me, Archie Sutherland – return to your own house, and to such a manner of life as becomes an honorable and upright man, and I give you my word – the worth of which, you may be known – that for disentangling you from the unhealthful meshes of borrowed siller, the means shall not be to seek.

"Unto your sister Isabel, I have ever been a prophet of evil; nevertheless, she bears the name, and, in a measure, the countenance, of Sholto's Isabel and mine. If she will not return to the lawful shelter and rule of her own house, let her come to Strathoran, or, if it likes her, to the Tower. Do you think, or does she think, that the very winged things that are about you, their own sillie selves, honor the wife for disregarding her natural right? The bond was of her own tieing; she liked him better than father and mother once – does she like him less now than she likes ill-fame, and slight esteem? If it is so, let her come home

to me, her mother's earliest and oldest friend. Bairns! – bairns! there is more to provide for than the pleasure of the quick hours that are speeding over ye. Purity before God, honor in the sight of men: are your spirits blinded within ye, that you cannot perceive the two?

Catherine Douglas."

CHAPTER IV

THE festive morning dawned at last, a vigorous, red October day, and all about and around Merkland was bustle and preparation.

"Duncan," cried Bell the cook, her face looming, already red and full, through a mist; "when was that weary man, Bob Partan, to send up the turbot?"

"Punctual at eleven," said the laconic Duncan.

"Eh! man, Duncan," said May, "have ye tried on your new livery yet? – isn't it grand?"

"Hout, you silly fool," responded Duncan, "has the like o' me leisure, think you, to be minding about coats and breeks?"

"Eh!" exclaimed Bell, "what has possessed me! There's no clove in a' the house and they need to be in – I kenna how mony things. You maun off to Portoran, Duncan, gallopping; there's not a minute to be lost."

"Duncan," cried Johnnie Halflin, the boy at the Tower, who, with sundry other articles, had been lent for the occasion, "I've casten doun a jar o' the Smoothlie honey, and it's broken twa o' the bottles. Man, come afore the leddy sees't."

"Duncan," said Barbara Genty, Mrs. Ross's own especial attendant. "You are to go up to the parlor, this minute. You were sent for half an hour ago."

"Conscience!" exclaimed the overwhelmed Duncan, "is there

two of us, that ye are rugging and riving at a man in that gate? Get out o' my road, ye young sinner, or there shall be mair things broken than bottles! I'm coming, Bauby. Woman Bell, could ye no hae minded a'thing at once?"

Above stairs, Mr. Lewis's servant, who had left Merkland a loutish lad, and returned glistening in Parisian polish and refinement, a superfine gentleman, was condescendingly advising with Mrs. Ross, as to the garniture of the dinner-table. Things were so arranged in the Hotel de – , John said; for Monsieur Charles, Mr. Sutherland's major-domo, had a style of his own. But for the country, John fancied this would do very well. Mrs. Ross had dismissed Anne, an hour before, to her own room, as useless; and half-offended with the airs of her son's dignified servant, was yet not above hearing the style of the Hotel de – , and in some degree making it her model, certain that Parisian fashion had not penetrated to any other house in the district, and well-pleased to take the lead. For the gay parties at Falcon's Craig, and the stately festivities at the Tower, had an individuality about them which had always been wanting in Merkland, and Mrs. Ross had resolved to outshine all to-day.

Anne, meanwhile, sat up stairs, busied with her ordinary work. She was the seamstress of the family, and the post was not by any means a sinecure.

The guests began to arrive, at last. Mr. Ambler, of Smoothlie, emerged from his dressing-room, neat as elderly, finical gentleman could be, with his carefully arranged dress, and wig,

savoring of olden times. Mr. Ambler had been in India once, and alluded to the fact on all occasions; albeit, an indulged only son, with the snug enough of his lairdship to fall back upon, he had returned in the same vessel which took him out. But though Mr. Ambler was too fond of slippered ease to try his fortune under the burning sun of the East, his voyage supplied him with an inexhaustible fund of conversation, innocently self-complacent, in which India and its wonders had a place all incompatible with his brief experience of them.

Dashing in, full gallop, came the Falconers – the gay, bold brother and sister, fatherless and motherless, and entirely unrestrained in any way, whose wild freaks afforded so much material for gossip to the countryside. Then in a methodical, business-like trot, came in the sleek horses and respectable vehicle of Mr. Coulter, of Harrows; the Manse gig; the stately carriage of Mrs. Catherine, and other conveyances, whose occupants we need not specify by name. The room was filled. Alice Aytoun had never in her life been at so great a party.

She could distinguish on yonder sofa, in the corner, Mrs. Bairnsfather's black satin gown, side by side with the strong thrifty hued silk of Mrs. Coulter, of Harrows. The Misses Coulter, in their Edinburgh robes, were near their mamma. They were very well-looking, well-dressed girls; but Alice's own silk gown bore a comparison with theirs, and their ornaments were nothing like those delicate pearls. The discovery emboldened little Alice Aytoun, and took away her sole existing heaviness.

She was fully prepared to enjoy herself.

The stately dinner, and all its solemnities, were over at last. The real pleasure of the evening was commencing; the company forming into gay knots; and Lewis doing the honors, with so rare a grace, that his mother almost forgot her own duties in admiration of her son. Alice Aytoun admired him, too. The pretty little stranger had become a sort of centre already, with the gayest and most attractive of all those varied groups, about her – and Lewis let no opportunity pass of offering his homage. Even on Mrs. Catherine's strong features, as she sat near her charge, there hovered a mirthful smile. Mrs. Catherine herself was not displeased that the *debut* of her little stranger should be so much a triumph.

"A pretty girl – there is no doubt of that," said the good-humored Mrs. Coulter. "James, do you not think she is like our Ada? See, the heads of the two are together, and Jeanie is behind them, with young Walter Foreman. I declare that lad is constantly hovering about Jeanie. Ah, Mrs. Bairnsfather, we have many cares who have a family!"

"No doubt," said the little, fat, round-about Mrs. Bairnsfather, the childless minister's wife, whose cares, diverted from the usual channel of children-loving, expended themselves upon the many comforts of herself, and her easy, comfortable husband. "You must be troubled in various ways now that the young people have got to man's estate, and woman's. But what were you calling Miss Adamina, Mrs. Coulter? I noticed a change in the name."

Mrs. Coulter looked slightly confused.

"You see, Mrs. Bairnsfather, it is a cumbrous name – four syllables – and we must have some contraction. When they were all bairns, they used to call her Edie, poor thing; but that would not do now; and at school she got Ada, and it really is a prettier name, and quite a good diminutive: so we just adopted it."

"Dear me! is that it?" said Mrs. Bairnsfather. "When I got the last note from Harrows I saw it was 'A. M. Coulter.' And that's it!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Coulter. "Ada Mina – they are two very pretty names."

Mrs. Bairnsfather coughed a short sarcastic cough of wonder, and Mrs. Coulter continued:

"Oh! there is John beside little Miss Aytoun. Is he not like his father, Mrs. Bairnsfather? James, did you not say that Miss Aytoun was a relative of Mrs. Catherine's?"

"Ay, my dear," said Mr. Coulter. "Mrs. Catherine told us so herself – you recollect? or was it to me she said it? So it was – when she was looking at yon new patent plough of John's."

"I wonder," said Mrs. Bairnsfather, "who is likely to get the Tower? In the course of nature, it cannot be very long in Mrs. Catherine's hands, and it's a good estate."

"Wonderfully improved in my time," said Mr. Coulter. "Mrs. Catherine is not without a notion of the science of agriculture, which, to the shame of landed proprietors, is generally so much neglected. The low lands at Oran Point were but moor and

heather in my memory, but they grow as fine barley now as any in the country."

"Well, I suppose no one can say that Mrs. Catherine neglects her carnal interests," said Mrs. Bairnsfather, with a professional sigh. Her husband was known among his shrewd parishioners to be greatly more observant of temporal than spiritual matters, and his wife, conscious of a failing in that respect, was wont to assume at times a technical solemnity.

"I believe Mrs. Catherine is a very excellent woman in every respect," said the good-humored and uncensorious Mrs. Coulter, "and cares as little about money, for money's sake, as any one can possibly do; but she thinks it a duty to use well and improve what Providence has given her, as you do yourself, James, though, to be sure, we have more motive, with a young family rising round us."

"I was very much struck yesterday," said Mr. Coulter, "with the contrast between the Tower fields, and the adjoining lands within the bounds of Strathoran. There is a place where the three estates meet – Mrs. Catherine's, Mr. Sutherland's and mine. You recollect the little burn, my dear, which that silly maid of yours fell into last Hallow-e'en? well, it is there. Mrs. Catherine's stubble-fields stretch to the very burnside – mine are turnips – uncommonly fine Swedes; but, on the other side, spreading away as far as you can see, is the brown moor of Strathoran, miles of good land wastefully lost, besides breeding by the thousand these small cattle of game, to destroy our corn."

"Ay," said Mrs. Bairnsfather, mysteriously, "I hear the Sutherlands are not in the best way."

"Poor things! they are young to be out in the world alone," said Mrs. Coulter; "and Isabel was a wilful girl at all times. I gathered from what Lewis Ross said, that they were living very gaily; but perhaps you have heard more?"

Mrs. Bairnsfather shook her head.

"It is a melancholy thing to think of the downfall of an old family!"

"Hout! Mrs. Bairnsfather," said Mr. Coulter; "you are taking it too seriously. Strathoran can stand a good deal. It will take more than one lad's extravagance to bring down the family, I trust; and young Sutherland used to have good sense and discretion. I spoke to him of draining Loelyin before he went away, and he really had very just ideas on the subject. No, no; let us hope there will be no ruin in the case."

Mrs. Bairnsfather shook her head again.

"I have no objection to hope the best, Mr. Coulter; but it is no uncommon thing to be disappointed in hopes; and, if what I hear be true, there is more room for fear."

"What's this," said Mr. Ambler, approaching the little group, as he made a leisurely, chatting, circuit round the room – "hoping and fearing, Mrs. Bairnsfather? Is it about these happy-looking young people of ours, and the future matches that may spring from their pairings – eh, Mrs. Coulter?"

Mrs. Coulter smiled, and glanced over to where Walter

Foreman lingered by her Jeanie's side. They were a handsome couple, and Walter had a nice little improvable property, inherited from his mother. There was no saying what might come to pass.

"No, Mr. Ambler," said Mrs. Bairnsfather, "we were speaking of poor young Strathoran;" and, from the depths of her fat bosom there came a mysteriously pathetic sigh.

"Strathoran! what's happened to the lad?" exclaimed Mr. Ambler. "Lewis Ross left him well and merry – no accident I hope; but Lewis has not been a week at home yet: there is little time for any change in his fortunes."

"Ah, Mr. Ambler," said Mrs. Bairnsfather, "it is not aye well to be merry. I have heard from those who know, that young Mr. Sutherland's gay life is putting his lands in jeopardy; they say he'll spend a whole year's income sometimes in a single night, poor ill-advised lad! I happened to mention it to Mrs. Catherine, but she turned about upon me, as if *I* was to be any better of Strathoran's downfall, which I am sure I never meant, nor anything like it."

"Bless me!" said Mr. Ambler, "I am concerned to hear that – I am grieved, do you know, to hear that. Is it possible? Why, I always thought Archie Sutherland was a wise lad – a discreet lad of his years."

Mrs. Bairnsfather shook her head.

"Archibald Sutherland ruined!" continued Mr. Ambler, "no, it's surely not possible – it must have been an ill-wisher that said that. Why, Strathoran is as big as Falcon's Craig and Smoothlie

put together – ay, and even ye might slip in a good slice off Merkland. Ruined! it's not possible. When I came home from India I heard of old Strathoran saying – I do not recollect the amount, I always had a bad memory for figures – but a great sum every year. It must be a false alarm, Mrs. Bairnsfather."

"Very well, gentlemen," said Mrs. Bairnsfather, "it's no concern of mine; but a little time will show that I am correct."

"Bless me!" repeated Mr. Ambler, "then the lad must go to India, that is clear – he may do great things in India. You see when I was there myself, there was the best opening for a lad of talent that could possibly be; but I had a yearning for home. I was always uncommonly fond of home, and so I am only a country Laird, when I might have been a Nabob. But if he were once in India I would have no fear for him – he would soon get up again."

"India, Mr. Ambler!" exclaimed Mr. Coulter, "no doubt there are fortunes to be made in India; but *I* fancy it's a shame to us to send our sons away to seek gold, when it is lying in our very fields for the digging – agriculture – "

"What's that you're saying, Mr. Coulter?" exclaimed the Laird of Smoothlie. "Gold! where is't man? we'll all take a hand at that work, if it were but for poor auld Scotland's sake, who has ever been said to have but a scanty providing of the precious metal."

"There are harvests lying in the cold breast of the great Strathoran moor," said the agriculturist, energetically, "of more import to man, Mr. Ambler, than if its sands were gold. If what we hear of Archibald Sutherland is true, *he* may never be able

to do it now; but a sensible man, with sufficient capital, might double the rent-roll of Strathoran."

Mr. Ambler looked slightly contemptuous.

"Well, well, Mr. Coulter, I'll not gainsay you; but to tell the truth, I've no notion of making young lads of family and breeding amateur ploughmen – I beg your pardon, Mr. Coulter, I mean no affront to you – you look upon it as a science, I know, and doubtless so it is; but – you see if Archie Sutherland could fall in with such an opening, as was waiting ready for me when I went to India, he might be home again, a wealthy man, before your harvests were grown."

"James," interposed Mrs. Coulter, "you are not looking at our young people – how happy they all seem, poor things. I do not think you have seen my Ada, Mr. Ambler, since she returned from Edinburgh."

Mr. Ambler adjusted his spectacles, with a smile. "No, I dare say not. Is that her with Lewis Ross? No, that's Mrs. Catherine's little friend. Ay, ay, I see her – like what her mother used to be, in my remembrance. Mrs. Coulter, you must have great pleasure in your fine family."

Mrs. Coulter smiled, well pleased.

"Do you know, Mr. Ambler," said Mrs. Bairnsfather, "who that Miss Aytoun is?"

"Who she is? No, indeed, except a very bonnie little girlie. She is that, without dispute; but Mr. Foreman will know. Mr. Foreman, can you tell Mrs. Bairnsfather who that young lady is,

at Lewis Ross's hand?"

"Miss Aytoun, ma'am, a relative of Mrs. Catherine's," said the lawyer.

"We know that," said Mr. Ambler. "Is that all her history? Aytoun – Aytoun – I have surely some associations with that name myself."

"Very likely," said Mr. Foreman, dryly. "She comes from the south country; her mother lives in Edinburgh, I believe, and is of a good family. I do not know anything further of the young lady, Mrs. Bairnsfather; that is, nothing at all interesting."

"Which means," said Mrs. Coulter aside to her husband, as their little group increased, and the conversation became more general, "that Mr. Foreman knows something very interesting about that pretty little girl. Mrs. Catherine is a client of his. Perhaps he thinks of Miss Aytoun for Walter. James, will you call Jeanie to me?"

And so, in quiet talk, in that bright drawing-room, these ladies and gentlemen – all possessing their average share of kindliness – had decided upon the ruin of Archibald Sutherland, who sat this same night in yonder brilliant Parisian saloon, with the fatal dice trembling in his hand, in all the wild, delirious gaiety of a desperate man; and in their flood of easy conversation, had touched upon another centre of crime and misery, darker and more fatal still, the facts of which lingered in the lawyer-like memory of Walter Foreman's father, and even attached some dim associations, in Mr. Ambler's mind, to Alice Aytoun's name.

Strange domestic volcano, over which these slippered feet passed so heedlessly! How often, in quiet houses, and among quiet people, are mighty sins and mighty miseries passed by as lightly!

CHAPTER V

SLEEPY, weary, and uncomfortable, the household of Merkland reluctantly bestirred itself next morning. Mrs. Ross rose ill-humored from very weariness. Duncan, and May, and Barbara, were all more than ordinarily stupid; and Mr. Ambler, of Smoothlie, with all his neatness and finicality, was still in the house. The imperturbable Mr. Ambler was first in the breakfast-parlor, joking Anne on her pale cheeks, and Lewis on his last night's conquests – fully prepared to do justice to the edibles of the breakfast-table, and not, in any degree, inclined to forgive the sleepiness which had mangled these delicate Oran trout, and sent up the eggs hard-boiled; for Mr. Ambler, by right of his comfort-loving old bachelorship, was excused everywhere for discussing matters of the table more minutely than ordinary strangers were privileged to do, and had besides, as Lewis Ross's guardian, a familiar standing at Merkland.

"Bless me, Madam," said Mr. Ambler, "your cook must have been up all the hours of the night. Sleepy huzzies! Why, I myself was not in bed till two o'clock, and here I am, as fresh as ever I was. And just look at this trout – as beautiful a beast as was ever caught in water – broken clean in two! It's quite shocking!"

"Are there never any such incidents in Smoothlie, Mr. Ambler?" asked Mrs. Ross, somewhat sharply.

"Accidents, Madam! Do you call *that* an accident – the

massacreing of a delicate animal like a trout? No, I send Forsyth to the kitchen every morning to superintend; and Forsyth, by long practice, has arrived at perfiteness, as the old proverb says. – Better try a bit of one though, Lewis, mangled though they be, than hurt your stomach with these eggs; they're indigestible, man – like lead. Send me your plate; here is not a bad bit."

"There is a kipper beside you, more carefully cooked, Mr. Ambler," said Anne, smiling.

"Thank you, Anne, my dear; but I never take kippered trout when I can get fresh, fit for the eating. Lewis, man, what makes you yawn so much? It's very ill-bred."

Lewis laughed. Mrs. Ross looked displeased. "Poor boy, he is fatigued. No wonder, after all his exertions yesterday."

"Fatigued! Nonsense. What should fatigue him?" said Mr. Ambler. "Take my word for it, Mrs. Ross, it's just an idle habit, and not genuine weariness. A young man, like Lewis, fatigued with enjoying himself! – on his one-and-twentieth birthday, too! Who ever heard the like? When I was in India (which is neither the day nor yesterday) I have seen me up till far on in the night, and yet astir and travelling a couple of hours before sunrise. – What would you say to that, Lewis? No; so far as I can see, our young generation are more likely to be spoiled by indolence than overwork."

"Indolence! that's quite too bad, Mr. Ambler," said Lewis. – "Bear me witness, Anne, how I have been running about since I arrived at Merkland. I don't think I have had a couple of hours

to myself since I came home."

"Lewis," said Mr. Ambler, "what was yon I heard last night of Archie Sutherland? That little round body, Mrs. Bairnsfather, was enlightening us all as to Strathoran's affairs. She says the lad is ruined."

Lewis shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't say, Mr. Ambler. I am not so deeply read in economics as the good lady. Archie's an extravagant fellow: but – oh! if I say any more, I shall have Anne upon me. Never mind, he's a fine fellow, Archie."

"Anne?" said Mr. Ambler, inquisitively. "Ay, what is Anne's special interest in Archie Sutherland? Well, I will ask no questions."

"My special interest in Archie Sutherland, is a figment of my brother's lively imagination, Mr. Ambler," said Anne, quietly, "produced by what inspiration I do not know; but repeated, I suppose, because it annoys me."

"Well, you can pay him back in his own coin," said the old gentleman. "Oh, you need not look innocent, Lewis. Do you think nobody noticed you last night hanging about that pretty little girl of Mrs. Catherine's? Bless me! Anne, my dear, what is the matter?"

Anne had turned very pale, and felt a deadly sickness at her heart, as she saw the color rising over Lewis's cheek, and the conscious smile of pleasure and embarrassment hovering about his lip. But Mrs. Ross spoke before she could render any reason

for her change of countenance.

"Miss Aytoun, indeed! Upon my word, Mr. Ambler, your ward is indebted to you – after all the pains that have been bestowed upon him, and all the advantages he has had, to think he could be attracted by yon little animated doll. Nonsense! Lewis will look higher, I confidently hope."

"Upon my word, you dispose of me very summarily," said Lewis, half laughing, half angry. "Mr. Ambler, will you put my mother in remembrance of those cabalistic forms of yesterday, which made me master of my own person and possessions. I suppose I may be very thankful, though, that you did not make me over to Miss Falconer – eh, Mr. Ambler?"

"Miss Falconer would not take you, Lewis," said Mr. Ambler, coolly. "I will trouble you for the toast, Anne, and – yes, I will take the marmalade, too – do not alarm yourself, Lewis, you are in no danger from Miss Falconer."

Lewis looked piqued. It was more agreeable to feel himself a prize, than to be told so very coolly that he was in no danger from Miss Falconer, and the pleasant flattery of those blue eyes of Alice Aytoun's, which had looked up to him so gladly last night, returned upon him in consolatory fascination. His mother's interference, too, excited a spirit of opposition and perversity, which stimulated the remembrance; and when Mr. Ambler had happily ridden away, Lewis beguiled Anne into going out with him, and, before long, their walk terminated at the door of the Tower, whither Alice Aytoun had seen them approaching, from

her high window, and glided softly into the drawing-room, with her gay heart fluttering, that she might at once meet and welcome Miss Ross.

"Anne," said Mrs. Catherine, "Alison Aytoun has a petition to make to you. She wants you to protect her when she goes to Falcon's Craig. I, myself, as you know, am not given to visiting; besides that, at this time, I am taken up with graver matters. I would like you to take the bairn there to-morrow."

"Oh, if you please, Miss Ross," pleaded Alice.

"For the Tower is dreary enough for a young thing," continued Mrs. Catherine, "At all seasons. Lewis, they are always quickening the speed of travel: how soon could a letter be answered from Paris?"

"Oh, in a week or two," said Lewis, carelessly. "A fortnight, I dare say. But no one ever accused me of punctuality, Mrs. Catherine, so I cannot say exactly."

"The more shame to you," said Mrs. Catherine. "A silly youth bragging of a short-coming! Truly, Anne, I count it an affliction that folk must bear with the lads through their fool-estate, before ye can find an inkling of sense in any man. Alison, has Miss Ross consented to take charge of you? and will you go, Anne?"

"I shall be very glad," said Anne, as Alice hung round her. "But is not Marjory related to Miss Aytoun?"

"It's past counting, that kindred," said Mrs. Catherine; "we could reckon it in my generation, that is with Alison's grandmother and the last family of Falconers passing the father of

Ralph and Marjory, who was an only son, and died young – a poor peasweep he was, that might never have been born at all, for all the good he did! – and it was only a third or fourth cousinship then. I want the bairn to go to Falcon's Craig, more for a diversion to her, than any other thing: and doubtless we must have festivities of our own, also. I will borrow your French serving-man from you, Lewis, to teach us a right manner of rejoicing."

"You shall have him, with all my heart," said Lewis, with some offended dignity; "only, I fear John would not take his orders from Mrs. Morison. He is too sensitive."

"Set him up!" exclaimed Mrs. Catherine. "Sensitive, truly! Then you must e'en keep him and humor him yourself, Lewis. I am plaguit enough in my own household. There is Euphan Morison waylaying me with herbs. I caught her my ownself, this very morning, wileing the bairn Alison into poisoning herself with a drink made from dockens: the odor of them has not left me yet."

"It was only camomile," whispered Alice.

"Never you heed what it was," said Mrs. Catherine. "Unwholesome trash that she calls good for the stomach, as if a bairn like Alison had any call to know whither she had a stomach or no! I have no patience with them. Jacky, you evil spirit, what are ye wanting now?"

"If you please," said Jacky, "It's Mr. Foreman – "

Mrs. Catherine started.

"Where is he?"

"And a strange man with him, dressed like a gentleman," continued Jacky. "They're in the library, Mrs. Catherine."

Mrs. Catherine rose hurriedly.

"Bairns, you will tarry till I come back. I am not like to be long."

Mr. Foreman, the acute, and sagacious writer of Portoran, was seated in the library when Mrs. Catherine entered, and a man of equivocal appearance, bearded like the pard, who had been swaggering round the room, examining, with an eye of assumed connoisseurship, the dark family portraits on the wall, turned round at the sound of her step to make an elaborate bow. Mrs. Catherine looked at him impatiently.

"Well, Mr. Foreman, have you brought me any tidings?"

"I have brought you no direct tidings, Mrs. Catherine, but this," – Mr. Foreman looked dubiously at the stranger – "this *gentleman*, whom I met accidentally in Portoran, is charged with a mission, the particulars of which I thought you would like to know, being deeply interested in Mr. Sutherland."

"Maiden aunt," murmured the stranger. "Ah! I see."

"You seem to have clear eyes, Sir," said Mrs. Catherine, sternly. "Mr. Sutherland will be a friend of yours, doubtless?"

"Ah! a fine young fellow – most promising lad!" was the answer. "Might be a credit to any family. I have the honor of a slight acquaintance. Nothing could be more edifying than his walk and conversation, I assure you, Madam."

"I will thank you to assure me of what I ask, and trouble your head about no more," said Mrs. Catherine. "Are the like of you acquaint – I am meaning, is Archibald Sutherland a friend of yours?"

"Very intimate. My friend Lord Gillravidge and he are. Astonishing young man, Madam, my friend Lord Gillravidge – missed church once last year, and was quite overcome with contrition – so much comforted by Mr. Sutherland's Christian friendship and fraternity – quite delighted to be a spectator of it, I assure you."

"I was asking you about Archibald Sutherland, Sir," said Mrs. Catherine, standing stiffly erect, as the stranger threw himself into a chair unbidden, "and in what manner the like of you were connected with him. I am waiting for your answer."

"A long story, Madame," said the stranger, coolly, "of friendly interest and mutual good offices. I have seen Mr. Sutherland often with my friend Lord G., and was anxious to do him a service – my time being always at my friend's disposal."

"Mr. Foreman," exclaimed Mrs. Catherine, "know you the meaning of all this? You are a lawyer, man; see if you cannot shape questions so as they shall be answered."

"Your friend Lord Gillravidge is intimately acquainted with Mr. Sutherland?" interrogated Mr. Foreman.

"Precisely – delightful; dwelling together in unity, like – "

"And Mr. Sutherland is in embarrassed circumstances?" continued Mr. Foreman, impelled by an impatient gesture from

Mrs. Catherine.

The stranger turned round with a contraction of his forehead and gave a significant nod.

"A most benevolent young man – kind-hearted people are always being tricked by impostors, and made security for friends – merely temporary – does him infinite credit, I assure you, Madam."

"Assure me no lies!" exclaimed Mrs. Catherine. "What have you to do – a paltry trickster as you are – with the lad Archie Sutherland: answer me that?"

"Madam!" exclaimed the stranger, rising indignantly, and assuming an attitude.

"The lady is aware of Mr. Sutherland's embarrassments," interposed Mr. Foreman, "and is putting no inquiries touching the cause. Your friend, Lord Gillravidge, Mr. – "

"Fitzherbert, Sir," said the stranger.

"Mr. Fitzherbert has served Mr. Sutherland in a pecuniary way?"

Mr. Fitzherbert bowed.

"And you are charged with a mission of a peculiar kind to Strathoran. Might I beg you to explain its nature to Mrs. Catherine Douglas, a lady who is deeply interested in your friend's friend, Mr. Sutherland."

The stranger looked perplexed, gracefully confused, and hung back, as if in embarrassment and diffidence.

"The fact is, Madam, I am placed in quite a peculiar position –

a mission strictly confidential, intrusted to me – friendly inquiries – which I have no authority to divulge. I beg I may not be questioned further."

"Mr. Fitzherbert, fortunately, was less delicate with me, Mrs. Catherine," said Mr. Foreman. "Mr. Sutherland, Madam, is in treaty for the sale of Strathoran – for some portion of the estate, at least, and this gentleman is commissioned to report upon it, as he tells me, before the bargain is completed."

"Not fair – against all principles of honor," exclaimed Mr. Fitzherbert. "A mis-statement, Madam, I assure you; merely some shooting-grounds. Mr. Sutherland is no sportsman himself, and my friend, Lord Gillravidge, is a keen one. Amicable exchange – nothing more."

Mrs. Catherine stood firmly erect; gazing into the blank air. The shock was great to her; for some moments she neither moved nor spoke.

"I appeal to yourself, Madam," resumed the stranger. "*I* investigate farms and fields. I, fresh from the most refined circles: do I look like a person to report upon clods and cattle?"

The voice startled Mrs. Catherine from her fixed gravity.

"I will come to you by-and-by, Mr. Foreman," she said. "Gather the story as clear as may be – at present, I cannot be troubled with strangers."

A slight, emphatic motion of her hand conveyed her desire that the friend and emissary of Lord Gillravidge should be dismissed as speedily as possible, and turning, she left the room.

"Spoilt it all," exclaimed Fitzherbert, as the door closed, "never have any commerce with lawyers – bad set – Scotch especially – keen – ill-natured. What harm would it have done you, old gentleman, if I had pleased the old lady about her nephew, and got her, perhaps, to come down with something handsome? I always like to serve friends myself – wanted to put in a good word for Sutherland – but it's all spoiled now."

"You expect to see more of Strathoran, I suppose," said Mr. Foreman; "good sport on the moor, they tell me, Mr. Fitzherbert, and you say Lord Gillravidge is a keen sportsman."

"Keen in most things," said the stranger, with an emphatic nod. "Sharp – not to be taken in – simple Scotch lad no match for Gillravidge – serves him right, for thinking he was. But I say, old gentleman, don't be ill-natured and tell the aunt – let him have a fresh start."

"It is to be a sale, then?" said the lawyer, "is your friend really to buy Strathoran?"

The stranger laughed contemptuously.

"Has Sutherland got anything else, that you ask that? all the purchase money's gone already – nothing coming your way, old gentleman – all the more cruelty in you preventing me from speaking a good word for him to his aunt."

"Was the bargain concluded when you left?" said Mr. Foreman.

"Very near it," was the reply. "Why, he's been plunging on deeper in Gillravidge's debt every night. *I* say it was uncommonly

merciful to think of taking the land – an obscure Scotch place, with nothing but the preserves worth looking at; but Gillravidge knows what he's about."

Half an hour afterwards, Mrs. Catherine re-entered the library. The obnoxious visitor was gone, and Mr. Foreman sat alone, his brow clouded with thoughtfulness. He, too, had known Archibald Sutherland's youth, and in his father had had a friend, and the kindly bond of that little community drew its members of all ranks too closely together, to suffer the overthrow of one without regret and sympathy.

"Is it true – think you it is true?" said Mrs. Catherine.

"I can think nothing else," said Mr. Foreman, gravely; "there is but one hope – that strange person who left the Tower just now tells me that the bargain was not completed. Mr. Ferguson's letter, telling Strathoran of the advance you were willing to make, Mrs. Catherine, may have reached him in time to prevent this calamity."

"I cannot hope it – I cannot hope it," said Mrs. Catherine, vehemently. "It is a race trysted to evil. Do you not mind, George Foreman, how the last Strathoran was held down all his days, with the burdens that father and grandsire had left upon him? Do you not mind of him joining with his father to break the entail, that some of the debts might be paid thereby? and now, when he has labored all his life to leave the good land clear to his one son, must it be lost to the name and blood? George Foreman, set your face against the breaking of entails! I say it is an unrighteous

thing to give one of a race the power of disinheriting the rest; to put into the hands of a youth like Archie Sutherland, fatally left to his own devices, the option of overthrowing an old and good house – I say it is unrighteous, and a shame!"

Mr. Foreman made no answer – well enough pleased as he might have been that in this particular case, the lands of Strathoran had been entailed, he yet had no idea of committing himself on the abstract principle, and Mrs. Catherine continued:

"What is he to do? what can the unhappy prodigal do, but draw the prize of the waster – want. I cannot stand between him and his righteous reward – I will do no such injustice. Where did you meet with the ne'er-do-weel that brought you the tidings, Mr. Foreman? a fit messenger no doubt, with his hairy face, and his lying tongue." Mrs. Catherine groaned. "You are well gone to your rest, Isabel Balfour, before you saw your firstborn herding with cattle like yon!"

"I think," said Mr. Foreman, "that you are anticipating evil which is by this time averted, Mrs. Catherine. At the very crisis of Strathoran's broken fortunes, your seasonable assistance would come in; and, on such a temperament as his, I should fancy the sight of the precipice so near would operate powerfully. I know how it has acted on myself, who ought to have more prudence than Mr. Sutherland, if years are anything. I came here to advise you to withdraw your money, when there was such imminent danger of loss – and here I am, building my own hopes and yours on the fact of its being promised."

Mrs. Catherine was pacing heavily through the room.

"What care I for the siller," she exclaimed, sternly. "What is the siller to me, in comparison with the welfare of Isabel Balfour's son? Doubtless, if all the rest is gone, there is no need for throwing away that with our eyes open; but what share in my thoughts, think you, has the miserable dirt of siller, when the fate of the lad that might have been of my own blood, is quivering in the balance? George Foreman, you are discreet and judicious, but the yellow mammon is overmuch in your mind. What is it to me that leave none after me – that am the last of my name?"

"I think we may depend on the last statement of that strange messenger – that Fitzherbert," said Mr. Foreman, endeavoring gently to lower the excitement of his client, "that he came down to examine, and would have his report to make, before the transaction was finished. Your letter must reach Strathoran, Mrs. Catherine, before this fellow can return. Depend upon it, the immediate danger is averted. Mr. Sutherland has good sense and judgment: he must by this time have perceived the danger, and receded from it."

Mrs. Catherine seated herself in gloomy silence.

"And if he has," she said, after a long pause, "if he has saved himself for this moment, what then? He has sown the wind, and think you he can shun its harvest? What has he to trust to? principle, honor, good fame, the fear of God, the right regard to the judgment of his fellows which becomes every man – has he not thrown them all away? What is there then, to look to in his

future, if it be not a drifting before every wind, a running in every stray path, a following of all things that have the false glitter upon them, whatsoever ill may be below? I am done with hope for the lad: there is nothing to guide him, nothing to restrain him. I must e'en take fear to my heart, and look this grief in the face."

"He is quite young," said Mr. Foreman; "there is abundant time and room for hope, Mrs. Catherine. I feel assured we have erred on the side of fear. A shrewd lad, like Strathoran, surely could not be fascinated to his destruction, in society which can tolerate that man, Fitzherbert. Depend upon it, we have overrated the dangers; and that, by this time, Mr. Sutherland has taken warning, and withdrawn. A pretty counsellor I am, after all! – I should have sent Walter – coming here to advise you to withdraw your money, and now felicitating myself that it is given."

Mrs. Catherine became more cheerful at last, before the kind-hearted Portoran writer took his departure, and admitted the chances in favor of his hopes. Archibald *had* been shrewd and sensible, and could not surely be so ruinously involved as to put his whole estate in peril; nevertheless, dreary visions, such as he had read in books of modern travel, of haggard gamesters risking their all upon a cast – staking wealth, and hope, and honor, in the desperate game, and marking its loss with the ghastly memento of blood, the hopeless death of the suicide – rose darkly before the lawyer's eyes, as he rode home – home, to pleasant competence and unobtrusive refinement, and to a family of sound principle and cultivated intellect, in whose healthful

upbringing and clear atmosphere fictitious excitement had no share.

And Mrs. Catherine went up stairs, gravely, to her cheerful inner drawing-room, and looking on the youthful faces there – the peaceful household looks, suggesting anything rather than misery and crime – forgot her terrors for Isabel Balfour's son, warm as her interest in him was.

Haggard, desolate, hopeless, with no roof which he could justly call his own to shelter him, and with a dreary blank before him, where the teeming dreams of a bright future were wont to be, Archibald Sutherland stood that night, in the strange alien country, a ruined man.

CHAPTER VI

TIRESOME as the manifold preparations for a feast may be, there is something especially dreary and full of discomfort in the bustle of setting to rights, which comes after: dismantled rooms undergoing a thorough purification, before they can once more settle down into their every day look and aspect; servants, in a chaos and frenzy of orderliness, turning the house into a Babel – a kitchen saturnalia; mistresses toiling in vain to have the work concluded bit by bit; and all this without the stimulant of expected pleasure to make it bearable.

Mrs. Ross rather liked such an overturn, and had it commenced gaily in the first relief of Mr. Ambler's departure; so that when Lewis and Anne returned from the Tower, there was no place of refuge for them, save in the small library, which Lewis had already appropriated as his own peculiar place of retirement.

Mrs. Ross had long taken a malicious pleasure in excluding Anne from all share in the economies of Merkland, in which, indeed, her own active habits and managing disposition could brook no divided empire; and it was not, therefore any super refinement of feeling which called Anne Ross out after her daily task was over, into the silent evening air, upon the quiet side of Oran. It is true that there were delicate tones of harmony there, which few ears could appreciate as well as her own; but the first yearning of these human spirits of ours, is for the sympathy of

other human spirits, and it is oftenest disappointment in that, which at once makes us seek for, and susceptible to, the mild pity and silent companionship of the wide earth around us.

A long invigorating walk she had, the little river modulating its voice, as she could fancy, to bear her musings gentle company. Strangely accordant was that plaintive harmony of nature. Wan leaves dropping one by one, the stillness so great that you could hear them fall: the wide air ringing with its tremulous, silent music; the pleasant voice of Oran blending in low cadence, "most musical, most melancholy." These graduated tones had been significant and solemn to Anne's spirit all her life long – from the dreamy days of childhood, so strangely grave and thoughtful, with all their shadowy array of haunting ghosts and angels, those constant comrades of the meditative child – up through the long still years of youth, unto this present time of grave maturity, of subdued and chastened prime. Other and mightier things, springing from heaven and not from earth, the presence of that invisible Friend, whose brotherhood of human sympathy circles His people, no less tenderly than His divine strength holds them up, were with her in her solitude; and the lesser music of His fair universe wrought its fitting part in the calming of the troubled spirit; pensive, shadowy, calm, and full of that strange spiritual breath, which Time has, in his momentary lingering between the night and day.

A lonely unfrequented path, winding by Oranside, to a little clump of houses, not very far off, almost too few to be dignified

by the name of hamlet, ran close to the high, encircling hedge, which shut in at that side the grounds of Merkland. Not far from the principal entrance was a little gate, across which the branches nearly joined, and which was never used, except by Anne herself, in her solitary rambles. She lingered at it, before she entered again – her dark dress scarcely distinguishable from the thick boughs behind her, as she leant upon the lintel. There was some one approaching on the road, whom Anne regarded with little interest, thinking her some resident of the hamlet, returning to her home; but as the passenger came in front of Merkland, she suddenly stopped, and standing still upon the road, gazed on the quiet house. Her head was turned towards the gate, and Anne, startled into attention, looked upon it wonderingly – an emaciated, pale face, that spoke of suffering, with large, dark, spiritual eyes, beaming from it, as eyes can beam only from faces so worn and wasted. Wistfully the long, slow look fell upon Merkland; standing there, so firm, serene, and homelike, its light shining through the trees. And then Anne heard an inarticulate murmur, as of muttered words, and the cadence of a deep, long sigh, and the stranger – for the wan face, and thin, tall figure, were too remarkable to have escaped her notice, had the passer-by been other than a stranger – went forward upon the darkening path, scarce noting her, Anne thought, as the figure glided past her, like a spirit.

The image would not leave her mind. The pale, worn face – the wistful, searching eyes – haunted her through that night,

and mingled with her dreams. Strange visions of Norman, such as now filled her mind continually, received into them this stranger's spiritual face. Dangers, troubles, the whole indefinite horde of dreaming apprehensions and embarrassments clung round those wistful eyes, as round a centre. Anne could scarcely believe next morning, when she awoke, with the remembrance so clear upon her mind, that it was not some supernatural presence, lingering about her still.

The morning was very bright and clear, and cold, for October was waning then into the duskier winter; and Anne, remembering her engagement with Alice, laid her work by early, and prepared to walk up to the Tower. She met Lewis, booted and spurred, at the door.

"Are you going to the Tower, Anne?" he asked.

"Yes," was the answer.

"Well, don't be surprised if you find me at Falcon's Craig, before you."

"At Falcon's Craig, Lewis! What errand have you there?"

"May I not make a friendly call as well as yourself?" said Lewis, gaily. "Besides, I shall take care of you, on the way home. How do I know that the Strathoran roads are quite safe for young ladies?"

"But I thought you were afraid of Miss Falconer?" said Anne.

"Oh, Mr. Ambler relieved me of that fear, you know. She wouldn't have me, he said. Very fortunate, for she will never get the offer."

"Mr. Ambler was quite right," said Anne, uneasily. "But, Lewis do not go, pray – take another morning for your call at Falcon's Craig. Your mother will be grieved and irritated – do not go to-day."

"My mother!" Lewis drew himself up with all the petulant dignity peculiar to his years. "Upon my word, Anne, you are perfectly mistaken if you think I have come home to be restrained and chidden like a schoolboy! Grieved and irritated! because that pretty little Miss Aytoun happens to be of the party, I suppose. You are a foolish set, you women, forcing things upon a man's consideration, which, if you had but let him alone – ." Lewis drew himself up again, and let the end of his sentence evaporate in a smile.

"I was not thinking of – I mean it is not for Miss Aytoun," said Anne, anxiously; "but your mother wants to consult you, Lewis. There are so many matters of business to attend to that you should manage yourself. Do not go to-day."

"Don't fear me!" said Lewis, confidently. "I will attend to my business, too. We shall soon see who is strongest in that respect. Here, Duncan!"

Duncan had brought his master's horse to the door, and stood at some distance, holding the bridle.

"Good morning, Anne!" cried Lewis, as he mounted and cantered gaily out. "I am off to Falcon's Craig."

Anne would gladly have broken her appointment now, had that been possible, but, as it was not, she too set out on her way to the

Tower. A comfortable pony-carriage – Mrs. Catherine's favorite vehicle – stood at the gate as she entered, and up stairs in her bright dressing-room Alice Aytoun was hastily wrapping herself in the costly furs – Mrs. Catherine's latest present – which she had already spent so much time in admiring.

"Child," said Mrs. Catherine, during the moment in which they were left alone together, "let Lewis come to me the morn; or is he with you to-day?"

"He spoke of meeting us at Falcon's Craig, and returning with us," said Anne.

"Bring him to me, then, when you come back," said Mrs. Catherine. "I am feared there is little hope for the lad, Archie Sutherland, child, and I am solicitous to hear from Lewis what kind of friends his sister Isabel has. If the lad is ruined (which the Almighty avert, if it be His pleasure!) what is the wilful fool of a girl to do? A man may win back good fame, even if it be once lost – and *that* is a sore fight – but a woman can never; and if she be left in that narrow place, with an evil-speaking world that judges other folk as it knows it should be judged itself, I say to you, child, what is the inconsiderate fuil to do?"

"Captain Duncombe will surely come to take care of his wife," said Anne.

"What know you about Captain Duncombe?" exclaimed Mrs. Catherine. "I will go myself to bring Isabel Balfour's ill bairn home to my own house, child – the fittest place for her to be. I will leave her to the tender mercies of no ill-conditioned man,

well though she may deserve it; that is if things come to the worst with Archie. Bring Lewis to me when ye come back, child. I would know what kind of folk she has her friends among."

In a few minutes after, attended by Johnnie Halflin, the two young ladies drove over the bridge on their way to Falcon's Craig.

The road was pleasant, and Alice was so very gay and full of happiness, that Anne's heart expanded in involuntary sympathy. The girl had been so tenderly guarded through all her seventeen years, so hedged about with domestic love and protection, and did so trustingly rely now upon the kindness of all about her, that few could have been harsh enough to disappoint the reliance of the youthful spirit, or teach it suspicion. It was, besides, an altogether new enjoyment to Anne, to have anything loveable looking up to her as Alice did. It suited her graver nature to be trusted in, and leaned upon. The depths in Anne's spirit began to stir; tenderness as of a mother's to spread its protecting wing over the "little one" beside her. Might *she* not make some secret atonement – might she not by tenderest care, and sympathy, and counsel, in some slight degree, make up the loss which her brother's hand had inflicted upon that unconscious girl?

They reached Falcon's Craig at last. It was a great, rambling, gaunt, old house, standing high and bare, with inartistic turrets, and unsightly gables, on the summit of a rock. The perpendicular descent behind was draped with clinging shrubs and ivy, but the situation gave a bleak, cold, exposed look to the house. Nor had any precautions been taken to amend this. Trees and shrubs

before the door grew rough and unkempt as nature had let them grow. The grass upon the lawn waved high and rank, great rows of hollyhocks and sunflowers shed their withered leaves and ripe seed below the windows. The much-trodden path, at the further end which led to the stables, and the presence of one or two lounging grooms, told the enjoyments of the Laird of Falcon's Craig, and explained, in some degree, the inferior cultivation of the neighboring fields – fields over which Mr. Coulter, of Harrows, with a good-humored desire to see all around him as prosperous as himself, shook his head and groaned.

The visitors alighted, and were shown into Miss Falconer's heterogeneous drawing-room. The lady herself lay upon a sofa near the fire, with a newspaper in her hand. Alice Aytoun did not like the appearance of the reclining figure, in its bold, manlike attitude, and kept close to Anne's side.

"Anne Ross!" exclaimed Miss Falconer, springing up with an energy which made the room ring; "why, I should as soon have thought of Merkland coming to see me bodily, as you. How do you do? How are you, little Miss Aytoun? Tired of the Tower yet?"

"No," said Alice, drawing back, instinctively.

"Don't be afraid; I won't hurt you," said Miss Falconer, with a laugh. "Well, Anne, how do you get on in Merkland? Mrs. Ross will be good and dutiful now, when Lewis is at home."

"You must ask Lewis himself," said Anne; "he is here now, is he not?"

The face of Alice, which had been somewhat in shadow, brightened.

"Oh, yes, Lewis is here," said Miss Falconer; "gone with Ralph to these everlasting stables. Take notice, Miss Aytoun, that when gentlemen come to Falcon's Craig, it is Ralph's horses and dogs they come to see, and not his sister. I say this, that you may not be jealous."

Little Alice blushed, and drew up her slight young figure, with some budding dignity. "I have nothing to be jealous of, Miss Falconer."

Miss Falconer laughed again. "Well, we will not say anything before Anne. Anne is taking lessons from Mrs. Catherine, in state and gravity. How did you come? In that little phæton, I declare, with these two sober ponies, that I have known all my life. You never ride now, Anne?"

"I do not remember that I ever did," said Anne. "We keep few horses in Merkland; and besides, Marjory, there are not many ladies of your nerve and courage."

"Miss Aytoun," said Miss Falconer, gaily, "do you ever flatter? Anne, you see, knows my weak point, and attacks me accordingly. She thinks I rather pride myself on these two unsafe qualities of nerve and courage. Well, and why should we be cooped up within four walls, and sentenced to do propriety all our lives? The bolder a man is, the more he is thought of; but let one of us hapless women but stir a step beyond the line, and we have 'improper, indecorous, unwomanly,' thundered in our ears

from every side."

"Then you will not acknowledge the proverbial truth of what everybody says?" said Anne.

"Not a bit," said Miss Falconer, boldly. "Why should not I follow the hounds as briskly, and read that political article," she pointed to the paper she had thrown down, "with as much interest as my brother? I do, it is true; but see how all proper mammas draw their pretty behaved young ladies under their wings, when I approach. You all desert me, you cowards of women; I have only men's society to fall back upon."

"But did you not tell us just now that you liked that best?" ventured little Alice Aytoun.

"No, not I. Perhaps I do, though; but I did not say it."

"Then, after all," said Anne, "the mistake is not in what we quiet people call decorous, and proper, and feminine; but only that you, with your high spirits and courage, have the misfortune to be called Marjory, instead of Ralph; that is all; for here, you see, are Miss Aytoun and myself, and all the womankind of Strathoran to back us, who have no ambition whatever to follow the hounds, nor any very particular interest in the leading article. It is merely an individual mistake, Marjory. Acknowledge it."

"Not I," exclaimed Miss Falconer; "it is a universal oppression of the sex. They try to reason us down first, these men; and failing that, they laugh us down: they will not be able to accomplish either, one of these days. There! how you turn upon me, with that provoking smile of yours, Anne Ross. What are you thinking of

now?"

"Do you remember a little poem – I think of Southey's," said Anne, smiling – "about the great wars of Marlbro' and Prince Eugene, long ago? I was thinking of its *owerword*, Marjory – 'What good came of it at last? said little Wilhelmine.' "

"Ah, that is just like you," said Miss Falconer; "coming down upon one with your scraps of poetry, when one is speaking common sense. Oh, you need not raise your eyebrows! I tell you I am speaking quite reasonably and calmly; and we shall see, one day."

"But, Miss Falconer," inquired Alice, timidly, "what shall we see?"

"See! Why, a proper equality between men and women, as we were created," said Miss Falconer, vehemently. "No more bandaging up our minds, as they do the feet of the poor girls in China – oppressing us for their own whims, everywhere! No more shutting us out of our proper share in the management of the world – no more confining us in housekeepers' rooms and nurseries; to make preserves, and dress babies!"

"Are the babies to be abolished, then?" said Anne. "For pity's sake, Marjory, do not sentence the poor little things to masculine nurses. Farewell to all music or harmony, then. If we are to dress babies no more, let it be ordained, I pray you, that there shall be no more babies to dress!"

"Nonsense, Anne!" exclaimed Marjory Falconer, loudly; "you want to ridicule all I say. You are content with the bondage

– content to be regarded as a piece of furniture, a household drudge, a pretty doll."

"Hush!" said Anne; "spare me the abjective. I am in no danger of your last evil. And see how Miss Aytoun looks at you."

"Never mind," said Miss Falconer; "Miss Aytoun will sympathise with me, I am sure; every true woman must. See how they smile at our opinions – how they sneer at our judgment – 'Oh, it's only a woman.' I tell you, Anne Ross, all that will be changed by-and-bye. We shall have equal freedom, equal rights – our own proper dignity and standing in the world."

"And how will it change our position?" said Anne.

"How obtuse you are! Change our position! Why it will make us free – it will emancipate us – it will – "

"Particulars, particulars, Marjory?"

Miss Falconer paused.

"We shall not be thought unfit any longer to do what men do; our equal mental power and intelligence shall be recognised. We shall have equal rights – we shall be free!"

Anne looked up smiling.

" 'And what good came of it at last? said little Wilhelmine.' "

Miss Falconer started from her seat in anger, and walked quickly through the room for a moment, Alice looked on in wonder and alarm. At last Marjory approached the table, looked Anne in the face, half smiling, half angry, and replied, in a burst:

> " 'Nay, that I cannot tell,' quoth he,
> But 'twas a glorious victory?' "

Conversation less abstract followed, when Lewis and Ralph joined them; and not long after, Anne and Alice resumed their places in the phaeton, and turned homewards, Lewis riding by their side. Anne's spirits had wonderfully lightened during their drive, and now she defended Marjory Falconer, almost gaily, against the laughing and half-contemptuous attacks of Lewis.

"Marjory arms all the silly lads in the parish with flippant impertinences about women and their rights, Miss Aytoun," she said. "I did not mean you, Lewis, so there is no occasion for drowing yourself up. Yet Marjory has some strength, and much kindliness of spirit. And when she has once got rid of those foolish notions, which she will when she has matured a little – "

Anne stopped abruptly. She had noticed before the tall, stooping figure of a woman advancing towards them, and could recognise now, as the passenger approached, the wan face, and wistful, melancholy eyes, which had made so deep an impression upon her imagination, when she saw them on the previous night, looking so sorrowfully on Merkland. A very remarkable face it was, which the stranger now lifted to them, as she passed slowly on, speaking in its emaciated lines of mental struggle more than bodily sickness; and with its strange habitual look of wistful search, as if its eyes had been exercised by constant watching, and had sought about vainly for some hope or gladness never to be found again. Anne met her steadfast, melancholy look for a moment; in another she had passed on.

"What is the matter, Anne?" said Lewis.

Anne drove on awhile, in silence.

"Did you not observe that face?"

"What face? I saw a woman passing, who stared at you, as you did at her; don't be sentimental, Anne: some shopkeeper's wife, from Portoran, who has been at the mill. What were you saying of Marjory Falconer? Go on."

Anne went on.

"She will mature by-and-by, and come out of these follies a sensible woman. You shake your head, Lewis. She will never be of the gentlest; but sensible, and kindly, and vigorous, I believe she will be, one day. There is often some eccentricity about strength, in its development."

"Hear, hear," cried Lewis. "Do you observe how Anne turns her periods, Miss Aytoun? Marjory will keep a chair for you, Anne, in some of her feminine colleges, when she has accomplished the rights of women. Moral philosophy! I hope they will give you an LL.D."

They reached the mill as Lewis spoke. It stood near the spot Mr. Coulter had spoken of "where three lairds' lands met;" and the burn was intercepted for the uses of the mill, just before it joined its waters to the Oran.

Anne drew up her ponies at the end of the little bridge, which gave access to the miller's dwelling. Alice had never seen this picturesque corner of the Oran banks, and Anne proposed giving her a glimpse of the bright interior of Mrs. Melder's pleasant house: she was anxious herself to ask the miller's wife if she

knew anything of the singular stranger, whose appearance had interested her so much.

So Johnnie Halflin scrambled down from his perch behind, to hold Lewis's horse, much wondering what motive they could have for calling on Mrs. Melder; and Alice lingered on the grassy bank, that sloped down to the riverside, from Mrs. Melder's door, to ask questions and to admire. The grey mill buildings, and mighty revolving wheel, and rush of foaming water, as the bairn, like some brown mountain urchin, ran, boisterous, from its labors into the placid Oran, giving life and animation to the stream it increased, were worthy of admiration even more genuine than that of Alice, whose little heart was beating very pleasantly, from various causes, which she had not skill, if she had had inclination, to analyze.

But the cottage door was suddenly flung open, a loud scream startled them, and, turning round alarmed, they saw a child flee out, its little frock blazing, its face distorted with pain and fear. Alice screamed, and clung to the arm of Lewis, Lewis called to the boy, and sprang irresolutely forward himself, not knowing what to do; Johnnie Halflin scampered off in terror, holding firmly the bridle of his charge, and the child, blinded with fear, and scorched with pain, flew forward madly. Anne snatched from the carriage a large, rough plaid, threw herself before the little girl, and wrapped it closer round her. The child struggled – Anne pressed the long, wide folds closer and closer round her, extinguishing the flames with her hands. The terrified

miller's wife ran to her assistance – so did Lewis, and at last, very much frightened, and considerably scorched, but with no serious injury, the child was carried into the house, where Alice followed timidly, pressing the small hand of the sufferer within her own, and murmuring kindly words to still its weeping. It was a little girl of some six years, and moaned out its childish lamentations in broken words of some strange, sweet, foreign tongue. The remnants of its burnt dress, too, were not like the ordinary garments of peasant children, and Mrs. Melder herself had no family.

"God be thankit ye were passing by, Miss Anne!" exclaimed Mrs. Melder. "I am the silliest body mysel that was ever putten in a strait. Eh! do ye no hear my heart beating? – and the stranger bairn!"

"Whose is it, Mrs. Melder?" asked Anne, as they undressed the moaning child, and laid her on the wooden bed which formed part of the furniture of the homely apartment.

"And that is just what I cannot tell ye, Miss Anne," said the miller's wife. "It was left wi' me by ane – ye wad meet her on the road. She wasna put on like a lady, but she wasna a common body either – it was clear to see that. We've had a dreary house, Robert and me, since little Bell (ye'll mind her, Miss Anne?) was ta'en from us, two years syne come Martinmas, and the stranger leddy had heard tell o't, and thocht, as she said, that I wad be guid to the child – as I will, doubtless, puir, innocent thing! – who could be otherwise?"

"And where did she come from?" inquired Anne, as she assisted in applying some simple remedies.

"The bairn? Na, how can I tell you that Miss Anne, when I dinna ken mysel?"

"No, no; I mean the lady," said Anne, hurriedly. "I saw her – a very remarkable-looking person she is. Is the child her own?"

"Na; she *said* no, any way," said Mrs. Melder. "Whaever it belongs to, they think shame o't, that's sure. Woes me, Miss Ross! the ill that there is in this world! She has been living at the brig for a day or two back, and the bairn wi' her. I am doubtful it was but a foolish thing, taking a bairn when one kens nought of its kindred. But the house was dreary. Where there has been a babe in a dwelling, it makes great odds when the light of its bit countenance is lifted away, and my heart warmed to the puir wee thing, sent out from its own bluid. So I took it, ye see, Miss Ross, and Robert he didna oppose. It's to bide two years – if we're all spared as long – and the stipend for it is twenty pound, and the siller's lying in Mr. Foreman the writer's hands – so we canna come to any loss. It's an uncommon bairn a'thegither o't, and speaks in a tongue neither Robert nor me can make onything of. It maun have come from some far part – was ye speaking, my lamb?"

Anne beckoned Lewis forward as the child murmured again some incoherent words.

"What language is it? – I do not recognize the tongue."

"It is Spanish," said Lewis. "Strange! Where did the child

come from, Mrs. Melder?"

The miller's wife repeated her story, and, promising to call at the house of the doctor on their way homeward, and send him up to the little patient, her visitors left her, and proceeded on their way, disturbed by no further incident, except in Anne's mind, by the strange excitement of interest with which this story moved her. She could not banish the stranger's pale face from her mind, nor forget the pitiful look of the little child, in whose soft features she thought she could trace some resemblance, moaning out its feeble complaint in that strange language, uncomprehended, and alone.

CHAPTER VII

THESE days passed on in suspense and anxiety to Mrs. Catherine. Uncertain what to believe or disbelieve, concerning the young man in whose fortunes she was so deeply interested, her strong spirit chafed and struggled in its compulsory inactivity. Nor did Lewis's report of Mrs. Duncombe's friends, in any degree still her anxiety. Fashionable ladies stood low in Mrs. Catherine's opinion at all times; and her strong nationality aggravated tenfold her dislike to fashionable ladies in Paris – French or semi-French. Had it not been for Alice, Mrs. Catherine herself would have been on her way to Paris ere now. But unwilling to send the girl abruptly home, and riveted besides by a hundred little ties, which made her absence from the Tower (she had not left it since her sorrowful journey, thirty years' ago, from Sholto's island grave) seem an impossibility; she waited – we are constrained to admit, not patiently – for further tidings, inclined to hope sometimes that Mr. Foreman's benevolent surmise might be well-founded; and anon, cast down, and venting her grief in a show of bitter indignation at "the prodigal that could sell his birthright."

Many solitary hours were spent during that anxious fortnight (for mails travelled tardily thirty years ago) in the little room – and many wrestlings of secret, silent prayer these narrow walls were witness to. Jacky, gliding hither and thither in her elfin

ubiquity, could hear Mrs. Catherine's step shake the floor; and listened in tremulous awe and reverence sometimes to those often-repeated words, the burden of Mrs. Catherine's anxiety: "Isabel Balfour's one son – that might have been *your* firstborn, Sholto Douglas!" But Jacky, with a sentiment of honor peculiar to herself, kept her knowledge of Mrs. Catherine's trouble, jealously within her own mind, and in the intervals of her heterogeneous occupations, and no less heterogeneous studies, wove dreams of that young Laird of Strathoran, over whom Mrs. Catherine prayed and mourned – and creating for his especial service, some such wondrous vassal as the Genii of Aladdin, conjured Sholto Douglas back to life and lands again, and made the prodigal his heir and son.

Little Bessie, Alice Aytoun's maid, did not know what to make of that strange, thin, angular girl, with her dark keen face, and eccentric motions, and singular language. Bessie, plump, rosy and good-humored, looked on in wondering silence as Jacky sat on the carpet in the library, bent almost double over some mighty old volume from those heavy and well-filled shelves – was inclined to laugh sometimes, yet checking herself in mysterious reverence, revolved in her mind the possibility of Mrs. Catherine's frequent epithet "you elf" – having in it some shadow of truth. Bessie had read fairy tales in her day, and knew that in these authentic histories there were such things as changelings – could this strange Jacky be one? The flying footsteps, and bold leaps and climbings, which Bessie did not

venture to emulate, gave some color to the supposition, so did these out-of-the-way studies and singular expressions; but Jacky withal was not malicious, nor evil-tempered, and Bessie paused before condemning her. On consulting Johnnie Halflin on the subject, she found him as much puzzled as herself.

"For ye see," said Johnnie, "she was never at the schule – and look till her reading! I was three – four year at it mysel, the haill winter; for ye ken in this part, Bessie, it's no' like a toun – there's the beasts to herd all the summer and other turns, till the shearing's by; but I wad rather hae a day's kemping with that illwilly nowt that winna bide out o' the corn, than sit down to the books wi' Jacky. She kens best herself where she learnt it."

"And look how she speaks," ejaculated Bessie.

"Speaks! ye have not heard her get to her English – it's like listening to the leddies. No Mrs. Catherine ye see, for one canna think what words *she* says – ye just ken when ye hear her, that ye maun do what ye're bidden in a moment; but Jacky! ye would think she got it a' out of books – whiles, when ye anger her – "

"Eh, Johnnie! yonder she is, coming fleeing down the hill," cried little Bessie in alarm, as a flying figure paused on a ridge of the steep eminence above them, and drew itself back for a final race to the bottom. "Look! ye would think she never touched the ground."

"Whist, whist," said Johnnie, apprehensively, "she can hear ony sound about the place, as quick as Oscar, and Oscar's the best watch in the parish – be quiet, Bessie."

The youthful gossips were standing, during their gloaming hour of leisure, at the back of a knot of outhouses, barns, and stables, and Jacky came sweeping down upon them out of breath.

"Are you there, Johnnie Halflin? is that you, Bessie? Has my mother been in the barn yet? – whisht, there she's speaking."

"No, it's Jean," said the lad; "the cow's better, and Jean said she would never let on there had been onything the matter wi't, or else the puir beast would be killed wi' physic. Ye needna tell on her, Jacky – ye wadna like to harm a bonnie cow like yon, yoursel."

"And we'll no' tell on you," added Bessie.

"I'm no caring," was the quick response, "whether ye tell on me or no – only if you do, Bessie, I'll never be friends with ye again; and if you do, Johnnie, ye'll catch grief. Guess where I've been."

"Scooring ower the hills on a heather besom," said Johnnie, "seeking the fairies – they say ye're one yoursel."

A sweep of Jacky's energetic arm sent Johnnie staggering down the path.

"I have been down at Robert Melder's mill, and there's a bairn there – a little girl – Bessie, ye never saw the like of it!"

"Is't a' dressed in green, and riding on a white powny?" said Mrs. Catherine's youthful servingman, returning to the charge.

"Ye're a fuil," retorted Jacky, flushing indignantly, "how do the like of you ken what's true and what's a fable? There was a lady once, that led a lion in her hand —*you* dinna ken what that

means – and if there were gentle spirits lang syne in the air, what do you ken about them? Bessie, come with me the morn, and see the little bairn. I like to hear her speak; she says words like what you hear in dreams."

Jacky's companions indulged in a smothered laugh.

"Has she wings?" asked the lad.

"I will throw ye into the Oran, Johnnie Halflin," cried Jacky, in wrath; "if ye do not hold your peace in a minute. Miss Anne saved her life, and she speaks a strange language that naebody kens; and she's from a strange country; and she's like – "

"Oh, I saw her mysel," interrupted Johnnie, "a bit wee smout, wi' her frock burning – saved her life! how grand we're speaking! I could have done't mysel, a' that Miss Anne did, and made nae work about it – only I had Merkland's horse to haud."

"I have seen a face like it," said Jacky, thoughtfully, "a' but the eyes."

"Eh, and isna Mr. Ross a fine young gentleman?" said little Bessie. Bessie was glad to seize upon the first tangible point.

"How would ye like to bide constant in Strathoran, Bessie," said Johnnie Halflin, "down bye at Merkland? Eh, disna Mr. Lewis gie weary looks up at the easter tower?"

Bessie bridled, and drew herself up with pleased consciousness, as her mistress's representative.

"I wonder at ye, Johnnie! how can ye speak such nonsense?"

"Is't Miss Aytoun Mr. Lewis looks up for?" inquired Jacky.

Her companions answered with a laugh.

"I think," said the boy, "for my ain part, that there's not a young leddy in a' Strathoran like Miss Aytoun. She's out-o'-sight bonnier than Miss Anne."

Jacky pushed him indignantly away.

"A fine judge you are. Like a big turnip your ain sel. A clumsy Swede, like what they give to the kye. But, Bessie, do you think Mr. Lewis is in – " Jacky hesitated, her own singular romance making it sacrilege to speak the usual word in presence of those ruder comrades: "do ye think Mr. Lewis *likes* Miss Alice? he's no courting her?"

Bessie smiled, blushed, and looked dignified.

"O, Jacky, how do I ken?"

"Does Miss Alice like *him*?"

"Jacky, what a question! Miss Alice disna tell me."

Jacky looked at her inquisitively, and finishing her share of the conversation in her own abrupt fashion, shot into the byre to see the ailing cow, from whence she soon after stole into the Tower, where an irksome hour of compulsory stocking-knitting, in the comfortable housekeeper's-room of Mrs. Euphan Morison, awaited Mrs. Euphan's reluctant daughter. The room was a very cosy room in all things, but its disagreeable odor of dried and drying herbs; and Jacky, after a reproof from her mother, so habitual that it had sunk into a formula, took her customary seat and work. Bessie joined her, by-and-bye, with some little piece of sewing that she had to do for Miss Aytoun, and Johnnie Halflin, less dignified, betook himself to the kitchen

fire, to read, or joke, or doze the evening out.

The time drew near when Mrs. Catherine's doubts concerning Archibald Sutherland were to be solved. The strong old lady grew nervous on these dim mornings, and opened her letter-bag with a tremor in her hand; but when the latest day had come, there was still no letter from Paris. Impatiently she tossed them out. There were two or three letters of applicants for her vacant farm, the closely-written sheet of home-news for Alice, business-notes of various kinds, but nothing from the prodigal, whose interests lay so near her heart. She lifted them all separately again, turned out the bag – in vain. Her clear eye had made no blunder in its first quick investigation. Mrs. Catherine's brow darkened. Alice hardly dared to approach timidly, and withdraw her own letter from the little heap. Not that the face of her kinswoman expressed anger, but it bore the impress of some unknown mental struggle, which Alice, in the serene light of her girlish happiness, did not even know by name.

So Alice stole up stairs to the fireside of her bright dressing-room, to read the long mother's letter, overflowing with tender counsel and affection, and to weave fair dreams – dreams of joy and honor to that gentle mother, and all things pleasant and prosperous to James – round one unacknowledged centre of her own. Pleasant are those bright dream-mists of youthful reverie, with their vague fairy-land of gladness – pleasant to weave their tinted web, indefinitely rich and glorious, over that universe of golden air, with its long withdrawing vistas – the wealthy future

of youth.

But Mrs. Catherine sat still alone, her head bent forward, her keen eyes looking into the blank depths of a mirror on the wall, as though, like the hapless lady in the tale, she could read the wished-for tidings there. The door opened slowly. Jacky, with some strange intuitive knowledge of her mistress's anxiety, had been on the outlook from the window of the west room, and had now glided down stairs to report. Mrs. Catherine raised her head sharply as the girl's prefatory "If you please!" fell on her ear.

"What ist', you elf?"

"If you please," continued Jacky, "it's Mr. Ferguson, the Strathoran factor, gallopping up the waterside like to break his neck!"

Mrs. Catherine started to her feet.

"Take him to the library – I will be down myself in a moment. Are you lingering, you fairy? Away with you!"

Jacky vanished, and Mrs. Catherine walked hastily through the room.

"He will have gotten tidings!" And then she was still for a moment, in communion with One mightier than man, nerving herself for the "tidings," whatever they might be.

Jacky stood at the open door as Mr. Ferguson gallopped up, but he did notice the unusual haste with which he was hurried into the library. A cold dew was on his honest forehead; regret and grief were in his kindly heart; the familiar ordinary things about him bore a strange look of change. The difference was in

his own agitated eyes, but he did not think of that. Mrs. Catherine stood before him, calm and stern, in the library.

"Mr. Ferguson, you have gotten tidings?"

The firm, strong figure reeled in Mr. Ferguson's dizzy eyes.

"Mr. Ferguson, you are troubled. Has the prodigal done his worst? Sit down and calm yourself. I am waiting to hear?"

The factor sat down. Mrs. Catherine did not, but, clasping her hands tightly together, stood before him and waited.

"I have bad news, Mrs. Catherine," said Mr. Ferguson; "worse news, a hundred times, than ever I suspected – than ever you could expect. Strathoran is fallen – ruined! No hope – no possibility of saving him! It is all over!" And the strong man groaned.

"How and wherefore?" said Mrs. Catherine, sternly.

"He has sold his estate – parted with his home and his land to some titled sharper in Paris. Sold! he has done worse – still more dishonorable and fatal than that, he has *gambled* it away; what his father spent years to redeem, and set free *for him*, he has staked on the chances of a game. Bear with me, Mrs. Catherine, if I speak bitterly. The young man has disappointed all my hopes – ruined himself – what will become of him?"

Mrs. Catherine stood with her head bowed down, but otherwise firmly erect, and silent.

"What will he do?" repeated the distressed factor, "what can he do? land and name, fortune and character, all lost. What has he left, as he says, but despair – with his prospects too, his fair

beginning. O, it is enough to make a man distracted! What have they done, that unhappy race, that they should be constantly thus – father and son, a wise man and a prodigal, the one wasting his substance and his inheritance, the other denying himself the lawful pleasures of a just life to win it back again."

"Comfort yourself, Robert Ferguson," said Mrs. Catherine, bitterly, as drawing forward a chair with emphatic rapidity, she seated herself at the table, "there will be no son of the name again to waste years in building up the house of Strathoran: their history has come to an end – fitly ended in a rioter and a prodigal."

The factor looked up deprecatingly, the very words which his excitement brought to his own lips, sounding harsh from another's.

"Mrs. Catherine, Mr. Archibald is young. When other lads were leaving school or entering college, he was launched upon the world his own master, with a great income and a large estate. – You know how easily the light spirit of youth is moved, but you cannot know how the way of a young man is hedged in with temptations – Mrs. Catherine!" the factor raised his hand in appeal.

"Speak not to me," said Mrs. Catherine, "I know! yes truly, I know more than you think, or give me credit for. Temptations! and what is obedience that has never been tried, or strength that has not been exercised in needful resistance? I bid ye listen to me, Robert Ferguson – was there not a test appointed in Eden?

and would you set youself to say that the fool of a woman (that I should say so, who am of her lineage and blood!) might be justified for her ill-doing, because the fruit hung fair upon the tree, and tempted the wandering eye of her? Think better of my judgment and bring no such pleas to me."

"What can I bring? What can I say?" said Mr. Ferguson, in a low voice. "Is he to be left to live or die, as he best can, in yon strange country? Are we to let him sink into a professional gamester, like the men who have ruined him? I speak wildly. – He would never do that. I myself must seek, in some other place, a livelihood for my family; and I will get it; for my work is clear before me, and it is known that I can do what I undertake; but for him, Mrs. Catherine, with no friend in this wide world but yourself, who can give him efficient help – with not an acre but these poor lands of Loelyin and Lochend, which are still entailed; and, worse than all that, with his best years lost, his principles unsettled, and a stain upon his name – what is to become of him?"

"He will drink the beverage he has brewed," said Mrs. Catherine, harshly. "He will have the reward of the waster, as I have told you before now. Let him take his wages – let him want now, as he has sinfully wasted. It is his righteous hire and reward."

"And you can see that, can think of that, and not stretch out a hand to him?" cried the factor, nervously, as he rose from his chair. "Except my hand and my head, Mrs. Catherine Douglas, I have no inheritance; and your estate yields gold to you, greater

every year; but, before I see want come to Strathoran's son, I will labor night and day. The professions are open to him yet. – His mother's uncle was a Lord of Session; his father's cousin was the greatest physician in Edinburgh. I bid you good morning, Mrs. Catherine. I have to write to Mr. Archibald, without loss of time."

"Sit down upon your seat, this moment," said Mrs. Catherine, authoritatively, "and do not speak to me like a fool, Robert Ferguson. Let me hear Archie Sutherland's story, the worst and the best of it; and spend a pound of your own siller on the rioter, at your peril! As if I did not know one lad at the college was enough for any man. Sit down upon your seat, and tell me the whole story, as I bid you, this moment; or I vow to you, that your young advocate, if he had his gown the morn, shall get no pleas of mine!"

Mr. Ferguson sat down, well pleased, and taking out a letter, laid it silently before Mrs. Catherine. The letter was long, blurred, uneven, and written, as it seemed, in hurried intervals, with breaks and incoherent dashes of the pen between. It was not either very clear or very coherent; but it told how rent and distracted the writer's heart and spirit were, and what a ceaseless struggle raged and contended there. The large soft folds of Mrs. Catherine's shawl shook as if a wind had stirred them, but she did not speak; the moisture gathered thick beneath her large eyelid, but was not shed, for Mrs. Catherine was not given to tears. At last she closed the letter carefully, occupying much more time in

the operation than was necessary, and endeavored to assume her former caustic tone to hide her graver emotions. “A fine story to come to a gentlewoman withal! well, Mr. Ferguson, and what is it your purpose that I should do for your rioter?”

“I do not know – I have not been able to think,” said the factor, himself moved even to weeping: “that something must be done, and that immediately, is clear. If I had not been coming to you for assistance, Mrs. Catherine, I should have come for advice, for how to proceed I cannot see.”

There was a considerable pause – at length, Mrs. Catherine started from her seat and resumed her quick pacing of the room.

“Wherefore are we losing time – send a message home, to Woodsmuir to bid them put up a change of apparel for you; ride into Portoran and get what siller will be needful – do not be scrupulous – and go your ways this very day, or, if it be too far spent, at the latest the morn, to the prodigal. I would go myself, but the witless youth, as I see by his letter, is feared for me, and you can maybe travel with less delay. Bring him home. Strathoran can shelter him no longer, but the dwelling-place of Sholto Douglas can never be closed upon Isabel Balfour’s son. I say to you, lose no time, Robert Ferguson.” Mrs. Catherine rang the bell energetically. “Write to your wife about the needful raiment. Archie Sutherland has slept in young Robert’s cradle. She will not grudge the trouble.”

Mr. Ferguson did not wait to reflect, but with all speed, drew paper and ink towards him and began to write.

"Let Andrew or Johnnie be ready in a moment to ride to Woodsmuir," said Mrs. Catherine, as Jacky appeared at the door; "and tell your mother to send in refreshments for Mr. Ferguson. Begone, you imp – what are you waiting for?"

"If you please," said Jacky, "it's Mr. Foreman himsel in the gig – will I bring him in?" and, without waiting for an answer, the girl disappeared.

"Mr. Foreman himself," repeated Mrs. Catherine. "What new trouble is coming now? – they are ever in troops."

Mr. Ferguson raised his head uneasily and paused in his writing. The excited curiosity of both suggesting some further aggravation of the great misfortunes they already knew.

Mr. Foreman entered the room gravely, and with care in his face – greeted Mrs. Catherine in silence, and starting, when he saw Mr. Ferguson, asked; "It is true, then?"

"True? – Ay, beyond doubt or hoping," said Mrs. Catherine, bitterly. "The prodigal has made an end of his house and name. I was right, Mr. Foreman, and you were wrong. The hairy fool had been sent on no less an errand than to see the value of the prey. Grant me patience! – how am I to see daily before me, some evil animal, such as could herd with cattle like you, reigning in the house of the Sutherlands?"

"How have you heard, Mr. Foreman?" said the factor, anxiously. "Has Mr. Archibald written to you himself?"

"No," said Mr. Foreman, "I have got my information from a most disagreeable source. I received a letter to-day from the

solicitors of Lord Gillravidge, touching the conveyance of the property. Have you the intelligence direct from Mr. Sutherland? I came up immediately to let Mrs. Catherine know."

"I have a letter," said Mr. Ferguson. "It is indeed all over. He has lost everything except the entailed lands of Loelyin and Lochend, and the farm of Woodsmuir, upon which my own house stands, and it, you know, is mortgaged to its full value. All the rest is gone. Mr. Archibald is ruined."

There was a pause again, broken only by the sound of Mrs. Catherine's footsteps, as she walked heavily through the room. – These grave, kind men, Archibald Sutherland's factor and agent, who had known him all his life, were almost as deeply affected with his sin and misfortune as though he had been an erring son. Mr. Foreman broke the silence by asking:

"What do you intend to do?"

"Mrs. Catherine advises me to start immediately for Paris," said Mr. Ferguson. "We all of us know how bitterly Mr. Archibald will reproach himself, now that all self-reproach is unavailing. I will endeavor to bring him home – to the Tower, I mean; and then – I do not well know what we are to do. But we must try to rouse his mind (it is a vigorous one, if it were but in a purer atmosphere,) to shape out for itself another course. I was about to ride into Portoran to make immediate preparation for my journey."

"Your letter, Mr. Ferguson," said Mrs. Catherine, as Jacky again appeared at the door. "Let Andrew – is it Andrew? – lose

no time! Here, you elf! Have you anything else to advise, Mr. Foreman? I myself would start in a moment, but that I think Mr. Ferguson would do it better. The lad's spirit is broken, doubtless, and I might be over harsh upon him. Give me Archie's letter."

Mrs. Catherine's large grey eyelid swelled full again, and she seated herself at the table.

"I have nothing else to advise," said Mr. Foreman, abstractedly. "I think it is very wise, and you should start at once, Mr. Ferguson. But – " The lawyer paused. "Is it not possible to do anything? Could no compromise be made? Better mortgage the land (it was mortgaged heavily enough in his grandfather's time – I remember how old Strathoran was hampered by paying them off,) than suffer it to pass altogether out of his hands. Could nothing be done? Mrs. Catherine, if such an arrangement were possible, would you not lend your assistance?"

Mrs. Catherine raised her eyes from the letter.

"To what end or purpose? That he might have the freedom of losing the land again, if it were won back to him by the spending of other folks' substance? George Foreman, it is not like your wisdom to think of such a thing. A penniless laird – a shadow, and no substance – with a false rank to keep up, and nothing coming in to keep it up withal? I will not hear of it! Gentlemen, I have made up my mind; out of yon hot unnatural air of artificial ill, the lad must come down to the cold blast of poverty, if he is ever to be anything but a silken fule, spending gear unjustly gotten, in an unlawful way. I say I will have no hand

in giving back plenty and ease to Archie Sutherland, till he has righteously wrought and struggled for the same. Bring him back to my house, Robert Ferguson. He has lost the home and the lands of his fathers. Let him see them in the hands of an alien, and then let him gird his loins to a right warfare, and win them back again. With God's blessing, and man's labor, there is nought in this world impossible. I hope to live to see him win back his possessions, as I have seen him lose them. If he does not, he deserves them not."

"Write to him so," said Mr. Ferguson, eagerly. "It is the spur he needs. Let me have a letter, so hopeful and encouraging, to carry with me, Mrs. Catherine. Mere reproach would do evil, and not good. You are perfectly right. A struggle – a warfare – that is the true prescription. Write to Mr. Archibald yourself – it will have more effect than anything I can say."

Mr. Foreman sighed, and felt almost inclined to withdraw his adherence from those reformers who aim at the abolition of entails. At length, and slowly, he signified his consent.

"Yes – yes: Mrs. Catherine is right. I believe it is the wisest way. But – "

Mr. Foreman paused again. A strange master in Strathoran – the kindly union of the country broken in upon by one who, if they judged rightly, had done grievous ill to Archibald Sutherland. A painful film came over the lawyer's eyes. It seemed like treason to the trust reposed in him by "Old Strathoran" thus to suffer his son's downfall.

"You are losing time," said Mrs. Catherine. "Robert Ferguson, the day is wearing on. Ye will not be able to leave Portoran the night. Start with the first coach the morn's morning. Do not tarry a moment. Mind how long the days will be to a spirit in despair; and come to me when you are returning from Portoran if there is time. I will write to the unhappy lad."

Thus dismissed, both gentlemen took their leave, the factor receiving a parting adjuration to "take sufficient siller – be not scrimpit. Ye will have many charges in so long a journey; and, as I have said, Robert Ferguson, lay out a pound of your own siller upon this dyvour at your proper peril! I will visit your iniquity upon the head of your young advocate, if ye venture to do such a thing. – Mind!"

Mrs. Catherine seated herself at her library table as the factor and the lawyer rode away together, and began to write to Archibald Sutherland – a hurried letter, swiftly written. It ran thus:

"I have heard of your transgression and calamity, Archibald Sutherland, and write as I need not tell you, in sore grief. Nevertheless, I have neither time nor leisure to record my lamentations, nor do I think that tears from old e'en – the which are bitter in the shedding – are things to make merchandise of for the mending of young backsliders. At this moment, I have other matters in hand. I see by your letter to Mr. Ferguson (a better man than I fear you will ever be), that you are yourself cast down, and in grief, as it is meet you should be. See that it be for

the sin, and not for the mere carnal consequences, and so there will be the better chance for a blessing on your repentance.

"And boy, rise up and come back to the country that brought you forth, out of that den of sin and iniquity. The house of your fathers is open to you no longer – the house of Sholto Douglas can never be shut upon Isabel Balfour's son. Come back to me – you shall not be my heir, for the lands of my fathers must descend to none that cannot keep them firmly, and guide them well; but whatsoever is needful for you to begin your warfare, lies ready for your claiming. I say your warfare, Archie Sutherland, for I bid you not come home to dally through an idle life or waste more days. – Come home to fight for your possessions back again – come home to strive in every honorable and lawful way to win back the good land you have lost – come home, I say, Archie Sutherland, to redeem your inheritance by honest labor, and establish your house again, as it was established by the first Sutherland that set foot on Oranside. The road is clear before you. You have gotten all the siller wasted now that you can get to waste. I command you, as there is anything in this life you set a value on, to throw these evil things behind you, and gird yourself for a warfare – a warfare that will be neither light nor brief, but that will be – what your past life has not been – just and honorable, a work for a man, not a witless and sinful dalliance for a silly youth, a play for a fevered bairn.

"I have a burden of years upon me as you know, and may have but a small distance between me and the kirkyard of Strathoran,

therefore I lay my charge upon you to be speedy with your labor. My kin and youthful neighbors are round about me, Archie Sutherland, (all but Sholto my one brother, that I left lying in the cold earth of a strange country,) but they are dwelling in silent cities, where no living thing can tarry. Boy! let me see hope breaking upon you, before I lay down my head beside them. My time is short. Turn to this work, Archie Sutherland, that I may carry better tidings with me, to your father and your mother, in the good land where they are resting from their labor. To your warfare I command you, young man, that I may see your prosperity as I have seen your down-come. Come home to the house of your mother's oldest friend, come home without delay (and I charge you that what honor remains to your name may be preserved – to bring home to me that wilful girl, your sister Isabel) to your just work, that I may not go down with a sore heart to my last dwelling-place.

"Catherine Douglas."

Mr. Ferguson returned to the Tower on his way to Woodsmuir, and received this letter, with many messages and charges besides, especially addressed to Isabel Sutherland, whom Mrs. Catherine, in the excitement of her grief for Archibald, had almost forgotten. Mr. Ferguson was to leave Portoran with the night-coach for Edinburgh; and, again, the perforce quietude of waiting fell upon the aged lady of the Tower.

CHAPTER VIII

OTHER two weary slow-paced weeks wore through, before Mrs. Catherine heard any further tidings of her prodigal. At last Mr. Ferguson's hurried intimation of his arrival in Paris came at once to satisfy and to stimulate her anxiety – for Mr. Ferguson's brief epistle said emphatically that it was *well* he had lost no time in setting out upon his journey, and that he found "Mr. Archibald" in sorest need of some steadfast friend about him. A few days after there came a more explicit letter. Mr. Ferguson had found poor Archibald Sutherland in the strong grip of despair. Loss of fortune had brought loss of friends – not one of all his former guests or flatterers remained to comfort him in his poverty; and save for the jealous solicitude with which he guarded his sister, Mr. Ferguson believed that his reckless desperation would have laid him ere now in the grave of the suicide. But Isabel, wilful, impetuous and admired as she was, bound her fierce guardian to his hated life – still courted in these gay circles, for the wit and beauty which all this burden of calamity could not diminish, the ruined man stalked by her side everywhere, like some intruding spectre, casting a blight upon the smiles that woke no congenial sunshine in his ghostly face. The treachery which he had felt surrounding himself – the warning of Mrs. Catherine's letters had awakened him to a wild anxiety for Isabel: he could not bear her absence from

him. Regardless of sneers and inuendos – regardless of contempt and indifference, he followed his sister wherever she went, and scowled away from her in his gaunt pride and anger, whosoever ventured upon any show of admiration. But no human spirit could bear that fierce tension long; and when his factor's home face looked in upon him, so clear, upright, and manlike, with all its respectful kindliness of sympathy, the heart of Archibald Sutherland burst from its compulsory hardihood, and melted into very weakness. None knew or could appreciate better than he, the thoroughly honorable character of Mr. Ferguson – none better knew the warm kindliness of that pleasant home of Woodsmuir, which the factor had left for the discomforts of a long journey and a strange country, to aid and succor *him*– him, the prodigal, the destroyer of his father's house. Tears, strange to the eyes of the broken man, fell copiously over Mrs. Catherine's letter – a time of strange incoherence followed, and when Mr. Ferguson wrote again, it was from the sick room where Archibald Sutherland lay, prostrate in body and mind, in the wild heat of fever, struggling for his life.

Mr. Ferguson wrote with unwonted pathos of that strange phantom of terror for Isabel, which haunted his patient's mind by night and day – the one consistent thread through all that delirious chaos – of how the wilful sister in the pride of her wit and beauty heard it first from her brother's raving lips with indignant anger, haughtily blaming the manly watcher by that brother's bedside whose place she did not offer to take; but how, at last,

the "weeping blood of woman's breast" was reached by that wail of agony, and Isabel gave up her gaieties, and took her place in the sick room, soothing the sufferer by her very presence. But Mr. Ferguson did not tell, how unweariedly he himself watched by that bed of fever, and when doctor and attendant despaired, still hoped against hope – nor how, when feeble, and pale, and worn out, the convalescent could raise his head again, it was the strong arm of his Strathoran factor that held him up – it was the kindly tongue of home that gave thanks for his recovery.

But long weeks had lengthened into months during Archibald's illness, and the dark short days of December were rising, in their chill alternations of frost and rain, upon the northern skies of Strathoran, when Mr. Ferguson returned home. He came alone, for Captain Duncombe had joined his wife and brother-in-law in Paris, and was to be their escort to England. Captain Duncombe had got a considerable accession of fortune, by the death of some friend, during the time of Archibald's convalescence, and had managed to effect an exchange into a regiment stationed near London, whither his wife had no objection to accompany him. The saturnine Captain was something touched by his hapless brother-in-law's emaciated appearance, and had no objection to travel leisurely home for his convenience, though protesting many times, with unnecessary fervor, that, when once at home, he could do nothing for him; and Mr. Ferguson, whose own affairs imperatively called for his presence, and whose strength had been wasted by

long confinement, reluctantly left his patient, and returned to Strathoran alone.

In the meantime, changes had taken place there: bevies of English sportsmen had arrived with Lord Gillravidge at his newly acquired property – gamekeepers and grooms, a whole village full, overbrimmed its quiet precincts. Rough Ralph Falconer, condescendingly noticed at first, in acknowledgment of his kindred pursuits, was shrinking from the neighborhood already fairly over-crowed and put down, endeavoring to hide his mortification under bitter laughter. Bitterly upon them, "pilgarlic dandies," "hairy fuils," "idle cattle," poured the full flood of Mrs. Catherine's derision. The countryside was stirred with unwonted excitement. An Englishman, alien to their blood, and contemptuous of their Church – the supplanter, besides, of an old and long established family, in a district peculiarly tenacious of hereditary loves and hatreds, – the new Lord of Strathoran had all the strongest feelings of his neighbors arrayed against him.

The new Lord of Strathoran was supremely indifferent. The countryside and its likings and dislikings, were not of the remotest consequence to him.

And little Alice Aytoun was beginning to receive gentle and tender hints from Edinburgh, that the original limits proposed for her visit, had been considerably overpassed. She had forgotten, in the unconscious selfishness of a light heart, how lonely the Edinburgh parlor would be, during the long days which her mother spent there alone – for Alice's *entree* into the festivities

and party-givings of that quiet district, which her inexperience called "the world," had been a triumph – and with so much homage laid at her little feet, and so much girlish delight and laughing wonder, in receiving that strange, new tribute of admiration, it was scarcely wonderful that the Edinburgh parlor, with its quiet dwelling at home, and brief domestic circle, seemed almost sombre in the contrast. It was arranged, however, that Alice should return home after the new year, and, her conscience eased of some compunctions it had, respecting neglect of her mother, Alice looked forward to the especial merry-makings of that blythe season with a light heart.

Meanwhile, Anne Ross's ingenuity was vainly exercised in devising expedients to occupy her brother, and divert him from those frequent visits which it had become his pleasure to pay at the Tower. Lewis found numberless errands – alleged consultations with Mrs. Catherine, at which his mother fumed silently in sullen dignity – pretences for advising with the shrewd factotum of Mrs. Catherine's finely-cultivated home-farm, concerning those fields immediately adjoining Merkland which Mr. Coulter advised, putting on some scientific regimen – or even a rare fungus, or delicate moss to show to Miss Aytoun, who began to be interested in that beautiful science of botany which Lewis himself had taken up so suddenly.

These visits, and the too certain end to which they tended, pained Anne deeply, overpowered her, indeed, sometimes with sick bewilderment, the more that in the present state of matters,

she was perfectly powerless. Any step of her's might precipitate Lewis, so jealously alive to interference as he was, and make that certain, which was now only feared and deprecated, so Anne, like her friend in the Tower, had to wait perforce for the regular course of events, and with an anxiety still more intense and painful than Mrs. Catherine's. What but woe and mishap could come from this unhappy intercourse? What but pain and disappointment and sorrow to these two youthful hearts.

Anne could perceive that it annoyed her step-mother; that Mrs. Ross, with her overweening partiality for, and pride in her only son, was inclined to take his attention to Alice Aytoun as a personal slight and injury to herself. But it was not because a connection so terrible existed between the families already – Alice had no friends to elevate the standing, nor portion to increase the wealth of her future partner, and therefore Mrs. Ross frowned upon the growing devotion of Lewis, and already, in many a peevish altercation and sarcastic allusion, had brought in Alice Aytoun's name – fanning thereby the flame which she hoped to extinguish.

And during these months, the little girl, so strangely brought to Oran Mill, was learning the tongue of her new home rapidly. A strange junction, the liquid Spanish, which fell on Jacky's visionary ear so pleasantly, "like the words folk hear in dreams," made, mingled with these soft syllables of the homely, Scottish tongue, broken from what harshness soever might originally be in them, by the child's voice of lisping music. Mrs. Melder had

been told to call her Lilias, and affection had already contracted the name into the familiar diminutive of "Lilie." A strange exotic lily the child seemed with her small, pale features and olive-tinted cheek, and flood of dusky silken hair, and she had become already a wonder in the parish.

Mrs. Coulter sent for the miller's wife on some small pretext of business, that she might see her little lodger, and Lilie returned from Harrows laden with fruit, and toys, and sweetmeats, and leaving little Harry Coulter, the agriculturist's Benjamin, struggling with desperate energy to follow her, and hopelessly in love. Lilie had even been taken to the Tower, and half smothered with caresses from Alice, had received from Mrs. Catherine strange looks of musing melancholy, and one abrupt expression of wonder —

"Who was she like?"

Miss Falconer herself had gallopped a couple of miles out of her way, and stopped at the Mill, with her horse in a foam, to make acquaintance with the little Donna. Jacky had constituted herself her bodyguard and attendant, and carried her off whole days on solitary rambles among the hills. There were few of all the circle round who were not interested in the stranger child.

But no one received so great a share of Lilie's regard, or was so powerfully attracted towards her, as Anne Ross. There was a new pleasure now in the long walks, which had a half hour's playful intercourse with Lilie to make them cheerful; and Anne again and again repeated her inquiries concerning the stranger who

had left the child with Mrs. Melder, without however eliciting anything new.

"She wasna put on like a lady," repeated the miller's wife. "My ain muckle shawl, wi' the border, was worth twa o' the ain she had on, and naething but a printed goun. But I have seen folk in silks and satins, Miss Anne, that had a commoner look – no that she was bonnie – but you saw her yoursel."

"Yes," said Anne; "she was a very remarkable looking person."

"Na' but the eyes of her! They made me that I near sat down and fainted – they had sic a wistful, murning look in them. The bairn's are no unlike. Haud up your head, Lilie, my lamb – only it wad tak watching and sorrow, if I'm no far mistaken, to gie her yon look. Waes me, Miss Anne! it spoke o' a sair heart!"

"But Lilie's are bright and happy," said Anne, drawing the child closer to her, and looking affectionately upon the little face, from which shone eyes deep enough in their liquid darkness to mirror forth great sorrows. "We must not let grief come near Lilie."

"Lilie blythe – blythe?" said the child, clinging to her side. "Lilie no like happy. Blythe is bonnier! Lilie go the morn – up – up!"

"To the hills, Lilie?"

"Up – up!" said the child, imitating with feet and hands the motions of climbing. "Lilie look away far – at the water."

"At the Oran, Lilie?"

"Where he go to?" asked Lilie, pointing through the window to the brown, foaming water – "rinning fast? Where he go to?"

"To the sea, Lilie," said Anne.

"Yes – yes," said the child. "Lilie once sail upon the sea; row – row – in a big boat. Lilie likes to look at it."

"Were you alone, Lilie?" said Anne. "Was no one with you?"

The child did not understand.

"A big boat – big – big – bigger than yon!" Lilie had seen Mrs. Catherine's little vessel on the Oran, and had been greatly interested in it. "Lilie ran about," and the child eked out her slender vocabulary with the universal language of signs, "and saw the sea; but the water did not come upon Lilie."

"And was there no one to take care of Lilie?" said Anne. – "No one to put on her little frock, and to comb these pretty curls?"

The child looked up thoughtfully for a moment, and then, hiding her face in Anne's lap, burst out into a passion of tears, moaning out in her own language a lamentation over her "good nurse, her Juana," with all the inconsolable vehemence of childhood.

"She has done that before," said Mrs. Melder. "Can ye make onything o' the words, Miss Anne? I hae gotten to ken the sound o' them, though neither Robert nor me can make ony sense o' the outlandish tongue. Lilie, my lamb, whisht, like a guid bairn, and dry your eyes. See what a bonnie book Miss Anne has brocht ye, and pictures in't!

"There's mony o' the neighbors wonder at us," continued Mrs.

Melder, as the child, when its fit of weeping was over, clambered up upon the table in the window, and sat there, in enjoyment of the picture-book, "for taking a bairn we ken naething about; and ye may think it foolish too, Miss Anne. But the house was waesome wi' Robert out a' day, and the bit thing had a pitiful look wi't, and the leddy – for she bid to be a leddy, though she was plain enough put on – pleaded wi' me in sic a way that I couldna withstand it; and we're clar o' a' loss, wi' the siller being in Mr. Foreman's hand; and the bairn – puir wee desolate thing, cast off by its ain bluid – is a fine bairn, now that she's learning to speak in a civilized tongue. My ain Bell, if the Almighty had spared her, would hae been about Lilie's age. Eh, Miss Anne! a young lady like you canna ken what a sore dispensation that was! But we maun hae our ain way."

"And do you think the lady could be Lilie's mother?" said Anne, after a pause.

"It's hard to say," said Mrs. Melder; "but I am maistly inclined to think no, Miss Anne, for ye see the bairn disna greet after her the way she did the now, when ye asked her wha came hame wi' her; and the leddy hersel, though she beggit me to be careful o' the bairn, did not keep her in her sight till the last moment, as a mother would have done; and when she went by the Mill, Robert says – for he was watching – that she never stopped to look back; sae I think she may have been a friend further off, Miss Anne, but she couldna be Lilie's mother."

"Strange!" said Anne, "that any friend, above all a mother

should send away a child so interesting!"

"Ay, Miss Anne," said Mrs. Melder; "but the like o' you disna ken. There are bitterer things in this world than even grief. – One canna tell. It may be a shame and a disgrace to some decent family, that that wee thing, pleasant as she is, has ever drawn breath – and the lady may be some kin of the mother's, bringing it away out o' the sight o' kent folk and friends. The like of that is ower common. Eh, pity me! there's nae counting the wiles o' the enemy! There's Strathoran, ye see, and the gentlemen that's in't playing at their cartes and their dice, they tell me, on the very Sabbath day itsel! Is't no enough to bring a judgment on the country-side? If auld Strathoran – honest man – could but look down into his ain house now, I canna think but what it would make his heart sair – even *yonder*. He was a guid man, auld Strathoran, though he did put Mr. Bairnsfather into the parish."

"Was that wrong, Mrs. Melder?" said Anne.

"The Apostle says we're no to speak evil o' the ruler o' our people," said Mrs. Melder; "but, eh, Miss Anne, he's wersh and unprofitable. When I was in my trouble and sorrow (and who can tell how dark the earth is, and a'thing in't, when one is bereaved o' their first-born – their only lamb!) Robert brought the minister, thinking he could speak a word o' comfort to me; and what think ye he said, Miss Anne? No that I was to look to my Lord that had gathered my lamb to his ain bosom, out of a' the ills o' this world, but that I was to be reasonable and calm, and bear the trouble wi' fortitude, because it couldna be helpit. That was a' the comfort

he had to speak to a distracted woman, whose only bairn was in its grave! But he never had ony little ones himsel."

"And you do not come to the Church, now?" said Anne, holding out her hand, as Lilie descended from the table, and came to her side again.

"Na; we were once gaun to the Meeting, Robert and me, for the Seceder minister preaches guid doctrine, but we couldna think to leave the Kirk. My father was an elder for twenty year – sae we aye waited on till Mr. Lumsden came to Portoran. Eh, Miss Anne, he's a grand man! They say there's no the like o' him in the haill Presbytery!"

"What is this, Lilie?" cried Anne.

Lilie had brought her new "Shorter Catechism," that much-prized text-book of Presbyterian Scotland, to point out the lessons which she was to repeat to Robert Melder, on the Sabbath afternoon, according to the venerable and excellent custom of such religious humble households; and insisted upon repeating her former "questions" and the first Psalm she had learnt in her new language.

Anne took the book, well pleased, and listened, while Lilie repeated that beautiful proposition in which all Scotland for centuries has learned to define the chief end of man, and then, with some slight stammering and uncertainty, went on:

> "That man hath perfect blessedness,
> Who walketh not astray."

The first verse was repeated, and Lilie stayed to remember the second.

"Eh," cried Mrs. Melder, "hasna she come uncommon fast on? but I wish ye would speak to Jacky Morison, Miss Anne, she's learning the bairn nonsense ballants and – "

> "He shall be like a tree that grows,
> Near planted by a river,"

burst out Lilie triumphantly.

> "Which in his season yields his fruit,
> And his leaf fadeth never.
> And all he doth shall prosper well – "

The child paused – accomplished the next three lines with prompting, and then made a stop.

"Lilie no mind now – Lilie show you the tree."

Anne suffered herself to be drawn out – the tree which Lilie fancied must be the one meant in the Psalm, was an oak which stood upon a swelling hillock close by the Oran. When they came near, the child's wandering attention was caught by some carving on the rude and gnarled trunk.

"What's that?" she asked.

Anne read it, wonderingly:

Beneath were two longer lines:

> “Like autumn leaves upon the forest ways,
> The gentle hours fall soft, the brightest days
> Fade from our sight.”

and a date. The carvings were near the root, and might have been done by some one sitting on the grassy bank below. Anne had some difficulty in deciphering them, and when she had led her little charge home, returned alone to trace the moss-grown characters again. The date was seventeen years before – Norman R. R. Could it be possible that some other bore that name – or was it indeed a record of some bygone pleasant musing of her unhappy brother’s, before name, and fame, and fortune were lost in that dark crime – before the mark of Cain was sealed upon his brow.

And were there yet greater depths in this calamity than she knew, and more sufferers; the Marion who shared his happier thoughts – who was she? or how had Norman’s blight, so much more dreadful than death, fallen upon her?

The dusky December weeks passed on, and, on the last night of the year, a tall man, closely enveloped in a plaid, walked softly up the dark avenue towards the house of Strathoran. He seemed

to know its turns and windings well, as keeping under covert of the thickest trees, he hastily approached the house; – once near it, he crossed the path quickly to gain the obscurity of its shadow, and then walked round it several times without manifesting any desire of entering. It was a very dreary night – the ground was thoroughly soaked with recent rains, and heavy clouds drifted in dark masses over the sky, of whose dull leaden surface, and wading afflicted moon you could see occasional glimpses, as these gloomy hosts of vapors were parted by the wind. A fitful glance of the moon fell now and then upon the stranger's face. It was pale and resolute, and rigid, like the face of one undergoing some terrible surgical operation, to endure which manfully his every nerve was strained. He paused at last opposite a brilliant window, and retreating backward, raised himself by aid of a tree, so that he could look in. Through the closed curtains he could see a party of gentlemen sitting at their wine – the sound of their laughter, and gay voices, reached him on his watch. With keen eyes he surveyed the unconscious revellers, marked every face, took in, as it seemed, every particular of the scene, and then descending, took his way again through the solitary avenue, and turning as before into a side path, reached the highway unseen. Onward he went, walking very quickly for full two dreary miles, and arrived at last not at any dwelling of man, but at a solitary graveyard, still and solemn, lying upon Oranside, in the midst of which rose the ruined walls of an ancient chapel, moss-grown, and clad with clinging ivy. – The alarm which

called forth the parishioners of more southern districts, night after night, to watch their dead, had not reached the distant stillness of Strathoran, and the stranger entered unmolested and unseen. He directed his steps to the chapel, climbed the broken stair, and entered the small unroofed apartment, with its ruined walls, and trailing ivy, and floor of lettered flags, bearing upon them the names of those who slept below – for this was the burial-place of the long-descended Sutherlands of Strathoran. Another uncertain glance of the wan moon directed him to a marble tablet in the wall, by the side of which he stood long in the dreary silence, motionless and still, himself like some dark statue, mocking the dead with empty honor. Hugh Sutherland and Isabel his wife, lay underneath the watcher's feet; and the son to whom they had left so fair a heritage, and who had visited their grave two twelvemonths since, bearing a name of universal honor, and looking forth upon a smiling future, through natural tears that became him well – stood there now, tearless and stern in the thick gloom of night – a houseless, joyless man.

"I have obeyed," said Archibald Sutherland, leaning upon the ruined wall. "I have returned to see my father's house in the hands of an alien to his blood – and now what remains?" His knees were bent upon the stone that covered the dust of father and of mother – his brow pressed to the tablet that chronicled their names; and the ruined man in his extremity, poured out his full heart into the ear of One who heareth always, and never more certainly than when the voice of supplication rises to Him "out of the depths."

"Who shall stand before thee if thou markest iniquity? yet is there forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared, and plenteous redemption."

Yes, *that* remained – omnipotent, over all, in His tender mercy, the God whose plentiful redemption encircles with its arms of divine compassion its every returning prodigal – the loving-kindness that turns no supplicant away. The sympathy most wonderful and strange of all, which "touches" – the heart of the Incarnate God with "a fellow-feeling for our infirmities!" – these remained – greater than all sorrows of the earth.

So with less sternness in his pale face, and less despair in his heart, Archibald Sutherland retraced his steps, and turned to the humble fisher's house far down the Oran, the inhabitants of which had recently come to the district, and knew not either the name or the quality of the stranger whom they had reluctantly agreed to shelter for the night.

He had hovered that same evening in cover of the darkness, in the neighborhood of the Tower – had passed the hospitable walls of Woodsmuir, and looked through the bare trees at Merkland; but drawing back in painful shame, had not dared to enter, or make himself known to any of them all – they all had households, kindred, warm friends about them. He only was alone.

The next night, with his plaid wrapped as closely about him as before, and serving as a disguise, he passed along Oranside in the darkness, turning his steps to the Tower. He could not delay longer – already perhaps in the bitter pain of last night's trial, he

had delayed too long, and in passing those wide-spreading fields and plantations, once his own, but in which now the meanest hind dwelling among them had more share than he, he felt that last night's trial might be indefinitely prolonged. He came to the Tower at last, and found it also gay and full of light. The hall-door was open, and within stood a knot of servants. The door of Mrs. Euphan Morison's snug room was ajar, and showed Duncan from Merkland, and Mr. Coulter's grave man-servant sitting comfortably by the fireside, while the Falcon's Craig groom, and Mr. Foreman's lad, and one or two younger attendants, stood among Mrs. Catherine's maid-servants in the hall listening to the music above.

"Jacky, ye monkey, shut that door," cried Mrs. Euphan Morison, "Idle hizzies clavering nonsense, and decent folk like to get their death o' cauld. I wad advise ye to tak hame some o' that horehound-balsam wi' ye, Duncan – it's uncommon guid for hoarseness. I made it with my ain hand."

Jacky darted forward to do her mother's bidding; and Archibald felt the girl's keen eye pierce his disguise in a moment. – She paused, looked at him. "If ye please, will I tell Mrs. Catherine?"

"Yes – but wait, Jacky, let me go up stairs."

Jacky went gravely forward before him, and drawing his plaid more closely over his face, Archibald followed her unobserved. – The girl led him to a small apartment which opened into that well-remembered drawing-room, and without saying a word, left

him there. He sat down and waited. Ah! these gay sounds of mirth and music, how bitterly they mock sick hearts. A sort of hope had inspired him, as he felt himself once more in shelter of these stately walls, but now, within hearing of the sounds of pleasure and rejoicing, his heart again sank within him. There was no place for him – homeless and hopeless, there. As he listened, a simple voice began to sing – words chiming strangely in with his changed fortunes.

"Like autumn leaves upon the forest ways,
The gentle hours fall soft, the brightest days
Fade from our sight.
A dimness steals upon the earth and heaven,
Blended of gloom and light;
Shuts its soft eyelid o'er day's azure levin,
And shades with its soft tints the glories of sweet even
To sober-toned night.

"From his deep cradle the woods among
His russet robes waving free,
The Oran with his kindly tongue,
Is travelling to the sea.
He rushes to the ocean old,
In sparkling wave and foam,
And out into that trackless wold
Bears the kind voice of home.
Wayfaring man, far, on the sea
Listen how he calls to thee!

“Warm household lights are shining out
His rugged channel o’er.
Ill plants of malice, and guile, and doubts
Ne’er blossom on his shore.
There is Peace in her matron’s gown and hood.
Her footsteps never roam,
And Hope is in pleasant neighborhood
And strength is strongest at home
Thy foot is weary, thy cheek is wan,
Come to thy kindred, wayfaring man

“Oran’s ringing voice he hears,
The great sea waves among,
To yon far shore the ripple bears
The Oran’s kindly tongue.
Yet he labors on, and travels far,
For years of toil must glide,
Before he sees the even star
Rise calm on Oranside.
Speed thy labor o’er land and sea,
Home and kindred are waiting for thee!

“The gentle hours fall soft, the brightest days,
Like autumn leaves upon the forest ways,
Fade from our sight.
And night and day he labors as he can,
Far from home’s kindly light.
His foot is weary, and his cheek is wan,

Ah! pray, young hearts, for the sad wayfaring man
Laboring this night."

The air was very simple beginning and ending in a low pathetic strain, and with a quicker measure for the intervening verses – but the music was but a soft chiming breath, bearing along the words. Archibald Sutherland leaned his head upon his hands, the burden floating dizzily through his mind. Alas! for him, beginning his wayfaring so painfully, neither home nor kindred waited. He heard a step approach – a hand gently open the door of communication, and raised his head, a sad calmness possessing him. – Among the gay hearts, divided from him only by that wall, there might be some one, whose prayer of gentle pity, would indeed rise for the wayfaring man.

CHAPTER IX

ANNE Ross was seated near Mrs. Catherine's piano when Alice Aytoun took her place at it timidly, and placing a sheet of manuscript music before her, began her song. Anne started in tremulous wonder as it commenced. Most strange to hear these words repeated by a living voice at all – stranger still that they should fall from Alice Aytoun's. With breathless interest she listened as the lines flowed on. The wayfaring man in toil, and danger, and sorrow, hearing in the ripple of the great sea, far away in some strange country, the kindly call of the Oran to home and kindred. Her cheeks grew pale – her lips quivered. How could this be twined into Norman's history? – or was Alice unconsciously murmuring out the low, sad prayer of its conclusion for her father's murderer?

The tears were swelling in Anne's eyes as the song concluded; and Ralph Falconer who stood near had addressed to her some sneering compliment on her sensibility, when Jacky stole behind her chair, and whispered something in her ear. Anne recollected herself instantly, and, approaching Mrs. Catherine, communicated to her Jacky's intelligence. Mrs. Catherine started – rose from her seat – wavered a moment, and then restraining her emotions, sat resolutely down again.

"See, Anne, there is the key of the little room. Take the dyvour there – I will come myself when I can. Tell him that – ." Anne

turned to obey. “And, child, – bid Euphan Morison have a good fire kindled in the red room, and tell Andrew he is to hold himself ready to wait on Mr. Archibald – and, child – be kindly to the unhappy youth. It behoves me to be stern myself, but there is no such bondage upon you.”

When Archibald Sutherland lifted his head it was Anne Ross who stood before him, her eyes shining wet, her face full of sympathetic sorrow. She held out her hand, and advanced towards him.

“Mr. Sutherland – Archibald.”

“Anne!” said the broken man. They shook hands; there needed no more speech; perfect and cordial sympathy, of no exaggerated sort, but such as does sometimes, and should always subsist between those who have passed childhood and early youth together, was between them in a moment. There was no story told – no compassion claimed; but, in the pressure of Anne’s hand, and the subdued kindness of her look, the full heart felt itself eased, and leaned upon the unexpressed sympathy as with the confidence of nearest kindred. There were no words; but Anne knew how Archibald’s spirit was wading like the moon in clouds and darkness; and Archibald felt that Anne, in the confidence of ancient kindness, was ready to hope and believe all things for his final deliverance and welfare.

“You will not go in,” said Anne, gently. “There is a large party, and some strangers.”

“No – no,” said Archibald. “I regret now that I came at all to-

night. I would be a strange spectre, disturbing your merrymaking, Anne."

"Merrymaking! With some of us, at least, there is not much of that," said Anne. "Lewis is home, Archibald; you must see *him*. But now will you come with me to the little room? Mrs. Catherine will come herself immediately."

"To the little room?"

"Yes; the house is full, and all the other apartments are occupied," said Anne; "that is all. Mrs. Catherine has been looking for you, Archibald."

They left the room together, and, to the great wonder of the congregated listeners in the hall, descended the stair, and turned through a dark passage to Mrs. Catherine's place of especial retirement – the little room. Archibald entered, and Anne, leaving him, hastened to Mrs. Euphan Morison's apartment, to convey to her Mrs. Catherine's orders, in immediate execution of which a reluctant maid was hurried up stairs.

And Archibald Sutherland seated himself alone, fearing the interview which Mrs. Catherine made still more important and solemn by ordaining that it should take place *there*. The firm, dark face of Sholto Douglas looked down upon him from the wall, and fascinated his restless eyes. There seemed a lofty purity of reproof in those fine lineaments, over which the pallor of death had fallen, before Mrs. Catherine's only brother had told out an equal number of years with himself. Sholto Douglas, in his early prime of manhood, laid in a foreign grave, the odor of

a stainless name, and strong faith, numbering him among those just, who shall be held in everlasting remembrance. Archibald Sutherland, in the wreck of hope and fortune, and good fame, preserving barely life. Ah! who would not rather have chosen the solitary grave in far Madeira, in which all sin and uncertainty lay dead, and where, above flowery sod, and gray headstone, there blossomed one sublime and stedfast hope, as sure and true as heaven.

Archibald could not bear, what seemed the cold reproving scrutiny of that noble pictured face, and laying his arms upon the table, he bent down his head upon them. He fancied he could hear the music and gay voices still. Anne had left him. Mrs. Catherine lingered in her coming; even in this household, the only one in the cold world around him, in which he thought himself secure of welcome, the ruined man was nothing; bitter thoughts swelled up within his worn and wearied spirit, despair came back like a flood upon his heart; exhausted in health, broken in mind, disgraced in name – what remained for the once joyous heir of Strathoran, but poverty, neglect, and death.

Large gray eyes, made larger by the dew that swelled beneath their lids, were looking on him, as thus he sank further and further, into that horror of great darkness. Mrs. Catherine, whose slow step he had not heard approaching, in the tumult of his own thoughts, stood by him silently; her strong features moved by the contest between severity and tenderness.

"Archibald Sutherland," she said, harshly. The young man

started, but did not lift his head. “Archie, my man!” Her large hand was upon his hair, stroking it softly, as if the head it covered had been a child’s. He looked up. “You have sinned against your own spirit, and in the sight of God; but you are home in your own country, and under a kindly roof. Archie Sutherland, give me your hand, and let bygones be bygones between us.”

There was a silence of some minutes, during which, Mrs. Catherine grasped Archibald’s trembling hand in one of her’s, and with the other, smoothed down his dark hair, wet as it was, with the cold dew of mental pain. “Archie!” she repeated, “there have many waves passed over your head since I laid my hand upon it last; waves of sorrow and shame, and waves of sin, Archie Sutherland – but yet – be silent, and listen to me – yet I pray, as I prayed when we parted, that the blessing of the God of our fathers may be about you, boy, at this time, and for ever! Look up, and hear me. Let trouble, and toil, and hardship come, as the Lord will; lift up your head in His presence, Archie Sutherland, and plight me your word, that in your further warfare, manfully and honestly, and in the strength of His name, ye will resist sin. I fear no other thing in this earth, be it the sorest pain that ever wrung mortal flesh; but with a deadly fear do I tremble for that! That you will strive against it night and day, that you will give place to it – no, not for an hour – that wherever ye may be, in joy, or in tribulation, in peace, or in strife – ye will remember the One name whereby we can be saved, and resist iniquity, if need be unto blood. Your word, Archie Sutherland, I am waiting

for your word."

And solemnly, with lifted hand, and tremulous voice, the word was plighted. "With all the strength of a sad man, honestly, and in truth. Remembering the One name whereby we can be saved, and in the strength of Him who has overcome sin. God succor me!"

The flush faded from his thin cheek, his hand fell. Mrs. Catherine stood still by his side, in the same attitude, her hand lying fondly upon his hair, and there was again an interval of silence. "The angel that redeemed me from all evil, bless the lad. Archie, be of good cheer. Who kens the ways of the Lord? We are tried, but we are not forsaken."

Mrs. Catherine seated herself opposite him, and looked into his face. "You are white and thin, Archie, spent with that weary trouble – and you have been walking upon the damp road in the night air, like an imprudent lad, as you are, and will have wet feet, doubtless. Go up to your room like a good heart, and change them, and then, Archie, my man, we are all friends together. Come in, and see Lewis Ross, and the rest of them, for I have a houseful to-night."

"I am not fit for any company," said the young man. "I should go in among them like a ghost. Mrs. Catherine, I have obeyed you to the letter. Last night, I saw my father's house in the possession of strangers. Last night, I saw that man in my father's seat. I have not shrunk from the full trial, and now there is no probation so hard, no struggle so bitter, but I am willing to embrace it, if I

may but have a prospect of redeeming what I have sinfully lost; although it be only to die when all is done, beneath the roof where my fathers have lived and died before me."

A sympathetic light kindled in Mrs. Catherine's eye; but the wasted young man beside her, needed soothing and rest, as she saw, and after her own fashion she comforted him. "Archie, I am in years, and there is no wish so near my heart, as to see your work done before I go hence; but to do your work you must be strong, and to be strong, ye must rest; this is no a time to speak of dying. I ken no man in this world, that has a chain to life as strong as you have yourself, Archie Sutherland, if it be the Lord's will, and truly, I have little hope of a man, with a labor before him, turning to death for ease and idleness. I doubt not, there are many years before you yet, blyther than these; but we will have time to speak of that hereafter. Go up to your room, Archie. It will mind ye of your school days, to have Andrew about you again, and come down when you are ready, to the little east room to me. You must even be a good bairn, and do my bidding to-night."

Mrs. Catherine rose. Archibald rose too, in obedience. The strong old lady took the arm of the weak and exhausted young man, and half supporting him, went with him herself to the door of the red-room, where a cheerful fire was shining upon the warm color of curtains and furniture, while Andrew, with his grey hair dressed, and his best livery donned, in honor of the company, stood waiting at the door: the same room, with all its arrangements perfectly unchanged! the same friendly and

well-known face, that had been wont to hover about him in kindly attendance in those joyous boyish days! The prodigal had returned home – the despairing man had entered into an atmosphere rich and warm with hope. Archibald threw himself into the old fire-side chair, and hid his face again in his hands, overpowered with a momentary weakness, from whose tears the strength of steadfast resolution and grateful purpose sprang up boldly, rising over bitterness and ruin and grief in sober triumph, the beginning of better days.

But Archibald did not make his appearance in Mrs. Catherine's drawing-room that night. With the shame of his downfall strong upon him, and feeling so bitterly the disruption of all the ties which formerly bound him in kindly neighborship to these prosperous people, who knew his fall and humiliation alone, and did not know his painful struggles and sore repentance, he shrank from meeting them; and when, having entered the little east-room, he told Mrs. Catherine what pain her kind wish to cheer him would inflict upon him, she did not repeat her commands.

"But I will meet ye half-way, Archie," she said, "Robert Ferguson, your good friend and honorable steward is laboring at this time redding up the tangled odds and ends of your affairs, and it is meet you should see him and render him right thanks for his good service. You ought to have gone to Woodsmuir first. I know not any mortal you are so much indebted to. Go your ways to the library and shut the door – I will send over for Mr.

Ferguson. Na – you shall not stir over my door in a damp night till you have won back your strength again – and Mr. Foreman is here, Archie; would you like me to send him down? or are you able to stand it?"

"Quite able," said Archibald, hastily. "Ask Mr. Foreman to come to me, Mrs. Catherine. With all your kindness, I yet cannot rest till I see something definite before me. I have lost too much time already, and Mr. Foreman is an old and kind friend. I do not deserve so many. Let him come to me, if, indeed, he will come – I need counsel sorely."

Mrs. Catherine made a gesture of impatience. "And I am trysted with these young fools, and cannot win down beside you to put in my word. Mr. Foreman will come blythely, Archie – go your ways, and be careful of shutting the door, that you may not be disturbed. Andrew, let Johnnie Halflin ride to Woodsmuir without a moment's delay. If he tarries on the road, it will be at his peril; and give my compliments to Mr. Ferguson – or stay – Archie, write a word yourself."

Established in the library, Archibald wrote a hasty note to Mr. Ferguson, and in a moment after heard Johnnie Halflin, with many arguments, persuading an unwilling pony to face the damp, chill blast, which swept so mournfully through the naked woods, and over the sighing Oran, and at last galloping off on the road to Woodsmuir, the footsteps of his shaggy little steed sounding in unsteady leaps, as it struggled to turn its head from the wind, and regain its comfortable stable.

Various groups in Mrs. Catherine's drawing room were whispering already reasons for her absence.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Catherine is not well," said Mrs. Coulter, sympathetically. "Her face has had a look of trouble all the night."

"Perhaps it is some unpleasant visitor," suggested Mr. Bairnsfather. "I thought she was agitated."

"Mrs. Catherine agitated," cried Walter Foreman, "you might as soon shake the Tower."

"Hold your peace, Sir," said his father. "These young men are constantly speaking of things they don't comprehend. Mrs. Catherine feels much more deeply than you will ever do."

Walter looked up amazed. His father's eyes were uneasily fixed upon the door; his face anxious and full of care.

"Ay," said Mrs. Bairnsfather, shaking her head pathetically, "it has been a great grief to her this downcome of young Strathoran. A fine life he led in Paris, by all accounts; he will surely never come home, to be a burden on Mrs. Catherine."

Mr. Foreman turned round impatiently, as if to answer, but evidently checking with some difficulty an angry reply, looked again towards the door.

"Poor Archibald," said the kindly Mrs. Coulter, "this is not a time for his friends to desert him. Dear me, there is Mr. Ambler persuading Jeanie to sing. Jeanie, my dear, mind what a cold you have got."

"Just, 'Auld Robin Gray,' for the benefit of the seniors," said

Mr. Ambler, "the first notes will call Mrs. Catherine back again."

Jeanie Coulter seated herself at the piano, Walter Foreman took his place behind her. The "seniors" prepared to listen – the younger part of the company to whisper and exchange smiles and glances, the long ballad being too much for their patience.

"Do you think it can be young Strathoran who has arrived?" whispered Mrs. Bairnsfather.

Mrs. Coulter nodded impatiently, resenting the interruption of Jeanie's song.

"Not that new fangled nonsense, Jeanie my dear," said Mrs. Catherine, entering. "You ken the tune Lady Anne wrote it for – a right breath to carry forth the story on – not that – as if sick hearts were like to play with a melody, and did not just seek the needful breath of music to send forth their sorrows withal."

"You knew Lady Anne, Mrs. Catherine?" said Jeanie Coulter, playing with the keys, and finding this a proper opportunity for the hesitation and coyness necessary to set off her pretty voice and tasteful singing.

"Ay, I knew Lady Anne – you all ken that; sing your ballad, Jeanie Coulter, and do not keep us waiting. Mr. Foreman, I have a word to say to you."

The word was said. Mr. Foreman in haste, and not without agitation, left the room, and Mrs. Catherine herself stood near the piano listening to the music. Jeanie Coulter did the ballad – than which it seems to us, there is no history of more perfect beauty and pathos in all the stores of our Scottish tongue, rich

though it be in such – full justice. The tremulous sad music stole through the room, arresting even Alice, though she was rising then nearly to the climax of her girlish happiness – "I wish I were dead, but I'm no like to dee." What strange avalanche of trouble could ever bring such words as these from Alice Aytoun's lips? It was impossible.

Yet under that same roof was one, whose youthful beginning had been more prosperous than Alice Aytoun's, schooling himself to patience, as again and again the pain of his past transgressions came back upon him like a flood. Agent and factor had both taken their place beside him in the library – the lamp shone upon the somewhat sharp profile of Mr. Foreman, with its deepset acute eyes and deliberative look – upon the healthful, hardy, honest face of Mr. Ferguson, browned by exposure, and instinct with earnest sympathy and kindness – and upon Archibald Sutherland's wan and downcast countenance, with its mark of past sickness, and present melancholy humility; they were discussing his future career.

"I will tell you what I propose for myself, Mr. Archibald," said Mr. Ferguson, "My occupation is gone, as you know, in respect to the estate of Strathoran. Now there is Loelyin and Lochend the entailed lands – you will remember that Alexander Semple is in them, and there are three years of his lease to run; but Semple has little capital and no enterprise, and I think would be glad to get rid of his lease and try a more productive farm. It is poor land."

Archibald looked up vaguely, not seeing what the factor's

remarks tended to:

"The land is poor but improvable," continued Mr. Ferguson; "and the farm of Woodsmuir, which I have occupied myself, is in excellent condition. I believe that with capital and perseverance, the value of these entailed lands might be more than doubled, and Mr. Coulter, a practical man of high authority, bears me out."

Archibald shook his head sadly:

"We have no capital, Mr. Ferguson."

"We have thought of that," said Mr. Ferguson; "but your friends – Mrs. Catherine for example – have, and this would be no temporary relief, but a certain benefit."

"I see," said Archibald; "and yet it is impossible. My most kind friends, do not think it is pride – of all things there is none that would become me worse than that; but I am quite unfit for this trial. I question if now, with my mind excited and unsettled as it has been, I could endure the placid routine of a farmer's life anywhere. I have rather been looking forward to unceasing labor of a more engrossing kind, as the only wholesome discipline for me; but *here* it is impossible – to live within sight of Strathoran, to reap the bitter fruits of my folly day by day, without intermission, upon my own alienated land – it would kill me – I could not do it, I could do anything but that."

The factor had been waiting eagerly, with his hand lifted. – "Certainly not – surely not – we never could think of such a thing, Mr. Archibald. You must hear out my plan. What I propose is, that I, who have some knowledge of agriculture, and a taste for it,

should take these farms into my own hand. I have consulted Mr. Coulter, and I will have the full benefit of his advice; and I am confident of Mrs. Catherine's assistance. In such an investment, capital is perfectly secure, and subject to no vicissitudes – very few, at least; and I fully believe, that, carefully and scientifically cultivated, we may quadruple the poor two hundred a year it yields now: so that, in addition to your own success, which I have no doubt is certain, if you throw your whole strength into any profession, there will be, in not very many years, a property of seven or eight hundred a year waiting for you. The original property, Mr. Archibald, with opportunity of adding to it, perhaps, bit by bit, from the rest of the estate – "

Archibald Sutherland extended his hand silently, and grasped his factor's. "My punishment is to be overpowered with undeserved kindness," he said, his voice trembling. "My obligations to you already transcend thanks, Mr. Ferguson, and yet you increase them."

Mr. Ferguson resumed his statement hastily, as if ashamed of the emotion which wet his own eyes, and brought a kindred tremor to his voice. "I have grown grey in the district, Mr. Archibald, and would like ill to leave it now. My whole family were born in Woodsmuir. I have long been a theoretical farmer, you know; and now I will get some of my favorite crotchets put into practice. We shall come into collision Mr. Coulter and I," continued the factor, with a kind of hysterical attempt at a joke, which broke down woefully; "but we will, at least, have a fair

field for our respective hobbies; and the prospect of so great an increase, Mr. Archibald, is worth working for."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.