

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

The Complete Crockett

The Galloway Raiders

digital edition

Scottish works



BLOOM O'
THE HEATHER

S.R.CROCKETT

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

First Published as a collection in 1908 by Eveleigh Nash.

This Galloway Raiders digital edition published in 2021 is part of a decade long project (2012-2022) to bring the works of Samuel Rutherford Crockett (1859-1914) together in one place. The Complete Crockett comprises 66 published works, re-edited and re-formatted by volunteer labour to the highest standard.

Apart from the introduction, this work is in the public domain so please feel free to share it around. If you wish to quote from any material written by Cally Phillips please acknowledge and/or send a courtesy email to gallowayraiders@unco.scot

Other formats may be available from Galloway Raiders. As of 2021 you can find out more via the following web addresses:

www.gallowayraiders.co.uk

www.srcrockett.weebly.com

CONTENTS

1. Evil Merodach and his cure of Souls
2. The Seven Wise Men
3. First and Best
4. The Junction Gang
5. Out of Season at Berck-sur-mer
6. Big Sister
7. The Clarions Extra Special
8. The Packman's Pool
9. Barracloughs
10. Peter Peatrack
11. Nuria
12. Mr Supervisor's First Bribe
13. The Pest of the Village
14. The Last of the Smugglers
15. Lost, Stolen
16. The Herd of the Merrick
17. Harvest Past, Summer Ended
18. Proem

INTRODUCTION

This collection encompasses sixteen short stories and two longish poems. 'Evil Merodach' is a humorous story told in six chapters in the first person by Alec McQuhirr and 'Seven Wise Men,' (subsequently published on its own in 1909) is a first person account by the wife of the minister Isla Wood. This is stylistically reminiscent of other of Crockett's first person female stories (*Maid Margaret* and *Cinderella*). It is told in thirteen Chapters. These two stories, which make up the first third of the collection, show Crockett equally able to tell a compelling story with a male or female voice

The other fourteen stories are shorter and cover a range of themes. They move us from rural Galloway to the Edinburgh railway yards, from inside the kirk to the Spanish hills, from a self satisfied expat English community on the French coast to the 'worst people in the worst district' in the Stewartry (known as Little Dublin in Crockett's time.) The stories deal with the power of redemptive and sacrificial love, with theft and murder, with avoiding taxes, with the corruption of politics and journalism, and of course with the love between boy and girl. That is all to say it's a pretty comprehensive and representative collection of Crockett's writing, brought together from work previously published in serial and magazine form and published in 1908 by Eveleigh Nash.

For the modern reader, especially one who has read a range of Crockett's work, it is a very interesting collection, because the more you look at

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

the stories the more connections you see between them.

Personally, the stories I like most are those set in rural Galloway. It is always a treat to read Crockett in the 'voice' of Alec McQuhirr and 'Evil Merodach,' is no exception. It reminds me of earlier stories such as the various student medical stories in *Bog Myrtle and Peat* and of course of the first person narratives in *Love Idylls* and *Lads' Love*. Other Gallovidian stories in this collection are 'First and Best,' 'Packman's Pool' and 'The Herd of the Merrick.' All of these illustrate the harsh reality of living in rural Galloway. In 'First and Best,' John Stoba's concern for a child has unforeseen consequences, while 'Packman's Pool,' with its message that *'death as well as life is the gift of God,'* shows Crockett at his uncompromising best. 'The Herd of the Merrick,' sees an old man recounting his tales of young love. It is both funny and poignant.

How people treat each other in a community setting is a familiar theme in Crockett's work and his view of the world is not uncritical be it urban or rural focussed. This is clearly illustrated in his stories about community. In 'Out of Season' Crockett takes an ironic and critical view of an expat community, their pettinesses and small minded concerns. This is mirrored to some extent by 'Peter Peatrack' (one of several stories of ministers) – this minister, of a place called 'Biteangry' is a man far too concerned with the nitty gritty of doctrine and far too little concerned with the important issue of love.

In 'Beyond the Clarion' we see how a young man sacrifices his career for love – set against the all too real background of the shady world of local politics

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

and journalism. Journalism comes in for an amount of criticism in several of Crockett's works – most notably the short story 'The Heather Lintie' in *The Stickit Minister*. He revisited it again in *Sandy's Love* which was published in 1913 and offers, late in his career, some very interesting thoughts on the world of publishing.

Those who dismiss Crockett as merely a writer of 'kailyard' or rural romance should read 'Barracloughs.' It is an uncompromising picture of domestic violence, drudgery and small town urban poverty. With references to the 19th century Cuban Revolutionaries it shows Crockett is appraised of contemporary issues and its stark picture of the reaction of Anne Barraclough to the charge of murder stretches way beyond melodrama right into the underbelly of realism. It also shows (as much of Crockett's work does) how people are connected in ways they cannot imagine, and how great an influence people can have on each other, even unknown.

The railways feature in a number of stories. In 'The Junction Gang' we see a connection drawn between poaching and plain stealing as the Cubbison brothers are set against each other by other workers with few scruples. In 'Lost, Stolen or Strayed,' Rob Itherward comes from rural Galloway to work in Edinburgh and while this is ostensibly a love story, there is much more of interest to it – vignettes of Edinburgh working class life not the least of them. Crockett also highlights the different attitudes and manners of urban and rural life.

In 'Last of the Smugglers' the lack of 'left luggage' facilities offers a clear contrast with that of the Edinburgh life experienced by Rob Itherwood. For

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Hal Grierson, the journey from London to Curlywee is more than a journey of miles.

'Last of the Smugglers' and 'Mr Supervisor's First Bribe' (as well as 'The Junction Gang' to a lesser extent) deal with issues of 'smuggling' in more prosaic forms than those dealt with in Crockett's Hanoverian novels. The refusal of the Cameronian to pay his taxes on religious grounds is both ironic and interesting. Crockett delves into the reasons why smuggling was so endemic in Gallovidian culture. But he does it all through creating compelling characters and placing them in situations that are real enough for a reader to enjoy. He generally challenges through humour, even though there is all too often a darker reality underneath the subject matter. He is, however, always accessible to the popular reader of his day.

Several of the stories are set around the Christmas period and they are not all happy stories. While 'Peter Peatrack' may find the redemptive power of love at Christmas, for the 'Barracloughs,' and for Gray Steil in 'Packman's Pool' it is a much less pleasant time. The Cameronian fundamentalists had little time for Christmas as Hal Grierson discovers in 'Last of the Smugglers' when he strikes out for Curlywee on Christmas Eve.

Ministers and religion feature in a number of the stories. None other than William Robertson Nicoll helped him establish his career, and he wrote regularly for the 'religious' magazines. But throughout his career Crockett wrote extensively for a range of publishing houses. We should remember that religion was a huge part of contemporary life and mass market publishing was part of the 'battle ground' for hearts and minds. Hodder & Stoughton

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

(for whom Crockett wrote many novels) were founded as a religious publishing house. Religious publishing gave Crockett his break into the business but this is not to say it constrained him.

Readers familiar with S.R.Crockett will know that his fiction was not overtly moralistic, and certainly didn't preach an established party line, but he was a servant to publishing masters and he worked within the framework allotted. In 'Big Sister' we see a classic example of how religion is in the background of the story. Gregory, a minister's daughter feels she has to sacrifice her life for her family but then love comes knocking at the door. Peter Peatrack's daughters are 'disrailed' from his version of religion by a more powerful religion – true love- and this is a familiar story in Crockett's writing. Yes people make sacrifices for each other and most importantly for love. But the bonds of family loyalty tend to be represented as a sense of community which is over and above any strict religious doctrine. In this way Crockett worked from within the religious framework he found himself in, but without compromise to his own beliefs and principles. And all of it wrapped up in good storytelling.

Boy and girl are central to his stories. In 'Bloom o' the Heather' we have 'Nuria' which is exotically set in revolutionary Spain where a young peasant boy struggles to protect a rich girl. The story is told again in a more Gallovidian style in 'Pest of the Village.' Both stories feature war and it is interesting to note how significant war in Europe was in Crockett's writing – and therefore in his contemporary society, in the years before 'The Great War.' Crockett died before the First World War began but reading his fiction (especially if you read

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

beyond the Galloway Collection) offers an insight into a Europe we are perhaps unfamiliar with. He was well travelled and wrote fiction which reflected his observations both historical and contemporary on pre First World War European life.

One of the things I like most about Crockett is that you read him for the stories and yet you find yourself immersed in all sorts of layers you never imagined were there. They show you a world which is gone but which he realistically and honestly recorded during his life – though he serves it up in the form of romance and adventure. For me, Crockett writes social history as fiction and that is what I like. Yes, it's one man's opinion but it's an honestly drawn picture of the world and I enjoy making a connection with the words and thoughts of a writer from over a century ago.

The collection ends with two poems. Crockett had started off his career with the dream of being a poet. He published a volume of poetry under the pseudonym Ford Bereton. He sent his poetry to R.L.Stevenson who recommended he give up poetry in favour of prose and so he did. But in his collections, wherever he could, he included poetry (most notably in *Bog Myrtle*). I am not fit to judge the quality of the poetry, but I'm glad he was able to publish in this form too because poetry is really work of the heart and I believe S.R.Crockett was a writer who wrote everything from his heart even while he was keeping up a frenetic pace to keep the publishers happy.

Cally Phillips

January 2022

1. EVIL MERODACH AND HIS CURE OF SOULS

(From the Notebook of Alexander M'Quhirr M.D.,
of Cairn Edward, Galloway)

CHAPTER ONE NINIAN'S THORN IN THE FLESH

Ninian could only have lived in Scotland, and even there he is a rare bird, which is why I tell about him. Yet to this day he keeps his place among his fellows, remarked only for the many virtues of his nature, the sincere good counsel of his sermons, and the atmosphere of transparent and outspoken honesty which clothes him as with a garment.

I am aware that I have seldom made greater claims on the credulity of my readers than in this chronicle of how a coal-carter of Dundee became a minister of the Kirk, but my experience as a medical man of twenty-five years' standing teaches me that there is no obstacle which a determined Scots lad will not overcome on the way to the 'Ministry of the Word.'

In a Presbytery near me, and within the bounds of my district, there is one minister who began life as a veterinary surgeon, yet another who was a joiner for ten years, while a learned and popular Doctor of Divinity still holds his pen with the stiff and stubby fingers of the stone-mason's apprentice.

Furthermore, there is Ninian.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Ninian Murdoch, of all men I have ever met, had the greatest immediate personal charm—that is, as we say in medicine, it operated the most quickly.

Far from handsome according to any set standard, there was yet something so taking and kindly in Ninian Murdoch, something so breezy and open in his manner, such an irresistible infection in his laugh, that if any could resist him long, I never yet set eyes on that man or woman. Men grew to like Ninian's society more than that of their married wives. They took to Ninian as if they had been dram-drinking. And as for women—but stay. As to them, Ninian's salvation was that he preferred them well over forty and wedded to somebody else—except, that is, in the one instance which proves the rule.

His youth had been rough. The Sturm und Drang with which he drave through the coal-yards and alley gutter of a great town had left its mark upon him. The furrows were well marked on his face at twenty. But they were just deep enough for his own sweet humour to lurk in.

Nevertheless, he had a thorn in the flesh which buffeted him sore—even as he had buffeted many another as he fought his way upwards to be the boss of his gang. 'There's money in that boy,' a professional had said as he stood on the side-walk unremarked and watched Ninian polish off an antagonist three stones heavier and six inches taller than, himself.

Whereupon, with the shrewd canniness of the true Fifer, he combined business with pleasure, and, after training Ninian in infinite grief and tribulation of body, he took him round all the coal-pits in the country, and pitted his 'whelp' against all comers for stakes which ran from one pound to five, according

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

to the state of the local sporting pocket. Ninian's master would lay any money upon him and steal a watch to do it with.

In the daytime Ninian, whose thirst for knowledge of all sorts was quite insatiable, attended the day-school, where he studied Grey's Arithmetic, Clyde's Geography, and M'Culloch's Course with Dominie M'Whan, submitting to multitudinous 'palmies' with the same smiling grace with which he took in the evening 'mill' the knuckles of Tim Torry or Jock M'Taggart upon his frontal bones.

But of this period of Ninian's life I have no personal knowledge, and I have derived such information as I possess from Ninian himself and his friend Mr. Cleg Kelly, whose career has done so much credit to the neighbouring metropolitan city of Edinburgh.

It was in my last year at college when I first saw Ninian. It was, I remember, in College Street on the Saturday of the Rectorial election. That introduction opened up to me a new world. Such a mixture of engaging simplicity and shrewdness as Ninian turned out to be made a dull session pass almost too quickly away.

And when some time after Ninian came down to our part of the country as helper to the parish minister, my father, Saunders M'Quhirr, of Drumwhat, Cameronian elder as he was, grew fairly infatuated with him.

But first I must tell of the Rectorial. Be it known, then, to the Uninitiate that once in three years the students of the Scottish universities elect their Lord Rector. He is the statutory head of their particular seat of learning, and when the undergraduates get him elected, he is supposed in some mysterious way

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

to look after their interests. He also offers a ten-pound prize for the best of certain essays, which he would not read for a thousand pounds in gold cash. (They are generally 'On the causes which predisposed to the downfall of the Feudal System,' and of a solemnity warranted to make a cow laugh.) The ordinary Lord Rector is the original King Log. There once was a Lord Rector at another university who turned out a King Stork. The authorities had to promise him a statue in the college quadrangle before they could induce him to quit. But I must not enter into his case now, or I shall never get to Ninian Murdoch at all.

Well, at any rate, this particular Rectorial election was between two politicians of even less than the usual claims to distinction, and the University went wild over their merits and demerits. No work was done till election Saturday was well over. The chief feature was considered to be the great fight about the Brewster statue. This striking work of art was boxed up for the occasion. Tory blue and Radical red must deck the scientist in his complaining box of white pine. Every one came in his oldest coat and hardest hat. Sticks were freely used—also (in my time) eggs, yellow ochre, exceedingly gamy vegetables, and other things which had best be left in their native obscurity.

All this is supposed to introduce the students to the great game of politics. They used to do the same thing in Australia among the blacks of Queensland upon state occasions. Waddies were used instead of sticks—missiles, paint, and shouting as before. The only difference was that, politics being a trifle more aboriginal in Australia, the losers were always promptly eaten.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

But of all this Ninian, when I met him, knew nothing.

He was seated on the parapet of a new museum which they were just beginning to build— a smallish, able-bodied man, older than most of the students by ten or a dozen years. He had reddish hair, a stout birse of beard about his mouth and chin (this he shaved afterwards), the neck of a bull, shoulders broad in proportion to his size, and very sunny blue eyes, in whose depths flickered for ever Ninian's sweet, reluctant, appealing smile.

Evil Merodach we called him, because he looked innocent as a cherub new lighted down from the gate of paradise.

'Hello, you have been in the wars,' I said, clapping him on the shoulder. 'Hurt your head? How did it happen? Let me look at it!'

'Is a' the folk daft in this toon?' said the cherub letting the light of his eyes fall on me, and binding me for ever in his spell. 'Man, I hae leaved an awesome life— in Clesca an' Aiberdeen. Ay, and even in Dundee. I have been called a brand scarce plucked frae the burnin'! But I never saw ony-thing like this! An' oh, man, I am sore beset. My thorn in the flesh— ohanee, my thorn in the flesh that doth buffet me!'

He shook his head and sighed.

'Come away up to my rooms,' I said. 'They are just at the street head. I'll look at your bruise, and you can tell me all about it. I've been here four years, and am a medical. Perhaps things are not so bad as they look.'

'Oh,' he said, obediently following me, 'it's no' the bit crack on the croon that I care about. That's neither here nor there— no' to a man that has

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

leaved, like me, in Clesca, Aiberdeen— and Dundee.'

'Were you a student in Dundee?' I asked him, as we went clattering up the long cold stairs.

'Praise the Lord, no!' he exclaimed, with sudden fervour. 'I wass a cairter!'

Then when I had fixed a piece of sticking-plaster on his head, he sat down in my only arm-chair and watched me put on the kettle to make ready for tea. There was a picture in a carved frame on the mantelpiece.

'That's an unco bonny lass!' he said, looking approvingly at it. 'Your sister, maybe?'

I said, 'No— not my sister.'

It was, in fact, a picture of Nance Chrystie with her head turned a little over her shoulder. I liked the man better for his good taste—for he looked at it long.

'I'm thinkin' that if the like o' this is your fancy, ye'll no' want for a thorn in the flesh ony mair than me!'

Then I did not like him so well, but commanded myself sufficiently to ask him why he thought that.

'Me think?' he said. 'I dinna think, neither do I ken. I am only guessin'. But my faither's stepmither was a Heelantman that had the second-sicht.'

'Then you are a Highlandman too?' I said, willing to pass over his offence with regard to Nance.

'Ow ay,' he admitted, 'but lang, lang cast away frae grace. I'm tellin' ye I hae leaved an awesome life—before I was convertit, that is—in Clesca and Aiberdeen— and Dundee.'

'So you are going to be a minister now?' I said, to lead him on, for I could see he wanted to talk.

'Ay, ay— if it's the Lord's wull, and the loons that I fear I hae lamed and spared. Mirover, if I can win

through the examinations, I wad like to gie mysel' to the ministry o' the gospel!'

His extraordinary combination of accents interested me. It is of course quite impossible to render anything like the effect phonetically. The base was undoubtedly Highland; yet he would say 'doon-th'-watter' and 'Sekkerday' with the purest-tongued inhabitant of the Gorbals. And once (but only once) when he forgot himself, I heard the 'Dundee Irish' come out strong. But that was not intended for publication. He blamed it on the steepness of the hills there, and the need of being able to exhort his horses upon occasion.

'They aye said at the dock gates that I had a fine delivery,' he owned, 'and I'm hopin' that through grace the faculty may be o' some use to me in the pulpit.'

'But what brought you to Edinburgh College?' I asked. 'There are universities in these other places. Was it for the better learning?'

For I was jealous in the matter of my Alma Mater.

'Na, man, it wasna a' thegither the learnin',' said Ninian; 'pairtly it was because o' Professor Muckleriggs—but, to tell the Guid's truth, maistly it was my thorn in the flesh.'

'Professor Muckleriggs!' I cried in astonishment. 'He is not thought specially good. Why did you come to Edinburgh for Professor Muckleriggs?'

'Oh,' said Ninian, 'it wasna to sit under him for the scholarship's sake. It's because he is my mither's cousin twice removed, and they say that he has a great deal to do wi' the examinations.'

'Oh,' I said, smiling, 'then you think that he might be inclined to let a kinsman through easier?'

'Of coorse,' said Ninian, 'of coorse he wad. Bluid's

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

surely thicker than water—at least amang folk that hae the Gallic!

I gathered that he had already called upon his distinguished relative, and had been well received. He had not yet mentioned the subject of the examinations to Professor Muckleriggs (who was Dean of Faculty), but I understood that Ninian put his trust in being able to get from him 'a bit gliff o' the papers the fiicht afore!'

It was a wish I had heard many express at certain seasons, but none had ever gone so thoroughly to the root of the matter as Ninian.

'And what for no?'

 he would say when remonstrated with. 'It wad do him no hairm, and be doin' a guid turn to a near kinsman.'

Being satisfied on this point, I asked Ninian as to the 'thorn in the flesh' that had brought him to the hill-set City of the East Wind.

He looked long and steadily at me—the look of his grandmother who had the second-sight very plain in his eyes of sunny blue.

'I can see your thorn in the flesh verra plainly,' he said; 'it's juist the lasses!'

Here he sighed.

'Maistly that thorn sends a man intil the airmy,' he said. 'Ye are to be a doctor. Weel, ye'll hae ta tak' tent, my man. I mind a doctor yince in Dundee.'

But once more, I must not be led aside by Ninian's reminiscences of the faculty in Dundee, entrancing as they were. I brought him back finally to his own thorn in the flesh, when he had quite done with the one which (without the slightest warrant) he attributed to me.

'Mine?' he said, answering my question with a weary sigh, and lifting his hand to his plastered

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

head. 'It's juist this— yin.'

I looked at him in surprise.

'If that be so,' said I, 'surely the ministry is a curious choice of a profession.'

He looked over at me pityingly.

'Man,' he said, shaking his head, 'it's easy seen that ye hae read your Bible to but little purpose no' to ken that mair nor half o't is aboot nocht but fechtin'. Paul juist canna let it alane for a single chapter. And thae Children o' Israel, the craiteurs, they could never get their fill o't. Yon Jonathan was a daisy— man, I tell ye he was a fair daisy. Him and his armour-bearer to gang clamberin' up a rock-face as high as Edinbra Castle. And Dawvid wasna that bad, though maybes he was mair tarred wi' your brush!'

But as I considered that we had already had more than enough of my supposed 'thorn in the flesh,' I kept Ninian to the point by saying that the state of things which obtained in these times had altogether passed away.

He looked doubtful a moment, but immediately his face cleared up.

'I canna think sae,' he said. 'If He was sae fond o' fechtin' fowk to do His wark lang syne, there will surely be a corner for puir, hell-deservin' Ninian somewhere in the vineyard—that is, gin they dinna hang him for this day's wark.'

I asked him to tell me what had happened, and he began—

'I had seen my brither off by the train back to Clesca, and I thocht to mysel' that I wad gang up to the college an' tak' oot my ticket. I had the siller for my fees in my pooch. So I was gangin' quaitely up the steps o' the college. There was a feck o' laddies

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

there, some wi' papers and pencils and some rinnin' this way and some that. I thocht they were busy at their learnin', and took shame to mysel' to be sae idle!

'Then up there comes a loonie, lang and sma', wabblin' on his hips, like a fathom o' pump-water set on end, and says he to me, 'Wha's side are ye on?' So I says to him, says I, 'I am on the Lord's side!' For I am a convertit man, though ye wadna think it—me that has been a cairter, and leaved lang in Dundee.'

I signified that I did not doubt it for a moment, and Ninian went on—

'Then the dish-clout-lookin' laddie gied a great hooch — like that, man. And he cries oot, 'Here's a Tory, fellows! Dowse the Tory!' And wi' that a hale clanjamphry o' deils cam' rinnin' at me, and the first yin o' them gied me a dicht on the side o' my heid wi' his stick, and awa' flew my Glengairy bonnet. And the next covers me frae head to foot wi' yellow pease-meal, and the third gied me a rotten egg on the jaw. Then when I was wonderin' if this was a kind o' ordeal that had been ordered by the Senatus, up comes a score or twa mair, a' cryin', 'Doon wi' the Tory! Hit him! Hit him!'

'So I says to them—

'Ye had better leave me alane, for though I'm a convertit man, I am sair bothered wi' a thorn in my flesh, and I nicht hurt some o' ye!'

'But they never sae muckle as listened to a word that I said, but juist knevelled me wi' their nieves, and battered me wi' their bits o' sticks—no' that they did ony great hairm, the peetifu' craiturs. But after a while it got kind o' annoyin', an' a kennin' anger-somelike a flee rubbin' its hind legs on the brig o'

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

your nose in the kirk. So I askit for grace no' to hurt the laddies. I began to be feared aboot them. For I could discern that my corruption was risin' within me.

'So says I to mysel', 'Ninian, ye are a convertit man; tak' your time, Ninian lad! What wad Paul hae dune had he been here? Wad he hae let evil thochts arise in his mind? Think on a text, Ninian. For shame, Ninian Murdoch; think on a text!'

'But, wull ye believe me, faint a text could I think on except 'Fight the good fight o' faith,' and ithers like that, that was juist nae help ava'.

Then up comes the first limber laddie, him that speered at me wha's side I was on. He had on a muckle waterproof, like a drover's coat, to keep the eggs and peas aff him. And he gied me anither daud on the side o' the head wi' a blether fu' o' porridge. And faith, the thing burstit, and for a minute or twa I couldna see a yaird afore me.

'But in that time the deil put a thocht intil my heart. He taunted me aboot Paul fechtin' wi' the wild beasts at Ephesus, and says he, 'If Paul did the like that was an apostle, what hairm is there in you, that is no' even a probationer, let alane a minister, puttin' to your hand?'

'So afore I got the porridge richt oot o' my een, I caught hand o' the buttermilk-and-soda-scones loonie. I poo'd his white coat ower his head, and grippit him aneath the oxters by strength o' airm. And when I cam' to mysel', there was I, a shame to be seen, layin' aboot me wi' the loonie's legs, as it were, and garrin' his boot-heels play crack against the side o' some o' their heads. Oh, the shame, the shame o't, Ninian Murdoch! You that is a convertit man, an' delivered oot o' the pit o' iniquity, fechtin'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

like a Dundee coalie at the dock gates! And oh, man, I dinna ken for certain (for I mind naething about it), but I'm feared that I let oot some expressions that were no' juist.'

'You mean that you swore? I can't blame you much! It was abominable.'

'I dinna ken that ye wad ca' it sweerin', but I'm feered that I had some expressions that didna juist savour o' grace seasoned wi' salt!'

'And what happened after that?' I asked.

'Man,' said Ninian, slapping his knee, 'that's the funniest thing o' the hale lot. I had juist cleared a ring about me wi' the sparrables in the loonie's boot-soles, and gotten my back to the wa', comfortable like, when wi' a tearin' yell twa or three score o' ither laddies comes tumblin' doon the steps, an' I was juist thinkin', 'Can I manage a' thae?' when they a' cried oot, 'Rescue, rescue, rescue! Weel dune, Heelantman! Tories to the rescue!'

'And wi' that they lifts me up on their shooters and sticks a bonnet on my heid wi' a blue rosette cockin' on the side o' it. Then they carries me wi' great wavin' o' sticks to the ither end o' the square and sets me on a muckle white boxie. Then they cries again, 'Speech! Speech! Three cheers for the Heelantman! Speech!'

'Hoo the mischief they kenned I was a Heelantman by birth I dinna ken. I am sure it doesna show on me—after being sae lang in the gall o' bitterness, as it were—no' to speak o' haein' been a cairter in Dundee!

'But at ony rate ken they did.

'So aye the louder they cried, 'Speech! Speech!' and wadna be said nay to.

'Sae I telled them that I was nae speaker, but that

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

if ony o' them had a Bible, I thocht I could manage to make a few remarks upon the twenty-sixth chapter o' Leveeticus and the twenty-second verse: 'And I will send wild beasts among you.' For I minded the heads and particulars o' guid Maister M'Wheeble's discourse on Sabbath last in the Tron Kirk, and haein', as it were, gane sae far astray, I thocht I wad pass them aff as my ain.

'But wad ye believe it, no' yin o' them had sic a thing as a Bible aboot them, though their pouches were fair stickin' oot wi' carrots an' turmuts, and siclike carnal vainities. In fact, they didna want ony word o' truth ava'—I could see that clearly eneuch.

'So I askit them to fetch me my Glengairy bonnet. And they brocht it. But oh! it's a blessed thing my mither canna see it this nicht. It has lost its strings, and the state o' the him'— peety me!

'Aweel, at ony rate, I gat my bonnet— what was left o't. And I thankit the laddies verra ceevilly, and bade them gang hame to their lodgin's and tak' a lesson to themsels oot o' the Word. So they said they wad, and carried me shoother high to the muckle yett o' the college, and gied three cheers, and said I was the best fechter that had ever been within the college doors.

'But oh, I wad gie a' the vainglory o't to ken hoo that puir laddie is that I used as a flail in my anger and corruption, and if baith his legs are broken, or only yin. I think I will step roond to the Infirmary and find out!'

Now this is the story Ninian Murdoch, whom afterwards we called Evil Merodach, told me in my rooms over the corner shop in Bristo Port on the day of the election of my Lord Drowsington as Lord Rector of the University of Edinburgh.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

CHAPTER TWO THE 'SUCKING PARSON'

All through that last winter session of mine at Edinburgh I saw Ninian at least once or twice a week, and grew more and more in love with the singular mixture he presented of militant spirituality and the most engaging worldliness.

He would look in upon me as I sat under the mellow rays of my reading-lamp—the kind with the deep green shade, and oil that gurgles interiorly every six minutes and a half or so.

'Dinna let me disturb ye, Alec,' he would say, thrusting his mildly cherubic face round the edge of the door; 'but I'm nearly drove oot o' my wits wi' this weary Latin. It's Tacitus, man, and the Godforsaken brute leaves oot half the verbs. But I've wrestled in prayer for the Lord to vouchsafe me the victory. Ye havena sic a thing as a Kelly's key aboot ye, hae ye?'

Now the landlady had been strictly enjoined not to allow any one to pass the portal, but, like the rest of us she never could resist Ninian. Indeed, I could tell when he was coming up by the unwonted cordiality in the voice of my Cerberus, as well as by the bursts of laughter which came from Christina, my landlady's pretty daughter, as soon as ever she opened the door.

Sometimes, if I happened to be particularly busy, I would tell Ninian to go away, which he would do without a murmur; but from the ringing mirth which continued to make itself heard through the wall of the tall, ill-built tenement house, I was able to discover that his cheerful wit was still, as it were,

being consumed upon the premises.

But if, on the contrary, I felt death-weary of my book and coloured plates of dissections, I would welcome the eclectic Highlandman with enthusiasm, throwing Hickman upon Headaches and Parley's Poisons to the moths and the bats—or at least into the most unswept corner of the room.

We were all more or less necessarily sparing in those days, and knew how to make a red herring go as far as any man—especially when we needed to buy a new class book, when we did without a dinner for a fortnight—or three weeks, as the case might be. It was about this time that Ninian found out when my mother was in the habit of sending me her monthly package, and after that he always called round to the carriers' quarters for it. This he did entirely on his own account. Then he would carry it all the way home from the Grassmarket under his arm or mounted on his shoulder, even though it contained a Stilton cheese, three or four pounds of butter, besides a liberal consignment of oatcake and soda-scones. He would come marching in with self-consciously important tread, the landlady following with a broad grin on her face.

'There,' he would say, laying the box reverently on the table, 'I was juist passin' the Three Post-boxes, where the country cairriers maistly pit up (and a decent hoose it is), when it cam' to me to speer gin there was ocht for you. Alec. So I e'en brocht the bit boxie aneath my airm. Ye ken I was yince a cairter mysel'. And though that's no' the same thing as bein' a lawfu' and 'sponsible cairrier, yet it has a smell o't. And to hae been a cairter in Dundee gies ye a kind o' poseetion. Ay, it does that. A man that has the Gaalic— weel, he's respeckit! That's what he

is! He's respeckit!'

But it was not till the close of the session and in the very heart of the fine weather, about the time of the 'capping,' that I really had an opportunity of finding out the true flavour of Ninian's quality.

Nance Chrystie, of whom at this present I need not say more (having in another place said so much), had pestered and persuaded her father that nothing would do but that she and her sister Grace must come up to Edinburgh to 'do their shopping' — and that he would be the better of going as far as Falkirk Tryst in the interests of business. So that it was as well that I had done with my studies for the time being, because these days of early summer were filled very full with something better than notebooks and lectures and spiders' webs spun upon blackboards.

By the especial kindness of Providence (I am learning Ninian's phrases), Grace, whom I had never much liked, was prevented from coming by a kind of income in her knee, and my own dear Hempie arrived in her place. Of her it is sufficient to say that she was Nance's youngest sister, and a determined contemner of love.

Of course I took the girls about a good deal to see the sights, paying special attention to Arthur Seat and the famous loch of Duddingston. At the latter place the Hempie threw stones in the water till she tired of the amusement, and completely broke up the harmony of the meeting by exclaiming, 'Hae done there—I'm gaun to turn roond in half a meenute!'

So after this we generally went several of us in a band, the Hempie refusing any further trios.

On one happy occasion, and a most glorious day

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

it was, we crossed to Aberdour, having chartered a boat of our own at the pier of Leith. It was before the era of monster excursions, galvanised iron refreshment rooms, and Sunday sailings; but still the place, being as it were so near a great city, could not escape an occasional irrigation of the flood-tide which has more recently submerged it.

Aberdour was then small, clean, white-washed, green-gardened, tree-embosomed. A kind of caller and crystalline stillness was perennial about it, as I remember the place. The waves broke softly on a sweep of untrodden sand, and a pair of lovers whispering together in a sheltered nook, or the wheeling sea-birds out in the bay, seemed altogether in harmony with this dream-like stillness.

At any rate, it was like fairyland to be there that day. But then, so it would to have been anywhere with Nance Chrystie. There were half a dozen of us all told, students every one, and as some of the 'men' had brought their sisters (in order to make things more interesting by chop, swop, barter, or exchange), we made up a fairly large company.

But there was room for all in the green shades of Donnybristle; and up by the old dovecote tower, in its sunshiny croft, a wood pigeon was cooroing. This last brought to mind the old definition of a Fife laird—

'A wee puckle land, A big puckle debt, And a doocot.'

It was, however, all too soon mid-afternoon, and time to be gathering for the home-going. We met by appointment on the bright forth-looking crag that fronts the distant metropolis. It is even now one of the most beautiful views in the world. The 'City set on an hill' rises blue and purple across the flashing

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

waters of the Firth. The smoke of ten thousand peaceful fires blows westward over the land, while above all the Castle towers—with Arthur Seat and the Calton flanking it on either side. One may go very far and never see the like.

Nance fairly gasped with delight, and clutched my arm pleasantly. Even the Hempie was sober and thoughtful for at least the space of a minute.

But we had all grown hungry, and the lunch (or, as it was then called, 'nuncheon') which we had brought had long passed away. It was arranged that several of us who had been there before and knew the waters of the place should go on ahead and order tea, leaving the rest to follow more slowly in what order they liked.

So amongst others, Evil Merodach (as we then called Ninian Murdoch), John M'Donald, and I hurried on towards the village. As we went we heard loud voices profaning the silences. They were shouting like men in liquor, and laughing as only city bean-feasteis do when they 'are out for the day,' and have taken their cargo on board.

But we only shrugged our shoulders and said, 'A good thing they did not arrive earlier,' and went on our way, thinking no more of the matter.

When, however, we stood on the final crest under those great beeches, which apparently endure for all time, I heard the voice I knew best in all the world, better even than my mother's, calling me.

'Alec! Alec! Alec!'

There was pain and terror in the sound, and without waiting for more I took to my heels and ran as nearly as I could determine in the direction of the cry. With scarce less alacrity the others followed. As I came over the brae I saw Nance and the Hempie

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

with perhaps half a dozen men about them. One of these appeared to have his arm about Nance's waist, and the Hempie was standing at bay with an open penknife in her hand.

It may well be understood that at the sight I flew.

Seeing us coming the men opened out, and Nance ran towards me with a glad cry. Only the Hempie stood her ground, her little knife in her hand and her white teeth showing wickedly over her underlip.

I saw at a glance the sort of men we had to deal with. It was the time of the Musselburgh Races, and these were evidently stated frequenters of the track, betting men and miscellaneous hangers getting rid of an off day. There were also women with them of their own kidney. We could hear their voices down by the shore.

'And now, sirs, what is the meaning of this?' I cried, all tingling with anger — a sort of calm trembling, which is the way that anger always takes me.

The men were mostly of the white, drawn-faced spare-limbed type, hollow-eyed and haggard, that one sees most commonly among bookmakers at a big race meeting. But the man that had had his arm about Nance's waist was clearly of another sort. He was a big man, taller than I, almost as tall, indeed, as John M'Donald himself, and towering above Ninian, who had just come up, and now stood close beside me all unbreathed.

'And what is that to you?' thundered this man with a fierce, bullying accent. His manner of speech showed his temper, and explained the ascendancy which he evidently possessed over his companions.

'I will show you in a moment what it is to me,' I answered as fiercely. 'This young lady is under my

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

protection.'

'Protection!' he said, sneering. 'And mine!' said Ninian. 'And mine!' said John M'Donald, who by this time stood beside the Hempie.

The pugilistic-looking individual laughed a loud, coughing, wild-beast sort of laugh, in which all his company joined, like the true sycophants they were. 'Ha,' he cried, 'three noble champions! Perhaps, if that be so, one of you would be willing to do a little more than defend the lady with his mouth, which is all any of you have done so far!'

'Certainly,' I retorted promptly. 'You can have the pick of us!'

He did not seem quite prepared for this rapid acceptance of his challenge, and looked us over with a new light in his eye. Now there is something in the way a man stands who knows how to use his hands that is never lost upon an expert in the science, especially when he looks with a hostile eye.

John M'Donald was a giant trained fine; I myself was 'buidly' of build, and knotted with twenty years of hard work on a Galloway farm. Besides, I looked dangerous, for in the matter of Nance I was very angry. So his eye passed across us two and fell upon—Evil Merodach. Never had our cherub looked more serenely cherubic.

Ninian had shaved his face since he began stately to attend missions. He also affected black clothes and a style of necktie already more than half clerical. Like David, he was ruddy of cheek, and his long-skirted habit went far to conceal the depth of his chest and the great reach of his arms. The bully seemed satisfied.

'I will take the 'sucking parson!'' he said, with a strong Midland accent.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

And at this, as at an excellent jest, all his followers laughed. I pulled a dog whistle from my pocket and blew it. It had been the signal agreed upon to bring the party together. And presently, from various nooks and glades, the pairs began to straggle up. Seeing us with a number of strangers, they approached slowly. I called to the fellows to go on to the village with the ladies, adding that we had some little business to arrange with these gentlemen.

Of course all the men suspected that there had been some sort of a row, but equally, of course, they said nothing.

But the women, to whom business is a disease which may seize and incapacitate mankind at any moment, went on placably, chatting as they went. I bade Nance go with them, and she went, only adding to her lingering, anxious glance a low-voiced request to 'take care of myself.'

But the Hempie was more reluctant.

'Let me stop and see the fecht, Alec,' she said. 'I'm no' to be ordered hame like— like a lassie!'

But I was firm, and presently, with a decimating glance and a stamp of the foot, she was gone. Then, to make all safe and secure fair play, I called a couple of the men back and bade the other two go on with the girls to the village. I could leave Nance with confidence to make the necessary explanations.

Ninian seemed strangely anxious, and walked by my side as we withdrew to a green glade where the turf was excellent and the privacy complete.

'What will they say at the 'Kan' Mission?' he whispered. 'He may mark me— an' me a convertit man!'

I encouraged him by telling him that if I knew the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

spirit of the 'kan' of any sort or condition, she would think more of him than ever. But he took little comfort from this, urging that it was just a giving way to his thorn in the flesh.

'I never thocht in my wildest days,' he said, 'that it wad come to this— that I should fecht about a woman!'

'Are you feared, Evil Merodach?' I asked, a trifle tauntingly, I regret to say, to spur him on; 'for if so, I will take the job on myself!'

But at this he bridled and said he was none feared.

'But at the Last Day,' he added, a little fiercely, thrusting his clenched fist into my face, 'I shall see to it that you, Alec M'Quhirr and your jo, gets the weight o' this shameful' faa' frae grace, and no' puir Ninian Murdoch.'

I told him I would take the risk, and, to change the subject, asked him what sort of training he was in.

'No' that ill,' he replied. 'I wan the championship at the inter-university sports the week ye were up for your final.'

'Why did you never tell me?'

'Oh, that's nocht,' he said modestly, 'that's no' fechtin' ava'. Man, ye should hae seen me yince in Clesca!'

But before we got to the middle of Ninian's Glasgow reminiscence we had arrived upon the field of honour.

Then the enemy, who obviously worked on old lines, rapidly divested himself of his upper garments, while with more deliberation Ninian took off his 'dicky' and peeled to his striped flannel shirt.

I am not going to describe the fight. There is but

one perfect description of a fight in any language, and a man named Homer wrote that. So I will refrain me. The rest are mostly bones and blood.

But after Ninian found his feet in the first round, the enemy, though at least five inches taller and four stone heavier, was never in it. Nevertheless, I was anxious as I hunkered on the grass with Ninian between my knees, for so far our champion had never stricken one telling blow. He had only retired, measuring his distance, or taken the heavy though somewhat slow blows of his opponent upon his guard arm.

'Dinna fret,' said Ninian. 'I'm juist takkin' the edge aff him. He's a fair boxer wi' the gloves, but nae fechter, man. Man, I mind at Dundee.'

'Time,' said the man with the stop-watch.

The opposing champion was greeted with shouts of 'Well done, Jem! Give it him, Jem! Go in and finish, Jem!'

From that moment I seemed to be gazing at quite another person. I could scarcely recognise our own quiet Ninian. Evil Merodach was at last alive. A sort of cold, wild-beast fury glittered in his eye. The heavy sound of the enemy's blows ceased. Swift and masterful Ninian's came, 'spatting' all over the heavy-weight like the first drops of a thunderstorm. Rush after rush, ugly as sin, was stopped— simply and, as it appeared, inevitably. The enemy could not stand it long. The light of battle grew almost electric in the eyes of Evil Merodach. A dash forward, a duck, a miss, the sound of blows— one, two, three!—and the giant fell like a tower.

'All over!' said Ninian softly, between my knees. 'He's had his dose— mair's the peety!'

The men from the racecourse took away their

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

champion. That they did it quietly was perhaps owing to their suspicion that the rest of us were all so many Evil Merodachs. Then we walked towards the village, joyous and jubilant, singing what but the praises of Ninian.

'We never thought you had it in you. Evil Merodach! Why, you are fit to be middle-weight champion!' one cried, slapping the victor on his back.

'I was in sixty-aught!' said Ninian mournfully.

'You were what?' in various astonished voices.

'Oh, it was at a place called Birmin'am, in the year '68, when I was a laddie. But it was juist nae-thing—nocht but sparrin'. Gloves are but vanity. To ken what fechtin' is, ye maun hae been a cairter i' Dundee. But oh. Alec, I misdoot that my thorn in the flesh is no' dead yet! Man, when I was fechtin' the noo, I—I positeevly enjoyed it!'

I said something here.

'Oh,' he returned, with tears in his eyes, 'it's a weel, an' verra weel for you, that's only a doctor, and no' even a richt yin yet; but what's to become o' me, that's a convertit man, an' actin' Vice-President o' the Corinthian Wynd 'Kan' Mission?'

I searched my memory for Biblical analogies.

'But, Ninian,' I urged, 'you must not take it to heart. Think of what Gideon did—and Joshua—and David—and...'

But Ninian would have none of these, though I charmed never so wisely.

'Na,' he said, shaking his head very sadly, 'ye needna tell me. Thae folk were a' under the auld dispensation. They hadna my advantages. They werena nane o' them answerable to the 'Kan' Mission, as it were.'

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

A sudden thought came into my head. Ninian's scriptural exegesis was not equal to his enthusiasm. I would try it.

'Well,' I said, 'ye think a deal o' yoursel', Ninian, but surely you don't think yourself better than the Apostle Paul?'

'Ye needna tell me about the fechtin' wi' the wild beasts at Ephesus,' he cried; 'the cases are no' parallel ava'. He couldna help it; and as for me, as I tell ye, I positeevly enjoyed it.'

'But what do you make of his fightin' the Apostle Peter?'

'Eh, man, did he? I never heard o' that.'

'That shows that ye dinna read your Bible, Ninian. Do ye no' mind where he says that he withstood Peter to the face because he was to be blamed?'

Ninian thought it over.

'Ye are sure that means fechtin' wi' the bare nieves?'

'Certain!' said I.

(Oh, if my father could have heard me!)

Ninian drew a long breath.

'Weel,' he said slowly, as if weighing the matter, 'it is no' sae verra unlikely. I aye thocht that man Paul had it in him. He was a by-ordinar' birsy body. And him an' me are no' that unlike him wi' his thorn in the flesh, an' his takkin' up wi' Gamayliel and sich-like fowk, an' bein' a persecutor. Oh, he kenned what like it was—even though' (here Ninian sighed) 'he had never been a cairter in Dundee!'

Our dear Evil Merodach brightened up somewhat, however, as we came near the village. He even laughed a little.

'What are you laughing at, Ninian?' I asked him.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Oh, I was thinkin' if Peter did stand up to Paul, what a maist almichty drubbin' he got! I'm kind o' gled o't, too. I never richt likit that Peter. He was aye a forritsome craitur, an' it kind o' rins in my head that he turned Papish at the hinder end. It's a kind o' comfort to ken, on the authority o' the oreginal, that a man like Paul took him in hand!'

He laughed again, softly and meditatively.

'I wonder what it was that Peter caa'ed him to rouse his corruption like that. Maist like something about his no' bein' a richt apostle! Yon billy wi' the ticht breeks caa'ed me 'the sookin' parson!'

He chewed the cud of sweet recollection awhile. 'I dootna,' he continued, 'but what there were times when Paul fand his thorn in the flesh a kind o' satisfaction to him. 'I'll learn you,' says he to Peter, 'to caa' me 'sookin' apostle!' An' wi' that he turns and learns him!'

CHAPTER THREE A BRAND IN THE PLUCKING

After that first winter in Edinburgh I naturally saw little of Ninian Murdoch for several years. For one thing, I was working hard at my profession, and dreaming of the home Nance and I were to have together by and by. What with long wet drives, the bitter blackness of the night in one's face, along snow-covered roads, where one had to get out every half-mile and lead the horse down some ice-covered brae, with only an occasional blessed ten minutes with Nance in the Nether Neuk loaning to hearten a man up— it is small wonder that I had little time for

correspondence for several years.

Still, after the April and May exodus I generally made a point of seeing some of the men who were yet at college, and hearing the latest news from the classes and examination halls. Every one of these had something to tell of Ninian. His simple-hearted earnestness and singular air of innocence had endeared him to all. His very professors were to his faults considerably more than a little blind. In these later days of high standards and entrance examinations Ninian could never have succeeded in passing, and so the Kirk of Scotland would have lost a very faithful servant. Men know more when they go into college nowadays, but I am by no means sure that they know more when they come out.

Now, Ninian had the vast respect for those who were successful in examinations which pertains to the man who has never found his name higher in the list than the last-but-one. Every night it was his custom to turn up at this man's 'digs' and that other corporate educational barracks, half monastery, half beargarden, where a dozen sometimes chummed together. And the busiest men would stop their work like brothers to coach him. They collaborated upon his proses, made a patchwork wild and weird and wondrous of his English essays, crammed him with answers to 'certainties' at the seasonal examinations, and laughed at him all the time, both to his face and behind his back.

How John Mac and I rejoiced together in my rooms in Cairn Edward at the relation of Ninian's adventure with the grave and learned Principal, a Jove dimly seen afar to us, yet who had submitted to be buttonholed on the South Bridge by Ninian, and entertained all the way to St. Andrew Square with

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

reminiscences of the 'Brand's' career as a 'cairter in Dundee.'

Each generation of students has its own jests, its own nicknames; and I was not astonished to hear that our ancient sobriquet of 'Evil Merodach' had already given place to another.

'And who are you, sir?' the astonished Principal had said. (So it was reported.)

'Sir, I am a brand plucked from the burning!' Ninian had retorted with pride.

'Birk when it's green is a fire for a king,' the Principal hummed irrelevantly.

So the 'Brand' Ninian became, and indeed, to many, has thus far remained.

Next there came to me, filtering down through various channels, more or less inaccurate, the tale of Ninian and the Presbytery. I would tell it at full length but that, being but a layman and inexpert of the mysteries, I should have to invent the detail, which is against my principles.

Be it sufficient to relate that, having had the ill luck to come up before his local Presbytery when that distinguished spiritual court was in its most fretful and porcupinish mood (which, I am given to understand, is saying a good deal), Ninian suffered accordingly. Peerie of Drose tackled him on Greek, asking questions not in the chapters prescribed; which thing Ninian considered scoundrelly, and not nominated in the bond.

Hackshaw of Spindleston drilled him on the Kings of Israel and Judah, when the Brand had been carefully primed on the Judges. Even his blue eyes and engaging ways aided him not at the Presbytery of Dunderton, for the clerk had been snubbed on a point of procedure, and had to take it out of

somebody. Then, in the fulness of time, Ninian burst forth. To do him justice, it was not till Ballister of Lang Barns, a dour, pugilistic-looking man, rose up and threatened the suffering examinee across the table with his clenched fist.

Slowly, like the sun burning his way through mist, the Brand became once more Evil Merodach. Corruption triumphed.

'If it's fechtin' ye mean, my mannie,' quoth Ninian to him of Lang Barns, 'step ootside!'

After this, but for the intervention of the Moderator and the rapturous goodwill of all the elders and more youthful clergy present, Ninian would certainly have been put back a year.

But the summer after Nance and I were married saw a strange thing. We were living in Caim Edward, and, as in duty bound, attended Dr. Osborne at the Cameronian Kirk on the Hill. But Nance, having been born and bred up in the Establishment, had always (as I told her) a warm side to Erastianism. Also we liked Mr. Gilbert, the young parish minister; and though his manse was full two miles away, he used often to drop in upon us in the evenings. I think he liked me, and I know he admired Nance. He told me once that he did not know which helped him most— my advice and conversation, or to watch the shadow of Nance's eyelashes on her cheek as she sat and sewed at her white seam under the lamp. But I knew which— very well. And so did Nance, though the vixen pretended that he came all the time only to see me. But Nance had been born that way; and as for me, I cared not a pin, knowing that I had all her heart. And, indeed, every woman that is worth a pin is made that way. Well, as I was telling, one night in comes Mr. Gilbert, and says he,' I was at the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Presbytery today.'

'And that's a wonder,' quoth Nance, settling herself in her chair. 'I hear they call you the Angel of the Presbytery, because your visits are few and far between.' I never was able to put a curb on the madam's tongue before we were married, still less since. But the minister was not disturbed. Instead, he pulled out his pipe and slowly filled it. Now consider a strange thing. Nance does not allow me to smoke, but she positively encourages Mr. Gilbert. She gives no reasons.

'My going to the Presbytery is like your coming out to my evening preaching,' he said, as if he were meditating the matter deeply; 'so much depends on the weather.' For as there was only one service in the Kirk on the Hill, Nance and I sometimes walked out to the Parish Kirk in the evening when the nights were fine and the season summer. A good many of the young folk of both sexes belonging to the Kirk on the Hill used to do the same, but they for the sake of the dusky woods and the walk home. Indeed, the Session more than once threatened to deal with them.

The minister laughed a little chuckling laugh he had, and thumbed the tobacco well down in the bowl of his pipe. He liked it tight. Nance got him a spill. She actually made them on purpose. He nodded to thank her, and then said, 'We had a curiosity at the Presbytery today—the new helper to your old friend Dr. Stirabout of Whinnyliggate.'

'Dear me,' cried Nance, 'has the auld runt consented to get a helper at last?'

'Oh, this is juist another probationer,' said Mr. Gilbert, between his puffs; 'he will stop—most likely—as short a time—as the others!'

Then Mr. Gilbert went on to tell how the last 'helper,' an amiable youth with modern notions, once in Dr. Stirabout's absence had started a Sabbath school. When his chief came home again, the enthusiast waited in the certainty of receiving praise for his diligence. But the Doctor, appearing in the midst of the exercises, spoke to this effect: 'Here's your siller, and be going up the road— trying to steal the hearts of my people with your new-fangled falderals. And you, bairns, get oot o' this and take your ways home, or I will apply a stick to your backs. So long as I live, there shall be no ranting whigmaleeries in the parish o' Whinnyliggate!'

'And what's queer about the new man?' said Nance, glancing up from her seam and then letting her eyelashes fall slowly and, as it were, shyly. The witch! I never thought to see her at that again, and she a decent married wife and the head of a (as yet somewhat limited) family. But, as the proverb says, 'that which is bred in the bone,' and so forth.

Mr. Gilbert gazed at her a moment before he answered. At first (and till you get used to it), it takes you a little while to collect your thoughts when Nance looks at you like that. It does not disturb me seriously now. Perhaps that is why she tries it on the minister of the parish.

'Well,' he said, 'it is a little difficult to put into words, but the fact is, he talks as if he had just come out of prison, and looks as if he had just left the nursery.'

I began to be interested. I knew somebody answering to that description.

'Did you hear this marvel's name?' I asked him, looking up from my microscope, into which I was fitting a new triple nose-piece.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'I have got it here—the clerk put it on the Agenda paper.' He extracted a crumpled document out of his tail-coat pocket, standing up to do it.

It says, 'The Rev. Ninian Murdoch, Probationer of the Kirk of Scotland, to be received as a licentiate within the bounds of the Presbytery,' he recited in pulpit tones, bending and wrinkling his brows over the paper, for he was shortsighted.

'Evil Merodach, by all that's sacred! Nance, I must call on him tomorrow,' I cried, jumping up from my work.

'You do not know any ill of the lad, I hope?' said Mr. Gilbert, a little anxiously, turning to observe me. 'To tell the truth, I took rather a fancy to the young man.'

'Took a fancy to the young man!' I almost shouted. 'Why, of course you did! Nance there would have had to forbid you the house if you had not!'

'Oh!' said the minister, and sat down.

Then, being carefully let alone, he told us several things—for instance, how upon the king's highway Ninian had accosted the Moderator of the Presbytery, old Dr. Proudfoot of Hardhills, and asked him for a drive, informing that exceedingly desiccated 'Moderate' that he (Ninian) was a brand plucked from the burning, and inquiring tenderly as to the state of his (the Moderator's) soul.

The minister paused a little, in the manner of a practised tale-teller, to let us digest this, and then proceeded.

'And at first the Doctor was like to have thrown him out of the gig, and indeed did stop for the purpose of requesting him forthwith to descend. But your friend suddenly took the reins out of his hands; for it was a spirited beast he was driving, and there

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

was a caravan of tinkers coming up the road. Indeed, if it had not been for the New Helper, the Doctor now says they would undoubtedly have been thrown over the bank into the loch. So, Dr. M'Quhirr, as you are a medical man, and acquainted with the minister of Hardhills and the figure he makes in the flesh, I need not inform you what that would have meant.

The Doctor furthermore declares that it was the most wonderful driving he had ever seen in his life. He gave the Presbytery to understand that the young man (who from 'an insolent dog' had become 'a manifest instrument of Providence, sir, for the preservation of my life!') had guided the furious steed, together with the gig and its occupants, in safety over a stone wall, along the roofs of the gipsy caravans, running all the way on one wheel, and the horse principally on its hind legs.'

'Come, Gilbert,' I interjected, from the microscope, 'is this evidence?'

He smiled a little gravely under his black beard, and waved his briar-root at large.

'I was only trying to convey to you the impression Dr. Proudfoot gave the Presbytery.'

'Well,' said I, 'I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, though the next thing to that last, but I can tell you what the young man said of the performance himself!'

'I'll wager you an ounce of snuff you cannot!' said the minister.

'If ever either of you bring a grain of that abominable,' Nance began. But I in my turn interrupted her.

'This is what he said: 'It's naething ava' to be speakin' aboot— no' to a man that has been a

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

cairter in Dundee."

'Done—to a syllable!' cried Mr. Gilbert. 'Now I see you do know my man.'

'Know him!' I cried. 'Man, I know him as well as if I had gone all through him with this Beck microscope fitted with an oil immersion lens!'

'I do not call that a very nice comparison,' said Nance sententiously.

'Well,' said I, 'I don't mind making it a stable-lantern.'

One night awhile after this I came off my rounds to find my wife and Mr. Gilbert talking about love and marriage. Now I am just as jealous of Nance as she is of me—which is not at all; and I quite recognise that it is dull for her in a town like Cairn Edward after the bustle and diversion of a farm-town like Nether Neuk. For those who think that the country is 'quiet' know nothing at all about the matter. A Scottish farm-town is the heartsomest place on earth, and as for stir—why, the Strand is a Highland brae-face to it.

Well, at any rate, there sat Mr. Gilbert with one hand on his knee and a tea-cup in the other. He was looking at Nance. That pretty villain leaped up and ran to take off my coat as soon as she heard me open the door. She gave me a quick little private hug on the far side (Nance and I do not kiss each other in public, having come to an understanding on that point early in our married life).

'Do you know. Alec, Mr. Gilbert says that he will never marry!' she cried, giving the poor man's soul revelations away without a pang. 'I wish you would tell him that it is a tempting of Providence to boast of such wickedness.'

'Well, Nance,' I made answer, nodding to Gilbert,

'I don't see what you have got to do with it, that you should be in a fret. But if you mean that I am not giving satisfaction.'

I made a motion towards the cupboard where I kept my poisons.

'Pray don't be silly, Alec,' cried Nance; 'better the deil I ken than the deil I dinna ken. But do try to be reasonable, and (in a tone of great acerbity) will — you — drink — your — tea — while — it — is — hot?'

I drank it—scalding. I knew better than to murmur. 'Now tell Mr. Gilbert,' she commanded, 'that—that he must get married whether he likes or not!'

'Certainly, my dear. Gilbert, what do you mean by it? Get married, sir, at once.'

Nance's eyes fairly snapped, like a spark driven from an electric battery.

'You are just as silly as he is,' she said, and turned her rounded shoulder to the pair of us.

'Now, mistress,' said I meekly, 'are you not a little difficult to please? Gilbert won't get married to please you; I would—and did. We are both equally foolish. Pray, what are poor men to do?'

Nance did not answer in words. She only looked at me and nodded. But that nod meant, 'Wait. I will pay you out, my little man!'

Then the minister broke in.

'This is most unseemly, not to say embarrassing for me,' he said in his melancholy way. 'What I was saying to your wife when you came in was, that after a man gets to a certain age, he passes the point of danger, like — well, like a comet that breaks away from the sun to dissipate itself in space.'

'Bravo, Gilbert! a most exact and learned simile.'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Why do you not keep that for your next sermon?' said I.

'Because you would not be there to hear it,' he replied aptly. He had a quick, quaint way with him, and his words had a natural edge which made him detested of windbags and the common parish mouther.

'Well, but seriously, Gilbert,' I said, willing to curry favour with Nance, 'a man of your temperament ought to get married, if only in justice to himself. You will certainly smoke too much and get bilious, besides laying up for yourself a lonely old age.

'It is all very well for you to talk,' said the minister, looking at Nance. He also was squaring himself.

He bent and knocked his empty briar on the edge of the grate. 'Yes, you may smoke,' said Nance; 'you have not observed it, but this is the dining-room.'

Mr. Gilbert looked about him in the bewildered manner which comes from living much alone.

'I declare! So it is,' he said. Then he smiled quietly, and we waited.

'I have rather a good story about our Man—speaking of marriage reminds me of it,' he began. (This was what he always called Ninian. The latter, I may interpolate, we had seen time and again since his coming to Whinnyliggate, and found him just the same much-experienced cherubic innocent as ever. He was rapidly adding Gallovidian Scots to his other perplexities of accentuation.)

'You know Rorrison of Ingleston?' queried the minister, clearing the ground for his story. We did—who indeed in Galloway did not know that full-blooded, roisterous blade, who now, at an age when

most men begin to settle down, remained the same rustic buck he had been twenty-five years before? His travelling Clydesdale 'entires' were on every road; his loud voice and rubicund face pervaded every market-place; and his deeds and misdeeds were ever on the popular tongue. Though his praise could not be said to be in all the churches, he was a fairly regular hearer in the parish of Whinnyliggate, and therefore a leading parishioner of Ninian's.

Mr. Gilbert did not refer to all this. 'Well,' was all he said. We knew Rorrison of Ingleston— good; that was enough by way of preface.

'Well,' repeated Mr. Gilbert, 'you also know his daughter Eelan?'

Nance nodded. I did not, for when I went away she was quite a schoolgirl, and now the Rorrisons adhered medically to my senior Cairn Edward colleague. Dr. Hearsman.

'She is growing a bonny lass enough, though favouring her mother more than her father,' said the minister. 'And this Ninian of yours is not blind. At least, it seems that on several occasions he has conveyed Eelan Rorrison part of the way home. Her father heard of the matter and vowed vengeance on the audacious 'helper' upon the earliest opportunity, if he should ever catch him 'cuikin' round his daughter.

'So one Monday night on the back of byre-time, when Rorrison had just returned from market rather flushed in the face, who should come stepping into the Ingleston yard, walking 'caigily' together, but just Eelan and Master Ninian Murdoch, Probationer of the Kirk of Scotland.

'Rorrison, heated with the product of the Blue Boar (and sundry 'tastes' on the way home),

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

blustered up to the pair of them.

'I thought I had told you, sirrah,' he shouted, golderin' like a turkey-cock, 'that if ever I caught you talking to my daughter, I would thrash you to within an inch of your life!'

'No, Maister Rorrison,' retorted the Cherub, 'indeed you never told me that.'

'I told Eelan, and that is the same thing!' cried Rorrison, making a demonstration with his whip.

'It may be,' responded your man, without the least heat; 'me and the young lady do not waste our time speakin' much about things like that.'

This angered Ronison so much that he was about to strike the 'helper,' but just as the whip was descending, the Probationer caught him by both wrists, and bent him down till he found himself sitting on the ground— 'as easily as if mickle Tony Rorrison's arms had been plough-handles' was the description of an eye-witness.'

'And what did Rorrison do then?' cried Nance, her eyes sparkling. 'Oh, if I had been Eelan, I would have given Ninian a kiss!'

'As to that I have no information,' said the minister dryly, as he rose to go.

CHAPTER FOUR EXODUS

Evil Merodach got on well with his ecclesiastical superior, the Rev. Dr. Stirabout. Indeed, he remained longer in the parish of Whinnyliggate than all his predecessors put together. This was in part owing to the quiet and unobtrusive godliness of Ninian's life, his lack of all airs and graces of the

insinuating sort, and partly to the superior manner in which he could doctor the minister's old sorrel nagy 'Patrick Hamilton,' so as to save both the life of the beast and the expense of a vet.

In other ways also the 'Brand' pleased the minister well. First of all, he had obviously no intentions upon the succession of the parish; for, as was soon widely blazed abroad, he had on one occasion met the patron, old Admiral M'Skinning of Whinnyliggate House, and given him so efficient a dressing down for swearing on the public road that that distinguished naval officer was reduced to shaking his fist at the daring 'helper.'

But when the patron complained to the minister of his subordinate's insolence, Dr. Stirabout only chuckled and said, 'A faithful man, Admiral— A faithful man is a pearl of great price!'

This was the tale as it was told in Whinnyliggate, and the story which Mr. Gilbert brought to us. But the next time I was 'up the country,' I made a point of calling on Ninian and remonstrating with him upon the short-sightedness of his quarrelling with the patron of the parish. To try him, I took it upon myself to recommend a judicious submission. I told him, with the party bias of the son of a Cameronian elder, that the probationer of a kirk founded upon the civil magistrate and endowed by the State could not afford to be over-nice in the presence of the patron.

But I could get no change out of Ninian.

'He's but a puir craitur, a puir, puir craitur— and so I telled him,' said Ninian, all undaunted. 'What for should I be feared o' the likes o' him? Gie me the pairish when the Doctor dees— never, as lang as he has a cousin's son sax times removed to provide for.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Mair nor that, if it's the Lord's wull that I get the pairish, I'll get the pairish, patron or no patron! And if no' — weel, my auld maister in Dundee wad be gled and prood to get me back to the cairtin'. I was aye carefu' wi' the fodder an' kind to the beasts. And I daresay I could e'en do my duty there as weel as in Whunnyliggate, next door to the Kingdom o' Heeven as you Galloway folk think yoursels.'

As I say, I got little change out of Ninian.

But I asked him what had really happened at the famous interview, and he told me, with that mathematical accuracy which characterised all his assertions, and with that veneer of Galloway accent which had begun to overlay the cosmopolitan terrors of his utterance.

'There's little to tell,' said he, 'and that little no' worth the tellin'. I was comin' my ways hame, doon by the Lochar woods, when I hears a maist mighty noise, and somebody fairly tearin' their throats at the sweerin'. So I grips my stick by the middle and steps on.

'An' there, by the mile-stane at the foot o' the wood, I comes on a beast and cairt in the sheuch, the richt wheel tapmost and a' the load o' packages lyin' scattered abroad in the ditch. There was a man at the head o' the beast, but I saw at the first glis what was the maitter wi' him. He had bidden a kennin' ower lang at the Blue Boar doon at Cairn Edward.

'But it wasna him that was sweerin'. It was a wee pursy man wi' as mony chins as there are folds in the Doctor's Sunday neckcloth, and a face as round and red as the harvest mune. He had on white kerseymere shorts and a blue coat wi' shinin' buttons. He had an auld flappit hat cockit on the

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

back o' his croon, and he was dancin' about like a puddock wi' its heid cuttit aff, and layin' on the man and beast time aboot wi' a horse-whup whatever he could lay.

'So as he cam' ower near me in yin o' his spangs, I e'en took the whup frae him and threw it ower the dyke.

'Noo,' says I, 'what is a' this dirdum aboot?'

'But the wee mannie wi' the haggis kyte on him like till the pictures o' Boney never stoppit the sweerin'—the only differ was that noo he was sweerin' at me. I had to pit a stop to that, me bein' there as it were offeecially. So I says to him, 'Mannie,' says I, 'ye maybe think that's sweerin', but ye are sair mista'en. Bletterin' ower twa or three ill words is nae sweerin' to caa' sweerin'. Your maister the Deil should hae learned ye better than that. Man, ye should hae heard Geordie Culsalmond frae Kitty-brewster's. It wad hae been a lesson to ye. Even mysel', when I was in the gall o' bitterness an' nocht better than a cairter in Dundee, had a hantle mair poer and variety in my language nor that!'

'Then he wadna listen to me, but actually cam' at me wi' his nieves— at me, Ninian Murdoch—sayin' that he wad kill me where I stood, and sick-like fule talk. So I was obligated to catch him by the scruff of the neck and haud him up frae the grund. And there he hung atween earth an' heeven, yirkin' like a rabbit afore ye draw its neck, and the heels o' his wee patent-leather shune playing clicketty-clack thegither. Man, I could hardly keep frae lauchin'. And his een stood oot o' his head like a gaspin' cod's. For what wi' his anger and his kickin', the skin was fair streekit on him like the hide o' a drum.

'Noo,' says I, 'juist keep a ceevil tongue in the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

head o' ye, or I'll scrape it wi' a bane kame I keep for the purpose. An' no' anither word oot o' ye aboot my mither. She was as decent a woman as your ain — maybes better, for she brocht me up mair ceevilly than ye appear to hae been.'

'And wi' that I gied the craitur a bit shuggle that just shook him doon intil his claes, as if he had been sae muckle potty-heid! Then I sets him on his feet, and, man—wull ye believe me?— he could hardly stan'! No, it wasna anger. He couldna be ony angrier than he was. The speech was juist fair chokit in him.

'Noo,' says I to him, 'sit ye doon there by the dykeside, till I get this cairt richtit.'

'And doon I jumps intil the ditch. The man that had been lashed wi' the muckle whip stood wi' his mouth open like a pitawty-pit. So I ordered him to keep his hand on the richt wheel and I wad sune hae a' things snod. I lowsed the beast and gied it to the wee man to haud. He never spoke. He juist opened his jaws and yappit at me when I pat the reins ower his airm.

'Noo,' says I to him, 'let us see if ye can haud a horse beast better nor ye can sweer!'

'And faith, he did it no' that ill. But he never said a single sensible word; only juist gurgled in his throat like a muckle watch-dog that is chokit wi' a ticht collar.

'So I lifted the cairt and brocht it ontill the road. Syne I harnessed the beast while the man, sobered a wee noo, was gatherin' up the parcels and bits o' things tied wi' twine!

'Then says I to the man, 'Get in an' drive!' And to the wee man I says, 'Up wi' ye!' But he only gobbled and goldered waur nor ever. So I took him by the

breeks ahint and the collar o' his coat and set him amang the strae. 'Tak' the bit mannie hame,' says I, 'as if he canna walk better nor he can sweer, he shouldna be trustit oot on the king's highway wi'oot a keeper.' After that I gied him a word o' reelegious advice, as was my duty, and bade them drive on.

'And noo, Alec, do ye coont that muckle to mak' sic a cryin' aboot in the pairish?'

Then the next I heard was that Rorrison o' the Ingleston and the Admiral, old enemies though they were, had laid their heads together to get Ninian out of the parish. They had even gone to the Doctor. But the minister was an obstinate man, and when he took a thraw he would not be driven any more than Ninian himself.

So the Admiral being the laird of the village, and Rorrison the employer of all the field-labouring folk, it came to pass that Ninian was turned out of his lodging in the kirk clachan, and could not get another nearer than Whinnyliggate itself, which was five miles off across a wild moorish track of uncultivated land.

It was then that the Doctor showed the mettle he was made of. A thrawn, cantankerous old carle he had always been considered. Not a single member of Presbytery had ever slept within the walls of the manse. Judge, then, what the surprise of the folk was when it became known that Ninian, the new 'helper,' had gone to bide there by invitation of the Doctor. It was looked upon as the coming of the end. And so in a manner it was.

But there at the manse by the waterside dwelt Ninian Murdoch, looking more cherubic than ever,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

cracking up the firewood for old Betty Biggletree, the minister's housekeeper, carrying water, climbing on the roof to mend a loosened slate or sweep a chinmey. It was even reported in the parish that he had been seen with half a dozen clothes-pins between his teeth, helping Betty to hang out the washing.

Rorrison took his late defeat badly, and would not allow his daughter even to attend the kirk, but kept up a drunken splore all day with his cronies, roaring and drinking till the noise of them could be heard across the Water of Dee. It was a favourite ploy of theirs to devise punishments for the 'Heelant helper,' as with oaths and cursings they named him. Then Rorrison would call his daughter in and recount these things to her, shouting with delight when her face paled and her lip trembled. So, in his unutterable folly, the man thought to cure the lassie of her infatuation. He had no woman to warn him what would be the result.

It was whispered that the young farmer of Knockcannon and three of his cronies tried to ambush the 'helper' on Saturday night in the Long Wood of Larbrax. But as Ninian preached the next day as usual upon the text, 'Let brotherly love continue,' it was thought that there could be no truth in the matter. Still, when questioned at the market on Wednesday as to certain abrasions and contusions visible on his face, Knockcannon explained that he had been coming home late one night last week and had stumbled over the trams of a cart in the dark.

But all this was ended short and sharp by the death of Dr. Stirabout. He died one Sabbath morning very early, at the time when all very old and all very young people die. Betty and the 'helper' were

with him. Some premonition of what was to come seemed to have touched him that Saturday, for he spent nearly the whole day in his study writing a long letter, which, being finished and sealed, he committed to Ninian to post. It was addressed in a firm hand to 'The Rt. Hon. His Grace the Duke of Niddisdale, K.G., Durrisdeer Castle, Niddisdale.'

Ninian walked over the hill to the post with it, as the old man seemed anxious about it; and when he returned, Dr. Stirabout had been taken with a shock and was past all consciousness.

Only for a moment he rallied, as Betty has told me a score of times— indeed, to this day she continues to recount the minutest details every time she sees me. He opened his eyes and looked up at Ninian, whom he appeared to recognise. He even smiled a little.

'I'm feared you have but a poor chance of getting the parish, laddie,' he said; 'but at least ye made the Admiral dance to an unkenned tune!'

'Do not think of these things now, Doctor,' said Ninian soothingly.

'Well, I never was a great believer in death-bed testimonies,' said the old man, and again he smiled a little. 'It is my best hope to find myself in the place reserved for unworthy and unprofitable servants.'

And indeed he said rightly. For though he lingered some hours, that was all the testimony he gave. Only at the very last he opened his eyes. 'Lift me up a little, Ninian!' he said. The young helper did as he was bid. 'I thank you!' murmured the old gentleman, and they were his last words.

Ninian Murdoch made all the arrangements for the funeral, and, pending the event, stayed on in the manse. He preached a sermon on the Sabbath

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

which is yet remembered. He had a way of leaning over the book board of the pulpit and dropping his words on the folk like boiling lead out of a spoon, very searing to the consciences. And when he preached, all his grotesqueness of utterance seemed to leave him completely.

On the Wednesday of the funeral came Dr. Stirabout's brother, who was a lawyer in the town of Drumfern. The brothers had not spoken for well-nigh half a century, but all the same it was understood that everything was left to him. He did not go to the manse, but stayed at the big house with the Admiral, whose 'doer' or general man of business he was. On the funeral day he came down half an hour before the time appointed for the burying in company with the Admiral, Anthony Rorrison, the young farmer of Knockcannon, and Purdie, the minister of Southwick, a man very sib to so roisterous a clan.

Poor Ninian was never asked to put up a prayer, or so much as to read a portion, or even to taste when the whisky and shortbread were carried round at the first service, which is the right of the meanest beggar at the gate. But in the kirkyard it was noticed that he was the only one who shed tears for the lonely old man they were layng away in an unlamented grave.

Then afterwards they gathered in the manse, and Ninian with them, looking lost and shilpit and wae. So soon as they were within the door the lawyer brother turned on the 'helper.'

'And now, sir,' he said, 'pray remove yourself from this house. I give you an hour. You have too long imposed on the frailty of my poor brother. You shall not impose upon me.'

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Yes,' cried the Admiral, in his thin reedy voice, every moment shrilling higher and higher with passion, 'and out of this parish also! For be assured no roof to cover you shall you get within the bounds of Whinnyliggate.'

'No, nor yet any work outside of it,' said Purdie of Southwick, who had been primed before he came; 'I will see to it that no certificate of life, character or doctrine shall you have from this Presbytery. And without it you cannot be employed in any other. That will teach you to be somewhat less free in speaking evil of dignities!'

Ninian lifted a bag from under a chair. It was a small black one, only sufficient at the most to carry a few books and a few articles of clothing.

'Stop!' cried Rorrison. 'The fellow has been all night in the manse with the run of every lockfast place. The Doctor's keys were in his power. I do not think we ought to let him go till he opens his bag.'

'Indeed, I thank you, sir, for the suggestion,' said the lawyer; 'it is well thought on. He shall also submit himself to a personal examination.'

Then very suddenly a spasm of anger, quick as the lightning that flickers on wet shore sand when a foot presses it, flashed up in Ninian's eyes. 'Let any man dare to lay a finger on me,' he cried in a terrible voice, 'let any dare to hinder me, and, by the grace that drew me out of the horrible pit, I will wring his neck like a clockin' hen's!'

And though not a tall man, he looked around with so fierce an air that all shrank from before him. The little Admiral got behind a chair with some activity. The lawyer retired to the window and became absorbed in a paper. Even Tony Rorrison, who would have held up the beam at twice his weight,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

stood aside.

And so Ninian walked forth into the world, poorer than when he came to Whinnyliggate. For the Doctor had always meant to pay him his salary, but as often had put the matter off. He thought that, as Ninian was staying in the house, it did not matter.

Outside the manse the folk had not yet scattered. They stood in changeful groups about the kirkyard and the loaning foot, not saying much but making a pretence of 'caa'in crack,' and keeping the tail of their eyes ever on the manse door.

When Ninian came out, however, those nearest moved in to intercept him. And from all quarters the folk began to flock together, till he and his little bag had become the centre of as large a crowd of black coats as had ever been seen in the parish within the memory of man.

'Yes, freends,' said Ninian, smiling bravely, 'I am going to leave you. I am turned from heck and manger.'

'You shallna gang! We will petition! Every man here will stand by ye! We will mob ony man they try to put in your place! Hold by us, and we will stand by you as our forefathers did by Macmillan! Ye are welcome to bed and board as lang as we hae a roof ower our heads!'

These were some of the greetings that mingled with the tumultuary hand-shakings. But Ninian only shook his head.

'They are in the right of it— you deserve a better man than poor Ninian Murdoch. But dinna fear for him. When the Lord shuts yae door. He opens anither. Fare ye weel, freends! Fare ye a' weel!'

'Where are ye gangin', minister? At least bide awhile amang us and look about ye!' cried the kindly

folk.

'Na, na, freends,' said Ninian solemnly. 'God never meant that ony man should eat the bread of idleness and no' be the waur o't. I ken o' a job to put my hand to. It is in the toon o' Dundee, that maybe ye hae heard me speak o'—in the cairtin' line.'

So Ninian Murdoch, carter and probationer, turned his back on the parish of Whinnyliggate, and walked with his little bag in his hand along the dusty highway towards Cairn Edward. His eyes were dry, and he neither looked to the right nor yet to the left, save only when he passed the house of Ingleston. There he turned and took a long look at an upper window on the right-hand side. But he saw nothing. He did not know that a face, tear-stained and pale, watched him out of sight from behind the curtain.

And as he went he kept muttering over to himself, 'Ninian, ye thought to serve the Lord as His ordained minister; but if it be His purpose that ye serve Him as a cairter—the will o' the Lord be done!'

CHAPTER FIVE EELAN'S VICTORY

Rorrison was triumphant. The Admiral, against the protests of seventy heads of families, presented his grand-nephew to the parish, and retired behind his fir plantations, grumbling explosively that ever he should have had to do with such a pack of louts. The lawyer brother of Dr. Stirabout found all that he could hope to find in the manse, and young Kitson of Knockcannon was never frae 'boot the doors of the Ingleston.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

It was a glorious time for the conspirators. They rubbed hand upon hand and shouted to each other across half a dozen fields. Tony Rorrison even omitted to hold out for the uttermost farthing in a horse-dealing transaction on Market Monday.

Lock, stock, and barrel they had cleared the 'cairter' out of the parish. That was presently enough for them.

But they had reckoned without Eelan Rorrison.

Eelan was too like her mother ever to have given her father the least cause for anxiety. She said no word either of pleading or of reproach; she only went about day after day each morning a little paler and a little more listless. It had been her mother's way, and one morning, when his head was clearer than usual, her father asked Eelan what ailed her.

'Nothing ails me, father,' she answered him quietly. 'I think I am just not strong.'

It was the simplest answer possible. But somehow it took hold of him by the throat. Once an older woman, even his wife, had made him the same reply sitting opposite him at the head of the table as listless and as frail.

Then suddenly, like a vision of the night, she had vanished away. It came to him with a sudden start that this Eelan of his might do the same, and that she was all he had.

'Put on your things and come doon wi' me to Drumfern,' said Tony Rorrison in an altered voice. 'The drive will do you good.'

'Very well, father!' said the girl, moving out without interest or animation, like one accustomed to unquestioning obedience.

Tony Rorrison watched her, muttering explosive words beneath his breath. He frowned as she

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

dragged herself up the stairs, past the tall clock which seemed somehow to be ticking out the moments of her life... of Tony's own life also, but only Eelan's seemed to matter just then.

'Oh, I wish to God she would show more spirit!' he groaned. 'To go about like a ghost for the sake of a... What, ready? Are you sure you are warmly enough clad? Shall we take another rag?'

Eelan looked up at her father in astonishment. It was not his way to speak so kindly, or indeed to consult her at all. But this morning he put himself out of the way to be agreeable, and when they came to the corner of Knockcannon loane they saw young Kitson waiting. Eelan involuntarily shuddered and drew a little closer to her father.

The great, rough, coarse-grained man felt the action, more by instinct than otherwise. It pleased him vaguely. He wished she would do it again.

'Don't you want him to come in with us?' he said, as they were driving up.

'No, father, if you please!' said Eelan Rorrison very faintly.

'Then you shall not have him. Kitson, today you will have to wait for Langlands or harness your own beast. You see I have Eelan with me, and she is expecting a friend to join her farther down the road.'

For a gig only holds two or, which is more common, three at a pinch. Pinches are common in Galloway on Market Monday.

All the way to Drumfern Tony Rorrison talked to his daughter, and was pleased when he got even a smile in reply. For a kind of wistfulness had taken him close about the heart. Some premonition of his coming loneliness gripped him, and though he was a man fond of the coarse pleasures which leave a

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

gritty after-taste in the mouth, he had never faced what an utterly lonely home would mean. First his mother, then his wife, and now Eelan had kept his house, sat at his table foot, come in when he wanted company, and gone out when he nodded. And now the last of them was ill— it might be?

Curiously enough, he felt aggrieved, even angry, with Eelan. What did the girl mean by it? Did she know that she was annoying him— him, her father, Anthony Rorrison? Why did she not say something? Why had she no spirit? He would rather have her run away from home in laddie's clothes, like the daughter of the minister of Dullarg, than go about the house as she had been doing of late, silent, reproaching him vaguely with her pale face and thewless carriage.

But he was very far from saying these things to Eelan.

In Drumfern they put up the beast at the ancient hostelry of the Cross Keys. Tony Rorrison's friends and acquaintances shouted to him across the narrow Vennel, or hailed him from the open windows of the inn. But he gave no sign, hardly even by waving his hand upward and backward a time or two, which is the gesture of acknowledgment in Tony's circle.

They walked along the bustling streets, Eelan silent, her father nervous and talking fast about nothing.

They came presently to the corner of Castle Street, and the rich farmer looked up as if something had just occurred to him.

'I have a friend here,' he said, awkwardly enough. 'We will go in and see him.'

'Why, this is a doctor's house,' said Eelan,

glancing at the big brass door-plate and shrinking back a little. She felt the blood leaving her face.

Her father coughed behind his palm and shifted about on his great feet uneasily.

'Yes— yes,' he said, a trifle querulously, 'John Thorburn Brown is a doctor, it is true; but I kened him long before he was a doctor!'

They went in and waited awhile, for Dr. Brown had many to call upon him that market morning. He was a great strong dark man with a bright complexion and that instinctive faculty of raising confidence at sight which pertains to so many notable physicians; though he did not call himself that, being by fact and preference a surgeon. But physician or surgeon, John Thorburn Brown was a wise man of counsel always. He had certain thorns in his own flesh which even in middle age irked him occasionally, and these made him very kind and very tolerant to those of others.

'May I come into the surgery and talk with you, doctor, for a moment?' said Rorrison eagerly, as soon as they had shaken hands. 'My daughter can stay here.'

Dr. Brown took a long look at the girl.

'No, she can't,' he said, in his brisk way; 'she shall go in to my wife. She is cutting out papers for the tops of jam-pots, and is just aching for anything in petticoats to gossip with. In you go, dearie!'

He opened a door and smiled upon Eelan as she passed through.

Then he shut it carefully to, and with his hand on the handle listened a moment, his ear inclined to the inner room. The sound of laughter and gay greetings came pleasantly from within. Dr. John Brown nodded a little like one who says, 'That's all right!'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Then he turned on the rich farmer of the Ingleston of Whinnyliggate.

'Well,' he said, 'why did you not bring her to me before?'

'Because I never noticed,' said the father shamefacedly, sitting down beside the table and leaning his head on his hands. The doctor stood at the other side drumming the points of his fingers softly on the table. He looked a trifle grim. His teeth seemed to be biting on something. He did not mean to let Rorrison off. He understood the man thoroughly.

'But for Mary,' he said to himself, 'I would have been just such a man! Thank God for a good wife!'

And from within a cheery voice fell pleasantly on his ear. It gave him pleasure as of old, even though the sideboard was still littered with the debris of their silver wedding.

'How long has this been going on?' he asked abruptly.

'I don't know, John,' said Rorrison; 'I fear for some time. I have noticed that she looked a little pale, but thought nothing of it.'

'Tut, man, I don't mean the disease— but the irritant, the mind trouble?'

'I did not know that there was any!'

'Tony Rorrison, do you think it would do you any good if I were to call you a fool? Listen to me. Was it a love affair? Did you 'put your foot down,' as the saying is? I know your gentle ways. Man, I attended your wife when she was dying, and of all the...'

Dr. Brown had a free manner of speech, and on this occasion he exceeded the utmost licence allowed to his profession; but if he thought he could stir the man before him to anger, he was mistaken.

'I don't know about a love story,' Rorrison said

slowly, with his head still on his hand, 'but there was a young fellow—a sort of helper in the kirk. He was quite impossible. He told me himself he had been a carter before he went to college, and was proud of it—yes, actually proud of it!'

'And pray why should he not?' demanded the doctor. 'You and I, Tony, were not half so decent as most carters alive after we had been at college. I am not saying too much for us even at this present time. Well, where is this young man?'

'He has left the parish. How should I know?'

'Then you must bring him back to the parish!'

Tony Rorrison groaned.

'That I cannot do,' he said. 'The place is filled up—and he would not take a farthing from me, anyway!'

Then, without any encouragement from the grim, kindly eyes that watched him so closely, the farmer spoke at large, unrolling his big blundering heart like a scroll. John Brown waited till his friend had finished in order to put his thumb on the sore place.

'Gone to be a carter again, has he? Left the Church? Well, Tony Rorrison, you must go and fetch him back.'

'I'll see both you and him to the devil first!'

The doctor had been angling for this flash, and then sharp on the back of it he put in his counter with dry and calculated bitterness.

'You killed your wife, Tony,' he said. 'I am not going to stand by and see you murder your daughter! You have got to find that young man.'

'A likely story—that I, Anthony Rorrison of the Ingleston, should go to a Dundee carter and say, 'I want you to come and marry my daughter!' I tell you I can't, and, what is more, I won't, for you or any

man!'

Dr. John Brown leaned a little nearer and dropped his words singly and icily upon his victim. He spoke almost as if he enjoyed it.

'Then if you will not do this, listen! Your daughter is in a very dangerous state. The neck glands are all diseased. They must be removed. They have fallen very low—I know not whether or not too low. But any day the disease may reach the lungs. Then nothing can be done. I suppose even you may know that. Even now, at the very best, the operation will be touch and go, the recovery long and difficult. You must give the girl some reason for living, or she will go out like a badly snuffed candle between our fingers!'

The surgeon paused. He had never taken his eyes off the man, who was his patient as much as any that ever underlay his knife.

'Don't, doctor, don't! I will go,' he said, shuddering. 'I care not if I do shame myself. I will find him. And, by the Lord, if he will not come, by the great God of heaven, I will kill him! My girl shall not die.'

Dr. Thorburn Brown opened the door.

'What—still gossiping? Strawberries not all put away yet? Ah, that is a better colour! Come, your father has been waiting for you a full quarter of an hour. I have had the hardest work to keep him quiet. Do let her go, Mary.'

He patted Eelan's cheek kindly, and, as if accidentally, he touched her neck with his fingers as he had done when she came in. It thrilled her curiously. The doctor's wife looked at her husband with quick comprehension.

'You must come back and see me, my dear,' she

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

said, 'and if ever I can be any help to you get your father to drive you straight in to Castle Street.'

So much of the story I learned from my senior and colleague Dr. Thorburn Brown, with whom I acted as assistant in the operation. He has only just absolved me from the seal of the profession. Part, too, I heard from Rorrison that second night I watched with him, when his sleeplessness and his remorse had unhinged him. What I have now to tell I had from Ninian himself.

Evil Merodach had not gone to Dundee. He had stopped in the metropolis, finding work plentiful at the time. For the southern suburbs were creeping outwards towards the crest of Morningside, topping the swell and beginning to feather towards the hills of Braid like a wave before it breaks.

Ninian went directly to a contractor and builder whose son he had known at college. Bob Bertram had left college and taken, sorely against his will, to his father's business. And now, with his tall spare figure wrapped in a long grey overcoat, his well-shaped, delicately featured face sunk between his narrow shoulders, he could be seen flitting about with plans or directing the labourers who dug the foundations of eligible villa residences.

His voice rang occasionally in shrill invective, couched, however, in terms too academic to be very effective when applied to Irish navvies and Edinburgh gutter-bluids.

In return they called him 'Young Pinwire,' even as they styled his father the 'Gatepost.'

'Hello, Ninian, what brings you here?' cried Bob Bertram cheerfully at sight of his old college friend

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

and sometime butt.

'I'm lookin' for a job,' said Ninian, waving a hand to the second-storey window at which his friend stood.

Bertram laughed.

'Well,' he said, 'if it is preaching you are looking for, we have some hard cases in our trade. You can try your hand on this squad.'

The men digging the next foundation grinned appreciatively, and a mason paused with a dart of moist lime raised on his trowel.

'I've left the preachin',' Ninian called up, 'or rayther, it has left me. I'm turned oot on the world without a character. Will ye gie me anither chance at the cairtin'?'

Bob the tall and spare grew also Bob the grave at the sound of Ninian's words. For a kindlier or a more tender soul never breathed than Robert Bertram, that most unwilling architect and builder. He came down quickly, treading the slim planks and ladders with the sure, catlike tread which was his only hereditary outfit from his father and grandfather.

'Are you joking?' he said to Ninian, when at last they met on the moderately solid land of the 'foond' bottom.

'Never less in my life,' said Ninian stoutly.

'What for did you get your leave without a character?' said Bob. 'Was it through a lass?'

'Ay,' replied Ninian imperturbably, 'it was a lass—but no' the way ye think!'

Without asking more, Bertram led the way into a little wooden office strewn with papers, rulers, straight-edged and filmy tracing-paper with spidery lines and splotches of colour upon it.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

When they came out, Ninian was engaged as a carter at five-and-twenty shillings a week, five of which Bob Bertram did not take out of the treasury of the firm, though he said nothing about that.

'Aweel,' said Ninian, as he yoked his horse, 'maybe I'll mak' a better cairter than I made a minister. Haud up there; where are ye comin' till, ye freckle-faced besom!'

Meanwhile, in Whinnyliggate the interest in Ninian waxed ever greater and greater. His disappearance, instead of clearing the parish of him, had filled the air with rumours, which the curious doings of Anthony Rorrison fanned into a flame. He actually went forth from door to door of all the houses at which Ninian Murdoch had been in the habit of visiting, asking if he had dropped any hint of his destination. And the folk within shut their mouths or lied copiously according to their kind. For it was easy to see that these inquiries boded no good to the ex-helper.

But it was at a county meeting that the strangest thing of all happened. Admiral M'Skimming of Whinnyliggate had a vast regard for dignities, and he felt it was no mean privilege to sit next to His Grace the Duke of Niddisdale. Judge, then, of his surprise and pleasure when, the business of the Commissioners of Supply having been completed, the Duke turned round and begged the honour of a few words in private with his distinguished friend.

He took the Admiral's arm, and the two went out together. That moment atoned for much, thus to be distinguished before all the county.

At last the two were pacing the causeway together, and with the tail of his eye the Admiral could see the shopkeepers rushing like so many

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

aproned doves to their windows at the sight. Then the Duke opened out his business.

'I have taken this liberty, sir,' he said, 'because I judge that you are best fitted to supply the information I require.'

The Admiral bowed. The Duke had a sententious style. Indeed, if he had been other than the Duke of Niddisdale, he must have been called a trifle pompous. But he was a kindly, well-meaning man withal, and very faithful to his friends.

I wish to ask you if you can inform me of the present habitation of a young clergyman of the Church of Scotland, lately or at least sometime resident in your parish. I refer to the Reverend Ninian Murdoch, a Master of Arts, as I understand, of Edinburgh University.'

The Admiral was suddenly aghast, crestfallen, erased. He glanced nervously about to see that no one had heard. Then he plucked up heart. After all, how was the town of Cairn Edward and the gentlemen Commissioners to know that the Duke was not consulting him on the deepest affairs of State?

'Yes— yes,' he stammered, 'I do know him; but I am afraid—I fear that I do not know his present address.' The Duke waved a hand.

'A detail, a detail,' he said, in his large manner; 'you win easily get it for me. I make no doubt at all of that. I had a letter from my old tutor and I may add dear friend, the late Dr. Stirabout of Whinnyliggate. He made a dying request which I cannot overlook. Strangely enough, it happens that it is in my power to grant it immediately. I propose to present your friend and my old tutor's protegee to the vacant parish of Morland, my home parish, as it

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

were, in so far as Niddisdale Castle is situated within its bounds, and in addition, sir, one of the best livings in Scotland. Nay, do not thank me. I am always pleased to do what I can for any friend of yours. You will be sure to send me the young man's address? And by the way, Admiral, has nothing been done yet about that handle to your name? It is a crying shame. However, I am to see the Premier on Wednesday week. Be sure that you send me the address I have asked for before that date. Your letter will remind me of my promise. Good-day to you, sir! Good-day! Good-day!

And His Grace bowed himself off into his carriage, which had been slowly following them up the street, leaving the little Admiral blowing with pursed cheeks and staring after the swift horses with eyes fairly bulging with wonder and astonishment.

To have the coveted baronetcy which his gallant actions in a score of dockyards had so well deserved, and of which his wealth (gathered in the days when the senior officers of the Navy had the provisioning of their own vessels) so well fitted him to be an ornament, made to depend upon his discovering the whereabouts of Ninian Murdoch—no wonder that the very idea made him shudder. On the other hand, the thought that if he did not, he might miss the title, sent him posting to Edinburgh in such haste as he had not shown since the day he had bought the estate of Whinnyliggate and seen his name printed in the retired list of Her Majesty's Navy.

But for all his haste, Anthony Rorrison of the Ingleston was in Edinburgh before him.

So it came to pass that, just at the turning of the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

great road which, beginning at the end of the Pleasance, passes St. Leonards and strolls downhill to the red roofs of Echo Bank (long since, alas! disappeared) a very weary Admiral stood gazing southward, his hand no more thrust into his waistcoat in the Napoleonic manner, his shoe buckles unpolished, his white waistcoat no longer in its first freshness, and his whole figure betokening mortal weariness.

A red cart, or, more exactly, a cart that had once been red, was approaching. Two men were in it, sitting in front, their feet upon either shaft.

The Admiral could not believe his eyes. It was— it could not be—the sometime helper of Whinnyliggate, the minister designate of Morland.

'Stop!' he cried, holding out his arm as he had been used to do on the quarter-deck. The cart jogged on its way, the two men deep in converse. Ninian Murdoch's face was very grave. Admiral M'Skimming realised the danger there was of letting his prey slip through his fingers. But how could a rear-admiral and deputy-lieutenant for the county chase a lime-besmirched builder's cart through the metropolitan streets? Well, the thing can be done — at all events, when a title is in question.

'Hand up, Jess—woa—here's a wee fat mannie rinnin' after us,' said Ninian. 'If it's no' the sweerin' Admiral! What can he want?'

'What's your address— your address?' gasped the Admiral.

'What's your wull?'

'Your address— where do you live?'

Ninian looked at the little man standing panting on the dusty street beneath.

'I'm no' gaun to cry my address oot here. There's

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

ower mony poliss aboot. If you want it, loup up. Ye can hae my seat if your legs are lang eneuch to reach the tram. I can drive a cairt as weel standin' up as sittin' doon!'

Thus with an enemy on either hand, both of them silent and anxious, himself untroubled in the midst, his face more cherubic than ever, Ninian rode into the yard of Bertram & Son, builders and contractors.

'This is where I bide,' said Ninian, showing them the old wooden office where Bob Bertram kept his books by day and where Ninian spread his pallet by night.

The Admiral stared about him with his hand once more in the Napoleonic waistcoat.

'Do you not know,' he said sententiously, 'that His Grace the Duke of Niddisdale has presented you to the parish of Morland, one of the most valuable livings in Scotland?'

'I didna so muckle as ken that there was a Duke of Niddisdale ava',' said Ninian. 'Oor ain Duke o' Argyle is the only yin o' the name I ever heard o'. But juist bide a wee till I stable my beast, an' then I'll talk to you.'

But the Admiral had his notebook out.

'I have to communicate at once with His Grace,' he said. 'Be good enough to furnish me with your written address. I must write to His Grace by this evening's post.'

Then Anthony Rorrison spoke for the first time. His voice was quiet and very grave.

'Tell His Grace,' he said, 'that Mr. Ninian Murdoch's address will be at the Ingleston of Whinnyliggate for some time to come.'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

CHAPTER SIX APOTHEOSIS

'So you are to be a minister after all, Ninian,' said Bob Bertram as he stood at the door of the little wooden hut holding his eccentric friend's hand. Ninian had come to the yard to say good-bye.

'If it's the Lord's wull,' Ninian answered. 'But if onything should come in the road, I'll be at ye for anither job.'

'That you shall have and welcome!' cried the builder, with enthusiasm. 'There has not been a fight among the labourers since you came.'

'I hae aye been thocht to hae an influence,' said Ninian modestly. 'I hope it may be blessed to me when I gang amang dukes and that kind o' folk. I hae heard tell that some o' them are tairgers!'

'Oh, the Duke of Niddisdale is said to be a most respectable man,' certified Bob Bertram. 'He will give no trouble to the Session!'

'Mair especially as he is a benichtit Episcopalian!' responded Ninian, shaking hands for the last time.

Tony Rorrison had not spared himself. He humbled himself to the 'helper' as he had never thought to do to any man. And with great gravity Ninian had answered him—

'Did Eelan tell ye that I had said onything to her with respect to marriage?'

'No,' answered her father. 'I am aware we have no claim upon you, Mr. Murdoch— no claim whatever; but she is my only child. I have not dealt well with

her. I am trying to make it up to her now the best way I can!’

‘If ye hae been yae child o’ perdeetion in your time, I hae been anither in mine,’ said Ninian plainly ‘But, as ye say, we will make it up to her between us—if it’s the Lord’s wull!’

The two men were silent for a long while after this. They were driving out to Ingleston from Cairn Edward. It was Tony Rorrison’s favourite mare and lightest gig; yet it gives a better idea of the situation than anything else to say that it was the ‘helper’ who was driving. It was he also who broke the silence.

‘Maybes,’ he said slowly, ‘if I had been better brocht up, I wad hae telled you first that I had grown fell fond o’ the lass.’

‘I would not have thought you worth a docken if ye had!’ Tony Rorrison burst out.

‘But as it was,’ Ninian went on, ‘I got terrible fond o’ her—though I kenned she could never think on the like of me!’

‘It seems that she did, though,’ put in her father rather grimly.

‘I should hae gane awa’ when I kenned that,’ said Ninian, ‘but, man, I juist couldna gang. I canna explain it to you, but Eelan’s een juist held me like bands o’ iron.’

‘That’s all I want to know,’ said her father. ‘You can keep the rest to tell to Eelan!’

They drove into the yard, and, without waiting even for the lad who came towards them from the stables, started towards the house. There were many lights in the windows, a sort of hushed bustle everywhere, and in an unoccupied wing a light that went from room to room as it were without reason. Tony Rorrison opened the door and went in.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Ninian followed him closely. The main staircase was directly in front of them, and there descending it was Dr. John Thorburn Brown. He did not smile or hold out his hand. The two men, still blinking from the sudden light, stood speechless before him, stricken dumb with the same intolerable fear.

'No, she is not dead,' said the doctor, sounding their thought. 'Be calm, Tony; but I will not deny that the case is grave, very grave. Dr. M'Quhirr met me yesterday, and we decided to operate. It had gone a long way. It was far worse than either he or I anticipated. There was no time to be lost.'

'Did she suffer?' asked Ninian quietly.

'No, thank God—Sir James's new drug saved her that! But she had not the strength of a two-year-old bairn. And is this?'

He looked at Ninian with a curious questioning in his eye. With quick Celtic intuition Ninian understood him.

'I ken,' said he humbly, 'ye are thinking that I am no' a man like to tak' the e'e o' a woman. But I am fond o' Eelan, and I think maybes Eelan is fond o' me!'

'We will see,' said the doctor, and turning him about on the stair-foot, he began to reascend.

'Had she not better be prepared?' whispered her father.

The doctor continued to go up, the old staircase creaking under his weight.

'If you had not brought this young man,' he said, 'it might have been as well to prepare the lass; as it is.'

For answer he opened a door softly and peeped into a dimly lighted room. Then a subtle scent never felt before took Ninian by the nostrils. Slowly it

made its way down all the air passages till it seemed to permeate his whole life. It was chloroform—Sir James Simpson's single gift to the race which made him a greater and more godlike man than Alexander or Caesar, Columbus or Napoleon—indeed, perhaps the greatest benefactor of suffering humanity who ever lived. For not only is he the benefactor of those who undergo the pain, but still more of those who can only wait outside till the pain is overpast. Praise and honour and laud, then, to the man who has eased the heavier half of the Eden curse!

Not 'Ave, Caesar, we who are about to die salute you!' is the cry; but 'Hail, Wise Healer,' is the voice of a great multitude whom no man can number— 'Hail, Good and Wise Healer, we, who but for you would have died, salute you!'

And on the other side another yet greater multitude takes up the greeting: 'Hail, we also, who only loved those others, salute you!'

And the cry of the second multitude is far mightier than the cry of the first.

Nun-like and statue-white lay Eelan Rorrison, her head held motionless between two bags of sand. Her eyes were shut as they stood and looked, these two men who loved her. Ninian was on one side of the bed, her father on the other. The drops were beaded on Tony Rorrison's brow. Then they ran down his face, and fell on the bed large as a woman's tears. But Ninian only stood very quiet, and waited.

Eelan opened her eyes after awhile. She saw Ninian, and smiled a little, as if the thing were perfectly natural. Only her eyelashes drooped towards the hand which lay white and limp and thin on the cool coverlet.

Ninian understood. He knelt down by the bedside

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

and took the girl's hand. Then her eyes roved as far as they could for the rigid position of her head and the restraint of her bandages. The doctor touched her father's elbow, and silently pointed him to go forward. He came to the bedside, and laid his hand on Ninian's shoulder.

'Eelan,' he said, with a sound in his throat that was half a gulp and half a moan.

The girl smiled a little at him too. She knew these two men were at one. She could not even nod, so she smiled again, and then very contentedly shut her eyes. They stood awhile thus watching her. And then, as the doctor noticed the tears silently welling from under the closed lids and running down the wasted cheek, he took Anthony Rorrison's arm and drew him away. Ninian would have followed, but when he tried to lay Eelan's hand gently on the bed again, the thin fingers suddenly clasped his with a little jealous clutch, and so perforce he kept his place.

'Tell me, Brown,' said her father without the door, facing the doctor, as a man on trial for his life turns to the foreman of the jury who enters bearing life or death behind the mask of his face, 'will she get better?'

Ah, how doctors know and dread that quick change and challenge when the door of the sick-room is closed, and they have no word of hope to give.

But this time at least the notable surgeon's heart was not wrung.

'I cannot tell for certain,' he said gently; 'she is weak, but—she has a reason for living now! That is all I can say!'

'Thank you, Brown,' said the stricken strong man,

shaking his friend's hand as if the speech had been a personal obligation.

Slowly, and very slowly, the life came back to Eelan Rorrison. It was the evening of the third day when she spoke first. For she had indeed trodden on the very skirts of Death as he passed by.

'Why do you love me?' she said, as Ninian stooped over her pillow.

The young man gave a kind of quick, inevitable gasp. The question somehow unhinged him, and he had to balance his soul in order to reply.

'Nay,' he said, 'why do you love me?'

'Because I cannot help it!' she said, smiling happily; and so closed her eyes, as if her question had been fully answered. For lovers' speech is not expressed in that which meets the ear, but rather in silences, inflections, elisions. The lines mean but a tittle of that which is between them.

But now the inner strength of the woman's nature appeared, as well as the wisdom of the skilled physician. As the doctor said, Eelan had now a reason for getting well, and every day her father tried to show his satisfaction in the process by tricks of clumsy good-humour—the gambols of a whipped Newfoundland clowning to be taken into favour again. When Ninian had to go over into the Niddisdale valley in order to call upon and thank his patron, it was Tony Rorrison who drove him over with the favourite mare between the shafts.

Strange to say, Ninian found himself not at all abashed by Niddisdale Castle and its ducal master. At such times his blood of the Celt upheld him, and the three hundred and sixty-five windows of countryside boasting were to him as the single dead-light of the little shieling where he was born, or the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

skylights of the cottage in Campbelton in which he had spent his youth. And Ninian found the Duke even as other men. On his first entrance he had talked, as he could very well, the English of the sermon and of the Scriptures. But lo! at a sudden question from His Grace he uttered but one sentence of Doric, and immediately the Duke, till now formal and a little bored with this correct young man, came and sat down beside Ninian with quite a new expression of interest on his face.

Smuggling was the subject of conversation—in especial, the part taken by the late minister in conjunction with the Duke and his father in putting it down in the parish of Morland.

'I can tell your Grace something about smuggling,' said Ninian, 'for my faither was yince head smuggler o' a' Cantyre, and the M'Callum More got him made nicht watchman in the Cammelton distillery.'

'What?' cried the Duke, astonished.

And with that came and sat him down, hardly interrupting Ninian for a full hour except to ask questions.

'You must stay and take lunch with me,' said the Duke, who had not yet had enough of Ninian.

'There is a freend waitin' for me below,' said Ninian, suddenly recalled to himself.

'Who is your friend?—What, not Anthony Rorrison, the well-known breeder of Clydesdales? I know his name very well.'

He went to the window, and there, on the gravel, was his own head groom with half a dozen satellites examining the points of Tony Rorrison's mare.

'Tut— tut— very bad, most irregular,' muttered the Duke. 'But what a beautiful creature! I think I will go down and ask your friend myself if he will

favour us!’

So the alarmed grooms shrank and sidled away, finally vanishing affrighted at the unexpected vision of their master at the top of the steps of the great entrance.

The butler, peering from his narrow-barred pantry window, called to the housekeeper to come quick.

There beneath them was His Grace, now lifting a leg and now patting a flank, and finally, to the consternation of ail, mounting beside Anthony Rorrison and taking the reins out of his hands for a trial spin round the gravel, down the avenue, and back by the stables.

‘Gravely irregular,’ said the butler in his turn. ‘What would Her Grace say if only she had been here? Bareheaded, too. It is as well there are no visitors in the Castle at present.’

‘Indeed, I don't know what has come over His Grace!’ concurred the housekeeper.

That was easy to answer. Ninian had come over him even as in succession he had come over me, over Eelan Rorrison and Dr. Stirabout, and now over Eelan Rorrison's father and the little Napoleonic Admiral.

I think the Duke would have been quite prepared to crouch in the heather and watch for ‘gangers’ while Ninian kept the still fire clear and the worm running fine. When they came away finally, the Duke saw them off in person. Ninian was still in the full blast of reminiscence.

‘But a’ that I hae telled ye is juist naething, your Grace. Some day I'll tell ye about the time when I was a cairter in Dundee.’

At this point the swift mare bore him away, and

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

the Duke of Niddisdale, K.G., feeling more human than he had felt for years, and with not a particle of side about him anywhere, was left smiling upon the steps of the grand entrance.

'And from the excellent disposition of the Prime Minister and the representation he has made at my request in the Highest Quarters, I have little doubt but the next birthday will see us at the end of our endeavours, and you in the enjoyment of the honours to which your distinguished services and the amiability of your nature alike entitle you.

'Trespassing once more upon the latter, may I ask of you as a favour that you will be good enough to drive over to Ingleston (which I am assured is just outside your policies) on Friday next—that is, if you have nothing better to do; and, as my representative, deliver to Miss Eelan Rorrison the small parcel which accompanies this note. She is, I understand, to be married on that day to a gentleman whom I am sure you will be glad to unite with me in honouring—the Reverend Ninian Murdoch, minister of this parish, whom, though not of his communion, I respect so highly that etc. etc. etc. Niddisdale.'

This shows the Duke on his high horse, and a very exalted quadruped we must allow it to be. But when this letter and the accompanying packet came into the hands of the naturally-so-amiable Admiral, the smile which had at first lighted up his features upon breaking the ducal seal gradually died out in fast-thickening gloom, and before he had finished the sky was overcast by a black thunder-cloud, from

which issued lightnings and thunderings, with the reek of brimstone and a very great hail.

Nevertheless, when on Friday next at the appointed time the Admiral went over and stood in the sweet and gentle presence of the girl-bride, he was abashed and a new spirit came over him. With something of the Duke's own old-fashioned courtesy, he presented the gift and gave the message. Then, though in his heart deeply ashamed of what he was about to do, he turned away for a moment towards the window while Eelan opened out the Duke's gift. With a hand that fairly shook with haste, the Admiral detached from his fob a small beautifully wrought snuff-box of gold and blue enamel. With this in his hand the Admiral turned quickly to where Ninian stood. He was afraid lest he should change his mind.

'Sir,' he said in sonorous tones, 'will you accept this snuff-box as a token or omen of good luck? I am not aware whether you snuff or not.'

'Ow ay,' said Nnian. 'I have had every bad habit in my time—aye exceptin' profane sweerin!'

But the smile which accompanied the conceit took the sting from the reminiscence. At least, so the Admiral thought. For he laughed and said, 'You are right, sir—you are right! And, since you remind me of that unfortunate rencontre, I desire to tender you my hearty apologies, sir. You did your duty, sir. You were well within your duty, sir. I will never again swear before a clergyman, sir—demmy if I do, sir.'

He turned upon his nephew. Dr. Stirabout's successor, who had entered with that remote air of distinguishing the company by merely existing which even then had begun to be characteristic of youthful ecclesiastics of his top-lofty clique.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'As for you, sir, you insolent young jackanapes, what do you mean by never telling me of this—ahem —celebration? Is this all you care for the interests of your parish and your uncle's goodwill? To let me find out from a distant friend—I refer to His Grace the Duke of Niddisdale—that so fair a neighbour was this day to leave us! It is insufferable, sir! Is that the way you look after the parish with which Providence has entrusted you, and to which I, your maternal uncle, presented you?'

And the old man groped for his snuff-box, which Ninian instantly handed to him. He rapped on the lid, still staring fiercely at his angelical nephew, automatically opened the lid, and helped himself largely. Then, still nodding and frowning truculently, he slipped the box back again into his pocket, forgetting all about having a few minutes before made a wedding present of it. Nor to this day has Ninian ever set eyes upon it again.

The Reverend Evelyn Conrad Conynghame gasped, and words failed him.

'Uncle,' he said anxiously, 'you mistake me, uncle. I do assure you—that!'

'Don't assure me—get on with your work!'

'But allow me to explain. I was under the impression— indeed, you yourself gave me the impression!'

'Tut—tut—do not play with words. If you cannot marry any better than you do the rest of your parish work, by gad, sir, I'll marry the young couple myself—in virtue of my office as a Justice of the Peace! Demmy if I don't.'

But in spite of these preliminary alarms and excursions it was both a quiet and a beautiful wedding. In the douce Scottish fashion they were, of

course, married in the home of the bride; but the sun was setting and, to do him justice, the voice of the Reverend Evelyn Conrad Conynghame was like a low and melodious refrain. Ninian's face as he stood up showed simple and cherubic as ever, but now an unaccustomed gravity shadowed it. Eelan took her place beside him, gentle, dove-like, patient, yet with a certain pride and self-possession lying hidden under her drooping eyelashes. Tony Rorrison on one side and the Admiral on the other gave to the quiet wedding the dignity of two imposing personalities. Mr. Gilbert of Cairn Edward was Ninian's best man, while Nance and I held watching briefs near the door.

'As long as ye both shall live,' said the voice of the young minister of Whinnyliggate. He used a service-book, and came as near to chanting as he dared in the presence of his uncle, who wore boots.

And as the closing words were spoken, I whispered to my wife, 'Look, Nance—I never thought Eelan Rorrison could look so lovely!'

For Eelan's eyes were lifted to her husband's, and her pale cheek was flooded with unwonted rose.

Nance answered me with the least flavour of scorn, from the heights of her superior womanly understanding—

'Neither could Eelan Rorrison look so lovely, but that is Eelan Murdoch!'

(Exercise and Addition):—

I am informed, after my tale has been told and the record closed, that I must reopen my envelope in order to say that the ducal present was a noble necklace of pearls, which it makes Nance sigh even now to think upon.

I ask her if she would exchange with Ninian's wife

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

for a certain shabby little band of greyish-blue Water-of-Dee pearls, which she thought so meanly of that on one occasion she flung them from her into a field. She answered shortly that that had nothing whatever to do with the case.

So, on my own account, since the paper is blank before me, I may add, for the satisfaction of all who like myself are interested in Ninian, that the marriage was a very happy one. Eelan has softened many of Ninian's asperities, and though he still retains all his old frankness, he has benefited by being brought under the gentlest of all constraints—that of a wife who rules by always seeming to obey.

Whenever, for instance, he is in danger of enlarging unduly upon his career as 'a cairter in Dundee,' or at afternoon teas dropping into reminiscences of the Gorbals and the Gallowgate, he becomes conscious of a regard so gentle and penetrating, so quiet and so all-sufficient, that after a floundering moment he returns to subjects more suitable to the occasion if less intrinsically interesting in themselves. The Murdochs have no children, and so perhaps remain in some respects the closer to each other. But the last time I was over at Morland with our two boys. Alec and Ninian, it chanced that I was passing the barn on the morning of the second day of my visit. I heard a voice speaking from within—a voice the tones of which I had not heard for many days.

It was the old Ninian whom we had called Evil Merodach.

'Lead aff wi' your left, ye brat. Guard—there, weel dune, the wee yin! Hit him, Ninian. Dinna flip wi' your fingers as if ye were killin' flees on the ceilin' Dook! Dook! Ye wee deevil, what for dinna ye dook?

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

There—there—dinna greet, lambie! Man, I mind when I was a cairter in Dundee.'

I looked through the door, and there sat Ninian on a sack of oil-cake, smoking a black pipe and teaching my young rascals the whole theory and practice of the noble art of self-defence.

From which I understood that Evil Merodach was not yet dead, and that his ancient thorn in the flesh would assuredly irk him unto the end.

2. THE SEVEN WISE MEN

CHAPTER ONE TOLD BY THE MINISTER'S WIFE

Part of this I know of myself; part the minister told me. In either case it is true, word for word. If people could only hear us tell it, each interrupting the other, they would know. So, as the minister has not time to write it down, owing to having his two sermons a week to compose, I must do it myself.

I can do this the better that I do not come much into the first part of the story. But my husband tells it me at night, after supper, with long details and interruptions (which are the most interesting part), while I scribble everything on a pad, and then write it all out on his typewriter the next morning. That is how this book came to be written, and it is very interesting. At least, I think so.

And if it is not very well done, please remember that it is the first time I have ever tried. Likely also the last. Because if John died, I should die too. There never could be another love story after John's and mine— not in either of our lives. That is certain. But I must begin properly.

It was a September afternoon, crisp and tingly with the wind that tosses and ripens the corn, when a tall young man descended the broad steps leading to the Waverley Station. He passed through the throng of porters, taller and finer-looking than even

the stationmaster himself—which was saying a good deal in those days.

John Davidson had passed his exams, and was going off to preach in his first 'vacancy.' He had on a suit of clerical black, and his tall hat made him feel very uncomfortable. A stiff white shirt tickled him under either armpit. He had also a Saturday-to-Monday bag in his hand with some night-things, a book, and three sermons, two of which he meant to preach on the morrow.

He hunted about to find the wicket where they sell third-class tickets for the village of Longwood, in which place is a Free Presbyterian Church, situated so exactly on the borders of Scotland and England that the beadle can point you out a pew in which you can sit with one leg firmly planted on the Land of Cakes and the other wagging over 'pock-pudding England.'

As John emerged from the domed hall with the tessellated pavement he counted his change before pocketing it, slipped his return ticket into the little side pocket of his overcoat, and was just about to ask the nearest porter for the Longwood platform—Longwood is on the North British Railway, so they will tell you—when a pleasant-faced man in a grey tweed suit laid his hand on his arm.

(This reads fearfully like introducing the villain, as it is done in lots of books I have read, but that is owing to my inexperience. He wasn't a bit the villain. Quite the contrary, indeed.) The newcomer was Mr. James Rivers, the Longwood bank agent, and an elder, though not of the dominant party, in the Free Presbyterian Church in which John Davidson was going to preach on the morrow.

There was a 'vacancy' in the ministry there. Or

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

rather, there ought to have been. The Reverend Gustavus Bird had been sole minister for thirty years, and had retired with an allowance of £60 a year. He was a bachelor, a well-to-do man, a man of good family, and the £60 per annum of retiring allowance had to come off the salary of the new minister. This ought to have been exactly £160, for that sum was the tide mark of the Sustentation Fund that year. But then there was the Widows' and Orphans' Fund—to which all ministers, even when unmarried, had to pay. That took £15 of entrance fees and seven guineas of yearly subscription. Then there were other subscriptions to which, as a minister, the newcomer would have to put down his name. Such were the hospital, the choir, the various Sunday-school excursions, the town band, the local cricket club (so important to create a good feeling among the young men!). It was manifest that the coming pastor of Longwood, the predestined, would have to be passing rich on a sum not very much greater, in spite of the increase of expenses, than the classic £40 a year.

And as for his house furniture, he must trust to Providence to provide that.

But John Davidson took no care concerning any of these things. Indeed, he knew nothing about them, and would not have cared if he had. If any one ever needed someone to look after the pounds, shillings, and pence for him, it was John Davidson.

What he hoped for most at that moment was a quiet lodging where he could read at his ease the pocket 'Waverley' he had brought, go to bed early, and not be bothered on Sunday with people who wanted to talk to him. Also away at the back of his head there existed a mild irradiating thankfulness

like bottled sunshine, which was the consciousness that he had come to the end of all examinations. He had counted, and found that since the days of his first bursary he had passed some three hundred of these, including the little monthly amusements set by hard-driving professors to their classes.

But Mr. Rivers' conversation soon changed the current of John's ideas. He had rarely talked to so delightful a man. The Longwood bank agent was a good-looking man, a little bald, but not too bald to be joked about it. He had a stalwart, burly look, as if he had just taken off knickers and was longing to get back into them again.

'You are going down to preach at Longwood?' he said, smiling.

'Y—e—ss!' said John, with the stammering hesitation of great surprise.

'Oh, I am no wizard,' said the banker, enjoying the mystification, 'but I know more than that. Your name is John Davidson, isn't it?'

The look on John's face was corroboration enough.

'How did you know?' he asked, as they walked away in the direction of the Longwood train.

'I was behind you when you asked for a ticket to Longwood. I am the Secretary of the Church Vacancy Committee there. It was I who sent you the telegram to come on at once, as our supply had failed us.'

'You are Mr. Rivers?'

'My name is Rivers—I was in Edinburgh on business, and waited over for this train, knowing that you would be sure to take it.'

'Then you were on the look out for me?' said John.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Certainly,' said Mr. Rivers frankly. 'You see, I like to have a private look at my possible minister first. I had meant that you should lodge with Widow Kipp, like the others, but now you are going to stay with me at the Bank. I have wired my wife to that effect.'

'What— before you even spoke to me?'

The banker nodded with an amused twinkle in his eye.

'Yes, I was sure of you, you see,' he said. 'When you are as old as I am, and have as many people trying to raise money out of you every day, you will know that the best way to judge a man is by head-mark. Indeed, there is no other way. Certificates — testimonials—I suppose you can get them by the bagful, and they go down with people who don't know any better. But not with me. You've been golfing, I see.'

He turned the conversation rapidly.

'Well, yes,' said John, 'but not for a week or two.'

'How did you get those blisters on the pads of your fingers, then?' the banker asked briskly.

'I was forking sheaves from a cart to a corn-stack when I got your wire handed up. I had just time to clear the load, dress myself, shave, and catch the noon train to Edinburgh. So here I am.'

The bank agent rubbed his hands as he was wont to do after a good stroke of business.

'Better and better!' he said. 'That is the sort of man we need. I suppose your father is a gentleman-farmer?'

(He supposed nothing of the kind.)

John looked him straight in the eye.

'My father and mother are dead,' he said. 'They were very poor. My uncles are on the railway line — one a guard, the other an engine-driver. It was on a

little farm of my aunt's that I was staying till I got something to do. So of course I lent a hand. I was brought up to work.'

'Um— um— m!' the banker meditated, pensively caressing his chin with his forefinger. 'You know we are a very aristocratic people out at Longwood— all mill proprietors who have been ennobled by owning a bank account for at least a generation and a half, or bankrupt landowners with unblemished pedigrees and no bank accounts at all. But upon pasteboard all are equally aristocratic. Oh, you don't know what you have to face tomorrow, Mr. Davidson.'

John laughed a happy laugh.

'It would not matter to me,' he said, 'if I had to preach before the House of Lords!'

'So you have—so you have,' said the banker quietly, and now without the least sign of jesting on his grave, pleasant face; 'tomorrow you have to preach the gospel of the Carpenter before the Lords of the Congregation!'

'The Lords of the Congregation,' said John, rapidly recalling his church history, 'why, they were in Knox's time. Many a battle he had with the fellows. But there are none of them nowadays, thank goodness!'

'Ah,' said the banker, 'there you are wrong. You will find them sitting in the high places of every synagogue, making broad their phylacteries, oppressing God's heritage and making the hearts of His servants heavy.'

As he spoke, the voice of the banker took on a keener Scots accent, a more prophetic, almost Isaian tone, strange in a man so hearty and every way modern.

'If you come among us, will you be faithful?' he

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

asked.

'I will be faithful,' said John quietly.

And they shook hands in a strong, manful silence.

CHAPTER TWO THE SEVEN WISE MEN OF LONGWOOD

Now the Principal of John's College was a wise, far-seeing man of infrequent speech, with a head built up like a dome. Destined to guide the destinies of a great Nonconforming Church through difficult times, he could as easily have guided the course of Empire. He had the orator's magnetism, the statesman's wide vision, the administrator's grasp of detail, and the party leader's dislike of committing himself. From him John learned much. At their last parting he had said, 'Mr. Davidson, you are sent out to preach any gospel that may be in you, to the ignorant, the weary, the sinful, and the poor. Preach it to these, and never mind 'the Seven Wise Men.'

'The Seven Wise Men?' queried John uncertainly. 'I do not quite...'

The Principal smiled, calmly, distantly, but kindly, a slow radiation like the sun rising upon a granite mountain, and he answered his pupil, 'Sir, you will find that in every congregation there are Seven Wise Men — the Magi, the Folibri, who come to criticise, not to benefit; whose verdict is pronounced upon the sermon before they turn the corner, ere the spoken words have done vibrating in your heart. Nay, the Seven Wise Men will condemn you in advance for a lack of quotations, or for too many, because the shape of your head does not

please them, or because they do not like your text. My advice to you, sir, is to preach to the common people, who will hear you gladly, and to care nothing at all about the Seven Wise Men.'

Now of course the next day at Longwood was Sunday (we were too near the English Marches to call it 'the Sabbath'), and the main thing about that day for me is that it was the first time I saw John.

But he did not see me. How could he? The church of the Free Presbyterians was crowded— not a place to be got by a quarter to twelve. The service began at noon. The genuine Longwood folk turned out in great force, each with a pew and each with a force of children to fill it, as my sister Vic used to say, to 'stuffication.' Then there were farmers who had driven in five or six miles and put up their traps at the King's Arms. Behind them, bronzed and weather-beaten by the storms which swept down the blind 'hopes' of Cheviot, or wrinkled into a network of fine lines about the eyes from facing the driving winds upon Meggatsfell, sat the herds of the utmost hills, giving to the sermon and to the service a certain quiet, determinate attention, not at all unreverent.

Simple folk all. But there were, as the Principal of John's College had prophesied, 'the Seven Wise Men even in Longwood.' And the first of these was foolish exceedingly. Sir Bulleigh Bunny, seventh baronet of Bunnybrush Park, had stepped down through his policies—or rather, his creditors' policies — with his lady by his side. Sir Bulleigh now sat in the chiefest seat in the synagogue, betraying in his very manner that he was present upon sufferance. He always explained what a pity it was that they had no Church Episcopal in the immediate vicinity, and

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

that even to set foot in a Scotch kirk by law established, one had to go five miles over the hill.

So, the Free Presbyterian Church of Longwood being built on his estate (a site had long been refused by his grandfather), Sir Bulleigh Bunny now condescended to take his place, 'purely as an example,' throned above the townspeople, to whom he owed money for every mouthful of food that went over his throat, and the farmers upon whose tumbledown steadings he refused to execute a pennyworth of repairs.

But so curious a thing is human nature that his attendance at a nonconforming place of worship was generally esteemed a great condescension on his part; and when Lady Bunny opened bazaars, the genial land-steward, Mr. Guy Greatorix, was always on hand with a speech to prove to the Longwood people what an honour it was when a lady of rank and title, connected with the first families of the land, came among them in 'this kind and friendly way.'

'The name of Lady Bulleigh Bunny,' said Mr. Greatorix for the hundredth time, 'is in all our hearts,' and he did not need to say a word more. The last statement was quite true.

Then, still more important, there were the Dearbrooks. The colossal Dearbrooks, the widely connected Dearbrooks — famous shirt and underclothing makers, with branches in London, New York, and Sydney. They thought themselves the salt of the commercial earth, the twice-born Dearbrooks. But they had not enough brains among them to fill a decent-sized nutshell. For this reason the Dearbrook mills were managed by a clever manager — too clever, some people thought.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

But, under the dull owlish eyes of Sir Bulleigh, all was decorous enough that Sunday morning at Longwood. The Dearbrooks were in their several pews, a solemn company, except perhaps for some of their young people, who, sheltered from the observation of their mothers, kicked each other black and blue under the book boards.

Then under the gallery sat Mr. Augustyne, the bachelor manager of the Dearbrook mills, huge, gross, replete, with frogs to his eyes like those of a well-bred St. Bernard dog. A clever man, Mr. Augustyne— well-read and of copious speech, carrying more brains packed away in that huge squared skull of his than all the Dearbrooks on the surface of the earth. There was nothing mean about Mr. Augustyne. He was not small. He was popular, too, in the mill, where he could always find a job for anyone who touched his fancy; but withal despotic, incapable of bearing contradiction, and certainly thinking somewhat more of himself than he ought to think.

There was also the usual argumentative grocer with a large family and a turn for logic; and, seated under the pulpit, sharp as a terrier at a rat-hole, was Mr. Snipps the cobbler, sermon taster-in-chief to the congregation.

These were the Seven Wise Men, the lords of the Longwood congregation. And John Davidson preached to the large congregation over this solid barrier of mingled dislike and indifference.

Now the work of the man who has only to preach once or twice in a place is, after all, the work of a travelling apostle. He must hail the folk who sit under him from afar, as one ship hails another in the night.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'How is it with you, friend, there in the darkness?'

And sometimes from the bridge on which the soul keeps its watch would come back a ringing 'All's well!' Sometimes a despairing appeal for assistance; but more often than either only the weary Pilatian question—the question which has never yet been answered— 'What is truth?'

So John preached, as it were, blindly into the void. I forget the text. I have heard him preach so long and so often since that it is natural I should forget. But I know there are a hundred in Longwood this day who, if I asked them, could tell me. I was but a girl then, sitting mouse-like between my father and my mother at the back of the gallery. But somehow everything he said seemed to ring true—truer than the other sermons I had been hearing these twenty weeks. It was not that I thought of speaking to him—I did not want to. If John had spoken to me then, I think I should have run away. And besides, my sister Vic had come that day from Edinburgh. She had been a teacher in the school at Longwood, and was now in a ladies' college in the city. Her fawn-coloured coat, which, my brothers said, was made out of a blanket, and her big picture-hat seemed to shelter me. When Vic was there, I was sure that no one saw me or remarked me.

I was just little Isla Wood, but my sister's name is Victoria, and nobody, not even a minister, thinks of looking upon her as insignificant at all.

And Victoria likes that. Victoria was born to impress people. She is quite, quite different from me. Now, for instance, I knew very well that half the congregation were looking at Victoria's hat and wondering how her mother could allow her to wear

such a thing. For about that time all the great folk thought it was a mark of good breeding to wear rough tweed skirts, thick-soled boots, a man's jacket, and a straw hat. Mrs. Arthur Dearbrook of Monkswell House said so. Her eight girls were all dressed like that, and, of course, nobody (except, perhaps. Lady Bunny) dared to say or do any different—that is, if they wanted to be thought anything of in Longwood. But, you see, our Vic did not care.

Vic was earning her own living, and she said that she would dress to suit herself. All the same, I could see that mother had rather she wouldn't. But mother loved us so much really that we might have dressed in corn-sacks without her saying anything. Father was different. He liked us to be as pretty and quiet and ladylike as possible. Most men do; and my father was a good deal of a man.

We lived at Netherwood, which is a funny thing when you come to think of it, as our name was Wood too. Now Netherwood was high up on the hillside, near the moorland. It was, I know, a poor enough place. We had only a rent of fifty pounds to pay, and naturally father was never very rich. But he wasn't poor either, because he had the farm cheap. Also my brothers were brave lads, and either worked on the farm or went out into the world as soon as they could make their living. Perhaps father's temper helped them to quit early. For father was very stern with the boys; but we girls, especially Vic, could get out of him pretty much anything we wanted. So the boys always got us to go and ask for them. And father would say, with a twinkle in his eye, 'Who put you up to that? Well, I won't say no; but tell Tom and Alick to go and look to the sheep

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

on the Far Hill first,' which tasted of the sweet and the bitter both in one cup.

Oh, it was none so easy to hoodwink father, but for all that he shut his eyes to a good deal when Vic came home from town. For Vic was his favourite; but as for me, I was quite content to help mother in the kitchen and read all the books I could lay hands on between times.

So it came about that when Vic saw John in the pulpit rising to give out the first hymn, she turned quite pale, and presently her head in the big felt hat slipped down on my father's shoulder.

CHAPTER THREE AT AUNT FLORA'S IN CROSS STREET

My father nearly fainted himself, I think, when he felt Vic's head slide down soft and heavy on his neck. They called old Frankie Wood 'hard' and 'dour,' but at least he never was so with his girls, especially with Vic. And in an emergency father was always ready. He turned to our nearest neighbour Lament, the Bunnybrush estate forester, who was sitting behind us at the head of his pewful of children, all gazing open-mouthed at Vic.

'The heat and the crowded church have been too much for my daughter,' he whispered; 'help me with her into the open air.'

So, a strong man on either side, they supported her out, without a dozen of the congregation being aware what was happening—a fortunate matter in a place where tongues have so little to do. Well for John, as it turned out, and well for all of us. Well, too, for Longwood and its church.

But I don't think the rest of us heard much of that sermon, the first John preached in Longwood. I know I did not. I was thinking too hard about Vic, and wanting to go to her. Father came back when the service was about half finished. He whispered to us that Vic was all right, but was resting at Aunt Flora's. Still, there was a grim look on his face which I did not like. And it troubled me to think why my sister should faint at the sight of this young man in the pulpit. Though perhaps, after all, it was just the heat.

But of course John never knew anything about it—not the least in the world. He says now that while he was reading the last verse of the opening hymn (which in our church is always a metrical psalm), he heard a stir, but he thought it was only some fussy or belated office-bearer taking his seat. So he never even looked up. And he preached a splendid sermon that morning. So that even the Seven Wise Men—the Dearbrooks, Sir Bulleigh, Mr. Augustyne, and the wise grocer and sermon-tasting cobbler—could find nothing to say against it. They did not mean to vote for John, of course, because their minds were made up long ago. They would vote for a young man of good family, a relative of the Dearbrooks, and, indeed, their only link with aristocracy. This young man had raised the feeblest kind of enthusiasm among the people.

But when at last we got out of church and went over to Aunt Flora's, father would not allow us to go up to see Vic—no, not even mother. He was going to have a little talk with her first, he said. But mother laid her hand on his breast and said, 'Don't, Francis. Let me go. I will tell you faithfully; and whatever it is, it will be easier for Victoria to tell her

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

mother than anyone else.'

My father kept on his obstinate look for a little while. Then he gave way.

'Very well, Mary,' he said, 'I will not cross you. Deal with our daughter as seemeth good to you.'

Then we all sat down about Aunt Flora's table and made believe to eat. It was potato stew, and I have been fond of it all my life. It was always served on Sundays at Aunt Flora's, in her little house on Cross Street, because it could be put on the fire to simmer all the forenoon, and so kept nobody from church. But that afternoon, with the fear of something (I knew not what) heavy on my heart, and the murmur of voices up in aunt's spare bedroom, I declare that, for the first time, auntie's lovely stew and potatoes had no taste. But Tom and Alick ate just as usual—that is to say, as much as they could get.

In their opinion Vic had simply made a fool of herself, and incidentally of them, by this fainting in church. And after we got back home they would speak with Vic in the gate.

Aunt Flora was my father's youngest sister, but, as generally happens, as unlike him as possible. Plump, white, dimply, youthful-looking, with china-blue eyes and the expression of a confiding baby, it was a continual surprise to us why at forty-five she was still Miss Flora Wood of 10 Cross Street, Longwood. Meanwhile, overhead the murmur went on and on. But now it seemed that it was not continuous. Somebody was sobbing, and I was sure that one was mother. Father paced the floor like a caged lion. I had never seen him so upset. Two or three times he went to the door as if to mount the stairway. But Aunt Flora always came along just in

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

time and said, 'Don't, Francis, leave it to Mary. This is not your business. Remember you promised.'

'I know—I know,' he said, striking his hands together; 'but it is hard. Flora—it is hard. My own daughter!'

Then at last mother came down. She looked about, as I think, to see that the two boys were out of the room.

'No,' she said, 'Vic is not married to this young man, as you supposed, Francis. But she is engaged — what she calls betrothed— to somebody, and his name is Davidson. He is like the minister who preached today. But Vic will not say that he is the same. She is very reticent.'

My father started for the door.

'We must have something more definite than that,' he said.

But my mother interposed.

'Not from her just now—she cannot bear it. Ask the other, if you like. That is a man's business.'

And that is why John Davidson had his first interview with my father— one very astonishing one for them both.

I can always remember, indeed I can never forget, my father's face as he went out of Aunt Flora's at five minutes to four that afternoon to see John Davidson. That would just be at the close of second service, which none of us dared to attend because of the expression on my father's face. Victoria was still in the spare room, but once when I stole up very quietly I could hear her sobbing to herself. But I knew it was about something I could not help her with, so I did not go in, though I longed to with all my heart.

Now I had only seen John's face in church for an

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

hour—never before in all the world. But somehow I knew quite well that whatever had happened to Vic in Edinburgh, and whoever was to blame, it could have nothing to do with John. I had looked into his eyes and I had heard his voice. He could not be false or cruel.

But it was a lonely time at aunt's, and the boys spent most of it about the stables, because they could not stand the waiting stillness which weighed upon them— like that at a funeral service before they take away the coffin.

We remained till about six, and then while mother was up with Vic, and aunt busy with a tea that nobody but Tom and Alick cared anything about, we heard the sound of footsteps on the paved causeway in front of Aunt Flora's little whitewashed cottage.

Two men came in quietly. Neither said a word. It was my father and the young minister. There were no introductions, nor apparently any need to speak. My father was a different man from the one who went out two hours before. His assurance was dashed, his anger fallen. I think he knew not what to believe or what to do.

'Is Victoria ready to see us?' he asked my mother in a hoarse voice very unlike him.

She shook her head.

'Then go and prepare her,' he ordered sharply; 'we will wait here.'

And he indicated a chair to the young man. I was happy within the door of the inner room, and so could see without being seen. John sat down with a grave quiet which became him very well—or so at least I thought. My father had his fingers gripped behind his back, twisting and untwisting as he fidgeted about the room, while mother went lip to

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

tell Vic that they were coming. As for me, I own that I stood in the shadow and quaked.

Then in a little they went up. I saw mother and Aunt Flora go quietly past me into the 'ben' room and shut the door. I knew that they were going to pray. Then I cannot explain what came over me. I never did the like before, for I had been well brought up. But somehow I felt that, if I were to be ready to help Vic, I must know all about the secret, whatever it was. And also perhaps I did it a little because I was so sure that the young minister was as innocent as I was myself.

So I eavesdropped! Yes, I did. There is really no excuse, only I must tell the truth. I wasn't a child who knew no better, for I had passed my eighteenth birthday, but at least I had the grace to feel ashamed even when I was doing it. Generally, when one does wrong, that feeling does not come till afterwards.

I crept quietly to the door of the spare room and peeped. Yes, I peeped. Oh, I told everybody after, and how bitterly ashamed I was; and they forgave me. Even my father. As for John— but John did not matter. Well, I could see everything quite well, because there was a little gable window over the bed on which Vic was lying, fully dressed and wrapped besides in aunt's patchwork dressing-gown. She was pale like paper; even her pretty red lips were colourless. Now Aunt Flora had all her dresses hung up behind the door, some with old-fashioned 'busks' in them to balloon them out and keep them from creasing. So you can imagine that the folds would not let the door quite shut, and when any one pushed it to, it opened again as with springs. So I could see everything— hear also.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

It was a great shame, and I knew better. But still, since I am telling the story as it happened, this is what I saw and heard past the gores and flounces of aunt's old-fashioned gowns, all smelling of lavender and southernwood.

CHAPTER FOUR EAVESDROPPING

Vic rose sharply on one elbow to look at John. I never saw such a look before. She put her hands above her brows as if to guard her eyes from a strong light (though it was not at all bright in aunt's little spare room). Then with a sharp sigh of disappointment the faint glow of hopefulness faded from her face, and she sank back on the pillow.

'Why do you come?' she said, speaking the words as if very weary. 'You are not Earnest. You are like him, but you are not Earnest. Why are you all so cruel to me?'

The young minister stood alone at the foot of the bed. Father was at the side with the light behind him, watching both their faces.

'My surname is Davidson,' he said. 'I understand that you have a friend of that name. For my part, I have a cousin Earnest, whose Christian name you have mentioned. It is possible there may have been some confusion. I do not remember ever to have seen you before, Miss—Miss...'

'Victoria Wood,' said my father in a strong, sudden voice; 'and pray will you tell us, Mr. Davidson, when you last saw your cousin Earnest?'

John thought a moment, my father's gaze like a burning-glass upon him.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'It must be more than two years ago,' he said; 'we had been lodging together in the same rooms. Then Earnest wanted more freedom. He went to more expensive chambers, and after that we only saw each other occasionally. I heard, however, that he had passed his final examination in medicine and was preparing to go out to the colonies.'

'Oh no, no!'— Vic was on her elbow again— 'not without telling me. He would never have gone— not without his wife!'

My father drew himself up with the sudden jerk of a man stricken unawares. 'Married!' he said. 'But your mother— you told your mother...'

'No, father, no,' said Vic; 'mother asked me many questions, but I answered none. She misunderstood—that is all. And I thought—I thought, seeing him so suddenly and so like— that this gentleman was indeed my husband. His name was on the notice-board outside the church. I thought that strange, but only smiled and went in. For I had promised Earnest to keep our marriage a secret for a year, and that kind of secret, which others know nothing about, is sweet. Oh, it fills the heart and is sweet to keep deep hidden, all to oneself!'

'But you knew, surely, whether this young man, Earnest Davidson, was a doctor or a clergyman?'

'He went out to classes every day,' said Vic, 'that is all I knew. I was always at work myself. I have seen his scientific books lying about. But he always shut them up when I wanted to look over his shoulder. He said they were not for babies. I thought he was studying to be a medical missionary.'

The flicker of a smile passed over John Davidson's face.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Earnest has tried many professions,' he said, 'but not the ministry of the Word, in any shape or form. He has his faults, but hypocrisy was never one of them when I knew him.'

'Why did you hide this— this marriage from your father and mother?' asked my father.

'Earnest bade me,' she answered simply. 'We used to go the same way home, and Miss Fawcett introduced him. He had pestered her for a long time to do that. Afterwards we always walked back to Miss Kay's together. He told me that he loved me. He loved me so that he was afraid of losing me. It ended by his asking me to marry him before the Registrar, and to keep it secret from everybody, just for one year. I stayed on at Miss Kay's and met him on Saturdays and Sundays. There was no harm except I have not told you.'

Vic took her purse from below the pillow, opened it, and gave an oblong folded paper to her father. He read it carefully. Then he looked up at the young minister.

'I have to ask your pardon, sir,' he said, spacing his words carefully. 'You will agree with me that I had some reason for disturbing your first Sunday in Longwood. There is no reason for putting you about more than we have already done. If you hear any news of your cousin Earnest, as a father I shall feel grateful to you for communicating with me.'

John bowed to Vic and took my father's outstretched hand. Then he made hastily towards the door, and -oh, shame of shames—stumbled over me, Isla Wood, who had not the time or the presence of mind to get away, he came so quick. It was stupid of him to come blundering out like that. He says so now himself.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

I think he must have been a little shaken also by the experiences of the afternoon and evening. For he gazed with that curious blinking expression (like an owl in the sunshine) which he still has when he comes upon anything unexpected. I think he must have confused me with Vic. 'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Davidson,' was what he said to me. It was indeed.

Then the very next minute I heard him open Aunt Flora's outer door and his footsteps die away on the stubbly cobble-stones of Cross Street. It was an awful thing to be caught like that, yet the next minute I could not help laughing at what he said.

'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Davidson.' Just fancy!

How little either of us thought that I should be Mrs. Davidson as really as (and much more openly than) my sister Vic. Not that I loved him then, or he me. That came long after. He did not even see me, and indeed if John had had to marry every girl he stumbled over, the dear old purblind would have had as many wives as Solomon. Then we went up to Vic's room. We found her lying propped up on the pillow, and her eyes were upon the little stairway door by which John had descended. She knew that this man was not her husband, yet she could not help looking.

Of course mother was there explaining to Vic and all who would listen to her how it was all her fault and not at all Vic's. She had misunderstood Victoria. She knew (the dear old mother!) that she had been asking far too many questions, and not waiting for the answers. You should never ask questions of people whose heads ache. And if Vic were married, doubtless her husband was a very nice man, and had reasons of his own for telling her to keep it a secret from her parents.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Hold your tongue, Mary!' ordered my father, who had come back in the midst of all this. He did not say it unkindly, you know, but just in the way in which he went about commanding everybody. It was father's manner, that was all.

Then he turned to Vic, and, speaking sternly to her, asked if she owed money in Edinnburgh.

'I do not owe any one a farthing,' said Vic, flaming up. 'I paid Miss Kay the morning I came down here.'

'That is as well,' said our father, 'for you are not going back to the city. See, sit up, Victoria, and write out your resignation.'

'But you will not be able to keep me; I shall be a charge upon you.'

'That we cannot help,' said my father; 'at any rate, you can help your mother and Isla. And as for the cost, it is nothing; the boys and I will just work a little harder, that is all. But back to Edinburgh you shall not go!'

There was something strong and compelling about father when he was roused. I have heard brother Tom tell how his very appearance in the door of a barn where, in harvest-time, the hired men were at the card-playing, would make the most stubborn malingerer shake from head to foot.

So, as soon as Vic heard the words come out of father's mouth, she knew begging off was no use. Though, of course, it was like a blow in the face to her. Many girls would have fought awhile and then given way. Because it meant almost, if not quite, throwing up her profession to send in her resignation like that in the middle of the year. But Vic understood that it was no use fighting against father, and she took a strong grip of herself. I could see her pull herself together like a weary horse with

a steep hill before it. She got up from Aunt Flora's bed, put aside mother's hand which was stretched out to help her, and sat down at the table. Father fetched the ink, which was very muddy and sticky at the bottom. Aunt's ink always was like black gum. Aunt wrote about three letters a year, at Christmas time. Then Vic looked over her shoulder for me. I had a fountain-pen which she had brought me herself the last holidays from the city. It was my most precious possession, and you can imagine what care I took of it— more than a boy does of his first pocket-knife. So in a moment I had it out, screwed off the cap with a cunning twist so as not to draw the ink with it, and handed it to Vic.

'Sit down by me and help,' she said. I was never more surprised. Because everything had been done so sternly up to now, and all of us treated so much as children—even mother. For nobody but Vic and father seemed to have anything to do with the matter.

But Vic wanted me. And wasn't I glad. I was as proud as if you had given me a medal. Even father looked a little astonished, but he continued to stand over us both.

'I wish you all to go away while Isla and I write my letters,' she said.

'I require to know the terms of your resignation,' said my father, with something of his sternness still remaining.

Then Vic turned on father with the very match of his own look. She was always liker him than any of the others. None of the rest of us would have dared— not even mother.

'I am giving up my profession,' she said, 'throwing everything I have learned, and lived, and been,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

behind me at your word. Let that be enough. It ought to be obedience enough as between father and child. For, as a daughter, I have my rights as well as you. Let it suffice that I am willing to write these letters at all.'

'These letters?'

'Yes, these letters,' said Vic, fiercely making the plural. 'I am one man's daughter, and I acknowledge the bond. I obey. But I am another man's wife, and that is a bond also.'

'You shall not write to him!'

'I will,' said Vic quietly, 'or I shall return to Edinburgh tomorrow morning. I am of age. You can choose.'

For a minute, which seemed an hour to me, these two, Victoria and Francis Wood, daughter and father, fought with their eyes. And it will hardly be believed, but it was my father, whose frown could, tame a barnful of Irish harvesters, who said, 'Very well.' Then he turned on his heel and walked away. But so it was. You can't help wondering at such things. Mother went down too, trembling, I am sure, for what my father might do. Aunt Flora followed, and Vic and I were left alone in the little spare room with the mirror and the antimacassars pushed back out of the way.

Instantly Vic shook off her weary expression, took the fountain-pen from me, tried it on her fingernail, and drawing the sheets of aunt's cheap paper (five quires for sixpence), began to write.

Her first letter was to the Principal of the Southern Ladies College, and was quite simple. She did not ask me for any help in the writing of that. The fountain-pen seemed to run of itself.

'Dear Madam.' (she wrote),— 'Circumstances of

the most intimate personal and family nature, though not such as to bring any discredit either upon myself or the school, prevent me from returning to complete my engagement with you. In short, my father forbids my return to Edinburgh at present, and in some ways I think he is right. Should I have the honour of meeting you privately at any future time, I should be glad to explain the circumstances more fully than I can do on paper. Indeed, I am not at liberty to say more for the moment, but time will alter that.

I thank you, dear Madam, for all the kindness you have shown me. Of course, I understand that my action, though taken quite against my will and for reasons out of my control, forfeits that portion of my salary already earned. Therefore I shall say no more on that head, but only ask you to bid an affectionate adieu to my colleagues, and to believe that I shall cherish throughout my life a true and abounding gratitude to yourself, and of goodwill towards the school of which you are the Head.'

CHAPTER FIVE THE MOUSE HELPS THE LION

'And now,' said Vic, as she addressed the envelope to her headmistress, 'come nearer to me—nearer yet, Isla. For the next is going to be difficult to write, and I want my little sister to help me. They teach you at the schools how to do that sort of thing,' (she pushed her letter of resignation farther back on the table). 'But now I want a little girl with lots of heart to guide me. Mine is a little weary, more than a little sore. It has been trampled on, Isla, my

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

heart. But yours— yours is as fresh as a morn in May!’

‘But how can I help you, Vic dear? I am so willing if I only knew how.’

‘That I cannot tell— we shall see. Meanwhile it helps even to have you there.’

And she did what she had never done before, not since I was a little thing in short clothes, when she used to dress me up pretty to go to church on Sunday mornings. She took me in her arms and gave me a long hug. No, she did not kiss me. But I was so overcome at my sister's kindness, coming so unexpectedly, that I fell just into her arms and cried and kissed her such a lot. I am like mother, I think, the least bit of extra lovingness just knocks me over every sort of way.

‘Come, let us write to Earnest,’ Vic interrupted, with something of a duck in her throat— not sharp, you know, but as if she were swallowing hard to keep the tears down. You know, if you are a girl.

‘But have you his address?’ I said, only for something to say.

‘I know how a letter will find him, if he is alive,’ Vic answered.

‘Of course you will never forgive him?’ I said, though I knew better.

Vic gave me a look, not long, but rather sharp and contemptuous, with, for the first time, something of amusement in it. I liked that kind of look on her face. It was far better than the other.

She did not answer directly, but only said, ‘Dear little Isla, you will know all about it some day.’

Then, to show how wide awake she was, she shoved my beautiful fountain-pen into Aunt Flora's nasty muddy ink, which she would never have done

if she had been thinking about what she was doing. And I had to take it away and dip it in some old eau-de-Cologne that aunt kept in her reticule. It made it pale lavender colour, which would be good for aunt's complexion when she came to use it. Then I wiped the pen on a linen rag out of my old school-bag, which had hung behind auntie's door ever since I left the Longwood High School.

As I brought the pen I thought how pretty she looked—our Vic, with her hair curling about her face all in tangles and little running twists. Not that there was anything extraordinary in that. For in one minute Vic could always throw her hair up on top of her head, transfix it with half a dozen hairpins, and finish up with a little Spanish comb edged with silver. And yet when it was done it looked pretty enough for an artist to paint, and as if she had taken a whole day to do it.

I gave her my pen and told her to scribble a bit with it first, because it might run watery. For, you see, I had none of the proper fountain-pen ink to dip it in, so as to give it a start.

But she only wrote 'Earnest' over and over again, and once 'Darl —.' And being a girl, I knew why she stopped, and that she didn't mean me.

Then all at once she drew a long sigh and began to write very fast, with one arm tight about me—for something to hold on to, I think.

'Earnest, —I am sending this by way of Miss Fawcett, who will know what I do not know— where my husband is. My father has found out everything, though I kept my promise to you, God knows, better than you kept yours to me. I cannot go back to Miss Kay's or to Edinburgh. Father forbids me. I have sent in my resignation. You asked a thing

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

impossible from me, Earnest, and I kept faith and waited till I could do no more. Forgive me because, being a woman and weak, I failed. And believe that I forgive you—who are a man and strong.'

So far I had read word after word. And I touched Vic on her soft arm, which had such full gracious curves, just like a steel engraving in an old art journal,

'If you love him,' I whispered, 'don't stop there. Put in a loving word. That last was really a reproach.'

For I knew by myself, though I never had any one to love me like that (or at least no one whom I loved), that it is always at the beginning and end of a letter that people look out for affection. Especially at the end—their hearts are openest then.

'Well, what shall I say?' Vic whispered.

I was on the point of answering sharply, 'How should I know?' But something in my heart kept telling me that a woman can never forgive too much.

Perhaps also I remembered something of the 'hook' petition in the Lord's Prayer—I call it the 'hook' petition because all the rest hang on it—'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.' So I said to Vic something like this: 'Tell him that you forgive him as if you meant it, and not as if it were nasty medicine.'

'I cannot,' she said, and stamped her foot.

'Very well,' said I, 'then I will go down to mother and send up father to help you write your letter to your husband.'

But she clutched me to her, tight.

'Don't go, Baby,' she cried.

She used often to call me 'Baby' like that; I don't know why, except that she was always bigger than I,

and thought she knew so much more. Though, as things turned out, I am not sure that she did.

Then she added, 'Yes, I will write. Tell me what to say.'

And it was a strange thing that happened then. For I, who had never written a love-letter of my own, had, as it were, the words given me to dictate to my sister who had written hundreds. You see Vic was pretty and I wasn't. Also, she began early. For after she went to Edinburgh I found stacks and stacks in her chest of drawers upstairs, all sealed in envelopes, and then torn with a forefinger at the corners so that Vic might be able to see the handwriting and know who they were from.

'Tell him,' I said, 'that, though in sorrow and ashamed, you still love him more than ever you did before.'

'But I don't!' she broke out.

'Yes, you do,' I answered, quite patiently.

'I don't! I don't, I tell you!

I said nothing, but only waited; and in a little from her heart the words rent themselves as if a piece were torn roughly from a garment:

'Oh, I do—I do—but how did you know?'

And she wrote as I had told her.

'Then tell him' (I went on) 'that you will wait for him here as his loving, faithful wife till the light comes— till he comes; that you are sure he has not willingly deserted you; that you still believe in him '

'Ah, cruel, cruel!' Vic cried. 'Isla, how can you make me suffer like that?'

But somehow I had taken the mastery—I, who always before had been Vic's little bond-slave. And she wrote word for word and line for line as I told her. It came easily to me and was no trouble at all.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Now tell him that you love him and always will, 'till death you do part.' Yes, write the words and sign your name. No, your married name— his name.' By this time we were both crying over the paper, and a pretty spectacle we had made of it between us. Because, you see, Vic was sitting writing, and I had risen so as to see the better over her shoulder and to dominate my sister.

Then she wrote the address on the envelope, with 'To be Forwarded' in the corner, and I found two stamps in her purse.

'Give me the letters,' I said; 'I will go over to the post office with them.'

'You are mad, child!' said Vic; 'father is below. He will never let you pass with the letters in your hand without looking at them.'

'Give them to me. You will see,' I answered. For Vic and I seemed for the time to have changed natures.

I went down, and there sat my father reading out of the Book of Judges at the foot of the plain deal table, which Aunt Flora kept scoured till it was like milk.

He glanced at the letters in my hand.

'Let me see them,' he said. At any other time I should have trembled. But knowing that you are doing your duty, especially for somebody else, is a fearfully helpful thing. It makes you strong.

'These are sister Victoria's letters,' I answered. 'They are what you gave her permission to write. They are properly written. I saw every word. And now I am going to post them.'

'Very well,' said my father, and followed me with his eyes through the door. 'This little Isla is a Wood too,' I heard him say to Aunt Flora as I closed the

latch.

But all the same, when I felt the freshness of the outer air, somehow the whole world turned round and I stumbled on the kerb. Still, I posted the two letters all right, and came back steady and calm. Nor did I cry till I got upstairs again to Vic. Then it did not matter. For we both cried, and it did us good.

CHAPTER SIX THE CHOOSING OF THE TEACHING ELDER

John left Longwood the next morning. I went to the head of our plantation, which runs very high up Back Fell, and saw the train that would be carrying him away. Mr. Rivers, the banker, was there to bid him good-bye. I could see him through father's glass coming back down the hill with his heavy swinging stride. But he twirled his stick as he went, so that I knew that the heart of the banker was light within him.

All the world knew that the banker was the leader of the People's Party in Longwood, and that he would do his best to have John elected. On the other hand, the Seven Wise Men, the hangers-on of the Bunnybrush estates, and all the heads of departments in the Dearbrook factories, were anxiously canvassing for the election of the Reverend Augustus Towers, once a probationer of the Scottish Establishment, and now vaguely and ornamentally preaching in vacancies wherever he could hear of one. Mr. Towers came of a remote branch of the Dearbrook family (a tree of infinite ramification), which had borne too much fruit, and

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

so had dropped out of the apostolic succession—that is to say, out of the money which alone made the Dearbrook mare to go.

Mr. Augustyne, the plethoric broad-gauge manager, with all the brains of the concern packed away in his skull and the St. Bernard 'frogs' in either eye, did most of the actual canvassing.

Personally he cared not a jot one way or the other, but he did it chiefly to please Sir Bevis of Dearbrook Abbey, the richest of the partners.

Now I did not know whom father was going to vote for— not, that is, till the Thursday afternoon when he told me to bring his razor strop. Then I knew that he was going to the meeting, and I knew that he would not vote for the Abbey candidate, the Reverend Augustus Towers. For Augustus was a chubby lad who had worn a college gown with a hood, or, as it was locally termed, 'a tippet.' And that was enough, and more than enough, for my father. The cloven hoof had peeped through. The scarlet rag on the back of the Reverend Augustus (it was a B.D. degree of a minor university) called up mixed but unmistakable reminiscences of 'the Scarlet Woman' and of 'Her who sitteth on the Seven Hills.'

John was the only other serious candidate. Therefore I gathered that my father, which meant my mother also, would vote for John. I was to stay at home with Vic. Now this was manifestly unfair, for, having 'joined the church' at last communion, I had as good a right to vote as the ruling elder himself, and the boys could have stayed behind easily enough instead of raking the country. It would have done them good for one night. But I was to stay to keep Vic company.

All the same I resolved to vote if possible. It was

indeed my duty as a church member— ‘my duty and my privilege.’ How often had I heard Mr. Moffat the Moderator of Session and minister of the neighbouring parish of Edam, say so when addressing the congregation. It came upon me with a curious shock that John might lose the appointment because I was not there. Vic had no vote. She had ‘taken her lines’ with her, and had joined a congregation in the city. You will remember that this was on Thursday evening, four days after the terrible occurrences of Sunday— that Sunday I am not likely to forget. All day Vic had been more than usually restless, and had carried me off with her, here to pick gooseberries in some deserted orchard, and there to see if the hazel-nuts were getting ripe on the bushes. But I could see quite well that her attention was not really fixed on any of these things. She kept looking away across the moor and running her eye, keen-sighted almost as a telescope, along the heights, rocky barren ridges on which the long ice-worn boulders lay out like so many sea-lions or polar bears. But always she came back disappointed, and listened wearily enough to me while I talked about the changing September lights and cloud-shadows on the hills, or the pattern-work of a dose-clinging spray of wild ivy climbing up a beech tree in the glade. You see I had been reading Ruskin about the time, and after I had got to the end of one of his long sentences my little head was full of what I took for thoughts. But, I fear me, not at all what Mr. Ruskin himself meant. However, I babbled away cheerfully enough. But anyway, Vic did not care.

So when father and mother had gone off to the meeting of the Free Presbyterian Church down at

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Longwood, Vic said that she felt sleepy, and would go in and lie down. I was glad of that, for it gave me one chance at least of helping John. For I thought that he had behaved so simply and nobly the day when father brought him in, right into the middle of a family quarrel with which he had nothing in the world to do.

Before going upstairs, Vic was with difficulty persuaded to try some curds and cream with a piece of yesterday's bread that I had saved for her. If there was anything she would take, I knew it would be that. So Vic did, indeed, eat with some appetite, which pleased me. And then she went straight off to her bedroom. I had given her my bed and made up a shakedown on the couch in a little room between my bedroom and the landing. So Vic had to pass me close if she wanted to go out anywhere, and I was a light sleeper.

I waited quite half an hour, listening to Vic's quiet breathing, as regular and peaceful as if she had never known a bit of trouble all her life. Then I thought it would be quite safe to go. So I slipped a cloak over my house-dress, put on my second-best hat and a veil that had been Vic's—a pretty thick veil. After that I went out on tiptoe into the pastures and whistled up Dolly. Now Dolly is my own particular pony, a strawberry roan with a white star on her forehead. She used to come to me for apples, which she ate from the palm of my hand as daintily as a swallow picks flies from the ground or flirts a pond with its wing.

Dolly came for her apple, which I had smuggled off the shelf in mother's cupboard for her. Then in a moment I had a headstall over her nose and was upon her back. I had taught her to carry me with

only that, guiding her anywhere by laying the rope loose on the side of her neck to which I wished her to turn. A little switch and a touch of the heel did all the rest. We understood each other, Dolly and I.

As soon as she got the idea where she was taking me, there was no more trouble with Dolly. She would not let the boys touch her. They were too rough with her, and she lashed out every way if they came within-twenty yards. But Tom said that I was a witch and had whispered 'the gipsy word' in her ear. I didn't do that; but certainly I did talk to Dolly all the time, and right good company she was.

You would have thought that she really entered into the spirit of the night ride. It was a 'ploy'—a kind of exploit on the sly when father and mother were away. Animals like this quite as well as humans. At least Dolly did. I suppose the taste of forbidden fruit has never quite lost its flavour for her sex even to this day. Some people will say that such a thing could not extend to horses. But then they did not know Dolly. As for whimsies, Vic herself could not have been more whimsical.

At any rate we were not long on the road. The trees flittered past us—dim tall shadows, very still and in endless rows—the broom bushes went on crackling their cooling pods, while the rap, rap of Dolly's little hoofs, which I blacklead myself, every day, made the prettiest music to the ear. I did not see a soul on the road, but I had been too much on horseback and too much a child of the moors to have the slightest fear. Indeed, I did not know what fear was on Dolly's back, with her sensitive ears cocking back and forward just in front of me. Long before I got to the village I could see the big barn-like church all alight. From the Longburn Bridge,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

three miles away, it looked like a rising star of the first magnitude. From the top of Longwood Hill, just above the town, it was almost like a conflagration. Every window flared. The night, dim and grey out in the country between the hedges, and only comparatively dusk where it was open, became pit-mirk about the flare of the painted windows. For the Free Presbyterian Kirk of Longwood was choosing a minister— to be more correct, a colleague and successor to the Reverend Gustavus Bird, now happily retired to his native Aberdeenshire.

At the first dry arch of the bridge I slipped off Dolly and led her below by a narrow footpath. Underneath there was a ring let into a stone, and she could have both grass and water at choice, with shelter to boot, till I came back for her. There was not much risk of theft, for everybody for ten miles round knew old Francis Wood's Dolly by sight.

Then I went directly to the church and stole in through the crowded ranks of non-members, all anxious to hear the result of the voting. It was curious, all these people gathered to choose the man who was, as my father put it, 'to be over them in the Lord.'

Well, perhaps they were not all very wise. It may be that they were a little apt to follow a leader. But still, on the whole, it was better than having Sir Bulleigh Bunny, Baronet, do the choosing for them, as he would much have liked to do.

When I got in and slipped into a seat under the shadow of the gallery, big, fat Mr. Augustyne was busily (and a little fussily) engaged in making a speech.

It was in favour of the Abbey cousin, and, as far as he dared, against John, though of course he

never named him.

'The Free Presbyterian Church of Longwood' (said Mr. Augustyne, manager of the all-wool under-clothing mills)' occupies a somewhat peculiar position, that is, one peculiar for a Nonconformist congregation. It is not every such body of Christians which has the honour to number among its loyal members two gentlemen of title—I had almost said noblemen. Well do they deserve the further honour, which no doubt will one day be theirs—one as the representative of the ancient noblesse of Britain, which had bravely borne itself in many a desperate campaign.'

'Against the pheasants!' commented a perfectly audible voice from the back of the gallery. Sir Bulleigh Bunny, with his worst-bred under-game-keeper expression, turned sharply and tried to fix the culprit with an empurpled frown. But Bob Hexham, who had made his voice heard, kept his head reverently fixed on the book-board. Mr. Augustyne continued his impassioned harangue without noticing.

Having then not only among us a man so distinguished by ancient lineage, but also the representatives of the most lofty commerce—the nobility of the counting-house, if he might so express himself—good masters, kind landlords, he (Mr. Augustyne) thought that the least that the Free Congregation of Longwood could do, in order to show its gratitude for such providential favours, was to be guided by the expressed will of such men in the choice of their minister. It was an honour for the church—for any church. And though—far be it from him to threaten—yet in the natural course of events there was certainly a strong presumption

that, if the Reverend Augustus Towers, so suitable in every way, and of such an excellent family, were not chosen to the vacant post, the great families whom he had had the honour to name might— he did not say would — he had no authority to take so much upon himself — but might withdraw their support, financial and otherwise, from the congregation, taking with them all those like-minded with them. It might even then become a question to whom the property of the church belonged.

Mr. Rivers had too great a sense of his position as the sole local bank agent to appear himself in the matter. Personally harmless as a dove, he found the wisdom of the serpent serve him better in Longwood. He had therefore arranged with the village schoolmaster, who held a life appointment under the present arrangement, and also with a representative working-man, to move a counter-motion to that of Mr. Augustyne. The schoolmaster, Mr. Black, contented himself with moving that the Reverend John Davidson, who had preached to the congregation on the previous Sabbath day, with such satisfaction to all, should be elected minister of the congregation. The working man, having a good trade at his finger-ends and no fear either of Bulleigh Bunny or Dearbrook Abbey and Co. before his eyes, was more explicit.

They were a free church (he said), therefore they had a right to choose their own minister. They were a Presbyterian church governed, as he had read, by sessions, presbyteries, synods, and General Assemblies, therefore they could not be governed either by aristocracy or plutocracy, however ancient and however solvent. If Christ had acted on the principles so ably expounded by Mr. Augustyne,

there would not have been a fisherman or a tent-maker among His disciples, but only blood relatives of Herod and Pontius Pilate. He concluded by seconding the proposal for the election of Mr. Davidson.

Upon this there was wrath among the Seven Wise Men. They conferred hastily together, and there is little doubt that if Michael Gregg had been in the employment of any of the departments or on the estate he would have received his walking papers next morning. But twenty years' faithful service with a local builder of broad views secured his immunity.

The voting was first of all by show of hands, and those in favour of the Reverend Augustus Towers, 'the lad with the tippet,' amounted in all to eighteen. When it came to those who voted for John I felt that I wanted to stand on the seat and hold up both hands. Indeed, it was at once evident that he had been elected by a great majority.

It seemed as if the whole congregation was rising as one man, and the sullen little dots of the seated fourteen were lost in the rustle of the universal uprising. The enumerators, who were the elders (and one of them my father), made the number in favour of Mr. Davidson.

Then there was a cry of 'Make it unanimous!' And to avoid having any part in this the Bulleigh-Bunny cohort and the larger Abbey contingent made haste to get out of the church. I covered up my face as well as I could and slipped out with them, while my father and his fellow-elders were still busy with 'formalities.'

I found Dolly kicking impatiently at the turf under the bridge. Indeed, she nearly broke the rope straining to be off when she heard my footsteps.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

I went homeward with a light heart. John—I called him John even then, to myself, that is—would be minister of the church. And even now, though I know all he has had to suffer and pass through in Longwood, I cannot help being glad, even as I was that night, because of the happiness his coming has brought to the village, and perhaps— yes, just a little to me also.

All was dark at Netherwood when I rode Dolly into the courtyard. The doors of the cattle-sheds yawned big and black. The cows were all out at the pasture. I gave Dolly a rough rub down and left her with a good feed in the stable to cool. I would be up early in the morning and let her out to the field.

Then I unlocked the house door and stole upstairs to my sleeping-room. I saw my shake down with its white pillow glimmering in the dusk of the room, and hung above it the wan oblong of the window marked out in squares. I listened at Vic's door.

There was no sound of breathing. I entered hurriedly, fear knocking at my heart.

Vic was not there, and the bed was cold. Indeed, only the top coverlet had been moved. Beneath the blanket and sheets were taut and Smooth, scarce creased by her weight.

Vic was surely gone, and I was to blame.

And then the terrible thought came to me, what should I say to my father?

CHAPTER SEVEN 'FOR THIS CAUSE'

Of course you knew from the beginning that I

married John, and so I can't make a proper mystery out of that. Though how we did it is interesting too, when I come to it. But the whole story of my sister Vic is quite different.

It was a terrible homecoming for me that night when father and mother drove through the yard gate into the big quadrangle, and I had to tell them what had happened.

But I remembered what father had always told us— to tell the worst first and be done with it. So I did. And instead of breaking out into anger as I expected, he said not a word—only went upstairs and looked carefully at Vic's room.

'Did your sister receive any letters today?' he asked.

I could not tell him. I did not know. After the first time when I helped her to write to her husband she had not asked my assistance. I could only tell father, when I saw that he was calm, that I thought she had been getting some letters from Edinburgh.

'Have you any idea from whom they came?'

I answered that I had, but that I did not know whether it would be right of me to betray my sister's secret.

Then father sat down by me upon Vic's little white bed and spoke in a voice that I hardly knew for his, my mother standing trembling all the time in the doorway. This is what he said—or at least something like it.

'Little girl,' he said, 'listen to me. A daughter has never so good a friend as her own father or mother. You see that I am not angry. If Victoria has gone to her husband, we will make the best of it, your mother and I. But first we must be sure. If I have said anything in anger which has caused my child to

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

leave my house I must make it up to her. Now tell me, has your sister been in correspondence with her husband?'

I told him the truth. Even Vic would not have wanted me to tell our father a lie. He had always been good to us. Vic had written 'yes,' and I told him as far as I could remember what she had said.

'Did Vic say all that of herself?' he asked. Which shows that men are not all so stupid as we girls think them, about things that we pride ourselves upon keeping to ourselves. Who would have thought that of father?'

Then for the first time I blushed. Yes, I had helped. I owned it. But it was not wrong. The Bible said so. 'For this cause...'

I began to quote, but he stopped me. 'No, not at all 'for this cause,' said my father sternly. 'No man has a right to take away another's daughter unless he can give her at least an equivalent happiness—a home of some sort, fidelity, consideration even.'

'She loved him,' I said.

'She thought she did,' retorted my father; 'perhaps by now she has found out her mistake. We will go to Edinburgh and see this Miss Fawcett. It may be that I shall have a word or two to say to this Miss Fawcett.'

Meanwhile our poor little mother could think of nothing better to do than sit down and cry. But father, as was his way, ordered her sharply to stop. He knew how to deal with most of us—that is, except Vic.

'Be quiet, mother,' he said; 'stay here with the boys. No one need know that Vic has not gone quietly back to her school unless we tell them. The young minister will not speak; I will answer for him.'

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

What more natural than that her sister and I should go there to spend a week or two with Victoria?’

So we went to Edinburgh, father and I.

Also about five o'clock the following afternoon we found Miss Fawcett. It was in Walker Square, not very far from the western station at which we had arrived. I saw as soon as we got to the place that we had to do with someone far above us in money if not in position, and all at once I became afraid of what my father might say or do.

You see, he was at no time any great respecter of persons.

A smart maid in cap and long streamers down her back opened the door.

‘I wish to see Miss Fawcett,’ said my father.

‘What name, sir?’ said the maid, quite as a matter of course.

‘My name is Francis Wood,’ said he, with the simple straightforwardness which nothing and no one could intimidate.

We entered, and were shown into a kind of bare parlour, furnished with desks having gas-jets immediately over them, sheaves of foolscap papers sprawlingly written in schoolgirl hand and scored with red and blue pencils. A lady of perhaps fifty came in and bowed to us slightly from behind gold-rimmed glasses.

‘Mr. Wood?’ she said, with a questioning accent. ‘You are Victoria's father, and if I mistake not, this is Victoria's sister. You have a right to come here. You have a right to know whatever I can tell you.’

‘I have,’ said my father dryly.

‘I own it,’ said Miss Fawcett, talking rapidly, like one consciously on the defensive. ‘I have taken a serious responsibility upon me, and I am the last

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

woman to run away from it. Will you sit down?'

'I thank you, madam; but I would rather stand till I hear what has become of my daughter, and what you, in whose house we are, have to do with the matter.'

'Very well, sir,' said Miss Fawcett; 'in a way I understand your feelings. You shall not be kept waiting, for I have that here at hand which may anticipate many questions.'

And without another word she opened a door into an inner chamber. It was a large, dusky room, but we could see a nurse in uniform going softly to and fro. On the bed was a young man, fair-haired and with regular features, but oh, quite unlike John, really; and seated near his pillow, on the side by the window, was Vic—our Vic. Her hands were interlocked, and I could see that she had wearied herself with crying.

Miss Fawcett made a sharp sign with her finger to her lip. My father nodded, and entered as softly as if he had been the doctor. Vic rose, catching at her throat and uttering a slight cry. The nurse instantly turned upon her, reproach in the shake of her head. Then she bent again over her patient. Victoria sank her head in the curtain and wept silently.

Thus we stood a moment, too surprised to make a movement, and debarred by the sick man's evident condition from any speech. Then with a slight upward motion of the head Miss Fawcett called us out.

'Well?' said my father, but in a changed voice. And this time he sat down without being invited. Miss Fawcett sat down also, with her elbows on the table, gazing at him. As for me, I really don't remember what I did, and indeed it does not matter.

I heard, at any rate.

‘Earnest is my nephew,’ said Miss Fawcett, ‘my favourite nephew’ (oh, how could she say that!). ‘And though at one time he had a certain reputation for wildness, it was never—so far as I could find out—of a sort to do any permanent harm to himself or to others. In spite of my position and sentiments as the head of a school, I liked him, perhaps for the reasons for which others looked down on him. I knew there was good stuff in him. And when, as the result of a chance encounter, he fell in love with your daughter, who taught in my school. Earnest begged and prayed that I should introduce him to Victoria. So, after taking some time to consider the question, it seemed to me that, if he were ever to settle in life, Victoria would be just the wife for him; he would be proud of her—of what people call her beauty. And besides, she has enough character to master him.’

‘It did not occur to you, Miss Fawcett, that the girl had a father and a mother—relatives whom it is usual, at least, to consult on such occasions?’

For the first time the face of the Lady Principal flushed.

‘I am quite aware that such a course is considered usual,’ she said, ‘but I knew more both of Earnest and of Victoria than either of her parents could know. I have been used to taking responsibilities all my life, and I do not shrink from them.’

‘But in this case,’ said my father, ‘if anything went wrong, the pain would fall on others, not on yourself. I do not call that taking responsibility.’

‘I am free from many old-fashioned prejudices,’ said Miss Fawcett, mastering her annoyance. ‘I

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

acted for the best. In a way I was in the place of the parents of both.'

'I beg your pardon,' said my father, very quietly.

'Perhaps not from your point of view,' the lady went on; 'but I believed that it would make a man of Earnest. I was a witness of their marriage, and I started off my nephew the same afternoon for Canada, bidding him return for his wife when he should have a home ready for her. He landed at Glasgow four days ago, but unfortunately was a passenger in the wrecked boat-train that same night. I dared not keep back the news from his wife, and she came to him at once. That is all I have to say.'

'Miss Fawcett,' said my father, very gravely, 'I will not reproach you. Your own words condemn you, as does your conscience. You took it on yourself to put my daughter's innocence and inexperience into the scales to counterbalance your nephew's wild oats. Now you show me a sick man on a bed, my daughter watching him, as the result of your experiment. No one has a right to act Providence to the children of others—hardly even dare a man do so with his own.'

'Father,' I said, touching him gently, 'Vic is here. She is suffering. She loves her husband, or she would not have gone away as she did, without telling any of us. Say no more about it. What is done cannot be undone. And— they love one another.'

'I give you my word that my nephew was intending to proceed down to your house the very next day,' said Miss Fawcett, obviously ill at ease.

To this my father had some retort ready, for I could see him restrain himself with difficulty. Indeed, the words were quivering on his lips.

I think he meant that it would have been better if her nephew had asked a father's permission before than after. But the sentence, however stern it might be, remained unspoken. My father only waved his hand slightly to indicate that he had had enough of the discussion.

'Will the young man live?' he asked, dully regarding the carpet.

'With quiet and good nursing he ought,' Miss Fawcett answered; 'and these he shall have here.'

'Very well, then,' said my father, rising, 'in a few weeks I shall come again, and we will talk over what now remains to be done. Isla, let us be going.'

But I whispered, 'No, father, not without seeing Vic.' And without waiting for permission or refusal I made my way into the sick room, and in a moment had Vic in my arms.

At first I do not think she knew it was her sister. But after lifting her head and pushing me back a little impatiently, she murmured, 'Isla, my little Isla!'

'I must be quick,' I said, 'father is going. But he is not really angry— not with you—he will forgive you. He is coming back to see your husband, to see Earnest.'

Then she whispered, 'What did you hear them say about him? Tell me. Will he get better? They tell me nothing or not the truth. I know they do not.'

'That he will get better,' I said— 'at least, that is what Miss Fawcett told my father.'

'Oh, thank God!' she murmured, and came out to the door with me. I wanted her to come farther, but she refused, saying, 'No, I cannot bear to see father—not yet, not while he is angry— with my husband.'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

CHAPTER EIGHT THE NEW VIC

All the following weeks which we spent at home father was uneasy, restless, forgetful. He would gaze up the road by which the postman came, and if he saw there was a letter (always for me) he would hang about till I had told him what Vic had said.

One day he seemed as if he were on the point of asking something. Then he half turned away, but did not quite go, hanging on his heel like a bashful lover.

Then it came out.

'Did she ask for her mother—or for me?' he said. And there was a flush on his cheek, one of the first I had ever seen there in all my life. For father was a pale, hatchet-faced man whom even the harvest sun would not tan.

'Oh, yes,' I said, snatching eagerly at the alternative he had given me in his question. Vic had asked for her mother, though she had not mentioned father's name. All the same, I think he divined the truth—he was a good diviner—for he only sighed very softly, and turning, walked away down the rigs of the lea-field pearling in the crisp sunshine of autumn.

Now you will hardly credit what I am going to tell, yet it is true. My mother, who was not at all clever, but had a very loving heart, kept up during this time of anxiety far better than father—better indeed than any of us. She had been greatly taken with Mr. Davidson—that is, with John, when he preached, and especially when my father brought him so

unceremoniously to our house that evening. And she had got it into her poor dear head— how, I cannot tell—that Vic's husband must be just a second John. She would confide in me, therefore, that on this account all would certainly come right. She had had 'an intimation' to that effect in her sleep after many hours of prayer. She knew it the very first time she had ever set eyes on him.

'But you have never seen him, mother!' I cried, quite indignantly. (Why, again, I should have been indignant I cannot for the life of me say, for I had not begun to care about John at all then. He will tell you so himself.)

'Well, it is the same thing,' she would say. And from that there was no moving her.

Nor did it greatly matter, for after nine days I got a despairing couple of lines from Vic,

'He is dead. Come to me quickly, or I cannot live.'

And father, by the same post, got a letter, a very clever, capable letter from Miss Fawcett, which he put in his pocket after reading part of it aloud to OS, with loud 'hum-hums' of skipping in between. He had grown quite grave and grey all in a few minutes.

'Mother,' he said, 'you and I must go and bring Vic home out of that house.'

Mother looked helplessly at me, for she could never stand up to father. Nor I either— that is, till lately, and on Vic's affairs.

'No, father,' I said, 'mother must stay here. Vic asks me to come. So I must go to her.'

'Must?'

'Yes, father, must,' I was bold enough to repeat. 'She wants me. And...'

'So you are settled on going?'

'I am going.'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

My father smiled the 'Wood smile,' as we used to call it, and said no more, except, as he bade Tom put Bess between the shafts of the light cart, to say, 'Isla is going. Her bag will have to be put behind.'

As for himself, he carried everything he needed for a night or two in the pockets of his coat and big white waterproof. At least I presume he did, for no one ever saw anything of them. Yet he was always as neat and trim as when he came down on Sunday mornings ready to go to the church.

Just as we were driving out of the yard to go to the railway station—father and I in front, and brother Tom behind to fetch home the pony—John walked past the front of the house, and opened the gate to let us pass through.

My father waved a hand and called to him to go in and 'see the wife.'

'She might need him,' he said. 'As for Isla here, and myself, we are on our way to Edinburgh on business that cannot be put off.' John looked at me, slowly letting the gate swing back, and his face, on which I thought I had seen a hopeful expression, grew instantly serious and troubled. Afterwards he told me that he knew I had been crying. In that he was wrong; I was only very ready to cry, and wished I had had the chance. It was terrible to think about Vic, and also that John should visit our house just when I was going away. Perhaps he would not come again for a year, as our old minister, Mr. Bird, used to do.

I must say that Miss Fawcett was very kind, and so was her brother, Dr. Fawcett, who had attended Earnest during his illness. He was a Fleet Surgeon, but had resigned in order to travel all over the world, because he was rich. Now, however, he was going to

settle down to a lectureship on tropical diseases, recently established in the university, to which he had been appointed. There must have been wandering blood, an adventurous strain, in all the family—that is, except in John. And sometimes I have noticed it even in John, for when we were out on the hills he would persist in clambering all over the dangerous places. But he always came back when I told him.

What astonished me most was Vic. She did not seem to have any of those loving movements towards me, as if it comforted her to be petted, as she had the first time. She had a scared, far-away look in her eyes, and her face was deadly white. But oh, how beautiful she was. She had a new black dress, and I saw her being fitted for others, just as you might try them on a dressmaker's block. She said nothing.

She made neither objections nor suggestions, turning this way and that as a lady fitter told her, speaking indistinctly through the pincushion she had made of her mouth.

And when my father asked the reason of all this outlay— being, by nature, cautious, but not at all mean— Doctor Fawcett told him that he and his sister deemed it only becoming and necessary in the circumstances. His cousin Earnest had died rich—that is, comparatively so. He could not tell what the oil-wells in Pennsylvania might be worth, but at any rate something very considerable in yearly value, and Mrs. Davidson was universal legatee.

Vic, our little Vic, was rich! It took the breath from me. I did not know whether to be glad or sorry. Of course not from jealousy. Oh, how little you know me if you think that. But because I knew that in the end it would take Victoria quite away from us. I saw

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

on Miss Fawcett's table the 'invoice' (I think they call it) of a mourning dress costing— oh, I could not believe my eyes— actually £52— fifty-two pounds; more, that is, than the rent of Netherwood for a whole year!

I was perfectly aghast at what father would say if he knew. But he talked a great deal to the Doctor, a tall, dark man, very handsome and distinguished, but pretty old—I should think quite thirty-five. (In those days I thought that patriarchal.) He was rather stern, and had a stand-offish air about him that froze me up. So I stayed with Vic, but never could get her to let herself go till one foolish thing I said touched the spring. John always says that my foolishness is better than other people's wisdom. But that is because he loves me, of course.

Well, it was in the gloaming, and the lamplighters were running with their ladders about the streets opening into Walker Square, where we stayed (my father, of course, slept out at a little lodging-house he always put up at near the end of Drumdryan Street). I was sitting alone with Vic. The funeral was to be on the next day, and I had tried more than once to take her hand. But she was cold to me as a lump of stone; you can't think how different from our dear, happy, pretty Vic of the years gone by. And there came an idea into my head—foolish, I know, but, as it turned out, the very kind of happy folly that John says I sometimes have. (Of course that is ridiculous, the dear old thing!)

It was, as I have said, in the gloaming, and I was sitting by Vic, looking out down a long steep prospect on a little deep blue block, which was the sea, greying over now, too, with the oncoming night. And I laid my hand on Vic's shoulder and said, 'We

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

have got to lose you now, Vic, I suppose. You will be so rich!’

At that she broke into wild laughter, as if you had touched a spring. Then after that she sobbed, sobbed, sobbed. But of course I understood. I knew it was the best thing for her. So I never tried to stop her, but just kept quiet and patted her head down on my shoulder.

And when she was a little stilled she opened the door of the room where he lay.

‘Rich? Now?’ That was all she said.

CHAPTER NINE THE WIDOW’S HOMECOMING

It was not till long after that I knew the whole history of what had happened during the days before Earnest’s death. Vic told me a little, and I wormed the rest out of John. Yes, you need not look—out of John.

It was in the first days of his coming to Longwood, and as everyone, especially the clan of the Seven Wise Men, were eagerly watching to ‘see how he would shape’—that was the Longwood phrase—it was difficult for him to get away. But he did, nevertheless, as soon as he heard about Earnest. When I asked him how he got the time he answered, ‘Oh, I just made it.’ And indeed it is true that, if you are only keen enough on doing anything, time can, somehow or another, be made for it.

Miss Fawcett was religious—that is, after her fashion. But then that fashion was as different from ours as possible. For instance, she thought

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Protestant' quite the most degrading word in the dictionary, with 'Reformation' a bad second. She called a minister, if he agreed with her, a priest. And if he didn't (like John), a schismatic layman. And she had a 'spiritual director' who, no doubt, taught her to argue, as she had done with my father in the matter of keeping secret Vic's marriage. If you were about Walker Square in the early morning, winter or summer, you would have seen Miss Fawcett hurrying out, all wrapped up, and speeding away round the corner to be in time for the earliest of early services. This was indeed something for a woman who had perforce to spend seven or eight hours in a school every day, repeating the same formulae, detecting the fallacy of the same excuses, dealing out reproofs on so precise a sliding scale that from the wording one could discover, as it were automatically, the state of Miss Fawcett's nerves. All this was very excellent, and was mixed with a certain self-sacrifice not ignoble. Only, as John said, if Miss Fawcett wanted that sort of thing, and felt herself the better for it, why be content with the pale imitation? The Roman Church possessed the only recipe. No others were genuine.

I think it must have been because he told his aunt something like that that she removed the light of her countenance from him. But now that the dying Earnest had refused confession, absolution, and extreme unction. Dr. Edgar Fawcett insisted that John should be sent for. And, being a man of lenient decision but of swift action, he went out and sent John a telegram on the spot.

Of course I do not know what John said to his cousin, though I can guess. All he will say when asked about it is, 'I made it up with him.'

They had, it seemed, parted in some sort of ill-humour on Earnest's part; but before the great sun went down upon him wrath had vanished out of his heart; that ever it was in John's I do not believe.

All this, of course, happened before Vic sent for us; and now one of the few things that Vic said when I went to her was, 'Mr. Davidson has been elected minister at Longwood, hasn't he?'

I could only answer 'Yes,' badly enough.

'Then,' she said, 'I will go down there with you. I cannot bear this house. He was like an angel of light to Earnest when he came. Perhaps, as he showed Earnest how to die, he will also show me how to live.'

That was for me the first coming of the fear. Something leaped sharp and hurting in my heart. Every girl will understand.

After, the funeral—a terrible day of gloom, lightened for me by the absence of the men, and by my having Victoria all to myself to look after—which, after all, is the great thing on such occasions. To help, even the least, eases the ache. You must not tell anyone who would be shocked, but really the way I got through that day was by locking Vic and myself up in her room, and making her try on before a big pier-glass, this way and that, every single new thing she had got. And there was a lot, because Miss Fawcett had left the getting of them to her brother, and he, like a man, simply ordered by the shopful. As for Vic, she took no interest one way or the other, standing up when told to do so, and sitting down with her eyes distant and vague when they had finished.

But somehow that day, before I put them carefully away in the new boxes and cases which Dr.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Fawcett had bought, I tried everything on myself, and then insisted on Vic doing it too. Of course it was awful! Everybody (nearly) would say so. And I dare say they would be right. Except John, who only says, 'Oh, I don't know, Isla. You did what you could. And the little girl's mite may count in the treasury as much as a certain poor widow's.'

That is the sort of minister John is; but for all that he could stand up to the Seven Wise Men, as you shall hear in good time.

First, however, there is Vic to tell about. Oh, but wasn't I glad when we got her away at last from Miss Fawcett's. And her brother, the doctor, looking taller, darker, and more distinguished than ever, came with us to the station, all buttoned up in his black frock-coat. Vic looked lovely in her mourning dress and little widow's bonnet, so that all the people in the station turned to look at her, and the very porters stopped calling 'Out of the way, please.'

But when we were clear of everything and had changed into our little Longwood train, which went along like a linked snake shaking itself out leisurely over the ridges, and always mounting higher, so that we began to get wafts of the good heathery Longwood air— ah, then my heart began to kindle within me. Without saying a word Dr. Fawcett had bought us all first-class tickets, which he gave me to look after. I carried the little leather satchel which had been Vic's, at any rate. So father never knew. He only looked a little surprised at the fittings and the cushions. But taking it, no doubt, that in a big city station there would be fashions more luxurious, he settled himself to note the fields and the flocks, the empty harvest-lands and the full stackyards, which to him told like a clock the time of the year. I

knew he was mentally calculating how much there would be in such and such an array of ricks and barns, how much such a farm might be reasonably rented at, and what he himself would bid if he were an offerer.

When he had done all that he could, that was the sort of practical consolation he offered himself. Above all things he refused to brood idly on grief. And this lesson he had taught us also—or at least me.

Dr. Fawcett had put into the carriage a whole pile of papers and journals, at the names and prices of which my father gazed disdainfully, making the little gesture which stands with him for a Frenchman's shrug of the shoulders. He does it with his mouth and one corner of his nostril. But it means exactly the same. Meantime I set myself to interest Vic, as the Doctor evidently wished me to do, reading her little bits and then being quiet again. I thought the best thing for her was to think as little about her dead husband as possible. After all, it was not as if she had seen a great deal of him, or as if they had been all in all to each other for years and years.

As we got nearer to Longwood I began to feel the sharper tang in the air which spoke of home, the scent of autumn off the great rough woods, out of which Sir Bulleigh Bunny had sold every stick worth taking away, but which to the eye remained fresh and beautiful notwithstanding.

Tom was at the station with the Creochs' wagonette, which he had borrowed for the occasion from some neighbours of ours just over the hill. I do not think that any one recognised Vic in the tall slender girl in mourning costume whom Tom helped up behind with a quite new tenderness. Father sat

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

beside Tom, whom, for the first time in his life perhaps, he allowed to take the reins when he was in the same vehicle. All this tended to make our entrance into the parish of Longwood and our progress through the village a very serious event indeed.

If you know a Scotch, and especially a Border village of any sort, you can understand how rapidly the news spread, and how fantastic were the forms under which it was passed on.

Victoria Wood of Netherwood had been married all the time she was in Edinburgh. Her husband was dead, and had left her the heiress of half a million of money. No, that was not correct. The man was really quite poor, and had gone to America to find work. He had made a fortune, but had died just in time to leave everything to Victoria. Of course every one believed that we had known about it all the time, and several important local ladies called during the next few days to present their sympathies and learn all about it.

They saw my father. And from Francis Wood the amount they learned about his daughter's affairs was not great. He informed them that it was true that his daughter had been married to a cousin of Mr. Davidson, their young minister, the nephew of the Principal of the school in which she was a teacher — indeed, to that Mr. Earnest Davidson who, as they might see from their newspaper, had died from the results of the recent railway accident to the boat-express.

One of them had the boldness to ask (in local phrase) 'how the widow had been left.'

'I believe,' my father answered, very dryly, 'that a copy of the will can be obtained in the usual way for

a shilling. I have not yet seen it, and have no information.'

After this it is little wonder that, at certain influential Longwood tea-parties, old Frank Wood was noted as unsympathetic.'

'He seemed to think,' said one of the much-familied callers, 'that we had no right to ask. Why else would I have been visiting a mere farmer, one who pays little more than fifty pounds a year for his farm? But I have no doubt that the legacy has been much overrated.'

After that, as a last resort, they beset the minister, and made his life a burden to him, till he was obliged to say that he knew nothing about the matter beyond the facts of the marriage and death. He added that he considered the young lady's father the proper person to apply to for information on the subject.

'Most disappointing,' said Mrs. Fulleylove, who was calling at Bunnybrush. 'Who does the man think he is? It is his business to clear up mysteries like these about his family.'

'Yes, indeed,' interjected Lady Bunny, who was pouring out tea; 'two pieces, I think?'

'Mysteries which may implicate himself—who knows?' continued the guest. 'One never can tell with these people, can one? This young minister, Davidson, may very well be mixed up in the affair. I will find out. And now I remember,' she went on, her eyes turned inward to scan her open encyclopedia of scandal, 'was there not something about the girl fainting the first day the young man preached here?' She had no great bitterness of animosity, but rather a sporting instinct in a scandal. She had started many simply for the pleasure of seeing where they

got to with the hounds after them, and what they looked like when they got there.

Though duly married to her husband, Mrs. Fulleylove was not one of the twice-born. Hardly had she a right to call herself once-born. But she had what was so lacking in the Dearbrooks of the Abbey purple, a certain caustic wit, drowned for the most part in a billowy stoutness which enveloped her and made her look good-natured. She was not a truthful woman, and palmed off inventions as others sell goods over a counter, because it was her business.

Still there was something attractive about Mrs. Fulleylove, and when she died her wit and resource made her more missed than many people whose characters were more uniformly estimable. But she was emphatically of the party of the Seven Wise Men, to whom, in the churches, is usually conjoined the party of the Seventeen Foolish Women. She had had it in her mind for some time to start a scandal about their obnoxious young minister which, as Mrs. Fulleylove expressed it, 'would make Longwoodites sit up.'

Having chosen her confidante in Lady Bulleigh Bunny, she felt sure of the result. Coming from the house, the secret information would appear to start a long way from her door, and would be fortified by all the Bunnybrush influence. Sir Bulleigh Bunny, who lounged and yawned about his mortgaged policies, looking like an underbred gamekeeper, on the watch for little children whom he could order off what he called his covers (straggly pines affording no more 'cover' than a lamp-post), would certainly be delighted. There was a tower built by some worthier Bulleigh Bunny at one corner of his domain. If only the clan commercial of the Abbey would aid him to

restore it, then in time they might get a 'priest,' leave the ignorant Presbyterians of Longwood to stew in their own juice, and call upon the foresters and hangers-on to attend a Bulleigh Bunny place of worship, dedicated to a Bulleigh Bunny deity (one hard on trespassers, especially grown-up ones too big for Sir Bulleigh to tackle by himself).

Lady Bunny agreed that this would be a good thing. But it would, after all, be a pity to sit down in the same church with such people as the Dearbrooks, upstarts of no family—mere commercial people. But of course they would subscribe. And so they ought. That was what they were there for. They, the Bulleighs Bunny, had done quite enough by allowing the use of the tower as a chapel, and admitting them into the avenue every Sunday.

'I shall have to shut up that tower gate all the rest of the week, or it may in time constitute a right-of-way.'

Sir Bulleigh had right-of-ways on the brain—not having much else there to have. But Lady Bunny, as usual, was ready with her suggestion.

'No, no,' she said, 'let those who restore the chapel of the tower pay for a special walled path through the Long Wood. It is only a matter of thirty yards or so. And give each a special key. You see a proper priest would have all sorts of services at all sorts of hours, and you could not shut people out. It would look bad.'

'And who is to pay your—priest, I should like to know?' growled Sir Bulleigh, looking under his surly brows at Lady Bunny almost as if she were a trespasser herself.

'The people who have keys,' said that lady,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

smiling serenely. 'You see our church would be very select, and they would be quite glad to pay.'

The keys of Peter were, in the estimation of Lady Bunny, a poor and common affair compared with the honour of possessing one of those admitting to the Bulleigh Bunny walled-in path to heaven.

Yet it is generally believed that the Founder of the Faith (which presumably was to be preached in the Tower chapel) was only a journeyman carpenter, and that His disciples, the early church-builders, were fishermen and tent makers. But Lady Bulleigh Bunny and her like, being gentlefolk, have changed all that, and certain of the folk called snobs have followed them like sheep. At least, that is what John says.

CHAPTER TEN THE BIRTH OF A LIE

'You know, dear Lady Bunny,' began Mrs. Alfonsius Dearbrook, 'that my grandfather was a bishop— you have heard of the famous Bishop of Bally Clogher in Ireland?'

'Yes, yes, certainly,' interrupted Lady Bunny, who had only heard the history of the grandeur, the learning, and the power of that right reverend Irish prelate, some time deceased, about five hundred times. 'And pray what is this about Mr. Davidson? I am dying to hear.'

'Then you shall,' said Mrs. Alfonsius Dearbrook, bearing some little malice all the same because of her genealogical preface being thus burked. 'Ah, you shall hear— it almost surpasses belief.'

'It shall not surpass mine, coming from such a source and about such a person.'

Mrs. Alfonsius flashed one swift glance, spiky and triangular like a bayonet thrust, at Lady Bunny. Was the woman poking fun at her? Ah, well, no matter. The story, as a story, would do. But it would certainly do a thousand times better if it came from Bunnybrush.

Mrs. Alfonsius was a romancer born. She ought to have written serial stories (except that she never could remember previous instalments, and so would have got into trouble). She loved inventing for its own sake; and if she could give this one and that one, even of her friends, what she called 'a dig,' she felt the better for it. How much more so in her enemies' case.

'What I am going to tell you I had direct, dear Lady Bunny, from one who knows, but whose name, naturally, I am not allowed to mention. It appears that this Mr. John Davidson, who has been elected minister of their gospel-shop by these stupid village dissenters, was really married before he came here.'

'What, married?' cried Lady Bunny, holding up her hands— not in horror, be it understood, but with a sort of unavowed admiration.

The narrator wrinkled her face into a cunning smile, and her deep-set little eyes twinkled mischievously.

'Yes, married— why shouldn't he? It is not forbidden in the rules of what they call their church.'

'Oh, of course not,' said Lady Bunny. 'But still—to come to the place as a bachelor! And half the mothers in Longwood getting their husband-traps ready for him— well, go on.'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'But that is not the point,' said the teller of tales, watching her audience to see 'how much she would swallow.' 'It appears besides that the girl he married was— now you could never guess.'

Go on—what do I know about such people?' interjected Lady Bunny impatiently.

'Well,' continued the romancer serenely, 'it was done secretly, of course, when he was still at college. He married that teacher girl—what is her name? Oh yes, Victoria, the daughter of that old Francis Wood, who is one of their elders down there.'

'Pshaw!' cried Lady Bunny, 'someone has been putting nonsense into your head. Why, the girl's husband was only a cousin of Parson Davidson's, but of a much better branch of the family. I heard of it in Edinburgh from Mr. Thynnes-Fielden, who is curate at the Church of the Holy Saint Theresa in Walker Street.'

Mrs. Alfonsius leaned a little nearer to her ladyship and, with her voice duly hushed, fluted the following desperate story into her ear, this time without interruption.

'That was what they gave out,' said the lady, 'because the man was injured in the accident which befell the boat-express on his way home from Canada or somewhere, you remember. Well, he never fully regained consciousness; but for all that both the girl and Mr. John Davidson were present. What were they doing there, I should like to know? And afterwards a will was found of which I have secured a copy. I will read it.

I leave all of which I die possessed to my wife, Victoria Davidson.

'(Signed) Earnest Davidson.'

'Well, isn't that enough?' said Lady Bunny. 'The

man would surely not have called her his wife if she had been his cousin's.'

Mrs. Alfonsius looked pityingly at Lady Bunny.

'It is beautiful to see how innocent and fresh you keep, dear Lady Bunny. You never think evil of anybody. Yes, of course the will is enough—if— if Earnest Davidson had only written it. But he could not. He was never conscious.'

She paused a moment to give full effect to the words which followed.

'And I am informed that at school and college their masters and professors could not tell John's handwriting from Earnest's!'

'You mean—you mean,' Lady Bunny almost gasped.

'Of course you must not mention it to a soul—not, at least, till we have more certain proofs. It might be a serious matter for all if we moved too early. No harm, of course, in telling one or two.'

'But it seems incredible,' said Lady Bunny.

'True things always do. Think of the miracles of the saints, about which dear Mr. Thynnes-Fielden sent me so convincing a book. But at least you must remember that girl coming flaunting to church to hear him preach, dressed most unbecomingly for her position, and then fainting away when she caught sight of him, so that she had to be carried out. Then they were both at this poor young fellow's death-bed, and since she came home in her widow's weeds, forsooth, he has hardly ever been off the doorstep. You would think he had no other parishioners than the little twopeony-halfpenny farmer of Netherwood and his daughters.'

Mrs. Alfonsius glanced obliquely at her hostess. That lady seemed troubled, but not wholly

convinced.

'Naturally,' she added, 'they are taking every care just now so as to avoid suspicion. But see if within the year, or just outside it, the minister does not wed the 'widow'— his own wife, that is. It will be something new.'

(If you ask me how I know all this, I need only say that Jane Henrietta Sym, the servant whom we have just now at the Manse, was then under-house-maid at Bunnybrush. She is a nice little thing. But if John and I have anything very particular to discuss we either go for a walk, or else wait till Jane Henrietta is in bed. Even then I go up and make sure.)

Now, even as Mrs. Alfonsius told it (at least as reported by Henrietta), there are big holes in the story. But it did all too well for the people it was told to. And, once let loose on a countryside, it is almost impossible to overtake a tale like that, especially when told about a minister, much less to trace it to its origin. And I dare say the difficulties and improbabilities were overcome by individual effort as the story passed from hand to hand.

But since certainly it was the case that John came nearly every day to Netherwood, the necessary grain of probability was added to the romance. And day by day the newly placed minister of Longwood felt a chill settle on his soul. His people, of whom he had been so proud, and whose slender stipend he had accepted as their all, and at least the labourer's worthy hire, were turning their backs on him. So he came all the oftener to the one house where his welcome was ever warm—so often indeed that even I began to have my fears. Though mine (there is no harm in owning it now) were of quite another sort, thought he was falling in love with Vic. And indeed

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

small blame to him. So would I have done in his place. Every day she seemed to grow sweeter and wiser, while becoming also more beautiful, till there was not the like of her in all the country. No wonder one poor plainish little girl went about the house of Netherwood with an ache at her heart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN JOHN LIKED TO COME TO NETHERWOOD

Yes, John liked to come to Netherwood. And no wonder. For, though no one had spoken to him of the cause, John could not help being conscious of the changed regards of his people. The banker was away for his holidays, and everywhere else something covert, less frank, met him in their eyes. It was not at all because none dared speak— that does not happen in Presbyterian kirks— but because those on whom would fall the burden of speech were not yet convinced. But even those who did not believe, watched. John felt himself under surveillance — his outgoings and his incomings alike. And the mere lonesomeness, where he had looked (and had had a right to look) for something very different, drove him to Netherwood, where alone he met with unchanged faces and unclouded hearts. Because of course, being involved, we would be the last to hear what is so aptly named ‘the clash o’ the country.’

It was mostly in the afternoon that he came. And, as he tells me now, there grew up a feeling of home in his heart as he came nearer the farm-steading. He loved the slate roofs, golden grey in the afternoon

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

sun, or flashing out all polished steel after a passing shower. He would lean a pensive shoulder against the loaning gate, and watch the blue 'reek' mount straight upward into the bluer blue. This, he knew, meant that our dear old mother (about whom there is so little in this story, yet on whose love and tenderness the whole house turned) was building her fire to boil the water for the tea of afternoon.

He leaned his shoulder against the gate. All the farm-buildings seemed to smile down upon him. My father, afar at his task in some outlying field or up on the moor among his sheep, waved a hand to him. In the farmyard, mounted on a dyke, a cock crew. A collie came out with a rush, barking furiously, and then, discovering a friend, fawned upon him.

'Down, sir, down!' said John, who in those days would not have appeared in our parlour with the marks of Lintie's feet on his sober 'blacks.' Now he would not flinch before a regiment of Linties.

Then mayhap the boys would fling themselves towards him, for they had no fear of a minister who ran faster, leaped higher, threw a straighter ball, and, besides all that, could tell them famous stories of mountain - climbing and adventure in foreign countries. He loved going the round of the sober barns, with the corn ears strewed about the doors, or wide open for the threshing, the long ranges of the byre, and the little three-stalled stable with the loose-box in the corner.

But by this time there would go about the interior of the house a sort of vague rumour, like the wind which comes before the dawn. And we girls at least did not need to be told that he had come.

Then Vic, who had most likely been sitting with a book drooping on her knee, and her eyes on the far

'hopes' of Cheviot, would lay it down, give the Indian shawl she wore in those days a graceful turn about her shoulders as she rose, and so be at the door, looking down upon him from the height of three stone steps. For in the old days Netherwood had been a sort of small lairdship, and was in some things different from an ordinary farmhouse. I stayed behind, but Vic always lifted herself from sofa or chair with a sigh of relief when John arrived. She had grown paler—indeed quite pale— but then the rich warm ivory tint of her skin remained a colour sufficient unto herself, and the black mourning dress and red-bordered Indian shawl set her off to a marvel. I don't think they spoke when they met. There was certainly no eager greeting. The wide country and the fine, clean, untainted air were about them. They smiled, and Vic gave him her hand. In those days Victoria did everything in a large, gracious, blonde way—a little wearily or lazily, according to the visitor. But she had always a smile, calm and quiet like summer moonshine— yet warm, nevertheless, to greet John.

Oh, yes, I stayed with mother—that is, as long as I could— and let them talk together. Of course I did. I wanted to.

Then mother would say, 'Go in, childie, you are in my way here in the kitchen. I can get tea better myself.'

'Oh, they don't want me,' I broke out once, the tears prickly in my eyes.

I can recall my mother's look to this day.

'For shame, Isla,' she said, thinking me jealous; 'go in at once.'

Then I would go. And I must admit they were always glad to see me. John says now that was all

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

he had been waiting and listening for— my footstep on the red tiles of the kitchen floor and my hand on the door-handle before I entered. He says that he held his breath then. Well, I do not ask any better than to believe him, and of course I do believe him, dear old silly.

Well, there, I needn't cry about it now, surely. That would be a pretty thing, and I with so much more to tell. But just then, you see, it was different.

Vic had only to stand up, to move, to sit down, to reach out her hand for a book—a white hand with black lace on the sleeve drooping away from it— for me to feel myself an ugly little Cinderella, with no chance of a fairy godmother able to bring the prince to his knees, ready to help me on with my glass slipper.

There seemed to ignorant me to be a great hither-and-thithering before Vic came into possession of her fortune. A lawyer from Edinburgh came nearly every week, sometimes twice, and with him the tall and handsome Dr. Fawcett, Miss Fawcett's brother, who was Vic's executor. The folk, already half taken in by the story so carefully invented by Mrs. Alfonsius, watched them as they drove through the village, and suspicion became a certainty when, on their return, they saw them take the road to the Manse to call on John.

'The black ane will be the Edinburgh 'Fiscal,' they said, 'and the big stout man will be a poliss officer in plain clothes.'

'Na, na, he had boots like ither folk. Did ye no observe?'

'But comin' here in disguise like that, a policeman

wi' ony brains wad borrow somebody else's boots.'

However, it rather disconcerted the curious, who were waiting eagerly for an arrest, and expecting to see Vic and John taken to the station handcuffed together for their crimes of forgery and criminal conspiracy, that 'the black Embro' Fiscal,' as they called Dr. Fawcett, continued to come, but after the first two or three times, generally alone. 'It will no' be proved on them yet,' they said.

As a matter of fact, he brought Vic the newest books, and she would even walk out on the moor with him a little way. They talked (so she said) of the characters in stories, and about the best French literature. Besides, Dr. Fawcett had been long in Germany, and he promised to teach Vic the language. To me it seemed a long road to come only to give a lesson. But my father said, 'Oh, he is her executor, and he wants to take her mind off her trouble. Soon she will fall back into her old way, and then he will let her alone.'

Still Vic did not stop. Instead she would con for hours over the grammar and dictionaries that Dr. Fawcett had brought her. And then when John came there was no getting a word with him. He was hardly seated before the two had their heads over some long, distressing, topsy-turvy sentence. For John had been at college at a place called Halle; but I think he had forgotten most of his German; at least, he could not speak it like Dr. Fawcett. At any rate, there was really no reason for taking Vic's education so much to heart all of a sudden. He says now it was to please his cousin—that is, Dr. Fawcett. But then all men were like that where Vic was concerned, at least all that I ever knew. They simply fell over themselves if she wanted anything.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Of course this is not quite fair or even true. I am a spiteful little cat. John talked to me whenever he got the chance. And that, he says now—perhaps truly—was not often; for I would run to my mother's apron-strings whenever he came in sight. So would you, if you were a girl of any spirit, and John coming primed to the eyes with German which he had learned up on purpose to astonish your sister. Of course you would.

After the first month or two I could see that Vic had stopped thinking much about Earnest. I had always known she would, for she was that kind of girl whose love must have something to feed upon. And really, in Earnest Davidson's case, though he was her husband, there had never been much. I think, too, she wearied, away from the town and people. More than once I caught her with her old school-exercise books, looking over notes. Just think of a girl doing that!

And when I asked her the reason she said, 'Oh, I was only thinking what they would be doing now in Edinburgh,'— meaning at school.

Then by and by she had Miss Fawcett send her piles and piles of compositions to correct.

'It gives me something to think about,' she said. 'I like it. And the birds in the farmyard keep up such a 'keckling.' It wearies me.'

That was where Vic and I differed. Why, I loved every old brown motherly crone that nestled and fluffed the dust up over her back in the poultry-yard. Flecky and Specklie and Christopher Columbus—the latter an unpopular young pullet that went about finding other hens' outlaying nests—I loved them all. And oh, wasn't I glad when one of my pets grew too old to be made into chicken

broth, but became instead an old, reliable, daily egg-layer. I felt I could have bought her a silver plate with her name on out of my own money.

But Vic liked the push and bustle of streets, the wet shine of pavements, the blazoned hoardings, and the long evening perspective of lights, in which, with alternate hill and dale, no city equals Edinburgh.

But till I came to the Manse, as you all knew I would from the first (for this is no mystery story), I never was really happy anywhere except at Netherwood.

CHAPTER TWELVE THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

The scandal matrimonial is the most fatal to a minister — in Scotland at least. Not to have married when he ought is bad enough— But there are, in such a case, always apologists, who say, ‘He maun hae had his reasons.’

But to be married and to have said nothing about it, that is the crime without remedy, the sin unpardonable. Every self-respecting mother is up in arms, grandmothers too.

So thought Mrs. Fulleylove. So thought her daughters. And so, little by little, a considerable section of the parish came to think. You see, although John was not the Established Church minister, his character was more looked after because of that. The Kirk of Longwood parish was five long Scots miles away, quite on the other side of things. Its minister was an old quiet man, who

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

desired nothing better than to be let alone, and to give the Free Presbyterian Kirk of Longwood all necessary elbow-room and Godspeed.

So it came to pass that Sir Bulleigh Bunny, Baronet, of Bunnybrush, Mr. Cleophas Dearbrook, Mr. J. T. Augustyne, J.P., the bachelor manager of the Dearbrook mills, with Mr. Guy Greatorix, the Bunnybrush estate agent, appointed themselves an informal committee to convict John, or at least to bring him to such a confession as would ruin him in Longwood. Ultimately, and with the long arm, they would thus prepare the way for the coming secession to the church of St. Aidan's in the tower by the Long Wood, the chapel for the entrance to which the rich Abbey people were to have the keys and the privilege of paying the costs of reparation, this being the use of commercial Dearbrooks in the land of feudal Bunnybrush.

It was late in the afternoon of a November day before they could come together, Sir Bulleigh having had his time fully occupied hunting school-children off the hedges, out of which the young criminals were gathering hips and haws. The other three had waited for him a long time in the parlour behind the clerks' office. At last he came in, flushed and irate, a broken switch in one hand and the corners of his nostrils twitching.

Sir Bulleigh was a sullen enough dog at any time. He bit before he barked, as a rule. But now he was suddenly voluble.

'What are things coming to?' he cried. 'Where are the rights of property? I would like to know that. Good-for-nothing children running across my plantations and pulling down my hedges. A pretty government, calling itself Conservative and not able

to protect landowners. Why, the parents ought to be sent to prison! That would teach them to keep their children at home. Education— much good it has done the country. What—I should like to know? Only made people discontented and above their situation in life.'

Mr. Augustyne smiled covertly. He thought that Sir Bulleigh, having no education, ought to be the best contented of men.

At last, however, they got the landowner decently pacified, and all started for the Manse.

Now the Manse of Longwood (I say the Manse, for there is no other in the village) is rather a remarkable house, as who should know better than I. It overlooks the junction of two roads, one of them a mere farm track, leading up through high pastures into the Bunnybrush policies, while the public road, turning sharply right in front of the door, runs straight into the green centre, as it seems, of the Cheviots. One can see the white dotted sheep, hear the melancholy lapwing cry, and watch the flit of dappling cloud shadows on the green and purple slopes, all without leaving the doorstep.

From the Manse the village hardly seems to exist. The factories are below in the hollow. Bunnybrush, with its gamekeepers and 'warnings to trespassers,' lies away to the left, hidden among trees. But always the Manse itself is a pleasant place, especially when the windows are open, and the sights and sounds of the moorlands come and go, night and day, with the breathing airs and the changing lights.

Even on a November afternoon the Manse is nice— which is a word John says I ought not to use in writing. But it is nice to come home just before the lamps are lighted, when you can see through the

dining-room and study windows the red glimmer of the heartsome fire shining up from the grate, or perhaps the minister lighting a candle so as to go on with his work without smelling his fingers with paraffin—a thing he hates so much, that I have had to take to doing the lamps myself. He seems to have a nose made on purpose to smell paraffin; and oh, the soap and lavender water I have to use on my fingers after!

But I don't think these four men of the deputation thought about all that as they opened the Manse gate, walked up to the door, and rang the bell.

They had been so long accustomed to carry Longwood with them that they came with quite false notions of their own importance—all of them, that is, except fat jolly Mr. Augustyne, who was too clever not to take everybody, himself included, at what he called 'a sale-price valuation.'

But even Mr. Augustyne did not yet know the Reverend John Davidson, Master of Arts, recently ordained minister of the Free Presbyterian Church of Longwood.

John had just finished his morning's discourse, and was unaffectedly glad to see them. He is always like that when he completes one piece of work, and before he comes to grips, as it were, with the next. He has as much suspicion as a baby, which makes him all the more dangerous.

Would they have tea? No, they were a deputation. Apparently (no one quite knows why) deputations do not take tea. A little useful memoir, John says, might be written on this subject.

As his offer was declined, John, doubtless feeling vaguely that something was in the air, waited for the deputation to express itself. But the spokesman, Sir

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Bulleigh, rather uneasy under the minister's steady glance, wished first that he had some smallish children to 'gulder' at, and then that he had not been such a fool as to come.

It was Mr. Cleophas Dearbrook who stood next in rank. If Sir Bulleigh would not, he must. That was flat. He was no coward, Mr. Cleophas, and less of a fool than people thought, if only, that is, his wife had let him alone.

For, in his own place and amongst men, Cleophas Dearbrook was a good deal less of a fool than, at home, his wife made him appear. Now he cleared his throat and began in a kind of quick staccato.

'Mr. Davidson, we do not come here on behalf of the congregation. We have no mandate, but as not unimportant members thereof, we have a question or two to ask you.'

'Say on,' says John, very curtly indeed. Mr. Cleophas Dearbrook consulted a pencilled paper which had been drawn up in the office. It was in the hand of the manager, and Cleophas could not, in his haste, quite make out the first important word. He leaned over and consulted the writer. The red frogs in the corners of Mr. Augustyne's yellow eyes took on an absolutely savage expression, but he merely shook his head. His principal might go to Jericho for him. There was nothing for Mr. Cleophas then but to put the questions according to the light of nature.

'We desire to know, Mr. Davidson,' he began, 'if you are especially interested in the family of the Woods of Netherwood? What are your relations with that family?'

'I do not see,' said John, with a dangerous calm - oh, I know it so well, and it always makes me shake, yes, even me— 'I do not see at all what interest that

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

can have for you, gentlemen, either personally or as a deputation.'

Mr. Cleophas looked about him for support. It was evident that he would need it before long if this dour-tempered minister were to persist in his attitude.

'It does matter,' he said at length. 'It matters so much that if the questions are not properly answered we, and all who adhere to us, may think it our duty to leave the church.'

'Have you anything to say against the family of Netherwood?' said John, asking a question in his turn.

'We have not come here to answer your questions,' said Mr. Cleophas, 'but to require answers to ours.'

'Very likely,' said the minister coolly; 'but I have as good a right to ask as to answer. Do you, I say, know anything to the detriment of the Woods of Netherwood?'

'What passes between us here is private, I understand,' said the spokesman, 'and I have to answer that we have nothing to say against the family of Netherwood, save and except that rumour fixes upon you the intention of marrying a daughter of that family.'

John was on his feet in an instant. There was an unlighted lamp on the table, and Mr. Cleophas will never know the danger he was in at that moment. But I, who have reason to know the Davidson temper, know it well.

'And what, sir, if I have?'

Now John is tall and can look fierce. His voice would probably come out of his mouth with a kind of roar. A Numidian lion, lashing his flanks with his

tail, would probably have alarmed the party less than this sudden and unexpected truculence on the part of such a man of peace.

Mr. Augustyne nudged the elbow of Mr. Cleophas, but his employer, still sore from the former denial of assistance by the manager, paid no attention.

'Then,' he said sententiously, 'if that be so we had best be going.'

And accordingly he took up his hat and made for the door.

But Mr. Augustyne, who had considerable reasoning faculty, took up the running.

'There is no intention,' he said suavely, 'of spying a word to hurt either your susceptibilities or those of the excellent family at Netherwood. But it has been felt by many in the congregation that we must have light on certain matters which have been troubling the minds of not a few. I assure you, Mr. Davidson, that you will be serving your own interests, and those of the congregation which has so recently chosen you, if you will answer this question in the spirit in which it is asked. Is it, or is it not your intention to marry a daughter of the house of Netherwood?'

'In the spirit in which the question is asked, then,' cried John, 'it is none of your business. But since I have no reason to be ashamed of my intentions, I may inform you that it is —if the young lady will do me the honour to accept me.'

At this Sir Bulleigh Bunny snorted incredulously.

'It is a roundabout way to come at your cousin's money,' sneered Mr. Cleophas.

'How long have you been married to the woman who calls herself his widow?' said Sir Bulleigh, suddenly reverting to his 'trespassing - children

voice.'

'Get out of my house,' roared John, in sudden fury. And they went lest a worse thing should befall. John says that he only rebuked them. But he adds that he did it faithfully. Such was the end of the Bunny-Dearbrook connexion with the Free Presbyterian Kirk of Longwood—a connexion of quite imperfect sympathy. The next night when they 'foregathered'—that is, the minister and his chief elder, the banker—Mr. Rivers summed up the question in his Scottish way, quiet at first and then kindling into fire.

'Ye are doubtless somewhat downhearted, Mr. Davidson. But mind our discourse about the Seven Wise Men. Ye have lost a little to gain a mickle. I knew well that it was nearly time. The full corn was well-nigh ripe in the ear. Now I am a man who lays little stress on sects and 'isms.' But of one thing I am certain—that Rome has naught to do with Scotland, either under her own Red Mantle, or under the black guise of Ritualism.'

John looked up, astonished to see the banker so moved. But on his mother's side there was Covenanting blood of the best in him, and in common with most of his countrymen, nothing moved him so much as any thought of the return of the days of religious compulsion, either by the order of kings or the seductions of fashion.

'Our modem High Churchism,' the banker went on, 'here in Scotland, means no more than a little masquerading in the vestments of Prelacy. And as for those who follow them—why, there are doubtless a few old families who have always adhered steadily to the forms—I cannot say the faith—of their fathers. But for the majority, they have only sneaked in, that

they might rub shoulders with the gentry—tradesmen enriched who have become landowners—distillers and brewers. What care they for the days of persecution, for the moors of Scotland flowered with the blood of the martyrs, for the sacrifices of their own ancestors that the Kirk of God in Scotland might be indeed free? Nothing, if only their wives may sell at the same stall as my Lady Landless, and their daughters go to confession immediately after the daughters of her Grace of Three Stars!’

‘Nevertheless,’ said John, ‘in that Church I have known earnest men preaching and ingathering among the poorest—yes, the very poorest. One must be just.’

‘Certainly—certainly,’ said the banker, ‘I do not doubt it—not for a moment. I have also read of the Jesuit missionaries. Brave, devoted men they were; but that does not give them anything to do with my country! They have been chased from every land in the world, most often out of the most obstinately Catholic countries. Very well, let them endure hardness, doing what is accord to their consciences! But it is the wolves in sheep's clothing that I cannot away with. They would rob us of our most precious Scottish heritage. But John Knox and Welsh, and Peden, and Cameron cannot be killed with a sneer—especially an ignorant one.’

‘Moreover, Mr. Davidson,’ pursued the banker, after a pause, ‘I have but one name for such turncoats—the Rags of Rome. I have one name for those who lead and persuade them — Children of Rome, disowned and disinherited by their own mother!’

‘I think,’ said John hastily, ‘that you are a little hard, Mr. Rivers. We are so near England in this

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

place, and there is in the Church of England so great a preponderance of men earnest and faithful that it behoves one to be charitable. Even here in Scotland.'

'Charitable, but not weak,' interrupted the banker, with an indraw of the breath which showed how the subject warmed him. 'I have nothing to do with Rome. I have nothing to do with the Grand Turk. Scotland is my country—her free Gospel, her free and personal thinking, her simple worship, the heritage of the Reformation, sir! These we claim, Mr. Davidson, and these we in Scotland will have—counting every loss but gain that we may keep them!' The layman had risen as he spoke, and now went out, too moved to trust himself with further speech.

Then John came back in, and taking his Bible read some part of the simplest teachings of the Carpenter. After which he sat a long while like one who has heard strange tidings. So that I thought the light in his window would never go out that night at all.

We had lost the Seven Wise Men. Strangely enough, however, we never missed them, except to give thanks.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN THE MINISTER AND THE BYRE LASS

And with no more said, John put on his hat and was on the road for Netherwood within a minute after Sir Bulleigh had stumbled down the little narrow path which leads to the Manse gate—the steps are a little tricky till you know the way of

them.

He even passed the deputation still consulting at the comer of the village street. A stable boy in a tall hat with a rosette at the side was promenading Sir Bulleigh's dogcart up and down. John pushed passed without saluting, and the four plotters followed him with their eyes in the November dusk. I doubt not that Mr. Augustyne chuckled; for though bread-and-butter took him elsewhere, in his heart he was always fond of John—yes, and kind to me as well.

I always remember John's entrance that night. How indeed could I forget it?

You see father would not take any of Vic's money and as there was a ploughman to pay, and only one little indoor servant, the boys and I had to take turns at milking the cows. Vic wanted me not to. But I had always done it, and I knew that it would pain my father if I did not. More than that, our mother would very likely go out herself. And it was to relieve her that I had first taken to the milking when I came back from school.

Besides, to tell the whole truth, I liked it, especially when, as tonight, the boys were not there. I liked the warm pleasant smell of the cows, their scented breaths as they turned in their stalls to look at you, making up their minds whether they would graciously permit you to milk them. Oh, they were very particular, our cows, and at this time we had two that only I could handle. If the boys so much as came near they would think nothing of kicking over the luggie and spilling all the warm reaming milk on the black earthen floor.

Yes, I always liked the byre. The song, at first shrill, afterwards soft, of the milk in the pails, the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

sleek kindly fell of Jean or Bess, the slow munching sound, the flick of their ears, the lantern hung high on a beam, giving deep shadows and long lanes of light which ran across the causeway and up the wall, the crisp stars seen through the velvet black of the doorway, and softly and unceasingly the tinkle of head-chains on iron rings from end to end of the byre—all had grown into my life. Indeed, are in it now; and to this day when I go up to Netherwood I love nothing better than to get out my old byre-gown, draw a sun-bonnet about my ears, and hunt up my favourite stool. Then I am rejoiced to find that my fingers have not lost their cunning, and that, after blowing softly over me a time or two, Nance and Ferlie resume their munching, with the implied compliment that 'she's all right.'

But I must tell my story.

John arrived at Netherwood like a whirlwind. He hardly had time even to knock decently at the door, but was well within the little 'hallan' before my mother could come out of the kitchen where she was busy with the 'porridge'—the great working-folk's supper of Longwood. Now our dear little mother was the sweetest woman alive. But there was one thing she could not abide. She could not be 'bothered wi' folk when she was readying a meal o' meat.'

So, catching sight of the young minister standing within the 'hallan,' she called out to him, in words which she would certainly not have used at any other time, except at the critical moment when she was stirring the meal into the porridge (the special work of art for which the rural cordon bleu is awarded), 'Gae ben wi' ye, minister, I hae nae time to speak wi' you the noo.'

This is her account of what followed.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Ay, I did,' said my mother, 'I telled him plainly to gang ben to the parlour, me kennin' that he would find Victoria there, wi' her books and writin's. It's maistly her that the men-folk come lookin' after onyway. And if she is no to be seen, they dinna bide lang. But I juist heard Vic cry, 'Oh, Mr. Davidson, I am so glad to see you—you will help me with this difficult passage,' when oot the craitur flew, bareheaded through the kitchen door, as if the dogs were after him.

'So I gaed to the parlour door, and I says, says I, 'Victoria, what is the maitter wi' the minister? Has he speered ye the question?'

'And Vic was standing up, kind o' laughin', mair pleased like than ever I hae seen her since her hame-coming.

'Mr. Davidson, mother! Why, he never stopped to shake hands even. He just said, like a man in a hurry, 'Where is Isla? I want to see Isla.' And with that out he went with a bang, like a shot from a gun.'

'I heard the bang,' my mother would conclude. She had still the porridge spurtle or stirring-stick in her hands, and if Vic had not caught her in time she was actually going to lay it down on the fine green tablecloth in the parlour.

'But Isla is in the byre,' she said to Victoria; 'that is never a fit place for a minister to set his foot in. I will go and tell Isla that I will take the milkin' tonight.'

But Vic put her arms about mother and pulled her homely old head down on her shoulder.

'Better let Isla alone tonight, mother,' she murmured in her ear; 'the cows may be a little late, but never mind.'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Vic, what do you mean, lassie?'

'I mean, mother,' said Vic, smiling—I know just how so quietly—'that you and father are going to lose a daughter.'

And while mother let the porridge burn, while she wept and laughed and was consoled—what of John?

Well, there is not much to tell, really. He came into the byre so quickly that all the cows pranced to the limits of their headstalls. Luckily I was alone at the upper end of the byre. Lydia, our small maid, had gone home to her mother's for that night. I was in the act of pouring my last pailful into the great tin byne when I caught sight of him. He came straight up to me, the cows all looking soberly and expectantly over their shoulders, as they always do when milking-time is finished.

'Isla!' he said, and held out his hands.

What he thought I could do with them I don't know, for I had a heavy pail in one hand and my milking-stool under my other arm.

'Isla,' he said again, and I could see he was shaking, 'I have come to tell you that—that I love you—and—to ask you to marry me!'

'Oh,' I gasped, quite taken aback, 'I thought it was Victoria.'

'Victoria,' he repeated, evidently dumbfounded; 'why, she knew all about it from the first.'

'Then she told you that!'

'No, she told me nothing,' he cried, 'I want you to tell me for yourself.'

'Well, if you will put on your hat, I will—I do there! You can't stand in this draughty place getting your death of cold.'

And so that is how I came to marry John. And we did not put off time, neither. For John went right

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

over the hill the following morning to see his friend the parish minister, and had our names cried in church the very next Sunday, three times in one day. And when the parish minister gave out 'John Davidson and Isla Wood, both of this parish,' you could have heard a pin drop. For, you see, they all expected it would have been Victoria.

And as for Mrs. Alfonsius and the Seven Wise Men, they and their wisdom and their romancing troubled us not at all.

By us, I mean John and myself. For of course Victoria became a greater mystery than ever to them — indeed so strange that, if Vic will let me, and if the people who print things are kind about this, I will tell her story all at length some day. It is far more exciting than mine—as, of course, it should be.

About John and me there never was any mystery, for I let out that we were married in the very first sentence. I could not help it. Indeed I couldn't. So would you have done if you had been John's wife!

3. FIRST AND BEST

Sweet, clear, and wide, as if drawn with the broadest of celestial brushes, the twilight of December painted itself above the Galloway hills. Yonder was Bennan—to the left Cairn Edward. The Orchar stretched itself out, a long, barrow-like mound. All were streaked in brown and blue, for the first snow had not yet come, and the sheep were still free to come and go.

John Stoba, herd on Balminnie, came down the hill towards the massive farm-steading which showed itself white and grey out of the mist that filled the valley. He was a slow man, John Stoba, a bachelor of forty years' standing, and he knew well his value as a herd and as a man.

Mrs. Colvend of Balminnie knew it too. She was John Stoba's employer—or would have been if either of them had ever heard the word. 'The Mistress,' was what he called her. 'Joohn,' uttered in one long-drawn monosyllable—that was his title to honour in all the head-end of Balmaghie. Everybody knew John Stoba. He had gone to herd the Hill of Balminnie when he was 'but a callant.' He had been there before Archie Colvend had married Mary Shand. He even remembered 'the auld man'—Archie's father—hale, bowed, keen-faced, and grippy of hand, who had so spoiled his only son, refusing him nothing—in reason and out of it, and giving him, as they said in these parts, 'money to burn.'

John Stoba had been a kind of providence at Balminnie, in the many evil days when young Archie

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Colvend was going down hill, losing money in foolish speculations, or driving recklessly home on market nights with the reins trailing among the horses' feet, himself standing up shouting and thrashing, while the gig pitched and tossed like a wave of the sea from one side of the road to the other.

Then when the end came (swiftly, and as might have been expected), John Stoba stayed on in his old capacity. Young Archie, his master, had 'broken neck-bane' at the Raiders' Brig. But, because of that, Balminnie had more need of him than ever.

So John Stoba stayed on at the farm, the same solid, quiet-moving, silent man as ever. Mrs. Archie had been a little older than her husband, a tall, dark, buxom woman of Galloway type, far from uncomely, but reported to be of a most difficult temper. She had no children. So little Aggie Colvend, a niece of her late husband's, had come from Kyle to bear her company, and in time, it might be, heiress of the farm.

In the meantime, however, Aggie certainly endured hardness. She was a bright-faced and winsome maid of ten, who went to school at the Bennan when the roads were fit. But her aunt was hasty with her, and tears were more frequent than smiles on Aggie Colvend's face when at home. Indeed it was generally thought in the district that Mistress Colvend should have had 'bairns o' her ain, before she was trusted to bring up ither folks.'

As John Stoba came near the steading of Balminnie he looked about him for something. No, it could not be his dogs Glen and Cavie. They were both close at his heels, with their heads hanging low, all their morning gambols run out of their heel and toes—scarce a wag left in either of their tails. A

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

long day on the hill and the 'ingathering' of the far Whinny Knowes had taken the sport out of them.

No, John Stoba was looking for the small figure of a little girl. Aggie was wont to watch for him as he came leisurely down the hill—from the cow pastures in the summer time, and from the byre door when, as now, it was the season of wintry bleakness.

But tonight he was disappointed. No little girl could he spy— neither in pasture nor yet in the byre, where the breath of a dozen cows made the air pleasantly warm and scented with the breath of the bygone meadows— from which the hay they were munching had been cut and won.

The cows rattled their chains, and Tibbie Grier, the byre-lass, called out a greeting to John. A man of forty with a good wage and 'something laid by' was not to be despised. But John Stoba answered not at all to her rustic provocation.

'Where's the bairn?' he demanded.

'Wha kens?' said Tibbie, tossing her head, 'there's ither lasses forbye in the world.'

'Where's wee Aggie?' said John steadily, with that faculty for keeping on which ultimately compels an answer.

'I heard the Mistress on her tappan awhile since,' said Tibbie; 'but that's naething new. She's aye ragin' at the lassie—for what I dinna ken. It's nae business o' mine. She's neither better nor waur than ither lassies, sae far as I can see.'

John Stoba ordered Cavie, the younger and more troublesome of his collies, to stop sniffing at a milk pail, and, as Cavie did not instantly obey, his master enforced the order with a 'dickie' — with the result that Cavie went out of the byre door in one long yelp, and, so far as could be seen in the gloaming,

bent in the form of a hoop.

Then John himself showed signs of leaving, but was interrupted by Tibbie, a bold-eyed, yellow-haired, free-tongued lass of twenty-five.

'Here, John, what's your hurry?' she cried; 'sit doon on the stool there and gie us your crack. Ye will forget how to speak, man alive—oot yonder on the hills since mornin'. I wadna wonder if ye haena spoken a word a' this blessed day.'

'Some folk,' said John sententiously, 'speak mair words than sense.'

'For shame, John, are ye meanin' me?' cried Tibbie. 'Surely never! For I declare that I hae hardly had a sowl to talk to since yestreen. And to tell you the truth, John, ye are the only ane about the farm worth wearin' words on.'

To this quite life-sized compliment John replied with his usual plain-spoken gravity.

'Ay, I heard ye sayin' thae verra words to muckle Rob Steenson yestreen!' And he left Tibbie to rattle her pails and wonder for what purpose a man so impregnable to ordinary wiles had been created.

'It's that bairn,' she said at last, as she drew in her stool to attack a fresh cow, and the milk began to sing its merry song in the pail.

Meanwhile John moved towards the house. He had to cross the litter-strewn square of the yard. The back door was a ruddy oblong before him, and the collies made for it with a rush. They had their appointed places under the table, and the warmth and prospect of supper attracted them.

John entered, passed the vague outlines of pots and pans in the back-kitchen, and so found himself within the spacious 'house-place' (which was more, oh, so much more than a kitchen) of the farm of

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Balminnie. His grave eyes rested on the mistress of the dwelling. She looked up with a smile at his approach, but there was something dark about her brow, a furrow a little more deeply lined between the eyes, a warm oily look about the widened black pupils that told of anger not overpast—or at least not fully.

The 'house-lass' Meg manoeuvred about the hearth with pots and pans. A stray ploughman looked in to observe how far the supper preparations had proceeded, caught a glimpse of Mrs. Colvend's face, lost his tongue, and abruptly vanished. This was that Rob of whom John Stoba had spoken to Tibbie in the byre. He knew where there was an empty stool and a better welcome.

But John Stoba drew in his chair near to the fire, after hanging up his plaid. He had his own place, which was the arm-chair farthest from the door. Mere term-to-term ploughmen might huddle together on the long settle, but for John Stoba it was another matter. His coming to the farm antedated even that of 'the mistress' herself.

'All right on the hill today, John?' said Mrs. Colvend. She had spoken first, which, considering her temper, was itself a sign of the times. John had taught her by not speaking at all. Silence was no difficulty to him. He was in constant practice up among the sheep and the coursing collies.

'Ay,' he said gravely, with his eyes on the empty little three-legged stool in the chimney-corner; 'Where's wee Aggie?'

The mistress of the farm compressed her lips.

The frown deepened. Her eyebrows drew together, and the oily density of black in the pupils seemed to absorb the whole iris. For a moment she did not

answer.

'Where's the bairn?' John repeated.

'John Stoba,' said his mistress, stamping her foot, 'how often have I told you to mind your own business?'

'I am,' said John calmly; 'where's the bairn?'

Meg the house-lass, Tibbie's younger sister, let fall a 'pingle' of sowens in her agitation, but Mrs. Colvend was too angry even to register this for future punishment. She stood before the slow quiet man of the hills, trembling with anger, and yet with a fierce tiger-like beauty about her, of which even Meg was dimly conscious.

'She looks famous, the mistress, when she's mad—' was her verdict, 'that is' (she added), 'when she's no mad at you!'

Nor was Meg Grier alone in this opinion, though the herd of Balminnie appeared entirely unconscious of either charm or anger.

'Where's wee Aggie? Where's the bairn?' The question repeated for the third time nearly put the mistress 'by hersel',' as they said in that countryside.

'Where she may be, is nane o' your business, John Stoba,' she cried, setting her hands on the curve of her hips and bending down her face close to his.

John Stoba regarded the angry woman unflinchingly.

'If ye hae been lickin' the bairn,' he said, speaking slowly, and with a certain resolute dullness, 'I'll lick you! Haena I tailed ye?'

'And who are you, John Stoba?' cried the mistress of the farm, 'my herd— nae mair!'

'That's it— nae mair,' repeated John, 'your herd—'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

nae mair!'

A shiver of pain passed over the handsome woman's angry face. There came a change, strange, unexpected, pitiful.

'Oh, John,' she said, catching him by the sleeve, 'dinna speak to me that gate! What wad I do without you, John?'

'Where's the bairn?' repeated John, not a muscle of his grave, strong countenance relaxing at the woman's appeal.

'Dinna—dinna,' she cried, 'dinna look at me as if—as if—oh, ye think mair o' the Wee lassie than o' me!'

And she wept great tears, half in anger, half in agony of spirit.

'I hae nae peety for the woman that's no kind to a bairn,' said John Stoba, still more quietly.

'Wee Agnes is no here,' said Mrs. Colvend, sobbing. John Stoba rose to his feet. He lifted his broad bonnet from the window ledge, where it lay among almanacks and advertisements of sheep-dips. He whistled on his dogs, and was half-way to the door before the woman could stop him.

She put her arms about his neck, and her face was changed to that strange, impersonal, grey anguish, which only comes to women at times of their utmost agony.

'Oh, John,' she cried, 'ye winna— ye winna forsake me. What wad I do without you, John? I need you, John. My—hert— needs ye.'

'The bairn, woman, what o' the bairn?'

'The bairn I sent hame, John,' she pled with him; 'ye were that fond o' her, I couldna bear it, John. Ye looked for her first when ye cam in off the muir. So she's gone hame. I sent Bob wi' her to the toon.'

She's to stop the nicht wi' my sister Ann and her man in King Street, and the morn she will gang hame.'

Then John Stoba uttered a short command to his dogs which, instantly responsive to his voice, again took their places under the table.

'Oh, where are ye gaun, John?'

'To yoke the gig,' said John.

'What for—oh, what for?'

'For you and me to drive doon to the toon.'

'I winna—I winna!'

Then John Stoba stood up towering above her, very strong and very stern. The buxom, bright-eyed woman seemed to shrink and dwindle before him.

'Then ye hae seen the last o' John Stoba,' he said, removing her hands one after the other from his neck, without harshness, but rather as in a thick wood one might put aside natural obstructions.

In fifteen minutes more the herd of Balminnie and the mistress of the farm were on their way to Cairn Edward. It was a long drive— nine miles by the nearest road. But the man would not speak, and the woman dared not.

They drove up the street of the little town— then scarce more than a village. All was in darkness. To the moon had been left the task of lighting the burgesses home. Country visitors, except on market days, were not looked for—certainly not welcomed. Man, woman, and child in Cairn Edward— all were expected to know the way to their own doors in the dark. For the moon, though a party to the contract, not infrequently did not come up to time, owing to stress of weather, temper, and feminine whimsies.

For the first time since they had jolted out of the farm loaning, Mrs. Colvend laid a hand on John's

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

arm.

'It's here,' she said, 'that's my sister's door.'

John could only discern the white blur of whitewash, then the black of a door.

'I'll get the bairn,' she added.

'Haud the reins,' the herd commanded. 'Bide where ye are.'

Tremblingly the woman obeyed, venturing only the timid remonstrance. 'But they will a' be in their beds.'

'Haud the reins!'

He went to a window and tapped. Then he tapped again. A man's sharp voice barked from within. Then as the questioner was recognised, it subsided into the continuous quiet of men's communications with one another. John came back to the gig.

'Hap yourself up, Mary,' he said, 'there's nae need for them to see that you are here.'

It was the first time that night he had used her Christian name, and she nearly dropped the reins in her gratitude. She leaned down to touch him in the darkness.

'Oh, John, ye love me?—Ye winna gang awa?'

'That we'll see when the bairn's safe at Balminnie,' he answered, but there was a great kindness in his voice, which Mary Colvend caught at once. Still there is no such thing as instantaneous conversion, at least in the affairs of this earth.

'Oh, John,' she moaned, 'ye loe her mair than ye loe me.'

'We'll see, we'll see, Mary,' he answered, now gather the shawl close aboot your held, and I'll hand ye up the bairn when they bring her doon.'

'Oh, ye will love her and no me!'

And the mistress of Balminnie rocked herself to

and fro in the gig.

'Na, na,' said John, comfortingly, 'there's nae comparison between the woman a man loves, and the bairn he loves. But—' (he put his broad shepherd's hand up till it touched her chill one on the reins), 'mind—she is to be oors—yours and mine, Mary. You are to love her—as if she were our ain. Hear ye, Mary?'

'I hear, John,' she said, 'I'll do it, if ye will only love me—first and best.'

She had taken the herd's hand, twisting and squeezing it unconsciously among the reins so that old Grey heaved up his head. He did not understand why they kept him standing there in the cold, and yet tugged so at his bridle.

'Wheesht, Mary,' said John Stoba, 'they are comin'—yonder's a light.'

'Say it, John!'

'Say what, ye foolish woman?'

'That ye loe me first and best—ye maun say it. Ye ken that I loe you, I couldna help it. Maybe it was a sin, but I never lo'ed him! How could onybody loe him?'

'Mary,' he said, 'ye are temptin' Providence juist terrible.'

'I did—I do,' she said, sobbing. 'But I could say nae ither — no even afore the Judgment Throne!'

'Oh, Mary, ye shouldna speak sic words,' whispered the herd, 'ye ken I never gied ye cause.'

'Cause!' she laughed hysterically, 'was it no cause eneuch juist to see Airchie Colvend and you thegither?'

'But I never spak',' said the herd.

'Then speak noo,' answered the woman, 'say what I bade ye say—quick, afore they come.'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Then ye will keep the bairn as oor ain a' your days?'

'I will, John, I promise— as God sees us in the black, black nicht!'

'Then I will say it,' said John Stoba, like one taking oath. 'Mary, I love ye 'first and best,' And we will put up the banns in Ba'maghie Kirk next Sabbath.'

He ran to the door. Little Aggie wrapped for a night journey was put into his arms.

'Wha's that wi' ye, John?' said the man's voice from the dark door in which a solitary 'dip' glimmered.

'Juist a friend,' said John Stoba shortly, ' here gie me the reins. Tak haud o' the bairn—ay, that way—aneath your cloak. Guid-nicht to ye.'

And thus they drove into the deeper darkness—love in Mary's heart, and little Aggie contentedly nestling her cheek against her aunt's shoulder.

4. THE JUNCTION GANG

CHAPTER ONE A RISING OFFICER

‘And me on the rise; it's very hard!’ said Sergeant Archibald Cubbison to his half-brother Frank. ‘Why, it was only yesterday that the chief inspector says to me, ‘Sergeant,’ says he, ‘your work on the Netherby case is much appreciated at headquarters!’ says he. And now you turn up to disgrace me! It's very hard!’

‘Hoots, Bauldy, ye were saft a' your days. Ye never had the spunk o' a three-year-auld lassie bairn’ returned Frank Cubbison easily, prying his finger into a sack of Indian corn which lay on the ‘bench’ of the goods' shed at Allangibbon Junction on the P. & S. W. Railway. It was not yet the days of yard engines, steam cranes, and cattle traffic regulations. Allangibbon, though an important centre, ‘growing in commercial importance every day,’ as its local paper declared twice a week, was nevertheless very simply equipped as to its heavy traffic department. A double line of rail traversed the goods' shed from end to end. Great doors that never ran quite smoothly on their hinges disclosed a ‘bench’ heaped with ‘light sundries,’ together with bags of cereals, oil-cake, bone manure, disordered reaping machines, and calf-skins going to the tannery— not before their time. This in brief was the ‘goods' shed’ of Allangibbon Junction on the P. & S. W. Railway.

‘Spunk!’ cried Sergeant Archibald (it was part of

his rise in life that he was trying to leave his old appellation of 'Bauldy' Cubbison behind him), 'Spunk, indeed! Ye think it is spunk to poach the Laird o' Boreland's pheasants till the keepers ken ye as weel as their ain dogs. Ye think it spunk to send your gimblet through a cask an' sit for hours drinkin' wi' your blackguards— while I, Archibald Cubbison, that am sent by the department to investigate, canna report the circumstances according to my conscience for my mither's sake, and for the sake o' the guid name o' Cubbison!'

Frank, the poacher, did not answer for a moment. With his thumb he widened the rent he had made in the bag of Indian corn, and let the little straw-coloured grains drop one by one into the palm of the other hand. He was looking for a red 'corn' as Bauldy knew very well. Red corns were much sought after, being thought to be lucky besides being more toothsome when you came to eat them.

'Go on, Bauldy!' he cried at length; 'you prosecute, I'll be judge and jury baith! Man, ye hae a gift o' oratory. Ye speak like Fiscal Hislop himsel'. This court is now in session— the Honourable Francis Cubbison on the bench; a jury is impanelled, to wit: F. Cubbison, Drumfern Gaol, Frank Cubbie, Frankie, Brasswire Cubbison, Hare-an'-Hounds Cubbison, etceteray — jurors - At the instance of Sergeant Bauldy—I mean Archibald Cubbison, the prisoner at the bar, Frank Cubbison, is charged with various misdemeanours, trespassing by night on the lands, and so forth. Go on now, Bauldy!'

Sergeant Cubbison, 'on the rise,' looked keenly at his brother. He could not always make out when Frank was joking. For himself, he did not joke. Life

was too full of seriousness for that. It was a place to 'rise' in, and one stood to lose an opportunity which might not occur again, as the auctioneers' advertisements put it. Besides, joking is not understood, much less encouraged, in the police department of the P. & S. W. Railway.

Now Frank, on the other hand, had never (till lately) done anything else. He had played tricks on the master at school. He had made love to the girls when he left it. He had spliced fishing-rods most of the time, except for a lively twelvemonth when he was apprenticed to Bailie Meiklewham's hosiery business in the Kirkgate. In fact, Frank Cubbison had been a 'trifler' and a 'guid-for-naething' all the days of him. And now he was something much worse, for he had just been doing six months for night-poaching 'with resistance to capture' on the lands of Boreland, Skaillyhill, Lincolns, and Claypots, all in the parish of Allangibbon. His fair hair was still so short after his gaol-crop that the crisp curl of it, which the lasses liked so much, could not be discerned.

'Ay,' said Sergeant Cubbison, 'ye may make licht o' this, but it's far frae bein' a lauchin' maitter to me that my only brither.'

'Half-brither,' put in Frank easily. But the railway policeman went on without heeding the interruption.

'Should be convicted at the very Sheriff's Court where I was giving my evidence and obtaining the admiration o' my superiors. It's fair maddenin', I declare—that's what it is! Ye ken weel what ye hae dune, Frank Cubbison!'

'Unlawfully taking or destroying any game or rabbits, with any gim, net, engine, or other instrument, also in resisting capture, offering

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

violence with gun, cross-bow, firearms, bludgeon, stick, club, or other offensive weapon whatever!' quoted Frank from certain documents familiar to him.

His brother rose from the hacked bench on which he had been sitting with a certain air of hopelessness.

'I see,' he said. 'I may as well resign and go abroad. There is no chance for me here, handicapped wi' a brither like you. Ye care for neither God nor man— nor yet for your ain folk that brought you up. Your mither...'

'Stepmother!' interjected the poacher grimly.

'She will not show her head out of doors for very shame before the neighbours, and when I was up at Bog-hole the other nicht, she grat (wept) on my shooder to think on the disgrace ye were bringin' on decent self-respecting folk.'

For the first time the poacher seemed interested. He sat up on the Indian corn bags on which he had been lounging at ease.

'What were you doin' up at Bog-hole, Bauldy?' he asked, glancing keenly at his brother.

'Visitin' my mother. I hae some respect for my relations!'

'Were ye seein' Jennie?' he continued, with some suppressed eagerness.

There was a sort of gratified smile on Sergeant Cubbison's face at the insinuation.

'And what for no?' he answered boldly, kicking a heavy trail of wet skins with his foot— 'what for no? I ken o' nae reason why I shouldna look in on Jennie Margetson if I please, without speirin' leave o' Frank Cubbison.'

'When is't to be?' said his brother, biting hard on

a stubborn 'corn' which crunched between his firm, white teeth.

'Oh, it's naethin' like sae far gaen as that,' said the sergeant of the railway police. 'I haena said a word to hersel' yet. But I hae spoken to her mither, and I hae her guidwill. When I get my rise, I'll no say but I nicht do waur. I could afford to mairry as weel as ony man! It's surely nae shame for an honest man honestly to coort a lass! Hae ye aught to say against it, Frank?'

It was the policeman's first touch of dignity, the first spark from the iron of the inner man. And, with all his faults, the poacher could appreciate manhood. He rose to his feet.

'Bauldy,' he said, 'I didna think ye had as muckle in ye. Ye are richt. It is an honour for a decent lass to be honestly speired in marriage by a man that can afford to keep a wife!'

He moved to the door of the shed. A wind with an edge to it was blowing in from the bare fields of autumn. He had the remains of a prison chill upon him, and he shivered sightly. He indicated No. a siding.

'Ony shunting the nicht?' he inquired.

'Not on No. 2. There's six empty cattle-trucks on No. 1. They are for the 3.55 down, but they don't go till the morning.'

The railway policeman rose to his feet, and began nervously shutting the doors of the goods shed.

'What did I tell you?' he said, with a kind of angry groan. 'You will be the destruction of me some day yet. You've just had six months with; you'll get seven years next time, sure. It will look bonny if I am on special duty here some nicht, and you are found in the engine-room. The first cleaner would bounce

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

you, and then there'd be a fight. Then he'd swear till all was blue that I had let you in to sneak his 'waste' or collar his 'tommy.' How am I to do the square thing by my profession, an' you all the time disgracin' me before the hands?'

'A' richt, Bauldy, I'll try the M. R. sundries waggon. Has she straw in her?'

'I wash my hands of it, Frank,' moaned the policeman. 'What for can ye no gang dacently hame to Crosspatrick? There's a bed for ye there— my mither wad tak' ye in—for my sake!'

'Hame!' said the poacher, 'like this?'

As he spoke he uncovered his head, and showed it covered with a fine scrub of hair, through which the scalp showed plainly. 'Why, man, my very lugs stick oot like semaphores! But I'll be careful. Ye shall come to no trouble through me. That I promise you!'

He moved off with a curious little halt on his right leg, and he coughed as he went, both the result of watching behind hedges on damp nights when the pheasants were late in setting.

'Good luck!' he cried to his brother.

But Sergeant Archibald Cubbison had already resumed his professional tread, and was marching down the yard. He flashed his lantern from side to side, examining 'destination tickets,' and peering into the windows of coal agencies and yard offices. As he went he shook his head mournfully.

'I'll never mak' onything o' this— an' after Netherby too. I hae gotten my chance to clear oot the gang here at Allangibbon, an' I hae a guid guess at wha they are. But Frank spoils a'. He comes in my road everywhere. I'll never get my rise, sae lang as I hae to keep in wi' the gang, to get them to let him

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

sleep in the waggons. How can I be a 'smart officer,' and make creditable captures, when I have a jail-bird brother sleeping on No. 3 siding? If they 'broach the Admiral,' or break open a preserved meat case for the Eytalian warehooseman in the Vennel, I can never report them. For they wad stand up and swear that they saw Frank slippin' oot o' a ' sundries' waggon. And, faith, I couldna deny that I had knowledge o' his sleepin' there that nicht—a bonny like thing to get in the papers about a risin' officer!'

CHAPTER TWO AULD TAM MARGETSON'S JENNIE

But Sergeant Cubbison's brother, the poacher, did not go to the empty 'sundries' van on No. 2 siding. He waited till the distant star upon the sergeant's belt had perambulated to the extremest verge of the yard and was crossing the way towards the passenger station.

'Bauldy will never come near No. 2 this nicht, for fear o' kennin whaur I am,' he meditated, pausing between the 'cattle-bank,' which exhaled a strong odour of ammonia into the night air, and No.1 lie, which was entirely filled with live-stock waggons all marked internally with the criss-cross scoring of a hundred restless horns.

Like a hunted hare he cowered for a little, and then, with his shoulders bent and his head set low between them, he sped up No. 2 towards the white outer gates, where stood the cottage of Jock Lee, the weighing-machine man. Jock was a great hater of Sergeant Bauldy, who had more than once reported him for neglect of duty. And nothing would have

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

afforded more pleasure than to 'get square on the cop' by reporting him for harbouring on the premises of the Company a brother of the sinister repute of Frank Cubbison.

But the poacher was far too expert at his vocation to let himself be outwitted by a bemused yokel like Weigher Lee. He glided to the end of the 'lie' where the great twisted buffers hold out their iron fists to receive the shock of a score of loaded trucks in the day. He climbed upon the earthen mound that strengthened their wooden framework. There was now only a low wall between him and the street. He dropped on the other side as lightly as a bird flirting over a garden wall. It was already dark, with that surprising darkness that seems to come so needlessly early in late autumn. Far down towards the unseen town the lights twinkled through a chillish haze. Frank Cubbison looked once in that direction, but only once. There was a snug howff where his credit was still as good as the liquor was bad. Then he crossed the road, plunged down a steep descent into the old quarry where the town slaughter-houses have since been located. Here, finding a gap in the hedge, he crept through it, and struck right across country at full speed.

He passed farm towns with straw-littered yards and restless collies roving everywhere, yet never a dog barked at him. He pattered over the rough moorland, and his lame foot did not prevent him from covering the ground as fast as the best runner in the parish. Once he set his hand upon a hare lying warm in her form. As by instinct, he gripped and choked her with the professional touch which shuts off, for ever, poor puss's pitiful cry of mortal peril. But in another moment he set the licking

beast down and let her run again.

'Not tonight,' he said, and stood listening while she scampered away over the frost-stiffened turf. Greyer and sterner grew the night about him as he proceeded. The stray houses cuddled blacker in their close-set snuggeries of trees, and the lamps behind their blinds seemed to push jetting bars of comfortable light further out into the night. It looked bitterly homelike and cosy to the homeless man.

At last Frank Cubbison stopped near to the end of a little lane, at the top of which the figure of a man stood dark against the sky. He was leaning with his elbows on the gate, and gazing down in the direction of the poacher. But Frank climbed over a crumbling dyke without disturbing a single stone. He was not to be caught thus. The man at the gate clicked a latch and gazed slowly down, a little glowing spark (which was the bowl of his pipe) being visible as he stooped to fasten the hook again. Frank was back over the dyke before he had turned, and now lay along the further side like a thing dead. The man passed heavily down the lane, leaving a trail of burning twist tobacco behind him. Frank Cubbison had his reasons, which were by no means cowardly ones, for not desiring to encounter Auld Tam Margetson that night at the end of his own loaning.

But he followed afar off, and was at the barn-end of the farm-town when the staunch guidman of Bog-hole barred the door, having first assured himself that all his sons were within. His daughter, he knew on her mother's evidence, had long since retired to her chamber, and was doubtless sound asleep. For Jennie Margetson was one of those country maids whose beauty depends on clean air, wholesome food, sound sleep—and plenty of all three.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Bog-hole' —the name describes the former, not the latter state of Auld Tam's holding. The Margetsons had been nearly fourscore years in the farm. Auld Tam's grandfather, Auldest Tam, had gone thither when there was not a foot of arable land outside the patch of kailyard with the dry stone dyke round it. The first two cows his wife ever had shared the same little thatched house, the cow dwelling bill, the young married couple ben. The partition between was the top of the tall curtained box-bed, which with a couple of creepie stools and a board laid on trestles for a table, constituted the entire domestic plenishing of the original house of Bog-hole.

But the thrift of three generations had not been in vain. Good farming without, careful housewifery within, these were the open secrets of the Margetsons' success. And now, though Auld Tam wore a blue bonnet and abode at Bog-hole in the house where he was born, he had several 'led' farms elsewhere under the care of shepherds, and it is scarcely figurative to say that the cattle on a thousand hills were his. His daughter, Jennie, therefore, was no tocherless lass, albeit she had some claims to a lang pedigree.

Nevertheless, when Frank the poacher, with his gad-trimmed hair, whistled without, mellow as a blackbird after rain, Jennie Margetson stole to her window and peeped out. There was a dark figure beneath her window, and her heart beat a little faster. For though there was nothing between her and Frank Cubbison, she was unfeignedly sorry for him, and—they had gone to the dancing-school together. Besides, he had been the very first to tell her she was fair to look upon, and no woman ever

quite forgets the man who does that.

Looking up, he saw a glint of white behind the black panes, presently subdued and overcast by the shawl which the girl cast over her shoulders.

'Frank Cubbison,' she whispered, 'you must never come here again. My father swears he will shoot you if ever he catches you on the place. Besides, there is to be no more between us. You promised me that you would never poach again, and the selfsame night you were taken with game in your pockets and nearly killed the keepers.'

'Jennie,' said Frank the poacher gently, 'I ken weel that a' is over between us. I ken it fine—that was the reason I fought the Boreland keepers so hard. But I didna come sae far to vex ye wi' that. It's about my brither—about Archibald, that I wad speak to you.'

'I care naething about folk that canna speak for themselves,' said the girl petulantly. Frank could almost see the toss of Jennie Margetson's head as she spoke. He knew how pretty and taking it was. He used to try for it at the dancing-school.

'The lad is bashfu',' pursued Frank; 'he is simple and thochtfu' and weel-doin'.'

'Pity but thae things had been catching in the family like measles, Frank,' said Jennie from her window.

'Ay, Guid's peety!' and with this expression the poacher fell thoughtful himself.

'Is that a' ye hae to say to me?' Jennie said lightly, for if it be I'll bid you guid-e'en. It's no a healthy place to keep the window open a' nicht at this farm-toon o' Bog-hole.'

'Jennie,' he said, speaking sadly, 'God kens I do not want you to be wearin' a single thocht on the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

like o' me; I hae neither character, trade, health, nor habit o' industry. But Archibald has, and I want you to think kindly o' the lad; he wad mak' ye a guid man, Jennie, and...'

'He has been at my mither aboot me, I hear,' said Jennie crossly, 'the silly gomer. What for did he no speak to me, as a man should, if he had the like o' that in his mind? Bashfu'? Backward! I like nae sic wooers; they are no for Jennie Margetson!'

'But Jennie...'

'Ay, Frank?'

'Supposin' he should get his rise and could keep a wife as ye ocht to be keepit— micht he speak to you then?'

'Did his elder brither wait for that?'

'Jennie, dinna be hard on the lad! He loves ye truly, and that's a thing hard to come by in this world. Think on it; lass!'

'Frank Cubbison, gin ye are expecting me to say 'ay' to a man that has never speired me, ye hae even less sense than I thocht ye had. But let him get his 'rise' and then we'll see. Or 'rise' or no 'rise,' let him come like a man and speak his mind, instead o' sending his brother to do it for him!'

'He never sent me, Jennie; 'deed, he little kens I am here.'

'And for a' ye hae said, ye micht as weel hae bided whaur ye were.'

Mistress Jennie was piqued by Frank's personal indifference into severer speech than was usual with her.

'Ye are a nice lot, you Cubbisons! You, Frank, are a law-breaker, and get sent to jail. Archie is a policeman and man o' the law. What for dae ye no' work into ane anither's hands, and then Archie wad

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

sune get his 'rise'?'

'How that?' said Frank the poacher eagerly.

'Why, when ye do start oot to get sent to jail, lay the trail sae that Archie may follow ye and get the credit. Faith, if ye struck high eneuch and he caught ye, Archie wad sune get his 'rise.'"

'I'll think on't. Guid-nicht to ye, Jennie.'

But Jennie Margetson, being angry and disappointed at she scarcely knew what, shut down the window without farewell greeting of any kind.

CHAPTER THREE

M. R. SUNDRIES VAN NO. 4496

As Frank Cubbison lay that night among the wheat straw, in the Midland 'sundries' van, which had strayed as far north as Allangibbon Junction, he thought several things and he heard others. He thought what a fool he had been not to follow the main turnpike of life, instead of turning aside into every bypath that offered. It was so easy to follow the straight, like his brother Bauldy. He seemed to walk onwards towards a home and a wife with the solid impetus of a ball rolling downhill. Frank thought of his dead father; of his stepmother, whose harshness to the boy left in her care had first of all driven him from home; then of his companions of the slaughter-house gang, who had taught him to steal for pocket-money, or lightly for the excitement of the thing. Jennie could never be his now, and that was all right. He knew the wife of 'Hutt' Nixon, who lived at the cross-roads where you turn at right angles to go to Whinnyliggate.

'No,' thought Frank Cubbison, 'God forbid that

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Jennie should marry me and grow like that!

'No,' he mused again, deep in the bitter sea of the prodigal's thoughts, 'Jennie shall never be like Hutt Nixon's wife. Archie shall have her if I can manage it.'

At that moment the shoulders of the 'Junction Gang' brushed against his temporary bed-chamber. Frank lay so still that even the straw did not rustle. No. 4496 M. R. 'sundries' van was solidly built, a bluff-buttocked 'Englischer' from the wheat counties, and Frank's bed was packing that had come all the way from Rugby.

'Is this her?' said a voice apparently within an inch of his ear. It was really not much farther off, for its owner had stooped between the buffers to light his pipe, and Frank saw the red glow in the bowl fluctuate momentarily through a crack.

'Na, this is no' her,' answered a second voice farther away, yet perfectly audible. 'She's farther doon the 'lie'. This is that M. R. besom that has been four times to the port wi' sundries and four times back again. Frankie Johnstone has been up lookin' for her, but we aye get word and start her on anither jaunt afore he gets here.'

'Built for a guard's van she was,' said the first voice. 'She has a fine auld-fashioned Gridley brake that wad haud the Great Eastern on a mill-race, and a compartment bunk for packages and breakables that is grand for swinging your legs on!'

'She's fu' o' strae,' answered voice number two; 'let's get into her! This is cauld comfort, and Bauldy, the cop, may turn his lantern on us at any moment. Then that's a report sure!'

'Yes, the swine,'— the voice of the third was curiously distinct,— 'he just as near as a touch got

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

me the sack from the 'supe' on Tuesday week. May I be choked with holy smoke if I don't even up with the beggar some of these fine nights!'

'Put a 'broached Admiral' in his 'cubby' and set the town 'traps' on to him,' suggested a fourth, farther back in the darkness.

'N. G.!' responded the Englishy voice of number three; 'he'd spot it himself, or catch us shovin' the 'old sodjer' on him. 'Sides, 'is character's too bloomin' good!'

'Haud yer ugly mugs— here the beggar comes. No, he's turned into Ewing's coal-siding. In wi' ye afore he gets round the brick-bings!'

Inside M. R. 'sundries' No. 4496 Frank Cubbison listened to the soft shuffle of shoulders as the men took the lee side of the van. He heard the fingers prying at the catch. Fortunately, the system was an unusual one, and the man swore. He 'condemned' the designer, the foreman of the Midland fitting-shed, the eyes of the blacksmith that hammered the tongue.

'Why couldna they cast it decently and in a piece, wi' a bolt an' ring? I hae barkit my knuckles frae yae side to the ither. Folk that mak' sic-like gear should mak' men wi' brass knuckles to open them!'

'Tha has brass enough!' growled an ex-North-West man from Wigan way, 'but it has aw run into thy cheek, Geordie!'

'Haud yer wheesh, lads. She's open noo. Up wi' ye afore that ugly glim comes this way!'

'Hang it aw. Where does t' felly get his oil? It shines like the searchlight o' t' Mersey guard-ship!'

They entered one after the other, dim cowering figures all bunched together, disappearing one after another into the yawning cavern.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Thowt I heard a rotten, mates!' said Scrub Yeats, the red-haired Yorkshiremen; 'summat firsled in the straw up there, I'll swear!'

'Appen Sandy getting out his beer-mug to be ready!' said the Wigan man. This caused much smothered laughter, the explanation of which appeared that Sandy, the 'washer-out' from the engine roundhouse (otherwise Mr. Alexander Dalgetty), had brought a beer-mug to contain his share the last time the 'Admiral' had been 'broached'—the naval officer in this case being a full keg of 'Long John' bearing the superscription of the Laird of Boreland.

'I'll wager ye,' said Sandy Dalgetty, who had joined heartily in the joke against himself, 'that Auld X. Y. Z. didna say the Lord's Prayer the first time he put a gless o' yon stuff doon his thrapple. He wadna need to let it doon wi' leemonade or ony o' thae fizzy drinks that come frae Carruthers in the muckle cases!'

'Naw,' said Wigan Billy (Mr. William Sugg). 'Theer were as muckle wayter i' that tub as 'ud 'a floated himsel', bulky though he is. Weel, he'll want it bad some fine day for sure—that same rare owd engine-cistern wayter!'

'Got something to tell you, lads,' the voice of Hutt Nixon, the wife-beating professional poacher of the cross-roads, Frank Cubbison's enemy and rival, penetrated to the recesses of the 'bunk' or 'parcels cubby' where the poacher lay, his heart beating loudly, his face on his folded arms, breathing with his mouth wide open against a crack in the waggon bottom.

'Tell on, Hutt, while we get a drink!' said the others, clinking a tin dinner flask, which Frank's

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

keen out-of-door nostrils bore witness did not contain only milk.

'Have a care, Billy—ye are spillin' the stuff all over the blamed rabbit-hutch!' added Scrub Yeats, the Yorkshireman.

'Trot her out, Hutt! Doan ye mind them goats,' said Billy. 'Here's to ye, Hutt. You're the only mon to call a mon in this 'ere yard o' mangey Scotchies!'

'Wait till the morn's mornin', and by my sowl, if I dinna claw your turmut heid, ye can slash my back wi' nettles!' threatened Sandy Dalgetty, who, especially when in his cups, did not like to hear his country abused.

By this time the beer-mug was circling freely, with many jests of wondrous flavours, and Hutt Nixon sulked because no one had been anxious to hear his news.

'Wheer's that thunderin' bullock now?' queried Scrub Yeats presently. And Sandy, who was watchman, replied that he had crossed to the passenger side, and that for twenty minutes all might be safe.

'Speaking of bullocks,' said Nixon, finding his opening in the silence which ensued, while Sandy made his observations from the open door of the van, 'that scutt Frankie Cubbison is in the country again. I saw him comin' through the quarry in the gloamin'.

He will be lying up about the slaughter-house sheds, I warrant!'

'Ay, lad, looking for what he can catch, same as you and me!' said Wigan Billy. 'Haw ye another sup, Yorkshire?'

'Greedy gorbs!' he continued grumblingly, when Yeats denied him. 'You and Sandy there are enough

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

to suck Mersey dry, let alone a miserable half-cask of John Jamieson!

'See here, boys,' said Hutt Nixon, 'that cop wants his stripes. He wants them bad, too. That's what keeps him on the pounce after us, with never a let-up! Is there one here he hasn't either reported or let out his spite on in open court? Let's 'sell him a dog' and sort him to rights once for all.'

'Bring along t' pup,' said Yeats; 'let's see what he's like!'

Now in railway parlance 'to sell a dog' to any one is to put up a trick upon him which will get him into trouble with his superiors. The 'dog' varies in character from the harmless practical joke of the 'booby trap' order to the deadly 'spite' which may overturn an engine and bring hundreds of lives into jeopardy. Needless to say, 'dogs' of all sorts are much discouraged at headquarters. Still, not a few are 'sold' every year successfully, while few are ever discovered till too late.

I wad gie the man a day's pay that wad sell Bauldy Cubbison a dog to serve him for life. He's a hereaway man, too, and kens far ower muckle. If he were oot o' the road they wad send a stranger to Allangibbon that wadna learn in ten year what Bauldy kens aboot us the noo, a' through bein' brocht up wi' us and schooled here. What's your 'dog,' Hutt?

'Get at the beggar through his brother!' whispered Hutt, leaning forward eagerly when he saw a chance. 'Frank Cubbison has done time. He's habit and repute. He assaulted the poliss, and the town poliss down there hate the very sight o' them like poison—Frank, because he mauled them on the nut in the Boreland scrimmage; and Bauldy, because he got a'

the credit in the Netherby case!

'Noan great credit was there to get,' said Wigan Billy. 'Somebody turned soft, I bet a fiver. Like to see one o' us 'turn booty.' I'd slit his wizand. I'd show him what a Ratchdy scragging is!'

'Well,' continued Hutt Nixon, 'anyway, Bauldy got the credit, and ever since he has been fair girnin' for a 'step.' He cast up to Sergeant Pettigrew in the town there that he wad be an inspector and rank him before he was thirty!'

'Lor', how low!' said the Yorkshireman. 'What a man may coom to when he's left to hissell!'

'Now,' said Hutt Nixon, who had been well educated (his curious nickname came from his having been schooled at Huttborough Hall, a famous local academy of learning), 'it comes to this: either he makes a bigger strike here and gets us seven years apiece along with an inspectorship for himself, or we 'sell him a dog' that will get him the seven year!'

'It's as easy sayin' 'bow-wow as 'dog-dog,' put in Wigan Billy. 'Appen by and by you will begin to tell us what the 'dog' is. 'Appen he ain't whelped yet!'

'He's not only whelped, he's a game-pup well over the distemper,' retorted Hutt. 'This that I've in my mind would fix Bauldy Cubbison if he were an inspector already!'

'Gang on, man! Oot wi' it! Spit her oot—and less bloomin' jaw!'

'The stationmaster's office,' said Hutt Nixon in a lower tone. 'We can easy make it if you fellows back me up and draw off Bauldy. I was left in the office for five minutes last week when I was putting in a claim of Miller Hodgson's for some guano bags. The stationmaster's bunch was on the table, and I had

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

time to rub a fair pattern of the safe key. It's a Hobb's lever—an old patent. Now we'll go for it next Friday night. That's the day before the fortnight's pay. Old John B. will have all the wages in it then for the Junction. The bag comes with the guard of the 10.20 from Dumfries. The Company does not bank with the Allangibbon branch, and so the 'pay' comes up from Drumfern. Now we'll lift that stuff, leave a hat of Bauldy's and a poaching wire twisted for a lock-probe. We'll get Frank to sleep in the yard, and when once the plunder is lifted we have nothing to do but plant some in Bauldy's lodgings or under the floor of his room. Then, with Frank drunk and Bauldy sitting above the 'stuff,' Sergeant Pettigrew will get the office, and it's all up with the Cubbisons. What think you of that, lads?'

'It's great!' 'It's you that has the nut on you!' 'Thou's a dog that'll bite!'

These were the exclamations of the 'gang' as the scholar of Huttborough unfolded his precious plot. Only Sandy Dalgetty, the other local man, objected. He hated that Nixon should have more foresight and planning ability than he.

'That's a scheme no' worth a groat,' said he sneeringly. 'Who is to go into the ticket hall with the glass all round like a greenhouse and the gas turned half on like a jeweller's shop windy? Besides, how can we pass the landlady at Bauldy's lodgings?'

'Now, boiler-slusher,' said Hutt, turning truculently towards the objector, 'you'll be good enough to hold your jaw. Nobody is asking more of you than to stand with a life-preserver behind the lamp-room door and hit any one that passes you behind the ear—that's about all you are good for, if so much. Now don't you interfere in your betters'

business!

'He's right!' 'Hutt's right!' 'It's Hutt's job.' 'Dinna put in your oar, Sandy!'

'Hush there, fellows—what's that? It's Bauldy coming down the 'lie.' Bar the door! And if he comes in, fell him! We are too far on the crook to be taken together. Ready with that life-preserver, Sandy, and fell him if he tries to come in or use his lantern!'

The heavy step of Sergeant Cubbison could be heard as he came tramping down the step of No. 2 siding. The men in the M. R. 'sundries' crouched among the wheat straw and held their breath. Inside the luggage compartment Frank Cubbison managed to open his knife, and held it in his teeth ready to force open the lid and leap out to his brother's assistance in case of need. He could hear Sandy Dalgetty, the slogger of the roundhouse, getting into place behind the shut door of the van.

Then Frank the poacher prayed: 'Oh that my brither Bauldy will pass by!'

But the heavy footsteps stopped. Frank could hear the 'sparrables' of the official boot crunch against an iron bar which the shunters used to 'pinch' heavy waggons on the 'lie.'

'Frank.'

It was his brother's voice outside. The sound of it went straight to the poacher's heart. So the lad used to call him in the dark when he was afraid—in the good days before their father died, when they were boys at home.

'Hist, Frank! Are you there?'

The poacher had raised the lid of the compartment an inch. There was no one sitting on it now. He had heard the creak and rustle as he dived among the wheat straw packing on the van bottom.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Frank!' —the voice came from without in a whisper,— 'I hae left half my supper at the back o' the signal post at Weigher Lee's corner.'

The poacher prayed hard. He fancied he could hear Sandy Dalgetty raise the hand that held the life-preserver. There was the click of fingers upon the door irons, and Frank could smell the hot tin-plate of his brother's lantern. But Sergeant Cubbison knew that the poacher was a light sleeper.

'He's no' there!' he said to himself, and moved on down the siding to the next waggon. Then the lid dropped, and Frank heard the straw rustle a little as the men drew breath after the suspense.

It was almost daybreak when the poacher stole away unobserved, and without visiting the signal post for the half of the supper, which, moreover, it is likely enough that Bauldy had used himself when he failed to discover his brother's hiding-place.

Frank went across the fields to an outlying hayshed he knew of, where he had a small cache of tinned provisions. And, lying among the hay, looking up at the bright sunbeams wheeling lance-like across the cobwebs, the motes dancing hazily in them, and the sweet, drowsy scent of the hay all about, the poacher thought on all that had befallen, and on the things that yet should be. He had plenty of time to think, for no one disturbed him all that day, and by dusk he saw his way clear to a home with shining dishes on the dresser, a fire glowing red on the hearth, a smiling, snowy-aproned housewife running lightfoot to the door to see if 'he' were coming, young voices that clamoured cheerfully, an empty good-man's chair— ah, he had often dreamed of it, and now he saw a way to realise it all!

But it was to be his brother's! It was Archibald

Cubbison who must sit in that seat, for whom the cheery little wife would look out, his bairns who were to clamour about the arms of that chair. On the door of that home there was a polished brass plate with this inscription:—

INSPECTOR A. CUBBISON, P. & S. W. Railway.

When he thought of these things, the tears stood in his eyes. But when his thoughts came back to Frank Cubbison, he saw only the kirk-yaird's sunny corner where the poor folk lie, and the green grass waving wide and coarse and high, making Oblivion itself the fitting memorial of a life misspent.

CHAPTER FOUR HORATIUS KEEPS THE BRIDGE

The gloaming of Friday fell dark and rainy. It was a 'bad night' at 8 p.m., a storm at 10.30, and at midnight a tempest which racked and swayed the solid walls and iron-girded roofs of Allangibbon Junction. The gang were in high glee; no one would bide out of bed for any purpose on such a night. A watch set upon Sergeant Cubbison revealed the fact that, contrary to his custom when on night duty, he had installed himself comfortably in the lamp-room before a rousing fire. Frank was nowhere to be seen, but he would certainly be 'round somewhere.' Hutt Nixon had seen him coming out of the Blue Boar in the afternoon.

The Junction Gang were somewhat earlier at their posts than had been arranged. The stormy night made them anxious to get the job over and be done with it. There were beds waiting for them also, and, like other men, they wished to occupy them. Wigan

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Bill, guided by Hutt Nixon, had cut the gas pipe outside the ticket hall, so that the light was out, and indeed could not be relighted either there or in the inner office.

Hutt was a fine craftsman with the tools, and had the safe open in ten minutes, while Sandy Dalgetty, the 'washer-out,' kept watch and ward by the storm-beaten panes of the ticket hall. The money was in the safe. It was also soon out of the safe and stowed in the long pockets of Hutt's overcoat, which smelled of ground game. Now for the petty cash drawer. There was not much in that, and it was soon swept up.

'Now out with you! Quick is the word! We've got to plant some of the stuff on that beggar Cubbison!'

The gang were already in the dark of the outer hall, filing past the wicket of the ticket counter on tiptoe, when, like a gust of icy wind in their faces, a lantern flashed and a shrill whistle blew. There in the doorway was Frank Cubbison the poacher, a lantern in his hand, blowing the alarm with all his might.

But none other was to be seen, only the swaying branches of the trees across the main line.

'Kill the scum!' 'Rush him!' 'Doon wi' him!'

The police arrived a few seconds late, through no fault of their own. The howling wind had borne away the first notes of the whistle. So for the better part of a minute Frank Cubbison, brave as any Horatius, held the narrow way of the ticket hall door alone and unaided. The blows rained sickeningly on his head and shoulders. One arm dropped shattered to his side. But not a man passed him, and when at last the police came with a rush, led by Sergeant Archibald Cubbison, the latter was just in time to

receive his brother in his arms. Hutt Nixon leapt with a crash through the glass side of the ticket hall, but even he could not break that line of flashing lanterns. The entire 'Junction Gang' was taken red-handed, with tools, lanterns, plunder—everything. The capture was epic in its completeness.

And while they sullenly submitted, and were being handcuffed in the left-luggage office, Frank Cubbison revived under the hands of the doctor just enough to say, 'It was my brother that did it all. Station-master, see to it that he gets his 'step.' Promise me that!'

'I will certainly represent the case strongly,' said the stationmaster. 'Rest easy in your mind.'

And the battered poacher rested easy in his mind—and presently also in his body.

This was the paragraph which appeared in the Drumfern Saturday Standard, a journal of wide local circulation and considerable pretensions to literature:—

Clever Capture. —On Friday night an exceedingly clever capture was made at Allangibbon Junction by that very enterprising and intelligent officer. Sergeant Cubbison, of the police of the P. & S. W. Railway, whom our readers will remember as having been so honourably connected with the capture of the Netherby gang of thieves. It appears that on Friday, Sergeant Cubbison, acting on information received, arranged to keep a watch.

Here follows a detailed account of the surprise and capture, and the notice concludes thus:—

Our readers will rejoice that so daring a gang of thieves has been captured. Their depredations have long made Allangibbon Junction a Downword on the line, and many able officers have been worsted by

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

the problem so quickly and so satisfactorily solved by the brave young sergeant. We are glad to be able to announce that in this case merit has met with an immediate reward. We have not now to speak of Sergeant Cubbison, for he has already been breveted Inspector for his gallant conduct. It is curious that the only casualty on the occasion occurred to one of the same surname, Francis Cubbison, a relative of the above-mentioned officer, but one whose career, alas! has not been of equal honour. The man succumbed in Allangibbon Hospital during the course of Saturday morning to the injuries received in the fray. The burglars await their trial, and Mr. Alexander Hislop, the able and courteous Procurator-Fiscal, is making inquiries into the whole subject, in which effort he is greatly aided by Inspector Cubbison of the Company's police.

The following notice from the issue of the Drumfern Standard, dated one year later, is appended for comparison:—

Cubbison — Margetson. —On October 28, at Bog-hole, Parish of Crosspatrick, by the Reverend James Weir, Minister of the Parish, assisted by the Reverend Adam Margetson, M.A., brother of the bride, Inspector Alexander Cubbison, P. & S. W. Railway, to Janet Margetson, only daughter of Thomas Margetson, Esq., of Bog-hole and Rutherland.

Neither does any inscribed stone mark the resting-place of the poacher; but if there be any knowledge in the grave, surely Frank Cubbison is not wholly unhappy in the land of his sojourning.

5. OUT OF SEASON AT BERCK-SUR-MER

There are many English lodging-house keepers in foreign seaside places, especially along the English Channel. Perhaps no one knows what becomes of them out of season; few, indeed, care. But I will tell of one such little stranded community which I know of. It lives by itself, huddled away behind the great empty hotel barracks of sea frontage which I shall call Berck-sur-mer.

It is one of the largest of such colonies, possessing an English shop or two, a shadowy out-at-elbows club, a sewing circle, a church, and occasionally, when the Continental Services grant is large, a clergyman to itself all the year round,—a rich holiday-making rector in summer, a poor working curate in winter— but always, all the same, a clergyman of one sort or another.

There are also twenty thousand 'natives' of Berck-sur-mer, who speak another language, think other thoughts, go to mass, and, generally, do not count.

For, as elsewhere, truly English society—even if only that of lodging-house keepers anchored down by their house-rente, taxes, and furniture— keeps strictly to itself. But it has appointed rallying places, the chief being on the pier at the hour when the English boat comes in. The people on board are capped and ulstered to the ears, rather greenish about the gills, and have their hands full of small baggage. They never think of stopping to speak to their exiled country folk, who look at them a little

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

wistfully as they pass on. They are speeding south in search of summer. They would as soon think of camping on Dover Pier as pausing at Berck-sur-Mer in winter.

But when an English child, falling in the rush for the Douane, was picked up by an entire stranger, its tears wiped, petted, called 'a little darling,' and presented with an orange, it seemed to the child a matter of course. But it was a strange thing, nevertheless, and quite enough to bring the tears to the eyes of Mrs. Brown, proprietor of Mon Repos. Indeed, that excellent lady talked about the adventure for weeks—with reflections upon the carelessness of the child's mother, nurse, and other relatives which would have made their ears burn to hear.

Mrs. Percival Smythe of Smythe's Private Hotel and Pension was the chief of those who kept up some acquaintance with the Chief of Customs, so as to be useful to countrymen in case of need. 'You never know,' said Mrs. Smythe, 'as I was saying, you never know, Mrs. Partan. Once I had my first floor, front and back, let for four months. And all through what? Only a bit of common civility—standing by a lady that was travelling to Italy with fourteen boxes each as big as a house, nodding and talking to her as if I knew her. Then the Chief Customs man (his sister does all my washing, which comes to something in the summer months, I can tell you) checked them off one after the other with his chalk, and the lady took my card outside. Then back she comes next summer with two daughters and a sick husband. They stopped four months, with never an extra questioned and all bills settled weekly.'

Mrs. Bailing of the Imperial Boarding House

shook her head as much as to say that such luck did not come her way, and that if it did, she would not have the assurance to profit by it. But Mrs. Smythe was generally looked up to as a very clever, managing woman, and one who would not let a sixpence go past her door if she knew it.

Berck-sur-mer supported a Choral Union with, for the young people, a dance afterwards, when the clergyman had departed. There was also a Temperance Society, which all joined who did not care for absinthe, the wine of that country. There were quite a number of girls, but only one of them was pretty. She was Susy Singleton, and made up this scarcity of numbers by being very pretty indeed.

Miss Singleton was the daughter of 'Singleton's,' the best and the biggest 'Family House' in all the English quarter, and the one which presented the largest number of shuttered windows to the threshing winds and driving sands of the German Ocean during its winter rages.

Naturally, Susy Singleton had aspirants—in fact, several. Most, however, were but temporarily attached for special duty. Alone John Frobisher was on the strength. Miss Singleton did not know why at the Junior Temperance meeting (called the 'Kittens' Cream-Jug,' to distinguish it from the 'Tabbies' Tea-Fight') she should be called Saucy Susy. But then everybody had a nickname in winter Berck-sur-mer—from Dr. Halbert Hassal, the master of the Adventure School (known as 'Busby') to 'Saucy' Susy Singleton.

It certainly was a shame in the latter case (guileless newcomers agreed). Miss Singleton was demure as a kitten. She dressed in grey or brown, and for a winter hat wore a little fur cap with the

wing of a golden plover in it, which never seemed to take any more harm from the driving spume and salt sea spray than the clear pale oval of the face beneath it.

Miss Singleton meant no harm. Men were foolish, certainly, and there had been a young Frenchman once who did not understand the tone of (winter) watering-place society. But John Frobisher, who spoke the language, arranged him, and the trouble did not occur twice. Yet it was a mistake any foreigner might make. The non-English inhabitants were called foreigners because, though dwelling in their own country, they did not trim their moustaches properly, did not attend the Anglican Church, and spoke no English — ignorant, foolish people, with objectionable, incomprehensible manners and customs.

To bow to Miss Singleton as you passed the trellised garden at 'Singleton's,' to see her drop her eyes till the lashes swept her cheek—to be conscious of the little well of dew somewhere concealed which made them at once dark and moist, especially when the owner of the lashes kept the blinds down long enough for the little intermittent spring to brim over— this was the highest ambition of English exiled youth. If she flashed them at you, all was over. She made it, as it were, a speciality of the house; but naturally it was not understood of the cafe-frequenting gentlemen of Berck-sur-mer, nor even of the natty young officers who in pairs jingled spurs on the promenade and cantered the sandy roads among the dunes on sunny evenings.

Not that Miss Singleton bestowed a thought on such persons. She had too much self-respect. But sometimes one appropriated to himself a glance that

was meant for the landscape, and then there was trouble if John Frobisher knew of it. With the Anglo-Saxon races there was no difficulty. In that case you joined the staff, carried parcels, and were taught to think humbly of yourself.

Of Susy's cohort John Frobisher was the Old Guard. He neither died nor surrendered. No one knew how John stood with Miss Singleton, least of all John himself. Yet he was a notable man in Berck-sur-mer— vice-consul, chief forwarding and clearing agent to two big London houses, and doing, so everybody said, 'a tidy little exporting business on his own account.'

John was, therefore, distinctly eligible, and (put upon the French matrimonial market) he might have commanded a very well-dowried maiden indeed. But he was not even engaged to Susy Singleton. He owned no privileges and claimed no rights. At the door of St. Eustace's Hall he gravely stepped back if Miss Singleton came out in deep conversation with her latest recruit, raised to dazzling glory for that night only.

He was just 'Old John,' and after seeing that all was well with Susy, he walked quietly home and let himself in with his latch-key, without in the least feeling aggrieved. Nevertheless, he carried home a contented consciousness of having been on hand if wanted, and he knew that Susy knew it. She had not looked at him; but no matter, she knew.

Susy was never particularly gracious to John Frobisher— at least only once that he could remember. It happened upon a certain night when he had waited for two hours opposite a shop in the Rue d'Aspic in a drizzling rain for Miss Singleton to come out. She had just 'looked in' to see a new gown

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

of Sophia Smythe's which had arrived by that day's London mail.

She said when she came out, 'I can't take your arm. It's a perfect sop. Why can't you keep yourself dry, John?'

John got all wound up in his explanation, but Susy promptly cut him short with the exclamation, 'Just like you! What a goose you were to wait!'

By his silence John admitted this, and so, carefully apart, they came to the side door of 'Singleton's.' (The front entrance was barricaded because of the sand drift which beat against it all the winter, so that it had to be fresh oak-grained every spring.)

At the side door Susy took off her glove and laid her hand on John's wet arm.

'You ought not to have waited,' she said, 'but then' (sigh, and reproachful lift of eyelashes) 'you always were a silly old thing!' Then she ran quickly upstairs with a handkerchief over her hat so as not to get the curl out of her feather.

And strange to say, the grave business man went home highly elated with this very trivial remark addressed to an acting vice-consul with a imiform in his trunk. Truly a most 'silly old John,' as Susy named him! She often told him that he must be somebody's husband without knowing it. He looked just like that.

John checked the words of retort on his lip, and stood back to give Mr. Harry George Mason a chance. Harry George Mason was chief clerk at Hughson's, who were exporters in the wholesale egg and poultry way. He liked to be thought un-English, because, having to deal with the natives, he had acquired a smart continental air, a flowing tie of

mauve crepe de Chine, and a carefully waxed moustache. At least he thought of it as that, and surely a man may call his own what he will. He laughed at Old John Frobisher's beard, and wondered how any man, even a patriarch of thirty-seven, could make a billy-goat of himself by carrying about such a thing.

Harry George had a Kaiser moustache of fifteen hairs. Yes, exactly. But, in his optimistic moments the owner had hopes of a sixteenth, which would even up things. There were just seven on one side (left) and eight on the other (right). The night of the Anglo-American ball at Berck-sur-mer Harry George had seen Susy Singleton looking first at him and then at John Frobisher. He was sure that she was drawing comparisons between 'the Kaiser' and Old John's hay-coloured yard-brush. So now Mr. Mason waxed up the seven hairs on one side of his nose more carefully than ever, did the same to the eight on the other, tenderly regarded the doubtful progress of the sixteenth, and wondered how people dared put such lies in the hair-restorer advertisements. He forgot that he, at least, had no case. For you cannot restore what never existed.

For that little band of English folk whose interests clustered about St. Eustace's Church in Berck-sur-mer, the winter was their true life. They were too busy all the summer to do more than be thankful as each day followed its predecessor. But each merchant, exporter, passenger agent, hotel and lodging-house keeper rejoiced when the last visitor was gone; when the lights were out at the Casino, and any one was allowed on the scanty grass of the park; when the natives played at back-handed bowls in sheltered squares, ankle-deep in fallen leaves,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

and the whole place was sheeted down under wrappers of North Sea mist, to keep till next year's 'Season.'

There were not many children in winter Berck-sur-mer. These were at school in England, except a few babies in perambulators, attended by a nurse or two. But there were hardly any servants. People did their own housework mostly, and the rest had a 'native' in by the day. Winter Berck-sur-mer existed on the daily boat, the curate of St. Eustace's social evenings in the church hall, and—the iniquities of Susy Singleton.

There was also a 'dramatic association,' for which John Frobisher scene-painted, stage-managed, prompted, managed the curtain, did all the thankless drudgery of—and financed. Representations were mostly given in the church hall, which could be got by asking permission from the curate, the Reverend Hilary Lambert, who, being married, was of no particular interest to anybody except his wife. These were much applauded, but steadily resulted in calls upon John Frobisher's purse.

Now there came to Berck-sur-mer, in the dead middle of January, a stranger, a guest. What is more, he engaged rooms, at 'Singleton's.' Mrs. Singleton had to send a telegraphic message to Rene, her old and tried factotum on such rare inter-seasonal occasions. Rene arrived, and in two hours 'Singleton's' had waked up to its business air. Dwarf Irish yews stood ranged in pots at the side door, fires glinted in the dining and drawing rooms, and during the hours of sunlight Senor Blanco's great fur coat pervaded the entire sea-front of Berck-sur-mer.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

He spoke surprisingly bad French for a 'foreigner,' but, in revenge, surprisingly idiomatic English to be anything but a Londoner. It was a point debated with great heat to what nationality the stranger belonged. He called himself the Senor Blanco, and that certainly smelt of Spain. But then again there were no Protestants in that country, and the Senor had no objection to attending (in Miss Singleton's company) the Low Anglican feasts and fasts at St. Eustace's.

Yet there was something mysterious about him too. He did not like to be questioned about his affairs. Indeed, he resented inquiries even as to his good English— which in Berck-sur-mer every one not a mere 'native' was proud of. They stood on the pier with levelled telescopes and counted the ships with British colours as they passed on up Channel. They were desperately patriotic when a real Royal Prince, on a courteous message to the Shah, disembarked there, and Susy Singleton, by general (male) acclaim, was selected to present him with a bouquet — brought from London on the same boat by the purser. John Frobisher had made the arrangements and was to pay for the bouquet. But he stood modestly behind, and it was the stranger who supported Susy on that memorable occasion.

He was a creditable support, too, in his rich fur coat, tall hat, dark gloves, striped trousers, and patent leather boots. He was pale, and wore black curls 'clustering picturesquely about a marble brow' — as the young ladies wrote afterwards in their diaries. Susy wrote nothing, but even she could not help admiring a little the gently weary way in which he leaned his head upon his hand in church—some said because he harboured thoughts that far

outwent the Reverend Hilary's simple theology, and others that he wanted to show his rings, which he wore very fine and on the fingers of both hands. Nevertheless, Hilary called and found him 'a good churchman— not quite conventional, you know, but seems to have lived everywhere.' Thus approved of ecclesiastically, Senor Blanco made his way. He was asked out. He was made free of all Berck-sur-mer dances, and his 'imitations' of distinguished actors and politicians became quite a feature at the church Socials. If he had only said whom he was imitating, the performance might have been better understood, but the English colony put their haziness down, quite naturally, to their living so much out of the world. They had not the Senor's advantages.

Senor Blanco would not be tempted out of the great sable coat. He would not even help to sweep the little skating rink the exiles had made for themselves in a hollow of the dunes. Rude sports were his dislike. They disarranged his toilette. He wondered how Miss Singleton could join in such things. Miss Singleton wondered how he could wonder. He should just see the supper she and Old John ate after a moonlight skate. She invited Senor Blanco down, and putting a broom into his hand, bade him sweep for his life. But he only wandered disconsolately about in his fur coat, shivered, and then passed indoors again.

Sixteen miles to the south, across a wilderness of sand dunes, lay the port of Boulais, rival of Berck-sur-mer, where was a Casino open all the year round and a larger (though less compact and self-contained) English colony. The trade of Boulais was reported to be better, but the class of visitors—oh, my dear, the less said about them the better!

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Nevertheless, once a year St. Eustace's at Berck crossed the dunes in order to instruct the St. Philipians of Boulais as to the possibilities of sacred music, vocal and instrumental. The young people made the journey in three large brakes, with Mrs. Percival Smythe chaperoning the entire party from the front seat of the first conveyance. What the natives of both towns said about this arrangement is best left unsaid. But they were wrong. They did not understand the peculiar form of madness with which their English fellow-citizens were affected. Yet so far as innocence went, the excursion would not have gained if a French mother had been stuck between each several couple, while decidedly the function would have lost in popularity. On the night of the St. Philip's Concert at Boulais, the dunes were white with glittering snow. The wheels had been taken off the vehicles and long sleigh runners substituted.

At the last moment the stranger dashed up to 'Singleton's' in a smart turn-out. He had hired it from young van Helder, the son of the proprietor of the Opera Comique Theatre of Berck-sur-mer.

'Would Miss Singleton do him the honour?'

John, who was paying for the breaks and driving one of them, had been holding the box seat for Susy. But Miss Singleton jumped up beside the Senor without a glance at him. So John turned away and busied himself with wraps and water-bottles. No shade of dissatisfaction passed across his grave face. If Susy was satisfied, John was.

But, as it turned out, Susy was anything but content. For the first of the party breaks (crowded to the step) encountered Susy, walking calmly back across the snow-covered dunes, her hands in her

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

muff and the collar of her fur jacket higher on the windy side, as staidly and composedly as if the time had been four o'clock of a Sunday afternoon on the Berck Promenade. Miss Singleton was, indeed, infinitely calmer than the company, which with cries of alarm and rejoicing caught up Susy into its curious, sympathetic, and on the whole (even the women included) loving bosom.

Miss Singleton simply said that she wanted to walk. The night was fine. Of course the Senor had his horses to attend to. Was she not afraid? Susy Singleton afraid! Well, hardly; she had her father's 'Webly' in her coat pocket, and could hit a tall hat at twenty yards. Everybody knew that, and it was not likely that anybody would take the risks even at double the distance.

Nobody wanted to go back with the Senor after the concert. Yet, being in a manner of speaking our guest and invited by the Committee of St. Eustace's, obviously somebody must. Miss Singleton said, in words almost unladylike in their brusquerie, that whoever might ride with Senor Blanco she for one would not.

So, as there was no one else, of course Old John Frobisher must go. We expected it of him, and sighed a sigh of relief when we saw him safely mounted up beside the Senor.

Susy was silent most of the ride home. Perhaps she was tired. Curiously enough, though we kept to the beaten track, the breaks reached Berck-sur-mer first—and without passing the Senor and John on the road!

But we had not time to express our astonishment to the white roofs and glittering gargoyles of the Grande Place when John drove up also—alone,

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Where is the Senor?' we asked in surprise.

'He stopped behind,' said John Frobisher calmly.

'Stopped behind!' we cried, speaking all together.

It was no wonder we were astonished, for the snow had begun to fall again, and the wind was rising gustily off the German Sea.

'I tipped him out in a snow-drift,' said John Frobisher, patting the horse's head quietly.

We crowded about him.

'Tell us — why did you do that, John?' we clamoured.

'You can ask the Senor,' said John shortly, and led off the borrowed team in the direction of the Louvre Hotel stables.

All of us had much to say on the subject of Old John's unaccountable proceedings. Only Susy Singleton never said a word, but waited till John Frobisher came back. He picked up Susy's carriage wrap without being told, put that over one arm, tucked her right glove (with the hand inside) under the other, and so marched her off in the face of all the world.

However, we were none of us jealous of Old John. He had obliged all of us more than once in his silent, fatherly way. He never hinted at repayment. So we had a good-natured kind of contempt for him. He was too still and too amiable to be dangerous. Besides, he had always done things for Susy ever since we could remember—or Susy either.

Every one expected that the Senor would send John a challenge in the morning, and two half-pay officers went to offer their services to the offended person, but fotted him out— also Albert Percival Snr, he, who was romantic, called early at John Frobisher's office.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

It was the ambition of his life to be second in a real duel and have to sign a 'proch.' Such a dare devil was Mr. Albert. But quite unexpectedly John informed him that he could manage to be his own first, second, and steerage as well. He seemed strangely and (Albert thought) uncannily cool. But, of course, he must be putting that on. With a man of the Senor's character, tragedy was in the air. So like a good young man whose second thoughts are always best, Albert Percival Smythe, disappointed in hasty and bloodthirsty ambitions, went off to consult the Reverend Hilary.

The curate's wife, a moneyed lady, ten years Hilary's senior, stout, red-faced, and jovial, stopped him in the hall with a majestic wave of her hand. She wore green and pink flowers in her black lace cap. But she smiled on Albert Percival because he was first tenor in the choir, and never absent, never late. He was what she called 'a safe young man.'

Accordingly, she thrust Albert into a little side room shut off from the Reverend Hilary's study by folding-doors.

In this place of concealment Albert heard the curate break in upon the high-pitched recital of some excited person of the female sex by the single word 'Indeed!' 'Indeed!' repeated very often. This was varied by 'You surprise me!' and 'Madam, I can hardly believe it!'

Then the lady raised her voice, and Albert heard more clearly. The female voice was relating a story of wrongs, but, as it appeared, more in sorrow than in anger.

'An' 'e's bin a good 'usband to me, sir,' the lady was saying, 'only young and must 'ave his fling. Now 'e's in a good place as a gentleman's gentleman, and

has been all over the world with marster. So me and him (as was cook) made it up, and we got married all regular by Mr. Barlow at St. Martin's-in-the-Fields well on six months ago. We was quiet an' happy till Algernon (given name White) took marster's clothes and went off by the boat for a change, marster being in Egypt where them Pyramids are, sir—and Pharaohs and Buksheesh and that there Arabi Pasha, wot they call the Sirdar. Oh, I've 'eard all about them in the papers marster sends to Algernon to improve his mind.

'No, I don't mind 'im taking the clothes, sir, for my Algy's the man to take care of them. Even the fur coat Algernon took because Mr. Hughson, our table-maid's cousin, who is a judge of furs (particularly imitation), said in our servants' hall that it needed a good airing, being worth sixty pounds if a single penny. Oh yes, Algernon will keep everything in apple-pie order—very different from marster, as is careless by natur' an' don't appear to know wot a brush is for.

'But what brought me here to you, today, sir, is not to spy on Algernon—such not being my character, but live and let live. Only marster havin' sent one of them there telegraphts wot them himperant boys, all buckles an' straps, brings to the front door, and rings and rings most shameless—so he's expected back tomorrow, and I wants to get Algernon home quiet—yes, sir.'

As Albert Percival stole away on tiptoe he heard the curate of St. Eustace's declaring that he would do his best. His voice did not sound hopeful, but Albert Percival assisted him, for he told his mother, at whose house the Zenana Sewing Meeting was being held, who told Mrs. Perkins, who ran across

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

and told Mrs. Singleton. The Senor had notice to quit in five minutes, with a threat of the 'foreign' gendarme if he was not to be found on the afternoon boat for England.

With the assistance of the Reverend Hilary, staunch to the last (because in a way he had stood sponsor for him), Mrs. Algernon marshalled her loving husband on board the Quickfirer English packet-boat at three o'clock of the afternoon. In addition to the curate of St. Eustace's, John Frobisher saw off the Senor and his wife. Mr. White (late Blanco) was rancorously sulky and refused all speech. But, on the contrary, his wife was exceedingly cheerful and contented.

'E ain't doin' hisself justice, sir,' she said. 'E's down-hearted about marster coming home onexpected like an' spilin' his ' out.' But 'e'll come all right, being really the best of men and the lovin'est of husbands—though I sez it as shouldn't!'

The Senor sat grumpily in the corner reserved for 'ladies only' behind the funnels, while his wife wrapped his legs about in her shawl, tucking the corners under to keep his patent leather boots from the damp deck.

'May I shake you by the hand, madam?' said Old John in sudden admiration; and having done so in his solemnest vice-consular manner, he lifted his hat, turned on his heel, and went down the gangplank, conscious of having expressed to the best of his ability the sentiments of the entire English colony of Berck-sur-mer.

The affair made a nine days' wonder.

The wonder of the tenth day (a Sunday) was an announcement by the Reverend Eustace that there was 'a purpose of marriage between John Frobisher,

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

acting vice-consul of H.B. Majesty, and Susan Singleton, both residing within the Conunune of Berck-sur-mer!

Susy and John were both in church and looked as straight at Hilary as if he had only been giving out the object of next Sunday's extra collection.

When they came out John was heard to say, 'Come along, Susy!' with a most distasteful air of pro-prietorship. And every one agreed that they were most surprised at John, but as for Susy nothing that she did could surprise anybody. She had always meant to marry John Frobisher from the first because of his money.

But, as John himself doesn't seem to mind, it is hard to see why anybody else should.

6. BIG SISTER

CHAPTER ONE GREGORY MOURNS HER LOT

The family of Manners was a large, a very large one. Concerning the parish of Hinton it was a common saying that, though in it there might be a certain lack of manners, there was none whatever of Mannerses.

They were children of the manse—which is to say, of the minister. The Reverend John Manners was their father. His moderate salary supported them. They abode in his house, and, when not too studiously abstracted from earthly affairs, he knew most of them by sight. That is, if his attention happened to be called to their presence, which it mostly was by his tripping over them on the stairs, as he went from one room to the other in search of the second volume of the new series of the Hollandist Fathers, or the rare forty-first tome of *Espana Sagrada*.

Strictly speaking, and in accordance with the registrar's official statistics, there were in the Manners family eight boys—and a girl. Well was it for the eight boys that their sister had appeared earliest upon the scene. For to their father they owed little except original sin, and to their mother eight pairs of blooming cheeks and a superabundant, well-fed vitality,

Mrs. Manners had been the only daughter of a large store farmer of the neighbourhood, where Mr.

Manners had stayed in the days before he was called to the cure of souls in Hinton Parish. He had held in grateful memory Miss Mary Armstrong's puddings and custards, her dropped scones and tea-cakes.

'Truly,' as the minister was wont to say of his wife, 'Mary is one who taketh good care of the body. She is a very Martha in a house where there is much need of service.'

So it is certain that the material well-being of the Manners household was the affair of the minister's wife; and if it was whispered that she occupied herself too exclusively with the linen cupboard, and was mostly to be found in the kitchen flat among her servants, these were good faults in the mother of so many hungry and rampant boys.

'And then, you know, my dears,' she would say to her gossips, 'though the minister does not know whether a duck is stuffed with sage-and-onions or with sawdust, after all there is such a thing as a proper pride.'

And with this the matrons of her council nodded hearty agreement.

'And then,' they put in, 'there is Gregory. She will look after the boys. She has nothing else to do.'

And Gregory did. It was her mission in life. So far as her brothers were concerned she held the golden mean between the distant patristic abstraction of Mr. Manners and the material provisioning of their frames by their housewife mother. The Big Sister drilled them, slapped them, lectured them, petted them, spoilt them, coerced them—indeed, did all the things for them for which their father had no mind and their mother no time.

Furthermore, Gregory Manners had a Cousin Tom— Tom Forrest, her mother's nephew—to whom

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

she unburdened herself. He often rode over from his large hill-farm of Caldercrook to hear her do it.

Before he left he always asked her to marry him. Generally Gregory scorned to reply. She contented herself with moving the previous question and turning Tom out of the house. All the same, she liked to talk to him. Tom was a jewel of a listener.

'There is, first of all, the matter of my name,' she would say. 'Did you ever hear of such a name for a girl?'

Tom, who was often most disappointing, said that he had heard of a girl named Trottie, and that that must have been harder still.

'No, but,' said Gregory, 'do be serious, Tom. Here am I having to go through the world named after an old frump called Gregory the Great, just because my father finished an edition of his works on the day I was born!'

'It might have been worse,' suggested Tom Forrest blandly, flicking his riding breeches with his whip; 'your father might have edited the works of Burke.'

'And Hare!' scorned Gregory. 'You are not a bit helpful, Tom. And then those boys! I might as well keep an infant school. I wish I had never learned to read—or write. And father has only one idea—that they all go to college one after the other, and gain bursaries, and be clever enough to take a degree. Then they are all to go into the Church and instruct the souls of the poor! There is Jim, who only cares for rabbiting; and Dave, who draws devils on the margins of his Bible in church; and Allan, who can't tell the truth even when he tries; and Kitto, who was born to be a coal-heaver, and has to be thrashed before he will even wash himself—they are all to be shovelled into the Church—spawned upon an

unwilling people— ugh!’

‘What would your father say if he heard you?’ suggested Tom peacefully.

‘Oh, my father!’ said Gregory; ‘he would not care. Besides, he does not understand spoken English— only Latin and Greek— and solely corrupt and patristic forms at that!’

‘Tom and Gregory,’ cried a new voice, ‘what is that you are saying about Mr. Manners? For shame, both of you, to speak so about the minister!’

‘I was saying nothing at all, aunt,’ said Tom, rising to kiss the mistress of the manse as she came in panting and aproned from head to foot.

‘Don’t touch me,’ she cried, starting back with a sharp little scream, and holding up her hands; ‘don’t you see I am all over flour and butter? I have been down in the kitchen. Bridget has no notion of anything but cooking a potato. Not that that is really so very little, for few can do a potato as it ought to be done—mealy on top and sound as well-baked bread right through the centre— eh? what’s that?’

There came a sound of a crashing dish in the kitchen, and Mrs. Manners instantaneously precipitated her plump and well-contoured person in the direction of the stairs with a wild cry of, ‘Oh, my precious soup-tureen—the blue one! Bridget shall leave my house this instant, and I will do the cooking myself!’

Cousin Tom ventured a glance at Gregory, who was setting the copy-books for the younger boys. He could not always tell. Sometimes she laughed at her parents herself, but she would flame up into sudden fierce anger when Tom ventured to join her. However, on this occasion, he caught Gregory’s eye and the pair laughed together, innocently enough.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Poor mother,' said Gregory, 'you would never have caught her wandering out in that old wilderness. She would have stayed in Egypt by the fleshpots and become chief cook to Pharaoh!'

'Can't I help you?' suggested Tom, a little wistfully, as he watched Gregory's swift hand travelling over the ruled paper.

'Help me!' cried the girl, without looking up; 'the boys write badly enough without copying your broken-down fence railings. And that reminds me, it's high time for you to go. And, see here, if you come across Origen, or Augustine, or Philarchus, or Jake, out there in the yard, lay your whip about their legs, and tell them that they had better make haste. I want them!'

For some time past Cousin Tom had been coming a little nearer, edging unconsciously (as it seemed) in Gregory's direction. But the girl was too quick for him. She took a nibful of ink, and, poisoning the long holder over her shoulder like a javelin, she cried, 'Avaunt thee, false Sir Mordred, son of— whoever false Mordred was the son of! Come but one step nearer and you will get this empoisoned dart full on that white waistcoat of thine. Be off! AVOID! No, I won't marry you, so you needn't ask. If your feelings are hurt about it, take them out on any of the boys you happen to meet on your way home. It will do them good. Bye-bye, Cousin Thomas.'

CHAPTER TWO TOM TRIES BRIBERY

Tom Forrest punctually fulfilled his mission, and on his way to his stabled steed he gathered up part

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

of Gregory's scattered school. Kitto was found in a sad state of disrepair, fishing for trout with his hands, and wet from head to foot, green slime and duck-weed in his hair, and a kind of ooze defining his features.

'Better go and change, Kitto,' said Tom, with whom the dirty boy was a favourite; 'Cousin Gregory is waiting for you.'

'Does she look mad?' inquired Kitto anxiously.

'Very,' answered Tom, not quite truthfully, but certainly in the interests of discipline and prompt obedience.

'Um-m!' said Kitto, regarding himself with care, 's'pose I had better.'

'Whops you, does she?' inquired Tom tenderly.

'Ra-a-a-ther!' said the boy, with immense feeling.

'And why do you let her, Kitto?' suggested Tom the traitor; 'you are getting a big fellow now.'

The boy stopped unlacing his soaked boots and looked at the young man with immense disdain.

'You think you know a lot because you can ride a horse,' he said at last, speaking slowly; 'but you come up to the schoolroom and see Big Sister throw the heavy clubs about! Why, before Jim went to college, he thought he would do great things, and Sis Gregory floored him with the pole for shoving up the window-sashes. Gregory doesn't care where she hits a fellow.'

Kitto finished his toilet and moved off with a salute to Cousin Tom,

'Well, so long,' he said, 'sorry I can't stop. I'm still pretty soaky; but if I get my legs under the desk. Sis won't notice my bare feet. I'll come back for the boots!'

And tying the laces together, he hung them over

the branch of a tree.

'I say, cousin,' he called out, as he retreated, 'if I were you I would look after Blossom. I saw those young imps trying Jake on her back half an hour ago. They said he was to be Mazeppa. Jake was crying. He didn't want to be Mazeppa at all, he said!'

Cousin Tom started violently. His mare, Blossom, was as the breath of life to him.

'The imps— what imps?' he cried.

'Oh, just Orgie, and Tine, and Archus,' said Kitto; 'they are up to something all the time. That's why Sis told you to whale them if you met them. They are always at it, and they torment little Jake, too. So long, cousin, I think you'll find them down in the pasture. I saw the saddle come off at the turn; but they had tied Jake on with ropes, so he's all right.'

Cousin Tom Forrest did not wait for more. He went off at top speed, and as he went he muttered words which boded no good to the skins of that early Christian trio, Masters Origen, Augustine, and Philarchus Manners of the Manse of Hinton.

The hearing of his ear guided him down past the little avenue gate which led out upon the open road. Here he found his saddle, which had evidently been dragged some distance by a girth. He could trace its progress in bumps along the dusty road.

Then there came a sound of shrill voices uplifted in incitement. Halloos, yells, the scattering splutter of hoofs on soft meadowland. A lump of turf, evidently thrown at the passing racer, missed its mark, arched the hedge, and took Cousin Tom on the angle of a jaw already sufficiently squared.

It was the last straw. Tom Forrest shortened his grip on his riding-whip, and, choosing the thinnest part of the hedge, launched himself vehemently

through into the meadow.

Three tatterdemalion boys, barelegged and hatless, were scouring the soft, squashy turf of the glebe meadow in the rear of Tom's black mare. Blossom, to whose mane an urchin of six or seven clung desperately with tightly clutched hands. Some knotted fragments of rope floated behind, reaching as far as Blossom's streaming tail. These were the thongs which had once bound the captive.

Just as Tom burst through the hedge the poor little Mazeppa fell off, or rather slid to the ground, where he was instantly surrounded by that patristic trio, Origen, Augustine, and Philarchus. They danced about him as he sat and sobbed, his knuckles thrust into his eye-holes, from which, however, flowed no semblance of a tear.

'Hurt your foot, have you, little soft?' they shouted. 'Serve you right for falling off Cousin Tom's Arab steed. Come on. Tine, and you, Phil— let's catch the fiery untamed. We'll tie Mazeppa better this go!'

But at this very moment Cousin Tom's riding-switch whistled about their ears, and they fled with loud shrieks of pain and surprise, leaving their youngest brother, Jake, still squat on the ground, bewailing his fate with dry, hiccoughy sobs. As the last of them, who happened to be Master Origen Manners, was making over the gate of the pasturage, Jake removed his dirty knuckles from his eyes, sprang to his feet, seized a clod of earth, and hurled it at his late tormentor. The hard clod of turf took Master Origen sharply between the shoulder-blades, knocked him to the ground, completely winded by the shock.

Then Jake, the Benjamin of this remarkably

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

unclerical family, sat himself down very contentedly on a mound of earth, the result of former excavations for hidden treasures (dating from the days of certain elder Mannerses now at college), and gave his attention to the efforts of Cousin Tom to soothe the frightened Blossom.

Presently Tom Forrest came back with Blossom's bridle over his arm. He was on his way to return along the road for his discarded saddle; but presently he changed his mind, and with Blossom at his heels sought the green slopes of the treasure-seekers' mounds on which sat the youngest Manners. Jake, who well knew the value of tears, tried vainly to screw out one to wipe away now. He might as well have wiped the Sahara.

'Hurt, old man?' said genial Cousin Tom, patting his shoulder.

'Orgie is,' said Jake, smiling through a grime of sand and the pulp of meadow-grass into which his face had ploughed when he fell off.

'We must speak to Orgie,' said Tom, shaking his head gravely.

'I hit Orgie—aright atween the ribs at the back. He went plunk!' said the youth, with a worthy complaisance.

'Tried, sentenced, and executed!' cried Tom. 'You can look after yourself, I can see, Jake!'

'Have to,' said Jake easily, sucking a sappy grass-stem.

'Want to earn sixpence?' insinuated Tom Forrest, looking at his bridle.

'Do I?' said Jake, crooking his hand suggestively. 'Let's see it. No, that's got a hole in it. They won't take it in the shop over at Hinton village. Old Matchem is such a sneak.'

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Tom Forrest smiled as he exhibited a more satisfactory sixpence.

'That's all right,' said Jake; 'give me hold!'

'After,' said Tom; 'I want you to do something for it, first.'

'What is it?' said the boy.

'Only give this to your sister Gregory.' Tom held out a little box, neatly wrapped and sealed.

'Likely,' said the suspicious Jake; 'a real—real sixpence only for that, and you just come from talking with her— not me!'

'Well, I forgot, you see,' said Tom. Then he added in a low voice, 'And you are to do it when no one else is there. Will you?'

'Well, p'r'aps— if the sixpence is good. Tink it on that stone so as I can hear. Old Matchem nails 'em on the counter if they don't tink!'

The coin 'tinked' to a marvel.

'Mind,' said Tom, 'when Gregory is by herself. Don't let any of the other boys see you.'

Jake put the coin into his eye as an unusual kind of eyeglass to express his extreme knowingness.

'Not likely,' he said; 'why, they would want to go shags!'

Which is to say, in Hintonese, shares.

'If you do this for me all right,' said the tempter, 'perhaps there will be more sixpences where that came from. You are a smart boy, Jake, and I always liked you.'

'And I like sixpences— real— real ones—wot tink!'

Jake was absent what time was necessary for Tom Forrest to recover his maltreated saddle. Just as he was riding out of the domains, not very spacious, which pertained to the manse of Hinton, he once more encountered Jake, breathless,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

bareheaded, and exceedingly scornful. He had his grubby hand tight shut on something.

'Here,' he cried, 'here is your box. Big Sis won't have it— told me to take it back where it came from. But you can't have your sixpence back.'

Tom Forrest flushed a deep red, and then paled with anger. He took the little box, the white wrapping soiled with the honest sweat of Jake's endeavour. It had not been opened. The seal was unbroken. With a swift motion of anger he sent it skimming in the direction of the Hinton pond, a large reedy sheet of water out of which the glebe burn flowed. Then, mounting without a word, he went his way.

Jake watched him with the beginnings of a grin on his keen little face.

'Cousin Tom's mad about something— proper,' he muttered; 'p'r'aps coz I wouldn't give back his sixpence. Not likely— it is a jolly good sixpence.'

CHAPTER THREE JAKE MANNERS, BLACKMAILER

Jake Manners, youngest but not least guileful of the house of Manners, sat on his mound and thought. His eyes wandered now to the little jolting dot above the distant hedge, which was the head of his angry cousin on his way back to his ancestral acres. Again he looked down towards the reeds on the edge of Hinton Pond. Jake Manners was stating a case of conscience.

' 'Tisn't Sis's,' he meditated, nodding his dogged little head, 'coz she wouldn't have it. Nor no more

'tisn't Cousin Tom's, for he throwed it away. 'Tis mine— mine to keep. Not to go 'shags' with any of these— beasts! Yes, 'tis mine; an' it will be my hid treasure, so there!

A shy youth, most undesirous of publicity, skulked most of that day about the reed-beds of Hinton Pond. Cousin Tom impelled the little packet with a force born of sudden heat, and it was nearly four in the afternoon before Jake emerged from under the old bridge over the Hinton lane— a quiet rejoicing evident in all his demeanour. He took with quite unwonted meekness the paddling bestowed upon him by an anxious and indignant sister for being absent from lessons, absent from dinner, and only turning up barely in time for tea. After this pleasant stimulation, he applied himself with exaggerated gusto to the bread and water, which, under Gregory's Spartan rule, was the portion of the evil-doer in the house of Manners.

His late tormentors, having first jeered at him covertly in ways known to boys, began to be frightened by his unnatural calm. They were sure that he had either told about the Mazeppa business in the meadow or that he was on the point of telling. They offered him: Origen, a reliable bubble-blowing pipe; Tine, a lucky marble with which he had already broken three windows without ever getting caught once; and his immediate senior in age, Archus, exhibited a serpent's skin, which, when wrapped twice about the neck, had the curious property of rendering you invisible. Archus gave it away because it would only go once about his. He was a thick-necked boy. But neither torture nor bribery could induce Jake to state the cause of his self-satisfaction.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'I bet you Cousin Tom has given him something,' said Kitto the dirty, guessing very near the truth. 'Let's see.'

So the elders of the band, ever ready to resent private property in their juniors, had Jake down instantly and overhauled him with care. But this, of course, Jake had expected and been prepared for. Nothing more valuable than a broken fish-hook and the Archo-Tino-Origenian gifts were found upon him. But because the faint flicker of a smile played about his lips, his brothers first cuffed him and then kicked him out with fraternal care and attention in detail.

Yet Jake in no wise concerned himself with any amazement. He was supremely self-contained as to all his possessions and purposes, and did not even go near the old bridge down by the Hinton burn all that day. Instead, he wandered about asking a great many curious questions—some of cook Janet, and, when baffled in that quarter, he reverted to Gregory.

'Cook,' he began, sitting solidly down on the chopping-table and leaning his dimpled chin upon his hands, 'what does 1-o-v-e spell?'

'Loaf,' replied Janet promptly. 'Bless me, what does the boy want with a loaf? He's only just had his dinner!'

But Mary the housemaid, who heard, laughed, and having more immediate connection with these high matters, informed Jake that 1-o-v-e spelt 'love,' and it was not for little boys like him to talk about.

'Um-m,' said Jake, 'we'll see. But, anyway, what does folk give rings to girls for?'

Mary the housemaid, looking decidedly conscious, replied fittingly that it was because the givers were fond of these particular girls.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'And if someone gave you a ring,' continued Jake, 'and you gave it back to him, and you saw him throw it away, what would you think?'

'That he was a silly,' said Mary the housemaid, with feeling.

'But,' said Jake, 'if you knowed wot he wasn't silly, but nice, what would you think then?'

'Then,' said Mary the housemaid softly, 'I should know— what it is not good for little boys to be told!'

Jake mused a little, his eyes fixed on Mary's face.

'If he had been nice wot sent you a ring, you wouldn't have let him throw it away, I know!'

'Little boys who know too much get whipped,' said Mary, looking round quickly to see if cook were listening.

Thus, fortified with opinions, but developing his own plans of campaign, small Jake Manners went calmly in to evening worship, where he repeated the Lord's Prayer with the rapt devotion of a cherub, his mind all the while on the particular crevice under the arch of the bridge out of which he had scraped enough mortar to hide one of the greatest treasure-troves which ever fell to the lot of a small and dirty boy to possess for his very own.

He sat awhile watching Gregory knitting her brows over the household books. Means were small and margins narrow in the Manners household. Her mother was by no means economical in the kitchen, nor yet her father in his library.

'Big Sister,' said Jake, at last breaking the silence, 'does anybody want to marry you?'

'Goodness, boy!' cried Gregory, sitting up with a jerk, 'what puts such things into that towsy bullet-head of yours?'

'Oh, just!' said Jake lucidly. 'But do they?'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'No,' said Gregory, not very assuredly. 'Why should they?'

Then Jake began to recite something in a high key, based upon his father's reading of the lessons in church. He made a pause between each group of three words without reference to the sense, and his accent was slightly nasal.

'My darrellring Greg-ory I can-not live — longer in this uncertain-taty. I will not longer — be playeamth. Here is the ring I bought — for you. Wear it on Sunday — when you take off your gloves — to play the har-monicum. If I see it — I shall know — that you will marry me. If not — you will never — see my face again—I swear it.'

TOM.

Gregory sat back with a scared look. She had never thought Tom would forsake her—never dreamed of such a disaster. The meaning of the message for a time diverted all her attention from the small and dirty prophet.

Then, with a tightening of the lips, Gregory suddenly grasped her youngest brother.

'Deliver it!' she cried. 'Now— in a moment— out with it!'

But Jake smiled serenely.

'I have not got it,' he said calmly.

Really, Gregory might have known. She was certainly old enough.

'But you know where it is?'

'Where what is?'

'What Cousin Tom sent you with.'

'You didn't want it, Big Sister,' said Jake calmly. 'You told me to tell him so!'

'And Tom,' demanded Big Sister, 'did you give it back to him just as it was?'

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'I did,' said the truthful Jake, 'just as it was. He gave me sixpence.'

'Then you made up all that out of your own head, you little rascal?' said his sister.

Jake did not reply, but his vague smile was irritating to a degree,

'You made it up?' demanded Gregory. 'I am sure of it.'

But in her heart she thought nothing of the sort. She had reason to know Tom Forrest's epistolary style. It could not be called 'of imagination all compact,' but all the same it got there.

Her reverie was interrupted by Jake's high-pitched voice, quite as emotionless as before.

'And now I can have fig-pudding for supper— with cream? Can't I, Big Sister?'

And he could.

CHAPTER FOUR

GREGORY TAKES OFF HER GLOVE

All that week the Manners house walked in a vain show. The paralysis which comes upon an earthquake-rocked town fell upon it. Mr. Manners did not find his mid-forenoon glass of milk ready at his elbow, and though he could not exactly diagnose the trouble, vaguely felt the want of something. Never had so many boys shouted under his windows, or scuffled in the passage. He would have called them up for chastisement, but, after all, what was he among so many? And, besides, he could not always be sure of their names—at least, not in the intimate tangle of a rough-and-tumble at which he

peered helplessly through his glasses.

As for Mrs. Manners, she found herself without salt and flour for the first time in ten years. Of the lard only the flaccid skin remained. The spice-box contained only cinnamon, which all the family (except Jake) abhorred. He used it to preserve his moths. So, for the first time, Mrs. Manners was discontented, and began to be conscious that Gregory's silent and unremitting care of the household providing did as much for the family as her own busy boiling and stewing and baking.

The truth was that Gregory was troubled in her mind. It was something in this fashion that she stated the case to herself. The negative had precedence.

'First, I can't marry Tom, because I don't want to get married. Because, if I did marry, what would my father do, my mother— these imps of boys?

Who would dress them, teach them, thrash them? No; I must stay here. It is my duty. I must tell Tom so.'

Here she sighed. It would be a hard thing to tell. Then, being a girl of an impartial mind, she considered the affirmative.

'At the same time, I don't want anybody else to marry Tom. I don't want him to go away!'

She was sitting mending the most critical heel-and-toe holes in a basket of socks belonging to her brothers, and for the first time on record scamping her job, pulling the unoffending wool into lumps and ridges without a qualm.

To her entered Jake—Jake the universally privileged. He sat him down and watched Gregory for a long time without speaking.

'Say, Greg,' he remarked at last, 'father's awful

poor, isn't he?'

'No,' said his sister. 'Why?'

'Coz you work so dreadful hard,' said Jake; 'but I suppose that's because you are a girl and want to. Boys don't. They go to school. Why don't we go to school?'

'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings,' murmured Gregory. 'Perhaps if I didn't do so much for this household—perhaps if father had to be a little more aware of himself, if mother was obliged to keep out of the kitchen, if the boys went to school, it might be better for all concerned!'

She thought this over awhile, decided that only the highest and most unselfish motives would ever make her dream of leaving the inhabitants of Hinton Manse to their fate. Then she mused a little longer, and said aloud: 'And, of course, they could come and stay with us at Caldercreek!'

Jake's high, piping voice broke in, dreamily, as if he were repeating the burden of a song long familiar.

'Here is the ring — I bought for you — wear it on Sunday — when you take off your gloves — to play on the harmonicum — I cannot live longer — in this uncertain-taty!'

She looked up. On Jake's grubby little toe gleamed a hoop of gold in which smouldered a red spark. Gregory sprang towards him, made a clutch at the small boy, missed him badly as he made off towards the door.

'Give it me, Jake. Do you hear, sir?' she cried, with a fierce, sudden eagerness. 'It is mine!'

'Tisn't,' said Jake. 'A likely story. Why, you told me yourself you didn't want it, and to give it to Cousin Tom, and he throwed it into the water. So 'tis mine, and I'll sell it and get a lot of fish-hooks —

chunks and wads of fish-hooks!

Tom Forrest was sitting gloomily outside his patrimonial mansion. It was not a very large mansion, nor were the attached acres very numerous. But it had come down to him in unblemished ancestry from twenty generations of Forrests of Caldercreek. So that Tom, as a young fellow of fair means and good figure, had no need to pull such a long face as he gazed into the dusky shadows of the farmyard or turned his face up to the moorland above, all dusky purple with the merest edging of gold.

He had resolved to leave his home. He could not sell the old place, but he would let it. He knew a man who was eager to have it for the rough hill-shooting alone. Besides, the house was good and far too large for a bachelor. He had staked his future on Gregory Manners, and after all these years she had laughed at him and sent him back his love-token unopened, his letter unread.

Canada— yes, that was it. He would see what the new country was like and find out what pluck and energy— he was sure that he had them— would do there. Then, vaguely, certain images, compounded of Hiawatha, Fenimore Cooper, and perhaps also R. M. Ballantyne, floated upwards in his mind— painted cliffs by the side of Lake Superior, wampum, Indian braves, and stealthy canoes stealing noiselessly across the narrows of Winnepegoos.

'Hey, Cousin Tom!'

The voice startled him. For a moment he thought—but no—what a fool he was! It was one of these young—ahem!— angels from the manse: one of the eight Manners boys, his cousins.

He was right, as the next hail showed. He could

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

as yet see no one through the gathering gloom of that Saturday evening.

'You're mournful., Cousin Tom!'

Now there was no doubt about that piping voice. It was unmistakable as that of a curlew. Only little Jake Manners could produce a cry like that.

'You aren't mad with me, Cousin Tom?'

'No; what do you want? Come out. Where are you, Jake?'

A spidery form disentangled itself from the ivy of the very porch under which Tom Forrest had been sitting, appearing as naturally as a nesting sparrow from among the leaves.

'What ho!' cried Tom, surprised; 'been there all the time?'

Jake nodded and sat down on the steps, his chin in his palms, as usual, looking very meditative and elvish.

'What are you doing up here at this time of night, anyway?' demanded his cousin.

'I comed,' replied Jake.

'And you'll go back!' said Tom indignantly. 'Why, they will be seeking you all over the country.'

'No, they won't,' Jake explained placidly; 'think I'm in bed. So I was. Big Sister, she cotched me, whopped me, and put me to bed. Then I clom down by the roof to the shed—and comed.'

'Well,' said Tom impatiently, 'what do you want when you are here? Got any message from Gregory?'

Jake shook his head. Then he rubbed himself, as if chewing the cud of a reminiscence entirely private to himself.

'Didn't send you any message,' he said. 'She whopped me, though.'

'Well, you be off home,' said Tom, who was not in

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

a melting mood.

'All right—in a minute,' said Jake, biting his nails. 'No hurry. Cousin Tom. Going to church tomorrow?'

'No!' growled Tom savagely.

Jake Manners was silent. He scratched his head with a stiff stubble of wheat straw that lay under his hand.

'If I were you, I would!' he said, getting up. 'Good-night, Cousin Tom!'

And before Tom Forrest could rise to his feet he had melted into the darkness as mysteriously as he had come.

'Hold on, Jake,' he cried, 'wait till I saddle Blossom, and I'll ride you down in front of me.'

But all was silence about him, and far away the wind sighed lightly among the pines.

'Jake! Oh, Jake!'

Still there was no reply. The angles of the farmyard repeated, 'Ake! 'Ake!' as quick as clapping hands, and the more distant wall of green firwood threw back, 'Oh, Jake!' mockingly. But of the little figure which had sat on the step at his feet not a trace!

Then Tom Forrest had strife with himself. He was naturally stubborn, and living much alone had fostered the quality in him. He would not go to church, why should he? He had lived too long in a fool's paradise. Gregory had scorned him and laughed at him. (It was astonishing the comfort he had in repeating this over and over to himself.) He had flung the ring into the water in a fit of temper, and though he had gone back to search for it in calmer mood, remembering the enclosed letter, he had found nothing. But, then, the current was

undoubtedly swift there.

‘Could that young . . . angel?’

‘Ah!’

And Tom thought and thought and thought. So long, indeed, that Steve, his good-looking foreman, found him in the dawn of the summer Sabbath morn still pacing up and down in front of his house with knit brows and weary eyes.

‘Never so much as the coverlet turned down on his bed nor the pillow dented, Steve, my dear,’ said Elizabeth Cushydow, the house servant, who was keeping company with the ‘grieve,’ with a view to holy matrimony later on.

‘Ye tell me so?’ said Steve. ‘It’s my opinion the master is going off his head.’

‘Heart, not head,’ said Elizabeth Cushydow. ‘Mark my words, Steve, there will be a mistress coming to Caldercreek. And after having gotten my own way for a dozen of years, I could never bear to serve another— no, not under the Queen of England! So ye will have to look for a cottage, Steve, or, faith, I’ll marry Rob the smith.’

Still weary-eyed but shaven of face and decently black-coated, eleven of the clock on Sunday morning found Tom Forrest in his place in the kirk of the parish of Hinton.

Mr. Manners was just giving out the ancient psalm, Englished by Francis Roos—

‘Behold how good a thing it is. And how becoming well. Together such as brethren are in unity to dwell.’

Immediately beneath his eye, at the fine new harmonium, the gift of the ex-patron of the parish, Gregory was taking off her gloves in the most leisurely fashion in the world.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Something on the ring finger of her right hand caught his eye. It was gold with a red spark in it. The congregation rose to sing, but Tom sat on, glued to his seat, dumbfounded, dull to comprehend, or, rather, not daring to take the message. Gregory did not look at him till she was playing the accompaniment to the fourth line, and then she raised her eyes.

'In unity to dwell,' she sang, joining in the psalm with a kind of smiling triumph. Yet her eyes were dewy and glorious as they dwelt on Tom.

Then he rose to his feet with something like a happy death clutching his throat, and his heart flying in great leaps.

But he did not join in the solemn rhythm of the psalm. He had his eyes only for the spark of gold-and-red on Gregory's finger as it fled here and there over the keyboard. That held him.

Yet who shall say that Tom Forrest did not worship — if to praise God with the true heart truly be indeed, as some say, the root of the matter?

7. THE CLARION'S EXTRA SPECIAL

'Hang the Clarion — hang Carronside — hang Abraham Baker,' said young Kingsmill, the editor of the Carronside Clarion, a local sheet of pronounced views, confounding the entire trinity of his gods in one compendious anathema.

He paced up and down the dirty proof-strewn floor of the editorial room, his hands behind his back, brows bent, and his heels clanging on the uneven boards.

'If I had only been on the other side of the hedge — Blue instead of Red in politics! What's politics, anyway, when a fellow sees a girl he really—cares about? Politics! What's Hecuba to me or me to? Oh, hang it, there she goes—down the street to the Sheriff's, where that heather-mixtured young ass will drop in and talk to her all the time that she is visiting his sister. Dash it all—that's perhaps why she goes!'

And the stamping of the editor reached down to the Clarion composing-room, causing Davy Kelly, the foreman, to shrug his shoulders and glance at Peter McKinlay, his sole adjoint.

'He's on the high and lofty tear about something,' the latter remarked softly, jerking his thumb upwards; 'we'll get some pretty copy down in a jiffy.'

'Then he can just come down and set it up himself—I told him as much the last time,' said the foreman.

'Did you?' inquired his friend. 'Now that's funny. I wuz here the whole time and I never heard ye!'

'Annyway,' said Kelly, who had not come from the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

North of Ireland for nothing, 'it's none of your business, an' he's a daisy-cutter av an editor, and smashes somebody every week reggilar!'

'He'll get smashed one o' them days himself,' prophesied McKinlay. 'If he was in the blessed town of Belfast, he wuddn't keep that nate call-again face on him ten minutes, annywhere 'twixt Greenmount an' the Bathery!'

'Ay, and you're the fine lad to defend the clargy, Peter,' said the foreman; 'just oblige me with your time-sheet for Saturday night, and the text of the minister ye sat under on Sunday last!'

'Well and good,' said McKinlay, 'a man may take his fling, but he can have a conscience in his bosom at the same time. And I kyant help thinkin', Davy boy, that you and me wud be better breakin' stones on the roadside behind a pair of diver's barnacles apiece, than here in this rabbit-hutch settin' up lies agin the clargy.'

'Very like,' said Davy, 'but ye can set the difference of the wage againt yer tinder conscience, Peter jewel, and ye'll find it a tidy soothin' plaster!'

The door opened, and the flaxen head of the editor appeared. He threw some sheets roughly scribbled in pencil on the table.

'Set that up,' he said; 'I'm going down the street — see a proof when I come back!'

It was high election fever in Carronside. Never since that overgrown village had become an important manufacturing town had there been such anxiety. It had begun with strikes among the miners, following on a fire-damp explosion. Then a period of commercial depression had affected the ironworks, and through them every merchant and dealer in the town, down to the very farmers who

drove their milk to the doors of the miners' wives.

The Blues had been long in possession of the Parliamentary seat— too long said the Reds. The latter were undoubtedly, for the present, the popular party. The Carronside Clarion, a halfpenny paper of the newest and reddest type, had recently been established to make war on all institutions indiscriminately. It railed at religion and the 'Mistakes of Moses,' at the Blue Party and their precious Eight Hours' Bill, at mill-owners and capital, at the Salvation Army, and the Established Church.

The editor was a young man of a certain practised smartness with the pen, a high confidence in himself, and (said his opponents) no education to speak of. The Clarion dealt largely in stock phrases and catchpenny objections. The Bible was an immoral book. Read Genesis. It was ridiculous to suppose that the Sun stood still when Joshua told it to. Ministers worked only for their own ends. No one of them was better than another. Elders, Sunday-school teachers, mission workers, all had some purpose in view— their own honour and glory, the increase of their business connection, or sheer, plain, blatant hypocrisy.

These were the opinions of Mr. Cherry Kingsmill, the editor of the Carronside Clarion, and his paper, though nominally all on the side of the oppressed and the enslaved, was really bound hand and foot to one wealthy man, Mr. Abraham Baker, a retired glue manufacturer, who had returned to his native Carronside in time to make a most fortunate speculation in building land, just before the great increase of the local trade, consequent on the discovery of certain deep coal seams which could be

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

worked in connection with the iron.

This connection, however, was not acknowledged. Mr. Abraham Baker was a regular churchgoer, a seatholder, and had even been proposed for office in the session of Dr. Cotton, the minister of the largest and most influential congregation (as the County Express was fond of calling it) in all Carronside.

But Abraham Baker had in his heart a rankling hatred against Dr. Cotton, and he had brought Cherry Kingsmill to the town and started the Clarion for the express purpose of driving his minister from the place. He had sworn it to himself long years ago, and now with his money made, and a cool, calculating brain behind the high narrow brow, Abraham thought that he saw his way clear to his goal. The Doctor must go.

Dr. Cotton (suggested the Clarion) was a secret drinker. Casks of brandy had been seen being conveyed by night from a way-station to the back-door of the manse. Dr. Cotton was a plagiarist. And the Clarion printed, in the inevitable parallel columns, extracts from his last sermons, showing that in describing the Essenes he had used expressions very similar to those made use of by Maclaren of Manchester, and how his description of Nazareth was obviously and word for word cribbed from Farrar!

Yet darker things were hinted at. There was the matter of the Bazaar surplus, the Organ Fund, and the undoubted fact that on a day when the whole collection amounted to three pounds and sixpence, a well-known and influential member of the congregation (recently retired from business) had been seen putting a five-pound note into the offertory.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

The plate with the collection was as usual carried to the vestry; and, in disrobing, Dr. Cotton had been left for more than five minutes alone with it. These last words were printed in italics.

Dr. Cotton was repeatedly urged to take immediate legal proceedings, but he only smiled very quietly and said, 'I have dwelt in Carronside for nearly forty years. I came hither when I was but twenty. If the folk of Carronside do not know me now, they never will. As for this young man, he is doubtless doing as he is bidden. His writing is not without ability, I am only sorry that it should be directed, I do not say against myself, but in opposition to the cause of religion, causing the ignorant to gainsay.'

And all the reply the Doctor made to the supreme attack was to give out as his opening hymn of praise on the following Sabbath morning the well-known words—

I love Thy kingdom, Lord, The house of Thine abode, The church our blest Redeemer saved With His own precious blood. I love Thy church, O God, Her walls before Thee stand, Dear as the apple of Thine eye. And graven on Thy hand. For her my tears shall fall. For her my prayers ascend. To her my cares and toils be given, Till toils and cares shall end,'

And while the full congregation sent the words speeding upwards to the fine tune of *Quam Dilecti*, there was one man who sang, if possible, more heartily than all the rest. This was Mr. Abraham Baker, the Red candidate for Parliament, and everybody said how noble it was of him, thus to show his disbelief in the slanders and calumnies which had been printed about the minister. It

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

showed what a dreadful young man this Cherry Kingsmill must be.

Meanwhile Cherry Kingsmill, with his head against the end wall of the church, listened and tried to pick out Grace Cotton's voice in the choir. The passage in which he stood was a back-way to the unauthorised Sunday door of the Blue Bull Tavern. So if he sobbed, the rare passers-by would only imagine he was drunk, and say once more how that young man from the Clarion office was going to the devil the fastest way. But then, what else could you expect?

Now Grace Cotton did not think at all about the young editor, nor indeed very much of anybody except the Doctor. To her the young man who stared so, was just 'the wretch in the newspaper office who said such horrid things about her father.' She did not know anything about a man being paid to write what he did not believe. She never suspected that it was from the hospitable mansion of Abraham Baker that the bullets came which Cherry Kingsmill shot every week with such effect.

But one day a letter was put into her hand by a little ragged urchin—one Killy Corsan, 'devil' at the office of the Clarion, who immediately 'scooted' down a side street to escape recognition and catechism. Grace Cotton opened it without compunction. The Sheriff's daughter, or even May Baker, sometimes wrote her scraps like that. She tore the end carelessly with her gloved finger and tossed the envelope on the ground. But the first words of the letter induced her to turn on her heel and pick that up again.

'Dear Lady' (she read),— 'It may chance that, if you think of me at all, you consider me your worst

enemy in Carronside. I am neither that, nor do I wish ill to any of your house. But, at present, circumstances are against me. I was a poor boy, I have been compelled to struggle hard, and here I have to do as I am bidden or lose my position. Surely you will not refuse to hear what I have to say, simply because, as a journalist, I have done the best I could for my paper.

If there is the least hope that one day you may be able to regard me as a friend, may I ask you to send a line to the Clarion Office, and a mutual acquaintance will introduce me to you at the Tennis Courts. I might have arranged that this should be done first of all, but I judged it right to make a previous communication to you, informing you directly of my intentions.

‘I have the honour to be, Madam, your humble servant, Cherry Kingsmill.’

It was an honest letter, but only a man who knew nothing of women would have written it. As might have been expected Grace Cotton thrust it angrily into her pocket.

‘Oh yes,’ she said, viciously, ‘I will answer him—I will ‘send him a line to the Clarion Office.’ Whether he will like it when he gets it, is another matter.’

She could hardly wait till she got home to answer.

She had seen her father's white head daily droop lower on his breast because of what this man was doing. She heard in her ears the plaintive throb of Dwight's hymn which they had sung on Sabbath morning:

‘I love Thy kingdom. Lord, The house of Thine abode.’

It seemed to mean the veritable stone and lime of the sanctuary in which she had worshipped from a

child. And that he, the marpeace, her father's backbiter, should dare to make love to her. For it amounted to that. She would show him. She rushed to her own room and fairly precipitated herself on the letter-paper lying ready on her desk.

'Miss Grace Cotton has no wish to be acquainted with the slanderer of her father, the enemy of all she holds dear,' (then quite suddenly, her vexation mastering her, she became a schoolgirl again) 'and do not dare even to look at me or speak to me—I hate and despise you for what you have said about my father.'

Which, to say the least of it, was neither ladylike nor quite in her father's spirit. But then she was only a girl and angry— so, if you please, we will excuse her.

It was a staggering blow for the young editor when he received Grace Cotton's unsigned note. Being young and foolish, he had had hopes that the personal might be separated from the political. But he did not know Carronside, and still less did he know Grace's sex. She was so ashamed of the episode that she told nobody, not even May Baker—which, in view of what followed, was exceedingly fortunate.

She received in reply this brief acknowledgment of her letter:

'Miss Grace Cotton.— I will not say that you are wrong. I bow to your decision. I am leaving Carronside for ever. But before I go, I hope to do something in order to prove to you that I am neither enemy nor slanderer.'

'Say, Davy,' said the junior of the two Ulster men to his foreman, 'what's this our long-haired lunatic upstairs has unloaded on us today? Letters from old

Baker, retractions, 'The Truth about the Carronside Clarion' — it lucks like eatin' the leek, with humble pie to follow!'

'Set up your copy and hould your whist,' said his chief emphatically, 'this paper will be dhropped like a hot potato after the election is over, whichever way it goes. It never paid except as an electioneering rag. But if this little bomb-shell goes off— why, Pether McKinlay, I shuddent wonder if there was a vacant case over at the County Express for you, and another for yer friend Davie Kelly.'

'What,' cried Peter, with a grin of irony, 'and bethray the Cause!'

'Bethray your grandmother,' observed his chief, 'what ye have to do is jist to follow copy, earn your living dram, and see that your s's aren't turned!'

The Clarion came out on the morning of the election and paralysed the borough of Carronside. It contained the afore-mentioned article, 'The Truth about the Clarion,' signed by Cherry Kingsmill, in which he gave the whole story of his relations with Abraham Baker, together with that gentleman's private letters ordering his editor to insert certain paragraphs reflecting on Dr. Cotton. The story of the organ collection was retold with the unedited addition in Abraham Baker's handwriting, 'Not true, but we can retract and apologise—after the election, if there is any fuss!'

The article concluded with a notice that all the originals of the correspondence had been placed in the hands of the 'Blue' Election agent, and could be consulted at the offices of the County Express,

Naturally the Reds were wild. Never had there been such a manifest breach of confidence. It was for these Carronside politicians, 'the Great Betrayal.'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Indeed it would have gone hard with Cherry Kingsmill for many days had he shown his face in Carronside. But he was never seen there again— nor indeed elsewhere in Britain.

But a letter containing a galley proof of the famous article was posted from Queenstown addressed to 'Miss Grace Cotton, The Manse, Carronside, Scotland.' The envelope bore the pennon of the S.S. Cunardia in red on a white ground.

These words were written across the bottom of the rough proof paper:

'The enclosed will prove to you that I have kept my word. If ever you waste a thought on Cherry Kingsmill, do not forget that he is neither enemy nor slanderer, but— let him say it this once— your true and faithful lover till death.'

As for Mr. Abraham Baker, he was defeated by more than a thousand votes in the large and influential constituency of Carronside, which he had so assiduously nursed for years. Accordingly he gave up politics. They were of ill odour in his nostrils. So he returned to the sweet smell of the glue trade and the rigid integrity of commercial life. Grace Cotton is Grace Cotton no more— but Grace Something-else which does not come into this story. She has four children and a good husband. Yet sometimes, when the firelight burns ruddy, before it is quite time to light the lamps, she will sit with her hands in her lap and wonder about Cherry Kingsmill, the foolish young lad who once on a time threw away a career for her sake.

Of course it could never have been. She loves John. But still!

And then she sighs softly as she rises to feel for the matches on the comer of the mantelpiece. It is

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

time for Baby's bath!

8. THE PACKMAN'S POOL

'It's just three days to Christmas,' said Gray Stiel to Robin as they stood at the black gates of the farm-town and looked up at the threatening December sky.

'Kirsmas—I think I hae heard tell o' that afore—what is't?' said Robin Stiel, who was Gray Stiel's nephew and twelve years old.

'Oh,' said Gray Stiel, whistling on his smooth-haired little collie, 'it's a time, juist!'

'But what is it a time for?' continued Robin, who was small for his age but mighty persistent.

'Robin, man, ye are awfu' ignorant; I maun send ye to the schule,' said Gray Stiel, who had been as far as Lockerby Lamb Fair and once met an Englishman. 'Christmas is a time when folk hae mair to eat than they ken what to do wi', and mair to drink than is guid for them.'

'O Lord,' groaned Robin, 'I wuss Kirsmas wad come to the Nethertoun. I'm no mindin' what I hae to drink. There's naething sae slockenin' as cauld water, but to hae mair than ye can eat, it's just heeven to think on!'

Gray Stiel sighed, and for a moment his face looked a little weary. He too did not know what it was to have more to eat than left him hungry when it was gone. And, to tell the truth, he did not care much. For he had grown indurated to a brave, brisk, hard life at the hill farm of Nethertoun among the wild hills of Galloway. He had been fourteen years herd to Ralph Edgar of the House of Folds, commonly known as 'Hoppety-Skip' from a hobbling

way of walking he had, through his leg having once been put out of joint (it was said by an indignant former herd), and he now knew that he would not make a fortune in the service of his present master.

Gray had thought it was a fine thing when he was a younger man to get such a place, the sole charge of as fine a 'hill' as there was in all Galloway, a cow's grass, one lamb in every two-score of those drafted off the farm at selling time, and five-and-twenty pounds in wages. Gray Stiel at that time was twenty-four years of age and sanguine.

He was in love, too, and hoped that this 'doing for himself' would bring him quickly to the goal of his hopes. But after the first successful season a series of backward unkindly years had smitten him sore. There were late snowstorms, into which the young lambs were born only to die. He himself was stricken with a pleurisy which cut like a knife into his flesh each time he mounted a brae. But still he struggled on, with hope upspringing in the loyal faithful heart of him. Gray Stiel was true steel.

But yet sorer things to bear struck him. In one year his father died, his mother, left penniless, aged and infirm, came to live with him, bringing one Robin, a baby, the son of Allan, Gray Stiel's elder brother, who had levanted into parts unknown out of the reach of his responsibilities. Then one week after she had come to her son's house, she woke wailing in the dawn with a great and strange fear upon her. She was blind. Something had snapped after long wearing pain in her eyeballs—snapped suddenly and without warning. And so she became a burden upon Gray, and wearied his life out by telling him so—which, indeed, was his greatest burden.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

With his own hands he had to dress her, and lead her about the house. He was nurse to little Robin, carrying him often to the hills with him in the nook of his plaid, or in bad weather taking a hasty run down in the mid of the morning to the cot-house to see that all was right within.

Then to show that the blast of misfortune had not blown itself out, the one cow died, and Gray had three miles to walk before he could get a bottle of milk for his two helpless charges, while the road was so rough that oftentimes it was churned into butter in his pocket by the time he got back. After the lambing time it was easier, of course, for then he milked the ewes which happened to lose their lambs. And those who know understand that it is no joke to milk a full-sized old blackface of the mountains—a 'Snaw-breaker' and the mother of many.

But Gray Stiel came through the trial, though it handicapped him for life. In the autumn his cunning master offered him an advance upon his wages, part of which he used in buying another cow, and part in paying some outstanding obligations of his father's about which his mother kept up a perpetual craking complaint wearisome to listen to.

Then quite suddenly his sweetheart, Peggy Sinclair, a small farmer's daughter in the low country, married his master, Ralph Edgar, called Hoppety-Skip. She was eighteen years of age and she had been acted on by her people, whose pride was awakened when Hoppety-Skip came a-courting in a dark green gig with lines picked out in red. That the bridegroom was within a few years of seventy made no difference to them, though it did to Peggy, gentility's sacrifice.

For many days Gray Stiel went to the hill with a

worse pain in his heart than last winter's stitch of pleurisy. He had never seen Peggy since, though she had come to Nethertoun once or twice with her husband. But on these particular days Gray Stiel had business among his flocks on the remotest hilltops, and if Hoppety-Skip wanted to see him, he could come to seek him.

So the years went on and Robin grew a big boy. The weariful complaining of Gray's mother was suddenly stilled in the tenth year of his herdship at Nethertoun, and the lonely man felt the want acutely. But from that day his heart was set on Robin, the child of his lost brother Allan. It used to be his fear that he would come back and claim his son. Gray Stiel felt sure that Allan could do that, or any other mean thing to which he applied his mind.

So at the yett of Nethertoun, leaning upon the top bar and looking at the dull grey of a sky which presaged snow. Gray Stiel and his nephew Robin stood. Three or four dogs, feeling the need of keeping the blood coursing through their veins that nipping winter morning, tumbled over each other with riotous snapping of teeth, worrying and yelping with their noses in the scruff of each other's necks.

A far-away whistle reached them in the midst of their play, and instantly every dog stopped in the midst of a spring, or was turned to stone with jaws wide open for a snap. Their ears were instantly cocked in the direction of the sound, and a low continuous gur-r-r-ring quivered through each from sharply-pointed nose to twitching tail.

With a great fear in his heart Gray Stiel went to the barn-end and looked down the valley. What he saw made him turn sharply round and bid Robin go into the house and bide there. Whereat the boy,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

though infinitely curious, obeyed without question. He had but one law, and that was the will of Gray Stiel.

Then Gray took his staff in his hand and went down the glen to face what he felt might be the greatest peril of his life. Upon a rock sat a tall, burly man clad apparently in rags. The toe of one foot peeped through the broken boot. His hair of a sandy grey was short cropped, and his face had an unwholesome prison pallor like half-bleached cloth.

He was drinking raw spirits out of a bottle as the clean muirland nose of his brother told him a hundred yards off

'Ho, Square-toes!' he cried, waving the bottle about his head, 'come and have a drink. You won't — you upsettin' blastie. Well, then, I will, if ye will not. There!'

He swigged off the remainder of the contents without removing the bottle from his lips. Then catching it by the neck he threw it with unsteady aim at one of the circling collies, who, of course, easily evaded the clumsy missile. The bottle smashed against the rock with an ugly sound as Gray Stiel stood face to face with his enemy.

Allan Stiel balanced himself uneasily, lurching a little, and trying to suppress a hiccough. Then he smiled.

'I have come for my share of the family estate,' he said, 'heir, you know. Gray—eldest son of his parents. Where's the cash my father left— mother too? Give me my portion of goods. Master Stay-at-home, or Allan Stiel will soon let ye ken what's what!'

'Allan,' said Gray Stid, 'well do you know that our father not only left no money but died in debt—not

through any fault of his own, poor man. And as for my mother, God rest her, she brought me nothing but the clothes on her back.'

Allan Stiel laughed aloud.

'Nonsense, man,' he said, 'I've heard you paid faither's creditors in full, and some o' mine too. That shows ye hae siller. Nae man pays siller that he hasna got. Sae if ye please, nae gammon wi' Allan. Ten pounds ye pay me or I will tak' awa' that callant o' mine to learn my new business. Oh, it's a braw trade!'

There was no need for Gray Stiel to ask what that trade was. The man breathed beggary, theft, and debauchery from polled head to cracked boots. And to think that such an one had a claim upon Robin, and could make him like that!

Gray Stiel drew his breath hard.

'I havena the siller,' he said slowly; 'I havena a pound note i' the hoose!'

'Then ye ken where to get it,' retorted his brother, 'there's your sweetheart, Peggy, married to your rich maister, a young lass wedded to an auld man. She will never refuse a loan to her jo for the sake o' auld lang syne.'

'I cannot do that!' said Gray with a gasp.

Allan Stiel swore a great oath, and held up his clenched hand above his head. His prison paleness flushed purple.

'Then I swear that if ye do not get me that ten pounds by Christmas Day, I will tak' the boy wi' me. It's an awesome-like thing to keep a boy frae his ain faither that has tane a' the trouble o' bringin' him into the world, and noo ye wad hinder him frae learnin' to earn an honest penny, and to be the staff o' his faither's declinin' years!'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

The affectionate parent turned and strode unsteadily down the rough rocky track which led towards the loch. Gray Stiel watched him with wild whirling thoughts in his heart. At the angle of the path Allan stopped and shouted back, 'Ten o'clock at the Packman's Pool on Christmas mornin', and mind ye hae the siller wi' ye!'

Gray Stiel went back into the house and his colliers slunk uneasily after him. Their master ought, they knew, to have been on the hill long ere this. There were not so many hours of daylight left in which to cover so much moss and heather. But still Gray Stiel sat and thought.

Robin, wearied of his book, had risen and gone to the door with his dog Airie. Gray Stiel abruptly bade him come in and sit down. He was not to go out of doors that day while he was on the hill. He was afraid that his brother might yet return.

Then, having locked the door, Gray took the path for the Craig Lee knowes, whence the best general idea of the hill can be got. The sheep, it appeared to him, were all on their several ridges and slopes, and Gray Stiel resolved (as he put it) to 'leave them to Providence for yae day!'

Then with an abrupt change of direction he struck right across the moorland for Dee fords, conquering the heather and moss-hags with his long shepherd's stride. He was making a bee line for the House of Folds, where dwelt a woman he had never set eyes upon, since she had looked up and told him how much she loved him. But now it was not a time to let any sentimental considerations stand in the way. He must see Peggy Sinclair— he could not bring himself to say the other name by which men called her. And as he spoke the image of Hoppety-

Skip, his mean, narrow-visaged grippy master, rose before his eyes with a sense of physical disgust. He stopped and half turned on his heel. No, he could not do it— not even for Robin's sake. And yet the thought of the babe whom he had held in his arms, laying him down in his plaid only that he might milk the ewes, and— yes, it should be done.

It was late in the short winter's afternoon before he reached the House of Folds and asked for 'the Mistress.'

She came, and at sight of him set hand to her side with a strange little animal cry, something like a weak thing that has been trodden upon.

'Gray,' she whispered mechanically, 'ye hae comed!' Perhaps she was thinking of the tryst she never kept. At least Gray Stiel was.

Then it was that there came a strange construction into the man's throat. Something seemed to grow so great and hard at the root of his tongue, that he had no words to articulate. Then all at once he noted that it was dark, and he thought of little Robin sitting alone with his dog in the cothouse of Nethertoun. Then words came suddenly to him.

'I have a sudden call,' he said; 'Allan has come back and swears that he will take Robin frae me— and— mak' him a thief like himsel' if I winna gie him ten pounds on Christmas morning!'

There was a pitiful look on the face of the young mistress of the House of Folds and her hand sought her throat, wavering upwards like a little detached flame from a fire of green wood. 'Oh, I havena a shilling. Gray,' she whispered, 'he—he winna— And oh, Gray, it was a' my faither!'

At that moment from the little parlour there came the sound of a kind of skipping patter as if a large

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

dog had leaped down from a chest upon the bare wooden floor. And the girl involuntarily withdrew further from the door, as it were, shrinking within herself.

'Wha's there— wha's there?' cried a high-pitched, querulous voice, 'what for canna ye come in, whatever ye are? Stiel—Stiel! What's wrang about Nethertoun? Are ony o' the sheep deid? Dinna say that the steadin's on fire?'

Then he turned to his wife.

'Gang in there,' he said, as he would have spoken to a dog, glancing over his deformed shoulder at her with an ugly look on his face, strange imder his crown of reverend hair.

'Lend ye ten pounds to gie to your ill-set brither — my bonny pound notes that I hae worked sae hard for!' he screamed when he understood. 'Gray Stiel, do ye think I hae gane crazy? And ye hae no been that fast in payin' back what ye owe me already, that I should fling awa' ten pounds, for you and your brither to waste in drink an' debauchery!'

'To keep the boy—and what for should ye keep the boy? I wat ye hae wasted mair on that boy than wad hae paid me my legal debt ten times ower! Na, na, Gray, gang your ways back, and let the wean gang to his faither. That's aye a mouth the less to be fed aff the Nethertoun! And get a strong laddie that will be some use to ye on the hill. Guid-nicht to ye. And mind, dinna leave your hill and my sheep on ony mair siccan daft errands! Ay, or you and me will quarrel, Gray!'

The door slammed to and Gray Stiel was left without in the darkness gripping his hands to keep them from taking hold of the miser's scraggy neck. And while Peggy, the wife of Hoppety-Skip, lay all

night awake thinking of Gray Stiel and his trouble, hardly once did Gray Stiel think of her. For all his mind was on Robin, the boy whom he must deliver into his father's hand on the morning of Christmas,—the day when Happiness came to the whole earth.

And on the twenty-fifth day of December Robin woke late to see through the curtains of his bed a strange sight. His uncle Gray was taking down the old gun off the wall—the gun with the long single barrel which had not been fired for many a year. He cleaned it carefully, and then as carefully loaded it, measuring the powder in the hollow of his hand and taking care with the wadding and something else that was certainly not the lead pellets he used for rabbit-shooting. And the face of Gray Stiel was as the face of the dead, for he had not slept since he had met with his brother Allan three days before.

Then drawing an ancient web purse from a worm-eaten desk, sole relic of the former better estate of the family, he counted out seventeen shillings and nine pennies, in silver and copper—all his worldly possessions. It was with a somewhat grim look that he thrust this into his pocket, and taking in hand the alternative to the seventeen-and-ninepence, he went out on tiptoe.

Robin drew aside the curtain and saw him striding away down towards the loch through the falling snow. That was why Robin had slept so long. It was after nine o'clock of the day, but the snow had been falling all night and still continued. His uncle sank nearly to the knees in it. Poor Uncle Gray—Robin thought—to be obliged to go out in

such weather. But again, perhaps he had seen a deer on the side of Craig Lee, and was only going to try for a shot.

That might be God's Christmas gift. Robin had once tasted venison and the flavour remained with him yet.

Gray Stiel came of a race which loves not murder, but is not averse to slaying in a just cause. And it was with no thought of the consequences to himself that he resolved that upon no consideration would he deliver Robin to his father. The seventeen-and-ninepence— yes, or—that which he had dropped into the old musket! His brother should have his choice of these two—but not Robin.

The snow fell softly, whisperingly. It was powdery with frost, and slid off the plummy branches of the fir trees with a hushing sound. There— there was the Packman's Pool, dead black amid a perfection of whiteness.

A mist as of blood ran redly across Gray Stiel's eyes. His ears drummed and he gripped the old gun that had been his father's. He could feel his heart beating in his throat. He knit his brows, and tried hard to collect himself, and even to con the speech he had resolved to make to Allan, his brother.

Yet, as he approached, there was no Allan to be seen— an empty bottle winked at him with one black eye from under a hoary eyelid of snow. Beyond, on the edge of the pool, there was a curious mound of snow hunched together.

Something in the shape took Gray Stiel by the heart. He uttered a hoarse cry, and dropping his gun he ran forward and laid his hand upon the thing.

It was his brother, frozen dead, all his evil days and evil deeds covered with the spotless

righteousness of the snow.

And Gray Stiel fell on his knees and lifted up his hands in thankfulness to heaven that the sin of Cain was not to be his that bitter Christmas Day.

And away in the little cothouse Robin, for whose unconscious sake certain things might have been done, drew in a creeper stool to his porridge and milk with another thankful heart.

‘So this is Christmas Day,’ he said, ‘and in England where they hae a’ the siller they want, folk get presents, and grand gifts, and as muckle as ever they can eat?’

He took one spoonful and then, recollecting that he had forgotten to say grace, he reverently took off his bonnet and asked a blessing.

Then he took another spoonful.

‘But after a,’ he added thankfully, ‘Christmas or no Christmas, porridge is hard to beat!’

But though he knew it not, out by the Packman's Pool, God had placed the best Christmas gift that could have come to the cothouse of Nethertoun, or into the life of young Robin Stiel, the nephew of one Gray, a brave man of that name. But that is not the end of the story. Other things even more interesting occurred after the death of Hoppety-Skip, which happened also before that Christmas snow melted.

For death as well as life is the gift of God.

9. BARRACLOUGH'S

Undoubtedly Anne Barraclough had her griefs. She lived in a hovel which no other in Creelport would condescend to inhabit. It was set far back against the cliff, a dry and crumbly limestone, with cracks in it which opened mysteriously at night and shut during the day equally without reason.

But Anne Barraclough had other sorrows—a son and a husband. Sam, the son, had early despised authority, run with the wild lads from the mills,—played tricks with his master's till, narrowly escaped the jail, and, as the saying went, would have broken his mother's heart, but for the trifling circumstance that that had been broken before— by her husband, Bob Barraclough, poacher, pugilist, breeder of bull pups, pigeon flier and fancier, and, in fact, everything except what he had been brought up to be, the sober hard-working mason his father had been before him.

Nevertheless, Robert Barraclough was still a landlord. His property was, however, confined to the small ex-stable, which a misdirected ingenuity had converted into a shebeen and unlicensed lodging-house for tramps and other free-living gentlemen of undefined professions who objected to being looked up at four in the morning by the police in the regular lodgings of Creelport.

Anne Barraclough was a hard-featured, wizened woman, with a head that seemed always drawn a little back as if to escape a blow. And indeed Bob, her husband, let her know, as he said, 'what was the law of England in the matter of wives,' when he

came home after being turned out of the 'Blue Posts' or the 'Anchor' for quarrelsomeness in his cups.

He beat her if he found guests drinking with Anne in their slovenly barrack. Why should she be sitting there and enjoying life while he had been turned out of two public-houses into the raw night air— and him with such a delicate chest. He beat her equally if there were no guests in the shebeen, and, by consequence, no money to furnish him out with on the following morning. Anne was idle, good-for-nothing, lazy, untruthful, and worse than all, she had money on the quiet, which she was keeping from her lawful husband. She was making a purse for herself. For all which reasons, Anne Barraclough must be corrected. And when Bob Barraclough was incapacitated for the performance of the duty, his son Sam kindly undertook it for him.

Yes, her own son. And him she feared most. For he was more often sober. He was the more cruel, and Anne went in terror lest she should one day reveal her secret hiding-place.

Yes, it was all true. Anne Barraclough at fifty was deceitful, idle, hopeless for herself, and also—she had money, which, with a great carefulness, she was keeping away from her loving relatives—from Bob, her husband, who beat her, and from Sam, her son, who aided and abetted his father so to do.

Anne Barraclough did not drink. She could not afford it. She would have liked dearly to drown her sorrows, and she had many bottles of a certain cheap Water of Lethe, miscalled whisky, stored away at the back of the old stable under the crumbly limestone. But all that was to sell, drop by drop, glass by glass, counted and reckoned—so many pieces of brown money, so many small silver bits—

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

some to be beaten out of her by Bob, some to be yielded to Sam to keep him quiet and decently incapable of observation. But most—especially the silver ones, little and white and jingly, were to be hid away in another place—for another purpose.

What purpose? Ah, but that was Anne Barraclough's secret. Nearly all the world—that is to say all Creelport—looked askance on Anne. The Barracloughs were the worst people in its worst district.

'Down in Little Dublin,' was the standing direction to their neighbourhood, 'as far down as you can, and the farther down the street you go the tougher it gets. The Barracloughs live in the last house.'

After IT happened, all Creelport remarked, that they had always known it of Anne Barraclough.

'She has the look of a murderess!' they said, as usual, exceeding wise after the event.

'She looks secret!' the jurymen whispered in the court when they condemned her, and old Bowlby, of the 'Blue Posts' who had lost a steady customer in the deceased, voted steadily against any recommendation to mercy.

But this is going too fast. It was the revealing of Anne Barraclough's secret which led to the tragedy, and so that must come first.

Yet it was no dark and deadly secret after all. Only that, long before the day of Bob Barraclough, Anne, his wife, had once been young and happy. He had loved her—he had told her how much along by the harbour wall, at the place where there are the fewest lights, and after they were married he had taken her to live away in the great seaport to which, from the deserted pier of Creelport, they could see the vessels passing up channel in a long procession.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Then he had died—died far away from her, and, when his mate called in to tell her of it, and ask if she wanted his chest sent— there was a little baby girl asleep in a borrowed cradle.

These things Bob Barraclough never knew, and Anne, his wife, was afraid that he would find out. That was her secret.

But up yonder in Doggermouth there was a slim girlish pupil-teacher who was to enter the Normal College in November, and people wondered how a mere suburban lodging-house keeper, depending on the poorer class of summer visitors, could afford such an extravagance.

'It was a folly of Mrs. Smith's,' the neighbours said over their neighbourly tea. But then Widow Smith had always been foolish about that girl. They hoped that the money was honestly come by, that was all.

And Lily Smith going to and fro every day—morning at nine, afternoon at ten minutes past four — to the Doggermouth Public School—also thought it was very kind of Aunt Smith, the only relative she had ever known. So, indeed, it was, for though Anne Barraclough's secret was safe behind Widow Smith's mended spectacles, that good old woman added many little luxuries according to her means, and perhaps a little beyond, to the monthly remittance which came so regularly from the Creelport post office.

Now, Lily Smith was not by any means an ordinary sweet, pretty, young woman. She had a mind of her own, as her father had when he took to running arms and ammunition to the Revolutionists in Cuba and died of it with his back to a wall. Just a little brown-skinned thing, with a capable mouth, a

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

firm chin, and dark grey eyes which glittered quietly under long lashes whenever the head mistress. Miss Priscilla Fisher, rebuked her for what was noways her fault.

Having once or twice encountered this steely and most arresting look, certain young men pupil-teachers, arrogant and over well-informed young men, to whom all knowledge was an open book, very discreetly left her alone.

'That Lily Smith,' said Ernest Towers, savagely, as he experimented gingerly with his first cigar, 'has no more feeling than a cat!'

He was wrong, but it was as well for him that he did not persevere so as to find out. But all that the world saw of Miss Lily Smith was only a trim, grey-gowned, brown-cheeked maiden tripping like a mouse daintily along the doubtful cleanliness of the Doggermouth pavements, half a dozen pupils of doubtful cleanliness tagging about her skirts.

Only a science master, recently appointed to the new secondary school over the way, took very much notice of her, and he merely from a window. She had a sweet smile, and he liked the quick way she had of smacking the little urchins when they muddied her dove-grey dress. This always made him laugh, and as there was not much to laugh at in Doggermouth, Mr. Henry Hurst, B.Sc, was grateful, and at ten minutes to nine and ten minutes after four each day, he was sure to be at his window, carefully examining a test-tube.

Curiously enough, in order rightly to manipulate a test-tube, it is necessary to arrange one's hair before a mirror, and to make certain of a cunning little upward crook of the moustache upon which Mr. Henry Hurst prided himself as upon a scientific

discovery. The left side pleased him best, and so he always held the test-tube sideways to the light, as he examined it carefully, in approved laboratory fashion.

He thought that little brown Miss Lily was quite unconscious of all this, and so most people would have thought too. Yet she noticed him the very first time, remarked the device of the test-tube the second, and the third she kept her head down and muttered 'impudence,' as she walked a little more smartly past.

On this occasion she gave dirty Johnny Sams an extra shake for pulling at her portfolio, and perhaps in part he served as whipping boy to the intrusive science master across the way. But still, being a woman (or on her way thither), in a week or two it began to warm her heart to remember that her passing made a difference to somebody. In a month she would bitterly have resented his absence, and one day when she missed seeing him by the least fraction of a second, her temper was the object of comment to her entire division of the infant class.

However, the prize distribution would take place that day week, and (first) Miss Lily Smith, and (second) Mr. Henry Hurst, B.Sc, reflected that on that day they would be certain to meet face to face.

The great day of the prize-giving, as usual, stirred all Doggermouth, and happened also as usual on the day before Christmas. For the first time since Lily Smith was a little girl, the Creelport registered letter for Aunt Smith failed to arrive at the cottage.

'Something wrong at the office,' said the widow grumblingly; 'them young maids there be surely more concerned with their beaux, than to serve Thomas out his letters to fetch, as is their duty!'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

But the reason for the non-arrival of the registered letter was other than the beaux of the girl-clerks of Doggermouth. It concerned the Barracloughs, of Creelport, and in especial Anne, wife of Bob and mother of Sam— mother, too, of Widow Smith's Lily.

Barraclough's shebeen, down at the tough fag-end of Little Dublin, had been in the way of luck—that is, of such luck as came its way. There had been a strike, and the dock labourers thrown out of employment spent largely upon the fiery fusil-oil and raw spirit concealed at the back among the crumbling limestone. The liquor seemed indeed, more than ordinarily potent. Headaches were more rapidly produced, and even strong men, in that close dry-smelling atmosphere, experienced strange swimmings in the head. There was no doubt about the strength of Bob Barraclough's whisky.

Yet Anne Barraclough hardly did herself justice, for a reason. It was not the responsibility of so much money in her deep under-pocket, which she carried half-full of saw-dust to keep the coins from jingling. It was that she had a little paragraph in her breast, cut from a Doggermouth paper, left by a transient customer on the previous evening.

'Doggermouth Public Schools. — The annual Christmas prize - giving, inaugurated several years ago by our local school board, and which has in the past owed so much to the liberality of its generous chairman, Mr. Trophimus Gane, will take place in the large hall of the Technical Schodl on Friday, December 24th, at three o'clock, Mr. Trophimus Gane, J.P., in the chair.

In addition to the interest usual on such an occasion, parents and friends will be treated to the

performances of a choir, selected from all the infant schools, trained and conducted by Miss Lily Smith, who has recently so highly distinguished herself at the entrance examination of the Metropolitan Normal College, where she took a first place. Mrs. Gane will preside at the harmonium, the gift of her husband, Mr. Trophimus Gane, J.P., chairman of the board.'

The last noisy guests had departed from Barraclough's on the evening of Thursday, December 23rd. It had been a time of profit, and Anne had a goodly sum to put away. She lingered, however, over the contents of an old pocket-book which she kept (as least likely to be disturbed) within the rough covers of the Barracloughs' family Bible. She knew that for the present Bob, her husband, was harmless. She could see him extended, toes pointing to the ceiling, on the floor. She could hear him snore. She thought that Sam, her son, was out on one of his mysterious excursions.

Full of the pleasure of being alone, she took out an old pocket-book and gazed in rapture at the contents. There were two or three baby photographs, features and sex equally indistinguishable. Then came a girl—dimpling in corkscrew curls, with eyes like black beads—then a baptismal certificate, a school group, and a collection of such announcements as that quoted above, with the name of Lily Smith, underlined, always prominent among the prize takers. There were also many letters from Widow Smith, much in the same words, acknowledging a monthly remittance.

'Lily is as good a girl as any mother need wish, and no trouble, eggsept shows some temper with her

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

teething.' As who indeed would not.

Anne Barraclough was smiling at this last. A tear was slowly irrigating a furrow on her cheek, and pushing its way towards the angle of her chin, when suddenly a shaky hand, accustomed to larceny, shot over her shoulder from behind and snatched the pocket-book while the thief laughed a triumphant laugh.

'I have it this time, mother,' said Sam Barraclough, and he laughed again as she screamed in fear. He repulsed her several times, as she desperately strove to regain her treasure. Then he lay back on a wooden settle and kept her off with his foot, while he despoiled the pockets, rooting and nosing through them like a beast a prey, as, indeed, he was.

'Miss Lily Smith,' he cried, 'who's she? A marriage certificate—yours, old lady? A sister, too, have I? So that's where the money goes to, and tomorrow is the school prize-giving! So nice. Well, I'll be there, and I'll see Lily Smith. I'll tell her where the money comes from that's made a fine Miss of her. She goes to no Normal College, not if I know it! Normal College indeed—doing me out of my rights! Ain't I Sam Barraclough? Isn't the money all made at Barraclough's? Well, then—out with it, mother. Show me where you keep the shiners. Give me halves and I'll never trouble you more. You won't, eh? Then, by God, I'm off to Doggermouth Public School tomorrow— it's public, that's one comfort, and I'll cry out your shame and hers— before all them kids and teachers—some o' them sweet on Miss Lily, no doubt— ay, and before that precious school board that's so fond of her— yaw, that I will!'

'I will kill you first!' said Anne Barraclough, the

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

same glitter which lay so stilly under her daughter's lashes coming into her eyes as she looked at her son.

'Show me where you keep the money, then, or I will,' he threatened.

Anne Barraclough appeared to waver. Then, suddenly taking a resolve, she pointed with her hand.

'In there,' she stammered, 'in there, Sam— in one of them cracks of the limestone.'

'What,' cried Sam, 'between our cellar and the Provost's lime-kiln?'

'Yes,' said his mother softly, 'just at the place where it always feels warm when you put your hand against the wall.'

'Gimme a pick,' said Sam; 'I'll have it out, every penny of it.'

He laid down the pocket-book, in his eagerness to search for the hoard. She snatched it up, and was through the door like a shadow.

The Select Infant Choir of the Doggermouth Public Schools, trained by Senior Pupil Teacher Lily Smith, was singing its closing hymn—

'Lord, a little band and lowly. We are come to sing to Thee—'

The science master was crooking the left side of his moustache, and watching the brown cheek of the conductress flush with pride and pleasure, when he saw two policemen enter. They looked a moment, and then the taller laid a hand on the arm of a tired woman in rusty black sitting by the door, a stranger in the neighbourhood. He stooped and whispered something in her ear.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'What for?' she asked simply.

'Murder,' he answered as quietly; 'they are both dead.'

'Who?' said Anne Barraclough, her eyes on his face.

'Your son and your husband!' said the policeman.

'Thank God,' said Ann, rising with a smile; 'I'll go willin'!

It was long remembered as the most mysterious and difficult criminal case ever adjudged at Doggermouth assizes.

Briefly the facts as presented to the jury were these. Anne Barraclough had had a violent quarrel with her son and her husband, both of whom brutalised her mercilessly. She fled from the house on the night of the 23rd of December. On the morning of the 24th, both were found lying dead, Sam in the limestone cellar still grasping a pick, and a considerable sum of money in silver scattered about. Nearer the door Bob Barraclough was dead, lying on his back on the floor.

The cause of the quarrel probably concerned a child born to a previous marriage, to whom it would be proved that Anne Barraclough was in the habit of remitting considerable sums monthly. The medical experts diagnosed death by poisoning, but failed to find traces of anything specific. But the woman was a known bad character, a shebeener, while raw spirit, chemicals, and dried herbs were found on the premises.

Anne Barraclough herself seemed dazed, and attempted no particular defence. Her official advocate, appointed by the judge, essayed the usual

appeal to the feelings, but she seemed solely anxious for him to finish. She was listening for a name—that of Lily Smith. It was not mentioned in court, but was soon afterwards dragged into publicity by an enlightened and up-to-date journalism.

Twenty years was Anne Barraclough's portion, and, as she had said to the policeman who arrested her, she 'went willin'.'

She would have gone less willingly, however, had she known that Lily lost her place the week after, and that she was left without means to take up her course at the Normal College.

But Mr. Henry Hurst, B.Sc, promptly offered her another situation. He even changed his own line of life in order to do it, resuming his original role of chemist to a paper factory. Lily must go with him to Polwarth Mills as his wife. She refused time and again. After what had been printed in the papers about her mother, she would be a shame to no man. But Mr. Henry Hurst was nothing if not scientific. He said that it mattered not a straw to him who or what was her mother or her father, or her stepfather, It was the little brown thing with the flush on her cheek that he wanted.

And so, necessarily, he got her, flush and all.

It was not quite two years before the matter was cleared up. Barraclough's passed to other tenants, a shade more reputable. But it was not long before both husband and wife were found in an unconscious state, one on the threshold of the limestone cave, the other within. The wife died, the husband barely pulled through. The symptoms of poisoning were identical with those present in the Barraclough case. Then there came the long-refused investigation. It was a close day when the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

investigators arrived, among them Mr. Henry Hurst, still B.Sc, though in strict fact no longer a bachelor.

It chanced that one of the doctors had brought a dog, which, tired of the vapid boredom of the day, and the lack of canine society, stretched himself down on the threshold of the limestone cellar which had been Anne Barraclough's treasure house. By and by his master called. The dog slept on. He kicked him sharply in the ribs, equally in vain. The dog was dead. And Henry Hurst, nosing and searching about the cracks in the limestone, discovered the secret.

There was a lime-kiln on the other side of the little crag into which the original Barraclough had burrowed. As often as it was in action, after Sam's explorations with the pick, deadly carbonic acid gas poured through the cracks, and falling to the floor, mounted knee-deep or higher, an unseen pool of death to all that breathed it.

Thus had died Bob Barraclough and his son Sam, the latter kneeling in the pursuit of the threepenny bits which rolled about the floor.

When they took Anne out of the prison and told her that she was free, she said it did not matter so long as they were dead. Money was given her in the name of the Crown, to make amends for the terrible miscarriage of justice. But Anne only said, 'It is very kind of the gentlemen. Send it to the Widow Smith at Doggermouth! Thank God, I can always earn my livin'!' And so, for the second time, Anne Barraclough went out into the darkness, this time to be heard of no more.

But she kept the pocket-book, and looked at its contents each morning and night — the baby photographs, the stalky girl in corkscrew curls and

all.

'I am glad little Lily is married,' she said; 'he is a good man, they say. God keep such as I from ever coming between them!'

I am indebted for the facts and the dramatic conclusion of this story to Mr. Albert Bataillie's excellent report of the Maison du Four k Chaux case in the 1896 volume of his Causes Criminelles et Mondaines published in Paris by Dentu.—S. R. C.

10. PETER PEATRACK

Peter Peatrack, minister of the parish of Brinkilly, was a just man. Also an hard. He had argued himself out of friendship with all his neighbours. The very Presbytery of Biteangry had had enough of Peter. They even intimated through their clerk that Peter's attendance at the Presbytery at nine o'clock on the first Monday of every month would not be insisted upon. The brethren recognised that Brinkilly lay so far away, across so many dangerous waters, in such an out-of-the-way situation, that they could not expect to be favoured with the sight of the Reverend Peter Peatrack's countenance more often than, say, twice a year at the outside.

But Peter thought otherwise.

He had not much liked to go there before. He had no mind to jog on his round-barrelled sheltie all these weary miles to the town, and then pay the landlord of the Cross Keys sixpence for stabling, as well as provide a dinner for himself at the town of Biteangry, where the Presbytery dined copiously together after the transaction of business.

But now, since the Presbytery did not want him to go, Peter declared to his meek, inoffensive wife that he would not miss a single Presbytery day, not for all the tiends and tithes of the three Lothians three times augmented.

So Peter went, and his brethren moaned in spirit and were heavily afflicted. For Peter remorselessly lectured them on every subject that occurred to him, making his great brawny ploughman's hands crack together, as if he had resolved to take strength of

arm to the Moderator's head in case of the least contradiction.

Peter Peatrack's strong point was consistency—consistency, and the practice of the Church of Scotland.

'Sir,' he would say, addressing the Moderator in stentorian tones, 'I am not aware what you might have meant when you took your ordination vows. But for myself, I resolved to oppose, to the extent of my humble abeility, all innovations and creeping seditions, a-a-ll seductions of any Popish or Episcopalian sor-rt, by whomsoever promoted!'

And Peter kept his word.

The singing of mere human hymns within the bounds of the Presbytery, even at family worship or privately in families, was a matter to be dealt with rigorously. No man, said Peter, could tell where the like of that would end. They would presently find themselves sitting alongside of the Great Scarlet Woman on the Seven Hills. Only 'Woman' was not the word that Peter used.

Organs Peter could not away with. He could not even speak connectedly on that subject, but spluttered and gasped till the assembled brethren feared (and hoped) an apoplectic fit.

Now, the Presbytery of Biteangry was not a particularly large one, though it included one or two large and influential kirks. Specially Peter detested the two town congregations of his neighbouring metropolis of Biteangry, distant from him only about six miles by the moor road.

One of these was a quoad sacra church — that is something of the nature of a chapel-of-ease, built for the accommodation of the rich folk of the upper end of Biteangry, who found the mile of muddy road

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

between them and their parish kirk in the hollow down by the loch to be too much for their wives and children. At least, they put the blame on the wives and children.

This rich church of St. Bride's had recently called to itself a new minister. He was a young man, tall, with fair hair and a winning smile. Peter Peatrack hated him on sight, and when the Reverend Horace Glasgow first stated some of his college-bred opinions on 'winning the masses' and 'attractive services,' Peter Peatrack had to be held in his seat by two of the most burly of the Presbytery to prevent his destroying the rash young man on the spot.

After that the noise in the Presbytery of Biteangry could generally be heard two streets off, when Peter was on the war-path against 'innovations.'

'Those of us who have the honour and the privilege of being ministers o' pairishes, are well aware.'

Peter would begin his harangues, so as to exclude the young minister of St. Bride's from any part or lot in the matter. But one day—it was the first Monday of December—the raw, bony figure of Peter Peatrack could be seen driving the steamy easter haar before him as he flapped his way Presbyterywards with a printed sheet in his hand, his long arms going like old-fashioned steamboat paddles.

The Moderator was closing his prayer when Peter burst in, and hardly was the 'Amen' out of his mouth before Peter, standing at his side, clapped the 'poster' down on the table beneath his very nose.

'It has come at last,' he cried, 'the abomination of desola-a-tion, the Mark of the Beast—the fingermark of the Woman that sitteth on the Seven Hills and snuffeth up the bluid of the Saunts—there

it is before ye. Let the clerk read it, and then will I tak' up my testimony!

The Moderator mildly suggested that Peter was hardly in order, in so far as it was usual for the clerk first to read the minutes of the previous meeting.

'Maister Modera-a-tur, is this a time to be yawpin' about Puir's Boxes and Life-off-Wark when the foundations o' the faith stand no longer sure, and when there is amongst us a young man, caa'in' himsel' a minister o' the Kirk o' Scotland, that is for denyin' the Confession, and going to and fro on the earth daubing wi' untempered mortar — I speak of the Reverend Horace Glasgow, M.A-A-A.' (this with fine scorn), 'of the bit chapel-o'-ease up the hill yonder that they caa' St. Bride's!'

The object of all this sat calm and quiet. He knew that there would be a row presbyterial over his Christmas services, the first in the district, especially over the evening Service of Praise.

'The church richly decorated'— 'music by a select choir'—'the o-a-a-rganist, Mr. H. A. Gregg, Mus. Bac, will preside at the o-a-a-r-gan!' quoted Peter Peatrack, at last finding a subject to which he could do justice. 'Is this a Rood Fair that has come amang us? Is it a play-actin' booth, wi' a hand-organ in the pulpit and a puggy-monkey on the tap to tak' up the silver collection at the door?'

So for half an hour Peter the Objector invoked the shades of John Knox, or the 'Saunted Martyrs,' of the 'great fa-athers of the Kirk,' and then, suddenly finding himself without support, he snatched up the offending proclamation from the table, ground it under his heel, and took himself off down the street, making the doors of the Presbytery Hall clang after

him.

That was Monday, and during the week every parishioner within the bounds received notice that their attendance was requested in the Parish Kirk of Brinkilly on the evening of Thursday the 24th of December (falsely called Christmas Eve) in order to hear a lecture by their minister, the Rev. Peter Peatrack, in which he would prove from Scripture, and from the fathers of the Early Church,—quoting and translating the original tongues,— how utterly impossible it was that the birth of our Saviour could have happened on that day, and also that the celebration of times and seasons was only a mockery and a mummery—a shred of Black Prelacy and a rag of Rome.

Many of these circulars were addressed by Elspeth and Patience Peatrack— and Patience (the younger of the two sisters, and a born mischief) saw to it that one was carefully forwarded to the Rev. Horace Glasgow, St. Bride's Manse, Biteangry. As the young lady was writing to the young gentleman anyway, this is perhaps not so great a wonder as it may seem at first sight. Patience had met him at her aunt's in Edinburgh during the previous winter, but (and this shows the sad laxity of modern principles) she had not thought it worth while to say anything to her father on the subject. It was her mother who received the letters, and trembled all the time she kept them in her side pocket.

As these two estimable young ladies folded up and addressed their father's lecture notices, they smiled one to the other. Such young things they were— so innocent, brought up in a moorland parish in which their father was the chief prop of purity of worship and the self-appointed guardian of

the ark presbyterial.

Christmas Eve came. Willie Faddle, the ancient beadle of the Kirk of Brinkilly, grumbling and coughing as usual, went his rounds, lighting the drippy tallow candles which still served to illuminate the Parish Kirk in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

'What's come to the minister?' he growled. 'A lecture on a week nicht! Wha in Brinkilly cares a curse about Kirsmas? Had it been the New Year noo, and a roarin' First-footin' ploy wi' a score o' honest whusky bottles to be uncorked at twal' o' the clock—there wad hae been mair sense in that, and it wad hae brocht oot a' Brinkilly as wan man. But I misdoubt me sair that there will be a thin kirk and a thinner collection this nicht.'

At this moment the pretty head of Patience Peatrack, the minister's younger daughter, was thrust in at the door. She was hatted, and hooded, and boa-ed, and muffed against a winter night's worst inclemency.

'Ay, Willie,' she said, 'are you there? Tell my father when he comes that he is not to wait for us—we may be a little late!'

And with that she was gone. Willie went to the door, and cocked a rather deaf ear in the direction of the high road.

'Deevil tak' my auld deaf lugs,' he growled, 'but if that wasna the clatter o' the minister's powny in the licht cart may I never lift elsin to shoe-leather again!'

Then he went back to the methodical trimming and lighting of the candles, ranged in their 'scoops' along the walls, shaking his head, and muttering.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Weel, it's nane o' your business, Wullie lad, and she is a feat bit lass. But that there's some ploy on, mair than the minister kens o', I'll wager three pair o' guid single-sole shoon.'

After that there was another long wait. It passed the hour of eight, for which the lecture had been announced, but no one entered the kirk. With his long-handled snuffers in his fingers, Willie resolutely took his stand by the door, ready for all emergencies. At last he heard an energetic scuffling of feet, and such a kicking of snow off against the wall that the very lights within quivered on the sconces.

Only Peter Peatrack could have done that, and the beadle hurried out to receive his hierarchical superior.

'Is there muckle room left?' demanded the minister, who had spent his day in wondering if he should provide extra seats from the schoolroom. They could easily be placed along the aisles.

'There's no' a livin' sowl in the kirk!' quoth Willie, the beadle.

The minister made one bound into the interior, and faced the yawning vault and the guttering candles with a sudden consternation. It was the end of all things.

'And where are my daughters?' he cried, with a strange false note in his voice, as if it were about to break.

'Weel,' said Willie, 'Miss Patience lookit in a whilie syne, and bade me tell ye when ye cam' no' to wait for them. They micht very likely be late!'

Peter Peatrack stood a moment stunned. His eyebrows drew together ominously.

'And was that all?' he demanded, laying sudden

hold of his kirk-officer's garments as if he feared he too would escape.

'Leave go, minister,' cried Willie Faddle; 'ye are rivin' the lapels off my Sunday coat, and though it's time I had anither yin, I am no' likely to get it. There is something mair.'

'What is it—I charge you—speak?' said the minister huskily.

'Weel,' said Willie, 'dinna charge the candle-snuffers doon my throat and I'll tell ye. Ye ken I'm an auld deaf man, minister, but when the wind is in the west, and I get my lug in the richt direction.'

'Speak plain, or I'll rive the truth oot o' ye, ye dodderin' auld docken leaf!'

'Aweel,' said Willie, 'wha wadna dodder when ye are shakin' them like John Muir's terrier when he grips a rat? But I'll tell ye—oh, I'll tell ye plain, minister. I thocht I heard Donald's feet in the cairt drivin' awa' in the direction o' Biteangry directly after Miss Patience gaed oot o' the kirk. But then I'm a dodderin' auld docken leaf, ye ken, minister, and ye manna mind what I say!'

With one great leap the parish minister of Brinkilly was out of the kirk. He took the graveyard dyke in his stride, and the next moment he was down the road in the direction of St. Bride's.

A score of things which he remembered, but had thought nothing of, now returned to him. His wife was anxious and troubled. Letters had been hidden under aprons at his approach. He had seen books—poetry books—which he certainly had never bought, lying about the house. Why should he? He had been needing a new Turretin for twenty years. Worst of all, there were the strange reticences of his family.

Ah, he had it—they had gone to the Popish

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

festival—to take part in what was little better than a Mass.

Well, they should never enter his house again—NEVER—never — no—never!

But each 'never' grew less emphatic, even as it is printed above. After all they were 'his lassies.' His heart, hard to all else, narrow and shut in as a toad in a rock crevice, expanded when he heard 'his lassies' laugh together. He was proud of them too, proud of their wits and their good looks—though he had never told them so. He would have died first.

But— no, he was resolved. If they had really deserted sound doctrine and gone against his will, on purpose to defy him, to the Christmas Eve celebration at St. Bride's, he would cast them off! Yes, he would—he would!

It was late when he topped the last brae and saw the lighted windows of St. Bride's Kirk, with their illuminated tracery of coloured glass, and heard the solemn tones of the organ playing the people out of the kirk. In spite of the Voluntary, the congregation was already black on the brae when he struck the throng of them. Many knew him. One called him by name. And he heard an indistinct muttering of words that sounded like 'the minister's daughters—that's their father.' For the St. Bride's congregation were so respectable and rich that they had to speak English to prove it.

He stumbled into the porch. It was a solid arch of greenery and red berries. Somehow he did not seem to mind this so much now. For there, immediately before him, his two daughters were coming out in the company of a tall young man and a sweet-faced old lady with silver hair.

The young minister of St. Bride's, to whose arm

Patience had instinctively attached herself at sight of the white, drawn face of her father, came forward, holding out his hand.

'This is kind of you, Mr. Peatrack,' he said. 'Let me introduce you to my mother. These madcap girl had driven over to see her at our little service; but I am sorry to hear that it was done without your permission. Still more so, because I had made up my mind to come over to the Manse of Brinkilly tomorrow to ask you to give me your daughter—your younger daughter Patience. We love each other, as I daresay you know.'

Here he looked down, while Peter fought first for temper and then for breath.

'Sir,' he said, 'I did not know. Their father—who has loved them all their lives—to his shame, more than he has loved his Maker—is the last person they would think of telling!'

At which the two girls, Elspeth as well as Patience, flew to the old man, and with their arms about his neck hid their faces on his shoulder.

'We would have told you—we would indeed, father. Only we thought you would be so angry!'

'So I am—so I am!' gasped Peter, half choked, and trying to clear himself of the soft arms that clung so tight; 'your father that carried you on his back when ye were bairns—that has loved ye.'

And here he too had a difficulty with his voice. The girls wept unrestrainedly. The minister of St. Bride's softly shut the outer door of the church, and coming forward, laid his hand on the shoulder of his ancient and presbyterial foe.

'If there are not many other things we can agree about,' he said quietly, 'I think we do agree that they are a pair of naughty girls, and that I do you a good

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

turn in relieving your hands of one of them!

'You are taking a sore burden on your shoulders,' said Peter half relentingly— 'a lassie that would deceive her ain father— yea, a yoke on your neck shall she be—a rod to afflict you all your days!'

'She is on your neck at this present moment,' said the young man, somewhat regretfully, 'but as for me, I have no objections to bear the yoke— in fact, I am even prepared to kiss the rod.'

The which, the father of Miss Patience smiling a grim approval, he proceeded to do.

And overhead, all suddenly, the Christmas bells rang out.

11. NURIA

Her name was Maria de la Conception de Nuria—that is, Mary, dedicated at the shrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Virgin in the hamlet of Nuria. But very sensibly she insisted from the first upon being called Nuria, which is a pretty name and easily said. And in time even her father, who had been very proud of having loaded so small a girl with so formidable a name, gave in to the amendment.

So henceforth she was Nuria, except when she went to prepare for her First Communion, which consists of having on a new white frock, a wreath of white flowers in the hair, walking in procession through the church, and once of a fine Sunday afternoon through the village also. Nuria liked that part of her First Communion best.

There were other things too which Nuria had to learn and to do, but they were rather tiresome; so Nuria thought as little about them as possible. She told Jose that they bored her, and he looked scornful, though indeed he was secretly much interested, for no priest had ever taken any trouble about him to teach him his Catechism or how to find the place in the Missal. He was only a little gipsy boy who had come from the south with some trampers, umbrella-mending and tinkering, after his own father and mother died. But Jose had soon run away, because the umbrella-mender beat him too often, and besides, sent him to farms and houses where he had been during the day to steal whatever had taken the umbrella-mender's fancy. And if he

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

did not find them, if they had been removed, or if the dogs came out and bit him, it was all the same—Jose was beaten.

So after a while Jose ran away at a place called Belvero; and because he had no other name, he called himself ever afterwards Jose Belvero, which, when you come to say it, is a pretty name, and was quite as useful to a gipsy boy as any other.

And this is the way that Jose came to know Nuria, or rather, Maria de la Concepcion de Nuria. Jose was at this time a little curly-headed, brown-skinned, black-eyed boy of ten, with bare legs of incredible fleetness. His feet were shod with *alpargatos*, or sandals of white canvas with soles of woven string. It was a prickly country, with lots of cactus growing along all the banks of the river, and Jose's first care in the morning was to see to it that the soles of his sandals were well enough mended to keep out the pricks. Next he went into a little niche of the great abbey ruins where he lived, and kneeled down before a little clay image he had made all by himself and baked in the sun in a very ancient manner which came to him by instinct, as it seemed. He prayed for his daily bread towards the clay image, and touched his forehead, after wetting his finger in his mouth, as he had seen people do on going into church.

The image did not represent the Holy Virgin, but was made as like a little girl sitting knitting as Jose Belvero could make it. In short, it was meant for Nuria Garriga, and Jose worshipped her. Others have told their loves that they worshipped them, but Jose did it.

It is natural to worship that which we judge to be out of our reach, and indeed a queen is not more

above ordinary people or the little King of Spain, riding with his escort in crimson and gold behind him, more exalted above ordinary boys than was Nuria Garriga, the daughter of Antonio Garriga of Francoli, above the gipsy vagrant who made his lair like a dog within the ruins of the famous Abbey of Montblanch.

Nuria was the daughter and heiress of a rich farmer, a man who owned two or three farms among the mountains, besides this on the fertile bottom lands of the valley of Francoli where Nuria dwelt. A rough, boisterous man was Garriga, kindly when he remembered, but often and easily angry with men and things. For he was a Catalan of the Cerdagna, a country where people are quickly irate and quarrels are as quickly made as they are difficult to heal.

Every morning, after taking her cup of chocolate and bread, Nuria Garriga went out to watch the sheep on the valley pastures. Her father had done so himself when he was a boy, and he saw no reason why Nuria in her turn should not do it as well as he. Nor, in truth, did Nuria. She loved it.

In one hand she carried her little tin can of milk—cows' milk, so you may judge how rich the Garrigas were— and in the other, or rather under her arm, there was nearly half a loaf of brown bread. The top had been cut off, and in a cunning little hole there was stuffed a bit of sausage, some olives, and a large lump of butter. In a satchel pocket which swung by her side Nuria carried also a book, sometimes the *Misa*, but more often the *Adventures of the Seven Brave Knights of Christendom*, though the *Misa* was much bigger type. The book was to teach Jose his letters out of.

For every winter Nuria went to dwell with one of

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

her father's sisters, near whose house was a nunnery of the Good Sisters. And the nuns taught her many things— as, for instance, how to enter a church, how to bow before an altar, and how to hold her knife and fork at table. These things Nuria taught all over again to Jose Belvero as the sheep cropped and cropped onward, shouldering and jockeying each other out of the way of fat patches of grass or edging ever nearer to the forbidden young crops, the green withy maize, the scented lucem, and the beautiful red clover of Francoli with tops like half-dosed umbrellas.

Now I will tell a day in the life of Nuria and Jose, for I knew them very well and loved them both. They had a good life at this time, and it is worth telling about— yes, even though the old bucket at the deserted farm-steading by the abbey ruins could not be more lonely, nor the white clouds sailing overhead like galleons more largely peaceful.

When Jose prayed to his lady's clay image he took more pains than most people, for morning devotions are more or less hurried all the world over. It is a way they have. Then he ate a piece of dry bread sopped in cold water from the well. Nuria had drawn it the night before, and Jose liked the taste of it much better than if he had taken the pail himself and drawn some fresh that morning. Which indeed to Jose's mind would have been little short of sacrilege, for there was no privilege about which Nuria was more firm than this. Nuria, and she alone, must draw up the water out of the deep cool well. Jose might hold the rope and pull farther back, but Nuria insisted upon letting the pitcher down and down till it struck the water with a fine clack, wet and resonant and hollow. She alone must guide the

brimming bucket upwards and listen to the dripping swish it made as it brushed against the leathery-tongue ferns which grew so thick in the throat of the well. And she alone must receive it on the coping and taste the first drop with lips pouted. Ah, so good it was! And Jose watched her till it was time for him to take the pail down and carry it without spilling a drop across the field to the shelter of the olive tree on the slope in the great hollow of whose trunk was their frugal wine cellar.

So, after having eaten and drunk, Jose hid his clay image and swept out his shrine with a bunch of leaves. It was now time to look out for Nuria, so he put on his coat. It was a long coat with tails, which had been made for Antonio Garriga (who was a stout man with a presence), and it hung well down Josh's bare brown legs in spite of Nuria's care in shortening and repairing, which, as Nuria said, was evidently his own fault. For what could any one expect? He would wriggle about on his bed at night and pull out her stitches. At which Jose was wont to smile, for it was not easy to keep from wriggling on a rough plank floor, even when you have some hay underneath. His toes would persist in escaping from under the old coat which was his sole coverlet, so that in winter the cold nipped them, and in summer the mosquitoes did.

Not that Jose Belvero complained. Not he. Why indeed should he? He had something to eat, someone to worship, and— he was not beaten. At least, sometimes Antonio Garriga would give him a clip with his whip-lash when he came across him. But after the umbrella-mender, what was that? No more than a flick from the tail of one of the rats which took their ordinary exercise over him at

nights.

Complain—nay, Jose knew better than that.

So he betook himself to a high place among the ruins of Montblanch, scrambling up the bare wall almost as quickly as one of the darting lizards which poked their heads at him out of the clefts and crevices as he went. All that he did was just to slip off his string-soled shoes and hang them about his neck by the strings.

Soon he sat in a niche in the belfry, with his legs swinging out over empty space. Dangerous? Fall? Ah, you do not know Jose. Does Tommaso your cat fall from the tiles at the hour of the evening concert?

Well, neither did Jose Belvero, who dwelt among the ruins of Montblanch.

Ah I there she was at last—or at least not she, but the cattle going in to be milked. They separated by the gate, great black Gregory, the Estramenian bull, waiting lowing at the gate by the duck-pond (not yet dried up), while various bullocks and calflings tried to imitate his sonorous bellow, but at the same time took care to keep well out of reach of his horns.

Now there would be about five minutes, and then, lo! round the corner of the white farm buildings would come the pushing, inquisitive noses of the sheep—Nuria's sheep. Esteban, the overseer, let them out by opening the door of the fold after he had seen the last of the cows into the yard. At the door of the house Nuria would be standing waiting, and when the sheep came next into sight of the watcher on the belfry—there—there was Nuria walking demurely in front of them, her can in her right hand and the loaf of bread in the other armpit.

The day had begun in earnest for Jose.

He came down the tower with a rush, ten bare

toes instinctively seeking every crevice and projection of the stones, every crack between the joints and the sculptured tracery, ay, and finding them too without a mistake. So that in twenty seconds he was down on the ground and calmly tying the strings of his alpargatos about his legs.

'Bouch — ouch — ouch' That was Nuria's dog Batcho—a good dog spoilt. He barked, and no shepherd's dog must bark when on duty. But—what would you?—Nuria was mistress. He was Nuria's dog—one of her dogs, rather; for the other and the better was Jose.

Batcho was good—yes, to sit on his tail and cock his ears for scraps. Good to throw bits of hard bread into the air at a signal and catch them with a wolfish snap as they descended. But (here Jose laughed) when it came to disentangling two flocks which had got mixed on the highway, or taking them along the perilous edge of a neighbour's field of lucern without their eating one clover-head that did not belong to Antonio Garriga, who could do these things like Jose Belvero?

Batcho—he laughed at Batcho. Batcho could run faster certainly, but what of that, when more than half the time he did not know where he was running to or why?

But these opinions Jose very judiciously kept to himself. For Batcho was a favourite of his mistress—a clever dog at anything but his work, and, what was more to Nuria, a handsome dog with abundant hair; sharp, intelligent eyes that were black when you looked into them, but filmy blue when they sighted anything to which chase might be given.

'Good morning to you, dear Nuria!'

'Good morning, little Jose—but you must not call

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

me 'dear Nuria '!'

'And why—when you are 'dear Nuria'?''

'Because my father might hear you, or any one. You are only a silly little gipsy boy, and you sleep among the hay.'

'Ah, Nuria,' said Jose wistfully, 'I wish I did. For Antonio Garriga has taken away all the bundles, and last night I had to lie upon the bare boards!'

This he only said to make her sorry. Nevertheless, Nuria considered deeply upon the matter. Her deep brown eyes looked pitiful.

'Well,' she said gently, 'I will wait till my father is in a good humour, and then I will ask him to give you a bolt of straw and the old blanket they wrapped the sick foal in before it died.'

For Antonio Garriga was a great horse master, and many colts ran on his pastures, in order, apparently, that little Jose should ride them when he listed—ride and never fall off, while the herdsmen and stable lads laughed and lashed the unbroken beasts secretly from behind. But Jose only leaned forward and whispered the Word. For he was gipsy bred, and at that sound the wildest Andalusian, half-Arab, half-devil, would tremble in all his limbs and gentle himself like an abbot's white ambling palfrey.

But Jose laughed. He was not cold, he said; or if he had been, he was so no more. How could he be now that Nuria—the beautiful, imperious little Nuria—had come? He did not say this, but (as his sex can) he looked it. Then, having set the flock of pushing moist noses in the right direction, so that they could not stray off the narrow selvage of pasture which was their own, Jose made Batcho sit between the sheep and the red umbrella clover

which they sniffed at so wistfully. All attention, therefore, sat Batcho, pricked ears, restless eyes, tip of bushy tail beating the ground, while the dark brown woolly backs and the one white sheep (which Nuria called Christopher, because he could carry anything) drifted slowly like a cloud near and nearer to the red clover. It was always Christopher who was the leader in every mischief. For you know the folks' proverb which says truly, 'There is a white sheep in every flock.'

Then 'Bring them!' commanded Nuria.

And Jose went to a little bit of ruined wall within the roofless sacristy and prised up a large flat stone that had been part of an oven—the place where many monkish bakers had shoved in the bread—and took from a cosy little chamber underneath certain mysterious articles.

There was an old slipper,—a real slipper of leather with a heel,—two rods of beech twigs and another of willow, a copy-book half written and several little picture cards, such as priests give to children when they prepare them for Communion.

He brought all these out to Nuria. The little girl had meantime been arranging a wide half-circle of flat stones with a higher one in the middle, a stone so large, indeed, that she was quite unable to move it even slightly; so that the others had to be set round it.

Jose went round the circle laying a card on each stone, with a smaller one to hold it down, while Nuria, who had seated herself on the high central seat, called out for each a name and a little word of praise or blame.

'Jesusita, naughty girl, you have not washed your face this morning; your ears are black—stand aside

for punishment!

And at once Jose picked up Jesusita's card and held it in his left hand by itself.

'Tobal, I will give you a good mark—your hair is beautifully done! Diegnito, oh, wicked Diegnito! thou shalt have the slipper. Yes, the slipper with the heel! You have torn your copy-book, sir. There is mud upon it. Stand thou also aside for punishment!'

And Jose, secretly trying to brush away an undeniable stain of earth from the blue cover of his copybook, picked up the card belonging to the imaginary 'wicked Diegnito' with a look of affected penitence upon his face.

By the time that all the circle of seats had been covered this curious result was attained: of the scholars with boys' names only one, the aforesaid Diegnito, had been adjudged worthy of stripes. Of the girls not one was found good: all must endure punishment. Nuria was hard upon her sex.

For as an instructor of youth the Senorita Nuria had this peculiarity: to her boy pupils she was kind even to indulgence, but those of her own sex could scarce purchase tolerance with strivings and tears. Which at the first blush does not seem quite fair.

The reception and review of the scholars being done, Jose presented himself before his mistress.

'Well, Brother Chepito,' she said in a severe and dignified manner, 'who are the culprits this morning, and what is their punishment?'

'Four beech twigs, one willow rod, and once the slipper with the heel!'

'And who are the four who are to be beaten with the twigs of beech?' demanded the inquisitor-in-chief, with a fierce frown.

The names are Marta, Matilde, Teodora, and

Jesusita,' said the usher gravely.

'Wicked Marta, void of all decency and cleanliness, ignorant of religion, stand forth! How many strokes, usher?'

'Three, worthy maestra!' said the usher, making at the same time a curious movement with his right hand in his pocket as if he were rolling something in the palm of it. So he was—a piece of cobbler's wax.

'I think five strokes will be required,' said the court of punishments. 'Hold out your hand, wicked Marta of the uncombed hair!'

And Jose, the late usher, assistant-maestro, and superintendent of the ceremonies, held out his hand in the room of the absent Marta, and received from his stern mistress five stripes, cleanly and well laid on with the twigs of beech.

Now Jose's hand was so hard with climbing and so nicely coated with cobbler's wax that the strokes did not really hurt him more than if the whipping had been done with so many clover heads. Nevertheless, so completely did he enter into the dramatic occasion that at each swish of the twigs he uttered a little squeak, such as the rats often emitted at night scampering and chasing each other under the floor or up among the thatch of the corn stacks.

As soon as this was over, the much-enduring Jose had to be beeched for Matilde, Teodora, and Jesusita, willowed for Cristina, and slippered for the wicked Diegnito. All these sufferings he endured with ready and varied emotion, whining and begging for mercy in so lifelike a manner that the performance yielded the greatest pleasure to his mistress and stimulated her to yet greater exertions in flagellation.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

All the time Jose was keeping a sharp eye over his shoulder in the direction of Batcho and his charge, and at a sharp yelp-yelp, a kind of cry for assistance, Jose broke off in the midst of a final and quite unjustifiable slipping to scour away over the grass to Batcho's aid. He found that one or two of the flock, following the lead of white Christopher, had made a break for the red clover, and were snatching a few precarious mouthfuls to carry off with them before they could be interfered with.

In another moment Jose had the matter settled, Christopher turned from the error of his ways, and Batcho restored to self-respect. Christopher, still chewing the stolen mouthfuls, threw up his nose to heaven in thankfulness for the hasty good of which he had been permitted to partake, and forthwith began to manoeuvre for a second helping.

Whereupon Jose returned to his place of vicarious suffering.

'How many more, usher?' said Nuria.

'Four more!' answered the usher gravely.

'Five, I think!' said the judge sternly, with the slipper in hand.

And five it was.

In this way and with such pauses for reflection did Jose Belvero, the gipsy boy, learn all that Nuria Garriga, the rich farmer's daughter of Francoli, could teach him, including some things which are not set down in any lesson-book or taught in any seminary of the Good Sisters.

Yet, if you had looked at them from the poplar-fringed road, or down from the rocky bridle-path, you would have seen nothing but a maid sitting knitting under the scant shade of an olive, shifting only as the sun swung round in the heavens, while a

dog, erect with cocked ears and tense forelegs, watched a stupid set of nibbling sheep, brown and black mostly but with one white fleece among them.

You would not have seen Jose the gipsy, nor dreamed of the presence of the dirty Jesusita, the untidy Marta, the thrice-wicked Diegnito. All that you could have discerned would have been no more than a ripple among the standing corn, a break in the gently waving lucern, a short furrow from which the half-opened umbrellas of the red clover had been pushed aside. This indicated the spot where Jose had taken cover upon the first alarm.

For long before you approached, that sharp eye of Batcho would have perceived you.

‘Oucfhwouch! Gurr!’ That would have been his remark, uttered almost under his breath. His nose would have pointed straight in your direction, while his tail would have erected itself like a danger-signal. For if Batcho is a conceited dog, even Jose Belvero, his rival, allows that he has something to be conceited about—which is not always the case with conceited canines, dog or puppy.

But there arrived for Jose the gipsy a dark day. From his perch on the belfry he saw the winter sun rise upon a certain cavalcade. First, there was Antonio Garriga bestriding his black horse. Jose shrunk down at the sight, and cast an anxious look to where, in the hollow behind the abbey, Batcho was shepherding the transferred flock, as it were, single-handed.

For Jose was no longer a gipsy wanderer. He was to be shepherd to Antonio Garriga, full pastor with a salary and a chamber to sleep in, with a little window which overlooked the sheep-fold. But—the trouble in the breast of Jose was that on a

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

surefooted, tun-barrelled pony a little behind Antonio Garriga, lo! there was his mistress, teacher, and comrade, little Nuria, riding gaily forth.

It was so great an event for Nuria, this excursion to the hill-set town of Puymorens, that scarcely had she time even to wave her hand to the new shepherd, Jose. Aquilles was such a fine pony, and she so proud of riding on a horse of her own for the first time, that— well, was it not enough to turn any little girl's head? And Jose — well, Jose had a warm bed at any rate. She had seen to that herself— he had Batcho and the care of the sheep. Moreover, she would soon be back again, and all would go on as before.

But Jose knew better. And as the black figures on the horses, big and little, dimpled out and in of the trembling morning shadows which the poplars cast on the white winter road, there were tears in Jose's eyes and a bitter little pain eating angrily at his heart. He sat there and watched till Batcho had called for his assistance more than half a dozen times, and white Christopher had pulled several large mouthfuls out of the good clover hay which was for the winter feeding of Antonio's cattle.

Then that sad little 'turn in the road' which so often and so inevitably shuts out the beloved and familiar of our lives, cut them off; and Jose Belvero descended to the relief of Batcho, hard pressed by Christopher and his crowding followers.

But though the new pastor did his duty, it was sad, bitter work. Nothing to look forward to in the morning— no one to speak to during the day, no one to bid good-night to when the sun went down. How grey the fields were! How ugly the mountains with their capping of winter snow! He had thought it so

pretty at sunrise last year, and looked out a place from which Nuria could see the high peaks. And when she did come with him, she only slapped him for bringing her so far for nothing, saying, 'You silly boy; why, I can see it far better from my bedroom window, if I even cared to look!'

Jose had been disappointed at the time, but now, strangely enough, the memory was good to keep in his heart, and he smiled and looked across the mountains not a little consoled. Jose was an admirable shepherd. He led the flocks farther afield than any one else, looking for green places where the winter grass was beginning to come up through the stubble, and at the same time scouting for gaps through the hills by which he could see a little farther in the direction of Puymorens.

The days went by slowly, and still he did his duty, though there came no news to Francoli. Even Antonio was absent, for he had gone over into France to sell his wine, leaving little Nuria in the care of her aunt, the Senora Catalina Garriga, and the tutelage of the Good Sisters of the convent half down the hill. Bitter and black waxed the winter. The winds blew icy from the snow-fields of the sierras. But there in Jose's little chamber, with the warmth of the baking oven on one side and the pleasant warm smell of the sheep-fold coming into the little window on the other, who might not have been happy? All the country said so — indeed, they thought Antonio Garriga uncommonly soft to receive such a fox into his poultry yard as this gipsy to take care of the sheep.

But Antonio Garriga knew better than them all, and he left his flocks in the care of Jose and Batcho with the greatest confidence, thinking chiefly of the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

price he was to get for his wine in Toulouse.

But one day there came a rumour. It was a time of trouble, and the town of Puymorens had been besieged by roving Carlist bands. The people were defending it. There was the noise of cannon and the rattle of musketry among the garden walls and out upon the terraces of the convent.

The news cut into Josh's soul like a knife. Nuria was there— it might be in danger. She might need him, and he here in Francoli. Yet—there was his duty to Antonio and his flock. There was, about the lalqueria, no one to whom he could commit the care of roving Christopher and his companions. There was no one whom Batcho would obey. What was he to do? To reach Antonio in France was impossible. Jose's writing consisted only in scrawling a few large print letters on a piece of smooth slate—

NURIA

—that was all, and he practised it all day long. But that would not call Antonio Garriga back even if he had known his address.

Esteban, the overseer or sobrestante of the farm, was a well-known Carlist partisan, and indeed all the district was of Carlist leaning. It was possible that a raiding party might descend from the hills and carry off all his master's property.

It was a solemn day when Jose Belvero made up his mind what he was to do. But when once made up, there was no hesitation.

The next morning there was alarm about the farm. Neither sheep nor shepherd were to be found. They had vanished like snow off a roof in the spring sun. But whither?

Surely that was easily discovered. There is no trail so clear and so easily followed as that of a flock of

sheep. The road down the valley looked as if it had been swept with a twig broom. The sheep stealer was going in the direction of the town of Sarria, and the overseer pursued rapidly after him. He might come in sight of the runaway at any moment. But it was not long before other sheep trails met, crossed, and confused the one from the farm of Francoli. It was market day in Sarria surely. Other flocks were going to pasture. Other farmers were driving their flocks to places of greater safety, for fear of the Carlist bands was upon the people.

Then again the overseer did not care to trust himself within the power of so 'red' a municipality as that of Sarria. He was a known Carlist sympathiser, and as likely as not he might find himself in prison, or even backed up against a wall in the morning sunshine with a firing party in front of him.

The overseer turned rein and rode slowly back to the farm. The sheep were stolen. The gipsy had taken them. The cub was true to his nature—as he, Esteban, had always prophesied. It served Antonio Garriga right for taking up with kinless waifs like Jose, the umbrella-mender's apprentice.

But in the meantime, by steady travelling, Jose had brought all his flock to market, and as the town of Sarria was at the time expecting to be besieged at any moment, he could not have found in the length and breadth of the Spains any town where he would have been asked fewer questions or obtained a more ready sale.

By nine in the morning Jose had parted with his whole flock and was jingling the money in his pocket, all good undipped coin. Jose was dubious of paper money, and insisted upon cash in dollars. Several of the thieves of the town were following him

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

about with stealthy foot and eager eye, while some had even betaken themselves to quiet corners on the Francoli road, by which he would need to pass on his return from the town.

But not for nothing did the blood of Egypt run dark in the veins of Jose Belvero. He smiled at the thought that the paltry 'little rats' of such a town as Sarria could outwit a countryman of the great Jose Maria of Ronda, first brigand in Spain. Very well he knew that he would assuredly be charged with stealing the sheep if he lost a penny of the money, four hundred undipped dollars all in silver of Mexico. It was like carrying an anvil about with you in each pocket. So that there were the alternatives before him—either he would be arrested by the gendarmes as a thief, or have his throat cut by a greater and stronger thief.

But the wit of Jose was not at fault.

The alcalde and regidores of the town of Sarria were seated in their court-house taking anxious counsel. The paltry police cases of the morning had all been dismissed, and now the wise beards were nodding, and the grey heads were dose together over the latest scraps of news from the disturbed districts, when all at once, from before the raised dais on which they sat, a young voice spoke out—

'Most noble senors,' the voice said, 'I am Jose Belvero, herdsman to Don Antonio Garriga. He is absent in Francia, and the overseer of the farm is a factious man. Also my young mistress needs me. So I came and sold my flock of sheep for a great price in your market-place, and now, senor alcalde, I come to place the money in your hands in charge for my master, Don Antonio, whom you know— so that if anything happen to me, it shall be known that I,

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Jose Belvero, am no thief. Here is the money, four hundred dollars in silver. Write me a receipt upon stamped paper and seal it with the seal of the city.'

And the grave men first of all gazed in astonishment, peering down through their glasses at the dark little lad standing so boldly with his bags of dollars, and then with one accord they broke into a loud laugh.

'Count it, gentlemen!' he cried. And forthwith poured the shining silver upon the table.

The alcalde motioned his clerk of the town to count the money and to write a receipt. And while he was doing this, he himself questioned the boy.

'Why have you done this?— Are you not a gipsy?'

'I do not know,' said Jose. 'I am an honest man.'

'That is much to say in these times, little man,' said one of the magistrates.

'Why do they laugh?' thought Jose. 'Surely wisdom is not in the dotards!'

So when the receipt was given him he scrutinised it very closely, and seeing a man in black of a grave and sombre aspect, who sat a little back from the others, he said, 'Will that gentleman there also witness the receipt?'

Whereupon they all laughed still more, because the man was the richest banker and manufacturer in the district, and one in great respect, though one who, they said, cared naught for politics.

And he said, 'Little man, when you leave your present service, come to me and I will employ you.'

'I am going to Puymorens, where there are many Carlists,' said Jose, 'and I may never come back. But if I do, I shall not forget.'

And scarcely had he gotten out of the town before he was tripped up and searched by footpads, who

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

beat him and let him go. So Jose felt his receipt, which he had sewed in the lining of his cap, and hearing it crackle, went his way cheerfully.

And as he went, though his bones still smarted with the drubbing he had received from the robbers for not having any money, his heart sang, and he cried out, 'I shall see her! I shall see her!'

Then at the foot of the first hill there was waiting for him one whom he did not expect. It was Batcho. And he kept his tail between his legs. For well he knew that he ought to have gone home as Jose had bidden him. But instead he only sat on a wall out of reach and wagged his tail beseechingly and humbly.

But Jose was glad at his heart, though with lips he upbraided. But dogs and children judge by tones and not by words. So as soon as Jose had spoken, Batcho came bounding joyously upon him. And Jose hugged little Nuria's dog with delight, shaking his head, nevertheless, and saying, 'Ah, Batcho, Batcho, you make it ten times more difficult to get to your mistress. Yet I cannot send you away, though I ought!'

And Batcho leaped and wagged his tail— but moderately and soberly without barking, for he knew well enough that he was there on sufferance.

And so these two friends fared on towards Puymorens. And at the close of the second day Jose saw it clear and hard across the northern sky. And the next morning he was so near the fortress town that he could hear the roar of the besieging cannons on the heights and see the puffs of white smoke drifting from the walls and terraced gardens.

But that day Batcho all unwitting did Jose an ill turn, or at least so it seemed at first. The gipsy boy had managed to evade the first pickets of the

Carlists. He had made his way all unseen between two batteries which were firing with a loud noise, and the men shouting every time a ball left the mouth of the gun.

Then, with infinite caution, Jose wormed his way up towards the gate of the town, hoping to get near enough to some of the defenders to tell them who he was, and why he had come there at such a time. For he had no desire to be shot for a spy.

But at last he came to a terrace (as he thought) beyond the line of fire, and there he lay still, cuddling his dog to his breast. And from the other side of the garden wall there came voices and then something like a child's stifled crying. And at the sound instantly Batcho leaped up, sprang over the wall, and with a fierce yelp flung himself upon the man who was hiding in an arbour with half a dozen others. And, lo! when Jose looked over, there was his own little mistress, Nuria Garriga, tied hand and foot. And the man who held her was the overseer Esteban, the Carlist from the farm of Francoli.

And instantly Jose understood what had happened. This fellow, finding a favourable opportunity, had resolved to capture the daughter of the rich farmer and agriculturist in order to hold her to ransom. So Jose drew his knife and sprang over. At that moment two or three of the men were cautiously circling round Esteban, manoeuvring to get a shot at Batcho. But in the meantime they could not, because dog and man were mixed up together.

Then as Jose sprang between with his knife, the over-seer managed to fling off Batcho, who immediately leaped over the wall and vanished. Then the overseer, a strong man, struck Jose a

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

numbing blow on the muscles of his arm with the butt of a pistol, so that the knife dropped out of his hand.

A gag having been slipped into his mouth and his legs being tied, Esteban flung him like a bag over his shoulder. The party set off down the hill towards the Carlist position, and as soon as they got outside the line of firing, the overseer came to where Jose was standing propped up against a wall.

'Ah,' said he, 'you are a young thief. What have you done with your master's sheep?'

'And what,' retorted Jose, who had a gipsy's talent for repartee, 'may you be doing with your master's daughter?'

But the overseer had an answer to that, which was to strike Jose heavily across the mouth with the back of his hand.

'Tell me what you have done with the money for which you sold the sheep in Sarria. Do not imagine you can escape. I heard about that.'

'The money is on its way to Senor Antonio,' said Jose boldly; 'it is where neither you nor any other thief can touch it.'

'You will either tell me where it is or I will shoot you,' said the overseer.

And Jose laughed. For, being a gipsy, he had no fear of death. The oldest races in the world are not afraid to die. Only new crude peoples lust inordinately for life.

'And pray,' he said, 'tell me what good it will do to kill me? Will it bring the money into your palm?'

Nevertheless, the overseer would have slain Jose after he had searched him and found nothing. But the men that followed him demurred, and said, 'Let us take him to headquarters. Don Juan Sebastian

will tell us what to do with him.'

And though the overseer grumbled he was forced to comply. He did not seem a very popular leader with his men. So in a half-ruinous house they found certain grey-bearded men talking, and at the head of the apartment, in a place by himself, stood the same grave-faced man in black, whom Jose had seen in the chamber of the ayuntamiento when the alcalde and regidores laughed at him.

And at the sight Jose was glad, for he thought that this man, being of an honest face, would surely do him justice. And the overseer and the others took off their caps and spoke very humbly, saying that Jose had been captured as a spy, and that beside he was known for a thief, who had stolen a great sum from his master.

But Don Juan Sebastian bade them untie him, and drew him apart where he might speak privately with him.

'Why did you come here?' he asked. And Jose told him in a word.

'To see Nuria,' he said, 'and to find out if I could be of any use to her. And I found her with these men on the hillside, and they have left her on the edge of the camp with two fellows to look after her.'

Then Don Juan cried an order to the Carlist with the white cap at the door, and he called half a dozen others, and they took the weapons from the overseer and his fellows. Then said Don Juan Sebastian, 'Go out and bring me the daughter of Antonio Garriga from the place you have left her. And, if any evil hath befallen her, I swear that not one of you shall see the sun set. I will have no private ruffianing in my camp!'

So they brought in Nuria, and when they had set

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

her down, Don Juan Sebastian gave her a little white wine mixed with water. So, after a little, she came to herself and told them how she had been wiled from her aunt's garden by the overseer on the pretext that he brought her a letter from her father. But that the men had been kind to her, save once when they had thrust a gag into her mouth to stop her crying out.

And Don Juan looked at the overseer, and nodded grimly.

'It is indeed well for you,' he said, 'that the maid hath this testimony to give. Had it been otherwise!'

He did not complete the sentence.

Then he said to Jose, 'Go back to Francoli. I will send an escort with you till such time as you reach a place of safety!'

So he wrote a letter to Antonio Garriga, and gave it to Jose to deliver. Then he called two soldiers, kindly lads, and gave them charge to convey the children south to Francoli, or until they had placed Jose and Nuria in the hands of their friends.

But as they went along the highway and were come about half of the distance to the farm, they saw a cloud of dust (as it seemed) sweeping along the valley, and lo! there in front of them was Antonio Garriga and half a dozen armed youths, spurring furiously.

At first he was very angry and not inclined to listen. Because he thought that the overseer and Jose had made it up between them to rob him and hold his daughter to ransom.

But Nuria spoke sharply to her father, and told him he ought rather to kiss Jose's hand and thank him. For it was wholly through him that she had been delivered.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

And Jose gave him Don Juan Sebastian's letter, and while he was reading it, he grabbed in the lining of his cap till he found the receipt of the alcalde and regidores of Sarria for the four hundred dollars, at sight of which Antonio Garriga scratched his head in perplexity. For he would very gladly have parted with the flock for half that money.

And then the two Carlist soldiers saluted and asked leave to return with a note to their general that they had done his commission, and placed the two children in safety. This Don Antonio wrote, and they departed, refusing all reward, except a few double handfuls of good cartridges.

Then all turned their horses' heads and rode back to Francoli.

And as they went Nuria rebuked her father still more, so that at last he went to Jose who was upon the saddle before one of the lads of his company.

'I did you wrong,' he said; 'you have been very faithful. Will you come back and be shepherd, and I will give you, besides your shepherd's wages, one sheep out of every score for your own?'

So Jose was very glad, and Nuria clapped her hands.

'Oh, there is Batcho!' she cried, 'dear, good Batcho!'

And on the road before them there was indeed Batcho, who, attacking the overseer, and being fired at, had been skulking after Jose and his mistress all the way to see what was going to befall them.

And when they had got back to the farm, Nuria came to Jose in his little chamber by the sheepfold, and instead of thanking him she said, 'Go, get three switches, good and strong—of beech, of birch, and of willow. Also, father says that I may have the cane

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

that he rides with. It will do famously. And go round to all my lazy scholars and tell them that school begins again at eight o'clock tomorrow morning in the sunny corner by the abbey wall!

And Jose nodded gravely, and answered, 'I will go and bring all of them—Gil and Juan and naughty Diegnito, and Jesusita and Matilde, and the wicked Marta!'

'And above all, do not forget the switches,' Nuria called back as she went out. 'I have been looking forward to them more than anything.'

'So have I!' said Jose, with a little grimace. And the story went on.

12. MR. SUPERVISOR'S FIRST BRIBE

When I went first to Port Essock it was always being said that I was too young for my position. It is not given to many men to be Supervisor of the Revenue Preventive Service at twenty-seven. But there were perilous times when all the desperate runnagates of the narrow seas drew together and made a compact with the ill-affected of the countryside to defraud the King of his just dues and his servants of their night's rest. It is easy enough to make a certain not undeserved reputation when a man has a chance every second night of his life.

I have been in the Preventive Service ever since I was eighteen, and during that time I had had my full share of perilous 'scapes and rough appeals to arms. To those opportunities boldly utilised, and ako to the keen and discriminating eye for merit possessed by certain of my superiors, I owed my rapid rise. Yet I will not conceal that certain of the baser sort, lewd fellows and jealous country louts, did not scruple to say that if my aunt Rachel, a worthy woman as ever was, had not been so high in the household of my Lord Sandwich (who at that time was Chief Commissioner of His Majesty's Excise in Scotland), the powers that be might, in all probability, have passed over the abounding merits of Matthew Craig, presently Supervisor at the important seaboard town of Port Essock.

Whether these were in the right of it or no, my record has shown. Port Essock is a little old-fashioned cluster of houses, strung like a double

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

necklace about the turn of a bight on the Solway side. It had risen by smuggling. It throve by smuggling. There was not a man in it, from the Provost, douce man, to Daft Davie, the poor wastrel who lit the scanty oil lamps at the pier-end on moonless nights, that had not his finger deep in the unhallowed pie.

Consequently it was to no bed of roses that I was promoted at the age of twenty-seven, as I relate. Yet Port Essock was counted in the service a good post. For one thing it was right in the thick of the traffic. Yonder was the Isle of Man, where there was just room for the peak of Snaefell to stick up among the spirit-casks which occupied the rest of the island. Right in front was the Cumberland coast, Whitehaven, Workington, Maryport, with the white reek blowing from them far over the blue Solway. On either hand extended a score of 'holes,' 'lakes,' 'coves'—that is, creeks and inlets of the sea where the light vessels of the smugglers could be unloaded between tides and the contents transferred long before day to the backs of horses for transport to other less favoured parts of the country.

It may seem, therefore, an unlikely thing that I, being so highly favoured in my profession as to be advanced in the short period of nine years from the humble position of a coast-waiter at forty pounds a year to that of Supervisor, should forget my duty within a few months of my coming to Port Essock, even to the extent of aiding and abetting those who were art and part in the Black Traffic.

Yet such was the case, and how it came about I will now proceed to relate.

It was part of my duty to attend the markets at Port Essock and Drumfern every Monday and

Wednesday respectively, both to keep track of the holders of malt licences (these being under my supervision) and also, more generally, in order that I might have an eye on the smugglers and their favourers. For many were the deeds of derring-do and many the midnight landing-bout which had been hatched between two well-looking and decently put-on men in the market place of Port Essock, or on the plain-stones of Drumfern.

But in spite of malt licences I found plenty of time on my hand, so that, while I had a shrewd eye to business, and ear cocked for any news of Hollands or 'raisin wine' (which was the name they gave to French brandy), I could make my observes upon the trig and dainty maidens in from the country with their butter and eggs, their sleek tappit hens and lean kane fowk.

Now I have never heard that at any period of my life I was ill-looking to the eye, and the uniform of the service setting me well enough (great were the pains I took when in Glasgow to get it to sit well upon me) I may say, without conceit, that almost as many of the young lasses looked at me as I cast an eye upon.

Nay, I managed in the way of business, without in the least damaging the interests of good King George (whom God preserve) to do an occasional favour to the more comely of these, which rendered my escort not unpleasant— if, as it sometimes chanced I happened to be going their way at the close of market.

But there were two lasses among the others, so quiet and so reserved, that I could not in this fashion scrape acquaintance with them. It was not, indeed, difficult to find out whence they came, but

the knowledge put me to a greater distance from them than ever. For the nearest young farmer lad to whom I spoke, informed me that these were no other than the daughters of old Martin Sinclair of Barulleon, a man who had been for half a century a leader in the Free Traffic, formerly a famous sea captain and daring runner of cargoes great and little, and now in his old age the organiser of these 'gangs,' which, armed and ready to shed blood, deforced His Majesty's officers in the execution of their duty and defrauded the revenues of the country.

I knew Martin Sinclair well by sight, as, indeed, who did not—a gaunt rake of a man, on the borders, of seventy, but holding himself like thirty and of great strength, wiry as whip-cord, and equally at home with the cordage of a ship or among the screes and perilous fells of the rough country where the contraband 'stuff' was secreted.

This man walked about the market stalls and passed the very prison doors as if the whole town belonged to him. Ay, and though there was no one who did not know that he had spent his life defying His Majesty's laws, he would talk affably with the fiscal, and even with the sheriff himself. Such was the assurance of the Free Traders in these days.

But Martin Sinclair's daughters were to me at least more interesting, because less approachable than the grim old smuggler himself. Their names, my informant added, were Jacobina and Carolina respectively. For their mother was a rank Jacobite and had named them after the last Stuart kings. Though, as for their father, regality, whether of Hanover or 'ow'er the-water,' was all the same to him. Indeed, in his time he had broken King Jamie's

revenue laws to the full, as cheerfully as those of King George.

Beena and Charlie the girls were currently denominated, their birth-names being reserved for the family Bible, or the not unfrequent occasions when their mother, a high-tempered free-spoken old lady, rated them for the levity of their behaviour.

All this and much more I learned at various times during the winter and spring of the first year I spent at Port Essock. But, in spite of my most earnest endeavours, I could not get up so much as a glancing acquaintance with them. All in vain I donned my best suit of uniform, my epaulets, my new cocked hat and gold-hilted sword. I might just as well have been clothed in rags and carried a tin plate round my neck for alms—nay, better, for more than once I saw the lasses in merry talk with Daft Davie, and even slipping a groat or two into the old scoundrel's dirty hand.

At me they would not so much as look, passing me with an eye so level and a regard so lofty and unconscious, that I could not help feeling a back-spang of pride in the thought that they were intentionally avoiding me.

But Daft Davie spied out my secret.

'Superdeevil,' he said, in his licensed jesting way, 'yon's twa bonnie lasses, but desperate hard-hearted. They dinna value goold-handled whingers nae mair nor pot-sticks, and as for pointed shoon and silver buckles, ye micht as weel be a puir auld body like me wi' the strae stickin' oot o' the holes in your brogues!'

'I do not know whom you mean, Davie,' I said good-humouredly enough, for it was no use quarrelling with Davie. (He was in a business way a

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

sort of friend of mine, and often had information which could be relied upon.)

'Ow ay, your honour kens brawly wha Davie means,' he chuckled, hutching up his shoulders among his rags; 'brawly ken ye whatna lasses are bonnie. For mony is the decent and plain-favoured Mall that may gang by ye without a lift o' the e'e. But when young Beena Sinclair or licht-fit Chairlie gangs flichterin' by, certes, what a change! Jingle the spur, swing the sword, cock the hat! Buckle the siller clasps on the new-coft shoon. Knee-breeks o' velvet maun we hae, when the Barulleon lasses come to the toon. Corduroy guid eneuch for ither days! Oh, auld Davie kens! Auld Daft Davie is no that daft but he minds on the days lang syne when he coorted a bonnie lass and donned a gaucy beaverteen waistcoat to tak' her fancy!'

It was no use quarrelling with Davie; besides the creature had often ideas of surprising sanity. So I took him aside and showed him good cause why he should speak as freely as possible concerning the Sinclairs of Barulleon, and how a young man might become acquainted with them. This I did with the more assurance, for Davie, in his capacity as authorised 'gaun body' or honourable beggar, was a famous go-between, and had brought many a love affair to a successful issue between young people denied ordinary channels of inter-communication.

'Na, na,' said Davie; 'the job's abune me. Onything in the ordinar coorse o' natur' Davie can do, but to frank a heid-gauger intil the hoose o' auld smugglin' fechtin' Mairtin Sinclair o' Barulleon—it's as muckle as Davie's life is worth! And though Beena is a bonny lass and douce in her behaviour, that young hempie Chairlie disna belie her name.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

They say for a certainty that she has worn the breeks and ridden her father's grey mare, when there was a sloop on the sands at Gibb's Cove or the Dutchman's Hole. It maun hae been a sicht weel worth the seein'!

'Charlie is the bonny one, is she not?' I said to draw him out.

'Some says yin, an' some the ither,' said Davie judicially; 'Beena is her mither's dochter. She will be like the Tower o' Lebanon that looketh towards Damascus! Chairlie is mair like a young roe on the mountains. Some likes the weel-girthed oak and some prefers the bonnie jimp birk tree. The oak is a kennin' mair usefu' maybe, but, oh, the birk is heartsome to look on—no that it doesna mak' grund clog bottoms. But I am a' for the birk mysel' an' so I'll agree wi' you that Chairlie is the bonnie yin!'

Then having pronounced this judgment he looked at me a long while as if he had something on his mind.

'But the question is no o' this beauty or o' that,' he said at length, 'it is a maitter o' what ye wad gie to hae speech wi' the lass o' your heart!'

'All that I possess,' I cried, with enthusiasm—'that is, saving my duty to King George!' I added hastily.

'Ay, save him, guid honest gentleman!' said Davie sententiously. 'Weel, hearken to Davie. Gin ye like to strip aff thae bonnie daes o' the blue braidclath and dress like a kemper frae the border country, I wid tak' you up to Barulleon. Forbye, it is a' in the way o' your business. Ye can cheat your soul wi' that! For ye may learn something that wid set ye higher yet than Supervisor at Port Essock. But mind ye, gin ye

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

come wi' Davie, ye tak' your life in your hand. For they are folk far frae canny up there on the bare braes ayont the Fell o' Barulleon!

Well, even then I knew my folly, but the venture itself, and more than all a certain contempt in Davie's voice, decided me. I would go with him, I said, as soon as I had made my dispositions, while he on his part promised all secrecy and such completeness of disguise, that none might know me for the chief revenue officer of the neighbourhood.

And many a time did I curse my fatal complaisance when, having left my assistant Hutchins in charge, I joined Davie in a certain wood a couple of miles from town. He had a 'kemper's' dress with him— a rough shirt which rasped like hair ('It will keep ye frae the fash o' skartin' (scratching), said Davie grimily), a tattered coat and knee-breeches of frieze, a broad Kilmarnock bonnet so weatherbeaten that I declined to put it on my head till I had examined it outside and in with jealous solicitude, and for my feet a pair of clouted shoon. A stout cudgel completed my outfit, and all these, taken in connection with a four days' old beard and a skin wash of Davie's composition, were declared a sufficient disguise even by my task-master himself.

'Ye are maybe no juist as takin' to the carnal e'e as ye are on the Plainstones wi' the goold sword and the shooder-buckles. But ye are a guid deal safer gin ye intend to sleep in the barn o' Barulleon!'

It was growing grey when we approached the place. The toomy outlines of the fell closed about us. We found ourselves upon a wide wild wilderness of heather high as one's waist, enclosing green slimy moss-holes (where, as Davie said with some

humour, 'There was room for mony an exciseman'). Curlews sang their plaintive lullaby as they slanted down to their nests.

Above the snipe circled and stooped, the whinnying of its wings sounding weirdly through the dusk.

The farm-town of Barulleon was set like a place of defence—the outbuildings long and loopoled, the house to the north side, and the only entrance to the square farmyard by a gate of wood which could be swung to in a moment and barricaded in case of danger.

'The Lord hae mercy on this hoose o' Barulleon,' cried Daft Davie, my guide, at the kitchen door; 'may its rafters never want hams to swing frae them, may its meal-ark never be toom, its byre ever be filled fu' o' the denty black cattle. And abune a', may never black ganger set mark on ony barrel, keg, or cask that appertains to it. May the sup o' drink be free as the bite o' meat, and never yet has either o' them been refused to a puir gaun body— my service to ye, mistress! Ye are bonnier than ever. Auld, auld is Davie, but his e'e for beauty is not dinmied, nor yet.'

'Havers, Davie Henderson,' cried the mistress of the house, bustling out of doors with a luggie of fresh milk in her arms, 'I hae neither time nor desire to hearken to your flairdsan' (flattering) tongue. Tell me what it is ye seek on the Fell o' Barulleon, and wha is this swank kemper, that is gaun the country when a' honest folk are busy wi' their meadow hay?'

'We will ca' him Jock o' Mumpers' Ha' the noo,' said Davie, with a sly look; 'he is a smart lad o' his inches, but maybe a kennin' ower gleg wi' the jockteleg' (smuggler's sheath-knife). 'He belongs ower by Ecclefechan way, but for the good o' his

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

health he has come to Gallowa' till a bit accident blaws ower, or the man gets better!'

'From Ecclefechan, is he?' said a tall old man, rising suddenly out of the gloom behind the peat-creel, where he had been stretched on a wooden settle. 'What do ye ca' that, young man frae Ecclefechan?'

He held out a great door-key in his hand.

'I caa' it a' kei,' I answered promptly, giving the word the right Annandale sound.

'It's as weel for ye, honest lad,' said the old man with meaning, sinking down again on the bench from which he had risen.

It was indeed well that I had been settled in that district for some years before I came to Port Essock, and so had the right pronunciation of my supposed province— 'Yow, an' Mei an' the barn-door Kei,' being supposed to represent in brief the peculiarities of the true Annandale speech.

There was evidently a great bustle of preparation going on at the farm. The wide chimney, with its great 'swingletree' of solid iron, was filled with pots and frying-pans all bubbling and skirling. The two daughters of the house, lightfoot and trig of person, were speeding this way and that upon household errands, or adjuring to greater diligence the blowsy red-armed kitchen lasses who stirred pots, turned ham, carried water and peats, polished knives and kept up a constant clatter of compliment (and the reverse) with a jovial half-score of lads about the door.

Perhaps it was as well for me that this turmoil was going forward. For everyone about the house of Barulleon was busy, and my disguise escaped any very close scrutiny. Even the old master of the

house, Martin Sinclair, seemed preoccupied. He was continually leaping up to go to the door to whisper a secret order or to cry a more open direction across to the stables. I had not been long set down on my stool in front of the fire before I was aware of a singular noise of tinkling, like a thousand fairy anvils all ringing together. This puzzled me wondrously for awhile, and I could hardly resist the temptation to ask Davie what it might signify. Well was it for me that I betrayed no curiosity.

Contrariwise I kept my eyes on the movements of the two girls. Beena, the elder, was of taller and more solid build, a strapping lass to look upon, but modest and benign of countenance. Her sister, altogether slighter, and more highly strung, seemed to be everywhere at once, darting athwart her sister's path like a swallow about a slow-sailing rook or labouring heron.

Yet, all the time as I sat silent on my stool, I was conscious of a regard keen and piercing bent upon me. Presently there arose a greater commotion than usual in the yard, the clattering of horses' hoofs, the shouting of men. Every one rose and ran to the door—excepting myself and the younger daughter of Martin Sinclair. Instantly, the room being clear, she turned upon me where I sat on my stool gazing into the red peat fire.

'You are a spy—I know you,' she whispered, her face white and tense with anger and indignation. 'I have only to tell these men out there to have you killed!'

I had nerve enough to sit still and gaze calmly into the flame. Indeed, before replying, I stooped to replace a peat which had fallen out upon the hearth.

'But you will not?' I said calmly, and turned my

eyes to hers.

'And pray why, Mr. Exciseman?' she asked indignantly, curling her lip; 'a traitor's life is forfeit. You took it in your own hand when, for a spy's purpose, you came to this house of Barulleon!'

'I am no spy—I came to see you!' I spoke the words low and clear.

Now, whether it be that on this subject a woman is easily credulous, or that Charlie Sinclair heard the folk returning to the kitchen all talking together, and had pity on me among so wild a crew, I know not. At all events, it is certain that she thrust a long pot-stick into my hands and bade me stir for dear life, rating me angrily all the while for being a lazy good-for-nothing gangrel that would not scruple to eat and drink of her father's victuals without stirring hand or foot to help in the readying of them.

'Why, what is the matter, Chairlie,' some of them cried when they heard the girl scolding; 'what has young Annandale done to thee? Asked thee to marry him or to wash his face?'

'Done!' she cried, making an indignant flourishing with a ladle; 'nay, what has he not done? He sits there like a dumbie and lets me do the work.' (She turned quickly to the peat bin.) 'Here, take this' (she thrust a great basket of woven osier work into my arms); 'go to the back of the far peat-stack and bring the full of that fresh out of the dry peats you will find there. These are as wet as if they were fresh out of the moss this morning!'

Now it did not require one's wits to be sharpened by the fear of death to understand that Charlie Sinclair had some purpose in this order, beyond that of securing a certain quality of fuel for her cooking. So I betook myself to my task, not without

a certain tremor of hope and expectation. To the further peat-stack I went. It was a hundred yards or so from the house, on a little level space overhanging a ravine thick-bowered with birk and alder. The peats were kept dry by a thatching called 'wattle and dab,' and, having been excavated from the front, the stack formed a sort of shallow cavern of shadow floored with the soft aromatic peat 'coom.'

I was slowly drawing the dry and crumbling peats towards me, filling my basket with the largest and driest peats, not thinking much of what I did, yet instinctively doing as the girl had told me, when behind me I heard a footstep.

Let any who thinks of my position in the house of Barulleon judge whether I turned me about quickly or no... A jockteleg in the small of my back was the least I expected. It was Charlie Sinclair herself who barred my way. She stood in the mouth of the peat-cavern with a very set and determined expression on her face. I set down the basket and took a step towards her.

But she whipped out a pistol and held it to my breast with a quick imperious movement.

'Stand still where you are, Mr. Supervisor of Port Essock!' she said, in a low, distinct voice; 'you have the face to tell me that you are no spy!—You say—that—that you came to this house of Barulleon on this night of all nights because you wished to see me.— How can I believe that? You have never spoken to me before— hardly seen me, indeed!'

I have seen you— and only you, each time you have been in Port Essock or Drumfern, ever since I came to Galloway. I have had eyes for no one else. It was a foolish ploy, I own, to come hither; but I was desperate to get speech with you. Ask Daft Davie if it

is not true?'

'It was Daft Davie who brought you here?' she asked quickly, a new tone coming into her voice, from which I judged that Davie was accounted a safe friend.

'Yes; he swore that he would bring me unknown to the house of Barulleon!'

And at this she flung her head back and whistled a little gay hit of time as if the thing amused her.

'Well, Mr. King's-Officer,' she said, 'you have put your head into the wasps' byke now—whether it be as you say or...'

She gave a little coquettish tilt to her chin, which told me that in fact she did believe that I spoke the truth— perhaps because she was so well accustomed to have foolish and reckless deeds done for her sake.

'I am willing to go through with anything to which I put my hand—for your sake,' I answered.

'We will put you to the test or the night be an hour older!' she said, nodding at me through the dusk a trifle defiantly; 'there is a lugger. Captain Coonshine of Flushing, in at the Dutchman's Hole, and all these bold hill-country lads over there are for riding down to take the stuff out of her tonight. You shall ride with them. Foot by foot, bridle by bridle, you shall ride— ay, and take your chance of the fray too. Not that there is much of that' (here she laughed a little gay laugh), 'for the Drumfern Surveyor is asleep in his bed, decent man, having been bribed to bide there! And as for the famous young supervisor of Port Essock, that model of prudence, he that virill not be bribed— perhaps, Mr. Kemper from Annandale, with your barn-door 'Keis,' you can tell me where he is?'

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'I will do nothing of the kind,' I retorted angrily.

'I would have you know I am in the King's service.'

'Then you have lied to me,' she put in quickly; 'you have twice said tonight that you were here on my service!'

I took a step nearer to the girl, knowing the advantage of dealing at short range with a woman. But again the pistol confronted me.

'Stop where you are, sirrah, till I have my word out with you,' she said. 'This pistol is like yourself, somewhat apt to go off without preliminaries!'

'I am on your service—I am altogether yours,' I said impetuously; 'but I cannot be unfaithful to the bread I have eaten all these years!'

She let the pistol drop, and snapped the finger and thumb of the other hand, laughing a little bitterly meanwhile.

'I knew how much your words meant—a man's protestations! The rattling of stones in a barn-floor riddle were worth more. You would do all for the King's sake— nothing for mine. How then can I believe that you came not to Barulleon on the King's service also, Mr. Spy?'

A quick flooding resolve came over me at her scornful words— kind of dogged anger also to be disbelieved and flouted. I would show the girl. I would prove unmistakably that I had spoken the truth.

'Very well,' I said, biting on my words, 'I will ride to the shore. I will help with the emptying of the lugger. It is indeed shaftie and disgrace to me that have worn the King's coat, and have sworn that I would never be unfaithful to my duty.'

She let the pistol drop on the ground, and clapped her hands with a quick impulsiveness.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'After all the exciseman is a man!' she said.

Now it is one of the unkenned mysteries why we of the revenue do not like to be called by the name of our trade. But true it is that the word sticks in our throats.

'I will show you, mistress,' I cried, 'whether a King's officer, even if he be an exciseman.'

'Hush,' she said, 'I hear some one moving. Get your basket and follow me! Tomorrow you are the King George's, and welcome! This night you are sib to Chairlie!'

And she led the way into the house whistling the Jacobite air, 'Ower the Water to Chairlie.'

In an hour, full thirty men, all well mounted, with chains arranged behind the saddle and before it for the reception of the small barrels of spirits which they expected to secure, rode out from the dark house of Barulleon, and in a long serpentine procession made their way towards the Dutchman's Hole. As I stood outside the door, uncertain whether to make a break for it towards the ravine, or whether to carry out my mad promise, a stripling lad brought me a strong grey horse, saddled and equipped like the others.

'This is yours, man!' he said. And, by the stress on the last word, I knew that the youth was none other than the maid Charlie Sinclair, calling on me for the keeping of my word.

And as we rode through the night, our bonnets brushing the dews from the trees on either side of the narrow bridle-path, more than once a small hand was laid on my arm, with something in its touch which was half raillery and half a kind of silent appeal. But I said not a word in answer.

I can see, as I write, the wide glimmering bay,

grey under the stars, and the mast of the little lugger a-tilt upon the wet sands far out. I can smell the strong salt smell as the horses' feet slipped on the seaweed, and the chains jingled at their flanks. I can hear, with a flush and a sense of shame, the low orders of their leaders and the confidential directions which were exchanged over the side, I can see the kegs being swung out one by one, and again receive them into my arms—I—the man appointed to put a stop to the nefarious and unlawful traffic.

And then, just as I had the four barrels of my portion all duly secured, there came the crushing thought:

'What if Hutchins has got wind of this boat, and we are surrounded and captured as we go up the gill? How well it will look for me to be found hand in glove, mounted and riding with His Majesty's enemies! What will my superiors, what will my Lord Sandwich say of Mr. Supervisor of Port Essock, the man who prided himself on never taking a bribe, accompanying at the dead of night with law-breakers and free-traders?'

And it was with a smouldering and furious anger in my heart that I rode off, cursing fate and my own folly, and, above all, wishing that I had left in charge some one less acute and brave than Hutchins.

'He is the very man to find out all about it,' I muttered; 'and then again he may have suspected. Davie may have sold me. Hutchins would give his ears for my place, and now is his chance!'

And in an access of terror I actually set spurs to my beast and rode away ahead of the others. But in the lumbering wake of Martin Sinclair's grey there came another rider.

'Keep to the right—to the right,' cried a soft voice

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

over my shoulder; 'these kegs are going to the peat-stack of Barulleon!'

In the morning light, when the east was just reddening, we came beneath the Fell of Barulleon. I was still gloomy and angry. But the acuteness of my fear had passed away. Hutchins would have to wait awhile for my place. But how could I ever with a clear conscience make a capture again? Would not the jingle of the chains in the Dutchman's Hole and the memory of the peat-stack of Barulleon rise before me to shame me?

'Stow them securely!' said a voice in my ear, when I stood once more in lee of the peat-stack. 'Them that seek ken where to hide! I will be with you in a trice!'

I was heaping the last fragments of peat in a natural manner over the eight kegs of Hollands, when I heard again the light quick footstep, and a little mocking laugh thrilled me to the heart. I looked round, and there, in the first sunbeams, stood Chairlie Sinclair, no longer the slender-limbed stripling whom I had vaguely discerned in the darkness of the night, but arrayed in a gown of maidenly grey, and with a silken snood about her comely head. Her cheek was fresh, as though, like the morn, she had new risen from a bed of rosy clouds, and there was a merry mischief in the sparkle of her eyes.

'Good morning to you, Mr. Supervisor,' she said; 'what is the matter—you do not look happy?'

'I have shamed myself for your sake!' I said gloomily, avoiding her challenge, and looking away from her into the red eye of the sun.

She came a little nearer to me with a roguish grace. She pretended to pick at her apron with a

kind of mock modesty, which, after all, was natural enough to her.

'Methinks I know of one or two that would take it not amiss to be so disgraced?'

'What do you mean?' I said, now gazing straight at her.

It was now her turn to look at the sun pushing up through the red hearth-bars of the easterly clouds.

'You are the man who prided himself on never having taken a bribe, I have heard them say?' She spoke musingly.

'Yes,' I answered proudly; 'that I can say with a clear conscience. I have never taken a bribe. No one has ever dared even to offer me one!'

She lifted her face to mine wittingly, the lips a little pouted and cherry-red.

'Then what do you call this?' she said, almost in a whisper. And I took my first bribe.

It is to be as soon as, through the influence of my Lord Sandwich, I am removed to the Navy Office, of which his Lordship is at present the head. Then, by Christmas Day at latest, there will be a vacancy in the famous free-trading and smuggling house of the Sinclairs of Barulleon, and His Majesty's Revenue will be rid of the services of one most unworthy officer— a, man weak, corruptible, a companion of lawbreakers, and a habit-and-repute taker of bribes.

13. THE PEST OF THE VILLAGE

Ebie was the pest of the village— Eclipse first, the usual second. In the running far behind came Peter Mackie, the minister's loon. The pest's other name was Cassidy, and he ministered to the butcher of the locality in the quality of message boy.

There were many cooks who had to start out for the shop of Ebie's master, situated at the head of the street by the market-hill, a full hour after delivery had been promised, in order to bring the provisions for the day's dinner home themselves. On such occasions their tempers made them unapproachable all the way up the High Street; and, by the muttering tragedy of their undertones, you could tell that they were rehearsing the names they would call Mr. Christopher Irving upon their arrival at his place of business.

It was seldom, however, that they got so far. Not unfrequently, about half-way, they came across a crowd, which craned necks swayed this way and that with outcryings and shouts of vulgar encouragement to unseen combatants.

'Gie it to him, Ebie!' 'Haud on to his hair, Davie!' 'Noo ye hae him!' 'Hit him wi' the leg o' mutton—weel done!' 'That cloured the croon o' him!'

Dogs barked on the outskirts, tasting trouser-legs and boot heels—according to their fancy—for it was a crowd exclusively masculine. There was a blank space in the centre, of varying shape, in which fought, scratched, bit, pummelled, kicked, pulled hair, and compressed throttles— two boys, of whom one was, to a certainty, Ebie Cassidy, and the other

probably the minister's loon, Peter Mackie, son of the manse, light of the home, and— brother of a remarkably pretty sister.

There also, neglected among the multitudinous legs of the interested concourse, somewhere existed a market-basket, containing mostly the raw material of not a few suburban dinners— indeed, those very pieces of meat for which the cooks were now vowing dire vengeance on the innocent Mr. Christopher Irving. Usually, however, the basket did not contain them, having been overturned, and— but, after all, what the worse is a leg of mutton of a little adherent 'Macadam' from the king's honest highway? You can always wash it, and it is, moreover, a known fact that, as hens at times require crushed crockery mixed in their food in order that their eggs may come into the world with shells, as cage birds revel in a mixed diet of hemp-seed and fine sand, so the suburban stomach is benefited in no small degree by absorbing a little judicious macadamised gravel along with its too luscious diet of lamb, green peas, and beetled potatoes.

At any rate, this was Ebie Cassidy's opinion, and he acted upon it. What the cooks at the Grange, the One-Mile House, Fometh, the Lodge, and the Black-and-Tan House of the Golden Packman said, collectively and severally, need not be set down in the tale. The result was a perfect certificate of good faith, but wholly unnecessary (and even unfitted) for publication. What Mr. Irving, butcher, said to his apprentice was expressed in terms of an ash plant, while Ebie's running commentary at such times took the form of a litany: 'Oh, maister, it wasna me— it was the minister's loon. Oh, that's sair. It wasna me!'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'That's as it may be,' answered the angry butcher, holding his victim at arms' length and turning him about so as to present the proper surfaces to the ash plant; 'but ye see I haena haud o' the minister's loon, an' I hae haud o' you!'

Meantime the minister's loon had dropped in at the house of the minister's Man (to all who know Scotland, 'Man' in this case carries the capital letter), and was presently being stayed with treacle ale, and comforted with apples.

'Ye hae been at it again, Maister Peter,' said the minister's Man; 'a black e'e— a bluidy nose, a lug swalled as if it had been stanged by a hale bees' byke — whatna sicht is that for a minister o' the gospel an' a Doctor o' Deveenity?'

Peter said that he did not know— but added that, if possible, he did not mean to embarrass the sight of his reverend parent with these physical imperfections.

'Eh, Maister Peter,' said the minister's Man, 'but it's a quaestion o' ma conscience. It's my duty to tell him!'

Peter expressed a wish wjth regard to the conscience of the minister's Man which was entirely out of keeping with his birth, parentage, and education, and religious opportunities.

'Eh, Maister Peter,' said Samuel Kelly, the minister's Man, 'an' you to be a student o' deveenity!'

'I'm no gaun to be ony black-craw minister,' said the loon emphatically; 'never while I draw the breath o' life! I sweer it, I'll be an engine-driver— a jockey, a bellman, the provost o' a toun, or the prisoner at the bar, but— as shure as daith, I'll never be a minister!'

The judges of assize had recently visited the

neighbourhood, as is their custom, in royal red, and their visit explained part of the choice comparatives of Peter.

‘What for do ye fecht, then, like a common tinkler’s messan?’ said the minister’s Man; ‘thae folk that ye mention are a’ respectable—at least, forbye the prisoner at the bar!’

But before Peter, the minister’s loon, could answer, there came the flash of a light dress, the glance of a gold bracelet about a white wrist, the two long well-hosed legs showing under the short petticoat of Millicent Mackie, the loon’s sister, aged fifteen.

She loved Peter, but—she took him by the collar of his round jacket and shook him severely, divided between correction and the natural affections.

‘I’ll tell your faither,’ she cried; ‘ye hae been fechtin’ again!’

‘I haena!’ asseverated the loon determinedly.

‘Ye are leein’ (lying), ‘I ken by yer doomess that ye are leein!’ cried the girl, shaking Peter, as a terrier shakes a rat; ‘ye never bite your underlip like that but when ye are tellin’ a dooms lee!’

In the face of this direct accusation Peter was discreetly silent.

It was true. He only bit his lip when he lied. With shame and tears of anger he had striven against it, but in vain. He did not mind lying. To lie, according to his simple creed, was wrong—except when you are driven to it. Then the bit had to be taken between the teeth, and the matter pushed through at all hazards.

‘Wha did that?’ said Millicent severely, pointing to a rapidly blackening left eye. It was already purple, with a subtle under-suggestion of green at the

interior corner.

'I fell again a post!' said the simple Peter, holding his lower lip to resist the temptation to bite it.

Millicent, forgetful of his injuries, took him a 'ring on the side o' the heid' with the palm of her hand. She was nearly sixteen, and was thinking of putting up her hair and even coming out in long frocks. She held that it was hardly decent to go on wearing short ones. Other people, however, did not hold with her, for the reason that she was very good to look upon as she was. As for her father, he never saw anything unless his nose was rubbed against it.

'Tell the truth for once, Peter,' she said, 'if only by accident. Ye need never deny that ye hae been fechtin'. Wha was it wi'? If ye dinna tell me, I will grip ye by the collar an' maich ye straight up to my faithet!'

'Fecht', said Peter innocently, 'I canna fecht.'

Both of the children could speak excellent English, but, from associating almost entirely with the bairns of the village, they had fallen into the habit, between themselves, of speaking the dialect of the countryside.

'Ay, brawly ye can fecht,' said his sister, 'though maistly ye are lickit. Oot wi' it, my man. Wha was it? Samuel Kelly, as ye are my faither's Man, tell me what ye ken about this affray!'

This put the minister's Man in a very difficult position. To speak the truth would be unfaithfulness to a steadfast ally—to refuse to tell what he knew would be to lose the favour of his young mistress. So, as is usual in such cases, he compromised.

'I dinna ken, as the A'michty is my stay,' he said; 'but I saw that pest Ebie Cassidy gang oot o' the crood hirplin!' (limping).

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

It was enough for Mistress Millicent. 'The morn'n's mornin', I myself will speak with Ebenezer Cassidy!' she said.

It was the morrow. Early in the morning it was. School had not taken in. The first bell for the Latin scholars had not yet sounded. The infant mistress had not wended her way up the street half an hour before lesson time to put in order the 'seams' for the sewing-class. There was great peace in the land.

Also upon the shop of Mr. Christopher Irving there abode the shadow of a long night's repose. Yawning, like the opening of a rat-trap, the pest took down the shutters. One by one he removed them, carrying them off in solemn procession as if he had been a convict gang. There was an iron bar which passed through a hole in the woodwork of the window, and was caught with a pin inside. This bar it was the delight of Ebie's life to throw down with a ringing clatter upon the pavement of the cellar. There was, dwelling next door, a nervous old maid of the name of Miss Primula Ektree, the sister of the late veterinary surgeon. To her sorrow her brother had left her his house. The noise of the clattering bar invariably broke her best morning sleep.

Master Ebenezer Cassidy (sad to relate) would have been greatly disappointed if it had not. She complained of him to his master, as was right and proper, though injudicious, and on sundry occasions he had been castigated by the strong bullock-compelling arm of Mr. Christopher Irving. So now, when the bar did not fall with the proper ringing jingle, very deliberately and considerably Ebenezer picked it up again, held it as high as he could reach standing on a packing-case, and let it fall again with a clash to wake the dead. He was a

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

connoisseur in these matters, and kept his eye cocked to the window-blind of Miss Primula— if it lifted ever so little, he was happy for the day. If she shook her fist at him, he danced upon the pavement.

What mattered a thrashing more or less? If his master failed to administer a pummelling, he (Ebenezer Cassidy, apprentice butcher) would arrange one himself, and attend in person at the ceremony with his fists doubled.

But this particular morning, Ebie, the Pest that was, felt himself at peace with all the world. True, he had had a small difficulty the night before with his bosom friend, Peter Mackie, the minister's loon. But rancour had passed away in the hours of sleep and under the cleansing flood of dreams. What remained was less than the clouds of morning, evanescent as a tale that is told.

But suddenly there emerged upon this butcher's paradise of a good conscience and the perfect digestion which follows unlimited porridge-and-milk a shower of blows. They were not very hard blows—not as of a fist or of a stick wielded scientifically. But they were all the more ignominious for that. They were padded, inefficient, discourteous blows—cow-tail blows, as Ebie would have called them.

With a shutter in his arms and fierce imprecations (happily unspoken) on his lips, the Pest of the village turned.

He found himself face to face with Millicent Mackie, the minister's fifteen-year-old daughter.

'Take that! and that! for hittin' my brother!' she panted, as she laid the umbrella, tightly rolled, upon the neck and shoulders of the astonished Pest of the village. She appeared singularly beautiful. Her eyes

flashed dark and fierce upon him. Her hair seemed to crisp and kink with fury. Her lips were firm-set, save where three front teeth, white as milk, showed above the coral of the lower lip. Peter bit his lip when he lied, Millicent when she was angry.

'I didna hit him,' cried the Pest, who would not have said as much for an army of grown-up drovers, 'I didna hit him, I tell ye. He strack me!'

But Millicent Mackie was far past arguing with. That which she had come to perform she was bound to see through to the ripe fruit and the bitter end.

'That for his black e'e!' she cried, landing a fierce though vague side-stroke on Ebie's shoulder. 'That for his bluidy nose!' Here followed a thrust from the iron ferule which caught the Pest on the angle of his jaw and of which he bore the mark for many days. 'That's for bitin' his lug!' And the lunge was so deadly that almost she had borne off his eye on the point of her umbrella.

It was enough and more than enough. The enemy turned. The enemy dropped his shutter. The enemy fled, while after him pursued, tambours battants, his remorseless foe. Blows came showering down. The Pest flitted up the street. It was the hour of shop-opening. The contemporaries of Ebie Cassidy, his friends and his adversaries, particularly his friends, swarmed to the door to see him running—running 'frae a lassie!' He, the hitherto unconquerable! He, the leader of affrays! He, the boaster of boasts! Yes, there he went, making excellent time up the long village street, while after him, armed only with an umbrella and with her curt skirtlets not yet lengthened, very able of arm and lower limb, sped the minister's lassie, dealing blows upon such portions of the Pest's anatomy as came

most handy to the swing of her weapon.

In vain Ebie lightened ship as he went. He shed his hat, his belt, his butcher's steel, sundry secret articles of vertu (as a pipe and tobacco pouch) which cumbered his blouse. They strewed the public highway and were picked up with joy and the full-blooded laughter of scorn.

In this order they reached the head of the village, where the pursuer suddenly tailed off and slid down a lane. For an elderly man, walking in deep meditation, his hands behind his back, hove into sight. His hat was on the back of his head. It was a large hat and yet too small for the great-eaved brain-case it was supposed to cover.

It was the Reverend Mackie, father of Peter and Millicent of that name, and minister of the Original Secession Kirk of Cairn Edward.

Once and for all he broke the pursuit. Millicent was sitting at breakfast, calmly cracking an egg, when he entered the manse.

'Are you ready for prayers?' he asked, lifting his eyes from the ground.

Millicent bowed her head reverently, and in his saintliest manner Peter also signified his readiness for (and need of) the sacred intercession which began and ended all the days in the Manse of Cairn Edward.

'Then let us pray!' said the minister, who disbelieved in introductions, and went immediately to the matter in hand.

No, the Pest did not come back. He left the village once and for all. The jeering laughter of his comrades he could not face—the shouts of those over whom he had ruled as a king—the scarce concealed contempt of those whom he had licked

and still could lick. No, he could not go back.

The iron had entered into his soul. He sought the nearest barracks—and listed. He was not easy till the Queen's shilling was in his pocket.

It was a Highland regiment, and Ebie lied about his age. But his physical development, together with the hardness of his biceps and wrist muscles, helped him to pass the doctor. He was accepted—even with enthusiasm. And four months later he went to the front.

They came out of the fire scorched, shaken, trembling like aspen leaves, praying, singing, or spitting curses after their kind. The smell of powder was upon them—in their garments, in their beards. Or it would have been in Ebie's, if he had possessed any.

But the man on his back had a beauty. Sergeant-major he was, wounded as it seemed unto the death, and one Private Cassidy ran close up to the wire entanglements and the deadly flashing guns and bore him in.

The sergeant recovered — went back to be the curator of a provincial museum of military curiosities. Hale and hearty he is to this present, and drinks four glasses of beer a day— all the while talking about the Great War, of the Many Surprises, and especially of his own wonderful escape from death.

‘And the man that brought you out?’ his interlocutor asks.

‘Ah,’ says the sergeant-major, lifting his glass, ‘he was the Pest of the Regiment, you see. But he saved my life, giving his own for mine. He had six Mauser

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

bullets through and through him when he let me drop off his shoulder— clean drove they were like gimlet-holes!

'And did he die?' comes the question.

The sergeant nods his head—not sadly, but rather with a satisfied air.

'Ay,' he says, 'but— he lived long enough to get the Victoria Cross!'

The questioner looks sorrowful. He thinks it is a sad ending to such a tale. The sergeant is not of his opinion.

'And the curious thing about it,' adds the sergeant, 'is that he did not want it, for himself. Before he died in hospital (name of Cassidy—Peter Cassidy of E Company) he says to me, 'Sergeant, I dinna want it for mysel'. I never wanted it. Send it to a young leddy in Scotland. Her name is Millicent Mackie, the minister's lassie at Cairn Edward. I likit her a heap—but—she never kened!'

14. THE LAST OF THE SMUGGLERS

I had been so long away from my own country that when I looked out once more upon the heather at the little waterside station of Dornal, on the Port Murdoch line, the width and space about me, the loneliness of the hills, and the crying of the muir-fowl affected me almost to tears. It was not long, however, before I had other things to think about.

I had long been an orphan, and indeed had not felt much the worse for it. My father and mother died when I was a boy at school, and the uncle who brought me up and put me into his own business in England must have taken some distaste to his native country of Galloway. At any rate, he never revisited it, nor for that matter encouraged me to do so. Nevertheless, he gave me an excellent education, and trained me well to his own profession of architect and building contractor, with the idea that I should succeed him in Highgate when he should wish to retire to the pretty house he had built for himself on the shores of one of the most beautiful of English lakes.

But quite suddenly one morning, when I was twenty-four, my uncle was found dead in his bed, and I, Hal Grierson, came into immediate possession of a good business and a very considerable sum of money.

Among other things in my uncle's safe, I found a large number of letters, receipts for money, and private memoranda. From these I learned for the first time that I had a relative living of whom I had never so much as heard. My uncle Walter Arrol was

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

of course my mother's brother and a man singularly reticent in all things not pertaining to business. Still, it struck me as strange, and in a way humorous, that as a young man of twenty-four I should come first to the knowledge that I had a grandfather living.

Yet after many perusals and reperusals of the letters and memoranda, I could come to no other conclusion. It was now the middle of December, and so late as the month before here was a letter dated from the 'Cothouse of Curlywee.' It ran as follows:—

'Dear Son, —Herewith I enclose bank-bill for twenty-five pound. We have had a good back-end and are well. Please acknowledge receipt.—Your afft. father, John Arrol.'

I laughed aloud when I came upon the letter. It seemed to me that it was rather late to add a live grandfather to my family connection. Then the 'we' puzzled me. Had I a grandmother too—or several uncles? At any rate, my curiosity was highly excited.

But as far as correspondence went, I found no clue. My uncle had not encouraged sentiment, and though there were many similar notes, dating at half-yearly intervals for nearly fifteen years back, his 'afft. Father' never got beyond the simple and perspicuous statement that it had been a 'good' or a 'bad' year that the 'lambs were doing fine,' or that 'there were many daiths among the yowes.'

I discovered, however, that fifteen years before Walter Arrol had bought a little moorland property in Galloway which had then come into the market. He paid what, with my knowledge of English prices, seemed to me a ridiculously inadequate price for the five or six thousand acres it was stated to comprise.

The title-deeds were there, all in due order, and

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

the receipts for taxation stamps, and lawyers' charges. There was also the memorandum of a loan of a thousand pounds to 'John Arrol, my father, to stock the farm of Curlywee with black-faced sheep,' together with notes of payment of 4 per cent, for the first five years. After that I could trace no further receipts on that account.

It was just the day before Christmas that I set out from a midland town where I had had some business, resolved to find out all that I did not know about my Galloway relatives. I might easily have written, indeed, either to 'John Arrol' himself, who from his style of correspondence would have been the very man to give me exact information, or to the firm of lawyers in Cairn Edward whose name was upon the deeds and parchments.

But, though it would have ruined me from a business point of view had it been known in Highgate, I have always had a romantic strain in my blood, and the little adventure pleased me.

I would take a little climb, I told myself, into the branches of my family tree. I would go in person to the Cothouse of Curlywee, and make the acquaintance of my grandfather. I wondered if 'John Arrol' would turn out to be as ignorant of my existence as I had been of his. At any rate, he was clearly not a person to waste words or squander his sentiment broadcast. Had I been content to prove my title to my uncle's property, he would have continued to sign himself 'John Arrol,' to enclose his half-yearly rent, and to require a receipt therefor to the end of the chapter without making the least effort to cultivate my acquaintance.

So this was the errand upon which I found myself in the little wayside station of Dornal. It was a grim

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

and greyish winter afternoon, and I had occupied myself in speculating, as the train slowly struggled up the incline, how long this rough bouldery desolation was to continue, and at what point it would issue forth upon the level strath and kindly hamlets of men, where I had pictured to myself my venerable relative residing in patriarchal dignity.

'Can you show me the way to the village of Curlywee?' I said to the stationmaster, who came out of his office to take my ticket. He made a dash at me almost like a terrier at a rat.

'The what?' he said sharply, dropping his official manner in his surprise.

'The village of Curlywee!'

The stationmaster laughed a short, quick laugh, almost as one would expect the aforesaid terrier to do in mirthful mood. He turned about on the pivot of one heel.

'Rob!' he cried sharply. 'Come ye here!'

'I canna come! I'm at the lamps—foul fa' them! The oil they hae sent us this time will no' burn ony mair than as muckle spring water!'

'Come here, I tell ye, Rob, or I'll report ye!'

'Report awa'—an' be!' Something that I did not catch.

The stationmaster did not further attempt to bring his official dignity to bear upon his recalcitrant subordinate. He tried another tack.

'There's a man out here wants to ken the road to the village of Curlywee!'

And as he spoke the little wiry stationmaster glanced quizzically up at me, as much as to say, 'That will fetch him!'

I failed to see the humour—then.

Immediately I heard a bouncing sound. Heavy feet

trampled in the unseen lamp-room, a stool was knocked over, and a great broad, jovial-faced man came out still rubbing a lamp globe with a most unclean piece of waste.

'The village o' Curlywee?' he inquired, smiling broadly at me, as it were from head to foot. 'Did I understand ye to say the village o' Curlywee?'

I nodded. I was growing vexed.

'I never heard tell o't!' he continued slowly, still smiling and shaking his head.

'Is there not a conveyance— an omnibus, or a trap of any kind which I can hire to take me there?'

I was getting more than a little angry by this time. It seemed past belief that I should have come so far to be laughed at by a couple of boors in the middle of a Galloway morass.

'Ow ay, there's a conveyance,' said the porter, 'a pair o' them!'

'Then,' said I tartly, 'be good enough to put my bag in one of them and let me get off!'

The big man continued to rub and grin. The stationmaster watched me quizzically with his grey birse of a head at the side.

Then, with the piece of dirty waste in his hand, 'Rob' pointed to my knickerbockered legs and brown leather shoes.

'Thae's the only conveyance ye'll get to Curlywee if ye wait a month at the Dornal!'

'What!' I cried, 'is there no road? There surely must be some kind of a highway.'

Again the waste rag pointed. It was waved like a banner across the bleak moorish wilderness upon which the twilight was settling grey.

'Road?' he cried gleefully, 'highway? Ay, there's the hillside—juist the plain hillside!'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

He waved me an introduction to it like a master of ceremonies.

'Enough of this,' I said tartly. 'I have come from London.'

'So I see by your ticket—it's a fine big place London!' interjected the stationmaster, with the air of one about to begin an interesting conversation.

'To see a gentleman in the neighbourhood of the name of John Arrol who lives at Curlywee. I would be obliged if you would point out to me the best and quickest way of reaching his house!'

The two men looked at each other. There was nothing like a broad grin on the big man's face now. The stationmaster also had lost his alert and amused air and had become suddenly thoughtful.

As neither of the two spoke, I added still more sharply, 'Do you know the gentleman?'

'Ow ay,' said Rob, 'we ken the man!'

'Well, be good enough to put me on the road to his house!'

Rob of the lamp and rag turned slowly as one of my own cranes turns with a heavy load of stone. His arm pointed out over the thin bars of shining steel of the railroad track.

'Yonder,' he said. 'Keep straucht up the gully till ye come to yon nick in the hill. Then turn to the left for three or four mile through the Dead Man's Hollow. Syne ye will come to a water, and if ye can get across, haud up the face o' the gairy, and gin ye dinna break your neck by faain' intil the Dungeon o' Buchan or droon ye in the Cooran Lane, ye will see the Cothouse o' Curlywee richt afore your nose!'

It was not an appetising description, but anything was better than stashing there to be laughed at, so I thanked the man, asked him to put my bag in the

left luggage office, and proffered him a shilling.

The big man looked at the coin in my fingers.

'What's this for?' he said.

'To pay the ticket for the left luggage,' I said, 'and the rest for yourself!'

Slowly he shook his head.

'There's no sic a thing nearer than Cairn Edward as a left luggage office,' he said; 'but I'll put the bit bag in the lamp-room. It'll be there if ever ye want it again!'

'What do you mean?' I cried furiously. 'Do you know that I am?'

'I mean,' said Rob deliberately, 'that ye are like to hae a saft walk and to need a' your daylight before ye get to Curlywee this nicht. A guid journey to ye!'

Upon the details of that weary and terrible journey I need not linger; though, when at first I threw my leg over the wire fencing of the railway and stepped out on the moor, the instinct of the heather seemed to come back to me. I lost my way at least half a dozen times. Indeed, if the moon had not been shining about half full in behind the grey sky, I must have wandered all night without remedy and most likely been frozen to death. My London-made single-soled shoes were soon completely sodden, and the uppers began to part company with the welt. I was wet to the waist or above it by falling into deep moss holes, where the black peaty water oozed through the softest of verdurous green.

I was bruised by constant stumbles over unseen boulders, and scratched as to my hands by slipping on icy rock. A thousand times I cursed myself for leaving my comfortable rooms which looked over to Hampstead Heath. I might have been reading a volume of Rob Roy with my feet one on each side of

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

the mantelpiece. And— at that very moment my foot plunged through the heather into a deep crevasse between two boulders, and I wrenched my ankle sideways with a stound of pain keen as a knife.

By this time I had been six or seven hours out on the moor. I had, to the best of my ability, endeavoured to steer the course set for me by the big-boned genius of the lamp. I possessed a little compass at my watch-chain, and my profession had made me accustomed enough to using it. But in the grey uncertain light the glens seemed to turn all the wrong way, and what 'the face of the gairy' might be I had not the least idea. I only knew that at the moment when I sprained my ankle I had been descending a hillside as lonely as an African desert and apparently as remote from anywhere as the North Pole.

I managed, however, by an effort to get it out of the trap into which I had fallen, and sat down upon a rock, half dazed with the shock. I remember that I moaned a little with the pain and started at the sound, not realising that I had been making it myself.

When I came round a little I was looking down into a kind of misty valley. The ground appeared to fall away on every side, and I could see shadowy and ghost-like forms of boulders all about me, some standing erect like menhirs, pointing stony fingers to the grey winter sky; some with noses sharpened took the exact shape of Polar bears scenting a prey as you may see them in the plates of my favourite Dr. Kane.

Gradually it dawned upon me that there was some sort of a light beneath me in the valley. It seemed most like a red pulsing glow, as if a nearly

extinct fire were being blown up with bellows. A sense of eeriness came over me. I had been educated by my uncle in a severe school of practicality. To be a contracting builder in the better-class suburbs of London is destructive of romance. But I have the Pictish blood in me for all that. Aboriginal terrors prickle in my blood as I pass a graveyard at midnight, and never when I can help it do I go under one of my own ladders.' But now, for the first time in my life, I felt a kind of stiffening of the hair of my scalp.

But this did not last long. My foot and ankle recalled me to myself. I could not, I thought, be worse off than I was— wet, miserable, hurt. If that light beneath me betokened a human habitation in the wild, I was saved. If not— well, I was no worse than I had been.

So, with a certain amount of confidence, I made shift to limp downward towards the strange pulsing, undulating glow. But though the sweat ran from me like rain, I could only go a few yards at a time. Nevertheless, the ruddy eye grew ever plainer as I descended, winking slowly and irregularly, waxing and waning like a fire permitted to go low and then again replenished.

At last I was near enough to see that the light proceeded from beneath a great face of rock which sprang upwards into the sky so high that it faded ghost-like into the milky glow of the choked moonlight. Just then my injured foot jarred painfully upon a stone which gave beneath its thrust. The loose boulder thundered away down the declivity, and with a cry I sank upon my hands and knees.

When I came to myself I could not speak. Something had been thrust into my mouth,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

something that gagged and almost choked me. My hands also were tied behind me. The red pulsing glow had vanished, but between me and the faintly lit grey sky I could see a tall dark figure which moved purposefully about. Presently I found myself dragged to my feet and thrust rudely forward. I tried to make my captor understand that I could not walk; but as I could not speak, I could only do this by lying down and utterly refusing to proceed. Then my captor drew a lantern from behind a heather bush and flashed it upon my face.

As he did so I held up my foot and endeavoured by signs to show where and how it was hurt. I was utterly unprepared for what my captor did next. He took me by the arms and laid me over his shoulders, pulling the plaid which he wore about my body as a kind of supporting belt. Then, with slow steady strides, he began to descend the hill. I suffered agonies lest we should both fall, and my ankle pained me till I nearly wept with sheer agony.

At last, with a fling of his foot my captor threw aside a door, stepped down a step, and I found myself stretched upon some straw.

Then a candle was lit, and the flame, sinking to nothing and then rising again, illuminated a little barn half-filled with sheaves and fodder. Upon a heap of the latter I was lying with my head away from the door.

'So,' said he who had brought me, 'I hae catched ye, sirrah!'

I saw my man now— a tall old man, with abundant grizzled hair, his face clean-shaven, and having a fringe of grey beard beneath the chin. Its expression was stern, even fierce, and the eyes, under bushy eyebrows that were yet raven-black,

looked out undimmed by years, and unsoftened by pity. It was a medieval, almost a savage, countenance. Even so, I thought, might Rob Roy himself have looked in his wilder moments. I had to recur to my wounded foot to convince myself that I had left a nineteenth-century railway station less than ten hours before.

Was it possible that this was the reason that my uncle did not visit his Galloway tenants, and did this one wish to square a deficiency in his rent by making an end of his landlord?

But the old man did not offer to touch me again, not even to release me from my bonds. He simply threw a few sacks over me, picked up the lantern, and went out with these words, 'Bide ye there, my man, till I am ready for you!'

But whether he went out to dig my grave or take his supper I could not make out, though the speculation was not without some elements of interest. At any rate, he locked the door behind him, and I was left alone in the black blank darkness of the barn.

It was poor enough cheer, and I began to shiver with the cold of the moss hags in my bones. Whether that exercise helped to loose the bonds about my wrists I know not— perhaps they were hastily tied. At any rate, it was not long before I had my hands loose. Then I could take the knotted handkerchief with its short cross knuckle of bog-oak out of my mouth. But I could do no more to make myself easy. My foot and ankle were already terribly painful, and the latter, as I could feel with my hand, had swollen almost to double its usual size.

After that I cannot tell very well what happened for some time. It may seem impossible, but I think

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

that I slept at least, certain it is that the night passed somehow, between sleeping and shivering. Hot flushes passed over me, with wafts of that terrible feeling of falling away, which precedes fever.

When I awoke in the morning, it seemed that I saw a young girl sitting opposite me on the edge of an overturned bushel measure. She had her chin in the hollow of her palm. Yet my head so whirled with the trouble which was on me, that I could not be sure till she rose and came close to me with a pitying look in her eyes. Then I tried to think of something to say to her which might explain who I was, and how I came thither. For I began to be sure there had been some mistake. However, I could think of nothing but what day it was. So I said to her as she approached in the most commonplace way possible, 'I wish you a merry Christmas!'

Yet all the time I knew very well that I was making a consummate fool of myself.

The girl seemed checked by my words, and then touched, perhaps, by the ridiculous anomaly of my appearance and my commonplace greeting, she burst into a ringing peal of laughter. I think I laughed, too, a little, but I am not sure. When next I came to myself I was being supported upon clouds or down, or at least by something equally pleasant and soft. Whereat I opened my eyes, and there was the girl trying to get some hot liquid down my throat out of a long thin-stemmed glass.

As soon as she saw that I was conscious, she said, 'Are you the excise officer from Port Mary who has been watching my great-uncle?'

'No,' said I; 'my name is Henry Grierson. I come from London. Where am I?'

But she sat up with a face of great horror.

'Not the exciseman— why, you are never Hal Grierson, my cousin?'

'That is my name,' I said, steadied by the situation. 'I came to look for a grandfather I never knew I possessed till a week or two ago! His name is John Arrol, and he lives at the Cothouse of Curlywee!'

The girl smiled a little.

'This is the Cothouse of Curlywee, and my great-uncle mistook you for a ganger, an exciseman! It is a mercy he did not kill you I But wait—I will bring him— he will be so sorry!'

By this time I had forgotten the pain in my head, and I was none so eager for the presence of my terrible relative.

'Please wait a moment. I want to ask your name,' I said, looking up at her.

'My name is Elsa Arrol,' she answered frankly, and in a cultivated manner. 'My father used to live here with his uncle during the last years of his life, and when he died I had to leave school in Edinburgh and come to Curlywee to keep house for my great-uncle!'

'Then you are my cousin?' I said, with some eagerness.

'Yes; a cousin of a sort— not a first cousin!'

And even then I was glad somehow, of so much kinship.

'Will you shake hands with your new cousin before you go?' I said.

'I will do better,' she answered, fluttering down from the edge of the corn-mow where she had seated herself. 'This is Christmas Day, and the cobwebs on the roof will serve for mistletoe!'

And, soft as a snowflake, I was aware of a waft of

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

perfumed air and something that, which might have been a butterfly and might have been a pair of lips, alighting on my forehead for a moment.

'There, you will think I am a bold madam, but you are hurt, and deserve a greeting better than a handshake after what you have gone through.'

Again I was left alone. But not for long. I saw the fierce old man again in the doorway, his brow still gloomy, though it was no longer angry.

'This lass tells me you are not the Port Mary ganger,' he said, with a hard accent; 'that you come from London. Is this true?'

'It is,' said I briefly. For I thought of the knuckle of bog-oak between my jaws.

'Then what might you be doing on my hill at midnight of a winter's nicht?'

'Well,' I returned, with some point, 'it is, in a way, my hill also. At least, if it be a part of the property of Curlywee, left me by my uncle, the late Walter Arrol of Highgate.'

'What,' he cried, a little hoarsely, 'ye are never my Annie's boy— wee Harry Grierson?'

'The same!' I said, still curtly. For I wanted to see how he would extricate himself. He stood frowning awhile, and stripping the piles from a head of corn.

'Ye will not misunderstand me if I confess that I am grieved for what has happened,' he said, with a certain stern and manifest dignity of bearing, which became him. 'I am sorry, not because ye are now my landlord, and I your tenant and debtor— but because I have made a mistak', and showed but poor hospitality to the wayfaring man!'

'Say no more about it,' I answered; 'but give me a bed to lie down on, and a pillow for my head. For I am very ill.'

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

The old man lifted me in his arms like a child, and carried me into his own room, where he laid me down. Then with a skill, patience, and tenderness I could not have believed possible, he undressed me, and laid me on his own bed.

When this was done he called Elsa, and she brought hot water to bathe my swollen ankle, now in girth well-nigh as thick as my thigh. He said not a word more about his rough treatment of me, nor did he mention my late uncle, nor the quarrel which had separated them in life.

All that strange Christmas Day I was light-headed, and these two gave me brews of herb-tea, famed in Galloway as a febrifuge. I dozed off, and awoke to find my cousin Elsa still unweariedly pouring hot water over my foot, or coming in with a new poultice of marsh-mallow leaves in her hands. I suppose I must have talked a great deal of nonsense. Indeed, Elsa told me afterwards that I made a great many very personal remarks upon her eyes and hair, which made her blush for shame before her great-uncle.

I was somewhat better, however, the next morning, and was able to join in the exercise of family worship, which my grandfather conducted at great length, reading two or three chapters of names and genealogies out of the historical books of the Old Testament in a loud, harsh voice (as if he had a spite against them). Then, reverently laying the great Bible aside, he stood up to pray. I noticed that as he did so he smoothed his grey badger's brush of hair down on top, as if it were a part of the ceremony.

When he had finished praying, my grandfather stood awhile, and then sat down beside me.

'Elsa,' he said, 'will you betake yourself to the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

aumry for a space. I have something to say to this young man that is only for a man and a kinsman to hear.'

My cousin obediently vanished. I never heard so light a footfall.

'Now, sir,' said the old man, 'you have been brought up in another school and may misunderstand. But I must e'en tak' the risk of that. Did your uncle give you any religious training?'

'He never mentioned the subject to me, sir!' I said. For my uncle, though a good man, had been no churchgoer or church lover.

'Are you a true Presbyterian, then, or are ye one of the worshippers of the Scarlet Woman that sitteth upon the Seven Hills?'

'I have not really thought much about it,' I replied. 'I am a Christian—I believe I may say that. Though, indeed, I have no claims to be thought better than my neighbours—indeed, the contrary!'

'Then,' said the old man, frowning, 'I fear ye are no better than a heathen man, and a publican.'

'But,' I cried, 'was not there One born this Christmas Day who was partial to the company of publicans and sinners?'

I thought I had him there, but he evaded me.

'That is in the New Testament!' he retorted, somewhat disparagingly. 'You will not understand, but listen. I am an old Cameronian, as my fathers were before me. No one of us has ever owned an uncovenanted king. Arrols not a few have gone to prison and to judgment, because we would not bow the knee to tyranny in the land and prelacy in the kirk. I have never paid a king's cess or tax till the law distrained upon my goods. And I continue to bake my bread and brew my ale as my fathers did

before me. And who shall say me nay? Not any ganger that ever tapped a barrel!’

I certainly had no intention of doing so; but, all the same, it seemed a curious thing to have smuggling and illicit distilling put, as it were, upon a religious basis.

The old man continued—

‘Therefore it was that I mistook ye for the spy of the Queen’s excise. I had watched the craitur nosing about the hilltaps for a day or two. I fear I used you somewhat roughly. For that I ask your pardon.’

I hastened to assure him that I never bore a grudge. He thrust out his hand at the word.

‘No more do I,’ he said, quickly adding, however—‘that is, no’ after it is satisfied!’

It was thus that I spent my Christmas Day in the Cothouse of Curlywee. It was three weeks more before I could leave my chair, and a month before I was able to return south to business. So that it was well my uncle had left competent men in charge. During this time, not unnaturally, I saw a good deal of my cousin. I thought her every day more charming, as she certainly grew more beautiful. As for my grandfather, he used to lie out upon the braefaces with a long spyglass looking for the exciseman from Port Mary. But that gentleman showed the excellence of his judgment by obstinately staying away.

When at last I went over the moor towards the station, I rode upon a strong sheltie. Elsa came part of the way with me, ‘to convoy me off the ground,’ as she said.

At our parting-place I asked her a certain question, which at first she refused to answer directly.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Afterwards she stated that she had conscientious scruples about the marriage of cousins and other near relatives. However, I am not without the strongest reasons for hoping that these objections are not insuperable, and that they will be overcome by next Christmas Eve. Already I have observed tokens of wavering. But, in any case, we will not tell my grandfather till the last moment; for where he will get a housekeeper to dwell alone in the Cot-house of Curlywee is more than either of us can tell. Meantime I am grateful for all that my Christmas Eve search for a grandfather has brought me.

15. LOST, STOLEN, OR STRAYED

Rob had been three weeks in the city. It was a strange place the city. He had heard of it before, because the trains went there. The railwaymen often spoke of it at Creelport, sitting on the light luggage 'hurleys,' or wagging their legs over the 'bank'—the stained and weather-beaten wooden platform from which the 'heavies' were loaded. Rob Itherward had been second goods porter at Creelport, and the new superintendent had promoted him to the better wages and harder work of the Lothian Road yard in Edinburgh—because it was 'a rise,' and he thought Rob would like it.

To some extent he did. There was the eclat before he left. The Creelport Bowling Club, of which Rob was a distinguished amateur, met and presented him with a silver-mounted umbrella. The wife of the president accomplished this in the following soul-stirring words:

'Maister Robert, I hereby present you with this silver-mounted umbyrelly—in a waterproof-cover—both of which, and this purse of gold, two sovereigns and sixpence-halfpenny, are the unanimous expression of the goodwill that the bowlers of Creelport feel for you, Maister Itherward—as well as their wives and daughters!'

Thus the 'silver-mounted' passed into the care and keeping of Rob. And the first thing he did was to remove from the umbrella its precious metal fittings, half from a doubt as to their safety, and half because he was ashamed to be seen with such a thing. He was assured in his own mind that his new

corduroys and stemmed bonnet with C. R. embossed upon it would attract attention in the yard— no less than his Sunday outfit on the streets of that churchgoing northern metropolis.

True, he had been mistaken. In the yard they called him 'Country Jock,' and were only kept (that is, the younger spirits) from rolling his new corduroy in the mud by accidents which happened in quick succession to three of their number. A doctor had to be sent for from the Fountainbridge Dispensary, and the Company refused to pay the bill. There had been negligence, the superintendent averred. A heavy weight might have fallen once, bruising the face of the junior lorryman, but it was impossible that the same thing could have happened three times in succession to three different employees.

This made Rob famous all over the old goods' yard, which extended from the Canal Basin to the back of Torphichen Street. Many offered him drink, but Rob did not drink. He had been brought up a douce Cameronian, and though a Cameronian is a fighter, he is no brawler. Besides, when you come to think of it, drinking leads to other things, such as staying away from the prayer-meeting, smoking, wasting your money, and sleeping in on Sabbath mornings instead of going to the kirk. Indeed, once you begin with the drink, there is no saying where you may end. In this connection the horrible case of Jamie Irvine was generally cited. Jamie, having been late at the Cross Keys one Saturday night, took a walk on Sabbath morning after the churches were in, and met the minister face to face on the Town Lands. How was he to know that the minister's brother was preaching for him that day, or that he himself had been sent for in a hurry to administer

the Cameronian form of extreme unction (which consists in the next thing to prayers for the dead) to old Betty M'Tavish? Betty always died at least once every year—the day after the new potatoes were pronounced eatable. She knew they were death to her, but she always gave them one chance more. Jamie Irvine was struck dumb on the spot, and immediately left the vicinity, for a well-paid but godless situation in Birmingham, where there is no Cameronian kirk. This shows what drinking may lead to.

For three weeks, then, Rob Itherward had been in Edinburgh, and during that time he had seen no soul from nearer home than Dumfries — which, to a Creelport man, is almost a foreign country. Rob had grown so homesick that he took to slipping over to the passenger side just to see the Creelport trains come in. He saw none of his own folk, however, because these mostly went Glasgow-wards for their marketing, and they changed guards at Lockerby. Still it was a comfort to see the carriages labelled Creelport to Edinburgh.

'It has been raining on Ben Gairn,' Rob would say, when he observed the splashed windows of the first-class carriage, which was always empty, swept, and garnished, because nobody in Creelport thought of travelling anything but third-class. Once he went to the long range of pigeon-holes, from which they label the, luggage of the passengers, carefully extracted a dozen 'Creelport' labels, and went home to his lodgings happy.

Rob Itherward had only one big wooden box for all luggage, like those which country joiners make for ploughmen going into service. But he labelled it 'Creelport' all over, in no less than ten different

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

places. Then he walked all round it, and felt that if anything happened to him, it at least could be trusted to find its way back to Creelport unaided.

At the yard—Rob had an 'early' Saturday and a 'late' Saturday. On the first he got away at half-past one of the afternoon. Seven in the evening was his lot on 'late' Saturdays. Not that at first this made much difference to Rob Itherward. Indeed, he often 'obliged' a comrade by 'taking his day' for him, so that, not unaccompanied, he could flee to the rural fastnesses of Gorgie, or the remote pleasancess of Portobello Pier. It was all the same to Rob, they said to each other. He would as soon stay in the yard as anywhere else.

But one Saturday, an 'early' one, Rob thought he would take his afternoon off just to see what it was like. Whereupon two of his seniors, James Dickie and Gib Kirkpatrick called him, among other things, a greedy pig. They had counted upon his complaisance, and had even arranged dual excursions on the strength of it.

Consequently, both James and Gib aforesaid, senior yardsmen and inferior only in strength and courage to Rob Itherward, considered themselves defrauded of a lawful half-holiday.

'Ye should hae warned us,' they said reproachfully. 'Then we wadna hae been landed like this. A dried stick like you disna ken what it is to keep a lass waitin' for you, and you no' there to meet her!'

'Dinna be so sure,' Rob answered with spirit. 'You tell me where ye were to meet the lassie, and I'll see if I winna do instead!'

Gib and James looked at each other, and shook their heads. Certainly this was not the Rob

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

itherward they had known, but they discreetly refrained from indicating their places of rendezvous, or the names of the disappointed damsels. They did not know what this new man, arisen in the place of 'Country Jock,' might not be capable of.

So they called Rob all the names they could think of, and settled down to the slow afternoon's work upon the sundries at the yard, while Rob, with a vague sense of elation, strolled home to put on his tweed suit (made at Riddick's, High Street, Creelport, price £3, 5s. for cash). Then he marched down Princes Street as if the place belonged to him.

The shops were closing. Some of them were already shut. Others had the steel roller shutters down, but a small compartment of the door open. From one portal still wide and black a stream of girls was ebbing. They came in clumps and clusters, laughing and whispering. Secrets and projects spilt over. Mystery ran riot.

'At six—at the Register!'

'No, not the theatre—I said no at once!'

'He might do as he liked, but I told him straight I would have nothing to do with any one in the carpet department. Besides he may go any day. Mr. Martin told him yesterday that he was getting too big for his berth!'

'And did he say that? Mr. Martin, himself?'

'Yes; Effie M'Laren was passing and heard him. I shouldn't wonder if Mr. Septimus gets his money this very night! Anyway I won't have anything to do with him!'

Rob was immediately behind the last two girls as they turned eastward, away from Martin & Learmont's.

The girl who was so determined to have nothing

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

to do with the 'carpet department' was much the taller. May Dear walked with a certain ease and grace which came from the habit of 'showing' specimen dresses and peignoirs in the ready-made department to customers who thought they would look as well in them as she did. Her companion was a fair-haired little thing, who served at the glove counter, and sometimes took a turn at one of the pay-desks in case of need. There were in Martin & Learmont's at least fifty little blonde girls exactly like Lizzie Stewart, but there was only one May Dear, the 'show' girl of the dress department. Mr. Martin had said so himself, and there was no end of jealousy about it too.

Sighing lightly, Rob Itherward reluctantly crossed to the opposite pavement, because Princes Street, though wide, did not seem half so wide as the difference which separated these dainty young ladies out of Martin & Learmont's from his world of the goods yard and thirty-three shillings a week. Also, he had feelings, somewhat belated, it is true, concerning eavesdropping. Just opposite the Scott monument, the two girls turned sharply southward, as if a sudden new intention had moved them like a command on parade. They made towards Princes Street Gardens, and the abrupt wheel brought them face to face with Rob. He half raised a stiff arm as if signalling in the shunting yard.

'May!'

'Rob—Robert Itherward!'

Rob is believed to have lifted his hat. It felt about a ton weight and he could not get it right on again, which made him feel more awkward than ever.

'What are you doing here, Rob Itherward?'

Mechanically the three turned into the flowery

spaces of the East Princes Street Gardens, and felt wide keen air press against them as it rebounded fresh from the slopes of Arthur Seat. There was a dull rumble in Rob's head, which might have been the N. B. R. trains running along the dry bed of the Nor' Loch, or something within himself that pumped the ideas too quick into his big, honest, slow-thinking brain.

Lizzie Stewart looked across her friend at Rob many times. Was it to walk in the Gardens with this big-boned, ill-dressed country 'gawk' that May Dear of the dress department had refused the escort of Mr. Septimus Sparks of the Carpets? Lizzie only wished she had had the chance. And the head of a department, too! Why, this man clumped along like a policeman in plain clothes, while Mr. Septimus had yellow boots with brown laces. All the world might take them for no better than nursemaids!

As they were momentarily separated from their escort, Lizzie Stewart communicated this fear to her comrade.

'Take us for housemaids!' retorted May Dear; 'well, I hope neither of us will ever be taken for anything worse!'

Then as Rob Itherward rejoined them, after coasting a plot of red and white foxgloves. May put an audacious hand on his arm.

'Rob,' she said, 'my friend Lizzie here is afraid we may be taken for housemaids!'

'Gracious,' cried Rob, 'what's thae?'

For in Creelport only the provost keeps two servants, who are known severally as 'the Provost's lass,' and 'the Provost's lassockie.' When, however, the social standing of a housemaid was explained to Rob he said he did not mind what they were taken

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

for so long as he saw a Creelpport face, and especially one that had been in the same class with him at John Cranmer's Academy.

'It's an awesome pleasure juist to see ye, May!' he kept repeating as he walked by her side. He could hardly keep from cracking his finger and thumb in his enthusiasm.

May smiled and nodded, to the extreme astonishment of Lizzie Stewart, who had never before seen the haughty princess of the dress department show the least favour to any man.

'And such a man!' muttered Lizzie to herself, as she inventoried the white waistcoats and resplendent ties of Mr. Septimus Sparks of the Carpets. She took another look at Rob—such shoulders—like the end of a barn, and feet—well, perhaps the feet were not so bad, but the boots must certainly have been made for crossing ploughed fields.

She thought better of the 'hulk,' however, when Rob proposed that, if they had nothing better to do, they might go down by car to Leith. There were, he had heard say, pleasure boats that ran from there. And, above all, there was a man in Ship Row who got his butter, eggs, and milk from Creelpport. This he knew better than most, for he had often enough anathematised the daily relay of cans and firkins at Creelpport Station.

So Rob, who walked in a maze, did the right thing by instinct. He got them all on top of a car at the head of Leith Walk, assisted them down at Pilrig, where, as on a hostile frontier, high and low must change carriages—for the Edinburgh Jews have no dealings with the Leith Samaritans. And so, in due time, they came to the house of a certain Alexander

McCubbin. It was a temperance eating-house, clean and comfortable, with fewer flies and fresher bread than are usually to be found in such places. Also they sold Kops' ale, which is the next thing to taking a drink.

Yes, there was no mistake. Alexander M'Cubbin had his milk, his butter, and his eggs all the way from Creelport-on-Dee. Also he baked his own bread, and if the ladies would like some Creelport bacon

'From which farm?' interrupted Rob sharply, who was learned in all the local manner of feeding and rearing.

'From Ingleston!' said the host, pleased to find one who so justly appreciated the provisioning of his table.

'It's as weel!' retorted Rob sagaciously, 'for if it had been frae Craig Feechy, I wadna hae gien it to a dowg that I was ony way fond o'!

The talk during this Galloway repast ran on local things, persons and reminiscences quite unknown to city-bred Lizzie. They recalled the Provost's habit of sleeping in the kirk. Dr. John's garden, the frailties of Jock the bellman in the matter of liquor. They told who had married which, and which was likely to marry whom. By and by Lizzie began to feel interested. The young giant's face was almost handsome when animated, and—she could not see his boots. Certainly she had never seen her friend look so natural and happy.

There was the usual little wrangle about paying — which, by the way, Lizzie considered quite unnecessary. But the big goods porter carried his point, and when it came out casually that he was expecting a 'shift' into the 'Lost, Stolen, or Strayed'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Department, where he might even be an inspector and get forty-five to fifty shillings a week, Lizzie Stewart reconsidered her whole position and called in her prejudices.

'Why,' she thought, 'even Mr. Septimus of the Carpets doesn't touch anything like that. He could marry tomorrow if he liked.'

They made part of the troop which pressed on board the Aberdour boat at the West Pier, and through the warm July afternoon they continued to voyage among the lush pasturages and gowan-spangled meads of Creelport. From their talk Lizzie Stewart received a general impression that Creelport was more beautiful than Edinburgh, more commercial than Glasgow, more populous than London, as well as humorous and desirable, as only (apparently) Creelport could be. In Creelport itself they call it a hole. But after six months' absence it becomes an annex of Paradise.

Now there are craigs and woods and a shore at Aberdour; but Rob Itherward recalls these vaguely, as in the morning one remembers a dream of the night. He walked between the two girls, and his heart beat with wholesome pride when he thought of Gib Kirkpatrick and James Dickie kicking their heels on the bench by the canal basin—with strange, complicated odours all about them—and wondering what their girls would say to them the next day at church.

By the time they had finished a second repast it was late afternoon. There was just time for a stroll along the beach, mounting that craggy little hill from which one sees Inchcolm and the towers of Edinburgh making successive Turneresque pictures all by themselves as fast as in a factory.

By this time little Lizzie Stewart had become much interested in the stalwart Gallovidian. Indeed, now she generally walked on one side of him, while May Dear of the Dress Department took the other. They passed the children playing low down on the wide beaches and had entered what in pre-railway days had been one of the most beautiful walks in the world—that between Aberdour and Burntisland. Suddenly they saw before them two young men, both with billycock Panamas of the cheaper sort, both with white waistcoats, both with yellow boots. No, it could not be. Yes, it was—Mr. Sparks of the Carpets and his assistant and worshipper, Mr. Elkin.

Even an hour ago Lizzie Stewart's heart might have beaten tumultuously. But now she could look down at Rob Itherward's boots without the least shame. The good-natured giant from the south had interested her, and she would have given all she possessed to walk round the town lands of Creelport with him or paddle in a boat down by the Dutchman's Isle.

But of course he was in love with May. How could he help it? Why, May was the prettiest girl in all Martin & Learmont's! And they talked about all sorts of things she knew nothing about. Besides, she was only a plump, rosy, golden-haired little person, not statuesque in the least or imposing like May. But he would, of course, love May. Very likely he had loved her all her life, and never dared to tell her. It certainly would be difficult with May. But when he was an inspector with forty-five shillings or more a week—why, then he could speak to May or anybody else. So little Lizzie Stewart thought with a sigh that at least she would be asked to be bridesmaid.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

The two young men from the Carpet Department halted, and Lizzie noted, with quick professional eye, that they each wore lemon gloves to match their boots, and had on the wonderful knitted ties which cost two shillings apiece wholesale.

Lizzie wondered what they could be doing there, and hoped that they would not notice them. But Mr. Sparks and his friend Mr. Elkin were determined that they should. It was at the steep part of the Burntisland road that they turned, and, taking off their hats very politely, explained that they had come to see the two young ladies home. They added that the policeman in plain clothes need not trouble himself further in the matter.

Now this was dangerous talk to Rob Itherward, who had the family muscles as well as a certain family infirmity of temper well known in Credport. His Aunt Lummy and his sister Flecky were both noted for the instantaneous nature of their resentments.

But Rob looked so quiet and patient that the two smart young men from the Carpet Department thought what a fine joke it would be to take the girls away from this sheepish country swain. A rare tale it would be — one of the finest, and calculated to add greatly to their reputations at Martin & Learmont's.

As a jest, Mr. Septimus called Miss Dear 'May dear!' At which his satellite Mr. Elkin, a little wizened pins-and-needles fellow, nearly shook himself apart with delight. He would never have dared all this alone; but now he advanced boldly to offer his arm to Lizzie Stewart. Lizzie emitted a little scream and clutched hold of Rob Itherward's sleeve, which seemed to embarrass that slow giant no little. Only May kept her calm countenance. She stood

apart, very tall and unapproachable. Her face did not even express contempt.

'Come, Lizzie,' she said, 'come away. Mr. Itherward is wishing to speak with these two gentlemen alone.'

Lizzie still had Robert's arm, to which she clung with touching confidence.

'But they might hurt him!' she said, with a pleading glance at her friend.

Miss May Dear flashed her first word of scorn, bred of the fulness of knowledge.

'Them!' she cried, taking in the two young men from the Carpet Department, and then allowing her eye to travel over the huge frame of Robert Itherward. She made no further comment, however, but simply repeated her command—

'Come along, Lizzie.'

She knew that women only retard and embitter masculine explanations. The youths in the yellow boots and finely worked ties would have followed, but the path was barred by Robert Itherward, goods porter at the Caledonian Station.

'Bide!' he said. And they abode perforce, while he presented his ultimatum.

'Will ye let the lassies alane, or will I throw ye ower the craig into the sea?'

Now in his own way Mr. Septimus Sparks was a man not without courage. Discretion was what he lacked.

'Go into him on that side, Elkin,' he cried; 'I will take him in front.' And he advanced in what was believed in the Carpet Department to be an attitude of attack.

'Weel,' said Rob, 'if ye winna leave the lassies alane, on your ain heads be it. An' it's a fine warm

nicht for a dip in the salt water!'

Saying which, he picked up Mr. Septimus as easily as ever the latter handled a 'small Persian.' The girb stood chatting apart—May Dear not even troubling to turn her head, though her companion clutched her arm and trembled for Robert Itherward.

Lizzie, however, watched out of the corner of her eye, and screamed as one pair of yellow boots disappeared over the crags into the sea with the diver's splash, and the other pair twinked rapidly up the dim glades of the wood in the direction of Burntisland.

'Come back,' roared Rob Itherward, 'and I'll fling you after your friend!'

But Mr. Elkin had learned a lesson, and had no desire to turn back. Besides, it was all that fool Sparks.

'Step on a wee, lassies,' said Rob. 'I'll see this yin oot safely. He nicht be for settin' up lip. Ye never can tell when thae Englishers hae eneuch.'

It was not till the third time of asking that Mr. Septimus Sparks had enough. Twice again did he plunge into the sea, which seemed as pleased to receive him dripping as dry. Then he threw up the sponge. Rob, standing comfortably on the rocks, hauled him out by the debris of his collar and woven tie. The saffron colouring matter had run all about, and from the chin downwards Mr. Septimus was an arrangement in egg-yolk and mustard. But with his mouth he still proffered injuries. So that Rob, assured by this time that hydropathic treatment was useless in his case, adopted the most ancient form of dry-land pathology, and kicked him down the path after his comrade into the advancing night.

Then he came back to the girls and began to tell

them about the wonders of the Borgue shore.

'Sand and bonny freckled stanes,' he said, with enthusiasm, 'an' wee coves to bathe in as safe as in a tub, and the fuchsias growing richt doon to the water's edge—big as trees! —Help us, what's the maitter wi' the lassie?'

He broke off his description because Lizzie had begun to sob bitterly. Inexperienced Rob scratched his head, and found an opportunity to whisper to May, 'Surely she never could care for yon puir craitur in the yellow boots!'

May made a gesture of impatience.

She put an arm about her friend with a protecting gesture, which Rob Itherward obligingly imitated. It is wonderful how soon one gets used to that sort of thing. Thus between them they supported the little yellow-haired girl in the direction of the boat. To the stolid Creelporters she seemed a kind of town baby and they treated her as such. Indeed Lizzie Stewart had never been so spoilt all her days. They made much of her— both May and Rob. And Lizzie, nothing loath, let herself be petted. It had not happened too often in her life. And after all, there is something comfortable in the strength of a man, even if his boots are made for crossing ploughed fields. But then, after they were married, of course May would see to that. Lizzie wondered if May would give up her place in the Dress Department. She would miss her if she did. And then, all at once Lizzie began to cry again. She could not tell why. She thought it was the idea of losing May.

Rob walked home with them that night to their lodgings in St. Patrick's Square. Then he went home treading, in spite of his boots, upon the viewless air. He was to take them to the Cameronian Kirk next

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

day, where his pew, with some skill in packing, held three. And this in spite of the fact that Miss May Dear belonged to the Estabshed Church at Creelpport, while Lizzie had distinctly Episcopalian leanings. It was a triumph of the faith, no less. On account of this he compromised with his conscience for another walk with May and Lizzie on Sunday afternoon. They went to the Botanical Gardens to observe the wonderful works of nature. Rob thought he had never seen these so clearly before. He repeated the 8th Psahn to himself. But he did not pause to consider how much nature is assisted by the presence of a pretty girl or two.

Not till long afterwards did any of the trio know how near they had come to a tragedy that Saturday afternoon.

Mr. Martin, senior partner of Martin & Learmont, was also Director of the Caledonian Railway, and he met the Goods Manager of the line after Monday's board meeting.

'Have you got a man in the yard of the name of Itherward?' demanded Mr. Martin.

'Yes,' said the Goods Manager. 'A fine young fellow from Galloway—got him from the 'G. & S.W.' I am thinking of making him Inspector in the 'Lost, Stolen, and Strayed' Department.'

'Well,' said Mr. Martin dryly, 'he would need to be a fine young fellow; for he threw two of my men into the sea at Abdour last Saturday—one of them three times!'

'What sort of men?' said the Goods Manager sharply.

'Oh, so so,' said Mr. Martin. 'But I don't think that sort of thing should be passed over.'

The Goods Manager looked uncomfortable and

anxious, but the wishes of a prominent railway director are not to be lightly passed over.

'Itherward is one of my best men,' he said slowly. 'I should not like to dismiss him. I think there must be some mistake.'

'No mistake,' said Mr. Martin. 'Something about two girls, of course. Our men wanted to see them home, I am told.'

A light flashed across the Goods Manager's face. 'Ah,' he said, 'I saw Itherward in church yesterday with two ladies: one tall and dark, and the other little and fair. You know I am an elder at Dr. Silver's on the Bridges?'

'Ah, the Cameronians,' said Mr. Martin, who did not often cross church thresholds himself, but respected those who did. 'Well, perhaps after all our men may have been to blame. I shall make inquiries. I confess I have not been satisfied for a long time with at least one of those implicated. Do nothing in the meantime.'

That same week Robert Itherward was nominated Inspector at fifty shillings a week in the 'Strayed Waggons and Lost Parcels' Department, while there were two vacancies in the 'Carpets' at Martin & Learmont's.

Rob walked frequently out now. His new duties permitted him much more leisure, though sometimes he had to be away from the city for a couple of days at a time. But—he could go to Creelport when he chose, which was some comfort.

Very curiously, it was Lizzie Stewart who had taken the greater interest in the new appointment. Miss May Dear was exceedingly busy at the time. For one thing, the autumn rush was just on, and she was nearly run off her feet. For another, she was

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

receiving a great many letters by the post— letters which needed to be answered.

More than once at the Ross Fountain in the West Gardens it was Lizzie who met Rob Itherward. Also, strangely enough, Rob talked away with unabated pleasure and vehemence concerning the Isle Wood, the Furbar, Dirk Hatteraick's Cave, and all the topographic marvels of Creelpport, till Lizzie knew them almost as well as Rob himself. Lizzie thought he did this to please May, and being a conscientious little girl, she spent an hour every night in retailing the subject-matter to her friend, who yawned undisguisedly. Then she praised the Inspector of the 'Lost, Stolen, and Strayed' Department. It was wonderful how he was getting on. He would live to be Superintendent—that he would. Now Lizzie Stewart was just a plump, pleasant little towsy-headed girl, with eyes that were sweet, soft, and adoring. But what she could, she did. She adored May Dear with all her heart, and for May's sake she got to like Rob Itherward very much. A day when she did not see him was a day lost. There were, however, not many of these.

Lizzie got her surprise—the surprise of her life, indeed—one September Saturday on the western slopes of Arthur Seat. She had left May Dear at home writing letters, and had gone, not very reluctantly, to carry her excuses to Rob.

They sat down on the bare slopes above Samson's Ribs, from which they could look out upon Duddingston and the grey-green rearward butt of Pentland. Being in the Glove Department of Messrs. Martin & Learmont's, Lizzie Stewart was naturally dainty about her hands. Besides, there were often 'returns' and 'splits' which Mr. Martin allowed the

girls to have at purely nominal figures. And Lizzie had a pretty hand, small and plump like herself, with rosy nails, each with a warm half-moon where it escaped from the flesh of the finger—a marvel of a hand to Rob Itherward, who found himself pondering much upon it.

At last he asked to look at it, to compare, doubtless, with his own worn member, scarred with the nails of boxes and the unchaining of many waggon doors. Rob thought himself cunning, but he knew not women. Lizzie saw through him at a glance.

‘Mind,’ she said, looking up at him roguishly, ‘I’ll tell May.’

‘Oh, don’t, then!’ said Rob, quite taken aback, ‘at least, not till I hae gotten the proper size!’

‘The proper size?’

Lizzie’s cry of amazement was genuine. What could the man mean? The Inspector of the L. S. & S. took a little case from his pocket. It was dark leather outside. Inside all was deep blue velvet, and several rings with stones grew out of narrow furrows, sparkling nobly.

‘Ye see,’ explained Rob heavily, ‘there’s a Creelport man that has a shop for thae bits o’ things in Leith Street, and he lent me this bit boxie to try!’

‘But,’ quavered Lizzie, the blood leaving her face, ‘what’s the use of trying them on me? May’s finger is quite different.’

‘May’s finger? They are no’ for May’s finger, but for yours—that is, if ye will tak’ yin frae a great muckle awkward gomeril like me.’

‘But— but,’ said Lizzie, now nigh to fainting— ‘I thought—I thought—May is the bonniest. I am nothing at all. You should marry May. You must!’

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

You must!

'A likely story,' broke out the giant. 'Why, May was trysted from she was a lassie to my cousin. Pate Roger, the coal-agent at Creelport Station. They are to be married in three weeks. That's what she's aye writin' letters for the noo! I am to be best man.'

'May Dear to be married, and never told me!'

'She wad be ashamed,' Rob explained cheerfully. 'I never telled onybody either! Gallowa' folk are like that.'

'Are you to be married too?'

This time the blood left her cheek so completely that the burly Rob had to sustain her as if she had been a long-lost, long-stolen, long-strayed consignment of high value which he had just recovered.

'Ay,' said Rob with her ear close to his mouth, 'I'm to be married—that is, if the lass is willin'!'

'What's her name?' said the girl before whose eyes sky and land were whirling mistily.

'Her name,' said Rob slowly, 'her present name is Lizzie Stewart. But if she's willin', in three weeks it will be Elizabeth Itherward, and there's a cottage I hae been furnishin' oot at Kirkliston.'

'Oh, Rob,' sobbed Lizzie, 'and what for did you let me think it was May all the time? That was cruel—cruel!'

'Was it?' said Rob, softly for him, 'well, I'm vexed for that. But troth, it never entered my head. And as we tak' yin anither for better or for waur, I will hae a lang time to mak' it up to ye for the cruelty. Let me begin noo by tryin' on the Leith Street man's rings. They're real bonny!'

'Oh—h—h—ooh!' sighed Lizzie Stewart happily, as she endeavoured to decide between a spinelle ruby

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

and a genuine opal. I wonder what they will say at the glove counter.'

'We will ask them a' doon to afternoon tea,' said Rob daringly, 'auld man Martin too, if he behaves himsel'! Ye can gie him in your notice on Monday, and say 'wi' Rob Itherward's compliments.'

16. THE HERD OF THE MERRICK

'Dowgs—dowgs!' said old Willie Mabie, the herd of the Merrick (which is a void mountain, the crown of Galloway and the highest south of the Grampians on the mainland of Scotland), 'dowgs! There is never a collie nowadays worth his brose and the bacon-rind he steals at the kitchen 'bucket.' But in my young days there were dowgs wiser than mony humans. Eh, lad, but the tales I could tell ye. And true tales—ye needna look!

'There was my ain wee Leddy. And a kennin' brute she was—brute, did I say? Faith, there are few that gang to the market at Newton Stewart on Fridays, to drink at the Croon Inn and rub their backs against the bricks o' the braw new auction mart, that are half as wise.

'Ech, ay, lad—but we were a braw pair, Leddy and me! When ye see Willie Mabie wi' his bent shoulders and a face like a last year's crab-apple, ye ken nocht o' what Willie Mabie was in the year '52. And as for puir wee Leddy, she has been in her grave for mair than forty year. So ye can ken nocht aboot her ava'.

'For me, I was set up like a grenadier, and on the hilside there was nane to equal Willie Mabie.

He had had a man's herdin' ever since he was a boy o' fourteen, and the best wage in six muir parishes. Lord, but wi' Leddy at my heel and a guid hazel rung in my grip, I wasna feared for the deil himsel'!

'And, certes, I had need no' to be easily scared. For I met in wi' him! Ay, ye may look, but it is true—I met in wi' him that men caa' the Prince o'

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Darkness, and yet cam' back to tell the tale— me, Willie Mabie, that herdit the Merrick— me and nae ither!

The way o't was this. Ye see— and weel do you ken—that it was and is the ploy o' ploys for country lads to tak' 'shanks' pony' and aff i' the gloaming to see the bonny lassies. Oh ay, ye may look at me— hardly fit to hirple frae the peat-stack to the ingle neuk—and think that it's time I was thinkin' on my latter end. But, laddie, if ye hae loved the bonny queans in your youth, man, ye like to mind o't in your auld age. Ay, ye mind o' it when the sun warms your bluid, and your warst regret is that you hadna mair and better to bethink ye on. And folk will wonder what for ye are screwin' up your auld birsy face and bleary een, and they will say under their breath that the auld man is gettin' doited. But never ye heed!

For ye are awa' back by some snug trysting stile, wi' the scent o' the lilac and the flowering gale a' about ye! Ye are waitin' for her. Ay, and yonder is the link o' the road where ye will first get a glint o' her, and your een are glued to that. The heart in your breast gangs hop-skip-and-loup. Something dizzies afore your een, and for the life o' ye ye canna mind what ye had made up to say to her when she cam'.

For there she is! She has turned the corner. And ye are awa' to meet her. Ye haena the least idea what ye are sayin'—no' that it maitters; for she is tellin' ye that she canna bide a minute— her mither will be missin' her— ye ken the things that they a' say the first time they come to the trystin' stile. Ow ay, ye ken, lad! Was it no' We'nsday nicht that I saw ye doon at the Caldons Yett wi' Jeannie?—och no, never a word about that! Willie Mabie will never be a

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

spoil-sport. Na, na; in his day—ow ay, in his day—ay, ay—weel.

'About the deil! And what he had to do wi' my collie bitch Leddy? That is what ye want to ken! Who telled ye about that? Me telled ye? Never! Aweel—aweel! I am an auld man, and whiles I wad forget to come in to my meals if they didna send oot some o' my grandson's bairns to gie me a cry. No' but what I mind the auld things best — aboot when I was a braw lad and great wi' the lassies, and could button my knee-breeks below the knee without stoopin', as lithe an' limber as King George himsel'.

There was a lass—och ay—there was a lass. There aye is a lass, but the real trouble disna begin till there are twa! Howsomever, this lass was the bonniest lass— we will caa' her Kitty Kirgan—though that wasna her name, it sounded juist like it.

'And Kitty had a way o' lookin' at ye underneath her eyelashes, as if she was feared o' ye, but no' as feared o' ye as o' the rest o' the lads. Laddie, when I think o' the look she gied me when I askit her 'if I micht hae the plesure' (we were desperate polished i' thae days) the plesure o' seein' her hame frae the singin' schule! She said that 'if it wasna takkin' me oot o' my road ower muckle ' And then Kitty raised her lashes on me— slow, slow! Naebody had the gait o't but Kitty. And when at last her een were dear, it was as if a cloud o' the nicht had passed across the moon. I was fairly dazzled, and the heart within me gaed kerwallop. And faith, it does that this very minute, me that canna mind the minister's text last Sabbath day, and doubtless should be thinkin' on my latter end. But it's mair comfortin' to think on Kitty, for a' the way that the gipsy served us. Mind, ye are no' to tell o' this to my grandson, that is a

sober-like man and makin' for the eldership o' the Kirk. Him! He never had the spunk o' a sparrow, my John's Tam! And I wadna be tellin' you, laddie, had I no' come on ye—quaite like—the ither nicht doon by at the Caldons! Though, mind ye, Jeannie is a feat bit lass, but no' to compare wi' Kitty. Oh, hech, no!

The folk were better made and bonnier langsyne—baith men and women. There was me mysel'—aweel!

'Ow ay, hech — maybe I did say that before. And about Kitty, and the wee collie Leddy, and the Black Deil? Oh, I'll tell ye— never fear— but gie a man time to get a snuffie. Noo, there's a silk hankie for ye— yaird-wide, and juist the colour that nae amount o' sneeshin' mak's ony mark on it! Na, na!

'Aweel. Kitty fairly bamboozled us, me amang the rest. She was the dairy lass doon at Palgowan— the braw big farm ye hae seen in the howe o' the hills as ye gang into Ayrshire. It was a lang heel-and-toe tramp doon by the Spear o' the Merrick every nicht. And as like as not, juist to find some ither lad there afore me, talkin' to Kitty Kirgan.

'Oh, I could hae killed them on the spot—though I never saw that she lookit at ony o' them as she did at me. She keepit her een doon on her bines (milk-pails) and cheese-presses. I never saw her lift them upon ony lad but me. Though there was Ebie Borthwick and Tam MacCleary, and a McHaffie— I dinna mind his first name, a limber chiel, the son o' a wee laird about the back o' Cairnsmuir. Faith, we snarled at yin anither like oor ain collies, and stopped late to stay the ither oot. So that whiles I had to gang richt to the hill and the sheep-herdin' without ever comin' hame to my mither's for my breakfast. Sic fools are young folks— and oh, the

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

sweetness as of honeycomb in mindin' o't! But dinna tell Tam, my grandson, that's aimin' to be an elder o' the kirk. Gosh no! Dinna tell him, the saft, cabbage-headed cowl, that wad grudge auld Willie his bite-and-sowp but for the wee pickle siller that he may hae in his stockin'-foot!

'But you that's acquaint wi' the Kitty Kirgan breed will no' need to be telled that Kitty lifted her e'elashes... syne droppit them feared-like, and then flashed them up like yin o' thae patent wunda blinds they pit in the hooses nooaday, till we were fair dazzled—Ebie Borthwick, Tam MacCleary, young Laird McHaffie, and a' the hale clan! And every chiel o' them thocht himsel'— what I wad hae ta'en oath to being—the man preferred. And faith, whiles I think sae yet! And sae, dootless, wad Ebie and Tam and the Laird, had they no' been lang in their restin' graves. For it is wonderfu' the conceit o' man— though 'deed I cam' better oot o't than the rest. Ech ay!

'But Kitty drew me on— and led us a' by the nose— the wee ill-contrivin' denty fairy that diddled us a'!

'She wasna a muckle lass, but raither smallie, wi' black curls on her heid that whirled up o' themsels like a watch spring when ye drew them oot atween your fingers! I hae tried. She telled me that nae ither man had ever daured, and that nicht I gaed hame walkin' on the clouds o' even—I had that guid a conceit o' mysel' I wadna hae caa'ed the King my cousin!

'Ye see Kitty had a curl that was like a camsteery yowe in the flock, a regular dyke-breaker. And that curl it was fell bonny, and wad slip frae its bounds juist as Kitty Kirgan was creamin' the mornin's milk.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

And with the muckle byne in baith her hands, of course, she couldna help hersel'. So she wad say, 'Willie, juist pit that up for me—it will be in the byne among the milk in anither minute.' And so ye bent nearer, wi' ten fingers that were a' of a sudden ten thoombs—and there was the curl that twisted and twirled between your fingers like an eel on a string. Talk o' yer electreecity! And there was Kitty's ear, like yin o' the shells that the sailor lads fetch hame frae foreign pairts—a wee farther on a dimple on her cheek, and then something that was like a rosebud and wasna. Laddie, ye wad hae done as I did—judgin', that is, frae what I observed doon by, at the Caldons Yett. And your Jeannie never a patch on Kitty Kirgan! Na, na!

'But say naething o' a' this to Tam, my grandson! For these are but the things that rise up in my auld carnal heart, and deep doon ye ken, I am bethinkin' on my latter end. Hech how, ay! It's an unco thing to dee, but it's a hantle waur never to hae leaved as a man should!

'But waes me for the perfidy o' thae Kitty Kirgans! Every man o' us had had oor turn at that camsteery, misleared, dyke-breakin' curl. We had a' pitten it back wi' fingers that were thoombs. We had a'—weel, that I canna vouch for. I wadna like even noo to say that Tam and Ebie and the Laird had my assurance. I only ken it took me a' my time, and in thae days I wasna blate.

'And what yin o' us was it that she chose, after a'? Ye may ask— ye may guess. No me, the herd; no Ebie, the ploughman; no Tam, the grieve— no, nor yet (as I ken ye are thinkin') McHaffie, the wee Cairnsmuir lairdie.

'But wait till I tell ye how Leddy, my bit collie,

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

comes into the tale. She was nearly human, as I telled ye. And she kenned a' about my stravaigin' after Kitty Kirgan, and whiles she wad be sulky a wee— maybe jealous like a woman. I declare to you that that dowg fand oot lang afore ony o' us that Kitty Kirgan was no' for ony man o' us. For instead o' sittin' doon wi' her back to me— as she used to do when I was watchin' for Kitty at the trystin' stile, or bidin' outside the hoose when I was in at Palgowan dairy—Leddy began to do what she could to show that she was vexed for me. She wad come pushin' her cauld nose into my hand or cuddlin' under my plaid. It was as if the puir beast wanted to say, 'Kitty winna lo'e ye—but Leddy will.'

'And Leddy did, and Leddy it was that showed me first the fool I had been—the fool I was— maybe, heeven forgie me, the fool I am!

'Somehow or ither, Leddy, as soon as we took the road for Palgowan, showed that she kenned brawly what we were there for—grieved-like she was, but never reproachfu'. And if Kitty did not come to the trystin' stile, Leddy wad set aff by hersel' to seek her, just as if I had telled her that there was a sheep missin' oot o' the count.

'And if she fand Kitty Kirgan on her road she wad gang nae farther, but juist sit by hersel' on the brow o' the hill. And if onybody strange cam' in sicht, Leddy gied a bark—sharp-like— and Kitty had time to aff ae road and me the ither. Oh, she was a pearl; but, for a' that, I'm thinkin' she aye saw through Kitty.

'But if there was company in the dairy, Leddy kenned weel that there wad be nae trystin' stile for us that nicht, and back she wad come wi' her tail atween her legs and makin' a wee whinin' noise in

her nose, juist (as she does at the singin' o' the psalm in Bargrennan Kirk.

'And then when I took the back-track for my shieling in the lirk o' the hill aneath Ben Yelleray, Leddy wad walk by my side. She wadna even run after a rabbit if it got up aneath her nose—juist hing her head and her tail, as muckle as to say she was vexed for me. For though Leddy was a wee jealous to begin wi', before a' was done she took near as muckle interest in my courtin' o' Kitty as I did mysel'.

'But she kenned mair than us a'—she saw farther into things, maybe. Bein' o' the sex, she kenned Kitty for a bonny wee curly-powed deceiver. Men folk might be ta'en in, but no' Leddy. And though she wad let Kitty's hand lie on her head I could see it took Leddy a' her time to keep the gur-r-r-r oot o' her throat when she made a wark aboot her, and said what a perfect non-such o' a dowg Leddy was. Yet Leddy liked to be made o' juist by-ordinar', but no' by Kitty Kirgan.

'It cam' oot ae nicht at the lang and last, as a' sic things come oot. It was a fair nicht at the toon—Newton Douglas they caa'ed it then, but Newton Stewart noo. And Auld Palgowan, the farmer o' the big farm where Kitty was dairymaid, had bidden rather lang aboot the 'Airms' or the 'Croon.' In fact, he wasna juist himsel' as he turned up the Water o' Cree. But he wasna that far gaen but that he could stand up in his gig and leather the beast wi' the whup till it brak and left the butt in his hand.

'Aweel, the horse had serious objections, and the next minute Auld Palgowan fand himsel' in the ditch wi' Black Bess far on her road to Palgowan stable. It was near the White Waters at the Minnoch Brig that

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

I fell in wi' Auld Palgowan. It was already the gloamin', and a sore-hurt man was he. Rise he couldna. He was deep laired i' the bog, and the mark o' the gig wheels had crossed him as Black Bess raged away mad frae the whup-lash.

I took his auld doited head on my lap and gied him a drink. And faith! he was that gratefu' he caa'ed me 'his bonny Kitty,' and telled me what a happy man I had made him by promisin' to be the mistress o' Palgowan farm!

'And never a bonnier or a feater wife cam' within the auld waa's, Kitty,' he said, 'no' amang a' the lasses that hae made the auld place their hame. And a true man ye will find me, Kitty— kinder at three-score-and-ten than daft young birkies like Willie Mabie, the herd o' the Merrick, or young McHaffie, that is never awa frae the milk-hoose door.'

'And he said mair nor that, too. How that the day was named—and the colour o' Kitty's wedding dress, that was to be a grass-green silk lined wi' violet — brawer than onything that had ever cam' into Bargrennan Kirk. Wi' flounces, too, lace and velvet in screeds, fit to put to shame the very carriage-folk that cam' yince a year on Sacrament Sabbaths.

'And I listened, but my heart was bitter and black as that awfu' deep place they caa' hell. Ay, it was then, in the gloaming o' yon wild muir, me sittin' there wi' Palgowan's heid on my knee, an listenin' to him flairdyin' up Kitty as his 'bonny,' and askin' if he hadna sorted the curl weel this time, that the Enemy o' Souls appeared to me.

The first o't that I kenned was that the lift darkened to a slaty black, and the lichtnin' began to flicker and wicker. And though some say my mind was wanderin', and some that it was the wee drap I

had had at the Fair at Newton Douglas, as sure as I am a livin' man and Willie Mabie, I saw a great black man sit on a stane, juist on the edge o' the ditch, lookin' doon on me. And he spak' wi' me in words as a man may speak to his fellow.

'Oh, I ken— it can be explained— it often has been. It was a dream. It was the drappie! But naebody will persuade me that I did not indeed speak face to face that nicht o' storm wi' the Enemy o' Mankind.

'Put his head into the soft o' the moss,' he said as it were in my lug, 'the glaur and the black peat brew will soon stop his breath. None will be the wiser. An' then you will marry Kitty Kirgan at your leisure. She likes you best onyway. But the broad lands and the thousand sheep on the hills o' Palgowan — what lassie could resist the like o' that?'

'But I would have none of his persuasions. I said that it was murder. But, says he—'Murder— havers! The man is as good as dead already. The wheel has been over him as he lies. That will be a proof that his death was an accident. Down wi' his head—ever so little! The black slime o' the ditch over the face o' the drucken sot for a bare five minutes, and Kitty is yours!'

But I said that I would not so peril my soul.

'Your soul!' cried the Black Man, throwin' back his held and laughin' loud as the very thunder, 'your soul! Willie Mabie, ye hae lived twa-and-twenty years on this earth, and this is the first I ever hear about it! Your soul,' quo' he, 'wha wants your soul? Souls like yours wad be dear at a bawbee a dozen!'

'However, I stuck to it. Maybe my soul was little worth, but it was the only one I was like to hae, and not for the Black Deil himsel' wad I put it in danger.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

'Not for Kitty Kirgan?' says he. 'Not even to save her from a life of misery—from marryin' a drucken auld sot like that? What's your soul to the savin' o' the lass ye love frae that? It's but a poor kind o' love ye have, man, if that is a' ye will do for her!'

'At that I cam' near breakin' doon. For to think o' denty Kitty and— that great swine o' the sty— it garred my blood boil. And I took him by the hair and turned his face to the sticky ooze!

'Well done— well done!' cried the Black Man, clappin' his hands. And then I kenned I was wrang, and I lifted Auld Palgowan clear and cleaned his face on a napkin, and cried mightily on the name o' the Lord—as indeed I should hae done at the first. But to tell the truth, I didna like, for I had been a gye wild ramblin' lad, wi' mony things laid to my charge, especially amang the lasses.

'But when I lookit round again, the Black Man had vanished—clean gane, he was. And I was as sober as I am this day. There on the bank was Auld Palgowan mumblin' awa' like a pair o' fanners runnin' empty, and namin' me ' his bonny dawtie ' at every ither word.

'But I kenned my duty noo, 'dawtie' or no. I had fought with the Accuser o' the Brethren. Nor was there ony Deil or ither ugsome creature on the hillside—only Leddy that had run alang the road to the Stroan Farm, and raised the farmer and his twa men. So atween us we got Auld Palgowan hame and safe in his bed.

'And there was Kitty Kirgan greetin' when she saw her maister a' covered wi' glaur. Ye see Black Bess had come hame an hour before wi' the gig shafts clatterin' about her heels. But when she saw me, Kitty catched me by the airm and grat like a bairn.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Ye are surely awesome vexed for the drucken auld taed, Kitty?' said I to her.

'Ay,' says she, lookin' up at me wi' the licht glintin' in her wat e'en—oh, as bonny as a painted picture ootside a show, 'he has been aye a kind maister to me!'

'So I'm hearin',' says I, very dry; 'ye will be meanin' the grass-green silk wi' the purple linin'?'

Then Kitty stoppit greetin', as if she had been shot, and gaed as white as a linen sheet fresh frae the bleasin-green.

'Ye ken?' says she.

'I ken,' says I, 'and for your sake, Kitty, I hae focht this nicht wi' the Black Deil himsel!'

'Hoot,' she answered, 'ye will mind better the morn, Willie— ye hae been at the fair?'

'And she gied me a kindly clap on the shoulder that at another time wad hae pitten me clean oot o' mysel'. But noo the net was spread ower plain in the sicht o' ony bird.

'Kitty,' said I, 'if ye are ta marry that— Thing — there will be nae mair trystin' stile!'

'Hoot,' she said, 'dinna be angry, Willie. I'm no' married yet. A lass maun do the best she can for hersel'. And it wad be a grand thing to command in the dairy where I hae served. Mair nor that' (here she looked at Anld Palgowan as he lay breathing like a hog in a stye), 'I will no' be thinkin' that he will be a long-lived bridegroom! There are waur things than a rich widow, Willie—and a bonny yin, as ye ken!'

'I tak' no man's leavings, Kitty Kirgan,' said I; 'and, let me tell you, bonny as ye are, I think ye are but ill-advised in your heart—to marry an auld drucken sot juist for the gear and the byre.'

'Dinna preach, Willie Mabie!' she answered; 'am I

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

the first lass ye hae kissed or telled I was the bonniest? Maybe ay, and maybe no. I hae done nae ill—less maybe than you. And if I marry Auld Palgowan, a good wife I will be to him. But I aye liked ye best, Willie—as well—ay, ower weel, ye kened!

'Oh, the witch! I couldna be angry wi' her even then.

'But Kitty—bonny, little Kitty, Kitty that no man could trust, got a sore cheat. For the Black Deil (if indeed I spoke face to face wi' him that nicht o' the Newton Douglas fair) meant to deceive me also, being, as the minister says, a liar from the beginning. The minister strove hard to persuade me that the Deil was in my ain heart, and that I must sign and be a sober man from that day. And a sober man I have been. Only a sober man can herd the Merrick for near on to fifty year without a day off!

'The rest o' the tale? That's the tale, laddie—what wad ye hae? There is nae mair.

'Oh, Kitty—what became o' Kitty? What should become o' her? No, she didna marry Auld Palgowan. For, ye see, the wheel o' the gig and the shock of the system had done his business. Besides, he had run his sand-glass ower near the lees. He gaed oot like the lowe o' a candle when the wind blaws the lantern door open. A far-awa' cousin heired everything aboot Palgowan. So Kitty, the wee deceitfu' besom, never ordered the cheese to be turned or the butter kirned in that dairy, nor yet saw anither lass stir the curds. Na, na—it was itherwise ordained! And what a blessin' it is that we puir sinfu' creatures never ken what is before us—me to be here in the enjoyment & health and strength when a' my auld companions—and the

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

verra minister—ay, the minister—what's this his name was!

'What's that ye say? Speak louder, ye are on my deaf side! Kitty? What Kitty?—Yonder's Kitty, my grandson's auldest lass bringin' in the kye aff the hill. Oh, Kitty Kirgan? What is it ye want to ken about Kitty?' Wha did she mairry after Auld Palgowan gaed Yont-the-Yett?'

'Why, wha should she mairry but me— me, Willie Mabie. She aye likit me best, ye ken. She telled me sae. And it was juist the glamour o' the wide green fields and the thirty kye, and the thoosands o' sheep on the heather hills that led her mind awa' —forbye the grass-green silk wi' the purple linin! Can ye blame her? Weel, ye may—I never did. She made me a brave herd's wife and brocht up the bairns weel—ten o' them, or was it eleven?'

'And she telled me aboot Ebie and Tam and the young laird McHaffie. Oh, plainly and straight-forritly she telled me when I askit her what for she had played wi' them and let the curl doonfa!—and a' that. And she answered, 'Will Mabie, it was juist to see if they were a' as great, muckle, stupit, handless safties as you yoursel!'

'And were they?' said I.

'Ay, that they were! The identical same! But Willie, in my heart, I aye likit you the best!'

'Ay—ay,' said the herd of the Merrick, his hands trembling on his stick, and his bleared eye vague in the past, 'bonny wee Kitty Kirgan—ye aye likit me best! And I likit you, Kitty. Ye were a grandmither when I laid ye aneath the gowans, Kitty. But I aye see ye as ye were when ye cam' first to meet me at the Trystin' Stile— that feared-like look, the slow lift o' the eyelash—deceitfu', maybe, but oh, that bonny!'

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Wee Kitty Kirgan, she aye likit Willie Mabie best!

And as he went slowly homeward at the call of a younger Kitty, the wind bore back the refrain of his meditation— 'Denty Kitty, Kitty Kirgan; she aye likit me best! Ay, ay, she aye likit me best!'

17. HARVEST PAST, SUMMER ENDED

And is the Summer past indeed—
The white-starred meads of May,
The June nights never dusk.
The scented roses clambering on the wall—
Are they all gone into the wrack
And dust-heap of the years that were
And not again shall be?
Oh, great Midsummer, fallen like a star—
Like Lucifer, the Morning's glorious sun—
Midsummer, flaming passionate
In burning gold and blood
Athwart the July hedges, and the blue.
The overarching blue of his great close of day.
Yea, all are gone—the clouds, the sprinkled flame.
That die before the morning into light,
That faint into the dusk of eve.
Before the sun's advance.
Or die when he retreats.
The wine of life, that in its chalice cup
Leapt to the fevered lips.
Surely not yet is fallen back.
Lost its rathe morning scent,
Its untouched virgin cup
Drained to the drenched lees.
For still we see the fields both white and green-
Gemmed cloth of green, starred cloth of gold.
The harvest of the pasture land,
The deep swathes of the hay.
The crisp luxuriance of the deep-ranked wheat,
The mellow clover's white and rose.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

These still are ours and more!
Unreaped the rye stands ready;
The bearded barley bows.
Like pilgrims at a pontiff's incoming;
Surely the harvest-time is yet afar.
Surely not yet the time,
Of yellow leaves and ground-trailed stems.
Lo, the array of flaunting poppies.
Blazoning their thankless heads above the corn—
The harvest's barren foam.
Blackening the field like blood of midnight crime.
Yea, even the poppies, scarlet far above
The fruitful yellow and the springing corn.
Tell us that harvest-time is yet afar.
Because they stand, the red-coat officers.
The proscript traitors, alien and outlaw.
Who lead their honest ranks
To hateful carnival of sin and death.
What enemy hath sown
The binding tares among my springing corn,
So that in bundles at the close of day
The servants bind it, and the field
Flameth with inquisition.
Till weed and heretic alike are changed
To wind-blown ash?
No common weeds are ye.
Poppy and tare, oblivion and doom.
Drugged wine of Lethe, and the bonds that bind
Sin's ministers in service to the wheels—
The wheels triumphal, the resistless cars,
That splash and burn alternate
Along the ways of life.
To the great portal dire.
The iron gateways of the nether hell.
Such for the tares and poppies.

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

No vulgar death for them.
No harvest into cocoon barns.
No grinding in the common mills,
For comfortable food for comfortable men;
Not these for traitors dire,
All in the purple born.
Not yours to rot on dull December fields
After the harvest that seems yet afar;
November shall not sleet you.
Fogs choke you, nor the common day
Gloat o'er your pride, rotten with mist and mire.
For you a tyrant deaths—aflame amidst,
The ruins of the palace of your pride.
Haughty to die, the earth folk thrusting spear
And rustic instruments to stir the pyre.
Rejoicing in your end.
Lo, harvest-time!
And after harvest too.
Dumb in the fog the rain falls drearily.
Midsummer fallen, Autumn dead.
Blank fields outstaring the blank sky—
The Autumn past, the Summer ended—
yet Not saved.

18. PROEM

THE SONG OF LIFE'S FINE FLOWER

I

WHEREFORE OF JOY REMEMBERED

Wherefore of joy remembered should I sing—
Do any bells for bygone bridals ring?
For nesting joy of years and years ago?
Do the birds diant, upon the wheat a-swing?
Nay, sharp as joy-thrill breaks the sudden song.
Cleaving the murmur of the cornland's throng.
For this glad morn, for these young ones that flit,
On balanced wing the summer flowers among.
I sing because my love desires a lay—
New as new bliss, and old as Love's old May:
I sing a song of love fresh-gamered,
From Love's last volume, clasped in his old way.

II

IN MORNING SHINE

In morning shine I wrote Love's good and ill—
Echoes, they say, from some Sicilian hill
Of linked arms, and seas that separate.
And eyes like wells where Love might drink his fill
Yet who dare say what songs are new or old?
Great Omar's scroll at either end was rolled,
And in the midst he read one single line—
A shadowy now traced on the gleaming gold!
Unroll which way you will, from that great now.
And read the script, I care not when nor how.
There will you see, blazoned in blood of men.
Love, hate; joy, sorrow; faith, and broken vow!

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

III

NO NEW SONG

No new song then I sing, no note of new,
Save new joy's marvel ringing through and
through-

Only of Love and Her and Italy—

Alas! unworthy I, God keep me true.

Hither from England, lying bleak and grey,

We came. Ah, wondrous we! To this fair bay

Of white Amalfi, whose mysterious hue

Gleams blue and bluer fifty miles away.

Sweet, sweet above the dash of waves, to catch

The shine of eyes, to mark the light winds snatch

A lock precise to gentler negligence,

Or the kissed cheek's responsive red to watch.

IV

THESE MAKE MORE FAIR

These make more fair the girdling Apennine,

Brighten the changing sapphire of the brine.

Cut in ten myriad facets multiform—

As various as this joy of mine and thine.

Behold the Apennine Ethereal

As the white throne set in God's judgment hall.

Between the inmost sea and outmost Heaven

They wait His pleasure and the close of all

Draw in the breaths from many an orange tree

And drink the bursting passion of the sea—

Strange welling perfume from the morning
flowers.

This Southland's half-awakened mystery.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

V

LO! CLIFF ON CLIFF

Lo! cliff on cliff in surge tumultuous.
In passionate protest overfrowning thus
The waves' dull clamour and white Judas kiss.
Whose silver sparkles scatter tremulous.
Which love we best? Still day of upturned Heaven,
The blue-globed sea and sky a marvel given.
Turned by its Maker's hand, perfect as God,
Wherein our souls dream, waldng, sorrow-
shriven?

Or this fresh, dewy, air-stirred earth,
A wide, glad place, wherein is room for mirth.
Where earth and sea and sky talk each to each.
New merged in some diviner bath of birth.

VI

TO EACH GREEN TERRACE

To each green terrace clings the dark stone pine.
The cliff's grim ruin breaks the black sea line:
Hang oranges of orbéd Hesperian gold.
Their chaliced cups brimmed full of scented wine.
Grey tower, bright dome, white winding loops of
road

Flashing and twining like the serpent rod.
The prophet cast to earth by Nile's old flood—
Shall tell us 'Lo! sweet Italy you trod!'
White bending sprays of spineless strange
hawthorn.

Pure favours by a bride's tire-maidens worn.
Weep blinding sheets of tears, or distant shine
In mourning argent o'er a land forlorn.

VII

HOW MEN HAVE LOVED THEE

How men have loved thee, Italy divine.
How the Greek pledged thee in his Chian wine.
And set his temples' magic colonnades.
Where blue sea-hollies front a bluer brine.
From the far burning East thy lovers came,
To weary thee with war's fierce amorous game.
Till through the death-song of imperial Rome,
Pealed the wild clamour of Mohammed's name.
Now Mahmoud's moon is old. But fiercely then,
The crescent swayed o'er hosts of swaying men.
Ah I never more shall sabre flash attest
The surging glory of the Saracen.

VIII

THAT WAS ITALIA'S GLORIOUS AFTERNOON

That was Italia's glorious afternoon:
It is her twilight now. Pray ye that soon
Over the Adriatic may arise
The glowing crescent of a brighter moon.
Even now it shines upon the solemn seas.
Sifts on us as we pace the terraces
Of bursting vine—and in this high-piled town
Transmutes to faery pearl her palaces.
O for one flash of the old dead renown,
To make this Italy the whole world's crown.
For Rome is gone. Her name is all of her—
And all her gods' high temples broken down.

S. R. Crockett.

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

Also available in Galloway Raiders digital format:

CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF THE COMPLETE CROCKETT

- 1893 The Stickit Minister and some common men
- 1894 Mad Sir Uchtred of the Hills
- 1894 The Play Actress
- 1894 The Raiders
- 1894 The Lilac Sunbonnet
- 1895 Bog Myrtle and Peat
- 1895 A Galloway Herd
- 1895 Men of the Moss Hags
- 1896 Cleg Kelly
- 1896 The Grey Man
- 1896 Sweetheart Travellers
- 1897 Lads' Love
- 1897 Lochinvar
- 1897 Sir Toady Lion
- 1898 The Red Axe
- 1898 The Standard Bearer
- 1899 The Black Douglas
- 1899 Kit Kennedy
- 1899 Ione March
- 1900 Joan of the Sword Hand
- 1900 Stickit Minister's Wooing
- 1900 Little Anna Mark
- 1901 Cinderella
- 1901 The Firebrand
- 1901 Love Idylls
- 1901 The Silver Skull
- 1902 The Dark o' the Moon
- 1902 Flower o' the Corn
- 1903 The Adventurer in Spain
- 1903 The Banner of Blue

Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

- 1904 Love of Miss Anne
- 1904 Strong Mac
- 1904 Raiderland
- 1904 Red Cap Tales
- 1905 Maid Margaret
- 1905 The Cherry Ribband
- 1905 Kid McGhie
- 1905 Sir Toady Crusoe
- 1906 White Plumes of Navarre
- 1907 Me and Myn
- 1907 Little Esson
- 1907 Vida
- 1908 Deep Moat Grange
- 1908 Princess Penniless
- 1908 Bloom o' the Heather
- 1908 Red Cap Adventures
- 1909 The Dew of Their Youth
- 1909 Men of the Mountain
- 1909 Seven Wise Men
- 1909 My Two Edinburghs
- 1909 Rose of the Wilderness
- 1910 Young Nick and Old Nick
- 1911 The Lady of a 100 Dresses
- 1911 Love in Pernicketty Town
- 1911 The Smugglers
- 1912 Anne of the Barricades
- 1912 Sweethearts at Home
- 1912 The Moss Troopers
- 1913 Sandy's Love
- 1913 A Tatter of Scarlet
- 1914 Silver Sand

THE BLOOM O' THE HEATHER

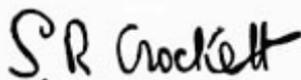
POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATIONS

- 1915 Hal o' the Ironsides
- 1917 The Azure Hand
- 1920 The White Pope
- 1926 Rogues' Island
- 2016 Peter the Renegade

Find out more about Crockett's life literature and legacy at: www.gallowayraiders.co.uk

www.srcrockett.weebly.com and The Galloway Raiders YouTube channel at www.youtube.com

'Mayhap that is the best fortune of all – to be loved by a few greatly and constantly, rather than to be loudly applauded and immediately forgotten by the many.'

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. R. Crockett". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized, with a prominent "S" and "R".

